

**NARRATIVE DISRUPTIONS IN COMPOSITION'S CULTURE OF
SCHOLARSHIP**

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This dissertation examines the reception of narrative scholarship within Composition Studies. Scholarly narratives—that is, stories of teaching and learning from and about the writing classroom—circulate widely in Composition Studies' scholarly body, yet their prevalence belies the dismissal they face as unrigorous and atheoretical. I argue that the field should more closely attend to the kinds of knowledge narrative scholarship offers. Further, I contend that such an investigation into narrative's case exposes tacit interpretive practices that circumscribe the discipline's dominant ways of reading scholarly work. Narrative scholarship, and the field's arguments over its (il)legitimacy, have potential to productively “disrupt” dominant practices of scholarly production and consumption that are often perpetuated uncritically and to the discipline's own detriment. This disruption allows reflection not only about the narrow question of whether stories of teaching and learning have value, but also on the conservative disciplinary commitments that underpin composition's culture of scholarship. Such self-reflection is important, I maintain, for our own professional identities, for what we invite or discourage in our discipline's intellectual conversations. But it is equally important for our teaching since the judgments we make about what counts as “worthy” scholarship have consequences for our writing pedagogies—especially for first-year composition courses that ask students to write personal narrative essays.

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PREFACE

If not for the many people that have shaped my life's trajectory, these words would not have been possible—or, even if possible, I would not have cared to write them.

Thanks to my many faculty mentors at Pasadena City College who introduced me to the teaching of writing. Thanks especially to Steve Whitney who saw potential I didn't know I had. I owe much to the English faculty at the University of Pittsburgh for helping me turn that potential into a trajectory that could be deepened and maintained—especially Don Bialostosky, Jean Carr, Jessica Enoch, Jennifer Lee, and Brenda Whitney. Thanks to Troy Boone, director of graduate studies, for refusing to let us wither on the grad-school vine.

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I could not have completed this project without the inspiration, charity, and grace of my friends and family. To my Pitt crew, thank you for making graduate school fun even when the intellectual journey felt less than tolerable. To Zephaniah Scotti, thank you for showing me—long before graduate school—that an intellectual’s work could permeate the better part of life and could bond people over beers.

Though this project started before I met my wife, Aarti, its completion is largely due to her. This writing, like everything else worth doing, is dedicated to you. Thank you for being my best reader and never doubting I could write this. To Mathaji and Pithaji, I felt your prayers. To my brother Kincaid, thanks for showing me what it looks like to pursue a passion, even when other things start to get in the way. Finally, to the most patient teachers I know, Roger and Nancy Smith: You supported me in everything I ever did and ever would have done. As it turned out, this is what I chose.

1.0 RECONCILING PROFESSIONAL AND PEDAGOGICAL SELVES: THE CASE FOR NARRATIVE DISRUPTION

1.1 A PERSONAL ENTRANCE

In 2002's *Reading Critically, Writing Well: A Reader and Guide*, editors Rise Axelrod and Charles Cooper voice an organizational rationale common to instructional readers in composition: "There are four personal and explanatory genres [...] and four argumentative genres [...]. Some of the reading and writing assignments give students opportunities to think deeply about their own experiences and perceptions, while other assignments require them to think about points of view other than their own" (iii-iv).

As a student and worker at Pasadena City College—where I first encountered this text—that division between “personal” kinds of writing and analytical/argumentative kinds felt unremarkable, in part because it was so familiar. In freshman composition I was taught to approach writing through a personal narrative lens—learning to read, mimic, and reproduce essays that drew on autobiographical experience before graduating on to writing more “argumentative” essays. Working later as a peer tutor and in-class aide at PCC in writing courses of all levels, I came to observe that same division from behind the curtain. As I watched students negotiate their reading and writing assignments, the ideological heft of these organizational and categorical schemes became more apparent. According to Axelrod and Cooper's introductions to their gen-

re-chapters, writing an *evaluation* is an “intellectually rigorous” process (251); *Speculating about Causes or Effects* “involves some of the most challenging problem-solving and decision-making situations a writer can experience” (314); Writing a *Proposal to Solve a Problem* requires a “critical questioning attitude” (382). Yet in contrast, *Autobiography* (which is the opening chapter of the book—not innocently, it seems) is “enjoyable and instructive” (though it admittedly requires “think[ing] deeply about the meaning of your experience”) (12). The difference in language here is powerful: those writing genres whose content is experience-based and “personal” in nature, do not, by implication, require the same intellectual rigor and are subverted beneath (and chronologically before) other forms of “more rigorous” writing: analysis, research, argument. The naming and arrangement of such categories suggest the academic capital held by some genres and lacked by others. The labels do not merely indicate distinctions about each genre’s formal features, in other words, but suggest, and reinforce, perceptions about the intellectual work imagined to be possible within each approach.

I did not at the time of using this text have a theoretical or disciplinary vocabulary to articulate a stance toward this arrangement. But as a teacher’s aide I started to notice a disconnect between these implied hierarchies and the difficulty faced by student writers passing through each “unit.” Students’ difficulties constructing personal narrative were considerable, and the descriptors Axelrod and Cooper used for the weightier forms of writing seemed to equally apply. To write about one’s experiences was to draw on a “critically questioning attitude,” wasn’t it? And the need to “problem solve” and “decision make” didn’t seem any less fraught. If there were important differences between these kinds of writing—between the approaches they required, the difficulties inherent in their creation, or the values of their production—the textbook’s terms and divisions were unable to put those matters into play.

I don't mean to pick on Axelrod and Cooper. They face, as many textbook authors do, the challenge of providing students with manageable genre categories without slipping into over-inflated distinctions. But this textbook-as-artifact is one placeholder in my memory representing years of witnessing lots of teachers teach lots of composition—each class its own 14-week-old universe, a big bang that sometimes felt more like a sputter. These memories of particular students and teachers, of essays written and conversations had, lurk behind my ongoing interactions within the discipline and this profession, and challenge my imaginings of what is possible and desirable in the work that I do. But that shaping goes both ways. The stories of those years at PCC are themselves renewed—and troubled—as they refract through the lens of my growth as scholar and teacher. A memory becomes something more, and less, than what it was.

Recognizing and reconciling these colliding histories—of a pedagogy once lived and a set of assumptions, methodologies, and theories since internalized—has been a perpetual internship, unpaid work for which there's no lack of available hours. At the heart of this collision is the failure of *Reading Critically*, and texts like it, to describe the task of narrative essay writing with enough sophistication to capture, and be accountable to, the ways theories of narrative have gained traction in the humanities. Or, to put this still in personal terms, the pedagogies I helped create and police as an undergraduate writing tutor and classroom aide compete for mental space with my graduate research into theories of the structural force of narrative. Narrative constructionism—the name I use to describe theoretical investigations into narrative as a category of knowledge-making and interpretation—can be found in disciplinary histories well beyond Composition's: in the work of philosophers of history (Hayden White), science (Donald Polkinghorn), and politics (Charles Taylor); in the investigations of discursive and social psychology (Jerome Bruner, Theodore Sarbin); in Linguistics' attempts to formalize communication

patterns (Wallace Chafe, William Labov and Joshua Waletzky); and in developments within philosophical and literary hermeneutics (Paul Ricoeur and Tzvetan Todorov).

Particularly eye-catching as a young graduate student were those theories that saw the nature of knowledge, learning, and expression as fundamentally and foundationally interpreted—and re-represented—through narrative frameworks. The ways that, as Jerome Bruner points out, life and narrative become circularly intertwined as our lives equally shape and are shaped by the stories we tell:

Eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very “events” of a life. In the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we “tell about our lives.” (italics in original, 15)

The power of such theories, and the long shadow they cast even now as part of the broader project of social constructionism, felt, to me, conspicuously absent from much of the conversation surrounding the “the personal” in composition, particularly in scholars’ dismissals of narrative pedagogies. If narrative structures could be made significant to such a large swath of theory from a variety of humanistic disciplines, I wondered, how could the work of narrating-through-writing be seen by teachers or textbook authors as intuitive for students, as a primer for the “real work” of composition? How, too, could *teaching* personal writing be seen as a simpler teaching task?

As I steeped in that disjunction—between a valuing in theory and a devaluing in practice—I came to see another complexity, too, besides the pedagogical-theoretical question: composition scholars have regularly submitted narratives of *their own* teaching (and/or their students’

learning) to scholarly journals, conferences, and book collections. It seems the pedagogical and theoretical questions are equally disconnected from the ways personal narrative intermingles with our scholarly roles as academics. What is deemed merely intuitive for student production is valuable enough (at least in some cases) to be labeled scholarship when teachers are the ones doing that work. This leads to a quandary: if narrative *is* granted the status of scholarship in our professional work (even if in a weakened state), how can we continue to think of its presence in the classroom as benign or intuitive? Or, the inverse problem: if we commit in pedagogy to a view that narrative writing is a novice's easy entrance into a writing life, how can narrative have enough intellectual capital to be capable of producing scholarly interventions?

I am no longer invested in living these contradictions, at least not without questioning what of value they might reveal about our discipline and our discipline's possible futures. And while I have graduated beyond the moment of thinking that one could settle these matters with finality, I remain ever more convicted that the questions themselves are valuable in the asking. Hans-Georg Gadamer tells us in *Truth and Method* that the perpetual meeting of past and present experience, past and present knowledge, can't be escaped and, in fact, should be embraced for what it enables: knowledge itself. "To be situated within a tradition," he says, "does not limit the freedom of knowledge but makes it possible" (354). That possibility depends on an engagement with tradition that demonstrates "the same readiness for experience that distinguishes the experienced man from the man captivated by dogma" (355). I was unprepared for the ways that my history as a writing student and TA would come to conflict with the dogmas of my graduate education. The results of that meeting remain unresolved. But as though to prove Gadamer right, the collision between these histories is, itself—even without resolution—the very condition enabling this scholarly investigation.

Narratives of teaching and learning, as I'll call them here, prove difficult to characterize singularly, both as a category and in their individual instantiations. For definition's sake I use the term to mean scholarship that is overwhelmingly narrative in form, scholarship that deploys narrative storytelling as a driving force to make its "argument." I distinguish this kind of scholarship from that which appeals to narrative occasionally, for example discursive writing that uses anecdotes as opening gambits or as evidence to support already articulated claims.¹ Perhaps one way of noting scholarship that depends on narrative, rather than just employing it to further other ends, is through the phenomena of its reading. Does the reader need to be invested in the narrativity of the work in order to interpret its overarching intellectual project? Or is the narrative an aside in service to larger argumentative or analytical structures?²

Scholarship with such deep narrative investments abounds in composition studies. Teacher narratives of classroom experiences (for example, Wendy Bishop's *Teaching Lives: Essays and Stories*; Joseph Trimmer collection *Narration as Knowledge: Tales of the Teaching Life*; and Jan Zlotnik's Schmidt's anthology *Women/Writing/Teaching*; scholars' narratives recounting their pro-

¹ Mariolina Salvatori has sharply criticized unreflexive use of anecdote in scholarship on teaching: "To talk or to write anecdotally about teaching can indeed make it interesting, even humorous, and hence easily communicated and entertaining [...]. But to theorize teaching through a form of discourse that by definition is 'not published,' is 'not given out,' seems to me to mark it inevitably as mysterious, difficult, or not interesting enough to be given out. Insofar as knowledge about teaching is anecdotally conveyed, it cannot be systematically traced. This is a characteristic of the genre of anecdote. Neither can it be systematically built on, since it cannot be accurately retrieved. It is undocumentable, open to appropriation and plagiarism; it does not conform to most commonly accepted criteria of traditional scholarship ("Scholarship" 302-303). In the next chapter I will explore in more detail whether narratives of teaching and learning that strive to be more than anecdotal are able to escape these criticisms of the anecdotal.

² Douglass Hesse characterizes three different uses of narrative form: 1) "there are stories with *narrative*, essays that contain narrative sections that do not themselves, however, take the shape of story." 2) "There are also essays with *story*... In them, narrative has taken the shape of story, but this story is preceded, followed, or surrounded by text that is not narrative and therefore does not seem to be part of the story." 3) "Finally, there are essays *as* story... In them every word is part of the story; story and essay have a one-to-one correspondence" (182). It is this third that most closely names what I'm describing here. We might also note Mary Gorden's description: "Story is able to handle being itself and its opposite. Anecdote is only one thing at once"—this since anecdote is in evidential service to some other (non-narrative) claim (qtd. in Lewiecki-Wilson 107).

fessional attractions to working in the discipline (for example, *Teaching College English and English Education: Reflective Stories*, edited by Thomas McCracken et. al.; and *Living Rhetoric and Composition: Stories of the Discipline*, a collection edited by Duane H. Roen et. al.); and narratives of writing-program administration or other institutional/administrative challenges (Diana George's collection *Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers & Troubadours: Writing Program Administrators Tell Their Stories*; Lynn Bloom's *Composition Studies as a Creative Art: Teaching, Writing, Scholarship, Administration*): all of these circulate regularly throughout the profession's arteries. And yet, thanks to narrative's formal qualities and generic exigencies, these projects have a different texture than the scholarship most often identified with academic work and scholarly thought, leading to skepticism about their value and risking Geoffrey Sirc's characterization of "a lot of stories of just you...feeling (or not), realizing (or not)" (520). And yet such doubts and dismissals must be understood (or misunderstood) alongside the simultaneous and widespread authorization of these narratives in the face of that skepticism (as signaled by their prevalent distribution in scholarly forums). As each narrative of teaching/learning is valued or devalued, arguments for the purposes of scholarship, the value of discursive decorum, and the place of genre are being worked through, tested and contested. As a result of that contestation, these narratives make visible the arguments, assumptions, and values that underlie the ever-shifting label of "scholarship," exposing inchoate philosophical positions and opening them to further reflection and investigation. To consider what narratives might do as scholarship in our profession, then, is to poke and prod at the edges of important sites of reflection in composition studies and English studies more generally. In other words, through this exposure, these narratives have the power to disrupt assumptions about what counts as scholarship and how we know what to look for.

As I try to write you—and myself—toward these questions, I find it difficult to negotiate the numerous possible entrances into this discussion, of which my personal story that begins this essay is only one. It's helpful here for me borrow a notion of *beginnings* from Patricia Donahue, in her “Disciplinary Histories: A Meditation on Beginnings,” who in turn takes that term from Edward Said:

Said's final point in the introductory pages of [*Beginnings: Intention and Method*] is that a beginning cannot just exist: it has to do something, function in a particular way, produce a particular effect. One of these effects is to create a moment of differentiation by distinguishing itself from what preceded it. Another effect is to serve as a strategy of delimitation by imposing constraints on how what “comes after” is explained and interpreted. (Donahue 224)

Donahue uses a notion of beginnings to worry over the ways that the temporal and spatial starting points of historical investigations shape the historian's trajectory and discovery. My own scholarly project is not historical, but my struggle to choose a path into this conversation is still fraught. Which beginnings will best illustrate that the questions of *who in the discipline narrates, what they narrate, for what purpose, and in lieu of what* are worth pursuing? What entrance will best show that a discussion of narrative can, and should, go beyond the often narrowly-described debate about expressivist verses academic pedagogies? Which beginning to select when, in the peculiarities of my reading of these issues, multiple doors lead to the same conviction that this matter is as important pedagogically as it is professionally, that it is as much a matter of how we read scholarship and reflect on its role as it is a matter of how we write or teach?

As Donahue says through Said (or vice versa), each beginning “delimit[s] by imposing constraints on how what ‘comes after’ is explained and interpreted.” Rather than elect one be-

ginning over others, I instead choose to begin with multiple, though to my mind interconnected, entrances—a series of doors through which one might come upon this question of narrative and disciplinarity and think it worthwhile to stay. As you will see, they are entrances that, despite their differing points of departure, bring me to the same commitment that a discussion of narrative can shed light on the way we frame, read, and value scholarly work in composition studies. That matter, I will show, has consequences for both pedagogical and professional identities.

1.2 A DISCIPLINARY ENTRANCE: GENRE AND SCHOLARLY INERTIA

In *Situating Composition* Lisa Ede writes, “We have been quick to comment on the extent to which others are disciplined by various ideologies—but much less willing and able to recognize our own immersion in ideologies of disciplinarity and professionalism” (188). What Ede observes about Composition is true of English Studies more generally: despite cultivating rigorous analytical tools for evaluating the ideology imbedded in cultures of language, disciplines are less likely to turn those tools back onto the foundational (and usually tacit) justifications that authorize their own inclusionary and exclusionary practices. Looking at the ideologies buried in disciplinarity and the circuits of language through which ideology travels is one way to explore the gate-keeping functions of disciplinary uses of language, including scholarship’s role in creating and maintaining disciplinary identity. After all, cultures of scholarship constitute crucial parts of the larger linguistic communities that authorize disciplines, and they function within and for those bodies through acts of oral and written language (talks, conferences, colloquia, journals, books, dissertations). Disciplines also negotiate via scholarship with a host of other bodies—

competing disciplines, administrative networks that govern them, institutional spaces that house them, and the governmental organizations that regulate and fund those institutions. Those texts and interactions (re)create, maintain, and normalize disciplinary practices in language, and, in doing so, marginalize other ways of speaking/writing, and other ways of understanding/knowing.

By saying this I do not mean to suggest that disciplines, or their language practices, are static. To say that cultures of scholarship are governed by strong disciplinary forces—forces that affect both the discursive characteristics that constitute language and the generic form by which language travels—is not to claim that scholarly genres (in composition or elsewhere) are homogeneous. Rather, as Tzvetan Todorov points out, deviations in genre are ever-present, making visible genre characteristics that are so normalized as to otherwise go unnoticed:

The fact that a work ‘disobeys’ its genre does not make the latter nonexistent; it is tempting to say that quite the contrary is true. And for a twofold reason. First, because transgression, in order to exist as such, requires a law that will, of course, be transgressed. One could go further: the norm becomes visible—lives—only by its transgressions. (“The Origin of Genres” 160)

Even with an assumed level of variation, however, obedience to or deviance from a given genre is rarely innocent. As James Slevin puts it, “the organizational and stylistic choices we make are not just aesthetic but ideological, having profound implications for the ways in which we invite others into, or exclude others from, our texts, and so implications for the kinds of social relations that our texts produce” (141). We might describe the power of genre as twofold. First, disciplinary structures, and their concomitant genres, act as interpretive filters that shape “our way of grasping, and living in, the world [...]” (144). Second, genres perpetuate those particular ways

of knowing through users who reproduce the ideological and textual character of the genre in their own future utterances. Neither of these actions need be explicit or calculated to be powerful: “We are all disciplined by ideologies of which we can at best be only partly conscious,” Ede reminds us. “And we all at one time or another intentionally and unintentionally contribute to the disciplining of others” (170). In fact, it is typical of disciplines not only to perpetuate such ideology through language but to use language to erase traces of that ideology.³ It is no surprise, then, that scholars, according to Ede, often fail to “recognize the extent to which ideologies of disciplinarity and professionalism may encourage us to *need*, say, to develop critique in ways that ‘perfect’ our argument in terms of disciplinary norms [...]” (183, original italics).

A. Suresh Canagarajah’s important study *The Geopolitics of Academic Writing* illustrates more concretely how US-academic conceptions of scholarly genre resist change and exclude other voices. His analysis of the differences between the two cultures of scholarship he lives between—the academic community of Sri Lanka (represented by the University of Jaffna) and the western academy (of the U.S. and to a lesser extent Europe)—is insightful. By stepping outside of the rationale of the American-dominated culture of scholarship, Canagarajah is able to interrogate that culture in ways difficult to do from the inside. In order to argue that “Euro-American dominance of intellectual inquiry is sustained and reproduced in the domain of academic writing and publishing,” Canagarajah leads his reader through the pressures that politics, culture, and economics exert on scholarly production and interpretation (47). He lays bare the contingency of all intellectual cultures, including that of the U.S. academy—even as it markets its

³ It’s worth reading Jean and John Comaroff’s introduction to *Of Revelation and Revolution* for their cogent account of this erasure—the movement from ideology to hegemony (24-25): “hegemony is a product [...] whereby the content of dominant ideologies is distilled into the shared forms that seem to have such historical longevity as to be above history” (30).

ubiquity as evidence of superiority. Canagarajah's mission in the book is to expose the arbitrary conventions by which the Western system polices the borders of its identity. He does this, in part, by discussing a host of internal and external factors that form unique scholarly values in certain communities. Here he discusses those factors in relation to the genre of the research-article:

[Conventions of research-article writing] are shaped by a variety of contingent factors. Some are discipline-internal factors: the state of professionalization, the status of the discipline, and the identity of the scholars in the field. Others are extra-academic: the availability of material resources, dominant cultural values in the community, and patterns of social relations in the larger society.[...] Not only do certain conventions gain importance 'naturally' because they belong to dominant social groups, but in some cases these are calculated to establish the knowledge of the dominant circles over others. (*Geopolitics* 93)

Canagarajah details several characteristics of the University of Jaffna's scholarly community that are in tension with the U.S. system: a focus on oral expression over written; a commitment to civic-minded scholarship that encourages generalist rather than specialist contributions; the preference for "pluralistic practices of knowledge construction and communication" that privilege sharing ideas (and texts) over owning them (187); the use of writing to remember and engage with reading rather than the use of reading to buttress arguments made in writing (213); their "adept[ness] at adjusting to changing contexts" in writing, including the use of "divergent discursive traditions within the body of a single text" (156).

The fact that scholars develop "cultures of literacy that cope with the conditions existing in their communities" is, of course, not just true for Canagarajah's Sri Lankan colleagues (106).

That contingency of place and circumstance equally permeates U.S. scholarly culture (and its various disciplinary components), even if its solid veneer feigns otherwise. For Canagarajah's purposes, the incommensurability of the two scholarly communities is fact; but the interpretations leveled by the culture of power (the U.S./West) against the academic periphery (Sri Lanka, in this case, but the East and the Global South generally) exposes the arbitrary and value-laden judgments the center uses to cast the periphery's scholarship as unpublishable, even unintellectual.

Despite Canagarajah's attention to the "extra-academic" factors that hinder the periphery's participation in center scholarship (for example the lack of web access necessary to send electronic journal submissions), what is more interesting for this discussion are the "discipline-internal" factors that mark certain characteristics of written language in scholarship—the modes of inquiry, discourses, and genres—as "insufficiently scholarly" for center publication.

‡ ‡ ‡

English Studies' primary professional organizations are becoming increasingly concerned with the institutionalized and disciplinized momentum that has come to privilege and normalize certain ways of writing and knowing to the exclusion of others, prompting increasing calls to interrogate and open dominant practices in academic scholarship. In 1993 the Association of Departments of English issued its "Statement of Good Practice: Teaching, Evaluation, and Scholarship," in part arguing for a less rigid definition of scholarship: "Scholarship should be defined broadly and not be limited to the academic book or article. Local definitions of scholarly activity will vary and may include the presentation of papers, the development of instructional materials, reviews of others' scholarly work, and other forms of writing" (45). Fourteen years later the demand for change is not sated—the Modern Language Association uses nearly identical terms in

its 2007 “Report of the MLA Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion”: “The profession as a whole should develop a more capacious conception of scholarship by rethinking the dominance of the monograph, promoting the scholarly essay, establishing multiple pathways to tenure, and using scholarly portfolios” (63). This report asks how the profession can loosen the stranglehold of the monograph as the “gold-standard” evidence of intellectual work, how it might better value web-published works or co-authored scholarship, and how to promote the intellectual work of editing or textbook writing. The MLA report—and the widespread professional concerns voiced in it—look for ways to reconceive scholarship’s role in the profession and interrogate the complex assumptions that circumscribe scholarship’s relationship to other academic activities and structures.⁴ These concerns tacitly admit that definitions of scholarship 1) arise from contingent historical and disciplinary processes and 2) are often held and perpetuated uncritically, to the discipline’s own detriment. The temporal distance between ADE and MLA reports suggests, however, the difficulty of resisting the professional, disciplinary, and generic structures that perpetuate a conservative set of scholarly values. As Ede reminds us,

Despite the many changes scholars in English studies have seen in the last thirty years, for instance, most—though by no means all—scholars in the field continue to privilege texts that manifest the traits of consistency, coherence, parsimony, elegance, and originality. Though scholars argue about substantially different sub-

⁴ Many of these questions are taken up in the 2008 edition of *Profession*, as one thematic section of that journal reflects upon, and extends, the MLA report. For other examples of calls to challenge current definitions/perceptions of scholarship see also the Two-Year College English Association’s (TYCA) report “Research and Scholarship in the Two-Year College” (2004); also see the work of those at the Carnegie Academy for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning (CASTL), particularly Mary Taylor Huber and Pat Hutchings. John Guillory is also a strong voice in this debate, having produced various relevant contributions to *ADE Bulletin*, in particular “Evaluating Scholarship in the Humanities: Principles and Procedures.”

jects than they did thirty years ago, and read substantially different texts, the deep structure, as it were, of English studies may not have changed as much as scholars would like to believe. (161)

If it is true that judgments of what counts as scholarship depend on underlying foundations that are 1) thoroughly ideological, 2) poorly reflected upon, and 3) recalcitrant even in the face of reflection, what are the consequences of such a reality? There is no doubt that the norming function of cultures of language, including cultures of scholarship, creates valuable common ground for intellectual exchange. But the insularity of disciplinary discourses, and the way that such conservatism enables judgment of atypical work as inappropriate, or worse, inferior, is what I want to highlight here. It is within this institutional-disciplinary reality that peripheral textual forms, like narratives of teaching and learning, must battle for recognition. If conservatism wins that battle, the ways of knowing and seeing interwoven within alternative forms are lost. As Canagarajah says, “writing conventions can become a weapon for suppressing positions oppositional to the dominant discourse. Style colonizes!” (*Geopolitics* 154).

1.3 OBJECTIFIED ENGLISHES: A TRANSNATIONAL ENTRANCE

Recent applications of transnational frameworks to theories of composition pedagogy have provided new grounds for investigating the consequences of uncritical reifications of academic language. The diverse pedigree of transnational studies in various disciplines, including American Cultural Studies and Linguistics, means that composition’s appropriation of transnational ap-

proaches has taken various forms.⁵ In a special issue of *College English* on “Transnational Feminist Rhetorics” (May 2008), Wendy Hesford and Eileen Schell introduce the value of this methodology for the discipline: “rhetoric and composition studies would benefit from a more critical engagement with its use of transgeographical concepts (displacement, transculturation, translocality[...])” (463). “[W]e need to become more reflective about the ‘American’ aspects of our work,” they continue, “and how, in defining and sustaining our discipline, we often slip into nationalist rhetorics on the one hand and uncritical cosmopolitanisms on the other hand” (463). But what does it mean to adopt a frame that attends to the transnational rather than the national? In the broadest terms, Hesford and Schell characterize a transnational focus this way: “*Transnationality* refers to movements of people, goods, and ideas across national borders and [...] is often used to highlight forms of cultural hybridity and intertextuality” (463, original emphasis). An emphasis on composition as a transnational enterprise views language as relevant beyond the limited context of nationhood, beyond simple identifications between nation-states and their languages. Despite the initial appearance that transnational methodologies might only apply to relations between disparate national languages, the concepts of hybridity and intertextuality made evident by the category of the transnational are equally useful for theorizing the complex interactions within *intra*-national cultures of language, as demonstrated by another special issue of *College English* (July 2009) that explores the force of Latino/a “border” rhetorics.

Scholarship working against English-only conceptions of literacy instruction (from the likes of Bruce Horner, John Trimbur, Min-Zhan Lu, Paul Kei Matsuda, and the aforementioned

⁵ Some might view the flexibility of transnational theory as a point of weakness rather than possibility. Its promiscuity might signal, for example, that the concept’s breadth weakens its claim as a representational category. For the moment, however, I am less concerned with what gets lost by such a grouping than I am encouraged by the powers of self-reflection it makes available for investigating composition studies’ linguistic-disciplinary identity.

Suresh Canagarajah) best illustrates the potentials for a transnational lens to illuminate composition. In their award-winning essay “English Only and U.S. Composition,” Bruce Horner and John Trimbur argue that the dominant (though usually only implicit) position of U.S. composition overwhelmingly identifies its project with “American English”—what Suresh Canagarajah calls in its written form “Standard Written English” and what Horner and Min-Zhan Lu have called “Edited American English” (Canagarajah, “The Place of World Englishes”; Horner and Lu, “Resisting Monolingualism”). In such a model, this Edited American English is imagined to be a stable, unchanging, predictable commodity that is grafted onto national identity. In the words of Horner and Trimbur, “the territorialization of languages according to national borders puts into place a reification of social identity in terms of language use: one’s social identity is defined in terms of nationality, which itself is defined in terms of a single language” (“English Only” 596). As both a national language and a commodifiable product obtained within (and for) the nation, “ownership” of that language becomes a tool both to prove one’s citizenship and to expose (and root out as alien) those whose language can’t carry off the performance.

By looking past the physical and imaginary borders of national context that attempt to contain and limit language use (including its uses in composition studies), scholars employing a transnational methodology break the illusion of language containment and question the premises on which this “territorialization of language” depends. Because it validates Other englishes beyond the long arms of U.S.-English’s linguistic policing, a transnational view is able 1) to pose theories for understanding motives behind attempts to systematize and perpetuate such misunderstandings and 2) to expose as inaccurate the assumptions that undergird attempted equivalencies between American English and U.S. composition. In other words, looking at language outside of the confines of national borders is not meant to produce simple comparison, but, re-

visiting Hesford and Schell, to “highlight forms of cultural hybridity and intertextuality” that permeate all uses of language, even those most guarded by monolingualistic interests.

By revealing the ways linguistic ideologies prescribe the language of the status quo as natural and correct, transnational composition has primarily tried to expose and problematize English-only attitudes in composition pedagogies that frame Standard Written English as an object of desire for teachers and students. Rejecting such attitudes would affect everything from how teachers approach language differences in the classroom to how administrative criteria place students based on their “level” of English:

Recognition of the arbitrary and fluctuating character of writing at particular sites, including the academic, requires that we reject denials of the legitimate place of students and their work in the academy, manifested in the refusal to grant academic credit for basic writing courses and the treatment of composition courses generally as, at best, preparatory to rather than an integral part of academic work. If we reject the reification of academic language and competence in it, we cannot use instances of students’ language to deny them academic citizenship. This doesn’t mean the abolition of standards but the development, by students and teachers working together, of different standards, understood as contingent, local, and negotiable. (Horner and Trimbur 620)

These scholars demonstrate the potentials of transnational understandings of language to help the discipline become more reflective about the nationalistic assumptions that influence teaching practices and institutional-administrative approaches. Because the “tacit language policy of unidirectional monolingualism” and the “history and cultural logic” that make it possible are insufficiently interrogated by the field, such a logic, according to Horner and Trimbur, “continues to

powerfully influence our teaching, our writing programs, and our impact on U.S. culture” (595), making it difficult for compositionists to “resist thinking of identifying students and our teaching in terms of fixed categories of language, language ability, and social identity, however natural and inevitable such categories can seem to be [...]” (622). The point, indeed, is that these categories are neither natural nor inevitable, but historically and socially constructed, sanctioned, and maintained to the benefit of some language users and to the detriment of others.

Although transnational scholarship in composition has primarily focused on the consequences of such a narrow view of language for writing pedagogies, its persistent, and to my mind compelling, critique of the tacit monolingualism within composition might equally urge us to interrogate reified views of scholarly propriety. If we think of disciplinary insularity as a well-policed intellectual metropolis,⁶ one that judges who is worthy to occupy the city of scholars and who should be relegated to the suburbs—or the ghetto—we should reflect more carefully on the criteria enabling such judgments, and the monolingual assumptions about scholarly character that enable them. What happens to the forms of thinking, knowing, and writing that do not con-

⁶ I borrow this term from Suresh Canagarajah’s “The Place of World Englishes in Composition: Pluralization Continued.” Canagarajah counterposes *metropolitan* and *world* englishes. Metropolitan englishes are those discourses authorized by supposed centers of language that, through political and economic processes, claim privileged ownership and access to “correct” English. Because these sites have strong historic identifications with the language, they claim themselves as originary sites and are thus particularly dedicated to policing its uses. World englishes, by contrast, circulate around the globe without enjoying such privileges because they are seen as receivers, rather than originators, of English. World englishes may have been acquired as second languages and adapted for local contexts and transactions (either within the metropolis itself or in its peripheries). Or they may have been acquired as native languages thanks to histories of British or American colonial/imperial intervention. The fact that this latter type of world english—that is, englishes learned natively but in a non-western nation—are disregarded by the metropolis as “nonnative” demonstrates well what is at stake in the distinction between national and transnational views of language. As Canagarajah says from his own experience,

I have acquired Tamil and English in parallel, with equal facility, since my earliest days of linguistic development. Therefore, I am tempted to ask in Babu English, ‘Honored Sirs and Madams, I humbly beseech you, which language am I a native of?’ Only the color of my skin would influence someone to call me a non-native speaker of English—not my level of competence, process of acquisition, or time of learning. (“Place” 589-90)

The case of the non-American or Non-British english-user who speaks fluently but in a nonwestern dialect shows that categories like “native” and “non-native” are arbitrary and contested (589; see also Canagarajah’s *Geopolitics* 258). These distinctions are not “natural” but political, created to reinforce hierarchies of power.

form? That, because of their flexibility and hybridity, mark themselves as outside? What would happen to the scholarly metropolis—how might it change—if that kind of peripheral work were made central, rather than brushed aside?

1.4 IMAGINING OUR SCHOLARSHIP, IMAGINING OUR STUDENTS: A BEGINNING IN DISJUNCTION

In his essay “Frame Lock,” Charles Bernstein argues for the link between the work we do as writers, teachers, and scholars and the work we ask of our students. Bernstein laments the pressures of professionalization that sap academic writing of its creativity and strip from it the poetic potential of critique (or the critical potential of the poetic). Such limitation, he says, results from a theory of writing

in which one's work is supposed to be easily summed up, definable, packaged, polished, wrinkles and contradictions eliminated, digressions booted. Insofar as we make hiring decisions using these criteria, insofar as we train graduate students to conform to such market imperatives, insofar as we present our own writing and scholarship and evaluate each other's along these lines, then the demands of our work—teaching, research, encouraging creativity—will be severely compromised. (93-94)

Bernstein sees a disjunction between the claims about what we often value in literature—writing that disrupts, resists, betrays social and generic propriety—and the work produced by scholars and students as they write about that literature. Walter Mignolo, tireless critic of the ways na-

tional languages (including their cultures of scholarship) turn difference into justifications for colonial/imperial domination, similarly notes the difficulty of transporting poetic value into our conservative scholarly cultures:

What is permitted in literature is not allowed in cultures of scholarship. Cultures of scholarship [...] could make of hybridity an interesting topic of study, but the discourse reporting the finding cannot be hybrid itself! [...] Language shall be controlled by rules, and one must respect grammatical structure, discourse coherence, and argumentative logic. All this is certainly fine. But it is neither the only way nor the best way to produce, transplant, and transform knowledge. (*Local Histories, Global Designs* 222)

Both of these thinkers should prompt us to ask how evaluations of “appropriate” scholarship and the attitudes toward language that constitute them affect the work we do with, and ask of, our students. Could a profession-wide commitment toward redefining scholarship encourage a richer notion of intellectual work in our students’ writings?

I see three ways that attitudes toward scholarship closely intertwine with our pedagogies. First, the grounds by which we judge what counts as scholarship reflect, and are reflected by, the methods of inquiry we ask our students to practice and the forms of writing we ask them to produce. In other words, conceptions about what “true” scholarship looks like, and who can and should do it, impact the writing subjects, genres, and the kinds of language permitted in the writing projects we assign to students, as well as how we scaffold progress toward those projects.⁷ Second, attitudes toward scholarship affect how teachers receive and value student writ-

⁷ I should note, though, that the results of such a relationship don’t necessarily manifest in predictable ways. Such perceptions of scholarship may prompt some teachers to encourage students to mimic certain approaches to literacy in

ten work, especially that which skirts expectation. Evaluations of scholarly propriety shape what gets read as error and how errors are prioritized. They also delimit what approaches to revision are advocated, and thereby shape the imagined purposes and priorities of teacher commentary on student writing. Third, attitudes toward scholarship help shape the role of reading in the composition classroom. Potential course texts deemed unscholarly or less rigorous might be withheld from the classroom, or might be read dismissively. What gets read—and how—has consequences for the kinds of writing implicitly valued, as well as the approaches to writing and thinking available for students to internalize as models for their own intellectual projects.

I take the connections above—between the work we think to be worthwhile from our colleagues and the work we try to solicit from our students—to be largely uncontroversial, though not often the object of reflection. If we are uncritically conservative in assessing what constitutes “true” scholarship then we have lost an important opportunity to interrogate the underlying assumptions that guide the work we do with and ask of our students. If we feel uncomfortable soliciting narrative in either one of these forums—professionally or pedagogically—then we can and should look to the other realm for clues about why we value, or are skeptical about, that work.

hopes of bringing them closer to doing academic work. But those same perceptions of what counts as scholarship might, instead, have teachers withhold certain writing practices from students because that work is deemed yet too advanced, too sophisticated.

1.5 AN OLD ENTRANCE: VALUING DIFFERENCE

To note the difficulty of resisting entrenched norms of scholarly discourse, it's enlightening to look at the historical impact of one of composition studies' most notable scholarly movements. I refer here to the movement theorizing student error, scholarship that has worked to disabuse educators from equating language difference with inferior intellectual work. This important body of scholarship, along with work toward validating students' rights to their own language, began to shift the discipline's prominent questions from what error and difference revealed about a student's ability to what those moments of *reading student error* revealed about the interpretive frames used to identify categories of difference. "[I]f we read any text the way we read freshman essays," Joseph Williams says in his "Phenomenology of Error" (1981), "we will find many of the same kind of errors we routinely expect to find and therefore do find. But [...] if we could make the ordinary kind of contract with those texts that we make with other kinds of texts, then we could find many fewer errors" (159). David Bartholomae runs the same path in "Writing on the Margins" (1987): "[Basic Writers] are not the only ones who make mistakes and who present their work in ways that are inappropriate for a university. Mainstream freshman, senior English majors, graduate students, our colleagues may all produce work that is naïve, wrong, or off the track. The issue, then, is not who misses the mark but whose misses matter and why" (113). In his 1985 article "The Language of Exclusion: Writing Instruction at the University," Mike Rose argues similarly that the university's treatment of basic writers reveals less about the writers themselves than about the university's "Myth of Transience"—the false (and damaging) assumption that basic writers' difficulties result from generational failures in student ability rather than challenges inherent to the intellectual work of writing (355).

At its most rich, composition studies' history of reading nonstandard discourses, styles, and approaches has helped teachers (and their institutions) become self-aware of long-held biases against certain kinds of language uses and users, and encouraged a suspicious eye toward the presumptive interpretations that color evaluations of student work. It would seem intuitive, one might think, that such a movement at the level of pedagogy would provide inroads into valuing textual diversity within the discipline's own scholarly culture—within the professional forums we write within and for. But if it is, and has been, difficult for the field to remember to value that diversity in student writing, it has been equally challenging to resist the normative pressures of scholarly discourse lamented by MLA and other professional organizations.

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The question remains, though: what is gained by soliciting work that breaks the comfortable and conventional boundaries of expectation? What gets lost, in our students' work and our own, if we continue to dismiss difference in favor of "texts that manifest the traits of consistency, coherence, parsimony" (Ede 161)? First, lessened diversity means fewer available resources for not just communicating but interpreting and representing experience. In short, monolingual commitments in scholarship tap into a smaller body of knowledge from a more limited swath of the community. Min-Zhan Lu argues convincingly that nonstandard englishes voice complex and hybrid experiences unlikely to find expression through standardized forms. Lu paints language use as a continual negotiation of competing interests, and she argues that the interests officially sanctioned by writing pedagogies too narrowly conceive of the ways students (and language users in general) resource multiple languages to make sense of their worlds. While students do use language valued by education's standard-bearers, they use that language alongside other less-

authorized languages that might better name, and make sense of, their experiences. Lu calls those determined to keep alive such non-sanctioned language uses “Living-English Users”:

If we approach “experience” in terms of socially constructed relations between individual selves, others, and the world, then the act of trying to “limn” or make a language “bear” or “carry” the burden of a particular lived experience would necessarily involve efforts to use language to interpret and represent such relations and their interrelations: to not only make sense of such relations while describing and legitimizing them but also shape how one lives such relations in light of one’s interpretation and representation. (Lu, “Living” 609)

These interpretive and representational values of language call into question what Lu defines as the “commodity approach” to literacy, in which “the acquisition of a language, whether a standardized or peripheralized English, is associated with the image of someone first buying or inheriting a ready-made, self-evident, discrete object—a tool (of communication) or a key (to success)—and then learning to use that object like an expert” (Lu, “Essay” 25). This commodity approach, along with the socio-economic benefits that are supposed to grace those who prescribe to it, is balanced against “what English-only instruction *cannot* do: it cannot address their needs to use English to articulate—work out meaningful connections across—experiences and circumstances of life consistently discredited by standardized English usages” (Lu, “Living” 609, original emphasis). Canagarajah likewise emphasizes the possibility of using multiple, diverse languages to create knowledge within and between authorized discourses of the center. “Writing is rhetorical negotiation for achieving social meanings and functions,” says Canagarajah. “We don’t write only to construct a rule-governed text [...] we write in order to perform important

social acts. We write to achieve specific interests, represent our preferred values and identities, and fulfill diverse needs” (Canagarajah, “Toward” 602).

Can an understanding of this commodity approach toward pedagogy help illuminate cultures of scholarship? To what extent do dominant conceptions of scholarship encourage a commodity approach to scholarly writing? What other possible approaches to meaning-making could come to the fore if scholars saw themselves as “living users” in Lu’s sense, refusing to prioritize their language primarily for the sake of “inheriting a ready-made, self-evident, discrete object—a tool (of communication) or a key (to success).”

The second consequence of excluding diverse languages is that such an absence makes it harder to resist the attempts of those who would reify language as a tool of domination. Walter Mignolo, whose work I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 3, values language uses (including scholarly interventions) that break through, straddle, and unsettle linguistic boundaries of power. According to Mignolo, “thinking and writing between languages” gets us “moving away from the idea that language is a fact (e.g., a system of syntactic, semantic, and phonetic rules), and moving toward the idea that speech and writing are strategies for orienting and manipulating social domains of interaction” (226). For Mignolo, such a correction is central to his mission to explore, expose, and intervene in the false hierarchies that justify colonial-imperial domination. Resisting that sentiment of reification, especially through language uses that cross “borders,” is itself an important act of decolonization because it recognizes the right of Other languages to move outside the static bounds of pre-established colonizing categories. Hence Mignolo’s privileging of what he calls “bilanguaging”: “that way of life between languages: a dialogical, ethic, aesthetic, and political process of social transformation rather than *energeia* emanating from an isolated speaker” (*Local* 265; see also Mignolo’s “Bi-Languaging Love”). In Lu’s terms, to em-

brace peripheral languages is to “tap into the knowledge and theory emerging from [...] the ways in which English has been continually and consistently ‘broken and invaded’—and thus kept alive—by users using it in and in the interest of ‘developing,’ ‘underdeveloped,’ or ‘undeveloped’ areas of the United States, the Americas, and the world [...]” (“Living” 612).

A third consequence of forfeiting peripheral languages is that doing so limits the resources available for composition studies to self-reflect on its own intellectual-disciplinary practices. Canagarajah calls this academe’s “self-fulfilling prophesy”: “what is not defined as acceptable knowledge is always going to be kept out and thus be prevented from becoming accepted knowledge. This situation denies the chance for center scholars to conduct thoroughgoing critiques or reconsideration of their dominant assumptions and practices” (*Geopolitics* 256). Without embracing “the tension and struggle between conflicting discourses that functions as the mechanism of scholarly development,” he adds, “center academic institutions are themselves impoverished by their hegemony” (*Geopolitics* 254).

1.6 WE MIGHT FIND OURSELVES HERE: ENTERING THROUGH FEAR

Lu defines composition as “Boundary Work”—as “efforts to articulate responses to (or take a stance towards) the dissonance between and across languages, englishes, and discourses [...]” (“Essay” 19). If we join Lu, then our work in composition, with student writing and with each other’s scholarship, will require a more attentive resistance to the tendency of institutional, disciplinary, and generic pressures to smooth over complex difference in the service of categorization and consistency. This dissertation argues that we would benefit from interrogating what

gets lost within the discipline—both the pieces of scholarship less seen and self-reflective resources less tapped—when it cedes to this blind momentum. It also argues that narratives of teaching and learning are causalities in this exchange, but that their lurking presence in the scholarly metropolis can pressure the field to pose critical questions about its disciplinary understanding.

Yet as I read Bernstein and Mignolo and Lu it is difficult not to feel personally implicated in this discussion about my own “response” to these possible dissonances. How am I to feel about my own scholarly production? What about the connection between my own work and the work I ask my students to produce? So much of my scholarship—including this dissertation—confirms my conservatism by being, as Wendy Bishop says, “predictably academic” (217). I speculate within these pages about the value of narrative discourses to our professional and pedagogical commitments, yet it has been some time since I’ve made a real attempt to narrate my own teaching (only in Chapter 4 do I try this here), despite the scraps of story I’ve written in less public forums. It has been even longer since I’ve asked my students to write personal narrative essays. To write in current frames of acceptance is easier than to imagine inventing something else.

But despite my own conventionalities I can’t help but wonder whether the most challenging intellectual work—that which is more valuable for its difficulty—is on the other side of what I am doing in this chapter. What would it mean to write a book-length narrative that would approximate the same critical work of this dissertation? What would it mean to visualize an intellectual destination for my students and have them get there through narrative? Not cheaply as in a one-time experiment, but as a dedicated approach to inquiry, as an attempt at thinking-in-

writing? What have I done to my students, Bernstein's voice asks through my lips? What am I doing to myself?

Fear, in part at least, is what makes it hard to take such steps outside of the norm (or to take the prior steps of confronting the structures that make taking those later steps seem unimaginable). I agree with Lu: "We need ways of using English," she says, "which unravel the fear that attend[ing] to dissonances between and across standardized and peripheralized languages, englishes, and discourses [...] will interfere with rather than enhance our expertise as users of English" ("Essay" 45). I take it that Lu implicates us all here. We are guilty for indulging our own fears and enabling the fears of others, both our students and colleagues. It behooves all of us as scholars who teach and teachers who write to search out ways to unravel that fear in our work and the work of our students. In order to conquer the fear that might snuff out our narrative impulses, we need to get better at knowing what narrative is doing in the field and better able to talk about why, as writers, we have chosen that route; it might also take confronting the discomfort that comes from reading others' narratives (something I will discuss in the next chapter). But we also must acknowledge the ways that a lack of engagement with narrative scholarship (caused in part by that fear) has resulted in a powerful ambivalence toward narrative's presence in the field.

In "Resisting Monolingualism in 'English,'" Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu comment that within a "multilingual" approach to language, "writing itself is understood as the site of a clash of shifting expectations and beliefs about writing" (149). At bottom, this project is an attempt to show that, despite the monolithic façade of scholarship, the same can be said about scholarly communities: scholarship can and should be read not just for its "content," but as evidence of shifting expectations and beliefs about what counts as valuable writing for ourselves

and our students. This project argues that an investigation into narrative might expose that evidence, and provide inroads to abandoning that ambivalence.

Here is a set of questions suggesting the promise of such an investigation:

1. Could an engagement with narrative form help composition's scholarly culture acknowledge, value, and perpetuate hybridity and intertextuality (to use Hesford and Schell's language) within composition's professional discourses and the discourses of its students?
2. Can narrative scholarship's contested position as scholarship help the discipline better understand, characterize, or recalibrate the arbitrary relationship and inter-related histories of scholarly centers and scholarly peripheries?
3. Since transnational composition emphasizes contact and interaction between diverse kinds of language through "a more complex and sophisticated theory of culture, cultural interconnectivity, and language" (Hesford and Schell 465), how might considering narrative's place within scholarship precipitate those more sophisticated understandings?
4. Can narrative scholarship allow a hearing for speakers who might otherwise be silenced? Can it make accessible a wider set of contexts and conversations from a more diverse set of voices? Can it encourage composition studies to broaden existing contexts from which scholarly work is solicited?
5. Transnational theories see conflicts between competing cultures of language as generative, propelling, creating. Can discussions about and inclusions of narrative scholarship foreground tacit movements within the discipline's identity-trajectory,

and create opportunities for composition scholarship to solicit and value work that pushes against and revises long-held disciplinary tenants?

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In the chapters that follow I try to demonstrate the ways that narrative scholarship can productively disrupt the tendency to seal ourselves within the restrictive walls we rarely see fit to tear down.

Chapter Two begins this work by examining the limitations of our dominant modes of reading narrative—both as we encounter them in the scholarship of colleagues and in the writing of our students. The gap between narrative’s ubiquity in scholarship and persistent doubts about its belonging should make us wonder not just what aspects of scholarly decorum narrative may violate, but how dominant *approaches to reading scholarship* might be ill-suited to understand narrative’s value. One important criteria of scholarly reading, I argue, is a work’s citational rigor—it’s ability to mark its participation in scholarly discussion through its uses of bibliographic citation and rhetorical positioning. Recent attempts to bolster the legitimacy of a long-dismissed body of pedagogical knowledge—the “scholarship of teaching” (Shulman, Huber, and Hutchings)—highlight the importance of such citation. I argue here that those demands are too-easily seen as at odds with conventional narrative form, and that this case shows the importance of imagining other ways that narrative scholarship can mark its engagement in scholarly “conversation.” This matter of how we read narrative conversation does not only impact the reading of narrative scholarship, I contend, but also bears on the ways we evaluate and interact with (that is, read and comment on) the narratives we ask students to write.

Chapter Three discusses the two-year college as a potentially important locus for theorizing narrative scholarship’s value vis-à-vis the discipline’s presumptions of value. By most statis-

tics, two-year colleges teach nearly half of all undergraduate composition courses in the U.S. each year, a number that will only increase as the costs of higher education continue to rise due to struggling local, state, and national economies. Yet despite this incredible opportunity for knowledge production within Composition (and, in fact, because of the material constraints provided by that burden), two-year-college-composition teachers battle for scholarly participation and legitimacy. They often face meager encouragement and support from within their institutions, heavy workloads that make dedicated research difficult, and cultural and academic stereotypes that denigrate their generalist knowledge and teaching focus. These marginalizing pressures have attracted many two-year-college compositionists to marginalized forms of scholarship that skirt mainstream acceptance—especially narratives of teaching and learning. By examining claims that two-year-college stories produce a kind of “border knowledge,” and by extending those claims through postcolonial theories that value peripheral knowledges (e.g. Mignolo; Anzaldúa; Glissant), Chapter Three investigates how narrative scholarship has come to represent the potential of intellectual exchange within and from two-year-college composition. What can this unique institutional space, with its particular student body and particular location of its faculty, teach us about the potential of narrative knowledge-making?

Chapter Four considers how narrative might not only disrupt the discipline through its scholarly presence, but might also do so through students’ uses of narrative. I argue that writing students—this group that is frequently the object of scholarly investigation but rarely a party to scholarship’s creation—can use narrative reflections of their learning as access points by which to theorize the discipline. To explore the benefits of student narratives of the classroom, I analyze the weekly journal entries (amongst other reflective writing) my “basic writing” students produced as they grappled with the ongoing challenges of the class’s trajectory, often by telling

stories about the ways I, and the discipline I represent, were failing them. By being witness to this collective online space (which I too wrote in and for) I became audience to my students' scholarly critiques of the discipline that, for this fourteen-week term, largely dominated their educations. By looking at these acts of student critique through the lens of postmodern and surrealist ethnographic theory I argue for the value of asking students (especially those historically typecast as burdens, rather than contributors, to academe's intellectual mission) to be read as redirectors of the discipline, rather than merely objects of its gaze. The stories told by students as they interact with our professional and intellectual spheres not only interrogate the theories we pursue on our students' behalves but also train our ears to read "complaints" as valuable—and often sophisticated—critiques of the disciplinary structures so often hidden from the very students we work with and for.

Before embarking on this investigation, I'd like to end this introduction with an important caveat. In marking narrative's possibilities and limits, it is important, but difficult, to resist overgeneralizations about this body of supposedly unified and stable backdrop of "dominant" scholarship that narrative scholarship may contest. I hope I have avoided those temptations in what follows. What I call narrative disruptions are not stable; they operate as slippery variables standing on an ever-shifting ground. We might remember that composition studies itself was born out of an attempt to disrupt certain monoliths of academe—the dominance of Literature in English Studies, a dominance which became increasingly incapable (and often times unwilling) to theorize the role of student writing in the discipline. Now through its own processes of disciplinization, composition studies is beset by self-created restrictions about what is worthy of attention. What is once unimaginable becomes entrenched; what is now entrenched will eventually give way to new norms. Even if narrative scholarship has the ability to urge critical

reflection about composition's too-comfortable practices, as I claim it does, it may not always have this disruptive power.

In her essay "Daring to Dream: Re-Visioning Culture and Citizenship," Mary Louis Pratt tries to imagine a progression toward a "new national subject"—the "polyglot citizen" (borrowing from Renato Rosaldo)—who participates in a new American project: replacing dominant ideologies of monolingualism and monoculturalism with an "extraordinary multilingualism." She says,

as a purely linguistic entity, the polyglot citizen would be the result of changing realities in the U.S., notably the arrival of large, new immigrant populations—8.5 million in the 1980s alone, and that's the official figure. On the other hand [...] such a concept would simply *incorporate into the national understanding realities that have constituted American life and history for a very long time*. For of course multilingualism, intercultural contact, radical social heterogeneity and discontinuity have been part of human history in the Americas for a very long time [...*T*] *he polyglot American has been everywhere but never named as a model for citizenship*. (my emphasis, 6-7)

Pratt's orientation helps me imagine a nuanced view of narrative scholarship's status vis-à-vis composition's disciplinary culture. My claim is not that narrative's presence will make the field anew, nor even that the discipline's scholarly body does not already contain adventurous and risky scholarly texts (ones that would make narratives of teaching look tame). Rather my claim is that, like Pratt's polyglot citizen, the polyglot scholar—the scholar who dabbles in experimentation more than expectation—is surely everywhere, but has not, despite flashes of presence, become "a model for [academic] citizenship." To accept narrative's disruptive value in composition's culture of scholarship would be not to introduce something new or revolutionary, but to

“simply incorporate into [disciplinary] understanding realities that have constituted [composition’s] life and history for a long time.” It would be to take what has been “everywhere,” in a certain sense, and self-consciously name what that presence makes possible. It will be the naming, and the critical processes brought to bear in that naming, that enrich our professional consciousness as teachers and scholars.

2.0 AFTER THE TELLING, THEN WHAT? NARRATIVE AND THE PROBLEM OF CONVERSATION

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In his editorial afterword to *Comp Tales: An Introduction to Composition Through its Stories*, Richard Haswell describes his initial doubts that composition narratives could substantially intervene in the field: “[These narratives] felt, well, lightweight. They just didn’t seem to go very far. What they didn’t have were those ideas—they appear in every issue of the trade journals—that pull together or light up or transform whole chunks of our understanding about the profession” (184). Haswell eventually goes on to co-edit *Comp Tales* despite this initial hesitation, admitting, “Actually I was wrong. I just didn’t know what to make of what we had. I was just better at taking in a composition article than a comp tale” (184).

If Haswell’s conversion feels a bit too easy (and I think it does), I still find useful his way of framing the difficulty of encountering scholarly “tales” in composition studies. As Haswell’s impulse toward dismissal demonstrates, such narratives are often approached with skepticism about whether their form is antithetical to the intellectual work most valued by the discipline. The question often asked, in other words, is *Can narratives of teaching and learning “cut it” as scholarship?* But Haswell inverts the question from whether the *genre* can be scholarly into a query about whether our *reading practices* neglect the genre’s scholarly possibilities. Or, to put the issue more

broadly, he asks us to consider now much our evaluations of scholarship depend on characteristics of the text, and how much they depend instead on the frames of reading we bring to bear in making use of those elements.

The consequences of that distinction are not innocent since narratives of teaching, like all texts, operate within community contexts bounded by particular reading practices and values. In “Thoughts on Reading ‘the Personal’: Toward a Discursive Ethics of Professional Critical Literacy,” Jane Hindman recognizes the uphill climb for “personal” scholarship to become recognized as intellectual work within composition’s community: “Historically, scholars have submitted to the discipline’s view of the self and affect as unauthorized subjects; we’ve been trained to see authors’ revelations of their personal stories or emotions as self-indulgent at worst, irrelevant at best” (Hindman 11). She notes that these practices of reading and valuing, which in this case interpret “personal” gestures as debilitating rather than enabling, have not, as I noted in my first chapter, kept pace with the increasing distribution of such scholarly narratives throughout the field. “It would seem to go without saying,” Hindman continues,

that these calls for and responses to an ever-growing expansion in the conventions of the academic essay—in professionals’ critical literacy—require similar expansion in the conventions for scholarly consumption of academic texts. But say it I must, for despite the discipline’s growing acceptance of such alternative discourse(s), many if not most academic readers remain committed to conventional professional practices of reading. (11)

The “dissonance” between the expanding practices of production and still-limited practices of reading, “presents a crucial ethical dilemma in our professional discursive practice: we argue for

innovations in our professional writing but remain faithful to conventional logics, gestures, and epistemologies in our reading” (Hindman 12).

This disjunction is an ethical, rather than merely practical, matter because from that gap emerge judgments about scholarly quality, judgments that, by default, privilege familiar discourses. Common linguistic character enables easy communication between those in the community, but that same commonality can easily be harnessed as circumscriptive grounds for marginalizing discourses that cannot seamlessly participate.⁸ The questions of who has the burden for “taking in” a given text (and therefore who will be judged deficient in a failed exchange) is a political matter dependent, in part, upon who has the power to define and police norms and who, on the other hand, feels pressure to conform to those standards by normalizing their language in relation to the center. Such power differentials establish loci of critique that judge textual difference as failure—both of ability and effort—to conform to that center.

In line with these observations, we might consider three broad propositions that help illuminate the problem of narrative reception within the larger community of composition studies scholarship:

1. How a text “works” or operates depends not only on its characteristics—its form, language, organization, design, etc.—but also how the text (and its features) are received, interpreted, read.
2. Where the burden lies for textual meaning-making is unstable and negotiable, but is largely determined by the discourse of power. In the case of “nonstandard” texts, blame for difficulty in meaning-making is more likely fall on the side of textual production—of the writer being “unclear” (perhaps on the sentence level) or

⁸ For linguistic accounts of this phenomenon, see Stubbs (2002) and Gee (1989).

unaware of, and therefore not properly catering to, the textual decorum or rhetorical moves valued by the audience. In contrast, in the case of texts written in discourses of privilege, the difficulty will more likely be ascribed to the reader's behaviors or practices or even against readers themselves who may be typed as uneducated, lazy, or insufficiently literate (linguistically or culturally) to understand the text.

3. Languages of power, because of their tendency to normalize their positions as presumptive objects of desire, create a context of linguistic forgetting⁹ which continually obscures histories of language diversity and reinforces the language of power as desirable (economically and socially). This power imbalance perpetuates a relationship wherein language users of center discourses are accustomed to—and even expect—others to conform to the center's standards, while feeling little obligation to revise their own hearing/reading practices to understand those others.

Because of the tentative, unauthorized (to use Hindman's term) position of the personal within academia, narratives of teaching and those who write them are especially saddled with the burden of justifying their discourse to their scholarly community, rather than the community feeling convicted to adapt more productive ways to read them.

This is why I'm particularly interested in the inversion toyed with by Haswell and Hindman—the move from evaluating the (un)skillful production of narrative to evaluating (un)generative interpretations of narrative: I'm curious about how our frames of reading shape

⁹ See John Trimbur's "Linguistic Memory and the Politics of U.S. English" and Mary Louis Pratt's "Daring to Dream: New Visions of Culture and Citizenship."

perceptions of narratives of teaching, and especially how those narratives are seen to confirm or violate scholarly norms. I write this chapter, then, less to argue for one specific mode of reading scholarly narratives than to begin a line of questioning which emerges from a particular difficulty of reading narrative scholarship—and just as much, a difficulty reading and evaluating my students’ narrative compositions. What would it mean to become “better at taking in” this kind of writing as intellectually valuable? How might I, and others implicated by that question, go about becoming better at reading the narratives of our colleagues and students alike?

The term I use to frame this investigation is *conversation*. I argue below that one of the primary values by which we understand the work of scholarship is by its ability to precipitate, participate in, and extend intellectual conversations within the field. I argue that judgments of scholarly quality revolve, importantly though often only implicitly, around determinations of a text’s ability to incite such conversational exchange and, further, assumptions about who/what is to blame when those conversations fall flat.

Identifying conversation as grounds of inclusion or dismissal is important for threefold reasons: First judgments about conversational value matter for how we understand the status of narrative as a scholarly discourse; second they matter for how we understand the ways we read student narratives; third (and less obvious) they matter for how those students learn to read and revise their own narratives, as they model teachers’ practices of interpretation, commentary, and conversation. For this complex of reasons, I use two interlinked approaches to investigate these questions: my first is reflective, hypothesizing about the general assumptive grounds upon which readings of scholarship—and dissatisfaction with the narrative variety—might be based. How do our typical readings of narrative—and our assumptions about what it offers—shape and limit the “conversations” we have with these stories? What expectations of scholarly conversation do

narratives violate in the eyes of their academic audience? What kinds of conversations are typically struck with narrative in the discipline, and how might those conversations seem ill-suited to satisfy the expectations of scholarly conversation?

Second, I investigate the consequences of those reading practices of scholarship to the ways we interact with narrative pedagogies. I analyze an extended cycle of production and revision of a narrative written by one of my freshman composition students as he tries to make critical, intellectual, scholarly use of his own narrative. By reframing this discussion around student narrative (rather than sticking exclusively to professional scholarship), I want to show that the reading frames that shape our interaction and evaluation of narrative scholarship are equally problematic, and equally challenging to avoid, when reading student narratives. The difficulty of reading this student's narrative—demonstrated both by me through my teacher commentary and by the student through his revision process—is not unlike (and should be informed by) our difficulties interacting with our colleagues' narratives of teaching. And yet this case is not just a way of understanding how scholarly reading approaches affect (in a top down fashion) our reading of student work; it is also to say the converse: critically investigating our relationships with students and student narrative opens up theoretical pathways for naming what narratives might or might not achieve as scholarship, and how they might disrupt our current thinking about cultures of teaching and scholarship alike. Which is perhaps to say that not only do our narratives of teaching disrupt paradigms scholarly culture, but students' narratives do as well, a matter I investigate further in Chapter 4.

2.2 THE CHALLENGE OF READING: CITATIONAL AND CONVERSATIONAL DEMANDS

Kathy Carter, in her survey of the recent surge of narrative scholarship, notes that narrative scholarship dissatisfies some because an “extreme emphasis on a teacher’s personal meaning implies that such stories are of significance only to the writer” (8). This notion of limited significance—a significance not transportable to a broad audience because it is restricted to the narrator herself—is a common point of criticism for narratives of teaching. Jane Hindman, in recounting her experience editing *College English*’s special issue on “The Personal in Academic Writing” (September 2003), laments similarly that “some authors use ‘the personal’ to reveal intimate details of their lives not readily or even tangentially relevant to professional work; to be cloyingly flip or trendy or hip; to satisfy their longing to write creative nonfiction without much academic purpose. Who can really blame readers for being nervous about or disappointed in such writing?” (12).¹⁰ Without displaying a sense of “academic purpose,” as Hindman says, such narratives threaten to portray an aura of unapproachability, of operating independently of the scholarly, disciplinary, and institutional structures that typically inform academic work. “[L]ike all professional writing,” Hindman says, personal scholarship “cannot be properly ‘placed’ in the academic unless it’s social, that is, constructed for readers in the context in which it is to be received (10), or, in Carter’s terms, in the context of a “a community in which readers make something of them” (8).

¹⁰ By her own account, Hindman is primarily drawn to what she calls “embodied personal writing” (following feminist efforts to create embodied research methodologies)—writing that uses the personal to “stage the author grappling with his or her own self-construction(s)” (10). That staging is not necessarily presented through the kind of personal scholarship I’m most concerned with in this study—narratives of lived experience. Even so, her concerns are largely applicable to the case of personal narrative storytelling.

Such communities can be immediate and local, as in the case of the submissions to Hindman's special issue of *CE*, many of which failed to cater to "*College English* referees' traditional concerns (articulated on the standard referee questionnaire), such as whether or not the subject will be of general interest to readers of *College English*, whether previous and current scholarship on the topic is acknowledged, how likely other authors might be to cite the submission, and how readily non-specialists will understand the article" (Hindman 10). But a disconnection from the academic community can go far beyond an ignorance of a given journal's readership. At worst that disconnection can truncate the broad possibility of scholarly evaluation or interaction. Richard Flores recounts these larger worries in his contribution to a discussion about "Problems of the Personal": "[T]he collegial, collective, and communal process of producing, evaluating, and disseminating knowledge is necessary to intellectual activity. The personal seemingly stifles this process by silencing the judgments and critiques of others. How are my evaluative peers to assess my scholarly work that is fastened to my experience [...]? Could my peers write in their reviews that my account is incorrect and that I must reconsider my experience?" (1166).

Interestingly, Flores' characterization ascribes the difficulty of engaging with narrative to the particular nature of its content. That content is imagined to be too personal and therefore cannot be evaluated because it cannot be sufficiently extricated or abstracted from the author's individual history and meaning. Within such a view, if the personal cannot be easily "placed" within the community, that difficulty is due to the ways personal narrative content is inherently less "place-able" than the content typical to research-based articles. Indeed, I would argue that the common criticism of narrative scholarship as navel gazing or solipsistic rests very much up-

on this premise: that narrative content by its very character can provide only impotent engagements with scholarly subject matter and the community which it concerns.

But the temptation to dismiss narrative for its particularity of content misses the complex transaction that makes any content *mean*. As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, narrative scholarship's status as "understandable" within a scholarly community is not just a matter of whether that content is personal-experiential instead of universal-theoretical; rather scholarship's ability to make meaning is always bounded within the reading practices of communities that understand particular conventional gestures as marking and soliciting certain conversational engagement with the community. If narrative's compact universe is alienating to some academic readers, as it seems to be, it is found to be so by readers who have difficulty integrating those narrative worlds within their own scholarly cosmologies.¹¹ In other words, the problem is one of striking a dialogue, and as such it is not merely the failure of the narrative content to prompt engagement; it is also the failure of the reader to know how to converse with narrative content, content that rarely demonstrates the same markers of conversational engagement to which academic readers are trained to attune.

This difficulty of establishing narrative conversation is unsurprising if we consider the ways academic discourse typically establishes and marks conversation—through citation, a practice so internalized within discursive scholarship as to be unremarkable, but a strategy quite foreign to narrative scholarship. Since the operations of citation provide a useful demonstration of the power of conversation-marking conventions (and narrative's difficulty using those conventions), I'd like to explore citation in more depth by turning to a movement that has spent the last

¹¹ I do not mean to shift responsibility away from the producers of such narratives and onto the readers, and my goal is certainly not to assign blame to "bad" readings. Rather I mean to give a more complex account of what is happening in these reading exchanges.

several years exposing the importance of citation as a conversation marker: the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, particularly those involved in the foundation's CASTL initiative (the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning). These scholars have been exploring the power of citation to bolster the profile of pedagogical scholarship and, thereby, to intervene in the pervasive hierarchy between research and teaching.

Few figures have been as active in establishing the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning movement (which I'll abbreviate SoTL) as Lee Shulman, now-retired president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and co-founder of CASTL. Shulman's work has been a touchstone for scholars across the academy who commit not only to producing scholarship that investigates questions of teaching and learning in their disciplines, but who promote a recognizable movement to validate such pedagogical scholarship across the academy. One of Shulman's most cited contributions is his argument that teaching's marginalization in the academy (that is, the marginalization that necessitates a movement like SoTL in the first place) is not a consequence of institutional indifference to teaching's importance—which is how the scholarship/teaching divide often gets characterized—but rather that the isolated nature of teaching removes it from the academy's ritualistic channels of visibility and evaluation:

I now believe that the reason teaching is not more valued in the academy is because the way we treat teaching removes it from the community of scholars. It is not that universities diminish the importance of teaching because they devalue the act itself; it is not that research is seen as having more intrinsic value than teaching. Rather, we celebrate those aspects of our lives and work that can become [...] 'community property.' And if we wish to see greater recognition and

reward attached to teaching, we must change the status of teaching from private to community property. (141)

Creating a framework of support through which scholarship about teaching and learning is sustainably visible across disciplines and institutions describes the larger project of the SoTL movement. This broad goal of visibility depends on individual acts of scholarship that transcend pedagogical solitude to become community property. But being seen as community property is not just a matter of “getting out there”; it is a matter of reproducing the textual characteristics that make those works recognizable alongside other well-worn scholarly forms. In Shulman’s words, SoTL “must be made visible through artifacts that capture its richness and complexity,” artifacts “that can be shared, discussed, critiqued, exchanged, built upon” (142). Shulman suggests that to be “celebrated,” which I take to mean respected as scholarship rather than dismissed, they must be visible, be able to be “taken in” (to return to Haswell’s words). And yet gaining that visibility is a complex issue. As I suggest above, becoming visible demands more than walking into the light; it depends on an audience capable and willing to interpret that work as worthy of celebration. To be recognized and accepted, scholarship must demonstrate first that it belongs, and it must do so in ways that are appropriate and recognizable to the community.

Shulman’s colleagues at CASTL—Mary Taylor Huber and Pat Hutchings—have further nuanced the properties necessary for SoTL to produce artifacts that can be acknowledged as scholarly within the discourse expectations of the academy. According to Huber and Hutchings “habits of citation are part of what is most needed to make the otherwise often fugitive work of teaching and learning grist for a commons with broad reach and significant potential to improve practice” (xiv). By “habits of citation” I take Huber and Hutchings to mean both 1) explicit cita-

tion via the mechanics of parenthetical reference, footnotes, and bibliography and 2) rhetorical gestures that position the author's intellectual formation within a larger context of scholarly thought.

These habits of citation, both mechanical and rhetorical, are recognizable features of academic discourse; they thus mark community membership—in this case by demonstrating knowledge of the rhetorical conventions and methodological practices valued by that discourse community. It is also important to note, however, that habits of citation promise to be more than rituals by which academic discourse polices its borders. What Huber and Hutchings value, and Shulman too, is citation's ability to create spaces of participation (both literal and imaginary) in which scholarship speaks and its audience listens and responds.

The value of citation in its various forms is that it situates the author's ideas alongside others', couching those ideas within intellectual work that has come before and the possibility of the intellectual work that might yet come. Scholarship, then, does not just emerge from reactions to others' ideas (which might be marked with varying degrees of explicit attribution), but also marks the topical, methodological, and disciplinary conversations in which it expects to be received. In that process of situating itself within conversations and alongside other conversers, scholarship solicits particular kinds of readings from particular readerships, and may, again with varying levels of explicitness and aggression, solicit future rejoinders from those who might support, refine, or resist that work through their own scholarly production. In this sense citation is not only the act of stepping on the scaffolds others have built, but also extending that scaffolding so as to provide footing for future projects.

If the above observations about citation seem intuitive (or even obvious) CASTL's efforts show that the capacity they describe is far from benign. In the move to position oneself,

one's work, within and against colleagues', a scholar is seen as taking seriously values broadly held in the academy: wide and deep reading with an investment in and contribution to a community of thought whose purposes extend beyond individual scholar's narrow proclivities. We might say that citation, then—when understood broadly as conversation—is not just a physical marker of academic discourse or scholarly genre, but a defining feature of scholarship's project. Without citation, a text is, perhaps, not scholarship at all, but something else: a soliloquy in a community that values, because it depends on, dialogue. As a result, its no surprise that conversational engagement is taken as a signpost of intellectual rigor.

SoTL's project makes a strong case for the value and importance of citation. Because these Carnegie scholars are battling a specter of pedagogical scholarship resistant to citation—due to a history of conceptualizing good teaching as gifted exceptionalism rather than practiced reflection¹²—CASTL has focused on citation's import in justifying SoTL's status alongside academia's more typical objects of study. In other words, CASTL scholars are, in part, concerned with increasing citational rigor to correct perceived lack of quality signaled by absent citation. It makes sense, then, that CASTL's intervention asks producers of pedagogical scholarship to “cultivate habits of citation” in their writings. Shulman, Huber, and Hutchings make it their goal to expose the rules of the dominant paradigm of scholarship and encourage scholars of teaching and learning to master the rules and be viewed as serious players.¹³

¹² See Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori's *Pedagogy: Disturbing History, 1819 to 1929*, as well as Robert Scholes' *The Rise and Fall of English*.

¹³ I don't mean to suggest that increasing the visibility of pedagogical scholarship is CASTL's only aim or SoTL's primary intervention. I acknowledge that CASTL's primary goal is to deepen the theoretical foundations for pedagogical scholarship, in part by creating a record of pedagogical knowledge that can be built upon and refined by others. My point, rather, is that increasing the visibility of this scholarship is crucial to making its knowledge widespread, and bringing that scholarship in line with the broad conventions of scholarship is crucial to establishing that visibility.

This strategy of better appeasing existing frames of reading poses a problem, though, for narratives of teaching. It should be obvious that narrative scholarship cannot easily signal its commitment to conversation in the ways discursive scholarship can: by reproducing the textual features of parenthetical citation and bibliography. Narratives do not typically employ mechanical devices of citation. They do not often situate their content alongside existing scholarship, at least not explicitly, since narrative presents itself through first-person experience rather than transportable concepts. Thus, not only are the mechanics of citation strange to narrative as a genre, but their very absence seems to reflect the fact that narrative material emerges less from conversation with previous scholarship than from a “conversation” with experience.

Just as important as their difficulty signaling conversations from which they emerge or those in which they wish to enter, scholarly narratives also have difficulty signaling what conversations they want to precipitate. Readers can and might, by their own will and effort, see resonances between a narrative and an existing scholarly conversations, but conjecture about such conversations might not be enough to stir further involvement from that readership, to mobilize readers to incorporate that material into future work of their own.

It is this second step—being extended by the readership—that seems particularly difficult for narratives of teaching, and particularly crucial to interrogate if we are to understand narrative’s possibilities in a scholarly community that values conversation. Because of the nature of their discourse as non-evidential and non-argumentative, narratives of teaching aren’t so easily mobilized within others’ scholarship. One way of thinking about this challenge is to consider how discursive scholarship is typically picked up by others and hauled around town. Perhaps its premises and conclusions are questioned or revised. Perhaps pieces of its evidence or theoretical orientations are carried off to be used or remodeled elsewhere. Though versions of this engage-

ment might be possible with narrative scholarship, that engagement is less intuitive since narrative depends on its unity of detail to make meaning; it thus doesn't lend itself to being excerpted and reproduced elsewhere. To cite another's story in one's own scholarship is to begin unraveling a very long thread.

Thus narrative scholarship finds itself in a difficult position in the academy. It is the object of genuine concern by those questioning the rigor of scholarship that doesn't explicitly emerge from, or inspire, future conversation. And yet, by its very form, narrative is ill-equipped to fulfill such demands on existing terms. To ignore narrative's difficulty inspiring conversation is to ignore one of the most crucial ways that the field evaluates intellectual work. But to ask narratives to converse via typical forms of academic citation—that is, to explicitly signal the conversations they wish to extend and create—would be to ask them to upend their rhetorical and intellectual projects.

If it is misguided to evaluate narratives of teaching by whether they enter scholarly conversation via conventional forms of mechanical and rhetorical citation—and I think it is—it's not unreasonable to ask how we might revise our reading frames to understand other ways narratives might create or enter conversation. Or, to put it differently, rather than lament that narratives are not doing something that they've never claimed to do well, we might instead reflect on how we read narratives and what we might change about those ways of reading to better understand the intellectual work narratives pretend to make possible. If narratives do converse with readers in ways we are not yet good at naming, what are those ways and how do we harness them? As I've tried to show above, one element of that equation is the readers' burden to receive and further the ideas within narratives of teaching—to make them scholarly, in effect, through their own engagement with them.

But not just any kind of conversation will do.

2.3 TROUBLED ENGAGEMENTS

I don't, of course, wish to suggest that anyone consciously dismisses narratives for lacking par-
enthetical citation or bibliographic apparatuses. Most readers surely recognize narrative as a dis-
tinct genre with different structural obligations. Rather my argument is that without the guidance
of conventional markers of citation, readers are left to read these narratives for other kinds of
conversation, for other ways to engage. And on that spectrum of engagement (complete dismis-
sal being one terminus of that spectrum) less rigorous approaches reinforce the notion that nar-
rative provides only inferior intellectual rewards compared to research-oriented or theoretical
scholarship. The problem, then, as I will argue below, is not that narratives of teaching and
learning are *dismissed* by the field (their steady publication would suggest they are not) as that
they are *misread* by the field, or perhaps better said, that they are read absent of a framework that
could make sense of their value to the discipline.

To consider the pressures of academic reading on these narratives, I find it useful to look
at the ways these narratives are valued as much as they are criticized. Earnest attempts to praise
narratives reveal, just as criticisms do, implicit arguments about the intellectual value of that
work as scholarship, and implicit guidelines for what kinds of conversations readers can and
should strike up with that narrative material.

One interesting place to look for praising readings of narratives of teaching are academic
book reviews. As one might expect, the increased publication of narrative texts, especially an-

thologies showcasing narratives of teaching and learning, has been followed by reviews of those texts within the discipline's prominent journals. This is especially true for the more prominent collections mentioned in my introduction.¹⁴ Though I should be careful not to generalize too heartily from a set of individual scholar's opinions, I find these reviews have potential to be broadly instructive because of the rhetorical context of their creation. Because academic reviews, as a genre, are crafted to appear in the field's professional forums, these reviewers presumably discuss narrative in terms thought to be understandable, palatable, and resonant with their audiences. At their best, these reviews—like academic reviews of this genre more generally—make a case (more or less explicitly) for the text's value to the field and recommend that value via assumptions and projections about how the text will (and should) be used by the academic audience that might read it. This is to say that such reviews don't just represent one scholar's approach to reading narratives, they advocate a reading approach or an evaluative discourse for discussing these texts.

In this next section I look at a range of these scholarly reviews. Most of these reviewers grouped narrative collections in multi-text reviews, suggesting the ways the reviewers saw them participating in a larger disciplinary movement toward legitimizing narrative knowledge-making.¹⁵ In order to categorize the wide range of terms used by reviewers to name narrative's

¹⁴ Joseph Trimmer's *Narration as Knowledge: Tales of the Teaching Life*, Wendy Bishop's *Teaching Lives: Essays and Stories* (a collection of her own past work), Jan Schmidt's *Women/Writing/Teaching*, Thomas McCracken et. al.'s *Teaching College English and English Education: Reflective Stories*, and Duane Roen et. al.'s *Living Rhetoric and Composition: Stories of the Discipline*, Diana George's *Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers & Troubadours: Writing Program Administrators Tell Their Stories*; Lynn Bloom's *Composition Studies as a Creative Art: Teaching, Writing, Scholarship, Administration* (another mixed-genre self-collection); Min Zhan Lu and Richard Haswell's *Comp Tales: An Introduction to Composition Through its Stories*.

¹⁵ The fact that each review grouped these texts differently made it difficult at times to pinpoint what was being said specifically in regard to a single text. Although this variety made it difficult to draw broad conclusions about how a single text was most often viewed, the grouped reviews proved useful since they often self-consciously concerned themselves with these texts as representative of a movement to value personal narrative scholarship. This recognition that these texts are recognizably part of a larger movement bolsters my claim that these reviewers aren't just talking about their

value, I turn to Walter Fisher's two categories of narrative rationality, the two ways readers naturally judge narrative: through an assessment of "narrative probability" and "narrative fidelity." Candace Spigelman has used Fisher's categories as one resource to "continue to fight for the personal narrative" by helping to "ensure measures for determining judgment" (80). Fisher's categories, according to Spigelman, are particularly suited for providing these measures since they represent ways we all, as intuitively narrative creatures, judge narrative quality. Fisher's theory, Spigelman says, "asserts that humans instinctively know how to produce and judge stories because stories are an 'inherent' way of organizing experience and understanding that organization (80). For the purpose of my analysis, this innate and therefore widespread ground of evaluation provides useful categories for identifying common patterns of engagement relied upon by these reviews, and thus allows useful speculation about how these ways of reading may be poorly reflected upon because of how "intuitive" they are.

NARRATIVE PROBABILITY: COHERENT CHARACTERS, COHERENT STORIES

One of the primary ways we interact with narrative, according to Fisher, is by judging a story's narrative probability—that is, the internal coherence of the story as a whole, the way a story "hangs together" (*Human Communication* 47). This coherence is established through multiple pathways: it relates to the structural coherence of the story's arc, the consistent presentation of characters' (and narrator's) behaviors and motivations, and level of detail that renders the characters and story-world in life-like terms.¹⁶

personal proclivities for narrative, but that they are saying something in line with, or adding to, existing (and already authorized) ways of discussing this kind of work.

¹⁶ I've omitted technical terms here for the sake of a streamlined summary, but Fisher divides narrative coherence into three categories: "Coherence has three aspects. First, there is a concern for *argumentative or structural coherence*. Second,

Such a focus on the power of narratives as coherent, credible, and compelling, is prominent in many of these reviews and at times appears to be the primary lens of engagement through which texts are judged. Stephanie Vandrick's review of *Narration as Knowledge* (Joseph Trimmer's anthology of teaching stories from the writing classroom) makes this focus evident as she discusses the engagement provided by vivid depictions of real-feeling environments: "The immediacy of the stories' portrayal of distinct moments in and around the classroom, complete with vivid characters and compellingly realistic dialogue, makes this book very readable" (153-154). The careful detail noted by Vandrick is not only important to readability, however; it also creates a level of believability needed for the reader to image herself within a visualizable story world and thus be motivated to invest in that world's happenings.

Kate Ronald's review of several narrative anthologies indicates her own desire for "readability." She applauds the texts she reviews for containing "all the elements of good narrative"—"heroes, villains, colorful characters, tragedy, comic relief, suspense, happy endings, and instructional morals" (256).¹⁷ But when Ronald comments next that that these stories manage to include these elements while "avoid[ing] fairy-tale endings," she makes clear that she, like Vandrick, is very much concerned with narrative believability—with the need for these stories to balance compelling action with realistic and believable portrayal of those events (264). This is to

there is a concern for *material coherence*, which is determined by comparing and contrasting [a] story with stories told in other relevant discourses. By juxtaposing stories that purport to tell the 'truth about a given matter, one is able to discern factual errors, omission of relevant arguments, and any other sort of distortion. It is important to recognize that any discourse is as good as it stands with or against other stories. There is, in other words, no story that is not embedded in other stories. Third, there is a concern for *characterological coherence*. Here there is regard for the intelligence, integrity, and goodwill (ethos) of the author, the values he or she embodies and would advance in the world (character). The degree to which one adheres to the message of any story is always related to the degree to which the narrator is taken to be a character whose word warrants attendance, if not adherence. In each of these features of coherence, values are manifest: consistency, completeness, and character." (original emphasis, "Narration, Knowledge" 177. Also see *Human Communication* 47).

¹⁷ Ronald reviews Bishop's *Teaching Lives*, McCracken and Larson's *Teaching College English and English Education*, and Trimmer's *Narration as Knowledge*.

say that though many of these reviewers seemed to appreciate a compelling action in a story, deep investment seemed to equally depend on the immersion created by realism of dialogue and characterization. Compelling events lost their sheen if they succumbed to the seduction of cliché “hero-narratives” or overwrought suspense. It is the believability of the narrative created by the intricately crafted descriptions that creates a sense of satisfaction, as described by these commentators.

But to read narrative scholarship for its engrossing qualities is also, as Lewiecki-Wilson says in her review of several of the collections listed above, to find oneself “reading these teaching tales with an eye to their craft” (97).¹⁸ As with many of these reviewers, satisfaction with detail gets transferred into an awareness—and valuing—of the story *as a story*: “any reader, old or young, can take pleasure in the sheer storytelling talent evident in these collections” (Ronald 264). The recognition that believable, compelling stories result from a storyteller’s skill in manipulating those elements leads to an appreciation of the quality of the text: “The beauty of these narrative essays is their specificity as well as the fact that they are actually stories with compelling and even suspenseful plots” (Vandrick 153). Martha D. Rekrut makes a similar point in her review, noting that despite the collection’s stories being “uneven in quality,” “Many stories are fascinating because they are well told [...]” (493).¹⁹

NARRATIVE FIDELITY: INTERSECTING VALUES

Whereas narrative probability “brings into focus the integrity of a story as a whole [...] the principle of fidelity pertains to the individuated components of stories—whether they represent ac-

¹⁸ Lewiecki-Wilson reviews Bishop’s *Teaching Lives*, Newkirk’s *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*, and Trimmer’s *Narration as Knowledge*

¹⁹ Rekrut reviews Trimmer’s *Narration as Knowledge*.

curate assertions about social reality and thereby constitute good reasons for belief or action” (*Human Communication* 105). In other words, readers assess narrative fidelity when they evaluate the ways their own values intersect with the values the narrative espouses rather than focusing on the form the narrative takes. Fisher poses several questions to elaborate this interaction:

What are the explicit and implicit values in the story? Are the values appropriate to the nature of the decision or beliefs that the story concerns? What would be the effects of adhering to the values in regard to one’s concept of self, to one’s behavior, to one’s relationship with others and society? Are the values confirmed or validated in one’s experience, in the lives and statements of others whom one admires and respects?” (“Narration, Knowledge, and the Possibility of Wisdom” 178)

This category of questions proves useful, too, for understanding these reviews’ engagements with narratives of teaching and learning. Several of these reviewers appeared eager to find ways of relating to or identifying with the story, leading them to consider or question, confirm or problematize their own experiences. In addition to praising *Narration as Knowledge* for its vividness, for example, Vandrick values the way its stories remind the reader of her own past experience: “Any teacher reading them will experience a sense of recognition” (154). Ronald praises narratives for “hav[ing] the effect of a good story: they take the reader back to her own life, reminding those who fear fatigue, complacency, or cynicism that true teaching stories are comprised of small, wondrous, and awkward moments in particular classrooms” (264).

At its most interesting, of course, such reminders lead to deep introspection about one’s own teaching practices. Lewiecki-Wilson says, for example, “One pleasure that comes from reading about other teaching lives is that it invites reflection on one’s own” (96). Thus a dis-

course of “learning from,” not just seeing oneself within, the narrative appears in many of these reviews. A narrative’s telling might inspire the reader to change thought or behavior, or to reproduce or extend those values through her own work. Rekrut says, for example, that stories show that “all of us can learn from our colleagues’ attempts to make sense of what it means to be a teacher” (493). Ronald says, similarly, that the narratives she examined “prompt[ed] [her] to think not only about story but also about history, theory, pedagogy, and method” (256). Lewiecki-Wilson elaborates the possible value of this intersection:

Those narratives I deemed most successful sparked my desire to experiment with my own writing and were exciting to read because they presented experiences and reflection in unpredictable and risky ways. I know the risks have paid off if I am left thinking about my teaching—perhaps devising ways to adapt an assignment for my class, or revising course goals in light of a new way of understanding, or questioning my motives and changing my practices. (97)

PROBABILITY AND FIDELITY AS CONVERSATION

If we are thinking about how readings of narrative for probability and fidelity strike different kinds of conversations with their texts, it seems quite clear that the former type—an engagement with narrative probability—creates a conversation unlikely to satisfy the criteria of scholarly conversation discussed in my previous section. Reading narrative for its vividness of detail or its skillful, well-crafted presentation does not, to my mind, encourage the kind of engagement that moves a reader “outside” of the narrative, toward ways of making the text relevant to other scholarly conversations (either conversations it emerges from or those it hopes to inspire). If an appreciation of probabilistic coherence moves us outside of the narrative’s world at all, it seems

to do so only because an attention to storyteller's craft might inspire the reader to craft an equally compelling tale of her own. For example, Lewiecki-Wilson says about Wendy Bishop's collection that "her creative approach is contagious" (98-99). That sense of the contagion—the way stories beget stories—is perhaps the best hope probabilistic readings have to inciting readers to mobilize narrative scholarship into future work that interacts in the broader community. And yet there's no guarantee that narratives birthed out of such inspiration build off of, in any meaningful sense, the original. Conversation created by probabilistic readings, if we can call it conversation at all, seems unlikely to ward off criticisms that narratives are insufficiently contextualized in the discipline's scholarly concerns.

At first blush narrative fidelity, on the other hand, looks more promising for creating sufficiently expansive conversation to be recognized in the typical rituals of academic writing. Rupert says about *Comp Tales*, for example, that the collection's stories provide "a spiraling web-narrative that lures readers and participants of the profession into the conversation" (142). The lure of participation—as the reader feels compelled to take the values of the story-world and bring them into dialogue with her professional experiences and commitments—sounds quite promising for creating intellectual exchange. As the reader assesses overlaps or incongruences between the value-world of the story and the living values of the reader, a conversation might spark that has broader relevance to the field. Rupert notes that *Comp Tales* inspires the reader to not just reflect about those practices, but to speak back to the stories: "Not one person who teaches writing should feel voiceless after reading this book. If stories do not match scene for scene or character for character, readers are compelled to fill in the gaps or revise the versions using their personal, intimate knowledge of similar situations" (141). To draw on the conclusions of my previous discussion about what citation does and why we value it, narrative in this

case *does* seem to provide a way for the reader to move forward with intellectual scholarly work. In this way of reading, narrative scholarship can be built upon, can open new avenues of exploration by prompting reflection and revision of one's own practices. This is the power of "embodied experiences rub[bing] against abstract knowledge, vexing each other enough to generate a critical question, a contradiction, or a new way of thinking or understanding" (Lewiecki-Wilson 109).

But though fidelity is a more promising conversational category than probability, reading narratives for how they represent one's own values can create myriad levels of dialogue, some of them quite superficial. The question is what kind of intellectual action gets spurred by seeing one's values intersect with the story's. For example, despite Lewiecki-Wilson's claim that reading for such values can prompt "critical questions" that "act as openings to knowledge" (108) and lead the reader to "new ways[s] of thinking" (109), she also notes that recognition allows for "good ideas to steal for use in my own classes" (97). While I don't wish to discount the value of gleaning teaching ideas from exposure to another's practice, to value narrative content through a lens of identification or appropriation—*I see myself in you, and you do something I would like to do*—creates a very different ground for narrative value and quite a different expectations about what a reader might come away with through exposure to these narratives. It's perhaps useful to distinguish, here, between reading a story to *remember* or *confirm* one's practices (or to see one's ideals represented within the story) and being prompted to *reimagine* one's practice. These different acts of engagement result from very different burdens of reading, though they are often conflated within these reviews. Take Cook's characterization of *Comp Tales*, a clear example of a focus on reading for recognition of one's own practice: "Writing teachers and others, male and female and of whatever ethnicity, will learn from *Comp Tales* and draw on its episodes again and again, if

only as reminders of teachers as all too human” (312). Rupert, too, displays moments of reading for personal confirmation: “As I wrote this review I both laughed and wanted to cry at the same time. It was amazing to see myself in this book, both the pains and the joys of what I do” (142). Vandrick’s moments of recognition are less particular to her own experience than to a larger identification with what it means to teach: “[These narrators’] love of teaching and their belief that they can make a difference” makes their stories “a true celebration of the teaching life” (154).

Although probability and fidelity provide different kinds of engagement, what is interesting about both reading methods are the ways they allow for, and implicitly advocate, reading for pleasure or emotional satisfaction as a primary interface with narratives of teaching. I was surprised at how often a discourse of pleasure dominated these reviews, across both responses to probability and fidelity. A narrative’s ability to instill pleasure in the reader becomes not only a way to judge the narrative’s quality, but also a way to characterize what the narrative has to offer to its reader. I’ve already quoted some of these passages above, but I reproduce portions of them here to show the attention to pleasure as an object of reading.

From Lewiecki-Wilson:

“One pleasure that comes from reading about other teaching lives is that it invites reflection on one’s own.” (96)

“reading [these narratives] yielded pleasures” (97)

narratives that “were exciting to read” (97)

“Narratives can be read for [...] aesthetic pleasures and for information.” (97)

“Story offers many pleasures to the reader—opportunities for sharing experiences, surprises, suspense.” (108)

From Ronald:

“Any reader, old or young, can take pleasure in the sheer storytelling talent evident in these collections.” (264)

“But I also appreciate the heroic hopefulness of his moral [...]” (258).

“I find in these narratives a tremendously hopeful—and heroic—accountability.” (264)

From Vandrick:

These stories are “a true celebration of the teaching life.” (154)

From Rupert:

“As I wrote this review I both laughed and wanted to cry at the same time. It was amazing to see myself in this book, both the pains and the joys of what I do” (142).

The attention of these readers to some form emotive engagement with narrative, and in particular the creation of pleasure in the reader (either due to a pleasure of reading a well-told story or a pleasure of recognizing one’s own professional development reflected in the story) is quite revealing. These reviews suggests, quite problematically I think, that pleasure is not just something that a narrative can create in a reader (no one would deny this about narrative scholarship, or even about conventional discursive scholarship), but that creating an affective response is the very purpose of narrative scholarship, and that finding or being receptive to such emotional appeals is the appropriate role of the reader in that interpretive transaction. This view is articulated well by Richard Murphy when he says

that the stories we tell will be deeply valuable to us, that in telling them we will define ourselves and what we know, that in hearing them we will remember who we are and what teaching and learning have come to mean to us. Still, this characterization of stories does not describe their purpose so much as their effect. The

purpose is the same as has always moved tellers and listeners—the pleasure of the story. (original emphasis, “On Stories and Scholarship” 471)

These reviews reveal that such a focus on pleasure not only affects the interpretive frames through which narratives are read, but can even affect material engagements with these texts. “[P]recisely because it reads the most like story,” says Ronald, “this is the book I read out under the trees in my backyard, the one I kept on my bedside table, the one I didn't markup with my pen (until I remembered I was supposed to be reviewing it)” (261). Or, to return to Cook's comment about *Comp Tales*, “The stories, though brief, merit repeated contemplation, but, if need be, can be read on the run (312).

To see narrative's project so identified with the pleasures of reading reveals, I argue, the difficulty narratives of teaching have had earning respect as scholarship in the field. Pleasure of a story might have the power to propel interaction between text and reader, to motivate a reader toward future intellectual engagement, but the emotive reaction itself cannot constitute a conversation with which the rest of the discipline can partake. A reader's pleasure does not move scholarship within the community but rather keeps it purely internal and restricted, creating only a private conversation with a narrative, if a conversation at all. And yet these reviewers take note of the narrative's emotional value right alongside the narrative's capacity to produce knowledge or do critical work, as though the two reading objects are of equal kind and equal value to the community.

I should say here that if my above criticisms of pleasure as a ground for conversation make me seem to advocate stereotypically dry, unpleasurable academic prose, I do not. The claims in my introduction, I hope, have shown that I value writing that pushes against the often-arbitrary boundaries of scholarly decorum. We would all benefit from an academy more con-

cerned with producing writing that our colleagues (and others) would enjoy reading. But, that said, I doubt many in composition studies would say that causing pleasure should become the end, or primary focus, of scholarship. It is hard to imagine, for example, that we would be comfortable with a review—this time of a research monograph—that focused primarily on how the text made the reviewer *feel*, or on how it allowed the reviewer to *see herself* in the ideas expressed; rather we are much more likely as academics, I think, to expect of such reviews an account of the intellectual contribution the text makes to the field at large. It is not that we might not value something like reading pleasure, but rather that we as academics have not been induced to think—via our graduate training, our institutional professionalization, our participation in the discourses we are steeped in—that such comments would be valuable to, or valued by, our peers. That these reviewers of narrative scholarship talk so comfortably about pleasure within academic contexts is itself noteworthy, suggesting perhaps that the field is comfortable reading narratives (and talking-about-reading them) in terms quite different than those typically used with more conventional forms of academic scholarship.

What concerns me here is not that those other kinds of readings circulate, but rather that they seem to do so without a self-conscious recognition that their approaches create different conversational relationships which will have different levels of value in the discipline's culture. A shift in reading approach toward prioritizing different conversational engagement could open other possibilities of what narratives of teaching could do in the field. What about reading narrative texts for the ways they are, perhaps, not pleasurable; the ways they can discomfort us, or send us off to research perplexing questions; the ways they can urge us to write against the narrative, to question it or trouble it or extend it? We might, in other words, read for the ways nar-

rative changes our thinking rather than the ways it provides a pleasurable stroll “out under the trees.”

The importance of more self-aware reading practices applies equally, I argue, to all of the above versions of probability and fidelity (not just those that focus on pleasure). Readings for storytelling craft, readings for identification, readings for remembrance, readings for affective response: all of these grounds of engagement need to be extricated from one another in order to allow a more sophisticated view of narrative’s possibilities. That these different objects of reading are conflated in the reviews above—sometimes with one another and sometimes with other more expansive accounts of narrative knowledge-making—is problematic itself. But such overlaps are further mired by the ways such readings invite attention to the presence of a creative author (the storyteller’s skill, her manipulation of details, etc.) rather than the interchange of ideas between reader and writer more typically foregrounded in readings of conventional academic articles. This focus on authorial genius only serves to further obscure the importance of the hermeneutic frames we bring to this form of scholarship.

The consequences of this state of reading are twofold. First, there is some set of academic readers, like the reviewers above, who engage with narratives in ways that limit the larger knowledge-making impact those narratives might have had otherwise. Though I certainly am in no position (and would not want to be) to police individual’s reading practices, such readers might find different value in narrative scholarship if they revised those practices. Second—and more importantly—as these individual readings proliferate, they implicitly advocate, and go toward normalizing, approaches toward reading narrative scholarship that reinscribe limited notions of what narrative is good for and how it should be read. As those individual readings circulate and accumulate within a scholarly culture that devalues the products of those readings, the

narratives themselves—rather than reading approaches—are likely to be further stigmatized as unrigorous and uninteresting. To illustrate, if I were someone disinclined to value an academic book that I could “read on the run,” I think I would more likely dismiss the text itself for soliciting this description rather than critique the reviewers’ choice of interpretive lenses.

“[W]e ought not to try to make stories into something else,” says Richard Murphy Jr. “The meanings and methods of the stories we tell ourselves are unlike those of any systematic mode of inquiry. Their value to us depends on this difference” (471). I agree with Murphy; I don’t wish to make narrative into something that it is not. But what I am advocating instead is the need for readers of narrative to feel a stronger obligation in this exchange of reader and text, a stronger obligation to think about what mode of inquiry narrative *does* offer and how we can access it. Such a change would make it all the more important to recognize that the sorts of readings evident in these reviews create a different kind of conversation that, because enclosed—a particular skilled storyteller making a particular reader feel this way or that way—will have more difficulty gaining respect within the academy as intellectual work that can move the field forward. In the absence of conventional forms of academic citation, such a project of creating more satisfying readings would certainly have to understand differently the position of narrative scholarship, both its potential contributions to the field and the arguments used to justify and contest its presence. Candace Spigelman agrees, saying we need more sophisticated ways of recognizing narrative’s accomplishments, even if those ways mean reading for different things than we are used to: “We will need to devise measures and means of analysis to evaluate claims derived from personal experience just as we have devised evaluative tools for other kinds of arguments” (83). I would add to Spigelman’s comment by saying that we need to devise not only more productive means of analyzing these narratives but also more rigorous understandings of

the conversations that narratives might strike, the kinds that will be unique to their capacities but also satisfying to an academic community that demands intellectual exchange within a community of scholars.

This is to say, too, that we need to distinguish between readings that don't make an effort to converse with narrative scholarship (that are dismissive or superficial), and those that make the effort but have limited resources for alternative possibilities of reading. This is a problem that can't be solved purely through good will—for example Jane Hindman's call that we need to “recognize that accountability for discursive practices comprises an academic professional's ethical and interpretive responsibility” (13). I think most scholars would profess a commitment to such accountability. Nor is it just matter of blind acceptance of narrative—as Kathy Carter says, “we cannot escape the basic problems of knowledge in our field by elevating teachers' stories to a privileged status” (9). Instead the challenge is in knowing how to construct readings that join the reader's intellectual world with that of the narrative's.

To read narratives differently, or more carefully, or with more explicit direction, will not always provide greater rewards. Doing so will not always send us back to the field with a gem of an idea in hand or the first words of a compelling conversation. Even those texts that most conform to the stereotypical vision of scholarly work do not always satisfy, and very often it is indeed a fault of the writer, not the reader—because the ideas are bad, the explanations thin, the theories half-baked. The same will hold true for narrative scholarship: narratives will not always be worthy of extension or doubt or engagement. But to say so does not absolve the reader of the need to make that effort, and the need for self-reflection that must precede that it.

2.4 CONVERSING WITH SELVES: (RE)READING AND (RE)WRITING THE STORY

Those Artful Stories

“Life sucks,”
my big farm grown student writes
when his eighteen year old friend
going home from work
is killed by a drunk driver
running a stop sign
whereas
for an older woman education major
it’s her dog Tootsie
who becomes a main character
upchucking in a red marbled ball
the six steaks the family was hoping
to have for dinner;
[...]
A typical semester.
As always I am baffled
at grading time
wondering what to do
about those most artful stories
the inadvertent
baleful and wonderful tales told
somewhere between my people and their
lettered pages.

–Diane Sautter

I have tried to make the case above that reading practices greatly shape the possibility of what narrative scholarship can come to mean in the discipline. If we are underprepared to extend our colleagues’ narratives toward meaningful conversations, I would argue that we are just as easily underprepared to make use of students’ personal narratives. That feeling of “wondering what to do,” as described here in Diane Sautter’s poem, doesn’t just mean difficulties of evaluating those student narratives, but also knowing how to guide writers to make those narratives do meaning-

ful, critical work. It also means knowing how to help students face the challenges telling one's own story presents as a writer and thinker. In short, the grounds on which we stand to receive narrative not only impact how we read the work of our colleagues, as I've just discussed, but also how we converse with the essays our students produce in our composition classes. And, not only that: those frames of reading can color the ways we ask students to approach their own narratives, that is, how we train students to read—to converse with—the stories they reflect upon, write about, and revise. In the remainder of this essay I try to foreground the importance of reassessing our grounds of narrative conversation by looking at one student's narrative sequence, and the difficulties both the student and I, his teacher, had in knowing how to interpret that work. This student's struggle to write and revise a narrative of his education usefully foregrounds the difficulty of conversing with—both as writer and reader—student narratives.

Since I want to underscore the importance of viewing the act of reading narrative as a transactions between text and reader, I turn in this next section to an explicit theory of interpretation—that of Hans Georg Gadamer. Gadamer's hermeneutic theory provides substantial resources for negotiating a dialogue between interpreter and text—in this case the dialogue between a narrativized past conversing with a lived present. Gadamer does not himself use the term “conversation,” but I find his theory useful for reflecting on my interactions with this student's essay drafts, and equally useful for speculating about the student's own negotiated relationship with various versions of his own text. By analyzing excerpts of three versions of this student's same autobiographical essay, as he tries on various ways of conversing with his own narrative, I try to show the interpretive challenges of shaping one's own history into a critical and self-implicating narrative. But what follows is not just an interrogation of student difficulty. In other words, I don't want to stop at the claim that students find it hard to write satisfying

narratives just like we do. Rather I want to interrogate the ways my own approaches to reading—my own biases, agendas, and struggles reading the student’s narrative through my own pre-established frames of interpretation—failed to guide the student toward a satisfying dialogue with his narrativized past. As such, in what follows I’m less interested in recounting the challenges of student writers producing narrative than I am interested in exploring the difficulty of invoking a narrative in service to a larger intellectual project.

GADAMER AND THE HISTORICITY OF UNDERSTANDING: RECONCILING “I” WITH “THOU”

Openness to the other [...] involves recognizing that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no one else forces me to do so.

—Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth And Method*

In *Truth and Method* Gadamer details how interpretation consists of an interpreter’s negotiated relationship to the historicity of the work being interpreted. Which is to say that the act of reading the present necessitates grappling with a reading of the past, and vice versa. His theory’s focus on interpretation as the act of negotiating the relationship between the work’s historicity and the interpreter’s provides useful terms for understanding what students face when they write and revise their personal narratives; it therefore provides a useful lens through which teachers might understand their own readings of such student work.

A “fusion of horizons,” to use Gadamer’s oft-cited term, is unavoidable in the substantial intellectual work of narrating one’s own story, since doing so requires negotiating converging temporalities. In this sense, narrating autobiography *always* necessitates moments of interpretation, moments of conversation rather than mere duplication or reproduction. To tell past events through present lips is to engage in historical negotiation of past and present selves—to engage

in interpretation as well as communication. To narrate a story is necessarily to re-understand it, to re-cognize it.

Gadamer explicates this relationship between she who interprets and that which is interpreted, between what he calls (following Martin Buber) the “I” and the “Thou.”²⁰ For Gadamer this I-Thou characterization helps ground theoretical hermeneutics in concrete relationships—between the I of the interpreter and the Thou of the work under interpretive scrutiny. As I’ll show, Gadamer privileges “openness to experience” over “definitive knowledge,” valuing a sense of ongoing engagement with and extension of the present as it reaches back into the past (350).

In order to develop a heuristic for better understanding and naming possible conversations between narrative and reader, I look at this student’s texts alongside Gadamer’s three characterizations of the I-Thou relationship—that is, the three more and less authentic ways of balancing the tug-of-war between the historicity of the interpreter and the historicity of the work. Or to put it in my terms, three more or less authentic ways of conversing with a text.

The excerpts of student writing that follow came out of a set of interactions with Guy Patterson, a student from one of my freshman writing classes.²¹ The essay assignment that be-

²⁰ Martin Buber’s *I And Thou*, as a source from which Gadamer draws, is worth exploring in brief. Buber’s theory is much more invested in worldly relationships than Gadamer’s, especially focusing on (though not limited to) relationships between people. Much of Gadamer’s discussion in *Truth and Method* is an adaptation from these person-person relationships to person-text relationships. Thus Buber cannot help much here, except by shedding light on Gadamer’s broader theory of experience behind the much narrower moment of I-Thou encounters with texts.

Buber counter poses the “I-It” relationship to the I-Thou. It is useful to keep this separation in mind, as much of what Gadamer points out as failed I-Thou relationships would be characterized as I-It relationships by Buber. The relationship of the I to the It is one of varying degrees of objectification. According to Buber, “The man who [...] says I-It assumes a position before things but does not confront them in the current of reciprocity. He bends down to examine particulars under the objectifying magnifying glass of close scrutiny, or he uses the objectifying telescope of distant vision to arrange them as mere scenery. In his contemplation he isolates them without any feeling for the exclusive or joins them without any world feeling” (80). The imagery of this quote echoes well Gadamer’s dissatisfaction with science-based methods of understanding.

²¹ This student granted me permission to reproduce his writing, though he requested I refer to him by this pseudonym.

gan this cycle asked students to “work autobiographically, to tell a story that allows you to both *explore* and *say something* about the way you have been shaped by the time and place in which you live” (original emphasis).²² To understand the context of the material that follows, it is important to note that Patterson wrote this essay about his experiences attending a private Quaker High School during the attacks of 9/11 and the height of the U.S. government’s subsequent “War on Terror.” The school’s pacifist and, to his mind, politically liberal response to these events pushed him, he explains, toward the political conservatism he has since come to espouse. Patterson had the rare chance to revise his original essay twice over, providing a fascinating record of how his representation of his past evolved over time, and just as importantly, how he negotiated my comments, which perhaps unsurprisingly given his past experience, he initially feared to be ideological bullying by another liberally-biased teacher.²³

Because Patterson’s juxtaposed drafts make visible the evolution of his reading/writing process, his work gives special insight into how much narrative’s intellectual value depends on the terms of conversation established through its reading. But, as I’ll show, to understand Patterson’s ongoing interpretation of his narrative means questioning my own commentary on his drafts and my own difficulty negotiating the categories of interpretation discussed by Gadamer.

In order to focus my investigation, the pages below discuss three revisions of the same paragraph, and the comments I directed towards each of those versions. The paragraph in question forwards one anecdote in a series that catalogs some of the Quaker school’s liberal attitudes (mostly as they related to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq) against which Patterson strongly reacted, and how those moments came to foster his conservative ideology. Because I will rely on

²² Great thanks to Jennifer Lee for authoring the staff syllabus the year in question.

²³ Patterson voiced this worry during midterm reviews, at which time all students were asked to speak to how they understood the comments I had left on their essays.

these texts for the rest of this chapter, I quote each version of the paragraph in full. Here is the paragraph from Patterson's first draft:

My history class that year was an open forum for debate about the war. In my class were very liberal advocates, those who didn't know enough to have an opinion and me. I used this time to speak out and defend my own beliefs, but also listen to the opposing theories from my classmates. Listening to them support their beliefs would anger me far more forcefully than any insult or physical attack possibly could. I took it very personally and watched my progression to the conservative base. I was so susceptible to change; because I couldn't possibly take the same views on domestic issues as someone I despised this much. The disagreements I had with the Quaker way of solving problems alienated me enough to completely change my political ideology. I began to accept the conservative doctrine as it was told to me by my step-brother. I won't forget the one instance in my Quakerism class, when we talked about sweat-shops. The teacher, Mr. B, was head of community service, a converted Quaker, and the teacher of most of the religious classes. We were shown a video of sweat-shops in South America and asked to respond. Defying the Quaker mode of thinking, I raised my hand and argued about how these factories were a good thing for everyone. I cited the cheaper prices and help to businesses in the United States, and I also mention the raising of wage incomes and job opportunities for the workers. The teacher was shocked. He could not believe that someone could actually advocate sweat-shops, but I did. I did it so persuasively that nearly everyone in the class began to advocate for sweat-shops behind me. In the beginning of finding my political belief, I

just looked at what the opposite of the Quaker view was and supported that idea.

My comments on this first version of Patterson's essay addressed characteristics well-represented by this paragraph. First, I noted a tension between two distinct kinds of language: language that on the one hand appears to criticize his past behaviors as reactionary; and language that, on the other hand, seems to praise his behaviors as ideologically principled. The first kind of language is evinced by several statements in this paragraph which suggest Patterson recognizes that his behavior came out of a dissatisfaction with Quakerism, a kind of devil's advocacy, rather than a positive ideological commitment to the alternatives he so aggressively posed. He "took it very personally" when others would speak disagreeable beliefs; he argued for sweat-shops, "defying the Quaker mode of thinking," "shocking" the teacher. As Patterson's last sentence admits, "In the beginning of finding my political belief, I just looked at what the opposite of the Quaker view was and supported that idea." These statements felt inconsistent with language that suggests it was, in fact, a commitment to significant ideological, conservative positions that motivated his actions: "I used this time to speak out and defend my own beliefs [...]" He had "beg[u]n to accept the conservative doctrine."

Second, my comments centered on Patterson's carelessness in speaking of highly politicized topics without delicately negotiating how those moments might be read by diverse audiences. In this paragraph, for example, his descriptions of his reactionary behavior create a flip-pant tone regarding sweat-shop labor. I worried his descriptions of his past self, via a kind of rhetoric of pride, kept him from speaking to a broad readership who might balk at his fervor. That fervor is captured well by the fact that, while he describes his teacher's disbelief "that someone could actually advocate sweat-shops," he gives little sign that his teacher's "shock" had, in hindsight, caused him to question this advocacy. Similarly he seems unconcerned with

the consequences of arguing “so persuasively” that he brought others to take on this significant political and moral position: “nearly everyone in the class began to advocate for sweat-shops behind me.” It is as though the shock-value that characterized his behavior in his Quakerism class still characterizes his present rhetoric in describing that moment.

At the time of commenting on Patterson’s draft, I felt these two categories of suggestion—to revisit his inconsistencies and to examine his politically charged tone—to be fair ways of voicing my reading of the essay’s weaknesses; I further believed that those suggestions provided reasonable grounds by which Patterson could revise both the language and the critical reflection grounded in that language. They were comments in kind that I had used before on student narratives. In my experience, students have difficulty encapsulating a history of their lives without, in some ways, providing contrary reflections or incongruent interpretations. Such is the burden of trying to write about life trajectories that are rarely straightforward or uniform. Thus, the comment *present the meaning of your story more consistently* (or, more reductively, *stay on point* or *follow your thesis*) has often dominated my commentary on personal narrative essays. Likewise, because it’s not unusual for these kinds of assignments to solicit morally, emotionally, or politically charged material (something the student felt or did or witnessed), it is again not unusual for my commentary to focus on ways the student might revisit his or her decisions of language in order to demonstrate sensitivity to a range of audiences that might react strongly to particular descriptions of events, beliefs, or actions.

SHIFTING THE TERMS OF DISCUSSION

Looking back on these interactions with Patterson’s first draft, it’s clear that my attention as a reader focused primarily on the rhetorical decisions Patterson made to portray his past actions,

rather than the difficulty he faced reading the meaning of that past. As such I believe both categories of my comments diminish the true value and true challenge of this autobiographical narrative. If we think of the problematic of Patterson's paragraph, and the intellectual work attempted therein, as a difficulty of interpretation—the difficulty of taking a narrative (in this case his own) and trying to extend it toward some trajectory—rather than as a difficulty of production, then my understanding of his first draft must be revised.

By appealing to Gadamer's first I-Thou relationship, I'd like to pose an alternative reading of the nature of the "problem" of this draft, of why it is unsatisfying as a piece of scholarly, intellectual work within the university context. Gadamer's I-Thou relationships shift my understanding of that difficulty from the moment of rhetorical decision to the interpretive act of putting past and present selves into conversation, in other words to the way Patterson converses with the narrative of his past as he shapes and reshapes it.

Gadamer's first I-Thou relationship names a dialogue that, on the surface, appears to constitute a genuine interaction between the I and the Thou.²⁴ According to Gadamer, however, in this relationship the dialogue is disingenuous:

One claims to know the other's claim from his point of view and even to understand the other better than the other understands himself. In this way the Thou loses the immediacy with which it makes its claim. It is understood, but this means it is co-opted and pre-empted reflectively from the standpoint of the other person. (353)

This claim—the claim the Thou has on the historical consciousness of the I—is preempted be-

²⁴ Though I've labeled this the "first" of three for the sake of my own chronology, I should note that Gadamer orders these three relationships differently, swapping the first and second.

cause the I makes a fetish of the Thou. This over-identification with the Thou is itself a kind of “mastery” that does not acknowledge that the I’s own historicity makes it impossible to achieve such unconditioned embodiment of the past.

In the case of Patterson’s paragraph, the question is to what degree he lets his past—his experience arguing for sweatshops—*speak* to his current ideological/political development. It seems to me that his narrative does not let that past genuinely appear or speak. The sweatshop incident is not explored in the rest of the essay; nor is it substantively engaged with in this paragraph, except in the minimal way that it shows a moment of reaction against Quaker ideology. The meaning of his sweatshop advocacy is not shown to be important because of how it might complicate the understanding of Patterson’s present position. Rather it is privileged as an unarguable truth-in-itself because of the self’s forceful assertion of its value. By stepping into that position and controlling it, Patterson not only doesn’t listen to the what the past might say to his present position, he doesn’t let his present self be accountable to that past since he is too busy being overrun by the supposed authority of that moment’s history.

How does such a characterization illuminate my reading of Patterson’s draft? In this light I’m encouraged to question my characterization of Patterson’s weakness as one of poor production, of inconsistent reflections and insensitive tone. In fact, by thinking of Patterson’s first draft in terms of this I-Thou relationship, the problems of inconsistency and tone become interestingly connected as evidence of his difficulty conversing with the past. Patterson’s tone—which I initially read as a symptom of insufficient awareness of a charged rhetorical situation—is better read as a less-than-successful attempt (in Gadamer’s terms, at least) to reconcile, to balance, historicities. The matter of tone is less a problem of indelicate writing as it is a problem of which history has the right to speak, and which has the obligation to listen. His tone of pride at his ac-

tions, the way he seemingly steps back into that role of sweatshop advocate, is not a fault of careless rhetoric as much as it is an attempt to “co-opt and pre-empt” the Thou of his historical text so as to avoid dialoguing with it. This is not a genuine fusion of horizons, not a dialectical interaction of present with past, because the I-Thou relationship does not create space for both parties’ historicity to be legitimized. Finding it difficult to reconcile his present commitments with this past behavior, Patterson’s explication of that moment is an embrace that, paradoxically, smothers that past and silences it from speaking. Yet as we can see from Patterson’s assertions that he “just looked at what the opposite of the Quaker view was and supported that idea,” he can’t re-embody that past role without filtering it through his present self—hence his need to qualify the very same moments he tries to fully embrace, what I identified in his essay as a kind of equivocation or inconsistency. As Gadamer states, “A person who believes he is free of prejudices, relying on the objectivity of his procedure and denying that he is himself conditioned by historical circumstances, experiences the power of the prejudices that unconsciously dominate him as a vis a tergo” (354).

Insofar as Patterson has let this past voice speak over his present, I—as a writing teacher—have too become overwhelmed by that past. My fixation on his text’s tone as offensively flippant to the consequences of sweatshop labor prevents me from engaging with this story as a site where the negotiation (and friction) between present and past histories could foment valuable critical work. Because of the conversational frame I’m used to establishing with student narratives, I speak to Patterson of how he represents that past to his readers through the rhetoric of his storytelling—not how he, through a different kind of reading, might make that story *mean* differently, might create a conversation that not only originates from his past but engages and extends it toward new understandings of past and present.

My comments, along with whatever private reflections Patterson generated during the revision process, brought him to this revision of that same paragraph, found in his second version of the essay. You will note, I'm sure, how his attempt to reconcile those histories has flown to an opposite extreme:

Time went by, more happened in the world, and my mind was still looking for answers. My beliefs had been very reactionary. I didn't have a firm ideology. My basic beliefs were, "Whatever the Quaker stance is, I stand opposing it." Is such an outlook a good thing? Of course this is not the best course of action; however, I am certainly glad that I reacted this way because of how I would eventually find my beliefs. In my Quakerism class, after watching a video about sweatshops, I argued against the Quaker viewpoint. They looked at the factories as a place of human maltreatment, and therefore, they demanded they be shutdown. I, on the other hand, had no opinion of such a matter, and I therefore argued against the Quaker perspective. I advocated for sweatshops that day. While [that] may be a good or bad thing, I don't care and neither should you. All that matters is that I acted in an extremely reactionary way toward Quakerism. That is how I was at the time.

It is clear from this revision that Patterson has processed the two categories of comments I outline above. He has attempted to quell my critique of his vacillation between portraying his past self as ideological on the one hand and reactionary on the other. He now admits that he was "still looking for answers" (in other words he had not established a firm ideological position) and, in the mean time, "had been very reactionary." To address my other prominent critique—that his tone was insensitive to those with dissenting views—he attempts to distance himself

from, and more explicitly pass judgment on, the past behaviors that might be unsavory to certain readers (“Is such an outlook a good thing? Of course this is not the best course of action[.]”). In fact, more than passing judgment on that past self, he tries to erase the relationship between present and past selves altogether by subsuming that relationship under the exigencies of storytelling: “I advocated for sweatshops that day. While [that] may be a good or bad thing, I don’t care and neither should you. All that matters is that I acted in an extremely reactionary way toward Quakerism. That is how I was at the time.” This comment is best understood, I think, not as the outright dismissal of the moral/political question of sweatshop labor, but as an attempt to subsume that moral question (and all others) under the utilitarian demands of narrating his story. Take, for example, his introductory paragraph from this same draft in which he asserts, “I certainly have a core set of views of our world, and I’m sure that many people would think I am deranged for feeling the way I do. However, I am not writing to say what is right and what is wrong. All that matters is how I came to be the individual that I am at this point in my life.” We might add to this final sentence, *because that is the story this writing assignment asks me tell.*

It’s worthwhile to note that this new draft removes reference to Patterson’s history class—“an open forum for debate about the war”—which originally began the paragraph. He chooses instead to focus solely on the Quakerism class and the discussion about sweatshops, though even talk of that incident has been greatly reduced, removing some of the more overt statements that valorize his arguing prowess. In effect he streamlines his paragraph to focus on the sweat-shop incident only to dismiss its significance through qualifiers.

My comments on Patterson’s second draft praised him for softening his rhetoric by providing distance between his present and the past selves. But I went on to say that his qualifying statements were distracting and sounded unnaturally defensive within the context of the sto-

ry itself. In other words, the comments didn't feel integrated into the story's trajectory; they felt instead like qualifiers meant to appease his teacher's comments rather than insightful revelations within the narrative or genuine moments of reflection.

As in my comments on Patterson's first draft, my reading of this version of the essay treated this overcompensation as a matter of language infelicity and rhetorical register—as an inelegant and sometimes overbearing attempt to impose a more palatable ethos and demonstrate his attention to my comments. My commentary on this second draft, in other words, focused on the ways his revisions had created moments that would distance readers from his narrative.

But if I appeal to Gadamer's second relationship of the I to the Thou, I am again encouraged to complicate my reading of the true problematic of his narrative, and the advice I gave Patterson as a result. Gadamer describes this second kind of relationship as follows: "Someone who understands tradition in this way makes [the Thou] an object—i.e., he confronts it in a free and uninvolved way—and by methodically excluding everything subjective, he discovers what it contains" (352-3). Thus, the "discovery" of the Thou is supposed rather than genuine. In its overzealous desire to understand, the I extracts meaning from the Thou and thus "flattens out the nature of hermeneutical experience" (352). If I can return for a moment to the discussion of Gadamer's broader theory of interpretation, this version of the I-Thou does not allow for openness to the historicity of experience, but rather forces the interpreter to "detac[h] himself from the continuing effect of the tradition in which he himself has his historical reality" (353). Put simply, the I claims to understand the Thou finally and objectively, in doing so, closes the book on its other possible meanings.

When Patterson says in the introduction to his second draft, "I am not writing to say what is right and what is wrong. All that matters is how I came to be the individual that I am at

this point in my life,” we might read this gesture not merely as a way of deflecting the previous comments of his teacher, but as an indication again of the difficulty inherent in conversing with a narrative representation of present selves. In this case the attempt to circumvent that reconciliation does not take the form of imbuing the past with so much energy as to make it beyond question (as in his first draft), but rather by enervating it of all power. The anecdote becomes the important yet meaningless story of “how I came to be the individual that I am.” This past is not given a voice to speak, and therefore Patterson’s present self need not converse with, or be implicated by, that past. The story instead signals one thing only—a genealogy of how he became who he is. The sweatshop incident is dismissed as irrelevant to that genealogy but is also justified by virtue of being a historical moment on that genealogy’s timeline. Thus the question of whether sweatshops are “right or wrong” is not something we should “care about” because that judgment is irrelevant to the narrative progression of how Patterson “became who he is.” It is nowhere acknowledged that his present self—the person he became—might be implicated by the answer to this moral question if he confronted it in open dialogue. The final effect, then, is that this historical moment, despite its highlighted presence, is disempowered from truly speaking to the I. Instead it is viewed from a safe distance, as if behind museum glass.

RE-PLACING THE DIFFICULTY

To be situated within a tradition does not limit the freedom of knowledge but makes it possible.

—Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth & Method*

Through the lens of Gadamer’s hermeneutic theory, neither of these first two drafts effectively negotiate the challenge of bringing a present self (along with its present knowledge, understanding, and beliefs) to an understanding, a re-cognizing, of a past self. Patterson either gives that

past moment too much credit or gives it none at all, making an extended (and extendable) conversation with that narrative past difficult. Through Gadamer's theory it is clear too that neither of my engagements with Patterson's drafts read that difficulty through a lens that moves him toward a more-productive engagement. My ways of reading Patterson's narratives were as limited as his were.

So did Patterson's third and final revision strike up a more satisfying conversation between past and present relationships? I think it did, but not in the way I might have expected. To the extent his final revision is able to put his narrative content in genuine dialogue with his present self, he has done so by choosing a different conversation partner. In draft three he abandons that moment which had heretofore caused him so much difficulty as a writer—the sweat-shop story—and replaces it with and a story of the History class (which the second draft had removed) that fostered open debate amongst students.

My beliefs were very reactive toward Quakerism in tenth grade. I simply looked at whatever the Quaker viewpoint was, and I chose the opposite perspective. Since my Quakerism teacher was a far left Democrat, I considered myself Republican. While I wasn't very political at the time, I just couldn't be on the same side as Quakerism. As I consistently became interested in politics, I wanted to build an actual belief system for myself beyond Quakerism. The teacher of my history class in tenth grade was very objective and wanted to know our opinions on world affairs. He fostered an environment of an open forum for debate with students of different beliefs. As I stood up for my opinions for the first time, I began to realize what I truly felt. I came to realize that I believed in many of the Conservative points on foreign policy. As I read more and investigated further, I

realized soon that I believed many Conservative points on domestic policy as well. By the start of the next year, I had become a mild Republican. The process of arguing against the Quakers had slowly moved me toward the Right. While I was mindless in my reactionary stage, it led me to self realization and the adoption of new ideas.

It is clear, I think, that Patterson has made strides in this revision to negotiate the tension between past and present selves. If I read this revision in relation to my comments on the previous two drafts, which is to say as motivated in part by those comments, I read Patterson's decision to abandon the sweatshop story as his recognition of the difficulty of using it to build a larger narrative about his politically-conscious coming of age. I also read it as his fear that he wouldn't be able to get that part of the story to work in the eyes of his teacher.

Either of these motivations show a sophistication of Patterson as he negotiates a difficult circumstance of college writing. But despite my admiration for his progress, in hindsight I'm still dissatisfied with the fact that this progress is grounded in avoiding the difficulty that the text of that moment caused. In other words, both of the above motivations for abandoning the sweatshop incident—1) finding an example that more seamlessly allows for his larger story's trajectory and 2) avoiding an example that he cannot make work in the eyes of his teacher—interpret the sweatshop story as unsatisfactory because it disrupts expectations of smooth reading, because it produces a text that is hard to control (for the student, for the teacher who has to grade and comment on that student work, and for the imagined reader who, presumably, wants a coherent story). Both of these impulses—which I helped to foster through my way of reading and commenting on Patterson's narrative—presume that this disruption should be silenced rather than made use of. Not surprisingly given my comments on his first two drafts (*be consistent* and *be more*

rhetorically savvy), Patterson produces a final draft that can be made most clean, most straightforward. That mission involved abandoning his attempt to converse with the sweatshop narrative and, instead, choosing an example (the history class) that he could more easily align with these demands. Thanks to the reading approach I model to Patterson through my comments on his essay, he too begins interpreting the shortcomings of his paper as rhetorical ripples that should be smoothed rather than the predictable, and potentially generative, challenges inherent in interpreting a past self in relation to a present self.

Gadamer characterizes the third and final I-Thou relationship as “the highest type of hermeneutical experience: the openness to tradition characteristic of historically effected consciousness” (354-355). It is this “historically effected consciousness”—the realization of interpretation as fusion of present and past horizons—which prevents the I from either reifying the Thou through fetishizing its history (as in Patterson’s first draft) or through viewing it under removed observatory method (as in Patterson’s second draft). The historicity of the Thou is instead acknowledged in relation to the historicity of the I, “not in the sense of simply acknowledging the past in its otherness, but in such a way that it has something to say to me” (355). This is the key to this most authentic I-Thou relationship: the I is fundamentally open to the other, letting the Thou “really say something” (355). Patterson has discovered a historical moment that can better speak to, and be spoken by, his current ideological growth and commitments. Insofar as Patterson was able to practice such negotiations using a different text of his life story, his third draft is an accomplishment that he should feel proud of.

And yet I believe that had I better understood Patterson’s task of narrating as a conversation between past and present selves—the way Gadamer understands interpretation as a negotiation between historicities—I might have been more able to encourage a kind of reflection

about the sweatshop moment that, even in his best revision, he could not produce. This is what keeps bringing me back to this sequence of drafts: the thought that this writing assignment, under a different kind of guidance, might have gotten Patterson to interrogate the contradictions built into the story of the sweat-shop incident. But to write this other essay, one that makes use of such friction, of such disruption, would require an approach to reading one's own narrative that creates a different kind of conversation: an approach that asks questions of the narrative, questions that the writer doesn't already know how to answer; an approach that hears (and attempts to answer) questions asked *by* the narrative; one that uses both questions and answers to extend future thinking. Importantly, for Patterson to write that imagined essay, such a conversational commitment would be required from both Patterson himself and from his teacher.

2.5 SEAMLESSNESS AND DISRUPTION

Patterson's case naturally exposes important pedagogical stakes in both teachers and students both having more directed approaches toward understanding the range of conversations one might strike with narrative essays. But by discussing Patterson's case alongside the disciplinary question of narrative scholarship, I also hope to suggest that this case speaks back to our professional, not just pedagogical, commitments. My difficulty with Patterson makes visible what is at stake in exploring, and better characterizing, our scholarly engagements with narrative. What I have done with (or *to*?) Patterson's text is not that different than the reviewers' inclinations detailed at the beginning of this chapter. My desire for Patterson to write a seamless narrative—one that doesn't disrupt the reader's reception of the story because of politicized content or in-

congruent gestures—overrides what might have been a more generative reading, a reading that could have valued his text for the conversation started by a difficulty or irresolution. Or, to put it differently, as a reader of Patterson’s narrative I saw its incongruities, its lack of seamlessness, as a weakness rather than an opening for engagement. I looked for this weakness rather than seeing it as an opening for us both, as thinkers, to talk-through a worthwhile problem.

If there is some sense in which the conversation I establish with Patterson’s narrative fails to move him toward the “real intellectual work” (as I have characterized it above) of reading and writing his narrative, I want to argue that the same can be said of compositionists vis-à-vis narratives of teaching in academic scholarship. We expect seamless story—one that is coherent and compelling, one that doesn’t ruffle our feathers so much as make us enjoy stepping into someone’s shoes—and then criticize these narratives for not stirring our intellects, for having limited impact. This is not so different than the two faces I have put on for Patterson: I ask him for a consistent story and then bemoan his avoidance of material that, though compelling, might have produced inconsistency.

Gadamer’s I-Thou terms are further useful, then, for conceptualizing the more and less intellectually stirring conversations that scholars strike with each other’s narratives. Gadamer’s two less-than-satisfying I-Thou relationships echo, to my ears, the problematic readings of probability and fidelity detailed above: readings that either 1) put too much emphasis on the work’s textual autonomy so that the reader can’t make use of, extend, or work with the narrative; and 2) interactions that allow the interpreter to overrun the work by over-imposing his or her values onto it. Readings of probability—which I’ve described as focusing attention on the text’s storytelling craft, its readability, its compelling story-ness—elevate the status of the narrative to something that can be praised, but not questioned, revised, or spoken to. At best the reader can only

“converse” with the text by noting it as an inspiration, as a catalyst for telling an equally compelling story—the notion, as told by Richard Haswell, that “the best way to read a comp tale is to tell one of your own” (192). Gadamer’s theory should lead us to think that such a relationship between text and reader is one-sided, imbuing the narrative with all of the power to be embraced as memorable or compelling, but none of the power to reach its reader through substantial dialogue. It is an interaction that values the narrative on its face but doesn’t provide the interpretive power to engage it in a way that would allow others to extend it toward participation in the discipline’s scholarly conversations.

In the case of readings of fidelity, stories serve as mnemonic, a reminder for recalling one’s own lived memories and emotions of participating in the field—that “in hearing [stories] we will remember who we are and what teaching and learning have come to mean to us” (Murphy 471). If we think of “remembering” in the strong sense of inventorying and deeply reflecting upon the experiences and knowledge of the field, as Richard Murphy must, then perhaps such a conversation feels genuinely interactive. But there is a sense of memorability that shrinks in value in light of Gadamer’s warnings about one-sided interpretation. As the reader mines the narrative for recognition of her own life and work (the difficulties, the emotions, the pleasures), the reader’s historicity threatens to over-identify with the story, co-opting it without allowing it to speak. It is, in a different but potentially equally disempowering way, to dismiss the productive conversation that the narrative might have prompted under a different reading relationship.

If we think about these problematic ways of reading narratives, whether we name them through probability and fidelity or through Gadamer’s I-Thou terms, their danger is that they threaten to discourage, rather than value, stories that cannot be so easily interpreted, stories that baffle or trouble us. Probabilistic readings threaten to discourage texts that don’t take on recog-

nizable story-shape, that might seem, in some ways, poorly told because they don't provide the "pleasure of the story." Readings for fidelity, on the other hand, threaten to dismiss stories that resist easy identification, that read as profoundly unfamiliar, that willfully confuse or disrupt attempts at reader empathy, that defy readers' attempts to "relate." This is to say that readings of scholarship through the lenses of probability and fidelity, just like my reading of Patterson's narrative, are inclined to equate value with stories that feel "readable" and devalue stories that stubbornly buck expectation.

It seems there are reasons why we are so attentive to, and so desirous of, stories that feel familiar, either in structure or in values (or both). In "Life as Narrative," Jerome Bruner points out that we find stories powerful because they mimic our lives, and indeed our lives are interpreted as powerful when they mimic our stories. "Mind is never free of precommitment," says Bruner. "There is no innocent eye [...]. There are instead hypotheses, versions, expected scenarios. Our precommitment about the nature of life is that it is a story, some narrative however incoherently put together" (32). We identify our lives so thoroughly through narrative structures that seeing those structures reflected in a text makes it inherently familiar and attractive—not necessarily because it mimics life, but because it mimics life-as-story, something Douglass Hesse points out quite eloquently: "Stories are convincing not because they're lifelike but because they're storylike. The power of narrative in essay comes not from the writer's ability to mirror reality, then state its meaning; rather, it comes from his or her offering us assertions in a shape attractive because it's so familiar" (191). This familiarity of structure provides an understanding of how stories gain power; but it also gives a sense of why engagements of probability and fidelity can be so attractive. Candace Spigelman describes this quality of narrative as "seductive": "When all is said and done, the personal narrative is not problematic because of the limits of

judgment to its validity claims; it is problematic because the uninterrogated and unevaluated personal narrative is seductive and, consequently, dangerous” (83).

If it is true, as these scholars suggest, that narrative’s character steers our interpretive approach through the underlying appeal of story-shape, or because those narratives allow us to see moments of our own lives reflected in that story-shape, then it’s no surprise that approaches toward reading narrative, my own included, often privilege characteristics of the story itself rather than the interpreter’s right to extend or intervene in stories as scholarly discourse. The problem, though, is that those textual elements most likely to create believable and familiar stories—consistency, ease-of-reading, rhetorical manageability—produce conversational engagements that run contrary to deep-seated principles that underlie, at least in part, the field’s expectations for conceptually-stirring scholarly work.

The task of reevaluating narrative pedagogies and narrative scholarship alike will rest, it seems, on our ability to reconcile these two conflicting desires: the first to make good stories that satisfy our narrative impulses (both to consume stories and to retell them) and the second to interact, extend, and revise the discipline’s intellectual conversations. What is needed, perhaps, is a more self-conscious solicitation of narratives that, rather than satisfying our desires for confirmation or storied inspiration, leave us dumbstruck, leave us struggling to write our way toward, into, or away from that text. Stories, in other words, that we would have to engage more deeply because our conventional ways of reading could not begin to make sense of them. Min-Zhan Lu says that we should solicit narratives that break with tradition, that test our patience with their form, that surprise us. “We need to recollect stories,” she says, “which depart from standard notions of good storytelling and appear convoluted, strange, or unfinished in comparison.” (215). This means that in our reading and valuing of narratives, we should solicit stories

that aren't easily memorable, that test our ability to comprehend because they break apart the structures with which we have become most comfortable. The entry point for conversation could be to engage with these fractures, to explore them, question them. "Instead of recitation or replication, we need revision," Lu says (210). Revision toward difficulty is precisely what Patterson needed in order to try out new ways of conversing with his narrative, to begin making it into an intellectual project beyond just conveying "what happened." Revision toward difficulty is also what I needed to embrace as a reader and teacher of Patterson's work.

2.6 CODA: A MEDITATION ON TRANSPARENCY AND DIFFICULTY

Patterson and I both settled for a story that most easily revised away tension rather than revising toward an understanding of how that obscurity might have been made powerful. And this happened, at least in part, because there was a piece of me that wanted his narrative to not draw attention to itself, to ruffle the fewest feathers of his imagined readership. Though such a conversation felt unsatisfying, I nudged him along this way because an unremarkable story, one that readers might just nod at before moving on, was better, I thought, than a story that would garner the ire of his audience.

In casting readers as desirous of a straightforward narrative devoid of contradiction or friction, I encouraged Patterson to adopt a position that many of my students are good at, even without my accidental encouragement: a desire for univocal seamlessness. This teaching experience with Patterson finds me guilty of succumbing to a relationship with student texts that I would otherwise, in principle, disagree with: a theory of writing as the process of achieving

transparency. It is a view of the writer as someone who shouldn't smear the window of language that is supposed to open out to a world on the other side, a world that is thought to be equally transparent and, I would argue, equally unremarkable. To skew the predictable outcome of that world is to do a disservice to your readers who, presumably, also want to read something clear and digestible, something they can simply identify with, something that they, themselves, might have written if it had ever occurred to them to talk about such things. It is also the kind of writing that sees its goal as trying to seamlessly translate an act of reading into an act of writing. In short, this is a culture of writing that praises the student for writing herself out of the text, for disappearing. A woman I once presented with at a conference reported, for example, how other basic writing teachers at her institution characterize their work. One teacher, she recounted without judgment, describes to her students their ultimate goal in basic writing should be to get to a point where they could have a phone interview for a 100k job without their potential employer knowing what race and class they are. This is a certain conception of what it means to write well. Based on how my students often describe their experiences with composition, it looks to me that this theory still has a presence in the field.

Equating transparency with the goals of composition instruction teaches students an approach toward language that, in many ways, runs counters to how we represent intellectual exchange and development in our own lives as intellectuals. As academics we often resist the transparent in our own work. I have written this dissertation, for example, to demonstrate my commitments as a scholar and to represent myself as a professional, which is to say, in one sense, to demonstrate that I can write transparently within an academic genre. But, as a writer, that doesn't describe all of my purposes. I am also using this chapter, and the others, to try my hand at thinking through ideas that aren't yet settled in my mind. They have been so shaped

through writing and rewriting that it is difficult to imagine ever describing them as settled. Take, for example, the references in a few of the chapters here to the late Martinican poet and critic Édouard Glissant, someone whose work doesn't run in composition circles but whose literary and theoretical work on creolization has been important in postcolonial scholarship. For quite some time I've thought that Glissant says something to me about language that I can use as a scholar and teacher of writing pedagogies. But I've struggled to fully articulate that connection to myself, let alone to others. I have found him useful in this project to articulate positions that I would find difficult to present otherwise (positions important to me as a thinker and writer both), but that doesn't change my nervousness bringing him in here, as someone I've little studied and as a stranger to my field whose scholarship requires different kinds of reading and perhaps different background knowledge.

To own this position, and this discomfort, is to admit that my priorities in the act of writing, even in a professional forum like this one, cannot be reduced to the goal of producing transparent prose to represent transparent thinking. Insofar as I try to achieve that transparency at the level of textual procedure, I do so in order for my rhetorical savvy to gain the confidence and generosity of my readers so I can create space for experimenting with wrinkled ideas that are endless works in progress.

I feel comfortable admitting this here because we scholars work constantly with unfinished ideas, with intellectual explorations that may or may not play out, with ideas that unfold slowly and often only ever partially. A few years ago Gayatri Spivak returned to the University of Pittsburgh for a speaking engagement. She quite memorably, at least to a grad student's ears, responded to a critique of her analysis of a novel with something like, *I mean it's a reading. You have your reading. I have mine. A reading's a reading. I'm not going to argue with yours.* Those words might have

sounded deflective, even aggressively so (as I suppose they felt for the questioner). But Spivak's tone was matter-of-fact. She was aware of the limitations of her reading, and she was confident that the limitations of her reading did not undermine its value as an act of thinking. To justify her writing in this way was to privilege not the finality of the last word, but rather what a moment of reading/writing allowed her to say.

As demonstrated by my interaction with Patterson, this contingency of ideas is less freely granted to students. The intellectual capital invoked by Spivak when she says something like "I might be wrong" or "This is an experiment" or "I willfully write against your ways of understanding"—is not capital that our students, especially freshman writers, can access. In part, they don't have that access because we don't grant it; instead we too often advertise to students that, for them to even begin intellectual dialogue (with people or texts), they must first produce transparent writing. This during a time when scholars have begun to show that the assumption that such monolingual transparency exists (let alone that it is a desirable social commodity) is politically suspect at best and violently oppressive at worst. The criteria for transparency are not objective; they are interested: politically, socially, economically. They are established and maintained as inclusionary and exclusionary devices by those who have the power to posit them.

My own frustration with this disjunction between the productive contingencies of academic writing and my students' fervent (though unnamed) commitment to an ideology of transparency has got me fantasizing about, of all things, obscurity. This is, indeed, one reason why I'm drawn to exploring what Édouard Glissant might say to me as a writing teacher. Glissant attempts to theorize the consequences and potentials of a world whose immense diversity makes naming stable elements within webs of interaction increasingly impossible. But the obscurity of

those relations, for Glissant, is of the greatest value. It is simultaneously a goal and a starting place. He says,

I even openly claim the right to obscurity, which is not enclosure, apartheid, or separation. The obscure is simply renouncing the false truths of transparencies. We have suffered greatly from the transparent models of high humanity, of degrees of civilization that must be ceaselessly worked through, of blinding Knowledge. [...] We must reclaim the right to opacity. It is not necessary to understand someone [...] in order to wish to live with them. (“*Sur la trace d’Edouard Glissant*” xxxii-xxxiii)

For Glissant, to understand—to reduce to transparency—is the process of (colonial) imposition, of false understanding. It is the denial of the endless complexity of relations, the denial of the value of putting oneself next to something else rather superimposing oneself over it. Forms of production that capture that obscurity as valuable rather than as something to be reduced or managed away are most valuable, he claims. He makes me ask whether there is a place for privileging obscurity over transparency in college writing. And how I would have to differently understand teaching if that was my goal.

James Slevin, a scholar closer to my intellectual sphere, helps me consider this possibility, too. He describes the work of general education as “critical inquiry and critical exchange.” I think most of us would agree to this on paper. But listen to how he continues. The stakes go up:

The fundamental commitment underlying this work is the giving of reasons. [...] If the basic goal of general education is instilling and exercising the habit of giving reasons, the apt way to characterize the larger commitment of education is that it should be difficult and, more exactly, that it is about intellectual difficulty

as something to be sought and about being difficult as a way to be. The project of providing and requiring reasons is a methodology for critically engaging the difficult and also a way of causing difficulty, which is what I think we should want students to do. (“Keeping the University Occupied and Out of Trouble” 70)

It is no easy task to get students to embrace writing as a way of experimenting with “being difficult as a way to be.” And it might be even more of a challenge to get ourselves and our colleagues to embrace literacy instruction as causing, rather than removing, difficulty in our students. How do we as teachers, writers, readers, thinkers represent the work of writing as a productive thinking-through and perhaps even a demonstration of being difficult, being productively obscure? What positions might we take that temper our initial impulse for transparency, at least long enough for us to encourage students to explore ideas they don’t already know in writing that they don’t think we will listen to?

This is also why I’m thinking about narratives of teaching and learning. How can we get ourselves and our colleagues to appreciate each other’s narratives as being valuable for the difficulty they might cause and the disruption they might create rather than for their seamless predictability as stories? How do we encourage ways of reading narratives that search out difficulty rather than ease? How do we encourage conversations with narrative that value the productive obscurity that the field seems to already value in difficult theoretical texts?

The good news is that, to do such a thing, is to privilege much of the work that we already do as academics in relation to other kinds of texts—the values we hold for open-ended intellectual inquiry and scholarly complexity; the patience we have with colleagues as they try to position themselves alongside and against other thinkers and other ideas that we value within our disciplines. It means remembering that we—that I—write as often in the face of transparen-

cy as in its service, and that our students and colleagues' narratives might have much to teach us if we encouraged them to do the same. It would mean remembering that we value those conversations with each other that aren't just bullhorns for what we already know, that don't just allow us to bank someone else's monologue. We value conversation for the moments when we listen and change, in concert with others complicit in that conversation. That is a value transparency can't always capture.

3.0 KNOWLEDGE FROM "THE BORDERS": NARRATIVE DETOURS IN TWO-YEAR-COLLEGE COMPOSITION

Anyone who has ever taught in a community college classroom knows the power of stories.
—Howard Tinberg
“Seeing Ourselves Differently”

3.1 INTRODUCTION

From a career teaching writing at Massachusetts’ Bristol Community College, Howard Tinberg has heard and told plenty of stories. His students, like so many attending two-year colleges, have survived unlikely lives—some before they reach college age, others after years of “real-world” work. By the time they wind their ways back to the two-year-college classroom, they have enough distance to reflect upon those journeys. In the article quoted above, “Seeing Ourselves Differently: Remaking Research and Scholarship at the Community College,” Tinberg asks colleagues to embrace such stories and to write scholarship “from the head and the heart” that speaks from the uniquely valuable position these narratives provide (13).

As someone who spent many pre-Ph.D. years TA-ing and tutoring in “basic” and freshman-writing classrooms at Pasadena City College, I’m sympathetic to Tinberg’s desire to harness the power of stories. I want to sit down and listen to his and others’ and in turn tell my own. I

remember Samuel, for example, an amateur boxer slowed by a brain injury. After nine years on the ropes, he returned to college to learn how to write. He wanted to publish his born-again story of healing. Then there was Sylvia. At sixteen she became secretly engaged to, and later married, a man nearly twice her age. Two years later and defiant, she used her composition class as a forum to write poetry again, despite her husband's forbiddance. And Carlton, a onetime high-school linebacker who couldn't remember ever writing an essay. He dropped jaws (including his own, I think) with his first effort: a midnight yard, a pick-up game, an ACL tear lit by a "clock-shaped moon."

These stories are familiar to me—not just from memory, but because I have told them before. I wrote the bones of the above description in 2003 as applicant for Ph.D. programs in rhetoric and composition. That self of 2003 very much believed in the power of these student stories, at least enough to think retelling them to an admissions committee achieved something (though at the time all I could say in my Statement of Purpose was that these stories "put a human face on the importance of teaching writing literacy"). But after years more of teaching, theorizing, and questioning, of hearing stories and telling my own, I'm reticent to embrace Tinberg's notion. Or, to put it more exactly, I'm more aware of the ways that I still, even now, have difficulty knowing what to do with these student stories and how to think about the knowledge they make possible. Given the fraught position of narrative within composition studies—both as scholarship and pedagogy—Tinberg's call for scholarship from "the head and the heart" raises important questions about what it might mean to rely on narrative scholarship to further the work of the two-year college and composition studies as a whole.

In what follows I try to understand narrative through the lens of this particular institution—the Two-Year College (TYC)—and through the theories of those like Tinberg who ex-

plore the relationship between two-year-college institutionalality and narrative scholarly form. The TYC is a site where the questions surrounding narrative scholarship are crystalized, made visible, and mobilized in particularly rich ways—and so it is a valuable resource for investigating narrative knowledge-creation in composition scholarship. By building off of those two-year-college resources, I hope to put new pressures on the personal-narrative debate from an institutional voice that has too often been silenced.

3.2 A SCHOLARSHIP DEFICIT

To contextualize the two-year college's attraction to narrative scholarship, it's helpful to consider the two-year college's relationship to scholarship more broadly, particularly as that relationship is embedded within the TYC's complex relational history to higher education. Though there's much to cover in such a history, my primary concern here is the persistent identity conflict caused by the two-year college's struggle to define itself within the web of higher education.²⁵ As Mark Reynolds describes,

Since their founding in the early 1900s, two-year colleges have always sought to fill specific needs in American higher education beyond the traditional high school years. As a result, two-year institutions occupy an unusual position, lodged between the high school and the university, often seeming to belong to neither, and yet often integrally tied to both even though distinctly unlike either. As a re-

²⁵ See Brint & Karabel; Cohen and Brower; Zwerling; Dougherty; also see Fearing for a history in brief and Kroll for a literature review of preservice and faculty development studies that relay these struggles.

sult, these institutions have had to forge their own identity within their local environments [...]. (“Two-Year-College Teachers as Knowledge Makers” 3).

Within this struggle to seat identity between high school and university, the TYC has defined itself primarily as a teaching institution over and against its potential as a site of knowledge creation or research. Because of these characterizations, and the assumptions that often accompany them, earning respect within higher education has been a tough go. As Linda Ching Sledge puts it, “community-college scholars have the same image problem as their home institutions; they, too, are judged hybrid creatures whose work is only tangentially related to the world of higher education” (9).

As the two-year college has negotiated its identity-forging anxiety, so has it revised the ways it imagines the roles research, scholarship, and publication should play, if any, in negotiating or revising Two-Year College status vis-à-vis its educational counterparts. At institutions that do not significantly reward scholarship and publication, capital (both monetary and professional) primarily orbits around teaching and, to a lesser degree, service. How should scholarship fit into such an equation?

Answers to these questions are charged: a focus away from research and onto generalist knowledge and pedagogical praxis has long defined TYC identity—but that same focus has also fed into a deficit of two-year-college scholarship and a perception, by some, of the TYC’s intellectual modesty. Scholarship is not coming from the two-year college the way that it comes from four-year colleges, creating internal and external repercussions.²⁶ The internal benefits of schol-

²⁶ See McGrath and Spear’s *The Academic Crisis of the Community Colleges* (1991), which draws on Stephen North’s concept of “lore” in order to address this problem in other disciplines beyond English studies and Composition. As characterized by Jeff Sommers, “To McGrath and Spear the consequence of this separation of teaching and scholarship is that two-year faculty have created a practitioners’ culture [...]” (Powers-Stubbs and Sommers 30).

arship—the way it promises to enrich the intellectual community of the college; the way it dovetails into teaching, enlivening the classroom; the way it encourages professional and intellectual development of those producing and consuming it—are lost with such a deficit. Externally, as fewer texts from TYC professors circulate, opportunities to raise awareness about Two-Year college work are lost.

But the issues are actually much larger. This contentious relationship between the roles of teacher and scholar saturates the institutional memory of the two-year college, resulting in a resistance to scholarship that stems as much from the institution's material constraints as from the philosophical commitments engendered by that institutionality. Such a reluctance is evident not just in the modest participation of TYC scholars in composition's prominent research journals (like *CCC* and *College English*), but also (or especially) in the surprisingly low numbers of two-year college teachers contributing to *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*: a 2002 survey found that only 52 percent of articles published in *TETYC* were written by two-year college faculty (Andelora 319).

Because revising the relationship between the TYC and scholarship is imagined by many TYC advocates to be key in changing the college's direction and misperceptions, scholarship is not merely a tool of intellectual investigation and knowledge dissemination; it is also a topical locus around which to express anxiety about status and to incite institutional and disciplinary change. To talk about scholarship at the two-year college is really to talk about the ways scholarship evinces a struggle for intellectual and cultural territory, a territory still contested by those eager to shape the two-year-college trajectory. More than at the research university, the idea of scholarship at the TYC becomes a kind of currency, adding value, buying visibility, and regulating transactions within a higher-education culture that has long prioritized the research-

university model of new knowledge creation through original research and peer-reviewed publication.

It is this very discomfort with the place of scholarship that makes the two-year college such a rich venue for exploring disruptive forms of scholarship, including narrative. As I suggest in chapter one, the matter of what counts as valuable intellectual work (and in what form) is never a truly settled question; but it can seem to be so within well-defined and entrenched scholarly communities, as those communities police alternative practices that don't conform. At the two-year college, however, the history of negotiating scholarship's role is still in the making, and the patina of scholarship is not (and has never been) quite so shiny.

It's a truism to say that limited scholarly production from this site is not the fault of TYC faculty, but rather the predictable result of the historical, political, and sociological pressures that have come to shape two-year-college institutionalities—the institutionalities that constrain, just as it makes possible, two-year-college action. George Vaughan, the most prominent scholar reading the two-year college's relationship to scholarship through the lens of these institutional tensions, attributes the scholarship deficit to five conditions:

1. “Community colleges have failed to link scholarship to teaching,” thereby failing to suggest the ways that scholarship provides “professional renewal” even for those who primarily self-identify as teachers over scholars (“Scholarship in Community Colleges” 28).
2. “Community Colleges have failed to reward scholarship” in matters of promotion and scholarship, and therefore do not incentivise scholarly activities in an already filled work schedule (28).

3. “Community college presidents fail to engage in scholarship” and thus fail to provide leadership in scholarship production to faculty (28).
4. “Community college faculty and administrators have a misplaced sense of professional obligations,” committing themselves to their work-a-day jobs (teaching or administrating) at the expense of the knowledge-making contributions they might have made to their professions (28-29).
5. “Many community college professionals neglect scholarship because they have been drawn into the debate, intellectually and emotionally, of teaching versus research.” This false portrayal implies that teaching and scholarship as agonistic, even mutually exclusive. (29).

Vaughan attributes these tensions between teaching and scholarship primarily to a debilitating ambiguity between uses of the terms *scholarship* and *research*. Vaughan defines scholarship as “the systematic pursuit of a topic, an objective, rational inquiry that involves critical analysis [which in turn] requires the precise observation, organization, and recording of information in the search for truth and order” (“Scholarship in Community Colleges” 27). *Research*, on the other hand, is a subcategory of scholarship, “a systematic, objective search for new knowledge or a new application of existing knowledge” (“Scholarship in Community Colleges” 27; see also “Scholarship and the Community College Professional” 4-6). The danger of conflating these two terms, according to Vaughan, is that the more intensive time-demands of research create an appearance that any and all scholarship is out of reach for two-year college faculty who lack sufficient time and institutional support to engage in such activities.²⁷

²⁷ See James C. Palmer’s “Nurturing Scholarship in Community Colleges” for a similar argument (1991).

Recognizing the separation between a broader category of *scholarship* and the subcategory *research* is Vaughan's first step in a larger attempt to address the scholarly deficit by seeing it not just a matter of stalled production, a lull in the assembly line, but as a problem of conflicting academic cultures and their distinct ways of defining and interpreting what it means to do scholarship. To address the scholarship deficit, for Vaughan, requires considering the values that cleave these cultures apart. Instead of leveling armchair demands for increased scholarly production (which ignore the material conditions of an overworked teaching population), he hopes this redefinition will create occasions for scholarship, even within existing institutional pressures. Indeed, Vaughan's message to TYC professors can be read as quite practical: You need not live in the library or travel to distant archives to do the work of scholarship; you can produce scholarship from your institution, even between classes and burdened by large teaching loads. And—this work can contribute to, rather than compete with, your teaching and administrative practices. “Once an institution defines scholarship in terms that are acceptable to the college community and which are in concert with the institutional mission,” Vaughan says, “the institution is then ready to incorporate scholarship into the institutional culture” (“Scholarship and Teaching: Crafting the Art” 216).

Under all of these terms, redefining scholarship vis-à-vis research is not just about disambiguating terms and practices, but about redefining what scholarship might come to mean within the institutional context of two-year college:

My question is, why *shouldn't* community colleges break with conventional notions of scholarship and define scholarship in a way that is in concert with the community college mission and which enhances the faculty member's role in achieving that mission? My answer is that community colleges *should* break with tradition

and *should* define scholarship on their own terms. By defining scholarship in a way that is in concert with the institutional mission, community college professionals can begin to project an image that associates them and their colleges with a community of scholars created in their own image.” (Vaughan, “Scholarship and Teaching” 214)

By recasting what counts as scholarship, Vaughan opens the possibility that a wider range of work will be counted toward that project and, as a result, that those teacher-scholars will better see their work (and the work of their colleagues) as important additions to a scholarly corpus rather than unwanted chatter (as implied by traditional definitions and valuations of research). Each act of scholarly production, beyond its own individual value, promises to accumulate, adding to a broader movement of scholarship and multiplying access points for two-year college teachers to imagine their activities as part of a scholarly movement. The more TYC professors participate in scholarly opportunities (and witness others doing so), the more likely they will be to self-identify as scholars and to break the dichotomies pervading the TYC’s institutional memory: that teaching and research are mutually exclusive; that one shouldn’t attempt scholarship if time is short; that scholarship and teaching do not, or need not, inter-animate each other. By working with what TYC professors already do, scholarship might come to be seen not as an interloper, but as a familiar tool that motivates a certain kind of intellectual practice.

Vaughan’s call is a good start for seeing how narrative scholarship has come to represent one inroad into redefining scholarship “in concert with” the two-year-college setting. Stories of teaching and learning—or “local research,” as Candace Spigelman and Kami Day call it (137)—have come to bear a significant burden in imagining scholarship that represents and conforms to two-year-college academic culture. If the redefinition of TYC scholarship rests in part on the

availability of that scholarly content within current institutional constraints, then it seems that the work of narrating the classroom could be imagined as a form of scholarship particularly available to this population. As Frank Madden says, “In many ways two-year college teachers are in the best position to do this kind of research. A diverse student population provides many wonderful stories. Multiple sections of the same course provide rich sources of comparison. Unlike the research of university educators, who are usually visitors to the classes they observe, the focus of these observations is on the researchers' own students” (“Crossing Borders” 727). For a teacher that does not have time to do archival research or to synthesize large bodies of history or theory, storytelling as a reflective pedagogical device may not only be reasonable but valuable.

Despite the wide praise Vaughan’s attempts have garnered—and deserved—for clarifying two-year-college work, I want to pause in order to trouble the assumptions lurking behind Vaughan’s redefinition of two-year college scholarship, and what those assumptions might mean for our understanding of the role of narrative scholarship. I take it that such efforts to define scholarship *ex-post-facto*—based on the writing that is already done (or easily done) rather than around a strong position of what scholarship can or should do—risks further marginalizing the two-year college and narrative scholarship both. The implication, one could argue, is that two-year-college scholars can only be better congratulated for their day-to-day work, not relied upon to do something intellectually extraordinary. And scholarly narratives of the classroom, this same position could imply, are worth doing only when there’s not enough time to produce something more valuable. In short, I worry that such a position threatens to enervate two-year-college scholarship by prioritizing accessibility over intellectual rigor.

I’d like to flesh out two positions that I can imagine leveling such criticisms against this notion of convenience. I explore these positions to demonstrate what is at stake in how we

characterize narrative's possibility. The grounds for dismissal that I detail below will sound familiar to TYC advocates, for they are also the very terms used by some to criticize the overarching educational project of the two-year college.

First, Vaughan's approach threatens to reproduce the grounds of criticism represented by those who have long devalued the two-year college's open-access (and democratically egalitarian) admissions policies. The open-access roots of the two-year college—which welcome all students despite widely varying demographics of age and ethnicity, and differing levels of (dis)ability, preparedness, and experience—have simultaneously anchored the TYC's unique values and stirred criticism of its challenges. Serving these students is the cultural touchstone that motivates so much TYC work, and yet it is the dedication to that student population, that very openness and availability, that plagues the two-year college in the eyes of detractors who view unrestricted student acceptance as evidence of inferior intellectual potential. As Glen Gabert says, the open admissions policy “has been one of the most misunderstood characteristics of community colleges and has led to charges that they are second-rate institutions with low standards” (15). The assumption is that poor-quality students drawn by open-access policies require a dumbed-down curriculum, which in turn encourages inferior teaching to serve those students (or a lowering of the criteria for faculty hiring). As it welcomes all, the TYC cannot duplicate the elite cultural capital implied by limited access institutions—the ways, for example, that limited enrollment within ivy league institutions perpetuate an image of removed and mystical authority, superior educational standards, and unbounded student intelligence.

As a career two-year college president, Vaughan has surely heard such dismissals. Yet his own solution to the scholarship deficit relies upon characterizing a new kind of open-access scholarship: one that is valuable because it is available to, and can be employed by, all TYC fac-

ulty no matter how over-worked or beleaguered. If narrative is one valuable piece of this open-access approach to scholarship, it will face the same challenges for earning broad respect as the TYC itself. The question is whether narrative scholarship, valued here for its democratic availability, can provide credible intellectual visibility to institutions already denigrated for being open access. Can narrative—as available, as non-specialist, as imagined to skirt the required trappings of “typical” academic scholarship—do important work in the eyes of its readers?²⁸

There is a second way that Vaughan’s characterization of the scholarship deficit threatens to recreate historical dismissals of the two-year college’s project. In contrast to those who denigrate TYC students as unworthy of higher education, there are champions of these students who fear that open access disables student potential as much as it helps. Under this view, the TYC is imagined to disempower students despite its best intentions by channeling them away from other, more robust educational pathways. This funneling is a hindrance to students who, if given a *real* chance, could succeed in elite higher education. Ira Shor is one of those that questions the TYC’s mission as democratizing, as providing equal educational advancement to marginal populations on the best model of American equality and access. TYCs were not developed to serve those on the educational margins, he contends, but rather to appease the college-aspiring fringes from becoming restless with their lack of access to “public” institutions that had previously refused them. In the words of Shor, TYCs were “built to shunt nonelite students into lesser institutions,” thereby “quarantin[ing] working and minority students onto campuses with fewer re-

²⁸ It’s interesting to think of this “problem” with narrative scholarship as the exact opposite of Lee Shulman’s worry (as expressed in my last chapter) that teaching needs to become more public if it is ever to have the respect and force of scholarship. As one of my colleagues Brie Owen brought to my attention, one might think of the problem of diminished respect for teaching knowledge as a consequence not of being too private, but rather because it, in some respects, is seen as public, rather than intellectually private, property. Culturally we borrow assignments from one another; we cut-and-paste parts of each other’s syllabi; we borrow classroom strategies, ideas for workshops—all without the pressures of attribution and citation that scholarly contexts would require.

sources and higher dropout rates (qtd. in Tinberg, “An interview with Ira Shor—Part 1” 52). Brint and Karabel, among others,²⁹ claim that the TYC was a “moat” or “bumper” (229) surrounding four-year education, diverting those educational undesirables from knocking on the doors of universities which were supposed to serve them:

The two-year institution’s claim to being a genuine college rested almost exclusively on its promise to offer the first two years of a four-year college education. Yet the junior college was never intended, despite the high aspirations of its students, to provide anything more than a terminal education for most of those who entered it; indeed, at no point in its history did even half of its students transfer to a four-year institution. (Brint and Karabel 205)

These scholars suggest quite powerfully that a certain educational elitism circumscribed, at least in part, “undesirable” student populations inside two-year-college walls, managing their ambitions into the ground through either conspiratorial design or institutional ineptitude—what Burton Clark deemed the “cooling-out function” of the two-year college.

It is within this sense of “cooling out” that I hear echoes of Vaughan’s discussion of two-year-college scholarship. If the idea of cooling out is that a two-year-college education manages away ambition by giving undesirable students just enough opportunity so they forget they can do more (or, perhaps more accurately, forget that they *have the right* to do more) then

²⁹ See L. Stephen Zwerling’s *Second Best: The Crisis of the Junior College*. See also Kevin Dougherty’s “The Politics of Community College Expansion” for a good summary of both what he calls the “Functionalist view,” which contends that the two-year college was created out of the desire to satisfy the educational demand of those who theretofore hadn’t had educational opportunity (the marginalized of society), as well as the opposing view, the “class-reproduction” argument, whose adherents “argue that the community college upholds only in spirit, and vitiates in practice, the ideal of equality of opportunity. In their view, the community college’s fundamental social role is to reproduce the class structure of capitalist society by producing graduates trained and socialized to work in privately owned enterprises and by ensuring that children inherit their parents’ social class positions” (354).

couldn't the same be said about TYC-accessible forms of scholarship? Vaughan's desire to map the term *scholarship* onto existing work of an overworked populace invites the same criticism: because the two-year college provides only anemic support for scholarship, it must therefore invent ways to relegate scholarly opportunity to nominal or ready-made contributions. The cynic could read TYC "scholarship" not as genuine knowledge-making, but as a way for teacher-scholars to pretend, along with their students, that they are moving forward rather than stagnating. The genuine intellectual ambitions of TYC faculty—their desires to shape their fields, to become better teachers and scholars, to make others better through their contributions—would not be served under such a view. Instead those desires are managed away as the TYC tries to erect a façade of institutional progress while releasing scholarly steam of overworked faculty. "Classroom research runs the danger," Howard Tinberg admits, "of being the things that teachers do when they can't do the 'right' kind of research" (*Border Talk* viii).

It is interesting to imagine these two possible dangers of Vaughan's terms of evaluation, and I do so not because I subscribe to either (indeed, I've probably taken them too far in conjecture). Instead I provide them here to suggest that not just any redefinition or justification of scholarship will do. If our hope is to better understand narrative knowledge-making, then calls for convenient forms of scholarship within institutional demands will do little for those hoping to be heard by a serious readership; and they do just as little for helping the field imagine a grander impact of narrative scholarship beyond its practicality.

Such arguments of convenience rely upon assumptions that narrative scholarship provides transparent communication absorbed through predictable lenses of reading.³⁰ I've spoken of some of these assumptions in the previous chapter (though they are perhaps more visible here, given the context of the two-year college): that such narratives are intuitive to write (implying, for example, that two-year-college faculty do not require training or particular preparation for writing such scholarship); that the stories emerging from the classroom are easily interpreted (and thus that student and teacher actions are transparent and easy-to-use research objects); that the stories told about those interactions are as inevitable as they are predictable (and thus that teachers need little time to "write up" these straightforward narratives). These assumptions about narrative form are only amplified by attempts to value this scholarship as accessible to all who want to produce it.

Vaughan is right that the TYC should redefine scholarship from its own institutional setting, but it should do so not in the weak sense of better conforming that definition to what faculty are inclined to already do, but in the strong sense of capturing within that definition the unique and valuable intellectual work that these institutions offer (of scholarship and teaching, both). At best, such work would not just reveal what goes on at the TYC but also provide avenues to disrupt the too-comfortable, and perhaps too-narrow, paradigms of scholarly value and credibility represented by the research-university paradigm.

³⁰ This stance might remind us of Robert Conner's argument that narrative is the kind of writing we have our students do because we don't have institutional support to spend time reading, evaluating, and commenting on characteristics of student writing beyond the superficial ("Personal Writing Assignments").

3.3 BEYOND A SCHOLARSHIP OF CONVENIENCE: NARRATIVE AND THE BORDER

I value the considerable time and energy two-year scholars have spent theorizing narrative, including Vaughan's dedication to the two-year-college question. But at the same time I think it's important to put pressure on the current discussion by teasing out the possibility of something more: that narrative scholarship coming from the two-year college might provide unique knowledge, both because of its institutional origin at the two-year college (as a particular kind of place with particular kinds of students and particular kinds of teachers) and because of the possibilities narrative provides to exploit that position. Generating a scholarly discourse that talks back to, or disrupts, dominant forms of academic scholarship and discourse is the heart of that potential. It is this latter step that TYC scholars, even in their struggles to redefine scholarship, help send me toward.

Instead of inventing a theory of narrative's scholarly value and imposing it on the two-year college, I'd like to build on these existing claims and theories by two-year college compositionists, moving outward from that work by posing questions that complicate those theories. The most promising of existing theorizations from the TYC, to my mind, are the attempts to characterize the two-year college as occupying a kind of "border space" and producing a kind of "border knowledge" thanks to the institution's social, economic, and political marginality. The *border* has become a popular metaphor in composition studies broadly, but it seems to have taken a particular hold within two-year-college composition circles. A lot of this spread is thanks to Howard Tinberg's attempts to complicate reductive perceptions of two-year colleges as periph-

eral to the academy.³¹ I've spoken above about the supposed characteristics of that periphery: the intellectual modesty of the two-year college's general education mission, the demographic marginality of its open-admissions students, the professional and educational inferiority of teachers unable to "make the cut" at other institutions. It is against this backdrop that Tinberg tries to mobilize the specific location of the two-year college as the condition needed to produce unique knowledge within the field, in contrast to the evaluative terms of four-year and research institutions. In "Seeing Ourselves Differently: Remaking Research and Scholarship at the Community College," Tinberg explicitly advocates resisting the research university's scholarly paradigm: "I don't want us to be like [colleagues at research institutions], publishing their kind of article, presenting their kind of paper [...]. Rather I want each of us at the community college level to make a new kind of knowledge, one that blurs the margins, one that values immediacy of experience and the distancing power of analysis" (13).

Tinberg's attempts to distinguish between the values of two-year and four-year colleges reveals a larger mission: "To remap the terrain of knowledge—as ambitious as that might sound—ought to be the goal of teachers who want to engage in scholarship and research" (*Border Talk* ix). Tinberg wants to "remap the terrain of knowledge" because the current map does not, and perhaps cannot, account for the knowledges emerging from this distinct site. At best, the current map pushes the TYC to its edge; at worst, it excludes the TYC entirely. Thus the "border" becomes a useful term for Tinberg, naming through this visual-spatial representation

³¹ Tinberg is not alone in this venture. He is part of a cast of active two-year-college composition scholars who have, for the last few decades, increasingly devoted themselves to not just producing scholarship from this oft-marginalized site of composition but to questioning the very conditions that marginalize their scholarship. Other TYC Scholars in composition studies invested in this cause include Barry Alford (Mid Michigan CC), Jeff Andelora (Mesa CC in Arizona), Keith Kroll (Kalamazoo Valley CC in Michigan), the late John Lovas (De Anza CC in California), Frank Madden (Westchester CC in New York), Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk (Kingsborough CC in New York), Mark Reynolds (Jefferson Davis CC in Alabama), and Jeff Sommers (Miami University of Ohio satellite campus).

an exclusion, a lack of representation, and a lack of understanding. Inspired by Henry Giroux's articulation of "border crossings"³² as "excursions between distinct disciplines and between distinct ways of knowing"—Tinberg sees the border as a place where disjunctions are foregrounded and, potentially, bridged (ix). The two-year college's positionality, he claims, makes it particularly able to live in this tension, and to make those "excursions," engendering a more diverse set of conversations.

The marginality of the TYC on the borders of higher education allows for, or even engenders, a dissolution of internal and external borders through translation across division (ix). "The old walls," Tinberg says, "the old borders between one field and another, simply have lost their usefulness" (*Border Talk* ix). Instead of lamenting the ways the TYC sits on one border of authorized education, Tinberg wants these institutions to embrace their position: "The 'culture' that we community college faculty shape and maintain must, I believe, be less 'pure' and more messy, not because we are less capable of doing the more traditional kinds of academic work but, rather, because the 'purer' academic work is becoming, in my view, increasingly less tenable at a time when disciplinary lines are being blurred and the norms of traditional academic discourse challenged" ("Seeing Ourselves Differently" 13).

The opportunities to make these crossings come in part because of the position of the teacher-scholars who work there. "Community College faculty," Tinberg says, "live on the borders, as it were. We work in the space between the schools and the universities. In our teaching, we traverse the middle ground between the needs of those who will transfer to the university and those who will enter the working world directly from our classes" (Tinberg, *Border Talk* x). Tinberg uses the metaphor of the "postmodern anthropologist" to describe TYC composition

³² From Giroux's *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education*.

teacher-scholars' abilities to span distances, to make use of friction, to translate across the incongruences and difference which both separate and conjoin. Anthropologists must be ever aware of their positions as observers, participants, and translators, and by holding those simultaneous positions they must speak not just about their objects of inquiry but also their own subjectivities (Tinberg, "Seeing Ourselves Differently" 13-14). Authorial and interpretive subjectivity, then, become equally important material of reflection as the intended object of study. By inhabiting both positions simultaneously—the subject looking-on and the object looked upon—the TYC teacher-scholar is a hybrid, multi-vocal subjectivity that can do a kind of "border-thinking" that others at more singular institutional locations are less likely to produce.

Like Tinberg, Mark Reynolds has done much to discuss TYC marginality and knowledge-making as a matter of working on the "border."³³ He claims the TYC's location puts two-year college faculty (who are oft-defined as "mere" teachers) in a uniquely valuable position of knowing. "No one is more knowledgeable," says Reynolds, "about what is needed to expand knowledge in English studies than two-year-college faculty members" ("Two-Year College Teachers as Knowledge Makers" 11). TYC professors are skilled border crossers; their training in disseminating general knowledge to diverse populations allows them to be "adaptable to students and settings and able to take complex materials and discover ways to communicate them effectively to varied audiences. It is this teaching expertise that the academy might well learn most from two-year-college teachers" ("Two-Year-College Teachers" 8). "Working with such students," continues Reynolds, "takes special teachers, special means, dedication, and determination" (9). This adaptability, this breadth of experience and skill, comes, too, from a commitment

³³ Also see Reynolds' "The Intellectual Work of Two-Year-College Teaching" (1998) and "The Past and Future of (Two-Year) College English Studies" (2002).

to inter-disciplinarity, which Reynolds, like Tinberg, claims to be more prevalent at two-year colleges because of less-centralized departments and “more holistic and cohesive faculty than found on most four-year campuses” (8, also see “The Intellectual Work of Two-Year-College Teaching” 39): “By virtue of their unique location, sitting as they always have *between* the university and the secondary school, two-year-college faculty are in an important position to offer knowledge about those who move on to the university and those who will move from two-year settings to the world of work” (“Two-Year-College Teachers” 11).

Because these teachers themselves straddle so many intellectual and institutional borders, they are better equipped to offer up solutions for teaching students who are “on the margins.” By virtue of working with these students, these teachers can offer to Composition Studies ways of thinking about promoting and fielding multicultural classrooms, addressing ever-increasing numbers of English-as-second-language students, and pioneering approaches for teaching developmental reading and writing (9). “It is two-year-college teachers,” says Reynolds, “who most often help students navigate the border crossings necessary to move not just across poverty or social class or cultural boundaries, but also across language barriers of all kinds” (9-10). Speaking from the two-year college location, Reynolds hopes, might be a “position [...] of strength, a place from which new knowledge needed by the discipline for the future can be most productively engendered” (12).

Tinberg sums up that position in this way: “In a certain sense we community college faculty are quintessentially postmodern. We possess no single identity, but rather have shifting and blurred identities. Like the subject of postmodern anthropology, we move in a variety of worlds. We are the educational ‘mestizas,’ the translatable teachers” (*Border Talk* x-xi). This combination

of immediate experience and analysis may muddy the scholarly waters of TYC scholarship, but it is a muddiness that Tinberg values:

I think what I am talking about here is the need to reconstitute the way we at the community college look at ourselves, the need to refashion our professional ‘selves.’ Are we simply classroom warriors slugging it out in the trenches? Or are we cool and detached academics, capable of abstract and theoretical perspectives? Or are we something else, a messy and impure *mélange*. I think the latter, and for me that is an exciting proposition. (“Seeing Ourselves” 16)

In this language we should hear echoes of Gloria Anzaldúa’s *La Frontera/Borderlands*. As imagined by Anzaldúa, the border is a literal and figural site of constant slippage and contact, and thus of constant friction. The physicality of the border, between the US and Mexico in Anzaldúa’s case, comes to represent the multiple points of contact that she and many of us, to varying degrees, live between. These borderlands, according to Anzaldúa, are “physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (*La Frontera/Borderlands*, Preface to the First Edition). But the border is more than just a way of naming those points of contact; it ambitiously characterizes and values the friction that occurs there—the friction which, though sometimes painful, produces exceptional knowledge. Again, from *La Frontera*,

Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one’s shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an “alien” element. There is an exhilaration in being a participant in the further evolution of humankind, in being “worked” on. I have the sense that certain “faculties”—not just in me but in

every border resident, colored or non-colored—and dormant areas of consciousness are being activated, awakened. Strange, huh? And yes, the “alien” element has become familiar—never comfortable [...] but home. (Preface to the First)

If we follow Anzaldúa’s lead on the consequences of being a border crosser and border thinker—in being “worked on,” as she says—then we must admit that occupying this space of fluid marginality affects, and is affected by, expressive form, something *La Frontera* enacts through its own dizzying mix of literary genres, languages, dialects, and discourses. We might say that, for Anzaldúa, such border spaces can be made, or approximated, though textual form, or perhaps more specifically, that the rich slippage of the border can be recreated through a kind of textual slippage: that we can, in other words, swim through this “alien element” (and perhaps make others swim through it) by wading across a sea of words. The form of Anzaldúa’s work, then, is a textual embodiment of “living-between languages and not just a bi-lingual aesthetic exercise” (Mignolo, “Bi-Languaging” 131).

At its most powerful the border metaphor not only values marginality (which the TYC often claims to experience daily) but imagines harnessing that value through textual decisions of writerly creation. Tinberg is not blind to the connection between border thinking and border talking/writing. If the two-year college occupies a special kind of institutional-intellectual border, then the knowledge engendered by that border location, Tinberg suggests, might be articulated by a more diverse array of scholarly expression. Tinberg thus asks his colleagues to “discover a language that partakes of ‘border talk,’” a language that “has currency across the divides between disciplines and institutions, between the local and the global, the practical and the theoretical, the private and the public” (*Border Talk* ix). That language of “border talk,” particularly as it

promises to originate at the two-year college, seeks to resist and revise the research-university-driven discourse of academia.

This movement—from border-as-descriptive-metaphor to a call for a new kind of scholarly practice—best captures the promise of TYC theorizations of, and contributions to, narrative scholarship in composition. Tinberg’s claim that this new knowledge can be created by imbuing analytical scholarship with the “immediacy of experience” is a recognition of the power of stories originating from two-year-college. Tinberg asks his colleagues to embrace these narratives in their own scholarship by producing “‘thick descriptions’ of what it is we do, embedded in day-to-day experience” (“Seeing Ourselves” 13). This storytelling—this “put[ting] something of ourselves in our writing,” as he calls it—provides avenues for two-year-college faculty to use their uniquely valuable position on the intellectual borders (13). “What we community college teachers have,” Tinberg says, “are daily opportunities to be both ‘here’ and ‘there,’ to be involved and entangled in experience and yet to draw upon that entanglement to produce insights to teach and live by (16).

Tinberg’s and Reynolds’ conception of border knowledge—and the potential of that knowledge to emerge through contact with the lives and stories of students—is particularly promising since it goes beyond simply conforming scholarly practice to existing conditions or mere justifications of the current scholarship deficit.³⁴ Instead, these theories of the border

³⁴ Though I should note that both of these scholars, and Reynolds in particular, demonstrate an anxiety about justifying the work that already happens at the two-year college. At times they seem equally invested in defending the scholarship currently produced as they are with theorizing what might go on with further conceptions of scholarship and TYC knowledge creation. This anxiety most often manifests itself in the need to both list, in a bibliographic fashion, two-year college scholars who have contributed to Composition research, and also to assert colleagues’ dedication to community and academic service. Here’s the tenor of a typical sentence: “In addition to writing journal articles, books, and textbooks and finding intellectual stimulation through curriculum development and interdisciplinary work, two-year-college faculty members have for years been active in professional organizations...” (Reynolds “The Intellectual Work of Two-Year College Teaching” 39; also see his “Two-Year Teachers as Knowledge Makers” 6-7). This kind of

begin to explore the unique knowledge the two-year college might create given its special access to its students and their stories. It is a move, in short, to reorient composition's scholarly landscape by making two-year-college work a viable hinge-point for composition's future. As John Lovas says in reference to the disproportionate number of students taught writing at TYCs, "You cannot represent a field if you ignore half of it. You cannot generalize about composition if you don't know half of what is done" (276). This is the two-year college's push to not just say "We do scholarship, too" but "You will benefit from the scholarship we do."

To imagine the two-year college as occupying an institutional, intellectual, and pedagogical border space is compelling, as are Tinberg, Reynolds, and others' calls to explore that situatedness through complex stories of the two-year-college classroom. I want to value this position because it is a generous and rich way of imagining the value of narrative scholarship in composition studies (and perhaps beyond). But I also want to put pressure on this notion of the border. To value the ambition behind this attempt does not help clarify what the concept of "the border" describes or what kind of knowledge such borderedness makes available. The metaphor itself is slippery; it equivocates between naming the position of the institution vis-à-vis higher education, the position of teachers, and the position of students, often without precise articulations about what is at stake in each of these bordered positions. And the term risks being overused, becoming merely descriptive rather than generative. In other words, as the terrain of knowledge is remapped to mark the border spaces from which the two-year college speaks, those newly mapped coordinates threaten to become newly fixed and, perhaps, newly problematic. And in the fixity of those new coordinates, the discussion of the two-year college's value

defensiveness should serve as another reminder that, even after so many years of contributing to higher education, TYC scholars feel the need to prove themselves, against stereotypes to the contrary, as worthy intellectuals.

gets shifted from its fluidity as a point of constant contact—“swimming in an alien element,” in Anzaldúa’s terms—to a reified demarcation by which that site can be categorized and circumscribed.

To avoid these dangers *the border* deserves a more careful treatment. My goal in the remainder of this essay is twofold. First, I will ground the discussion of the border in more specific terms by exploring where and how two-year college scholarship suggests such border knowledge to be possible. Second, I will turn to post/colonial scholarship to mobilize a richer conception of “the border” toward reading this scholarship; in particular I turn to one TYC article that demonstrates well the value of such theoretical orientations, providing a more specific understanding of what the frictions of TYC border spaces—between teacher, student, and institution—provide, and how narrative might capture that borderedness in ways we aren’t yet skilled at naming.

3.4 BRIDGING DISTANCES

Though Tinberg’s and Reynolds’ assertions about the TYC as a border institution are intriguing for their promise, their generalizations fail to give us a sense of *how* faculty see themselves as (re)producing this bordered positionality into a knowledge sharable across the field. Here I turn to three prominent anthologies in two-year-college English/Composition to find evidence of such border relationships, even if these relationships aren’t named as such: *Two-Year College English: Essays for a New Century* (1994), *The Profession of English at the Two-Year College* (2005), and *The Politics of Writing in the Two-Year College* (2001). I’ve chosen these collections because they speak

from a position of self-awareness regarding two-year college institutionalality; they also try to address (in one way or another) TYC scholarship as a crucial factor in defining that institutionalality. In other words, these anthologies don't just address topics endemic to and resulting from the TYC setting, but purposefully organize themselves around matters of institutional identity as such. In his preface to *Two-Year College English*, for example, Mark Reynolds promotes the collection as self-consciously investigating the foundations of TYC institutionalality: "My hope is that this collection provides readers with new and significant information about two-year college English, that it stimulates discussion about the role and scope of two-year English [...]" ("Preface" viii). In the more recent anthologies—*The Politics of English in the Two-Year Colleges* and the *Profession of English in the Two-Year College*—the mission is equally ambitious, but newly refined. In the introduction to *The Politics of Writing*, for example, Barry Alford and Keith Kroll say they've chosen essays which "frame the issues that make the two-year college a critical and contested site for understanding and critiquing the composition industry" (v). The *Profession of English* focuses on this same unique role of the TYC, but through a historical lens. Editors Sylvia Holladay-Hicks and Mark Reynolds write, "As a whole these essays help to provide a significant historical record [...] in order to lay the foundation for a new and different kind of professional—the two-year college teacher-scholar of English" (x).

Although the similarity of these larger missions are interesting in their own right, the patterns of preoccupation found between their respective covers are especially revealing for how the two-year college might be enriched by its location on the borders of authorization. Each collection suggests that it's the pressures posed by the diverse, open-admissions student body

that create the institution's unique possibilities.³⁵ Despite the historical dismissals of open-admissions I mentioned earlier, two-year-college composition has internalized that mission as a powerful imaginary through which to interpret its knowledge-making potential. In *The Profession of English*, for example, nine out of its thirteen articles explicitly reference the pressures that these student populations place on teachers and institutions alike. In these references the authors cite not just their personal teaching challenges, but also the ways those challenges make possible—and necessary—certain kinds of pedagogical and administrative relationships. Taken together, these three collections offer a revealing account of how the demographic and democratic potentials of the two-year college are imagined to shape its trajectory.

The democratic commitment of the TYC's open-admissions policy—the principle that refuses to pre-judge who is (un)worthy or (un)able to succeed in college—gets particular attention in this discussion. In her article “Lives worth Fighting For,” Marilyn Smith Layton discusses this commitment to providing such opportunity: “What has not changed over my decades of teaching and learning is my conviction about the vitality of the two-year college as one of the premier institutions of democracy in the United States even though its bounties, as we know, are too often appreciated primarily by those who teach and learn there” (36). Ann Laster, in “Reminiscing about a Two-Year Regional Conference: Two Voices/One Viewpoint,” describes the TYC as welcoming

students who had the widest range of abilities and interests [...]: those wanting to change careers, parents and military personnel returning to school, workers up-

³⁵ According to 2007 statistics from the American Association of Community Colleges, TYCs, though they have a hand in educating 46% of all undergraduates, enroll 55 percent of the Hispanic college population, and 57 percent of Native American college population. The average age of the TYC student is 29. For those part time students, fifty percent work full-time jobs. Serving an older population, a minority population, and an economically burdened population suggests some of this diversity.

grading skills, high school graduates feeling unprepared academically for a university, and varied students seeking affordable higher education. Many enrolled at two-year colleges after unsuccessful attempts at four-year colleges and universities. Our doors were open to them all. (Laster and Fatherree 117)

Howard Tinberg's contribution to *The Profession of English* shows how foundational these values have been to TYC's historical identity, even back to the NCTE's 1965 Tempe Conference on the two-year college. He quotes extensively from the Tempe report, reminding the field that the "democratic principles of open admission and universal opportunity" embodied by TYC faculty were, even then, imagined to have had "a dramatic effect on the way two-year-college faculty view themselves and the work they do" (qtd. in Tinberg, "Teaching English in Two-year Colleges" 139).

Despite the heavy praise for open-admission principles and the democratic values guiding them, these authors also reveal a pattern of attention to the difficulties accommodating such student diversity, often without sufficient theoretical or practical preparation. Ellen Andrews Knodt, in her "Graduate Programs for Two-Year-College Faculty: History and Future Directions," quotes from *Guidelines for Junior College English Teacher Training Programs* (a 1971 CCCC Executive Committee document) to remind her readers of the necessity to "go outside the traditional methods of teaching composition and literature in order to make literature accessible, and effective writing possible, for a much wider spectrum of the population than has ever before attended college" (qtd. in Knodt 127). This need to break with tradition is a particularly salient theme in these histories. Richard Williamson describes the difficulty of doing just this—resisting a comfortable reliance on previously learned teaching tenants. He describes his own unpreparedness dealing with this wide spectrum of students, and the differing demands and expectations

they bring. “Shakespeare didn’t write literature,” he remembers proclaiming to his adult-education drama class in his inaugural lecture (43). The palpable lack of recognition for “such heady stuff” was only the first sign of his difficulty. After announcing to class his next marvel—that the class would explore *Richard the Third* through participatory playacting rather than through teacher lecture—his students made clear that they “weren’t in class to play [...]. They were paying for someone, and speaking pointedly they said ‘an authority on Shakespeare,’ to tell them what the lines meant and what the plays were about” (43).

I find this same preoccupation with difficulty in the articles in *Two-Year College English* as they spend considerable time investigating the lack of TYC-teacher preparation and training contributing to these conditions. Bertie E. Fearing, in his “Renewed Vitality in the 21st Century: The Partnership between Two-Year College and University English Departments,” attributes much of the disconnect to the fact that TYC teachers, especially in early years, migrated from either high-school teaching or from Masters programs in literature—each arriving with little pedagogical training relating to the two-year college context. Keith Kroll, in his “(Re)Viewing Faculty Preservice Training and Development” (also in *Two-Year College English*), confirms and laments this lack of preparation as he summarizes the findings of several studies from the 60’s and 70’s investigating the challenges of teaching TYC English/Writing.³⁶ “Not surprisingly,” Kroll states, “each study found the ‘traditional’ master’s degree in English—which offered courses in literature and rarely in composition theory and which did not typically offer experi-

³⁶ As Kroll notes, “Between 1963 and 1971, the preservice training and development of two-year college faculty in English received more attention than any other two-year college academic discipline” (196). Some of the studies cited in Kroll’s article include *The Two-Year College and the Teaching of English* (Kitzhaber, 1964), *The Training and Work of California Public Junior College English Teachers* (Bossone, 1964), *English in the Two-Year College* (Weingarten & Kroeger, 1965), *Research and the Development of English Programs in the Junior College: Proceedings of the Tempe Conference 1965* (Archer & Ferrell, 1965), and *The National Study of English in the Junior College* (Shugrue, 1970).

ence in teaching writing—inadequate preservice training for English faculty” (198).³⁷ Though these training conditions have improved over the last several decades—with greater numbers of graduate programs in composition acknowledging the importance of TYC instruction and training—Kroll and others lament the persistent failures of graduate programs to adequately prepare students for two-year college careers.³⁸

One might assume that such teaching challenges, and the deficits (in training, funds, preparation, etc.) they exposed, would be primarily a source for complaint. Yet as so many of these writers tell, contending with difficult student populations created occasions for the development, out of necessity, of student, teacher, and administrative to progress as all parties negotiated, together, new modes of intellectual work. Indeed, it was sometimes the very lack of preparation for dealing with such a student body that created openings for shaping institutions. Ann Laster (already quoted above) maintains that the very diversity which tested her also made possible, and encouraged, innovation: “During my two-year-college teaching (1964-1997), I experienced the excitement and the frustrations resulting from the open-door policy, both of which generated innovative curricula and creative teaching techniques” (Laster and Fatherree 117). In her article “Roger Garrison (1918-1984): Teacher of Teachers,” Mary Sue Koeppel describes a similar reaction to difficulty as motivator for embracing new ways of teaching, in this case by describing Roger Garrison’s influence as a teacher trainer. Garrison was so well received in part, she shows, “because so many [TYC faculty] had had little or no formal training in the teaching of writing. Based on their classroom experiences with two-year-college students, most two-year

³⁷ According to Kroll, “As one study stated ‘the lack of in-service training [was] widespread and lamentable’ (Kent, “A study of the English instructors in the junior and community colleges.” 1971). They found that current faculty felt inadequately prepared for the students and courses they were expected to teach and only vaguely aware of what it meant to be a two-year college English teacher” (199).

³⁸ Also see Frank Madden’s “Crossing Borders: The Two-Year College.”

faculty readily embraced Garrison's methods" (92). Dee Brock's "Curriculum Innovation: Pursuing Teaching Technology" recounts the way that nontraditional-student pressure opened doors for experimental learning technologies that her administration might have otherwise rejected, and a collaborative mindset between colleagues trying to fill student needs: "Each of us borrowed without shame the successful practices of colleagues and discarded without mercy the innovations that did not work. From the beginning, the district actively pursued technologies that could be used to improve instruction that would be effective with the vast range of abilities and many nontraditional students" (69). In "Lessons from a Cactus: Divergent Teaching in a Converging World," William V. Costanzo describes the potential this way: "Because our students were nontraditional, we were encouraged to explore nontraditional alternatives to traditional teaching methods and materials." He continues, "I learned the importance of listening to students. Instead of recirculating the received wisdom passed on by my college teachers, I saw that a two-year-college classroom could be an open field for fresh research. If we teachers kept an open mind and watched how our students learned instead of trying to fill their minds with precepts, we might learn how writers really write and readers really read" (62).

What I find interesting in reading *The Profession of English*, *The Politics of English* and *Two-Year College English* is that this particular kind of student-teacher contact provides not only useful experiential resources,³⁹ but also powerful interpretive schemes for valuing certain kinds of knowledge-making. TYC professors imagine that they would not have the same values, skills, or intellectual approaches without contact with this particular student body. Their ability to gener-

³⁹ Take Mark Reynolds assertion, for example, that two-year faculty's "expertise in dealing with nontraditional students, with multicultural audiences, with all the attendant issues of gender, race, class, and ethnicity can be the source of valuable and useful information to all of higher education as student populations in all settings only grow more diverse and more nontraditional" ("Two-Year College Teachers as Knowledge Makers" 11).

ate this knowledge is inextricably tied to the contact with *students* drawn to these “preparatory” institutions. These nontraditional students, and the challenges they often bring with them—academic under-preparedness, split obligations between school and work and family, burdens of occupying socio-economic, racial, and cultural fringes of society—precipitate occasions for newly conceiving composition, both as a site of academic research and pedagogy. As Reynolds says, “It may well be in the teaching of diverse students that two-year-college knowledge-making will prove most valuable to future educators” (“Two-Year College Teachers” 9).

But to nuance this relationship further, in my reading of these collections it is not just the *contact* that creates this potential value but the *gap* between teacher and student revealed through that contact: the irreducible space, in other words, that the teacher feels as she confronts the difficulty of preparing for a student that her expectations and training cannot contain. This, I believe, is one way of understanding what border knowledge might mean at the two-year college, and where it might originate. Despite the tension such gaps reveal (between student and curriculum, between teacher demands and student ability, between student demands and teacher delivery), these anthologies suggest that material filling those gaps are worthy of scholarly attention.

It is my argument here that writing stories of the classroom—asking students to tell their stories and incorporating those stories into scholarly accounts of teaching and learning—is one particularly fruitful way of reaching across that gap and exploiting its value, of turning that material into a border knowledge valuable to the field at large. To illustrate what those student/teacher narrative makes possible, I turn to a piece of two-year college scholarship that shows what knowledge is produced when that gap is bridged by an act of translation across margin and center. In “What Happened to Darleen: Reconstructing the Life and Schooling of an Underprepared Learner,” Smokey Wilson details her experience with Darleen Ramos, a 37-year-

old nontraditional TYC student, who she describes, in reference to the various literacy skills she lacked, as “the rankest beginner” (51). Though much of the article reads as a kind of longitudinal case study—which is to say, a piece not purely reliant on narrative—its force deeply relies on rearticulating three narratives that intersect with Darleen’s literacy education: Darlene’s narrative of her experiences at school; her Mother’s account of the family history that bracketed Darleen’s schooling; and the institutional narrative constructed across yearly reports of Darleen’s trajectory (as pieced together by Wilson through a reading of Darleen’s cumulative educational record).

Labeled in primary school as a “mouth breather” and a “slow learner,” Darleen’s early difficulties with reading and writing seem to be less a truth about her mental ability than evidence of the interpretive frames used by teachers and administrators to dismiss her potential and abdicate responsible intervention (39, 41). After a similar writing-off in secondary school—as she was promoted through special education classes without visible evidence of intervention—Darleen became pregnant at 15, dropping out of ninth grade and high school for good. She returned to education at thirty-seven through the open doors of Oakland’s Laney (Community) College, where Smokey Wilson teaches writing.

By reconstructing the story told by primary and secondary teachers’ end-of-semester write-ups, Wilson attributes the fundamental distance never bridged between Darleen and her teachers (until the TYC) to the institutional narrative that shaped the teachers’ interpretive approaches toward reading Darleen’s difficulties. The “deficit model” of education is the theoretical frame Wilson identifies as shaping that trajectory, a theory that had teachers “prob[ing] her knowledge of vocabulary or Block Design tasks, looking for certain cognitive structures. Not finding these structures, her performance on the tests justified their low expectations for her” (41). Facing difficulty in educating Darleen, and confusion in piecing together her acts and abili-

ties, these teachers turned to the institutional paradigms of the day as frames to interpret Darleen's potential and guide their pedagogical decision-making.

Wilson moves in her own article from "Reconstructing the School's Role" to "The Story Darleen and her Family Tell," revealing the counter narratives that run alongside institutional accounts. Darleen's mother's story, though interesting, fails to illuminate Darleen's educational trajectory:

The Mother's story, like the school's, does little to dispel the image of a child whom adults did not know very well, a youngster left to fend for herself against siblings and peers who were unkind [...]. But if this constitutes a kind of neglect, it must be seen in the context of the mother's other stories, which she told in subsequent conversations—stories of what it took to keep this household together. (43)

Although these household stories of the Latino-immigrant experience expose complexities of Darleen's case, they, too, like the institutional narrative of deficit, are equally inscribed within existing master narratives that overwhelm Darleen's voice. In Darleen's mother's case those larger narrative structures aren't institutional or theoretical, but rather cultural narratives of hard work and opportunity, the *si se puede* commonplace often invoked to interpret the hopes and challenges of "making it" as a Latino immigrant in America (44). "If you want it bad enough," Darleen's mother recounts telling Darleen, "you could *do* it; just say you know you could do it, and before you know it, you could do it. Just say, 'You're goin' to make it!'" (43). Even if that philosophy of persistence affected Darleen's trajectory (as her eventual return to adult education suggests it may have), it did not help her or others intervene in her educational difficulty.

Both of these broader narratives of institution and family/culture—as they try to make sense of, or, more accurately, wish away Darleen’s difficulties—conscript her as each story’s unwitting and unwilling protagonist (or is it antagonist?). In the case of the familial history embedded in the ideology of American bootstrapping, protagonist Darleen isn’t denigrated, *per se*, but neither is she helped by that role (or by those who see her in that role) to bridge the missed connections that characterized her educational troubles. Alternately, the protagonist of institutional narrative, beset by perceptions of inability and failure, disability and (perhaps, racialized) inferiority are not so benign. They permeated the interpretations of many of Darleen’s teachers, including Wilson herself. The institutionalized dismissal evident in the remnants of teacher records was likewise confirmed in Wilson’s own first impression of Darleen: “I remember my quick and unkind judgment, not different from that of other teachers who had helped to shape the figure I saw in front of me. Late enrolling, barely able to read, she almost exuded ineptitude. I told her my classes were full and probably [...] too demanding” (45). And yet, Wilson does eventually listen, becoming not only an important mentor in Darleen’s educational trajectory, but also a crucial junction point for that story to broadly converse with composition studies.

If Wilson’s position at the two-year college helps her resist succumbing to stereotypes of Darleen’s limitation it is because she is held to account by the alternate institutional narrative that has long held sway at the TYC. That narrative—the democratic open-access mission of the TYC evinced by so many of the anthologies I’ve documented above—creates an alternate path by which to bypass her initial assumptions and resistances. But there is more here. If the TYC’s democratic commitment partly explains Wilson’s stance, it does so largely because that commitment allows for, even solicits, Darleen’s own story. That story, filtered through Wilson’s retelling, is a powerful corrective to the institutional history that still casts a pall over Darleen’s

case, even from such a temporal distance. Her personal narrative does not provide a corrective because of its reason or clarity (that is, its content is not privileged because it presents Truth); rather it reveals the interconnected complexity of the colliding histories that shaped her, and it does so in ways that neither the institutional narrative of the school/teachers nor the cultural narrative of her mother/family were willing or able to admit. Though Darleen's account of her education fleshes out the institutional narrative in certain ways, her "consistently fuzzy recollections of her school experience" make for a story whose force lies in the very fact that it *cannot* cleanly illuminate the history of her difficulty (42). For example, Darleen's "sharp and spontaneously reported recollection" of "a second-grade teacher who locked her in a closet in the classroom and then forgot to let her out at the end of the school day" is followed by only vague understandings of "[w]hat behaviors resulted in this punishment, or why it was so harsh" (42).

Instead of rejecting the opacity of Darleen's stories as unhelpful or incredible, Wilson relies on these alternating, and perplexing, stories of Darleen's educational history—not to achieve the truth of the matter or assign easy blame, but rather to expose the difficulty of gleaning Truth that any one narrative might provide. The importance of this article, to my mind, is its resistance to such conclusions and its commitment instead to reveal the persistent gap of understanding left by the linear genesis of each narrative. The gaps between those narratives are filled with all sorts of material: expectations about what it means to be a student; proscriptive assumptions about teacher/student interaction; understandings of classroom as space; philosophies about what literacy is, why it matters, and who should have access to it.

Wilson's article engages such a gap in two distinct ways. The first is Wilson's commitment to showing, through her content, the absence of consistent contact and social collaboration between Darleen and her would-be mentors—those moments so important to literacy

learning in which literacy could have been sparked but instead slipped away through silence and misunderstanding.⁴⁰ Wilson shows that, as those missing conversations accumulated into a pile of irretrievable but weighty absences, this gap of understanding grew wider and more persistent—that is, until the two-year college gave Darleen access to a web of tutors, faculty, administrators, and departmental office staff willing to take up these conversations.

But Wilson does much more, in my reading, than reveal that gap through her content. She also *embodies* the gap—and begins to bridge it—through her article’s textual form. That lack of contact within Darleen’s education was clearly detrimental to her educational success, but it was also, less visibly though no less importantly, detrimental to the educational institutions that Darleen’s presence might have shaped. By narrating the student story alongside the disciplinary story that had heretofore buried it, Wilson creates a moment of contact that was lacking throughout Darleen’s education. In short, because Wilson entangles these stories, we see a work of scholarship in which a teacher implicates herself (and the institutional, disciplinary, and educational selves that constitute her) by confronting a student story that escapes easy summation by the dominant interpretive resources available to each of those professional roles.

3.5 "STAR-PATTERNED DETOURS" IN INEVITABLE HISTORIES: DOUBLE TRANSLATING DARLEEN

I believe that by subjugated knowledges one should understand something else, something which in a sense is altogether different, namely, a whole set of knowledge that has been disqualified as inadequate

⁴⁰ It is interesting to think of this silence within Deborah Brandt’s terms of literacy “sponsorship.”

to its tasks or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition of scientificity. I also believe that it is through the re-emergence of these low-ranking knowledges, these unqualified knowledges [...] which involve what I would call popular knowledge though it is far from being a general common sense knowledge, but on the contrary a particular, local, regional knowledge, a differential knowledge incapable of unanimity and which owes its forces only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it—that it is through the re-appearance of this knowledge, of these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work.

—Michel Foucault, “Two Lectures”

History tells us that radical transformations come from the spatial margins.

—Walter D. Mignolo

Local Histories, Global Designs

Scholarship of all kinds has the power to change the course of institutional trajectories and disciplinary cultures. But student voices can also do this if they are allowed—something that “What Happened to Darleen” makes clear. The marginalized story of the student, if given voice, can hold institutional narratives accountable in ways they might otherwise avoid. But resisting those institutional narratives is no easy task since they operate at the level of the disciplinary power and dictate over the top of local experience. The local is interpreted, defined, and consumed by the global.

But in my reading of scholars like Reynolds and Tinberg, and those committed to open-admissions policies, the two-year college is valuable precisely because it creates openings for student voices to challenge those larger disciplinary structures. The two-year college necessarily brings the institutional track and the student track into productive (even if fraught) contact and

friction. To value classroom stories as integral to the TYC as border space suggests that narrative itself can help these otherwise parallel histories change course and intersect. Indeed, one way of understanding the TYC's unique institutional value is that it makes new narratives, both institutional and disciplinary, possible because those narratives are fused with student voices that disrupt the discipline's comfortable practices.

To explore the border knowledge created when local stories like Darleen's confront institutionalized Histories of power, I turn to the scholarship of Walter D. Mignolo. Like Anzaldúa, one of the theorists on whom he draws, Mignolo is invested heavily in exploring "border thinking." He conceives of the border not as a static place that can be simply contained, but rather as a site of fluid hybridity. Mignolo's investment in theorizing the border comes from his larger investigation of colonial and postcolonial contact in the "modern colonial world system," and the effects that such a system has had on global knowledge creation (both for the colonized and the colonizer). As affirmed by the views of the Transnational Composition movement voiced in my first chapter, these "colonial designs," as Mignolo names them, rely upon positing the existence of stable, monolithic national languages and tying those languages to national territories. For Mignolo, this strategic localization of language and knowledge is a tremendously important piece of these colonizing projects; thus the strategic localization or spatialization of language and knowledge is a worthy site of investigation for understanding both colonizer and colonized.

Escaping the dominant terrain of knowledge (to echo Tinberg's terms) on which one stands—and from where one begins to investigate—is not easy, however:

From 'where' will I rethink? From the legacies of the very foundations I am trying to undo? Would it be possible to build on a foundation which is not the foundation that allowed for the justification of national languages? Perhaps one

could begin from the centers, which became margins due to the hegemony of major languages linked with territories and with nations. We should perhaps begin to think from border-languages instead of from national-languages. (“Bi-Languaging Love” 125)

Mignolo’s proposed solution for this rethinking is to mine peripheral locations that might disrupt national languages of power and the assumptive teleologies enabled by them. For it is in these peripheries where “thinking about writing between languages” becomes possible—where one can “mov[e] away from the idea that language is a fact (e.g., a system of syntactic, semantic, and phonetic rules), and [move] toward the idea that speech and writing are strategies for orienting and manipulating social domains of interaction” (*Local Histories* 226). It is the “local histories” (as his book title *Local Histories, Global Designs* suggests) spoken from the margins of contact with the colonizing culture that open opportunities for new investigations and new knowledge. In these hybrid spaces, “linguistic conceptualization[s] and literary practices create fractures within languages” (*Local Histories* 227), disrupting the illusion that these mono-languages of dominance are innocent norms and “revealing the colonial aspects of linguistic, literary and cultural landscapes” (*Local Histories* 226-227). The knowledge emerging from this liminal space Mignolo calls “border thinking.” He advocates looking to these peripheries in order to critique center practices of language that become normalized in their use, and normalized in their oppression of competing languages, knowledges, and worldviews.⁴¹

⁴¹ Michael Taussig’s *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism* (1980) argues that the anthropologist should study those on the cultural margins not just to understand the other, but rather to re-understand the dominant culture (from which the anthropologist speaks), since understanding one’s own culture critically, especially in its own dominance, is difficult to do from the inside.

Mignolo uses the term “Bi-linguaging” to name the complex hybridity of acts of language that constitute border thinking, as those acts emerge from spaces of friction between dominant and peripheral linguistic communities. His reliance on the gerund (*linguaging* as opposed to *language*, *bi-linguaging* as opposed to *bilingual*) differentiates between the colonizer’s desire to see language as a static, unchanging object to be internalized and a view of language as a flexible-becoming renewed in each act of meaning-making—a “living and dying in the tensions of conflictive linguaging” (as he says about Peruvian poet and novelist José María Arguedas who wrote within such a tension until his suicide) (“Bi-Linguaging Love” 140). Though this gerund distinction may seem minor, it reflects Mignolo’s fervent resistance to the use of language-as-object in fetishizing national languages, and the ways those national languages are used by colonial-imperial designs to imbue ideological power into cultural difference. Acts of bi-linguaging, insofar as they capture the “fractures” in languages and the working “between” languages, are not displays of mere diversity, then, but rather crucial windows onto the ideologies imbedded in language and the linguistic practices that might come to intervene in those ideological designs (*Local* 227).

These terms—as they identify languages of power and the possibilities to resist them—are important to my purposes here because they equally promise to intervene in cultures of scholarship and disciplinary knowledge (since those cultures, too, are implicated in the politics of language). Again from Mignolo: “Knowledge and forms of knowledge are exported like any other commodity, and imperial languages are the mediators in these kinds of transactions, from models for economic restructuring to theories of historical narratives, ethical arguments and philosophies of languages” (“Bi-Linguaging Love” 130). Thus bi-linguaging becomes not only a means of resisting monological conceptions of language practice, but a technique by which to

question dominant paradigms of what counts as legitimized knowledge and knowledge production. Like everyday language, the “disciplinary foundations” enabled by these cultures of scholarship “are legalized in the realm of monolinguing, but banned in the realm of bi-linguing” (*Local* 264). And thus, “Bi-linguing as a way of living in languages in a transnational world, as an educational and epistemological project, rests on the critique of [...] disciplinary structures and of cultures of scholarship complicitous with national and imperial languages” (Mignolo, “Bi-Linguaging” 139).

The ways that language is imagined to be static within this view and the ways assumptions about linguistic stasis infiltrate disciplinary structures means that institutional trajectories are extremely difficult to divert. Institutions of disciplinary knowledge, and the Histories relied upon to continually reconstitute them, are inherently recalcitrant, especially as they create grounds for dismissing competing knowledges—for example by creating harsh divisions “between external narrative forms, such as the myth, and internal narrative forms, such as history”; or by positing that “the so-called ‘Third World’ (external or internal to so-called ‘First World’ nations) is supposed to produce ‘culture’ while the ‘First World’ is supposed to produce scholarship and science” (“Bi-Linguaging” 130-131).

And here we see the value of Darleen’s story, as her local narrative cracks the façade of a History that had long entrenched its own right to be unquestionable. Given the strength of her opponent, it is no surprise that this local narrative of Darleen’s schooling could not—and in some ways still cannot—combat an institutionalized theoretical narrative about the nature of her educational difficulty. As the record of Darleen’s schooling suggests, the momentum of the deficit model’s institutional history was reaffirmed each semester in teachers’ reports. Each individual annotation re-perpetuated (just as each was perpetuated by) the authority of that disciplinary

History, making it increasingly difficult for subsequent teachers to avoid re-legitimizing the established narrative of Darleen's inferiority. Each note in Darleen's record made it harder to imagine that Darleen—and her difficulty—could be the protagonist of another narrative, one with a different ending. This was a self-fulfilling prophesy ensured by a piling-on.

The resistance faced by Darleen's narrative only makes it more powerful, as it finally announces itself with enough volume to resonate alongside and against those competing histories. That resonance may not provide easy answers, but it creates, through its friction, grounds to reject a dominant History for a new kind of knowledge. Mignolo uses the term "double translation" to signal the dual direction of interaction that holds local histories and global impositions accountable to each other, mixing each side of the border with the other across a chasm of difference. That contact, that double translation—"or rather, double infection," as Mignolo terms it—"makes possible a double epistemic movement" which "opens up the possibility of conceiving possible futures beyond the limits imposed by [...] hegemonic abstract universals" ("Zapatista" 249). The "negotiation" that happens in moments of double translation "makes it possible to imagine epistemic diversality (or pluriversality) and to understand the limits of the abstract-universals that have dominated the imaginary of the modern/colonial world [...]" ("Zapatista" 249).

The "doubledness" of this translation, and its ability to create unique knowledge, depends on the agency of these stories to push themselves onto the scene, rather than being solicited in a weak act of inclusion via the permission of those in power, which, as Mignolo shows, is just another way of reinscribing the difference that necessitates double translation: "those who are included would have to pay the price of being the included and being denied the possibility of being those who include," Mignolo says (263). Mignolo names the places where double trans-

lation can occur, “connectors”—“nodes where interactions take place” (“Zapatista” 263). But the balance of these interactions are important, since they “eliminate the possibility of some actors playing the role of includer and some other actors the role of the included. *Connectors* are the places where negotiation takes place and where the final destination is not being included or being successful as an includer” (Zapatista 263). For Darleen’s story to be labeled a *connector*—a worthy label since it exposes relations that are otherwise ignored—recognizes that Darleen’s story avails itself not solely through Wilson’s charitable inclusiveness, but because the two-year college’s setting provided a space where Darleen’s story could demand a hearing—a site where her utterances would either be heard or expose the deafness of those unwilling to listen.

Darleen’s utterances, now entered into disciplinary memory by virtue of Wilson’s scholarship, break dichotomies long used to delegitimize individual experience from the realm of institutional History. “[S]torytelling,” says Martinician poet and critic Édouard Glissant, “is, paradoxically, full of detours.”

What storytelling causes to make a detour is the tendency to link oneself to a Genesis, the inflexibility of pedigree, the long shadow of basic legitimacies. And when the orality of storytelling develops into the fixedness of writing [...], it clings to this star-patterned detour that takes writing off into a different direction and shapes narrative into a different configuration from which ontological absolutes are absent (Glissant 290).

The unpredictability of these student’s lives, their unlikely stories, provides detours in these narrative geneses. Student stories—perhaps especially those from the two-year college—cannot be contained in the narrative arcs that institutional Histories would try to impose on them. The power of student narratives (and the gaps that necessitate translation across these narratives) is

that they continually rend and re-stitch the curricular and institutional narratives which they live within daily. In short, Darleen's narrative asks these various educational stakeholders to "think with" each other, rather than accepting the institution's attempts to "think about" students—to use students as scholarly objects ("Bi-Languaging" 132). To "think with" is to make sense out of the student story using the resources of institutionalized ways of knowing; but it is also to continually question hegemonic knowledge through the resources provided by student voices.

3.6 MAPPING, AGAIN

If one abandons the pursuit of the complete map—a map that coincides with reality point for point—the fundamental issue becomes not the existence of an unavoidable gap between reality and representation but the consequences of specific representations, or, in other words, the relationship between the representation and constitution of social relations in specific societies.

—Fernando Coronil
"Beyond Occidentalism"

Today the avenue of history is barricaded with obscure turnings, apparent new beginnings wherein the peoples and communities that gave birth to the idea of History can churn their uncertainties.

They have confronted not merely the Other, the different, but what is harder still, the turbulence of empty space. The white spaces on the maps are now covered over with darkness. That has broken permanently the absolute of history, which was primarily a project and projection anyway.

—Édouard Glissant,
"The Unforeseeable
Diversity of the World"

To the extent that the two-year college is better positioned than its four-year counterparts to hear student stories and make room for them alongside the institutional narratives that might otherwise overrun them, this site of teaching and scholarship has the power to continually renew conversations within composition studies. The TYC is not just on the “borders” because it is a beleaguered or outcast site of teaching; rather it occupies a space where the reach of disciplinary authority is tenuous, where the dominant presence is of scholars teaching students who won’t be denied. Because of a history catering to a certain breadth of student population, the TYC and its faculty have become accustomed to valuing student stories as productively disruptive rather than merely compelling or poignant. The potentials of TYC scholarship—and these narratives—to expose dominant “realities” as constructed and interested is at the heart of this border knowledge. But this material can’t come from the institutional voices or faculty alone, who themselves are part of the disciplines and institutions which speak through them. Rather they come from the pressures put on that faculty by this exceptional student population as they are continually remade through interactions with the students who test them.

Yet to value narratives for this disruption is perhaps to revise, as much as to confirm, Tinberg’s notion of re-mapping. The potential of these narratives as border knowledge is not that they remap the terrain of higher education; rather they show us the importance of resisting the fixity of current—and future—maps that would claim to know too much. Anthropologist and critic Michael Taussig helps me think about such a project of resistance. In *Mimesis and Alterity* Taussig addresses the tension between social constructionism and realism using the following orientation:

When it was enthusiastically pointed out [...] that race or gender or nation...were so many social constructions, inventions, and representations, a window was

opened, an invitation to begin the critical project of analysis and cultural reconstruction was offered. And one still feels its power even though what was nothing more than an invitation, a preamble to investigation has, by and large, been converted instead into a conclusion—e.g. “sex is a social construction,” “race is a social construction,” “the nation is an invention,” and so forth [...]. (xvi)

An observation-as-invitation has been tamed by becoming a mere conclusion. Dissatisfied with settling for those constructionist conclusions, Taussig instead argues that *invention* be the response to invitation. What the invitation of social constructionism provides is a possibility, an opening, according to Taussig, to invent and “live new fictions” (xxvii).

Though Taussig’s object of investigation is, of course, very different than my own, I find the distinction between *invitation* and *conclusion* useful for thinking about the two-year college as border space and narrative’s role in revealing that character. The observation that the two-year college occupies a border space threatens to become, at its weakest, a mere conclusion, a place to stop and make a stand rather than a “preamble to further investigation.” These conclusions—that the two-year college is a border institution, that it teaches border students, that the stories teachers and students tell are border stories—might become too-comfortable generalizations, losing their power as invitations, as enticements, as challenges to explore the contributions that these very real institutional and demographic differences can make.

What is needed then is not a “remapping of knowledge” but a resistance to the project of (certain kinds of) mapping. A map cannot capture the border because the border, in Anzaldúa’s sense, is not static. The potential for this border metaphor will depend, then, on whether the two-year college can use it not to fix its location more firmly on academia’s map but rather as a

heuristic toward inventing, in Taussig's words, "new fictions" of what this site makes possible for the field.

This resistance is precisely what stories of the TYC classroom, in all of their complexity, might provide: a continual movement toward new ways of understanding and questioning the too-comfortable tenants of discipline and institution. But if stories from the TYC do have this potential, not just any story will do. If these stories are reductive; if they privilege well-worn frames of interpreting students; if they privilege equally predictable conceptions of teaching and teachers: then these narratives may only dutifully reinscribe, rather than resist, simple demarcations of intellectual-disciplinary landscapes. If these narratives will be powerful, it will be because they speak a border language that disrupts rather than confirms existing maps.

I have tried to show here that Smokey Wilson article, by combining a student story alongside an institutional one, moves us toward that goal of disruption. Darleen's story doesn't just put new coordinates on the map; it diffuses previously drawn lines, recalibrating existing modes of measurement; it lives in the gray area between a student's life and the institutional stories that fail to contain it. Darleen's story suggests that it is the relation between intersecting voices that are more important than the fixity of conclusion. To Glissant, the *writer* is a crucial voice in creating a world that can value and live with the piling up of such relations. "What might writing mean today?" he asks.

It is not just writing histories to amuse or move people; it may be, above all, a matter of looking for the frail but trustworthy link between the wild diversity of the world and the balance and knowledge we desire to have. Every day the world knocks us off balance, and we must try to find our place here. The artist and writer help us in this. Their work bears the marks of this vocation. (295)

Darleen, too, as student and writer (unlikely as she is in both roles), helps us. She reminds us that our disciplinary balances are contingent and temporary. Disciplinary structures of power try to occlude this contingency, this whirling “turbulence” (293). The beauty of Wilson’s article, and scholarship like it that mobilizes narrative, is that it embraces such irreconcilability, rejecting an Historical tapestry for a set of frayed threads and the ongoing project of tying them together.

4.0 WHAT ACCURACY MEANS WHEN WE ARE ALL SOMEONE ELSE

The task of the narrator is not an easy one [...]. He appears to be required to choose his tale from among the many that are possible. But of course that is not the case. The case is rather to make many of the one. Always the teller must be at pains to devise against his listener's claim—perhaps spoken, perhaps not—that he has heard the tale before.

—Cormac McCarthy
The Crossing

After you've written, you can no longer remember anything but the writing. However true you make that writing, you've created a monster. This has happened to me many, many times, because I'm willing to turn events into pieces of paper. After I've written about any experience, my memories—those elusive, fragmentary patches of color and feeling—are gone; they've been replaced by the work. The work is a sort of changeling baby on the doorstep—not your baby but someone else's baby rather like it, different in some way that you can't pinpoint, and yours has vanished.

—Annie Dillard
“To Fashion a Text”

4.1

My experience with Composition Studies began in stability. I entered a well-defined grad program with a deep history legitimizing composition studies and its orbiting partners—literacy

studies, pedagogy (both of writing and literature), and, to a lesser extent, rhetoric. Although the program was located within English, its relationship to Literature was more generative than troubling, largely because many of the “composition” faculty were introduced to composition through their own careers working from and pushing against certain conceptions of literary reading and theory. That faculty, much to my benefit, was more invested in exploring connections between composition and literature than divorcing them.

As a result of this exposure, the disciplinary history of composition’s growth into legitimacy—its record of angst, its desire to prove itself, to distinguish its kind of research from that of literature programs—has always seemed so distant, so oddly foreign to my ears. I realize these disciplinary tensions are not entirely resolved in the field. Every now and then a question crops up once again about whether the discipline is indeed a discipline, or how it might better cohere to be one, or what might be at stake in that status or lack of it. But in my own relationship to composition, these histories feel arcane. For even as this anxiety speaks it does so through professional venues and publications—academic societies and conferences, books and journals—dedicated to asking and answering questions about composition studies. This discipline—now and for quite some time—moves forward with impressive momentum. In plenty of ways, composition has become a machine sufficient to propel itself forward at speeds and directions that make us proud and uneasy both. As we add cars to that train, inertia does its work and the train rolls on in ever more committed in its directions. This is what disciplinarity might mean.

I take it that we write to the field, in part, to remind ourselves that we have the power and responsibility to correct and refine those movements—through conversation, through theoretical musings, through descriptions of what we are doing and what we might do. It is corrective work that the nature of disciplinarity makes necessary. It is in the nature of disciplines to

reproduce themselves: They “produce the idea of progress. They proliferate objects to study and improve explanations. They devise notions that command ever-growing assent [...] They tell stories of progress, showing how knowledge advances within existing disciplines and by the establishment of new ones” (Messer-Davidow et al. vii-viii). So, we write to each other—sometimes to advance our narratives of progress, sometimes to disrupt them.

It’s been my argument in the preceding chapters that narratives of teaching and learning, because of their different forms and the different ways they’ve been received and rejected by their readers, provide a special possibility to disrupt the comfortable tenants of composition’s scholarly culture. But disrupting disciplinarity is not narrative’s sole burden, nor could it be if we wished it so. Narrative is only disruptive to the degree to which it remains outside of, and can therefore expose, the norm—a position it may or may not continue to hold as the discipline evolves in its habits of scholarly production and scholarly reading. To admit the contingency of narrative’s disruptive powers is not to criticize narrative’s possibilities; it is simply to note the limitations of all genres as they interact with the shifting backgrounds on which they sit.

Given the ways those implicated by the discipline are most likely to advance and re-entrench those disciplinary master narratives (often doing so without even trying), it would be best to entrust disciplinary critique to a more diverse set of hands than our own. In this chapter, I’d like to examine an alternative source of disciplinary interrogation and (re)direction: our students’ work, and in particular, their writing. I’ll make the case that narrative has an important part to play in such a reorientation (in the form of narratives written by students about, or *to*, their educations); I’ll argue for this potential of narrative even while I argue that this need to value student work is exacerbated, in part, by the complex problems of representation perpetuated by *teacher* narratives.

James Slevin is my touchstone for thinking broadly about the ways students redirect the discipline (though he's one of many scholars who have fought hard for student writing to be more central to the field). In *Introducing English*, Slevin suggests we begin to recognize the ways students and their writing put pressure on how we imagine the purposes of our disciplines, as those purposes are enacted through our pedagogies—particularly our writing assignments. His own realization of this possibility, he tells, came out of his experience as a young teacher trying to make sense of his difficulties teaching literature at Lincoln College, the oldest historically black college in the US. His initial teaching approach, he says, assumed a stance toward reading and writing that was ignorant of its own political location; as a result, he was unable to understand, and more importantly *value*, the readings and writings posed by his students in response to classroom texts:

What students did during class that day and on many other days thirty years ago was to enact a way of reading, critically contrary to my own at the time, that has by now become a *dominant* way of reading in my discipline. They brought into the class ways of examining texts that are now at the center of the profession of literary studies. Because they were able to contextualize the texts we read, placing them within and against their own experience and thought, they could articulate and argue for a more complex understanding of the social construction of reading and readerships, and the political consequences of this social process. When necessary they would press against the text or against the institution (the school, the teacher) that was constructing these texts in what to my students were inadequate ways [...]. (20)

Such student writing—and Slevin’s desire to make sense of those differences—is what propelled him to engage in the intellectual work of composition, creating in him “not just a different theory of literary analysis but a different understanding of the work of the classroom, a different pedagogy guiding exchange, and a different appreciation of my own institutional responsibilities” (31). In short, his students birthed within him the awareness of the need for the discipline of composition even while they rocked that discipline off its axis.

Slevin uses this example as a call to action for composition studies to recognize and authorize “the changes wrought by students [...] on the intellectual purposes and climate of higher education” (35-36), for he feels that “The important, historical role that new student populations have played in the shaping of the intellectual work of the discipline has been suppressed, perhaps even erased, both in students’ challenges to prevailing orthodoxies and their collaborative exploration of alternatives” (21). Slevin calls on all of us to become open to the possibility that student writing—which so often seems to be the final output of our disciplinary efforts (a site where disciplinarity crystalizes into an object)—become generative in directing the discipline’s growth and trajectory. Instead of co-opting student writing into the structures with which we are already most comfortable and committed, can we read that writing toward shaping the categories themselves?

To value such a possibility is to acknowledge that intellectual approaches that guide the discipline are 1) reenacted in, and therefore reinscribed by, the daily acts of teaching and writing taking place in composition classrooms and, 2) because of the conservative workings of disciplinary momentum, are difficult to interrogate and unseat by those of us most immersed in the discipline (whether or not we are consciously dedicated to maintaining a status quo). Who better to challenge the assumptions and philosophies that underlie our practices than students: those who

are most exposed to those procedures—through their constant listening and reading, speaking and writing; those who get the least reward from perpetuating disciplinary decorum; those who have the most at stake in how our disciplinaries, like so many graveyard zombies, climb from their depths toward the living, breathing populace of our students.

To grant students this power of redirection would require that we, to quote Slevin, “shift from seeing student writing as marginal to seeing it as central to the purposes of higher education, as where the real action was taking place (or not)” (30). And to do that we have to interrogate the ways we view and characterize students and their work and the ways we value and solicit their commentary. I have used before (in my first chapter) this quote from Joseph Williams about the kind of interpretive stance we take toward student writing: “If we read any text the way we read freshman essays, we will find many of the same kind of errors we routinely expect to find and therefore do find. But [...] if we would make the ordinary kind of contract with those texts that we make with other kinds of texts, then we could find many fewer errors.” That phrase—“if we could make the ordinary kind of contract with [student] texts that we make with other kinds of texts”—rings in my ears, especially when I imagine, as I do, that what Williams means by “other kinds of texts” are texts we respect, namely each other’s scholarship.

To read student writing in this way, as texts worthy of speaking to the discipline, requires that we strike a different kind of contract with student writers. This chapter is an attempt to redraw that contract within my own work, to bring students into closer conversation with my own writing, and through that effort, to create an opening for them to converse with the discipline that guides my work as a teacher and scholar. It is an attempt to invoke student voices as they speak back to the discipline whose arms have already reached out to them, sometimes violently, before they ever reach my classroom.

Instead of just recounting how I've tried to reposition my students' voices in my work, I am also trying to demonstrate that value here by narrating a story about—and told through the texts of—my basic-writing students. In other words I would like to show what is possible even while making an argument for the value of that possibility. What follows, then, is a story of sorts, made of snapshots of interactions with my students and my past interpretations of those moments; it is a story that in many ways smacks of conventional topics of teacher narratives: difficulty, expectation, let down (for both teacher and student); but it is a story (or a set of stories) that has become much more in my intellectual imagination: it has become both an example of and an argument for the value of listening for student writing as critical work toward revising our discipline.

The class from which these students speak was my first attempt to teach basic writing at the University of Pittsburgh—what is called there “Workshop in Composition.” I designed the course to allow for and encourage students to reflect on their educations and writing processes, though at the time I could not have imagined the importance those reflections would come to have beyond their reflective, in-class pedagogical value. Those assignments took a range of forms: an online collective journal which asked students to catalog their experiences with the previous week's in-class or written work (I asked for these entries on a fortnightly basis, though in staggered halves of the class so that each week had respondents)⁴²; I also asked students for short ungraded written reflections (written in class) about their difficulties with particular essay assignments; last, I assigned graded essays which asked students—as the very topic of the pa-

⁴² I asked that the journal posts be at least ½ page long. But as far as direction goes, that was it, no constraints, except that their posts give some sort of account of the week of class that had just past—their experience with the readings, with the assignments, with the writing process, with in-class discussions. “The main thing,” I say in the syllabus description of the journal assignment, “is that you sit down to write a brief, biweekly thought about your experience *as a student/writer* in this class.”

pers—to critique their writing educations (including the one I was delivering) and venture their own tentative philosophies of writing.

It was the weekly journal, in its openness to shared response and shared reading, that best embodied the tension between the possibility of powerful critique and the mundane and dutiful non-responses that often replaced them. Much important work was done in that journal, including direct challenges to my teaching which provoked my responses. And, indeed, as important as anything the students were asked to do were the responses I asked myself to provide. My own contributions to the journal, which I had committed to doing weekly and under the same guidelines of reflecting on the class's proceedings, gave me occasion to constantly reflect on the class and on my teaching. In fact, *occasion* is too weak a word: writing alongside, and to, these students on a weekly basis (sometimes responding to things that happened in class, sometimes responding to other posts, often doing both) *compelled* me, often reluctantly and painfully, to write to my students about our class at each week's end—to write through my own exhaustion, and to do so while wanting very much to spend the weekend forgetting about the week's failures. Despite my resistance to addressing many of the class's difficulties in writing, the fact that I had set up such a framework and was then accountable to it prevented me from avoiding sustained reflection about *my own position* and the institutional constraints that bound me, the students, and the work we did—even though the outcome of that work sometimes felt uncomfortable, even counterproductive. Most importantly, every week, by virtue of this public (to the class) journaling, I grappled with difficulties and fears before students' eyes. I was writing to my students as an audience who had a right to hear my honest convictions about our class, and who had the right to push back against those convictions and question the educations being delivered to them.

This is a long explanation to say that my students in this class, and myself as their teacher, had opportunities to say a lot during this fourteen-week period. The pages of journaling (theirs and mine), the reflective assignments in addition to the “official” writing assignments, all of these captured furtive moments that might have otherwise been lost. These fragments of text—pieces of images, stories of past educations, descriptions by and of students, rants—served to create a temporary container to hold events that otherwise might have only stained and slipped away.

My conviction is that this material is worthy of scholarly attention—not in the sense of objects for us to study (though they may be that too), but as texts that could and perhaps should circulate alongside our scholarly conversations within the discipline. This is an argument for students to be heard, and for us to consider the power of storytelling and descriptive frameworks to provide students with avenues for providing that hearing.

But this chapter is also about the difficulty, even impossibility, of making those students’ voices and critiques heard.⁴³

4.2

••• HOW I DESCRIBED STUDENTS IN MY (PRIVATE) JOURNAL ••• AFTER THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS⁴⁴

- “Yade (pronounced with a swallowed *y*: *aw-day*), African American kid with a huge fro and kind of a quirky nerd style. Very quiet. Seems unsure what to say (and how loud to say it) when I ask

⁴³ No matter how much I include or discuss student writing here, those voices cannot escape the series of prisons that hold it: the way I framed the journaling and reflective assignments, the material constraints of the CourseWeb discussion board by which that journal was posted; then, later, the boundaries of my own preunderstandings and biases, my editorial selections of what is important of that writing to reproduce, and my decisions of how to frame the material within and alongside my own writing. To claim student texts can transcend these strictures would be irresponsible.

⁴⁴ I’m indebted to Markus Zusak’s novel *The Book Thief*, after which I’ve modeled this style of organizing section breaks.

- him to tell the origin of his name. He plays with his wristwatch in his hand the entire time, but he is not watching the clock. Or if he is it doesn't matter. His is one of the shortest responses to the [in-class essay] prompt. He looks like he might present a challenge, but a worthwhile one.”
- “Michael (Bickel). He is that student who asks whether they can leave after they are done with the essay. I say yes, but that I'll be disappointed if they spend 5 minutes on it. That it should take them the whole class time. Of course of course, he says—that's not what he meant. Twenty minutes [later] he is done.
 - “Delia. Cocky as all get out. Looks like she's struggling in the in-class essay, but more because she wants to be checked out than because she doesn't know what to say. We'll see.
 - “Tray. The time he takes to painstakingly write out his name on my sign in sheet. Is he dyslexic? Was he just trying to kill time away from his [in-class] essay by going over and over each letter with such care? Remind me to look back at his name on that sheet. Is it written in special characters? Flawless?” (August 25)

Imagine here a portrait these students. Of how I wrote them then and how I am writing them now, using those past descriptions to recreate them. Students whom I struggled with and struggled over during one fourteen-week term. Football players. Smart phones. Suspiciously long bathroom breaks. Subtle breakthroughs unrecognized, vocal breakthroughs soon retracted. Misunderstanding and missed expectations: me of them and them of me. Folded arms (theirs and mine). Writers misplaced and writers underworking. All of us reading *A Small Place*, thinking it's an easy read, thinking it's short. Thinking differently now about that time you vacationed in Jamaica or Mexico or India: “You disembark from your plane. You go through customs. Since you are a tourist, a North American or European—to be frank, white—and not an Antiguan black returning to Antigua from Europe or North America with cardboard boxes of much needed cheap clothes and food for relatives [...]” (Kincaid 4). Thinking it is plotless and repetitive, a real downer.

Imagine now a teacher imagining all these things—both before walking in the classroom and after experiencing them. Long after—almost four years later. A post-imagining of things imagined into reality.

Mike Cruz: Football player (one of six in this section?). Leaves what seems to be every class, right around the middle, usually during group work, to “go to the bathroom.” The first few times he asks for permission to go; I tell him, as I do every student, that they don’t need to ask. But when he starts walking out just about every class—and staying out—I wish I hadn’t said it. What could a person be doing for *that long*? I imagine him sitting on the floor of the sterile hallway talking on the phone, or shooting craps down the long oddly sloped passage leading from our room, past the door of the dormant biology lab that I, the first week, confused for our classroom (a mistake caused both by misleading room numbering and my own expectation—I had already developed a conspiracy theory about our class’s strange relegation to a building so distant from the humanities building where most freshman comp classes were held. *So far away, why not just hold class in a sink-filled laboratory, too?*). I imagine myself following him out, catching him in the act (of what?). I do track him just once and bump into him on the way back to our room. That day I confront him about a range of issues—his perpetual cell-phone checks, an “attitude” when I point out such cell-phone abuses.⁴⁵ When I confront him about these things—his missing work, too—I ask him about the bathroom thing. *Like, you are taking twenty-minute bathroom breaks every class?!* He is having stomach problems, he says, because of early morning weight training. I believe him. There is something baldly convincing about a 300 lb. 18-year-old admitting he has The Shits. He apologizes for disrespecting me (his words). He’s having a tough time. His sister is sick; his heart’s at home. He says he’s worried he might get cut from football. He should, but doesn’t, say the same thing about my class.

⁴⁵ It’s interesting to note we don’t use this word unmodified to describe attitudes we appreciate: *Marty had such an attitude—she was engaged and positive in every class!*

One experience you might have right before teaching basic writing for the first time is that you are primed with expectation: of how students will look, how they will act, how they will write. The oddity of this phenomenon as I experienced it was not the nature of the expectations themselves, but the sheer number of them—their weight as you carry them around with you. The number (of expectations, that is) is unequalled in the run up to your first time teaching, say, a course called “Introduction to Critical Reading” or “Literature and the Contemporary”—two other University of Pittsburgh courses which, you might assume, collect students across years and majors, levels of interest and investment.

But really that same variety is true of basic writing students, too—the differing levels of interest and engagement, the range student interests and student histories (if not yet majors since Basic Writing is placed as a first-year course). The diversity is much harder to see, though, since the institutionalizing of basic-writing as a first-year (or even pre-first-year) course allows generalization and prediction about the homogeneity of students placed there.⁴⁶ This mythology of basic writing comes without effort, making it a challenge to resist becoming a character within the institutional narrative. Students represent each other, their peers that sat in their seats last term, the students they predict for the future. They represent all students and none at the same time.

Ironically, it’s the basic writing classroom that, at least as I look back on it now, proved most difficult to characterize, at least in the ways that characterizing might matter. I expected these students to be difficult, troubled, opinionated. And in many ways those assumptions were

⁴⁶ To better confound these assumptions is, I take it, one reason to take seriously David Bartholomae’s argument in “Tidy House” that basic writing students might be better served in “regular” writing classes. If every type of student is in every class, you have to confront the students, not your imagination of what they will be.

confirmed. But where my prediction about my *experience* proved insufficient was in anticipating the underlying *reasons* for those externalized realities (and here I mean both the reality of student actions and the reality of my interpretations of those actions). That's what confounded my expectation: my predictions could not provide a framework through which to make sense of the class's difficulties.

Bickel (aka Joe Bickel): Swimmer. In the back row sleeping. A lot. Something swimmers do when they wake up at 5am everyday to train. (I would find out later that he hadn't been on the official team at all. He was a club swimmer, and, as athletic tutoring would later tell me, he wasn't even doing that anymore, at least not officially). Bickel, as we all called him (too many Joe's to go by first names): head on the desk, head on the propped elbow, head on propped elbow resting on retracted knee (quite peaceful looking, that pose). He sat in my office during midterm conferences, arms folded loosely as they often were in class (to fold his arms any more tightly would've implied more investment than he seemed to want to show). His autobiographical vignette about a swimming competition (writing which I've just praised him for) is a lie, he says. I understand him to mean that this ruse has proven that writing, or the class, or my teaching, or the university (or all of the above) is bullshit. That he's too good for this class (in truth he's right—he should be in freshman comp and he knows it). His revelation doesn't surprise me. I knew his narrative was too clean to be true, but I was still impressed. I tell him that the fact that he can bullshit a good essay about swimming still shows a skillful awareness of audience expectation, of how to answer a writing assignment. (I'm uncomfortable with this compromise but I also think it's partly true). He resists my praise—I've unfucked his fuck you. This makes me happy and sad at the same time. But I don't think he cares enough for it to even matter.

Adelia Mohan: Wicked smart. Just as disengaged. She's been placed in Workshop in Comp because she didn't take the placement test (on multiple occasions). She slept through the last one because of a faulty alarm clock, she says. I don't understand this, or really much of anything about her, until our final in-class essay which asked students again to reflect on their contact with writing pedagogies past and present. If I had found out in the beginning what I knew at the end, I still wonder what could've changed.

Discomfort and the difficulty it feeds on. Dissatisfaction that teachers aren't trained to face and that students and teachers both attribute to all sorts of things, but rarely the difficulties of composing, or the ways institutions frame those difficulties. But a space for resentment can be a space for critique if you, college writing teacher, can understand that you may represent something else to your students beyond the education you think you are offering. This realization makes things more complicated, of course. If you represent more than what you are, then student commentary about the teacher, or the class proceedings, might not best be read as personal, but as general and generalizable; it could, in fact, be read as critical work rather than the student being critical. It might mean, in other words, that those words are spoken about the discipline that speaks through you—the closest (and maybe only) representative of the discipline students can access.

If you represent *another* education that has preceded you without your knowledge or control, then you may also remember that your students are not your students either—they are all of the students you've ever taught and ever will teach. Each is a pixel in an image that contains but

transcends each of them. But if our students are so easily someone or something else, then we need to wonder about who they become when we write about them.

4.3

When I think of the students from this workshop class—all the writings, both theirs and mine, that I've collected, the ways the drama of that course has crystalized it in my memory, I think I have these students pinned. I'm not a talented drawer, which is why when I doodle I rely on multiple lines traced over each other to give an ill-defined, composite outline—the work of an animator before erasing the pencil lines. Each time I tell this story, I draw another line—approximate but weighty when seen next to the others. And yet each new line is drawn atop the others, affecting where the next one lands. My eye can then follow the pieces most useful for constructing the image. But how to finalize that edge in writing? How to draw a line distinct enough to erase the supporting matter without making it stand in for too much?

The writing seems to make it better, more concrete, but as so many scholars have pointed out over years in critiquing narratives, the truth has to be found somewhere else than in the flawless portrayal of events.⁴⁷ Which is why writing about students puts us in a nearly impossible position as authors. But teachers writing narratives of their classrooms have not always seen this position as worrisome. So-called “hero narratives” have dominated the field’s narrative accounts of teaching and learning, at least in past years. The Hero narrative: a predictable narrative arc in

⁴⁷ Creating a flawless portrayal is difficult in itself, but it’s nothing compared to the challenge of agreeing on what that would mean. Flawlessness is a judgment about how closely something approaches an ideal, but ideals are, of course, not things in the world; they are created by people who have decided, often in distinction to others’ contrary conceptions, about what the ideal is.

which the teacher encounters, and then triumphs over, some teaching challenge, thereby producing tangible success and a take-away lesson based upon it. Marguerite Helmers' *Writing Students: Composition Testimonials and Representations of Students* (1994) analyzes the circulation of such accounts, especially those she calls "testimonials"—short narratives of teacher experience circulated in published, though less-rigorously juried, professional forums (like CCC's "Staffroom Interchange"). As Helmers defines them, "testimonials resemble pieces of historical nonfiction, yet, in their narrative structure they owe much to fictional genres" (2). These testimonials both pander to—and therefore peddle—well-worn portrayals of student and teacher roles: "the instructor in the roll of undisputable knower/hero of classroom practice and the student as either listless or resistant, a figure in need of rescue" (19). With the players drawn in predictable roles, so follows the plot: "the instructor perceives a lack or absence in the students, the instructor 'discovers' a means of correcting that lack, the students are happy and fulfilled as a result of the instructor's efforts" (Helmers 20). This is a narrative arc that, to Helmers, "reiterate[s] dominant professional concerns and locate[s] practitioners in a matrix of imperial control that has transcended composition's paradigm shifts" (2).

The power of these narratives—which is to say their danger—is that they invoke and reaffirm "a widespread assumption that there is an essential, transhistorical student" who can be understood and safely assumed (Helmers 2). This student is counterposed, too, against a teacher who is a "pedagogical Everyman, whose experiences are presumed to be shared by most writing instructors" (29). The very popularity of the narratives Helmers describes is due, indeed, to their participation in such widely held conceptions of student, teacher, and classroom work:

Testimonials promote the adoption of certain schools of thought in writing pedagogy and work to bind the community of practitioners together through appeals

to common ideas. [...] [T]he overarching story of composition becomes enacted in the testimonials, apparently in the hope for better smarter students and a release from the composition ghetto. (Helmets 20)

The reification of teacher as hero and student as villain (or incompetent) creates a situation in which students and their writing can be ignored, or even if discussed, easily trivialized: “The narrative works like an argument, the premise of which (that students suffer from certain inabilities) is established through shared maxims so that the audience will focus on the success of the method—a method instituted to combat the presumably universal tendency of students to fail.” (29). Instead of reproducing a student’s words or actions to enable teacher investigation, such material becomes evidence to belittle the student and reaffirm the power differential between student and teacher: “The writing comes to represent a person, a set of traits ascribed to an individual. The students are what they write, and moreover they mark themselves by their unstable writing as something Other than the professionals whose texts are revered in academe. [...]. The implications are clear: authors have admirable thought as evidenced by their elegant prose, while students’ thinking is rough and ill-formed” (Helmets 9-10). Such ways of talking about student writing serve to further the division between text worthy of attention (our peers) and text that is undeserving of anything but the quickest treatment or total disregard (our students). Indeed, the fact that these characterizations are based on, and operate within, shared maxims means that, though readers are asked to engage the narrators as sympathetic support, they “are not given a position from which to argue for a different perspective: authors merely assume that others have encountered the same types of students and the same type of situations” (29).

In their collection of stories called *Blundering for a Change: Errors and Expectations in Critical Pedagogy*, John Paul Tassoni and William H. Thelin join Helmers in describing the hero narrative (what they call the “most dominant narrative construction in education”) as inevitably “flat-ten[ing] the complexity of classroom life” and therefore disempowering the student voices they seem to want to represent (Thelin and Tassoni 4, 5):

[W]hether they be villains or victims, [the students] have no true perspective to offer to the plot. [...]. The teacher-hero narrative, replete with its quest for better teaching methods against all obstacles—the students often cast in both the villain and victim roles—shows [a] penchant for operating in a closed system. Within this narrative pattern, teacher-heroes remain unchallengeable authorities, and students are treated as objects for pedagogies to act upon, rather than speaking subjects [...]. Therefore, despite the implication that these narratives convey real pedagogy in a genuine teaching environment, all of these testimonials can be seen more or less as fictions of a monologic worldview. The teachers (rescuers) and the students (those rescued) are simply mouthpieces for the author in a pre-ordained plot. (5)

Worries about these kinds of portrayals, and the ways they calcify student stereotypes even as they pretend to make students central, have led to new composing strategies that might revise this power dynamic, including an effort to change the presumptive content of these narratives, swapping stories of successes for stories about failure and difficulty and trading the hero-teacher for a well-meaning bumbler or even a downright villain.⁴⁸ Tassoni and Thelin’s volume is, in itself, designed explicitly to resist the hero-narrative construct by asking contributors to

⁴⁸ Victor Villanueva’s “Shoot-Out at the I’m OK, You’re OK Corral” comes close to doing the latter.

privilege moments of productive difficulty that they call “blunders,” a term Tassoni and Thelin coin to name classroom experiences or procedures worth discussing not for their definitive success, but rather for the possibility of their productive interrogation.⁴⁹ Blunder narratives need not be about moments of failure or hardship, per se, according to Tassoni and Thelin; indeed the narratives may end positively. But they distinguish blunders from heroics because they resist the hero-narrative’s static ending of conclusive resolution. The blunder narrative is seen as an

ongoing quest to alter education, not as a mission completed. Answers produce more questions. Attempts at resolution bring up new issues. Blunderers are in constant state of flux; their students do not automatically leave their courses transformed or otherwise saved. So blunderers might have heroic goals, but the hero plot unravels in unexpected ways, making blunderers continually revamp their strategies and reenvision their purpose. Blunderers are not heroes with or without tragic flaws. They are teachers forever struggling and sometimes getting lost on the way. (6)

Hero narratives, because of their particularly pat conclusions and cliché transformative outcomes, demonstrate well the problem that even more inventive narratives have trouble avoiding: the assumption that such a narrative can truly capture, bottle, and transfer “truths” about students to the reader. To avoid this thornier assumption, more capacious strategies have been adopted by teacher-scholars in recent years to upend the assumption of reliable, stable representations of the narrator’s monolithic “I”. Self-conscious narratives abound in this vein as scholars try to disrupt the general presumption of realist transparency even while they work

⁴⁹ Thelin and Tassoni counterpose the teaching “blunder” this with what they call a teaching “bungle”—“a classroom mistake that provided no insights for teachers” (3).

within the narrative genre. One strategy for doing this work is to play with form, breaking up linearity and the presumption of cause-and-effect sequentiality that narrative so easily implies. These authors rely on a combination of meta-discursive reflection about the writing process and postmodern narrative devices to disabuse the reader of comfortable interpretive conclusions. Indeed, by employing narrative features toward this end—mixed discourse, multiple tellings, fragmented juxtaposition—these writers distance themselves from their own interpretive authority over these experiences even as they translate them into written discourse.

Toby Fulwiler's "Telling Stories and Writing Truths" is representative of this effort. By writing a twice-told narrative from different perspectives, Fulwiler uses story to dramatize conflicting impulses of writer and teacher: "The writer has persuaded the teacher in me that true stories cannot be conveyed in single or simple tellings—that the truth of examined narrative will always be complicated, compromised, and uncertain. So, why does the teacher in me resist this liberation?" (97). In effect Fulwiler tells a story only to undue it, and thus explores not a representation of one instance of teaching for the sake of a lesson, but rather the power of recursive acts of teaching and writing. Other examples of this kind of narrative can be identified even by their self-conscious titles, which signal their movement from using writing to represent predetermined truths to seeing the process of storytelling as a central to the investigation itself: Joseph Trimmer's "Telling Stories about Stories," Michael Martone's "Stories We Tell Ourselves," Douglas Reichert Powell's "The Story of the Story *Is* The Story," to name a few.

4.4

The progression from cliché hero narrative to these more sophisticated ways of imagining the classroom in all of its flaws, complexity, and failures—and all of the complex ways of trying to capture that nuance through telling itself—testifies, perhaps, to the ways the discipline is becoming more concerned with students’ place of importance. But what is missing in all of these techniques is a way of hearing from the student, or seeing the scene, unfiltered, through students’ eyes. The subjects of so many of these stories, the very impetus for their tellings, have no voice but through the lips of the scholar doing the telling. In other words, what is true about all of these moves—no matter how much they have successfully destabilized the narrator’s authority—is that they largely constrain the weight of intellectual contribution to the teacher-scholar doing the writing. Thinking about the ways we narrate our students and classrooms gives us a chance to reflect on sheer absence of students’ *writing* within the walls of our scholarship.

It’s quite unfair to ask that every teacher narrative become a student narrative (this would really be to ask teacher narratives to disappear). But I am interested in imagining that reversal, of thinking about every teacher narrative as a student narrative untold. What would be made possible by such a switch? Some scholars have tried to move in this direction already, to varying degrees, soliciting deeper student involvement or even co-authorship. Examples include Tassoni and Tayko’s *Sharing Pedagogies*; Hurlburt and Bodnar’s “Collective Pain: Literature, War, and Small Change” (Bodnar was one of Hurlburt’s undergraduate students); Welch’s “Resisting the Faith: Conversion, Resistance, and the Training of Teachers; Bishop and Teichmann’s “A Tale of Two Writing Teachers ” (Teichmann was Bishop’s graduate student); Bishop’s (as editor this time) *The Subject is Writing: Essays by Teachers and Students* (four of the anthology’s essays are writ-

ten by students), and Fonataine and Hunter's *Writing Ourselves into the Story: Unheard Voices from Composition Studies*).

This recentring is promising, in part, because it would mean that we'd have to see that what students have to say holds the possibility of valued and creative critique, not just personal vendetta or unthinking whining. But getting to this place of reading is hard to do.

••• A SYLLOGISM OF TEACHING FAILURE •••
(DRAWN FROM THEMATIC STUDENT FRUSTRATIONS)

(P1): My expectations about student writing are, like all writing teachers' expectations, peculiar to my subjective tastes as a teacher, writer, and, perhaps, human being

(P2): My essay prompts do not specifically enough articulate what those peculiar expectations are.

(C): If P1 and P2, then the grades I give students are not only unfair, but also cruel.

Here is a moment from Workshop in Composition that captures my image of students as steering the discipline. I feel that the class needs to talk about expectations, lurking and (un)fulfilled—about what writing is and does, what writing education might do and what it's for, and how any of that might be enacted in our class. We have this talk—not because of some well-planned strategy on my part, but because I'm scrambling to respond to a class conflict, one bred specifically by my revealing the fourth (and final) essay prompt of the semester (which asked them to describe to an outsider—someone who has not been in a writing class for the past 13 weeks—something about being a writing student that their outsider status wouldn't afford them⁵⁰). Three particularly outspoken students raised concerns about the assignment not being directive enough. How should the paper be organized? What should be discussed? How

⁵⁰ I was trying not only to give them another avenue to reflect on their writing processes and what they'd learned, but also to help make explicit the progress they had made from "outside" college composition to "inside," the ways that they had come to understand things they had not understood before, or that they might have understood but that might have only been latent knowledge that they could not describe or make explicit use of.

long should it be? They haven't been getting explicit enough directions, they say. They are gobsmacked when I tell them that I don't know what to expect in this assignment because I've never assigned it before—they are the first to write toward it. I tell them I have no particular vision of the perfect essay other than broad expectations we've been working through all term, but that I'm excited to see what they do. I don't say this to be coy; I say it genuinely. But these statements light a fire, moving a class-wide murmur of dissatisfaction into a kind of intellectual mutiny—not just about this issue but about everything. They aren't seeing the grades they'd expected; they aren't seeing improvement; they feel undirected and increasingly unhinged.

By way of trying to search out their angst, we have a frank conversation about why their expectations are different than the reality of the class. We talk about the differences between what they did in high school and what they are doing here. I ask about their histories with high-school writing, and the adjustments I perceived they would need to make in my class and beyond. I tell them, in part, that the institutional pressures inherent in high-school and college contexts affect what they have been asked to do and what they are doing now.

This is hard to understand (as it was for me as a graduate student). To illustrate I lay out, in hasty terms, an argument for the pressures of institutional labor on education's supposedly-pure mission. By way of example I gloss Robert Connors' argument that composition's obsession with grammar instruction (meaning "correction") has a long history, one encouraged, at least in part, by overworked writing teachers trying to narrow the burden of commenting on a crushing reading load come grading time.⁵¹ And I further conjecture that the five-paragraph essay (which those students were so accustomed to and which I'd spent a lot of time resisting in this class and others) could, to a cynic like me, be seen as having a similar appeal, by allowing

⁵¹ In Connors' "Mechanical Correctness is Composition Instruction."

manageable commentary through a focus on inappropriate deviation from its prescribed form. Computers are beginning to evaluate GRE essays, I tell them; that means, eventually, we'll be increasingly encouraged to write in forms computers can evaluate (I realize, of course, that I don't understand—and am oversimplifying—such technology, but I was trying to prove a point).

To my mind, what I've said is instructive, but also obvious (if not in detail then in principle): high-school writing will differ from college-writing which will differ from writing in certain professions, because of the pressures context put on the scene of writing. But my students' reactions say it's not obvious. No one, it seems, had told these students that college might require different kinds of writing than they were used to; no one told them that the past writing contexts they'd moved through and the ones they would face in their futures (in disciplines and careers) shape the writing that was and would be asked of them and that was and would be (de)valued. They did not anticipate a transition to college writing because the writing they'd been doing in high school had been sold to them as static and inevitable.

For the rest of the term, which was only a few weeks by this point, our class journal and their final reflective essays became spaces to grapple with what I'd revealed. I'd like to quote some of these responses, now.⁵² It's not just the shock of these students that I would like to register (though it is hard to ignore), but the ways they turn that shock back toward the institutions that have put them in this position.

As I look back over my High School writings I frequently ask myself
‘Why did teachers teach students how to write such non-realistic essays when
they knew that it would not be an acceptable form of writing later on in life? Al-

⁵² I quote them exactly as they appeared. Where I think necessary, I've provided clarifying footnotes.

ways receiving good grades on essay my work allowed me to believe that I had this writing concept mastered. Writing 5 paragraph essay's on 3 topic points that I chose to briefly discuss was a strong point for me because I didn't have to really engage with it. All I did was introduce my topic and points, give very little elaboration on each point, and conclude all of my ideas in the last paragraph. Of course this type of writing helped me learn an adequate way of organizing a paper, but it left me naïve and blindsighted to the correct way of writing properly and presenting an essay. (Chrystin Bunion, untitled final in-class essay)

In the duration of my career as a writer, contradictory desires of teachers have pushed and pulled me under the pretense of molding. The most recent event takes place in this class, Workshop in Composition. Yes, I am fresh out of high school. Yes, I am here for the betterment of my education, but I was not aware the foundation of my education would be struck down. Throughout high school it was forbidden to write in the active voice, even the AP taught it to be unforgivable, yet Professor [Madan] penalized me for that passivity. Such hypocrisy causes the loss of faith in education as well as extreme displacement. The thing I learned was that you can't write for yourself or give voice to your thoughts because you are to write for the teacher. You are to take on the persona of your teacher and write as they would in order to succeed. Can you imagine the confusion that ensues when that same teacher asks you to free write, or voice your feeling on something? (Adelia Mohan, untitled final in-class essay)

I guess I would miss lead⁵³ the whole time. I thought that when you are assigned to write, you would be given explicated instructions—guidelines, directions, whatever you wish to call it—, but it seems that the higher you go the less it is true. I'm told the reason for this drastic change in the way your writing was judge in high school and college is time—with many students' writing to read, the teachers' time for reading each one is shorten to have them all done it a predetermined time period.⁵⁴ What got my goat was not that this news was so shocking but that I was told this news 12 weeks into the class. I racking my brains out trying to thing up ways to make my paper better, and when I think that I finally got it , it is better but still not good enough why I asked myself why. Then In class after a series of interrogations, the truth came out, I couldn't help but think—what the hell, are you serious....—, and afterwards I am left with a strange feeling— a cold hate would probably best describe it. I wish what was said in class was type in bold in the course description so people will know what they are getting in to and any false hood about writing would be slap out of them with the cold hands of reality—If reality had a form I would image it look like an average human but with big hands, swollen from slapping the human population in the back of the head on a daily base to try to wake them from their self-made delusions, but unfortunately some people need rougher treatment to wake them. When the day comes when I master writing if that is possible, I would articulate, in a clear man-

⁵³ “was mislead”?

⁵⁴ Ayala seems to refer here to my statements in the particular class period I described above about how high-school teachers' large numbers of essays to grade shape what they can assign and what they can say about each assignments in their commentary. By “done” I assume he means “graded” or “commented on” by a “predetermined time period.”

ner, my hatred for it, and in doing so make others hate it as well if they haven't already. That is the core of my resolve to continue improving my writing. (Yade Ayala, untitled journal entry, November 15)

I can't help but feel surprised rereading these passages, as I was then. What struck me, and still does in rereading, is not the anxiety students express about a lack of mastery of college writing (this was a tough class, and they were, without exception, struggling to move through it), or that, in this particular instance the impetus for that reflection was anxiety about approaching the difficulty of my open-ended essay prompts. Instead my surprise is that this particular class discussion evoked such emotion at all, such feelings of betrayal, confusion and, dare I say, a kind of exasperation not just with me, but with the discipline I represent, a discipline they could not even name.

••• THREE STAGES OF DENIAL •••

1. These students are frustrated and tired. They are just venting. Ignore it—it's not about you.
2. No, no. There's something here you can't ignore. This is about your teaching. You should learn from it. What can you do differently next time?
3. This isn't about you—but that's what makes it so important.

My first reaction to the following weeks' student writings (especially Ayala's which was the first to reference that discussion) was dismissal. But these students thrust their critiques upon the class in ways difficult to ignore—it oozed out the seams of the work they did and into their classroom behaviors. They would not let me trivialize their positions, even though that is what, out of defensiveness, I was most anxious to do. My second impulse was to think about what I might have done wrong as a teacher in this moment and before it: perhaps my essay prompts were indeed too confusing, too vague; or maybe my assignments were fine, but I'd gone about

this particular conversation all wrong. I'd misgauged how they would respond to the things I'd told them. I had stripped away some kind of Oz-like curtain, I thought to myself, revealing the disappointing untruth of the Wizard, who, we should remember, wasn't just a liar (a disappointment in itself), but a liar who made Dorothy and company do lots of dangerous things using authority he never should've had.

But in reflection I've graduated past those understandings (though this not to say that this material isn't instructive for my own teaching approaches). The matter of me in the classroom, doing this or that with these students, is one story that could be told, one view of why this moment might matter and might be worth recounting. But those aren't the stories worth telling, I think—at least not here. Such stories would make these student responses about me, and what I could change. Importantly, I don't think these stories are about me: the story that matters is the one these students are trying to tell to the discipline I represented to them.

If we allow ourselves to read these student words as critique, as I do (a reading which itself has certain limitations), we might think that this critique is fundamentally about the ways the discipline poorly translates students across the boundary between high school and college. It is a critique that would attack our institutions for not better aligning the work required in college and the work required in high school. From the student's perspective, that alignment may have encouraged their high schools to stop focusing so much on the five-paragraph theme if their college teachers aren't going to value it, or to provide more open ended assignments to give students practice finding self-direction rather than following orders; or, alternatively, it might have encouraged me to better understand and build from the work high school been trained to do before arriving in my college composition class.

I think that would be an important and perceptive critique. Indeed it is one heavily on my mind since teaching this class. But I'm also not sure that's the most powerful way of reading the critique these students are leveling. Instead, the powerful critique, to my mind, is one that replaces the *problem* of the high-school/college transition: seeing the issue not as poor alignment between institutions but as the act of cutting students out of the very conversations that could have prepared them for that miss-alignment—that is, withholding from students the underlying decisions and circumstances that have shaped their realities. Students cannot write away the high-school classroom, the school that authorizes that classroom space, or the larger state, national, political, and economic forces that make high schools what they are. These forces are what makes it impossible, or at least impractical, to imagine completely reducing the difference between high school and college writing. With unique traditions, associations, pressures, and expectations high school writing—and teaching—are different, even if we can and should make better efforts to close the gap. But the status of that gap between high-school and college writing is a separate question from whether the disjunction should be made a venue for student reflection and debate.

I get the feeling from these student writings that their strong reaction, the students' apparent feelings of injustice, emerge from their recognition that we (meaning academics, teachers, administrators) have been thinking about that gap, but we have cut them out of this conversation that affects them more than it will ever effect us. I don't mean to suggest that student passages above are articulating this critique in these exact terms, but that the question, like Ayala's *Why am I just now being told this fourteen weeks into the term?*, reveals frustrations deeper than a simple lament about one bad teacher. It is a perceptive recognition of a practice of withholding disciplinary knowledge from students who experience it daily. How often do we make a topic of

thought and reflection the institutional scene of writing which give rise to classroom activities? We teachers do this reflective work behind closed doors not out of purposeful obfuscation, I imagine, but because we have normalized a sanitary separation between student/teaching and writing/professing.

4.5

I have something to admit. I have written about these particular students before. Several times—in my last three conferences, and a few job talks in between. Since this class, these students have become central to my thinking about the teaching of writing; they have rewritten the discipline inside of me.

If you are generous enough to not judge me lazy for this redundancy, perhaps you'll let me chalk up my rewriting of these students to an attempt to allow them and their work to enter my scholarly vocabulary, the storehouse each of us draw upon as thinkers and writers. As scholars, we all have proclivities—because of our histories, our years of researching and reading and experimenting. We all have fallback voices that we rely upon as portals to thought and exploration; we spend careers writing about the same texts, the same theorists, worrying over them, rebuilding and unbuilding them.

I would like to suggest that those points of intellectual departure (which can also be points of intellectual return and refreshment) might be our students' writings, too. I have found myself, at least with the students I've referenced above, and a few others, doing this kind of work. I am not lazy, at least not in that way. I am haunted. I am combining student words with

(other) theorists of language to unseat the too-comfortable assumptions that have come to discipline my mind.⁵⁵ But I don't want to imply that I'm bringing these students up over and over again to better "figure them out." I am not talking about them to excuse their words away or contextualize them into oblivion. To do that would be to use them only to validate my own interpretive prowess. These students' words deserve to inspire future work, not just sit there as a code to crack.

You might think that these students, to be worth this amount of time and effort, were exceptional, as perhaps Slevin's students were. I wouldn't argue with you. Something intangible (or more complex than I have been able to parse) allowed for those students at that time to say those things individually and in concert with one another. The conditions are not easy to duplicate. But what is also clear to me is that this group of students, whose words I have worked with and reinvented so many times, is the only class whose words I have traced so many times as to be haunted by them. In this sense it is no curiosity that I keep writing these séances. That continual return is the very condition of possibility for intellectually engaging with—conversing with—their critique. We don't wait for scholars or theorists to come knock on our door. We go to them. We go to conferences. We attend to their work desperate for ways of understanding. We ask their theories to make sense of the half-baked ideas we bring with us. In this sense, the case of this student group as exemplary and as unusual is not a weakness (say, because the situa-

⁵⁵ Whether a strength or a weakness, my scholar's curiosity—my mulling over these same texts, my returning to them and finding them anew as I combine them with other readings and other investments—is, I think, just as likely to be attributed to my agency, my ability, my tenacity at working with text, to my scholar's curiosity rather than the quality of the students' words. One interesting way of gauging how we value student writing is to counter pose that perception with how we might view a scholar's repeated attention to, say, Foucault. We probably take for granted that Foucault is so widely read and applied because of his worth as a theorist, not because of particular or creative agency of the scholar "using" him. This is one way to see our tendency to deauthorize student contributions to our work as scholars.

tion is too local, ungeneralizable, or whatever). Instead their exceptionality is the grounds of their contribution.

I'm suggesting that we remember Slevin's suggestion that we allow student work to move the discipline in ways we might not be capable of moving ourselves. This is, I take it, the power of Slevin's claims that started this essay: not that student writing is in a position of power itself to shift the discipline, but that it has the power over time to shift the discipline as it is made manifest in the individuals who live in it and remake it daily.

4.6

What is true is that, as these students reinvent me, I reinvent them. In my telling of this class, in my attempt to make the students and their stories mean something, I'm losing them. I'm playing with their images. I'm trying to be true to them, sure, but I'm losing what that means. By writing about them on so many occasions, I've replaced Dillard's changeling baby more than once—a memory of memory.

Perhaps because I have a record of these students' writings I should be less worried. I have solid evidence on which to rest, something more sturdy than leaning on memory's elbows. But to say this would assume that what it takes to portray these students without bias (to be "accurate") is a matter of a firmer record—that with a journalist's eye and journalist's evidence, the task of making sense of this mess would be easy. But that isn't right either. The complexity of representation outstrips the possibility of achieving those truths, no matter how badly we might want them.

It's a tantalizing thought, though, and it's one that brings to mind for me, strangely enough, midterm conferences. The individual meetings I hold with students at midterm, just for fifteen or twenty minutes, always surprise me. From the mere act of taking them out of the classroom setting, framing their bodies within the walls of a more enclosed space, in different lighting, seeing them from a different angle and distance, apart from their classmates—my students change. I don't mean that they literally change, of course, but I don't exactly mean it figuratively either. In my perception—my reality of seeing—students morph before my eyes. Their faces, their proportions, their voices, the colors and textures of their skin—but especially their faces. Their noses drift to new locations, they grow or shrink; their smiles take on different postures and angles. With those changes, so go their personalities. They soften, they harden. They seem more depressed than before. Or more bright. I've misread them all in one way or another—and by that point I've misread them for nearly half of the term. I wonder if this is happening, too, always and with every part of my contact with students: a slow, recalcitrant unveiling of who students *really* are always battling that plateaued perception of who, for whatever set of incalculable perceptions, I had convinced myself they were.

To experience the disturbing magic of that transformation (and it does, at times, seem magical) makes me, now, want to revisit the students I'm narrating here. I want them to sit across from me as I write this. I want to study their faces again and, through that physical correction, correct the ways I might be misunderstanding them and the happenings of our class together.

But the visual metaphor is no more useful than the journalistic one, and maybe even more dangerous. It suggests that it is the casualness of contact with students that allows for untrue accounts. It implies that what makes our accounts of students more reliable is more time,

more attention—a new angle of closeness that reveals the detail. What’s hard to remember is how much you don’t know even *after* the faces have changed and you think you’ve arrived at understanding.

Cultural Anthropology’s ethnographic revelation is that even the thing you are most sure of—because of research and time and observation, derived at through the very closest of closeness—isn’t a sure thing. Ethnography has been a place to work over, defend, abandon, nuance, and recreate the justifications, values, and limitations central to this kind of representational work. Scholars, including those in composition, are fond of quoting Clifford Geertz’ phrase on this point—that descriptive accounts of experience should strive for, and derive value from, “thick descriptions” of their objects of study (I’ve already quoted Tinberg doing this in my last chapter). But wading into those thick descriptions makes for a mire much harder to escape from than most composition scholars referencing this claim are willing to entertain.⁵⁶

James Clifford is one of many notable anthropologists (I’m think especially of Paul Rabinow, George E. Marcus, and Stephen A. Tyler) trying to better characterize the truths that ethnography can and cannot manage, which is really to say these scholars have been trying to save ethnography from its early self. The birth of postmodern ethnography, or what Clifford calls Surrealist Ethnography, captures ethnography’s plight, and the plight of compositionists who try to represent students through observational methods. A few insightful passages from Clifford’s *Predicament of Culture*:

⁵⁶ To see the way Geertz’ perspective on writing’s role in ethnography in relation to the more capacious avoidances of representational truths, Paul Rabinow gives us this distinction: “Geertz (like the other anthropologists) is still directing his efforts to reinvent an anthropological science with the help of textual mediations. The core of his activity is still social description of the other, however modified by new conceptions of discourse, author, or text. The other for Clifford is the anthropological representation of the other. This means that Clifford is simultaneously more firmly in control of his project and more parasitical. He can invent his questions with few constraints; he must constantly feed off others’ texts” (242).

[A]nthropological humanism begins with the different and renders it—through naming, classifying, describing, interpreting—comprehensible. It familiarizes. An ethnographic surrealist practice, by contrast, attacks the familiar, provoking the irruption of otherness—the unexpected. (145-6)

The surrealist elements of modern ethnography tend to go unacknowledged by a science that sees itself engaged in the reduction of incongruities rather than, simultaneously, in their production. But is not every ethnographer something of a surrealist, a reinventor and reshuffler of realities? Ethnography, the science of cultural jeopardy, presupposes a constant willingness to be surprised, to unmake interpretive syntheses, and to value—when it comes—the unclassified, unsought other. (147)

Ethnography combined with surrealism can no longer be seen as the empirical, descriptive dimension of anthropology, a general science of the human. Nor is it the interpretation of cultures, for the planet cannot be seen as divided into distinct, textualized ways of life. Ethnography cut with surrealism emerges as the theory and practice of juxtaposition. It studies, and is part of, the invention and interruption of meaningful wholes in works of cultural import-export. (147)

With ethnography's objects no longer accessible in the ways imagined by early ethnographers, the writing of the ethnography—its production as a translative document—is what starts to hold importance. What is available are “assemblages of text, loosely and sometimes contradictorily united” and therefore a focus on the “inventive poesis at work in all collective representations”

(Clifford 41). “The truest thing,” says Michael Taussig, “is the interzone that the translation creates between the two domains of us and them, fiction and nonfiction” (*My Cocaine Museum* 201-02).

With the rejection of transparency and a focus on the text itself come realizations of the instability of the contingencies of writing and the new written forms that could privilege the textualization of observation. Stephen Tyler describes this new goal as “evocation” rather than representation:

The whole point of ‘evoking’ rather than ‘representing’ is that it frees ethnography from *mimesis* and the inappropriate mode of scientific rhetoric that entails ‘objects,’ ‘facts,’ ‘descriptions,’ ‘inductions,’ ‘generalizations,’ ‘verification,’ ‘experiment,’ ‘truth,’ and like concepts that, except as empty invocations, have no parallels either in the experience of ethnographic fieldwork or in the writing of ethnographies.” (original emphasis, 130)

But to achieve that evocation requires wider textual strategies of representation. Many of these scholars, including Clifford, look to ways of getting the ethnographic subject into the text as a participant: “Fieldwork cannot appear primarily as a cumulative process of gathering ‘experience’ or of cultural ‘learning’ by an autonomous subject. It must rather be seen as a historically contingent, unruly dialogical encounter involving to some degree both conflict and collaboration in the production of texts.” (Clifford 90). Tyler describes that collaboration as dispersed authorship. “Dispersed authorship,” Tyler says, “mirrors this dispersed self, this inconstant subject, just as the incompleteness of the text mirrors the dissolution of the object [...]” (Tyler 139).

All of this material questions my desire to solve my representational challenges by seeing my students again, by time-traveling. The desire for physical confirmation is just another way of trying to hold a picture of truth that can't be accessed, let alone be frozen:

The problems with the realism of natural history is not, as is often claimed, the complexity of the so-called object of observation, nor failure to apply sufficiently rigorous and replicable methods, nor even less the seeming intractability of the language of description. It is instead a failure of the whole visualist ideology of referential discourse...In ethnography there are no 'things' there to be the objects of a descriptions [...] there is rather a discourse. (Tyler 130-131)

4.7

••• THINGS WE WOULD NEED TO KNOW IN ORDER ••• TO EVALUATE GRAFFITI AS ART

- The importance of the use of color versus black/white
- The importance of 3-dimensionality of text
- The importance of the art's 'message' or 'argument' (the relationship between how the art 'looks' and 'what it has to say')
- The importance of the "presence" of the artist in the art itself (through the specter of the artist's moniker)

I don't know much about graffiti, though I think it's quite interesting as an art form, especially when that art is activist or politically subversive. This kind of graffiti I think I have a handle on (because I can interpret it under the same rubric as other forms of art I'm more familiar with). But the kind that is all bubble letters and tagger names is more mysterious to me. I understand graffiti's purpose as a territorial marker, and that makes it interesting for very different reasons

(something I'm invested in as a native of East L.A. gang territory). But is that sort of tagging art? Can it be evaluated for being more or less artistic? I suppose it's the possibility of the intersection between the seemingly vandalistic uses and the artistic uses that could be most interesting—but negotiating that border is difficult for me to know how to approach.

The list above was generated in class by students. It's a list I solicited to make a point about the challenges, but also the possible systemization, of evaluating something that seems difficult to evaluate because it feels, on the surface, subjective, up to individual preference. My point, at least as I attempted to make it, was that even though I knew little about graffiti art, and even though I might have personal aesthetic preferences (say, thinking two-dimensional writing is more stylish than mock-three-dimensional writing), if we all agreed to categories of evaluation and could articulate them in a way we all understood, there would be much less variation in our various evaluation. I was, of course, trying to draw an analogy to my evaluation of their essays.

Mickey: Graffiti artist. Cool kid. He wears skater shoes and a cocked, broad brimmed cap that frames his baby face. He's got a soft, thoughtful way of speaking, an odd juxtaposition of old-world manners and hip-hop style (odd, at least, if we abide by stereotypes about hip-hop culture). I Like him a lot. He's the only one that, from the word go, looks to be genuinely using our class journal as a way to reflect on his education. But I nearly lose him. Halfway through the term he admits to thinking essay grades are arbitrary. I sense he is voicing a broadly held gripe. I feel I have to address this worry, or at least that his class-wide comment on the journal is a good excuse to do so. So I use the topic of graffiti art in class as an analogy for positing some principles for evaluating something that is, in some senses unquantifiable, arbitrary, and contested. When I start using graffiti as my analogy, I project graffiti images and I ask him to be my expert

insider who can offer categories for analyzing what makes graffiti good. This meant calling him out as the person who brought up this concern about grading in the first place. I don't worry about this because his journal post was public, all of us in the room had (or at least could have) read it, and nonetheless I reference his post gently and with praise. But I can tell by his face that he feels targeted. He won't share his knowledge of what makes graffiti good or bad within his community of artists. He feels set up, forced to walk into a fight he didn't know was scheduled against an opponent who'd been warming up for days. In the next week's journal entries, I see him withdraw. The first student to extend himself on the journal now taking cover.



It's predictable, perhaps, that we write about our students. But we shouldn't ignore the fact that we rarely let students write about us. And when they do, we tend to be abundantly uncomfortable being on that end of the judgment (in course evaluations, for example). Here's the start of what might have been a longer telling by Mickey. It's only the beginning of this story above. He never returns to tell the end.

I'm glad you said that you don't enjoy reading cliché entries about how interesting and informing the previous week of class was because I hate writing that stuff just as much as you hate reading it.

Ever since I can remember I've dread going to my English class. To me, writing is all a matter of opinion. There is no right or wrong, but only this good or this isn't wrong but it doesn't sound very nice. I can't stand anything that isn't objective and doesn't have a formula (only when it comes to my grade). When it comes down to it, I'm being graded on what my teacher thinks is good writing, not to say that you don't but just the idea of it all seems bogus to me. Sometimes

when we revise things in class, to me they sound no better after than they did before. I mean I'm trying my best here to 'advance my writing skills' but I think that some people just don't have that knack for making things sound all pretty and nice no matter how hard they try, or no matter how many 'good' examples of creative writing they read. I don't know what profession I'm going to end up in, but its I can tell you one thing its not going to require me to write creatively. This isn't to say that I'm going to give up and stop trying to better my writing by any means, but I think at times I'm being asked to do things that maybe I'm not fully capable of. I feel like I'm going out on a real limb here writing this stuff, but I figured someone has to write about something other than what 'say' they learned over the course of the week." (Mickey Eligio, Untitled journal entry, October 4)

The trick, in the moment, is to think of these comments (and the kinds of comments they represent) as more than benign or innocent or misguided. When I've read the earlier student passages of Ayala and Mohan at conferences, as I've done several times now, I'm perennially surprised by the tendency to be dismissive. In the laughter that I often hear from the audience, and that I'm always taken off guard by (laughter especially stirred by Ayala's statement "When the day comes when I master writing if that is possible, I would articulate, in a clear manner, my hatred for it, and in doing so make others hate it as well if they haven't already"), I sense that dismissal. But I also sense nervousness. I will read these students' words and I will hear that laughter despite my own commitment *this time* to mark my intonation and posture with the seriousness these words represent to me, with a stance that tries to signal that I think there should not be laughter but rather pause, even regret. But even then my lip will sometimes peel away into a smile as I hear the chuckles, as I try to reconcile that there is both humor here and

seriousness, as there must be with anything worth critiquing. But afterward I will feel guilty, and in the question-and-answer I will try to acknowledge the humor while deflecting it, while reaffirming that these student words could have weight if we interpret them in ways we aren't used to, if we make a commitment—obligatory to my mind—to entertain the seriousness of them before succumbing to the laughter.

If there is a way in which we have not been, or have learned not to be, generous in hearing student voices as critique, it is because, in part, we have given students few forums to do that work in credible ways (which is to say in ways that we, as the ones listening, would find credible). Take the forum in which student critique and reflection are made most available to us—indeed because of institutional mandate: the student course evaluation. At my current institution these evaluations (or “course reports” as we call them) are dominated by an overwhelming onslaught of numbers. Twenty numerically-rated questions greet the student on the first page. Even if each question were designed meticulously and without flaw (which I think each is not), the overwhelming urge to bubble-fill makes turning the page to give written comments a secondary matter.

This is often the only chance students have in a class to textualize their experience, to understand through written reflection—and to make their reader/teacher understand—their experience of the class. I hope I have at least begun to make clear the importance of providing circumstances in which our own textualization is complicated by students who themselves have been invited to textualize their experiences of the class, rather than just produce texts *within* the class. Interestingly, though, course evaluation's function as policing teacher performance means that even the most interesting student comments can be read as off-base and dismissible by teachers vulnerable to this policing. *This student is complaining about things I have no control over*, I have

heard said by colleagues. *That textbook was chosen for me by the department or I'm not the one who mandated the first-year writing requirement, why am I getting bad ratings because of what the administration decided years ago?* I've said all of these things myself. The objections are understandable given the weight these student evaluations carry within institutions. Indeed in the case of this workshop in composition class, I could say (and surely did to myself at one point), *It's not my fault their high school teachers didn't tell them the five-paragraph essay has finite usefulness.*

But such frustrations miss the ways these comments are some of the few precious moments in which we ask students to become critics, rather than passive receivers, of their educations. And yet the opening they provide is only fleeting and, by virtue of the way we read the genre of course reports, often unproductive. The course reports don't provide a sustained opportunity for students to explore their critiques thoughtfully (making for quick comments that add to the sense that they are merely whip-dash complaints by bitter students); nor do these critiques find us teachers in a context in which we are inclined to read them as dialoguing with scholarly questions of our field (this in part because of their seriousness as evidence of teaching performance and in part because of their placement at the end of term, preventing us from engaging those criticisms by using them to shape our immediate teaching).

Teaching Comments

1. What were the **instructor's** major strengths?



Figure 1. Student Response on a Course Report Form

The above image is a scan of a student comment (not from the class I'm discussing here) that I received several years back while teaching freshman comp. It remains in my memory even after so many years not because of what it might say about the student's perception of my teaching (it's a toss-up for me whether this drawing is a way of saying "I'm doodling here because you have no strengths worth mentioning," or whether the cheerfulness of the banana-man is a sign of approval). What is interesting to me instead is the thought of this drawing as brilliantly subverting the genre of course reports, the genre that by virtue of its particular construction could capture in only the most superficial ways what the students might know or think about a fourteen week journey in difficulty. I prefer, in other words, to see a student in the banana costume waving back at us, knowing we are watching but refusing to dignify the question by writing anything other than to label what we already know how to name ("Bunny"). I don't know what this student was doing, of course, but this account seems just as compelling as one that says this drawing is about who the student and I were to each other.

**••• A BREIF ACCOUNT THUS FAR •••
or CIRCULAR LAYERS OF PURPOSE**

Layer 1: During this basic writing class, writing those reflective narratives allowed both students and me to interpret class proceedings in certain way by turning those events into texts.

Layer 2: Those narratives of classroom experience have been, and are here, crucial entries in my scholarly lexicon.

Layer 3: Trying to write a story about using those stories in *this* act of scholarship (re)creates my commitment to Layer 2 (in a sense it is only through writing here and elsewhere that I can achieve the richest version of Layer 2).

Layer 4: If I succeed at Layer 3, perhaps I can demonstrate to you the possible value of narratives of teaching and learning.

But before we go, back to this class and these students.

I began this chapter by saying that I had purposefully provided several avenues for students to do reflective work about the class and their experience in it. But as I mentioned when discussing Mickey Eligio's stab at questioning grading, many of these opportunities weren't always used in such interesting ways. The forced march of the class journal, a bi-weekly tedium for many students and a weekly one for myself, especially fell victim to superficial treatment, it's potential ignored or overrun by cliché, by what I imagine to be a "what the teacher wants to hear" statements. Those entries so overwhelmed and frustrated me that I confronted the class in week five about the uselessness of the journal on the whole. It had become a place of vague praise for the class, not specific or qualified enough to feel honest or thoughtful: "I enjoy the discussions in class because they it allows us to open up and communicate as a good writer" (Chrystin Bun-ion, untitled journal entry, September 6). Or, the other problem: they were so filled with reported (but not detailed) summary of the previous week's activities that there was no hint of an individual having actually experienced those events: "This week in class we talked a lot about [...]. We also talked a lot about [...]" (Philip Potena, untitled journal entry, September 12). Of course as you've already seen, as the semester becomes more fraught, the pages start getting filled and start feeling useful.

In those later moments, I too was using the journal to grapple with the increasingly conflictive proceedings of the class and the ways the discipline and its contexts were working (or not) in and through me as a teacher of this class. And as a result, although I cannot say that I planned this, I took a stance toward this class that, indirectly I think, served as invitations to students to break from some of the power structures that might have otherwise restrained them from speaking openly.

**••• ADMITTED TEACHING FAILURES THAT MAY HAVE
BECOME STUDENT INVITATIONS**

- “I’m working through a similar kind of fear too (one I always have to face in each class I teach)” (September 6).
 - “I’m remiss that we didn’t have more time [...]” (September 6).
- “I left class with a bit of regret today, thinking that maybe I had gone too far” (October 3).
 - “So why was I beating you guys and gals over the head? Why was I such a bully about it (which is what I felt a bit like after class) [...] as if I’m chewing you out for not coming home by curfew. Isn’t that a little unfair?” (October 3).
 - “So, in summary, I don’t mean to dog you all” (October 3).
 - “One final note—back to me and my teaching gaffs” (October 3).
 - “At times teachers throw off the balance” (November 14).
 - “Where my rant was not fair was in how [...]” (November 22).

The fact that I was simultaneously narrating my own difficulties, not just about but *to* my students, opened the possibility, I think, for them to narrate their own difficulties and start to dialogue about them with each other. I don’t say this in an effort to co-opt what students have done—to say that it was *because* of something I did. But rather I say it to try to acknowledge that the power structures which our students must negotiate daily can make certain things feel possible and others not. I modeled this self-doubt in our journal, my classroom persona, and my willingness to revise assignments that seemed to be going wrong. I expect all of these factors may have played into these student possibilities, but it’s still my belief (though I have no concrete evidence to say for sure) that it was providing that material in writing—showing students in a concrete and “permanent” forum that I was frustrated, weak, confused, searching for answers—that allowed them to articulate their positions in more explicit and thoughtful terms.

But that exposure, even as a teacher, is scary. In fact, I almost didn’t do it, and had decided I wouldn’t. As I said in a private journal entry just a few weeks into the term,

I’m frustrated today. It has been a hard week. Ups and downs. I feel like I’m losing them. That I’m doing a bad job as a teacher. And that is what I want to write about [in the class journal]—my failure. The way I think things should be differ-

ent. The way I've misread their level. [...]. But I can't. This is perhaps the limits of when the audience is your students, too. (or can I write about this [failure]? How would that work, what are the dangers, what would that achieve?). (September 19)

A week later I was admitting to students a whole heap of regret. I can't account for this change as purposeful. It was an imperceptible and natural shift compelled by the opening my students had created through their own actions. But it was also a consequence of forcing myself to write every week. I couldn't help but arrive at this point of honesty because otherwise I would have to skirt the topics that were most on my mind. My writing would have felt empty and dishonest. What I am trying to get at is that the same opportunity for critique that the journal (and my writing in it) may have provided students could be said to be equally true for me: the opportunity of the journal and my students writing in it to me prompted me toward some of the most compelling reflection about teaching I've ever done.

Students, of course, have even fewer opportunities and outlets to do this work. In the case of Workshop in Composition, it was largely storytelling that provided through these forums that provided that possibility.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ These student journal entries and reflective writings are not narratives in the vivid sense. But they are musings structured around experience—around descriptions of those experiences, both present and past, and monologues of their thinking while experiencing those things. I wonder what kind of student critique would be possible if I stressed further, and spent more time having them experiment with, narratives that are carefully crafted—not for seamlessness, but for vividness. Those decisions of writing would surely reveal some interesting engagements with our discipline.

4.8

But whether that student material ever sees the light of day is not just a function of providing opportunities for their creation, but opportunities for it to circulate beyond the walls of the classroom to impact the field more broadly. And this matter is indeed the intractable problem of scholarship—of whose materials are seen as legitimate to be used to forward the discipline’s conversations and its trajectory. The problem, in short, is how to value students’ words as more than objects or artifacts to study—as voices capable of speaking within, alongside, or against scholarship’s contributions. Mariolina Salvatori and Patricia Donahue have argued convincingly for the importance of the presence of the student in composition studies. Losing that presence means losing a kind of

inquiry into processes of knowing that finds its most powerful impetus in actual classroom work and the activities of students, constructed not as abstract and mythologized databases but as flesh and blood subjects whose intellectual, cultural, and emotional makeups test the assumptions every teacher brings to instruction and can, in the long run, lead to significant revisions of educational theories and practices. (Salvatori and Donahue 32)

Separately, Salvatori has argued that the absence of students is made more complicated by their supposed presences—the “accidental erasures” of students even within scholarship that tries to feature their work (“Charting the Way” 26). She notes that, though the field has largely “learned to engage student texts with respect and intellectual curiosity, by breaking away from early, parodic and condescending discussions of them,” it still has difficulty situating students’ voices in

ways that legitimize their position as credible authors engaged in scholarship (25).⁵⁸ One point of progress in this attempt, as Salvatori notes, and indeed a fact that is hard to avoid when writing a narrative of teaching and learning, is the common practice of asking students for permission to reproduce their (unpublished) written work within one's own writing. *College Composition and Communication*, for example, asks its contributors to submit a release form (one provided on CCCC's website) signed by the student giving consent for the publication.⁵⁹

It's easy to see how this convention of permission is an important step to validating student presences in scholarship. At its best it is meant broadly to protect students from careless and unwitting objectification in our work and to protect them equally from unwanted (and potentially harmful) exposure—as their published writing could be seen by other faculty at their institutions, or, increasingly, by anyone google-searching a student's name (this latter point is made in Salvatori and Donahue 30). There's important symbolism to the gesture of permission, too, as it goes toward validating student contributions to a discipline that has built its mansions on the backs of students even while sometimes locking them out. The ritual promises to extend the title of Author beyond those who, for a variety of reasons, might have access to a privileged sense of authorship often withheld from students. We should credit these students with the writing they do, this gesture says. And proper attribution is one way of signaling that value.

Including student writing in scholarship through a means of permission is one way of imagining how students might better be seen as participants in the discipline, as those who might have something to offer, something for us to listen to past grading time. But the construct

⁵⁸ See also Salvatori's "The Vanishing Presence of Students in Composition Studies."

⁵⁹ The form is not solely meant as a release for student work, but the way it is framed on CCCC's website suggests this use is primary: "Click [HERE](#) to read/download a copy of the CCC permission form needed to include the work of others in your submission (especially student work)." The targeting toward use with student writing is also suggested by the form's asking for a parent's signature if the author is younger than eighteen.

of permission is not without its own set of problems, or, perhaps better said, even as it authorizes students it reveals a deeper set of problems with how we position students within the field and within our scholarship, problems that permission itself cannot quell.

As one of the primary ways we try to enable student work to be visible in the discipline, what does the construct of permission reveal about the transaction of knowledge we imagine between scholar-teacher and student? Permission, or consent, is tied, as the *CCC* official form implies, to a matter of copyright and ownership. I quote from the *CCC* form (available through the *CCCC* webpage):

So that journals published by the National Council of Teachers of English can be protected by copyright against unauthorized use, it is necessary that consent to publish be obtained from persons who contribute to this work. By signing this form you give your consent for your writing or illustrations to be published.

What is curious about this passage is the notion of what constitutes a “contribution” to the work, especially in contrast to what we might call “appearing” in the work by being cited, quoted, or discussed by the author.

Although other disciplines have conventions for soliciting copyright approval for reproducing even brief bits of material (particularly in the form of graphic figures or tables), we in the humanities do not have this tradition, or insofar as we do, say for reproducing extended passages from another’s text, it’s not the typical way we encounter other’s words within a piece of scholarship. To quote someone’s else’s text within your own is not to ask that person to co-author (though that is an intriguing prospect); nor is it to ask that person to be a “contributor.” More usually, that inclusion is merely signaled through the act of acknowledging (via citation) that this person’s work was important to the formulation of your own. On the other hand, it is

equally strange to imagine that someone who had genuinely contributed to a text (say as secondary author) would be asked for copyright release but would not be formally acknowledged as a co-author or co-creator (or somehow otherwise acknowledged within the text's front matter as deeply contributing to the text's creation). Thus this construct does little to validate the student as an equal author with ideas to contend with. In fact the act of asking students for their copyright permission is, in some ways, a greater signal of the absence of student authority than it is a granting of it.

Nor do I think the copyright suggestion realistically characterizes students' power (or lack thereof) to own or withhold their writing. To grant permission in the sense of release implies that the author has control over, and leverage with, the material she has produced—the power that makes permission necessary in the first place. But I question whether students could be said to have power over their writing in this sense within the institutional structures that frame their work. They of course have the power to refuse to sign this (or any other) permission form, and thus refuse to be included in the piece of scholarship submitted to *CCC*, but that is where the power ends. They don't have that kind of power in other uses of their writing: they do not, except in the most indirect sense give us “permission” to grade or comment on their essays (this is a permission implied by their enrollment in the institution; it is not directly given to us as teachers); nor do they, on the whole, give permission to use their writing in the classroom, say in workshopping essays in the classroom (I require this willingness as one condition of staying enrolled in my class, but I do not ask “permission” from each student). The control students have over their texts after turning them in (and one might argue, even before turning them in) is minimal. The power to even be able to grant permission, in some senses, is given away before they step through the door. Students ask *us* for permission to do things in their own writing.

It seems to me that what we are really discussing is not “permission” so much as “assent.” And the distinction is important. Assent might be given or not, but it does not imply that the author of material has the power or ability to stop its use or to assert a right that others must abide by. The act of permission smacks more of looking for a blessing, of the nicety of asking the student to grant us that trust and the nicety of the student to grant it.

I don’t have an answer for this, nor do I want to claim that the construct of permission itself will bring the discipline to a halt. I have no doubt that the *CCC* form, and those moves like it, are done with the students’ protection in mind (I ask all of my students for such permissions, in part to grant them a feeling of authorship, in part to find out whether they would object to me discussing their work). These documents are created for the right reasons. But that does not exempt the idea from being misleading, or even dangerously misguided. The entrenched convention of asking for permission, though it may reflect important progress of the field, reflects—and at worst reinscribes—the image of students as research subjects with rights, but not as thinking writers who could steer our discipline if we found more careful ways to listen.

To see things this way throws in relief how our inventions for validating students by giving them “appearances” in our scholarship need to be interrogated for how they structure students as research subjects and research objects, as enablers of our scholarship and as possible shapers of the discipline.

The difficulty, and in this case perhaps, absurdity, of the contradictory impulses toward student visibility is well-represented by my wondering about the ethics of including the above course-evaluation drawing as a potential breach of confidentiality (both for the student and the institution). But I’m worried about this—in reproducing an anonymous drawing of a bunny and a banana-man—in ways that I’m not worried about describing my students, paraphrasing them,

characterizing their looks and behaviors, their intelligence and ability.⁶⁰ Those moves require no permission form, no worry about breaking rules. This is what is strange about negotiating permissions. Representation of student work is not something students can grant or withhold. Nor can they always assume, sans those types of protections, that the professional ethics of citation conventions will protect them.

Richard Miller's quite interesting treatment of ethnographic authority in composition studies comes to mind for me here. Ethnography in composition studies would seem on its surface, to be "guaranteed to provide an informed, respectful account of students' and teachers' ways of knowing the world that could, in turn, serve as a firm foundation upon which to build a sustainable project of educational reform" (Miller 158). As you know from my previous discussion of Anthropology's ethnographic crisis, it is not surprising that Miller shows this assumption to be naïve. In particular, he demonstrates that the illusion of respect shown the student subject through conventional means of ethnographic representation is enabled by the fact that students—and most other object of the ethnographic gaze—don't have the cultural capital to object, dissent, or express dissatisfaction about representations of themselves. He illustrates this point by discussing Elizabeth Sheehan's attempt to do an ethnographic study of Irish intellectuals, particularly how they interact with the public sphere. As a younger and female graduate student, not to mention an American outsider, Sheehan fought all manner of insult and obfuscation from her subjects (Irish academics), despite her status as an academic and the legitimacy of her

⁶⁰ I realize there might be push back to the inclusion of that drawing—for good reason. It could be argued that including any kind of confidential response from course evaluations, no matter how supposedly benign, could set a dangerous precedent of retracting confidentiality in cases that don't seem, to us, to be meaningful, and that such judgment could too easily be extended in order to dismiss confidentially written comments that we deem seem silly or half-hearted or uncaring. In short it could set a precedent for denigrating, by not granting the confidentiality that is due to them, student responses that we judge as unworthy. I would not disagree with this danger. But I would maintain, too, that this very worry reaffirms the double standard of representation I'm trying to point out by discussing this comment.

intellectual project. Her case, to Miller, reveals the dangerous imbalance within ethnographic relationships: it is only in trying to “study up”—that is, to ethnographically analyze and interpret a population with cultural capital to voice dissent and to disrupt proceedings—that this power differential becomes obvious. But, as Miller shows, the unsavory relationship made visible in the context of “studying up” is the same dynamic that dominates studies of typical objects of ethnographic research—those who don’t have the social, intellectual, financial resources to stand against the representations leveled against them (186-189): “There is some suggestion of bad taste in the notion that one academic should study another, a delicacy of feeling rarely extended by social scientists to the rest of the world” (Sheehan qtd. in Miller, 186). If we were on the other end of those representational practices, if that gaze was leveled toward (against?) us, we would likely think long and hard about the assumptions underlying those practices.

This is why I’m thinking about Miller in the context of permission and assent. As Salvatori has pointed out, we would not be satisfied with many of the validating, contextualizing, and interpretive strategies we employ when referencing student work, if those practices were turned back on us (“Vanishing”). We would see them as ungenerous, sloppy, perhaps even unethical. And even if those mechanical hurdles of citation were cleared, we, as subjects of that writing, would be looking for more: to have our writing interpreted with nuance and care; to have what was said about us be not only accurate but interesting; to feel a valuable part in the writer’s ability to say what she is saying; to have what we’ve said be treated as more than obvious or single-sided, as worthy of debate about what we meant and why it matters. In other words, we’d want to be not an object interesting because of the ways we can be analyzed and picked apart, but a subject who has something to say that others might want to hear, authors of ideas that could come be extended beyond us.

4.9

The ethnography as collage would leave manifest the constructivist procedures of ethnographic knowledge; it would be an assemblage containing voices other than the ethnographer's, as well as examples of 'found' evidence, data not fully integrated within the work's governing interpretation. Finally it would not explain away those elements [...] that render the investigator's own culture newly incomprehensible.

– James Clifford
The Predicament of Culture

I don't think that the student writing I've reproduced above makes my experience of teaching this class, or any of my teaching experiences, "incomprehensible." But this class—and these students—certainly cannot be "explained away," either. There is no way to make sense of them that is more powerful than what they say on their own. Their stories of frustration make me feel that teaching is both impossible and important. Perhaps their experience in Workshop in Composition brought them to the same conclusions about writing in the university.

••• HOW IT SOMETIMES FEELS TO BE PART OF THIS PROFESSION •••

- To write a story about students who will never know you are writing about them.
- To interpret students' writings through a theory students have never heard of that has currency in a discipline students don't know exists (or that there is peculiar set of people who would want to combine those things).
- To narrate interactions with students from a position of privilege (even if that position is qualified through strategies of hedging, multiple narratives, stories of failure rather than heroics).
 - To never be in a position to be narrated *by* those students.

Adelia Mohan's final in class essay:

I believe the art of writing is one of the most unsatisfactory, as well as unfulfilling, activities we can partake in. Writing is nothing more than trial and error,

vieving for the audience’s pleasure. Sure you may garner applause, but the audience will be replaced and your writing will unavoidably be subjected to change. The “damn if you do damn if you don’t” contradiction is inherent in the task of writing. And as E.B White so aptly sums this up, “writing is both mask and unveiling.”⁶¹

In the duration of my career as a writer, contradictory desires of teachers have pushed and pulled me under the pretense of molding. The most recent event takes place in this class, Workshop in Composition. Yes, I am fresh out of high school. Yes I am here for the betterment of my education, but I was not aware the foundation of my education would be struck down. Throughout high school it was forbidden to write in the active voice, & even the AP taught it to be unforgivable, yes Professor [Madan] penalized me for that passivity. Such hypocrisy causes the loss of faith in education as well as extreme displacement. The thing I learned was that you can’t write for yourself or give voice to your thoughts because you are to write for the teacher. You are to take on the persona of your teacher and write as they would in order to succeed. Can you imagine the confusion that ensues when that same teacher asks you to freewrite, or voice your feelings on something? And of course, confusion is a primary emotion which, in my case, leads to anger. It was in that state of anger that I began to resist conforming my writing to the desires of an outside party.

My frustration played out in to tension. I did not want to participate in the contradiction that E.B White described. Writing should only be “unveiling” never

⁶¹ This refers to one quote of three on the essay prompt that students were invited to put their thoughts in relation to.

“mask.” But regardless of my desires this is an institution of education to which I have to abide by. To do so, I have no choice but to don the “mask” and write to my teacher’s pleasing. Many grades later, I still find it distasteful to conform my writing for a silly letter on a report card. I feel like my back is in a corner and the only way I can edge my way out is to throw up my hands in surrender and accept the teacher’s offering of a pencil. It can only be a pencil because there is no better way to erase what I have and will write.

The bitterness and dislocation is quite transparent in my writing because, even now, I am writing the way my teacher wishes me to write. There are no positives to be gained by this experience with the classroom. I find that boundaries are preferred even when breaking barriers are what is preached. I have not addressed the complexities of my opinion [unreadable handwritten word] this here then is the form of my emotional response. I’m sure if logic were to be introduced, this paper would be a different form of evaluation and writing. However, as things are my opinion and thoughts are the only thing the promise of this paper concerns.

There has been no reconciliation or overcoming the writing task presented. I am still in the resisting phase as I find the contradicting motives of this class to be irresponsible and nearly unforgivable. So the tension will mount and my expectations will decrease until what? Some inspiring teacher will introduce curriculum that actually makes sense and has meaning? Probably not. This isn’t the movies after all.

End.

5.0 CONCLUSION: SITUATING NARRATIVE IN OURSELVES AND OUR INSTITUTIONS

What is still true after this investigation, as it was when I began, is that I'm hesitant to "use" narrative in my professional life. If my last chapter's narrative doesn't feel very story-like, or feels rather full of academic jargon and scholarly reference, it is not without reason. Writing a "typical narrative" is what I initially set out to do—the kind I describe in my first chapter: a text that is overwhelmingly made of story, one which cannot be truly engaged without understanding the narrative as crucial, rather than supplemental, to the text's argument. I think I've fulfilled that latter criteria but the former has escaped me. Highly embedded with references to others' scholarship and with theories and abstractions, full of claims and evidence, my last chapter shows the difficulty I've had separating myself from the paradigms of thinking-through-writing that I've been most trained in as an academic. What I had very much imagined doing, I could not, at last, bring myself to do fully.

My inability, or resistance, is in itself an important aspect of this project to reflect upon, since it speaks to the ways producing narrative (or not) is a decision always situated within the contexts of narrative's creation—within the competing internal-intellectual commitments that make certain things possible and desirable for our own growth and interest, and within the external professional and institutional pressures that delimit whether those commitments can find a voice and find a hearing. I think both aspects are at play here for me. Considering the kinds of

arguments I've made in previous pages about the reasons for writing narratives of teaching and the reasons for attending to the work done by others, it should seem like a sure thing to embrace it. But it is not that easy.

Part of my difficulty writing my own narrative was internal, ideological. I could not bring myself to do it because I was uninspired to do it. And I was uninspired, at least I think, because of a deeply bred skepticism about the essentialized "truths" that these representations so easily slide toward, and how those supposed truths have historically been traded as a dangerous currency in our field. Although I firmly believe in the value that narratives of teaching and learning can hold, my worry about how easily these narratives can be misconstrued, both for writer and reader—and how I might somehow be seduced into doing the same—makes it difficult for me to think within the "pure" narrative form I had imagined experimenting with.

I've written a narrative that eases some of that discomfort in me while ramping up that discomfort, or disorientation, in my reader. But I'm confident that narratives don't have to look like mine to avoid these pitfalls. They need not be limited to self-referential or non-linear tellings; there are other approaches of value that can keep from falling prey to the typical ways these narratives can become problematic. But for narratives to have that flexibility and still do critical work is, as I've tried to show, not just a question about what writers do or don't do; it is a matter of how narrative is situated within the culture of Composition Studies scholarship and pedagogy. It is a matter of what narrative is seen to do by the reader trying to make something of it. A quote from Stephen Tyler that I find helpful, again one ruminating on ethnographic writing in a postmodern era:

Perspective is the wrong metaphor. It conjures images appropriate to descriptive writing, writing in thought pictures or hieroglyphs. It is not a business of 'seeing'

at all, for that is the metaphor of science, nor is it a ‘doing’; that is a metaphor of politics. [...] Polyphony is a better metaphor because it evokes sound and hearing and simultaneity and harmony, not pictures and seeing and sequence and line. Prose accomplishes at most only a kind of sequential polyphony until the reader adds his voice to it” (Tyler 137).

In my narrative I’ve aimed for this polyphony by drawing on a range of voices between those pages—my own voices (both present and past), those of several students taken from different kinds of documents, words of scholars in my discipline and in others. I am trying to answer Susan Talburt’s question: “what if authors themselves refused unification by enacting multiple positions through the movement of their texts as they respond to their subjects?” (119). But as Tyler notes, my work in that narrative can only do so much to create a text that achieves insight through polyphony rather than unification: that goal can only be realized when the reader gets ahold of this material and makes it mean. The question is whether the reader of my narrative will call back to these voices or ignore the dissonances they create.

The textual features of my narrative are designed with the hopes of encouraging readers to hear these voices connect and be forced to add their own, which perhaps is another way to say that I don’t trust that my reader would be able to find, or add to, that chorus by reading a more linear story. In other words, I’ve resisted writing the typical narrative of teaching not only because of my own fear of being seduced by impossible truths, but also because I distrust the reader to resist this temptation. It might be some time yet—perhaps when the accumulation of so many essentialized representations of students begin to wash away—before I trust that I can tell a more linear narrative without danger of misconstrual.

To keep both writer and the reader out of that pit in the mean time requires lots of effort, lots of creativity. Part of what I've realized by attempting to recount this story of my students is how much less guidance I feel I have as a writer when trying to create a text like this. I don't believe that more conventional forms of academic scholarship are easy to produce, but I do think that writing narrative frees us from those conventions just enough to create a feeling of freedom and paralysis both. The terminus of such essayistic work is so open it's hard to imagine a final destination, and the academic training accumulated over years of schooling and professionalization doesn't help here. I have not internalized models for doing this kind of work; I do not have voices to invoke to guide me when I am lost (it is no accident that for organizational inspiration the voice I invoked, by luck and with some desperation, was Markus Zusak—a fiction writer). I've taken the easy way out, perhaps, by turning to academic frameworks to break up the monolith of my seeing. It is easier, situated where I am, to write about writing (about writing).

In the same way it has been hard to write my last chapter's narrative, if that is what we want to call it, it is hard to imagine teaching a narrative-centered pedagogy again. It has been years since I've asked students to write narrative essays in my composition classes (though, as I describe in the previous chapter, I still ask students to narrate their experiences and difficulties as students and writers in my classroom). Although this project tempts me to return to teaching narrative as a form of critical writing, my hesitancy in this realm, too, is worth considering. That hesitancy does not stem from a doubt that students can do this work and do it critically, or a doubt about the value in having them do that work. I want to make clear that I don't believe that the value of narrative is harder to come by because it is inherently unable to do important critical work (I hope by now I have convinced you otherwise). Rather I hesitate because I know

that I will have to struggle to produce a pedagogical context in which I, my students, and my colleagues—in concert with one another—see and believe in that value. This is difficult to imagine when narrative’s institutional and disciplinary location (both pedagogical and scholarly) makes its work feel less central and less important—even to me who is committed in principle to its value. Thus perhaps we think—as I do when I imagine assigning narrative essays to my students, and then decide not to—that doing so would require doing some time-consuming and difficult reflective work: *Why am I assigning this? What do I think will come of it? How will I evaluate the essays that I get? How will I justify my choices to my students and colleagues (and, really, to myself) so everyone (including me) understands why this kind of writing is important? How am I going to get my students to see the relevancy of this writing—to their lives, to their majors, to their intellectual maturity and development?*

Working with narrative gives a different resonance to these matters and forces us to recognize the discomfort those questions bring when answers don’t come readily. But that discomfort, again, is not a reason to avoid narrative; indeed it allows us to see the importance of answering these questions which we might not be, but probably should be, asking regularly about all of the pedagogies we deliver, especially those we feel least compelled to justify because they feel least dangerous, most easily explainable, and most valuable. Insofar as narrative pedagogies might answer these questions differently than instrumentalist philosophies of writing would want to hear, its teaching provides a valuable tool of inquiry into the place of writing (and of what kind) at the university.

The questions above are ones I feel particularly attuned to in my current position at Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI), a university that has no explicit writing requirement and no first-year composition course, which in some ways is to say that the writing pedagogies which circulate there are not validated *prima facie* through institutionally-imbued authority. (I should

say, though, that even without a first-year requirement, students do a lot of writing in the context of a project-centered curriculum, giving writing a surprisingly large role at such a STEM-focused school). The pressures that writing teachers often feel in any educational context are ones that take on a new flavor at a polytechnic university: the burden of feeling solely responsible for the student's academic literacy; the pressures to sufficiently prepare students to succeed in their future written coursework. These pressures aren't always explicitly articulated by the university's members, but they need not be to have power of a directional undercurrent. Thanks to the momentum behind *Writing Across the Curriculum* and *Writing in the Disciplines*, the field is, thankfully, dampening both the real and imagined pressures of such unreasonable burdens on writing courses.

But the challenge remains, especially in this university setting, to teach writing that feels immediately relevant to the student population, to their other activities, to their majors, to their future careers. In a school where, as our university's president recently informed parents, 90% of graduates have full-time employment (mostly in industry) within the first six months of graduation with starting salaries averaging 60k per year, it is hard not to wonder what writing classes—my writing class, my writing assignments—make possible for these students. What role could narrative have at this kind of institution?

I am thinking about this in part because I have just finished advising students on the most significant bit of non-major writing they'll do at the university, their junior-year project. That writing comes as part of a social-science research project wherein student teams of 3 or 4 have an immersive research experience while embedded with a corporate, governmental, or non-profit entity. The product is a 60+ page report which abides by a strict organizational progression: Introduction, Background, Methodology, Findings, Conclusions. I'm not complaining

about this writing project. I think it to be an incredible opportunity for students to boost their critical thinking, learn content-knowledge and problem-solving outside of their majors, and refine the rhetorical (both verbal and written) aspects of their thinking. But this writing, even though it is not yet in their majors, is also an easy sell in this context: its “usefulness” is obvious since the discourse conventions of the report approximate the professional writing many of these students will later do in their careers (evinced by the fact that many of these reports end up circulating as living documents within the sponsor organizations students worked for). To say that this work has practical justifications is not a criticism, but it raises a question: what would narrative mean to these students? In this institution? In the pressures of the culture that make up this kind of academic context? Those are important and difficult questions to answer, in part because they force us put pressure on abstracted theories of writing, and narrative writing’s, value.

And yet, *Why narrative?* is a question we should be asking not only if we work at an engineering school, but at any institution where we might consider asking our students to do this kind of thinking and writing. It is also a question we should be asking our colleagues and ourselves. Why narrative? Why not?

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