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# NARRATIVES OF IDENTITY: THEORIZING THE WRITER AND THE NATION

*ABSTRACT: This paper explores the ways in which basic writers begin to theorize identities that locate them in our larger culture. As part of the composing process students need to first locate their own notions of the writer in a dominant culture that has often labeled them as "non-standard" and "at-risk." The author reads student texts for "theories" about writing and identity. The paper then moves to an examination of a student narrative which acts to construct both an individual identity and a cultural identity through the recuperation of language.*

The truth is, however, that the oppressed are not "marginals," are not men living "outside" society. They have always been "inside" — inside the structure which made them "beings for others." The solution is not to "integrate" them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become "beings for themselves."

Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

All I asking for is my body  
Milton Murayama

While the literacy debates of the 1980s grew into conflicts about culture and cultural values and polemics about common American heritage and multicultural identities, the very subjects who were supposed to benefit from this renewed interest in literacy education, the students, were often left in the shadows of the political rhetoric. Certainly students were active participants in the debates alongside more public and "authoritative" figures: individuals argued for expanding

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the curriculum to include works that represented the diversity of America (and the World); others argued for a "return" to "traditional" education. But in many ways Paulo Freire's "banking" concept of education played itself out as both dominant and emergent cultural economies acted in the production of "literate" citizens by "depositing" sanctioned "knowledge" into student subjects. Thus the public debate about the "literacy crisis" became a debate about national and cultural identity and how *what* was read and written or *how* texts were read and written shaped the Nation.<sup>1</sup> What was seemingly ignored were the attempts to discuss a more complex understanding of student literacy practices. When the recent Oakland Public Schools policy statement asserting Ebonics as a separate language made news headlines, the same anxiety about language, literacy, and national identity emerged as critics ignored the emphasis on a new pedagogical philosophy and strategy and only saw a threat to the perceived unifying discourse of the Nation, standard English.

I want to suggest that there is a need to refocus our attention on the students who in many ways can and do create the terms for discussing literacy through the production of texts that engage their own literacy practices as well as the literacy practices and expectations of our larger culture. Talking about literacy is a complicated and often frustrating experience because the term "literacy" is just as ambiguous as it is powerful. When it is invoked, it is used to describe a standard in our larger society (perhaps most often manifested in our educational institutions), a standard that is never clearly defined and often relies heavily on "Western" assumptions and contexts and the modernity of nations. Literacy becomes a marker of membership, and those who can demonstrate this membership gain both access to and privilege in the dominant structures of power. Those without membership often face economic and political disadvantage, limiting their participation in the community in various ways. The implications of literacy, then, are greater than just acquiring reading and writing abilities that meet the community's standards: literacy often becomes the marker of citizenship and this assignment of legitimacy is often "required" to enjoy the full benefits of citizenship or even of basic human rights. Thus the incentive for students to be identified as "literate" is great; for students to question literacy is a great risk.

When Paulo Freire suggests the "oppressed" are not "marginal" because they are *already* located in dominant culture, he offers a space in the formulation of the Nation for an agency of the oppressed. The oppressed are already potentially active members of the community, capable of doing cultural work though this work may take different forms and represent diverse interests. The challenge, then, is to overcome the various systems of oppression that have maintained marginalized subjects and to dismantle those structures that act to keep

cultural control either through simple dominance or through the more subtle hegemonic acts of educational and cultural production. While aspects of Freire's liberatory pedagogy are problematic because it does act in ways to maintain the dichotomy of "oppressed" and "liberated" and suggests that acquisition of state sanctioned discourses can be enough to provide access, I still find his move to have the oppressed become "beings for themselves" an important theorization of agency. In Freire's work I find a suggestion for the right to self-determination. The oppressed do not only lift themselves up from oppression but also determine their own course of action; and perhaps most important, determine their own identities located not simply in the dominant culture, nor in opposition to it, but as continually being constructed in the conflicts between dominant and emergent cultures.<sup>2</sup> Like the title of Milton Murayama's novella about growing up in plantation Hawai'i, *All I Asking for Is My Body*, marginalized students are also seeking more agency to move within and beyond the institutional structures in which they find themselves.

The classroom becomes an important site to recognize and generate student self-determination. Too often the classroom has been constructed as a site for reproduction: students are trained in standard academic discourses; they deploy these discourses as part of required practice; they become participants in a community, often reproducing the practices of that community. The call by E. D. Hirsch, Allan Bloom, and William Bennett in the 1980s to "return" to a romantic conception of education as the discovery of Truth and Knowledge is explicit in its acceptance of a paradigm of domination; Truth and Knowledge necessarily connote a single cultural standard. Less explicit are moves by educational institutions to allow for limited change in curricular and pedagogical practices to provide an appearance of educational reform. However, this can be just a more subtle practice of student oppression as described by C. H. Knoblauch:

The kinds of change that the personal-growth argument recommends are, on the whole, socially tolerable because they are moderate in character: let students read enjoyable novels, instead of basal reader selections; let young women and young Hispanics find images of themselves in schoolwork, not just images of white males. Using the rhetoric of moral sincerity, the personal-growth argument speaks compassionately on behalf of the disadvantaged. Meanwhile, it avoids, for the most part, the suggestion of any fundamental restructuring of institutions, believing that the essential generosity and fair-mindedness of American citizens will accommodate some liberalization of outmoded curricula and an improved quality of life for the less privileged as long as the fundamental political

and economic interests are not jeopardized. (78)

In many ways, nothing is changed except for a moderate expansion of the canon and limited recognition of the students as producers of personal identities but certainly not as full participants in public culture. There is a "compassionate" oppression at work in this model as students are *allowed* to "read enjoyable novels, instead of basal reader selections," are *allowed* to "find images of themselves in schoolwork, not just images of white males." Students are *allowed* to locate themselves in the culture within certain limits and are permitted to choose from the representations offered to them. While Knoblauch describes the hegemony of American educational institutions, his examples can be extended to illustrate the hegemony of American culture in general. While the school operates to contain cultural resistance by its students by offering limited recognition, American culture employs schooling both to maintain a population of workers as well as to contain larger cultural nationalisms that can disrupt the American Dream. The use of a rhetoric of "citizenship" is an attempt to both appease resistance as well as to offer inclusion, though that inclusion in reality may be very limited. Thus students are still trained to become "literate" citizens, perhaps with a bit more "choice" but still remain very much part of the reproduction of structural oppression. Students do not have full "citizenship" in their own classrooms as they learn to become "citizens" and are not allowed to be seen as already contributing members of the community. They can only exist as or become "citizens" if they meet the cultural requirements and standards as defined by the Nation, though the narrative of Nation always makes the possibility of citizenship seem to be an easily achieved reality.

A move toward student self-determination, then, is not a rejection or dismissal of teachers or "knowledge" or "skills." Rather, it is a recognition of the very existence of the students and the way in which they already construct themselves, construct culture, and place themselves within this culture. It is the reconceptualization of the classroom and its participants and dynamics. It is the recognition of what Mary Louise Pratt has called a "contact zone," those "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (34). What is the role of the teacher? What is the role of the students? What role do they play together in the construction of a classroom culture that must account for its different types of members instead of dismissing them? There has already been much movement toward the inclusion of students as community members. In composition studies an early acknowledgment of the students' right to self-determination can be found in the 1974 statement by the Conference on College Composition and Communication on the "Students' Right to Their Own Language":

We need to ask ourselves whether our rejection of students who do not adopt the dialect most familiar to us is based on any real merit in our dialect or whether we are actually rejecting the students themselves, rejecting them because of their racial, social, and cultural origins. (2)

This statement is an early recognition of the role educational institutions play in the reproduction of dominant culture and its effects on those students often defined as being outside this culture. The possibility that teachers (either consciously or unconsciously) may be "rejecting the students themselves, rejecting them because of their racial, social, and cultural origins" is especially disturbing because it means that students are once again not seen as already being members of society. Rather, they remain outside until they can prove that in spite of their race, class, gender, sexual orientation, or any other marker of marginality, they can at least through language participate in the community. Students are forced to prove that they belong and that they are worthy of being community members by acquiring a particular discourse that often operates more on the assignment of legitimacy given by the dominant culture than by its utility in specific discourse situations.

While much has changed since the CCCC statement, there is always a danger of student texts being lost. As Knoblauch again recognizes, these dangers can often come from those who appear to be supportive of students and their rights as "politicians and school officials quick to realize the ultimate gain in administrative control that comes from allowing such modest symbols of self-determination to release built-up pressures of dissatisfaction" (78).<sup>3</sup> While this hegemonic control may appear to diffuse the power of students and their acts of self-determination, it is the continuing production of student texts which is their most effective act. Student texts may be "silenced" as teachers or other readers often reduce the power and subversiveness of these texts to comments in the margins about usage and effectiveness. But when we look past the marginalia and into what students write, we see that they write not only to meet their assignments but also to respond in various ways to their place in the world. In the basic writing classroom this is Tom Fox's redefinition of basic writing as cultural conflict.<sup>4</sup> As the following student narratives illustrate, students are already theorizing and producing narratives of self and cultural identity.

## College Identities

Writing a sentence, a poem, or a few lines in your diary makes

you a writer.

Rose

A writer I think may be someone who's creative in writing and making stories come true to life.

Peter

Furthermore, we can't really state the social significance of writing because it affects people who have diverse beliefs and principles.

Nate

What is a writer? What is writing? Are you a writer? While reminiscent of the questions asked by Roland Barthes and Jean-Paul Sartre about the philosophy and nature of language, the questions just recited were put to my students on the first day of class at the University of Hawai'i in the summer of 1992. The questions were asked as a prompt for a freewriting exercise that I hoped would give me some idea about the writers I had in class and what I needed to do in class to help them prepare for the types of academic writing expected of them in the university. However, I also asked the questions because of the subtext provided by Barthes and Sartre: their notions of writing and textuality allow for an exploration of the self as creator of texts and also of the self as a text.<sup>5</sup> While I did not expect the students to be explicitly philosophical or theoretical in their discussion of writing and language, I did hope for responses that would suggest that the students had some understanding of their relationship to writing and what writing meant to them in terms of participating in the university. At worst I expected "traditional" definitions of "correct" usage and standard genres; at best I hoped for interesting pieces and interesting students.

What I received were responses that in fact were quite philosophical and theoretical as the students did not merely consider how language and literacy might change the material conditions of their lives (an often stated goal of education) but rather described very personal connections with writing and its power in helping them enter the world of public discourse. I began this section with quotes from three of my students who each display in their statements an awareness and understanding of writing that moves beyond the privileging of correctness of form and the reification of textual and authorial intent. Rose questions the authority of privileged genres and believes the writer is created by the act of writing. Peter asserts that the writer is someone who creates texts and makes those texts active in the world. And Nate suggests that the acts of writing *and* reading are socially constructed in a postmodern world. While the students are probably not familiar

with the terminology I have used to frame their statements, their statements certainly suggest that they are familiar with a notion of writing that allows them to determine what is valuable and useful in their lives and are not concerned solely with meeting the expectations and requirements of an institution, an institution that can validate them and confer upon them a type of authority, or just as easily dismiss them.

In a sense these students have begun to define their sites of writing. They want to deprivilege “traditional” texts as autonomous and authoritative and emphasize acts of writing. They want to create something “true to life,” or more precisely, something that is true to *their* lives. And they want to recognize not the single social significance of writing but the multiple significances opened up by the possibility of writing. But they also find themselves in the university. And while the university is not antithetical to the modes of action that the students have suggested, the reality is that a particular public discourse — an institutional discourse — is utilized in order to participate in the community. The problem that is posed to these students, then, is whether the public identities they have already begun to create for themselves can exist within the public that the university will require them to participate in if they are to be “successful”?

The writing course I taught that summer at the University of Hawai‘i was part of a summer program for incoming first-year students. The program identifies graduating high school seniors who are not traditionally admitted to the university (i.e., “high risk”), but who can be successful if provided with proper support:

[the program] is based on the belief that given a chance, individuals who are motivated and provided with new learning opportunities and support services will be able to succeed in their first year at the university, thus being able to mainstream with the regular student population and eventually earn a bachelor’s degree.<sup>6</sup>

The program came into existence as part of the Honolulu Model Cities demonstration project of the early 1970s. The project reached into “Model” neighborhood areas that were traditionally working class and populated largely by ethnic groups who were underrepresented at the university. In 1973 the program was fully funded by the Hawai‘i State Legislature and became a University of Hawai‘i program, marking the beginning of a state-supported program in higher education for the non-traditional/disadvantaged student. The program continues today and in 1992 accepted 125 students from over 400 applicants statewide. Of the 125 students accepted into the program in 1992 a majority were female, Native Hawai‘ian or Filipino, and recent public high school graduates.<sup>7</sup>

The program sets certain writing requirements in order to model the composition requirements of the university, asking that the students write three formal papers (narrative, comparison/contrast, and argument). However, other than the three genre requirement, the instructors design their course as they see fit. Because of the student profile (i.e., high risk and probably underprepared) it seemed important to change the "traditional" conditions of the classroom. Rather than teaching strictly genre and form, I used the classroom to question existing notions of literacy and literature by having students read "literature" by writers from their community and by using both culture and language as themes throughout the course. The students were asked to write the three "formal" papers but they were provided the opportunity to develop their own subjects and were encouraged to consider their own experiences as textual material. In addition to the "formal" writing, students wrote daily in response to a variety of material (e.g., poems, essays, current events, or life experiences) in order to move beyond the limitations of an academic paper. These freewrites, though, often became the starting points for their papers.

Robert Scholes's strategy of teaching "textuality: textual knowledge and textual skills" was an important influence in my design of the course. In *Textual Power: Literary Theory and the Teaching of English*, Scholes writes:

We must help our students come into their own powers of textualization. We must help them to see that every poem, play, and story is a text related to others, both verbal pre-texts and social sub-texts, and all manner of post-texts including their own responses, whether in speech, writing, or action. The response to a text is itself always a text. Our knowledge is itself only a dim text that brightens as we express it. This is why expression, the making of new texts by students, must play a major role in the kind of course we are discussing. (20)

Thus the students were asked to produce a variety of texts. But in order to help them conceptualize their own texts as being "valid" textual material for the class they were presented with published works of writers from Hawai'i and from other "marginalized" groups (essays by Michelle Cliff, Richard Rodriguez, Ishmael Reed, and others). Before the students could begin to situate themselves as writers, I thought it important that they recognize that there are writers from their own community who are producing "literature." This further destabilizes the ideological and institutional structures that have privileged texts and experiences that are not necessarily meaningful to the students in my class. On a theoretical level, I wanted to emphasize that textual production could be thought of as an act of cultural pro-



duction; that the activity of writing the students were engaged in should not be thought of as being a distinct academic activity, but rather as an already existing cultural practice. By first recognizing the production of culture through their own texts other cultural constructs such as literacy could be both contested and produced in terms that would be useful to them.

Another critical factor in emphasizing textuality and the unstable nature of texts was the need to negotiate the students' own use of language, and in particular, the use of Hawai'i Creole English (HCE) or pidgin (as it is widely known). The students come to the classroom with a variety of languages; for some English was a second language, for others HCE was their primary discourse. Often their use of written English was viewed as non-standard.<sup>8</sup> However, rather than questioning the value of their language, or suggesting that standard academic discourse is a more valuable language, I hoped to show them in the class that these were merely different discourses that act within different communities. Instead of maintaining a separation of discourses, we used the classroom to discuss the differences and recognize that these discourses could inform each other in terms of content, rhetorical strategy, and creating identities within these texts.<sup>9</sup> This also allowed for students to be more productive in creating texts. Though there was an implicit understanding that they would be using "standard" academic discourse, I thought it was more important to emphasize that they just write and that once their texts were produced they could then shape them to meet the conventions of various discourse communities. It seemed more important to work toward fluency and building confidence in writing and producing texts than it was to emphasize form and convention which would be reinforced in First-year composition. The course was in Scholes's term, the pre-text, an activity to help the students situate themselves before being asked to engage in the critical activities of writing and participation in the university. They needed the opportunity to situate themselves in their own texts and through their own texts before they could be asked to write about others' texts.

I also had to situate myself and consider my role in the textual and cultural production of the students. My multiple subject positions complicated my pedagogy because of the various interests I had in this writing class. As a local subject—Hawai'i resident, public school graduate, university alumna, Asian/Pacific American—I shared many of the same experiences as my students who were just a few years younger than me. But I also found myself in a liminal position as a University of Michigan PhD student back for the summer to teach this course. My time away at graduate school provided me with the critical distance to think about issues of education and the teaching of writing in a place like Hawai'i, but I also wondered if I would lose sight of

the very real political and material conditions that affect Hawai'i's students. My interest in this course was about more than teaching writing; it was about my students as well as myself being able to move beyond the ideology of standard English which in Hawai'i's history has been used in the discrimination against Hawai'i's non-white population and moving toward an examination of the politics of language and literacy in such an explicit "contact zone."

However, in pursuing this critique of a dominant cultural institution and challenging the traditional construction of the academy was I just replacing one ideology with another? In introducing "new" writing to these students was I "opening up the canon" to allow for limited representation of marginal cultures and ultimately reproduction of oppression? As a local subject now removed to an elite university, was I exercising a quiet paternalism under the guise of critical pedagogy to "help" students "liberate" themselves?<sup>10</sup> The bottom line is probably yes. Program requirements and philosophy did not allow for the kind of radical restructuring needed to situate students in a more explicit position of self-determination. Students really were learning the "basics" to acculturate them to university life. And even the practice of a more radical pedagogy and awareness about situations like the "contact zone" can be problematic.<sup>11</sup> However, by focusing on textual production as cultural production, the terms for discussing literacy could be generated in the classroom. The students' texts could become examples of literacy and of the cultural work that could provide the students at least the opportunity to conceptualize themselves as cultural workers but perhaps more important, as producers of culture, or even cultural critics, and certainly as writers.

## **Writing/Writer Theory**

As I explained earlier, I asked the question "What is a writer?" as a writing prompt. Just as the question itself is full of possible answers, asking the question is also full of pedagogical as well as theoretical possibilities. On a very practical level, I wanted a writing sample from the students so I would know how to shape my pedagogy to address the needs of the students and their position as writers in the university. On another level I wanted to learn about the students, see how they viewed their relationship with texts, and find out how they placed themselves within our textual economy. And on another level, by asking them to define what a writer and writing is, I hoped to change the conditions of the classroom, to make it writer-centered instead of

teacher-centered. Though ultimately I would still be evaluating their texts, I did hope to create a classroom environment where students felt comfortable enough to begin to evaluate their own work as well as to respond to (if not question) my comments.

When I read over the students' responses I was surprised by how many of them asserted their right to determine what is acceptable as writing and who can be a writer. Surprised not because they formulated a stance about writing and the writer, but surprised because of the risk these students were willing to take when in their backgrounds and in the history of Hawai'i such a risk has often been rewarded with humiliation, dismissal, or even physical punishment.<sup>12</sup> A consistent theme in the responses was that an important part of writing and being a writer is the ability to be expressive and sincere in communicating experiences and ideas. This suggests that the students are privileging the imaginative writer, the writer of fiction and poetry. However, I believe it is also an indication that the students see the writer as making himself or herself through the texts, that the writer who is expressive and sincere has been successful in presenting himself or herself to the public to share experiences. The students that I will be discussing attempt through their texts to share experiences and ideas that are important to them and important in the construction of their identities.

The prompt, "What is a writer?" was actually asked at three points in term: the first day of class; after the first paper (narrative); and at the final meeting. This was done to provide some gauge on how the students' ideas changed over the term. It also provided me with some of the students' own "theories" about writing that informed my readings of their writings. The first piece that I want to look at is Rose's "What is a Writer? #1":

Writing, to me, is just a way of expressing your feelings, but instead of doing it verbally, you write it all down. Anyone can be a writer. Writing a sentence, a poem, or a few lines in your diary makes you a writer. So anytime you express yourself or your feelings down on paper, etc., I feel that you are considered to be a writer.

Writers write about anything they can think of, such as angry feelings that cannot be held in anymore written in a letter to the despised person, or a small poem to a love one.

Right now I feel as though I have "writers block", but I don't because I am writing what I feel down on paper. Thinking about what to write can take a second or a lifetime. It is taking me a while to think about to write because I am not a good thinker, but once I get an idea in my head. I write until my

fingers hurt. Also, I tend to babble. Which I feel is okay because I'm still expressing myself  
Writing is an expression.

Rose begins her "definition" of writing by suggesting that there is no separation between oral and written expression and that they are both "just a way of expressing your feelings," with the exception that one is written down. This is followed by the declaration that "[a]nyone can be a writer." The juxtaposition of these two ideas creates a possibility for an expanded notion of what writing is and who can be a writer. This is especially important when the politics of HCE are considered because what has been considered a non-standard oral form is given equal status with a standard written form. The next two sentences question privileged genres, giving value to more personal discursive forms and then equating expressiveness with being a writer. In the second paragraph the idea of expressiveness is reinforced by describing two powerful emotions (anger and love) and suggesting that writing becomes a way to negotiate those emotions, serving a therapeutic function. The third paragraph is perhaps the most interesting because in it Rose actively constructs herself, displaying a self-referentiality, and also performing a self-evaluation of herself as a writer. She uses writing as a heuristic, interacting with the text she produces as well acknowledging the dialectic and dialogic relationship that has been formed when she notes that even her "babbling" is a useful production.

Rose's second freewrite reinforces the ideas she introduced in her first piece:

A writer is a person who writes. Whatever you think about and write it down considers you to be a writer. Writing down your daily thoughts, jotting down a grocery list, or summarizing a book you just read, down on paper makes you a writer. What I am trying to say is that when you got any kinds of thoughts or ideas down considers you to be a writer.

Writing is important because it is a way of expressing yourself. If you don't express yourself, I think you're weird. Writing is an expression which when used properly will help you explore sides of you never existed.

In the first paragraph, Rose again questions privileged genres by privileging a "grocery list" as an important text. She also restates her belief that writing is an important way of expression and even makes the value judgment that "if you don't express yourself, I think you're weird." By making such a statement she clearly suggests that writing is a way to identify yourself, to reveal yourself, to make yourself pub-

lic. And in the final sentence the idea of writing as heuristic and self-evaluation is reintroduced. Perhaps the most interesting thing about this second freewrite, though, is her movement in the first paragraph to describing writing in terms of thinking and producing ideas. Her first freewrite almost exclusively discussed writing in terms of expression except for the idea of writing as heuristic toward the end. In this second freewrite she emphasizes the "writing-as-thinking" aspect much earlier and places it before writing as expression which assumes a secondary place in the next paragraph. In James Berlin's terms, this is a move from subjective rhetoric to epistemic rhetoric which allows Rose to start to make connections through language between the personal and the public.

Rose's final freewrite, though the shortest of her "What is a writer?" pieces seems to me the most revealing in terms of constructing a public identity. Though in her first two freewrites she begins to tease out ideas about writing as a way of developing an identity, it is in her final piece where she expresses this idea without hesitation:

What I think about writing is that it is and will always be a form of expression just as art and music is. People throughout time wrote to express their feelings or themselves as a whole. When I write in school, it is usually forced upon me to do and I end up not writing well. I don't like to be graded on how well I express my feelings and thoughts. When I write on my own, my feelings are as free as the blowing breeze.

Rose's second sentence ("People throughout time wrote to express their feelings or themselves as a whole.") brings together two important themes that have recurred in her pieces. The importance of expression and her ability to express her feelings is present once again but now she makes the move to say that this way of writing allows the writer to become "whole." Previously she had only intimated that not expressing yourself was to not have an identity, or in her words, "weird." The next two sentences, however, are even more intriguing because she now directly challenges those who would deny her the right to construct herself. By naming the "school" as a place where she has had difficulty being, she questions the right of the institution to construct her. She objects to being "graded" not because she is resistant to the opportunities that she knows education can provide her but rather because she sees that "grading" as a judgment of her identity and of her right to be a part of the public where she believes she is already an active participant. Her final line is not a rejection of public life but rather an affirmation of her existence in a public that exists beyond institutional boundaries where the freedom of the "blowing breeze" allows her to write her own self.

Nate's series of "What is a writer?" freewrites are shaped in a much more argumentative manner than Rose's pieces were. His first freewrite was among the lengthier ones in class as well as most ambitious in terms of rhetorical style:

What is a writer? Is he someone who has a college degree? Is he someone who has a sharp mind? Is he someone who carry a book or dictionary or a pencil and paper all the time? Is he someone who does all the paperwork in a business firm? Or just someone who jots down his thoughts and feelings as they come along?

I think a writer is someone who take the time to actually sit down and write whatever is in his mind. Writing about his inner thoughts and feelings I don't think it's fair to say that writers are the only people who actually get their works published in a book because I know that there are much better writer than those authors of books that we so oftentimes regard as bestsellers. I think that simply holding a pen and writing something that we are concerned about is already writing.

The thought of being a writer gives some people a feeling of intimidation because they think that people w/ college degrees, professionals, and authors w/ published books only have the right to be called writers. I think if a person feels this way he is insecured. Insecured w/ the fact that he knows he's a writer but then he doesn't get known for being one like Shakespeare or Judith Krantz, maybe. I don't tolerate this idea because I think we are only degrading ourselves if we take the time to pity ourselves because we are unsung writers. Well, we don't have to be known to be a writer. Just plainly writing something that you can consider marvelous is already a triumph of both the mind and the heart because we know deep inside us that we have done something.

If you get discouraged because you can't write anything? I think being in this mood is a good time to actually write. How? It's very easy. You get discouraged because you can't write. Then, write about what you are feeling, then start from there. Soon you'll find a good paper out of what you've just done.

Writer. College degree? No! It's within a person.

Nate uses his first paragraph to dismantle institutional and cultural representations of writers. In the examples he provides there is a strong link between texts and writers, suggesting that too often the reification of texts and their assignment of value have created a culture that has been exclusionary. Nate follows up on this idea in his second and third paragraphs by deprivileging both popular and ca-

nonical texts and the cultural capital assigned to them. He replaces these texts and their writers with the “unsung” writer, the person who becomes a writer by virtue of writing about something with which he or she is concerned. Unlike Rose who more subtly suggests that writing is a way of constructing identity, Nate is quite explicit and even polemical in his assertion. He totally dismisses the notion that a writer must be validated by another and is even more adamant in saying that writers should not even seek validation from others. For Nate, the construction of identity takes place in the act of writing and not in any form of validation.

We also find in the fourth paragraph an idea similar to the one Rose suggested in her freewrites. Nate also introduces the idea that writing can act as a heuristic, allowing writers to work out difficulties through producing texts. Underlying this use is the production of ideas and knowledge that in so many ways has been lost in the commodification of texts that Nate has earlier discussed. And in his final sentence he once again rejects commodification and asserts the individual’s ability and right to be a writer. In his second freewrite, Nate reiterates the points made earlier:

A writer for me, is someone who jots down his thoughts and ideas. The whole idea of being a writer doesn’t have anythings to do with best-selling authors. I think everyone can be a writer if they want to. Because writing is something that I do to make use of our time, I find to be interesting. Just sitting in front of my typewriter and type whatever I think of.

He much more explicitly points out in this piece that writing is related to thinking and ideas. However, he is less passionate in this piece and in fact almost seems to summarize the main points of his first freewrite. His final freewrite, however, moves toward a new conceptualization of writing :

I agree with what the author said. I think that the subject of writing doesn’t only affect what is being written rather it also consider other factors that would contribute to the success of writing. Like many other things, writing has an origin and it links to other roots in the society. For instance, religion has different beliefs that are presented in different churches. As for writing, we consider screenplays, playwright, poems, books and other types of literature, archives and so forth.

Furthermore, we can’t really state the social significance of writing because it affects people who have diverse beliefs and principles. What might be relevant for a mayor may not be relevant for a policeman, what might be relevant for a teacher

may not be for . . .

In the first sentence Nate is responding to William Stafford's "A Way of Writing" (read for class) and Stafford's description of the process of writing as opposed to the skill of writing. Nate further develops this idea of "process" and moves toward a notion of social construction. In his first freewrite, Nate argued for the individual and what the individual alone could produce. However, in this final piece he returns writing to society, but still makes the important point that there should be no single standard of judgment or evaluation. His example of the many different churches and religions alludes to a constitutional right to freedom of expression. His expansion of what can be considered writing also is influenced by this right. And in his final paragraph, Nate makes the profoundly insightful comment: "Furthermore, we can't really state the social significance of writing because it affects people who have diverse beliefs and principles." He recognizes that the individual must exist in society and cannot be so isolated as he suggests in his first piece. What Nate constructs, then, is a public where writing does not act as a meta-narrative nor have a *single* social significance. Rather, writing is rhetorical, creating situations where people with diverse beliefs can meet in a textual public and not remain isolated. Though Nate indicates that these people with diverse beliefs and principles may have different interests, he does not dismiss the possibility of interaction among them. He simply acknowledges that context plays an important part in both the producing and reading of texts. Social significance becomes not a marker of value but a marker of connection and purpose and of the transformation of literacy within culture to meet the needs of individuals.

## **Narrating a Nation**

While Rose and Nate theorize the role and identity of the individual writer underlying their constructions is an awareness of the writer in culture and how culture constructs the writer. Poet Eric Chock notes the specific problem of conceptualizing the writer in Hawai'i: "And we wonder why they have problems teaching our kids to read and write. The answer is the problem, obviously. If there is no such thing as a Hawai'i writer, how can you teach a Hawai'i kid to write" (8). Chock recognizes a problem of representation: Hawai'i writers have been represented as absent, as producers of colorful but non-literary texts; Hawai'i students have been represented as non-literate and as not being able to represent themselves. The complexity of this situation requires a strategy where subjects can begin to create a new space for writing.



While Homi Bhabha suggests that there is a certain ambivalence in the idea of the Nation, that the Nation becomes more of a transitional space than a stable history, he also recognizes the need to narrate the Nation (1). Narrating the Nation is an act of composing, perhaps ultimately rhetorical if the Nation is indeterminate, but important as a first step if one is to imagine oneself as part of a culture, and for my purposes, as a writer in that culture. While the Nation may often be a romantic narrative of progress and unity (perhaps like literacy), it provides for a space where individuals can write from or write against, where students can begin to locate themselves within the various spaces in which they find themselves.

The next text I would like to look at is a narrative written for the first formal paper assignment. The students were asked to write a narrative about an experience, either negative or positive, in which they learned something. The students wrote about a wide variety of things: leaving home for college; the death of a close family member; winning a state volleyball championship; graduating from high school. One student, however, chose to write about his lack of having a language. Peter is a Native Hawai'ian from the island of Maui. Because of current political activities concerning Native Hawai'ian sovereignty and the then upcoming observation on January 17, 1993 of the 100th anniversary of the overthrow of the Hawai'ian monarchy, Peter was very aware of his situation within the community. Peter uses his narrative to negotiate the confusion that he faces as a Native Hawai'ian in contemporary Hawai'i, concerned about preserving a cultural identity, but lacking what is often considered an essential marker and creator of identity, language.

#### "Know Your Language"

I don't know where I got the motivation to learn the Hawai'ian language but it started me off in a long term ambition and desire to learn my native tongue. The Hawai'ian language is so dear to me I would do anything to learn it. But the fact is, I do not know how to speak Hawai'ian, so that made me set some goals for the future.

It all started at home when my dad asked me, "What you going do when you grow up?" I really had nothing to say to him. I still had my mind set on learning the Hawai'ian language. Although my parents did not know how to speak Hawai'ian, they still encourage me to learn it. I was about eighth grade at this time and I couldn't wait to get to high school. It would give me some opportunity to learn the language while I was going to Lahainaluna.

Lahainaluna came and I was very disappointed to find out that Lahainaluna did not offer a course in Hawai'ian language.

So I took Hawai'ian studies instead. I wasn't satisfied with the class, because I had my mind set on learning the language and not the history. So I decided to join the Hawai'iana club thinking that it would make a change. I must say that it was a lot of fun, because we would play Hawai'ian music, dance modern and ancient hula. In the chants we would have a pretty good understanding of what the song was about. But knowing what the song was about and knowing what each word in the chant meant was different. If you knew what each word meant in the song then you would get a different perspective of what the song meant. And it would provide a deeper meaning.

Towards the ending of every school year, counselors would pass out registration forms for requests on what courses you would like to be offered the following school year. I have registered Hawai'ian language as a possible elective to be offered the next school year. From my freshman to junior year, I have been making the same request, but it was never a guaranteed matter. Every year I had my hopes up, but to my disappointment they still did not offer the Hawai'ian language course.

During my senior year I figured I shouldn't make any requests, because they'll probably never offer it for the next school year anyway. I would have to wait for college to get the opportunity of learning the Hawai'ian language.

Now college is almost upon me and I'm afraid that I might be facing some more disappointment, due to the experience I had at Lahainaluna. Being that Lahainaluna the oldest Hawai'ian school, having an alma mater sung entirely in Hawai'ian, and not having a Hawai'ian language course. The first thing that comes to my mind is, what if I don't make it into the fall. And that would only cause more disappointment.

To me having the opportunity to learn the Hawai'ian language is not something that you have to go to college for. It is something that should be used on a daily basis for everyone who lives here in this state, no matter what race they are. To express my point all Japanese who come from Japan, speak Japanese. All Filipino who come from the Philippines, speak the Filipino language. But not all Hawai'ian can speak the Hawai'ian language. I feel you do not have to be of Hawai'ian ancestry to speak the Hawai'ian language, you only have to have it in your heart.

Peter begins his narrative by describing a sense of loss but balances this with a sense of hope and optimism. Though he does not know Hawai'ian, Peter sees it as an essential part of his identity, de-

scribing it as his "native tongue" (as opposed to English, the language of the United States, where he was born).<sup>13</sup> He describes a strong attachment to the language and yet he never fully explains what that attachment is which becomes even more complicated since he discusses no active engagement with Hawai'ian at all. In the second paragraph the problem of identity becomes even clearer when Peter describes his answer to his father's question about his future: "I really had nothing to say to him." The inability to answer his father adds to the identity problem that Peter has described up to this point. He could not answer his father because he either did not have the words to explain himself, or did not know what he wanted to do, or could not even imagine his life. He simply did not have the language to conceptualize himself.

When Peter describes his experiences in high school there is a change in tone. The very place where he thought he would be able to acquire his language and to begin the process of constructing an identity could not help him. The school does provide the opportunity to acquire other cultural practices that could contribute to his emerging yet still unshaped identity. And yet, Peter rejects some of these opportunities believing that these other practices are not the primary tools that he needs. He becomes almost obsessive in his privileging of the language and of a textuality that in his mind cannot be produced in any other form or practice. In the sixth paragraph, Peter becomes guarded in his desire for Hawai'ian. Perhaps to prevent himself from further disappointment, he lowers his expectations and prepares himself to be denied the opportunity once again. However, the guardedness may also act to prepare him for a disappointment that might occur once he does learn Hawai'ian. He will finally have the tool that he desired so much and the opportunity to construct an identity. But what if the language does not meet his expectations? What if it does not provide him with a way of answering his father's question and helping him to discover not only who he is but who he wants to become? What if his already existing cultural identity remains unchanged by his acquisition of Hawai'ian?

In a small way his final paragraph answers some of those concerns. Peter begins to deprivilege Hawai'ian, or at least the construct of Hawai'ian that he created. The first important move that he makes is to remove it from the university and other institutional structures.<sup>14</sup> He recognizes that Hawai'ian, and probably texts in general, should not be assigned a value merely by being placed in the university. Peter wants to bring Hawai'ian back into the community, into a situation where it can further the construction of identity and of nationhood. In the final two sentences he notes that not all Hawai'ians can speak Hawai'ian but also that you do not have to be Hawai'ian to learn the language. In these words there is a call for nationhood, for the build-

ing of a sovereign Hawai'i that begins with the learning and activity of language. Peter has moved from his individual desire at the start of the piece to a community desire of citizenship within a new nation. The narrative has provided him with the possibility of narrating his life and discovering through a type of praxis the purpose for his learning Hawaiian.

## Literate Lives

What the texts of Rose, Nate, and Peter illustrate are an active participation between student writers and their texts. While the texts do have problems when evaluated in terms of standard academic discourse, they are very significant in revealing how students conceptualize their texts and the purposes of their texts. The activity of writing was often cited as a way of producing knowledge, acting as a heuristic in many cases. In other examples of student writing (not discussed here), there was an apparent therapeutic use of writing by the students who often reconciled feelings for relatives who had passed away or worked out confusing and angry situations like the sexual assault of a sister. But all of these writings were grounded in a purpose determined by the writers. Deborah Brandt sees this recognition of purpose and need as an important act of literacy:

The most successful readers and writers are grounded in an immediate and particular context of need, which gives purpose and direction to an act of reading or writing. Before skills or even background knowledge, literate people need a place to be literate—a place where they and others are asking the kinds of questions and doing the kinds of work that make reading and writing and text-based knowledge purposeful. (117)

She reconceives literacy as not grounded in texts but rather existing in the interaction between writer, reader, and text. And this interaction is also influenced by other factors which create the reading or writing situation, create the event which becomes a writer's subject, or create the context for reading a particular text in a particular way. When Rose, Nate, Peter, and the rest of the students write their texts, they write about their lives and their selves in order to create the context for their literacy. Certainly they will be influenced by the university and the larger American culture, but because they have begun to situate themselves within a knowledge that is purposeful to them they will be able to negotiate their identities and literate acts within the communities in which they find themselves.

For Henry Giroux, such a negotiation might be considered an act

of citizenship:

The concept of citizenship must also be understood partly in pedagogical terms as a political process of meaning-making, as a process of moral regulation and cultural production, in which particular subjectivities are constructed around what it means to be a member of a nation state. (7)

However, while Giroux's statement critiques both historical and current pedagogical theories and practices, his notion of citizenship becomes an important conceptual as well as pedagogical tool. I tried to create in my classroom a destabilized site where the students would need to become responsible in shaping their educational agenda. Thus instead of subscribing to the existing cultural hegemony of meaning-making, moral regulation, and cultural production, the classroom became a place to question these practices. Giroux accurately describes the dynamic of education which is so often lost in a conception of literacy as textual knowledge. The act of citizenship is a part of this dynamic. The students actively sought citizenship when they became aware of their role in shaping the public in which they were acting. They became citizen writers and one, Peter, even began to participate through his writing in the literal and metaphorical act of nation-building. Rose, Nate, and Peter have been able to create their own public identities. These identities will change as they experience different things, encounter new people, and live their lives both inside and outside the university. But they have begun to understand that to participate in public life and to use public language is not to lose a part of themselves. Instead they theorize their roles as writers and their place in the Nation because they recognize that they are cultural workers and already live literate lives. Our responsibility as teachers is to recognize this as well as to understand our own positions in culture. While I have discussed the theoretical, ideological, and rhetorical relationships between students, their writing, and culture, we cannot overlook the very real material effects on their lives. When we (students and teachers) write we begin the work of reading and writing our culture and moving toward a more complex understanding of literacy and education and what it means to be a citizen in America. What we cannot lose sight of is that there must be action which follows this understanding and that our work as both students and teachers of culture does shape our lives as well as the lives of others.

### Notes

I would like to thank Anne Ruggles Gere for her careful reading and thoughtful comments. I would also like to thank the editors and

consulting reviewers of *JBW* for their comments. All student texts in this article appear unedited. In all cases written permission from the writers has been given. Pseudonyms have been used to maintain author anonymity.

1. See John Trimbur's essay, "Literacy and the Discourse of Crisis," for a discussion of the cultural anxieties involved in the construction of the "literacy crisis," perhaps most often illustrated by "drawing lines between standard English and popular vernaculars, 'masters' and 'servants'" (280).

2. See Gerald Graff's *Beyond the Culture Wars* for a discussion on the teaching of ideological conflicts as a more effective pedagogy for contemporary society.

3. See also Gary Tate's "Empty Pedagogical Space and Silent Students." Tate critiques the essays in the collection *Left Margins: Cultural Studies and Composition Pedagogy* for not making student texts central in a discussion of developing critical pedagogy in the classroom. While I am sympathetic with Tate's critique I also recognize that the authors in the collection are involved in their own critique of culture and focus on classroom practice not to ignore student texts but rather to emphasize the power of those sites of composing.

4. See Tom Fox's essay "Basic Writing as Cultural Conflict." Fox suggests that a "basic writing pedagogy ought to help students explore the cultural conflicts and continuities that attend their entrance into the university" (80-81).

5. See Barthes's *Writing Degree Zero* and Sartre's *What is Literature?*

6. Mission statement from the program handbook.

7. The profile of the summer program student is similar to the profile of the "underprepared" writer identified by the University of Hawai'i's Manoa Writing Program. In their study of 342 incoming students who were placed into remedial writing classes (as determined by a writing placement exam) between 1987-1989, the Manoa Writing Program found that many were from ethnic groups underrepresented at the university, primarily Native Hawai'ian or Filipino. The study also showed that many of the students identified as underprepared were from the neighbor islands (the Big Island, Maui, Molokai, Lanai, and Kauai) or from rural areas of Oahu, had SAT-verbal scores below 400, but maintained a B average in high school (Pagotto 119). The majority of my 26 students were either Native Hawai'ian or Filipino and from a neighbor island or some rural area of Oahu.

8. The Hawai'i State Board of Education drafted a policy in 1987 that mandated that "Standard English [would] be the mode of oral communication for students and staff in the classroom setting and all other school related settings except when the objectives cover[ed] native Hawai'ian or foreign language instruction and practice" (Sato 653). The policy was met with strong resistance from the community and the BOE adopted a much weaker version

that simply “encouraged” the modeling of standard English. Also in 1987 a federal lawsuit was filed by two National Weather Service employees who charged that they were denied positions on the basis of race and national origin, specifically as reflected in their HCE accents (Sato 655).

9. I am thinking here of arguments made by Richard Rodriguez who rigidly defines public and private languages, and Lisa Delpit who critiques the notion that “authentic voices” are the only available discourses to “marginalized” peoples.

10. Lisa Delpit argues that sensitive and well-meaning educators do a disservice to students when they privilege “authentic voices” and argue that these voices do share equal status with the dominant discourse of standard English. Delpit’s point is well taken and in my class I tried to actively and critically engage “authentic voices” and “institutional” discourses to see how both operate as well as destabilize notions of what can be “valuable” writing in the academy. The recent trend of academic autobiography, ethnography, and other blends of the personal and public suggests that there is a rethinking of scholarship and research.

11. See Janice Wolff’s essay, “Teaching in the Contact Zone: The Myth of Safe Houses,” for a discussion about the difficulties that can arise from a pedagogy based on critical awareness. Despite her use of contact zone theory, Wolff describes the resistance of her students and her realization that her own radical pedagogy in fact was a privileged discourse that excluded students.

12. See Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s novel *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* for a fictionalized account of the humiliation and anxiety Hawai’i students face when their use of pidgin clashed with the school’s demand for standard English. Another example of linguistic discrimination is the suppression of the indigenous Native Hawai’ian language. During the turn of the century and through much of the 20th century Native Hawai’ians who spoke Hawai’ian in the public schools were often punished physically. See Albert J. Schutz’s *The Voices of Eden: A History of Hawai’ian Language Studies* for a discussion of the decline and revival of the Hawai’ian language. See also Vicki Viotti’s “Native Tongue” for profiles of Native Hawai’ian speakers and the discrimination they faced.

13. It is interesting to note that both English and Hawai’ian are designated as official languages in Hawai’i’s state constitution. The current Native Hawai’ian sovereignty movement has complicated the language situation in Hawai’i further. While not an official language (and lacking a standard orthography), HCE has had more of a presence than Hawai’ian and has played a role in defining “local” identity, the group identity of longtime Hawai’i residents. An interest in Hawai’ian language has grown considerably though and has played a significant role in the sovereignty movement. See Candace Fujikane’s essay, “Between Nationalisms: Hawai’i’s Local Nation and Its Troubled Racial Paradise,” for a discussion of the competing ideologies of “Local” identity and Native Hawai’ian sovereignty. Also see Suzanne Romaine’s “Hawai’i Creole English as a Literary Language,” for a discussion of the status

of HCE.

14. The role of the University of Hawai'i in the education of Native Hawaiians has been very controversial. Native Hawaiian sovereignty activist Haunani-Kay Trask, an associate professor of Hawaiian Studies at the university, has discussed what she sees as the institutionalized racism of the university toward Native Hawaiians. See her book, *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i*. See also *Restructuring for Ethnic Peace: A Public Debate at the University of Hawai'i*, which recounts a public forum where the status of Native Hawaiians in the university was the central issue.

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