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## **Forget about Community: Narrative, Ethnographic Writing, and (Alternative) Discourse**

### **Introduction: Problematizing “Community”**

ALTHOUGH CONVERSATIONS IN RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION HAVE often taken for granted the idea of classroom “communities,” the assumptions behind such communities have been questioned by several scholars. In “Classrooms as Communities: At What Cost?” Roxanne Mountford challenges the generally idealistic portrayals of communities in the classroom, arguing that such ostensibly homogeneous sites have put some marginalized students at risk, notably women, gays and lesbians, and students of color. Countering Greg Clark’s claim that classroom communities can become democratic sites through an egalitarian examination of difference, Mountford contends that students should not be forced to make potentially dangerous revelations in classrooms and proposes that they examine broader concepts of “culture” instead. In critiquing Clark’s goal of creating “a community of differing equals” (72), she echoes in part Joseph Harris’s article “The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing,” where he questions the often “empty and sentimental” notion of community based too much on a “sort of organic unity” (13, 20). Indeed, the evolving ideas behind classroom communities reflect some of the disciplinary changes that have alternately embraced expressivist, process, collaborative, and contact-zone pedagogies, mirroring disciplinary conversations over homogeneous and heterogeneous classrooms built on academic discourse, consensus, dissensus, and clashing cultures, among other theories (see, e.g., Horner; Bruffee; Trimbur; Bizzell, “Academic”; Pratt). Mountford, for her part, suggests that the fundamental problem lies in seeing the classroom as an egalitarian community to start with, that is, “a democratic oasis in which confrontation leads to growth and collaboration leads to greater justice for all” (305).

Mountford’s concern with *classroom* communities parallels longstanding disciplinary critiques of discourse communities—“sites” or “social groups” defined by their speech or writing and shared norms and cultural values (Killingsworth 194). Borrowing features from linguistic studies’ “speech communities” as well as Stanley Fish’s “interpretive communities,” discourse communities, which can include classrooms, have been criticized by scholars for

being too utopian, hegemonic, dematerialized, and abstract (Harris 14; Horner 114-16; Devitt, Bawarshi, and Reiff 541). In a change that implies her own disillusionment with the idea of discourse communities, Patricia Bizzell, an early proponent of the concept, eventually abandoned that term, adopting in its place Mary Louise Pratt's theory of "contact zones," "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (34), and later preferred "alternative discourses." Reflecting the profound change in her thinking, Bizzell refers to academic discourse communities in *Alt Dis* as "conventionalized . . . language-using practices," distinguishing them from the newer "mixed," "hybrid," "alternative," or "constructed" forms of academic discourse that she and her co-authors now embrace (1-3). Charles Bazerman and Paul Prior, dissatisfied with hegemonic views of professional and disciplinary discourse communities, argue that "it seems important to move [away] from a discourse community notion of disciplines as unified social and/or cognitive spaces" (152-53). For Amy Devitt, Anis Bawarshi, and Mary Jo Reiff, the Bazerman and Prior move involves a turn to genre theory: "Teaching students how to analyze genres can provide discipline and focus to the study of discourse communities" (542).

Because conversations in rhetoric and composition often tend to conflate the concept of community—extending it not only to classroom and discourse communities but also to communities in service learning and "activist intellectual" scholarship (Adler-Kassner 82)—I argue that many of the distinctive aspects of classroom communities have been lost. In other words, much of the research on "community" in the field over the last thirty years or so has tended to blur the distinction between classroom communities, discourse communities, and other communities beyond the classroom (e.g., sites of service learning). The one common thread, however, is that all three uses of "community" assume that nothing truly important occurs in the university classroom unless it connects with communities outside that classroom, which effectively works to sever the classroom and the community. Indeed, even in his much-discussed work on collaborative learning, Kenneth Bruffee proposes a classroom "community of status equals: peers" based on what one finds outside the classroom in business or professional settings (642). Yet, as Bruce Horner notes, "[T]he contradiction between this community ideal for the writing class and existing social relations in the academy is seen not as symptomatic of the social relations outside the academy but of the failure of the academy to conform to the 'real world' of business, government, and so on." The inevitable result, writes Horner, is that "*the pedagogy [in writing classes] is one of acculturation to that larger 'community'*" (44-45; emphasis added).

## **The Importance of Discourse**

These problematic notions of community overwhelmingly suggest that the real dilemma is

composition studies' privileging of *community* over *discourse* (and related terms). Thus, even as he acknowledges "the extraordinary rhetorical power one can gain through speaking of community," Harris nonetheless presages the field's lack of comfort with the use of the concept, suggesting it is insufficient to capture the reality of contested cultural forces. Proposing the alternative metaphor of a city and, subsequently, a public, Harris writes, "We have other words—*discourse, language, voice, ideology, hegemony*—to chart the perhaps less immediate (though still powerful) effects of broader social forces on our talk and writing" ("Idea" 13, 20; Teaching 108-09). In outlining the field's longstanding problems with some aspects of discourse communities, James Thomas Zebroski states that "the difficulties with the concept . . . have become increasingly apparent with time" (575). Zebroski offers Michel Foucault's discourse theory as a "corrective" that captures a complicated "network of power relations that can—even must—be entered" (575-76). While discourse is often defined simply as "language in use" or "language practices," Zebroski, invoking Foucault, complicates that definition, stating that discourse is "the power of language practices to constitute the object of which they speak" (529). Drawing upon Foucault (*Archaeology; Discourse*), Zebroski suggests that discourse, with its emphasis on knowledge and power, can effectively reverse the nature and substance of what some (like Clark) have construed to be the inclusive practices of communities:

Discourses create by constructing, but also *by excluding, by making invisible, by prohibiting, by silencing*. Discourses regulate. Discourses draw our attention to a certain aspect of the world and in that attending, for a time, create the objects of that world. Discourses are epistemic—that is, they have the power of helping to create the social worlds in which we dwell. But each construction of some aspect of the world entails the exclusion, prohibition, even denial of many other parts of the world and ways of seeing the world. Discourse excludes far more than it produces. A discourse narrows possibilities. (Zebroski 532, emphasis added)

As Zebroski states, Foucault's notion of discourse necessarily includes power relations and concerns "the power of language to influence and constrain in a group" (Jolliffe 101-03). According to a Foucauldian notion of discourse, the question becomes whether a community—and its discourse—is more inclusionary or exclusionary. Clark emphasizes the inclusionary meaning of community, asserting that we should teach writing and reading within a community as a means of validating difference: "We can do that by teaching first a rhetoric that directs people to make space for the assertions of others as a part of the process of composing their own" (73). Thus, Clark intimates that it is possible to create a cooperative community in the classroom as part of civic engagement, which understands and appreciates differences, for example, in gender, race, class, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Part of that

engagement implies that a community, by definition, is centered on already shared values. According to M. Jimmie Killingsworth, discourse communities, which embody many of the same features of classroom communities, “share a set of values and behaviors that strongly affect discourse practices” (195). When Clark says that a classroom is a cooperative community, he assumes that those common “values and behaviors” can be transformed into an appreciation of the differences of marginalized members. In other words, he sees the constructive, rather than the limiting, side of a Foucauldian discourse that can create “the social worlds in which we dwell” (Zebroski 532).

Mountford, on the other hand, has a view of community almost diametrically opposed to Clark's: “The classroom is not an oasis,” she writes. “It is not neutral territory” (306). Mountford suggests, in fact, that the apparent unity of a classroom is generally the result of the teacher, who dispenses authority in the form of grades and whom students are essentially trying to please. Clearly, Mountford's assertion goes hand in hand with those exclusionary and silencing aspects of Foucauldian discourse based on power. Indeed, this same view of discourse is echoed by Susan Jarratt who, in “Feminism and Composition: The Case for Conflict,” writes, “Even when teachers announce the desire to create a particular climate, they can't neutralize by fiat the social positions already occupied by their students” (113). In an article that makes a case for conflict in the composition classroom, Jarratt, with Foucauldian ennui, worries about the uneven power relationships brought about by gender, race, and class differences among students. Her concerns focus especially on the “kind of composition class that places a high priority on establishing a supportive and accepting climate in which students write primarily about personal experiences” (105-06). Jarratt cites, for example, the following situations that contravene Clark's idea of egalitarian classroom communities:

Heterosexual male students read aloud personal narratives about sexual conquest; women and other male students remain silent. [. . .] A female student reports two years later that she now feels resentment at having been “manipulated into a position of vulnerability” in a student-centered composition class whose instructor was male. (105)

Jarratt, in her concerns about power and silencing, is focusing on the limiting aspects of discourse enumerated by Zebroski, who states that “the study of discourse is not just a study of a set of any old language practices, but rather of *regulated* language practices—that is, language practices that emerge from and are controlled by institutions” (Zebroski 535). In problematizing classroom communities, Jarratt describes the same disquiet about a regulated institutional discourse that pervades the writing classroom. In this case, that institutional discourse, based in power relations, regulates in a way that favors dominant discourses at the expense of marginalized ones.

## Discourse and the Personal Narrative

In light of the scenarios described by Mountford and Jarratt—and echoed by others—how does a teacher create a discursive classroom space safe for students writing personal narrative essays about topics requiring personal disclosure? Is it possible to find a discourse that does more than limit or exclude possibilities? In evaluating the exclusionary aspects of discourse, I decided to complicate the idea of the personal narrative in a classroom community with a more nuanced view of discourse (see Foucault; Schroeder *et al.*; Zebroski). Put differently, my goal was to determine whether the exclusionary force of discourse could, in fact, be opened up and redeployed more productively in a classroom setting. Part of my project was to rethink the notion of the personal, which concerns Jarratt because of what she calls a traditionally feminist-expressivist model of pedagogy, one of those associated with classroom communities:

The expressivist focus on student experiences and concerns is an important starting point for feminist pedagogy. But my double concern about those feminist compositionists who advocate such pedagogies is not only that they are positioned unequally in the expressivist, but that they spend too little time helping their students learn how to argue about public issues—making the turn from the personal back out to the public. (121)

Moving beyond the “feminist-expressivist” model Jarratt mentions, scholars like Amy Robillard, Karen Paley, Candace Spigelman, and some of the authors of *Alt Dis*, among others, have recently revisited the use of the personal in academic writing. In calling for a “more complex pedagogy of narrative,” Robillard argues that the personal narrative is inextricably linked with analysis and argument, the genres she sees as most often favored in academic settings: “Every experience I’ve had with narrative—both writing and reading—leads me to believe that we cannot distinguish between narrative and analysis, between narrative and argument” (82). Bizzell confirms the resurgence of the personal in *Alt Dis* when she writes, “[The new mixed forms] have combined elements of traditional academic discourse with elements of other ways of using language, admitting personal experience as evidence, for example, or employing cultural allusions or language variants that do not match the cultural capital of the dominant white male group” (2). In his conclusion to the same collection, Chris Schroeder also highlights the importance of personal narrative, stating that “storytelling—not just for aesthetic pleasure but for cultural mediation and existential negotiation—becomes one of the fundamental acts of intellectual work, a means to rereading and rewriting the world” (186).

Spigelman, reflecting on Karen Paley’s use of ethnographic narratives, cites the benefits of the latter scholar’s “reflective, multilayered, first-person approach” and suggests that

in Paley's work "competing narratives overlap and complicate each other; participants' contrary interpretations enrich her account and bolster readers' confidence in the multiple 'truths' that might be gleaned" (79). According to Spigelman, ethnographic writing has had an enormous influence on personal writing in the academy: "Contemporary ethnographic methods not only have influenced the way compositionists report their research but also have encouraged greater use of personal reference in all types of scholarly writing" (11). That observation by Spigelman reflects the important intersections of ethnographic writing and the personal in the field, as documented by Bizzell, Jane Hindman, and others.

## Writing Ethnographic Narratives

Given the connections scholars outline between narrative and ethnographic writing, I devised an essay assignment using precisely that lens. I chose ethnographic writing because, as James Zebroski and Nancy Mack argue, "Ethnographic writing . . . reports on reality, the reality of our students and the people important in their lives, but it does so from the perspective of the insider in the community. The writer tries to understand how these people construct their world and their knowledge of it" (196). Zebroski and Mack's view of ethnographic writing is echoed by Linda Brodkey, who suggests that "[t]he point of ethnographic research is to examine how, in the course of fabricating their lives, individuals also weave their material cultures" (26). On a more practical level, I was inspired by the work of Bonnie Stone Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater, who write in their introduction to their textbook *FieldWorking: Reading and Writing Research* that "[b]ecause conducting fieldwork allows students actual contact with people and cultures, often ones different from their own, students tend to commit more of themselves to the topics they investigate" (vii.). In attempting to limit the scope of student projects, I find Wendy Bishop's work persuasive in *Ethnographic Writing Research*, where the author labels the kind of fieldwork research her students do—"mini-ethnographies, something between trial runs and pilot projects and actual microethnographies" (73).

To make use of ethnographic writing while testing the idea of a classroom community featuring principles of "discourse," I assigned a different kind of personal narrative to students in my first-year writing class at the community college where I was teaching. In her discussions of alternatives to traditional academic discourse, Patricia Bizzell argues in *Alt Dis* that "[b]ecause academic discourse is the language of a human community, it can never be absolutely fixed in form. It changes over time" (1). The narrative I assigned assumed a heterogeneous class, a group of twenty-three students diverse at least in the observable categories of age, ethnicity, and gender, and consisting predominately of first-generation college students, most with either full-time or part-time jobs to pay for their education. Situated in a

growing city with more than a half million residents, the branch campus where I taught had the fewest number of students in the entire community college system and was also its newest addition. The class had spent the semester discussing current issues from the class reader, *America Now: Short Readings from Recent Periodicals*, one of several textbooks accepted by the humanities department for teaching composition. As part of our discussion of such issues as homelessness, marginalization, and ethnic and sexual minorities, we spent time confronting stereotypes and assumptions that often arose because of their socially constructed nature. The discussion of these issues led naturally to the following essay assignment:

In light of our extensive reading in *America Now* and our discussions of the role of ethnographic writing in composition, your five-page essay will take an alternative form, inflected with the clash of cultures and discourses we have discussed throughout the semester. In this essay, you are asked to assume the persona of a member of a marginalized group in our culture and to write your essay from that person's perspective. While the precise contours of the marginalization may vary, do your best to choose a person whose location in the "borderlands" (Anzaldúa) would be easily recognized by others. Think about what you are choosing to reveal as you assume the *persona* of another person. How does the nature of the essay change as you write about someone else's experiences rather than your own? What does it say about the role of ethnographic research as well as the nature of discourse, based in power relations and various types of cultural knowledge?

In designing an assignment falling in the genre of Bishop's "mini-ethnographies," I also asked students to keep a journal of their fieldwork notes as well as reflections of their experiences. I wanted them to think deeply, too, about the nature of our class discussions, in which we debated, for instance, the discourse of homelessness. The often heated discussions focused on our cultural discourse around contested issues and how it ends up getting constructed in specific ways. The discussions also covered tips on how to write interview questions, which we later vetted in small groups as well as during individual conferences. In the process of problematizing how to assume the persona of someone else, the class thought critically about what it would be like to be asked questions as part of a marginalized group. As Janet Alsup writes in the collection *Ethnography Unbound: From Theory Shock to Critical Praxis*, "In a postmodern world where the Cartesian conception of truth has been dismissed and intellectuals now believe in a multidimensional or contextual truth, a self-reflexive researcher stance seems to be a necessity when seeking or creating new knowledge" (222). In encouraging that same reflexivity, Mountford asks students to focus on differences in the communication practices—that is, the *discourse*—of various professional groups, a practice Mountford sees as rife with potential conflict:

Language practices are often the source of conflict and misunderstanding among-groups. Students could be asked to analyze such conflicts that turn on differences in language use, power, and cultural orientation. In their papers students could analyze the communication patterns of groups [that] have been a part of the professional writing in their chosen fields. (307)

Mountford goes on to suggest that students conduct ethnographic studies of different groups as a way of identifying the differences in their communicative practices. Her decision to focus on discourse echoes Zebroski's suggestion that studying discourse uncovers the networks of power relations that discourse seeks to cover up and makes them subject to human intervention: "We begin to disrupt the ability of discourse to produce the seemingly stable, static, natural world removed from human transformation" (Zebroski 535).

In evaluating various approaches to the assignment, I turned to an article by Kate Ronald, "On the Outside Looking In: Students' Analyses of Professional Discourse Communities." In her work, Ronald asked students "to use rhetorical analysis of texts as a way to understand the professional communities they study and intend to enter" (131). In completing their projects, Ronald's students adopted the persona of a member of the profession they wished to join. For my part, I hoped that combining the goal of asking students to observe the discourse of others while also writing from their perspective would take the project beyond the narrower realm of academic discourse and complicate the limitations of a "community" in broader discursive settings. I also wanted to incorporate Jarratt's goal in personal writing of "making the turn from the personal back to the public." This idea hypothesizes that a public discourse encourages students to learn something about different cultures, genders, ethnicities, and sexual orientations, among other forms of diversity, and accounts for Jarratt's concern that compositionists who adopt feminist-expressivist pedagogy "spend too little time helping their students learn how to argue about public issues" (121).

In addition, I hoped students would gain a better perspective of what it means to be marginalized in our society and how that marginalization often occurs through the power of discourse in its exclusionary, silencing, and limiting aspects (see Zebroski 532). Because the writing assignment contemplated a more complicated notion of discourse in the classroom, I asked students to select a member of a group traditionally considered marginalized in our society—the homeless or poor; gays, lesbians, and transgender individuals; women, and people of color, for example. I also focused on marginalized or excluded groups because, as Stuart Hall writes, in a nod to Foucault's notion of discourse, "There is no moment now, in American cultural studies, where we are not able, extensively and without end, to theorize power—politics, race, class, and gender, subjugation, domination, exclusion, marginality" (286). Thus, with this assignment I tried to bring composition in line with notions of cultur-



al studies as well as Foucauldian discourse, based on unequal power relations, silencing, and invisibility.

In selecting the personal narrative as an assignment, I not only considered the resurgence of interest in the personal in composition studies (see Robillard; Spigelman), but also Brodkey's focus on the importance of stories as part of ethnographic writing. In her article, "Writing Ethnographic Narratives," Brodkey asks:

Who tells stories? Who listens to them? What stories are being told? What stories are being heard? Where and when are stories told? These are questions that might well guide research and remind us to include the narratives told to ethnographers, the narratives they themselves tell, and those that other researchers tell. (47)

By asking students to adopt the persona of their subjects, I expected that they would discover useful aspects of narrative and discourse—in this case, learning about the way stories as well as language practices in different cultures are inflected with power and knowledge and the often invisible perspectives of the marginalized, the subjugated, the powerless. I also wanted the assignment to avoid the harmful or overly sanitized aspects of communities that scholars like Harris, Mountford, and Horner have brought to light. More important, I sought to test whether the exclusionary aspects of discourse could be recognized by students as they assumed another persona and then, in turn, altered or rethought their subject positions as they wrote in an unfamiliar or alternative discourse.

In discussing some of discourse's exclusions, I asked students about the ways in which they may have felt marginalized themselves in the past and how their status might affect the kinds of questions they asked their subjects. While students readily volunteered some of their own experiences as part of disenfranchised groups—ethnic minorities or older women returning to school and the workforce, for example—they were reluctant to consider themselves "marginalized," and only with prompting did they recognize how their own experiences might help inform more careful, empathetic, and reflective questions. That class discussion also allowed me to raise ethical questions about the politics of representation and speaking for others. As Bishop suggests, "These issues arise regularly in ethnographic writing research: Who speaks for whom, how, why?" (149). At the same time, we reviewed some of the ethical considerations involved in interviewing subjects and reporting their statements accurately and

"allowed me to raise ethical questions about the politics of representation and speaking for others"

without bias. One question students asked was how to take accurate notes: whether it was necessary to use a tape recorder (an option some chose) or whether handwritten notes would suffice. We also discussed three ethical considerations included in Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater's *Fieldworking*, namely, to respect participants by allowing them to make an informed decision about whether to participate ("respect for persons"); to protect participants from harm and potential loss ("beneficence"); and to choose participants fairly and without "creating undue pressure" ("justice") (142-43).

## **Student Response to the Narrative Assignment**

Given the large demographic diversity in the class, I encouraged students to find their own subjects for the assignment. In asking students to locate these individuals, I started with an invention activity to generate as broad a group of potential interviewees as possible. We brainstormed a list of people who might serve as possible subjects, which they then discussed in groups. While we formed classroom groups to discuss almost every aspect of the assignment, students did not work collaboratively in interviewing subjects. Certainly, collaborative pedagogies are often adopted to promote more democratic relations in a classroom (see Clark). In his discussion of collaborative pedagogies, Bruffee states, "All that is new in collaborative learning, it seems, is the systematic application of collaborative principles to that last bastion of hierarchy and individualism, the American college classroom" (647). Yet as Bruffee himself recognizes, the classroom must be "organized appropriately" for collaborative learning to succeed. Otherwise, he warns, the practice can "perpetuate, perhaps even aggravate, the many possible negative efforts of peer group influence: conformity, anti-intellectualism, intimidation, and leveling-down of quality" (652). Because students in the course offered widely differing views on social issues—including, for instance, a divide over who is responsible for an individual's homelessness—I realized that Pratt's "clash of cultures" could be used productively for collaborative writing. Nevertheless, as Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford acknowledge in *Single Texts/Plural Authors*, "Just as collaborative writing potentially challenges the hegemony of single, originary authorship, so do a mix of historical, social, theoretical, and pedagogical forces all centered on a destabilized author/writer" (119). In our course, that combination of forces was discourse and its ability to disrupt and destabilize conventional thinking.

The list of individuals my students chose to interview was diverse and challenging: one male student interviewed a bisexual woman; several chose members of the gay and lesbian community as subjects. Another male student took on the persona of a breast cancer survivor, and a few students interviewed the homeless or disabled. One student talked to a woman forced by birthright not to marry but instead to take care of her aging parents; another

er interviewed a victim of domestic violence. Several students interviewed those who, as children, had been abused and removed from their parents' homes. Throughout the course of their research and subsequent writing process, students wrote journals about their feelings and experiences. Those journals, along with my observations during the crucial peer review process, form part of the basis for my discussion of this experimental assignment.

The first important barometer of student response to the assignment were the peer review groups in which students read and commented on each others' drafts. Although my normal practice had been to allow students to choose their own peer review groups, this time I assigned groups on a random basis. In their discussions, students seemed to feel the assignment was productive; they talked passionately about what they had learned about their subjects. Fellow students asked them questions about the identity they had assumed, based on the drafts they had written. They wanted to know more about the lives of the subjects they had interviewed. In subsequent journal entries, I learned that students felt at ease with the peer review process; many admitted they felt they learned more by adopting a persona than they would have in writing about their own experiences. Most important, student discussion of their writing in the context of an assumed persona was an exercise in discourse. While discourse can narrow possibilities, as Zebroski explains, it can also serve to expand or construct new ways of seeing by revealing the support mechanisms that make discourse possible. "By making visible these supportive mechanisms," Zebroski writes, "we do the very thing that the discourse exists to prevent: we make it visible, we de-naturalize it, its prohibitions, its exclusions and its taboos" (535). A few student comments reinforce the way the ethnographic assignment made discourse visible:<sup>1</sup>

My experience with the writing workshop was helpful. I don't know what I would have felt if I were describing my life to people I don't really know. I am not the kind of person to just let my problems out in the open. I probably would have chosen a topic like a dog's life or something. [ . . . ]

\* \* \*

The narrative essay workshop felt very comfortable. I thought it was much better to do the essay on somebody else. I would have felt less comfortable if it were to be my own identity. First, the subject would be completely different since I have not experienced the problems my interviewee did. Also, if it were my identity, I wouldn't have liked for many people to read about it.

These responses suggest students were able to reflect critically upon the narratives and the discourses of the subjects they interviewed. Indeed, I saw evidence of this in my observations of the collaborative groups, where students eagerly responded to questions

1. All student writing referred to in this article is used with the students' permission.

about the lives of the subjects they had interviewed. Students talked about issues like homelessness, homosexuality, sexual abuse, and breast cancer with an openness that—if I’m reading their journal comments accurately—would have been difficult, or impossible, had those issues been their own. Furthermore, the workshop discussions illuminate the way in which discourse can be exposed and made visible along with “its prohibitions, its exclusions and its taboos” (Zebroski 535). This can be inferred from student comments about their perceived reluctance to engage with these issues had they reflected their own experiences. In essence, students were recognizing the power of discourse to construct the way we think about taboo or prohibited subjects like homelessness, incest, or homosexuality. By looking at the objects of discourse through an alternate lens, they were able to “try on” exclusions or taboos while maintaining a critical distance from them. How else, it seems reasonable to ask, might someone get closer to discourses of exclusion and taboo if one does not experience them personally? In this case, I argue, students’ apparent distance from their subjects paradoxically worked to bring them even closer to the subject matter at hand.

Beyond the writing workshop, I wanted to gauge the overall effectiveness of the assignment based on the discourse students used. I asked students to write about what they had learned from their projects, and below are some sample responses that suggest the way in which discourse moves from what Foucault sees as a prohibition to a more epistemic function—one that creates alternative ways of “rereading and rewriting the world” (Schroeder 2002, 186). The first set of responses suggests the more inclusionary aspects of discourse enumerated by Clark— those that work toward validating difference:

I had the opportunity to put myself in another person’s shoes and really see what it is like to be in such a situation. Plus, it gave me the opportunity to get to know a person that otherwise I probably would have never met. [. . .]

\* \* \*

I don’t believe I would have ever chosen being a woman in the narrative essay. I would possibly have been a sports hero. What a life they have! The experience of writing from another person’s point of view has led me to an understanding that there’s more to understand about others. Everyone has a unique story and most really have a lot to say.

These student responses lend some support to Clark’s claim that one can create an inclusionary community by asking students “to make a space for the assertions of others as a part of the process of composing their own” (73). Clearly, at least on one level, the responses suggest that students did use difference as a way to construct their understanding of the language or discourse of someone else. Yet the responses complicate that premise at the same time. The idea of a shared discourse community implies a shared set of values and

behaviors, according to Killingsworth. While students maintain a critical distance that seems to include an appreciation for the values and behaviors of others, they do not necessarily embrace or “share” them. The fact that one student apparently still hopes to emulate the life of a sports hero implies a disconnect between his values as a male who admires sports stars and those of the woman he interviewed, who appears to remain somewhat removed from him even after he assumed her persona. Therefore, the evidence complicates the idea of “inclusion” and seems to suggest, as Zebroski notes, that “each construction of some aspect of the world entails the exclusion, prohibition, even denial of many other parts of the world and ways of seeing the world” (532).

The second set of responses has to do with the way the private becomes public, a goal of the discourse Jarratt hopes to achieve by asking students to discuss public issues:

The identity I assumed was not one I would ever want to experience nor can I begin to understand [the daughter’s] reasoning, let alone his [that of the father, an alleged perpetrator of incest]. However, I felt quite comfortable discussing this issue as did she. I guess that’s because I, myself, was not at all surprised because [incest] is a very common problem among daughters and fathers. In all honesty, when I was in high school—no kidding either—I would bet that seven out of ten girls experienced this very situation. I cannot tell you how many times I heard and knew of this happening. . . . This is a problem ten times worse than, say, “date rape.” It occurs more often than not. [. . .]

\* \* \*

In rewriting my narrative essay, I got a third look at what it is like to be homeless and to have to struggle like this man does. It was and still is very heartbreaking to read over my papers. I am the kind of person who feels deeply about this topic. I know that other people don’t really care because they figure that if he/she got themselves into this situation, they can get themselves out of it. The first time writing this, in my mind, I was already thinking to myself all of the things that I can do to stay away from all of the awful things this man has been through. I feel very proud of my essay, knowing that this is the best essay I’ve written all year long. I also know that I couldn’t have done it without this man who was kind enough to share his life story with me. [. . .]

These students echo a common refrain in their discussion of the assignment, citing the benefits of seeing life from another individual’s perspective, a perspective on the borderlands between private and public. The student who made a connection between the stories of incest she had heard about in high school, those of the girl and father she interviewed, and her own “story” about incest being “more serious than, say, ‘date rape’” shows a turn in what

was a private issue toward a public one. Clearly, the result is consistent with Jarratt's vision of a composition course in which students "come to identify their personal interests with others, understand those interests as implicated in a larger communal setting, and advance them in a public voice" (121). Also present is Jarratt's "weave" of public and private issues, a concept she borrows from Gayatri Spivak, who writes that the "[private] is the weave, or texture, of public activity" (qtd. in Jarratt 124). This Spivakian weave is present in the second respondent quoted above, who writes that "[t]he first time writing this, in my mind, I was already thinking to myself all of the things that I can do to stay away from all of the awful things this man has been through." The way the student makes the public issue personal is a weave that runs throughout many of the essays and suggests the reciprocal influence of public and private interests in this assignment.

The third category of response is reflected below and involves the relationship between dominant ideologies and identity, sometimes complicated by personal issues students would like to examine in greater detail:

The subject I chose was different from what I [would have] chosen because he had to be homeless for a few months. I would have written about when I was carjacked at gunpoint. His suffering lasted for a few months and he was able to escape the terrible situation. He has the memories and worries it will happen again, but he has no real lasting effect. For me, I have the memories, and I always worry about it happening again. For me, going out in public, especially at night, is very difficult. . . . This essay has made me see how people who are homeless want to work, for the most part. They have no other choice and really can't do anything about it.

This student's response introduces a thread that runs throughout many of the essays: the recognition of how dominant ideologies shape attitudes toward race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other aspects of identity. In this instance, the student who assumed the persona of the homeless man seems to acknowledge a type of "blame-the-victim" ideology. Part of his realization that "people who are homeless want to work" (as well as his qualification of that statement) may have been informed by a heated classroom discussion in which many students expressed their belief that the homeless could easily find employment "because there are lots of jobs out there for anyone willing to work." For the "homeless" writers, students who wrote about incest, child abuse, and other family dilemmas, as well as most others in the class, there seemed to be an acknowledgment—never stated explicitly—of the workings of power relationships within society. The marginalized, the excluded, are where they are partly because of their relative lack of power in society. The student acknowledges this aspect in writing about the homeless man he interviewed: "They have no other choice and really can't do anything about it."

The student's conclusion, of course, does not obviate the need to address his cautionary statement about wanting to write about his own carjacking, a concern that calls to mind Foucault's *The Discourse on Language*, where the author writes that access to discourse is not granted equally to everyone in society:

[N]one may enter into discourse on a specific subject unless he has satisfied certain conditions or if he is not, from the outset, qualified to do so. More exactly, not all areas of discourse are equally open and penetrable; some are forbidden territory . . . while others are virtually open to the winds and stand, without any prior restrictions, open to all. (224-25)

Foucault's cautionary note about unequal access to discourse parallels my student's desire to write about his own carjacking. Despite the way in which students learn about the constructive and silencing aspects of discourse in this essay, does the goal of creating a safe classroom space effectively prevent some students from narrating their own stories, thereby restricting their access to discourse? Does the ethnographic assignment teach them that some areas of discourse are inaccessible to or impenetrable by some, depending on one's position in society? Is discourse "forbidden territory" when one has not gained a proper entrée to social norms? By eliminating some of the falsely democratizing aspects of the community—ones that make it difficult for students to feel a true sense of openness during an assignment like the personal narrative—do we nonetheless open ourselves to the potential silencing of student voices?

While the assignment does, in a sense, narrow some possibilities, that is the very nature of Foucauldian discourse; therefore, I argue that students were not silenced by writing about the experiences of someone else. In fact, the narratives they wrote were, in a real sense, their "own" stories, answering the questions Brodkey's ethnographer poses: "Who tells stories? Who listens to them? What stories are being told? What stories are being heard?" (47). These stories were the students' interpretations of the lived experiences, the lived culture of another individual. However, by focusing the essay around discourse, the

"it exposed the normalizing social narratives related through discourse—narratives of homelessness, illness, incest, and gender, for instance—opening them to fresh examination"

ethnographic assignment fundamentally shifted the genre of the personal narrative; it exposed the normalizing social narratives related through discourse—narratives of homelessness, illness, incest, and gender, for instance—opening them to fresh examination and inscribing them with new meanings.

## **Toward an Alternative Discourse**

In *Alt Dis*, editors Patricia Bizzell, Christopher Schroeder, and Helen Fox attempt to sketch the parameters of “alternative,” “mixed,” “hybrid,” or “constructed” discourse along with other collection contributors. While it is difficult to define precisely the contours of this alternative discourse, the prelude to *Alt Dis* suggests it is a blending of more traditional academic discourse with, for instance, nonstandard dialects or exhibiting, according to the editors, “stylistic, cultural, and cognitive elements from different discourse communities” (ix). In her article from the same volume, “The Intellectual Work of ‘Mixed’ Forms of Academic Discourse,” Bizzell describes the way in which such alternative discourses are gaining an entrée into the traditional province of Standard English:

[S]lowly, but surely, previously nonacademic discourses are blending with traditional academic discourses to form new ‘mixed’ forms. These new discourses are still academic, in that they are doing the intellectual work of the academic—rigorous, reflective scholarship. . . . I think these new, alternative or mixed discourse forms are gaining ground because they allow their practitioners to do intellectual work in ways they could not if confined to traditional academic discourse” (2-3).

The essays students wrote in my course reflect features of the new “mixed” discourse. In taking on the personas of their subjects, students experimented with style (e.g., the use of rhetorical questions, anaphora, and sentence fragments), incorporated features of nonstandard dialects (e.g., the colloquialisms of children and teenagers), and reflected the cultures of the marginalized individuals they interviewed (e.g., a male student whose prose captured the feminist culture of disease). The essays represent “alternative” discourse in another sense, as well. In her reading of Brodkey’s article “Writing on the Bias,” Spigelman is persuaded that the personal operates subjectively in that different narrators would write alternative versions of the same story. In analyzing this constructed nature of discourse, Spigelman concludes that “we need not, or more accurately, cannot expect that our students’ personal accounts will capture their ‘true’ experiences” (66). For Spigelman, then, alternative discourse includes a crucial element of my classroom assignment: students, by adopting a different persona, write alternative versions that may be as “true” as any version they would write of their own experiences. In writing this constructed or alternative version, students blend their own academic discourse with the cultural and sometimes nonstandard discourses of subjects belonging to



different discourse communities. How can we say, in the end, that these alternative discourses are any less legitimate than a version based on their own experiences?

The students' narratives represent some of their most complicated writing during the semester and incorporate a blend of academic and nonacademic discourses. The excerpts below show how they wrestled with discourse, "rereading and rewriting the world" (Schroeder 186) in a way that avoided the "stable" and "static" world that Zebroski argues the power of discourse normally produces. The excerpts illustrate what Schroeder means when he proposes "constructed literacies," a form of alternative discourse that he says "bring together competing and context-specific discursive practices into integrated acts of intellectual work" (186). In explaining his call for constructed literacies as a form of alternative discourse, Schroeder describes their pedagogical value: "From the perspective of constructed literacies, my function is to learn to listen to, and to encourage, the telling of these stories" (186). Here are some of the stories my students told accompanied by my analysis of their writing.

[Emily assumed the persona of a homeless man.]

Today I wake up, wondering if I will be able to feed this empty, growling, starving stomach of mine. This is a thought that goes through my head every day. I walk with my head down, hoping and praying that I will find some loose change on the floor. I sit in the hot sun on a corner holding my sign with the best words I can think of written on it. People passing by, not caring, not even looking my way, as if I weren't even there. Sometimes I wonder, "Why am I here?" I know that people think I am just lazy and don't want to get a real job, but they don't understand. If I were to apply for a job, what address would I put down? The second tree at the park? What phone number do I write down? The pay phone at Circle K? Nobody wants to hire a person who doesn't have a home where they can take showers, rest, and freshen up. Employers want clean shaven, nicely dressed employees.

Emily's writing from a homeless man's point of view is a good start in her effort to capture her subject's voice. The perspective of her homeless subject is clear as she attempts to show the reality of his world with intimations of his daily existence (e.g., walking with his head down; carrying on an interior dialogue in asking why he is in this situation; indicating the material reality of not having a physical address to list when he applies for a job). In this instance, then, Emily seems to uphold the Foucauldian notion of discourse creating the objects of the world—specifically, a world that seems hopeless, even Sartrean, because of the man's inability to extricate himself from his situation. Yet Foucault also discusses the exclusionary aspects of discourse. In his interpretation of Foucault, Zebroski writes that "each construction of some aspect of the world entails the exclusion, prohibition, even denial of many other parts of the world and ways of seeing the world" (532). In that respect, it seems, Emily's

writing could do more. While the persona Emily adopts seems believable, the homeless man also seems narrow, limited by his recitation of little more than the commonly accepted stereotypes about homelessness. What seems excluded in Emily's portrayal, then, is a sense of what constitutes her subject outside of his homelessness. For example, is there any sense of hope or aspiration he may have for a different future? The discourse of homelessness adopted here seems to exclude or deny a fuller accounting of the man's life. To bring in what seems excluded or prohibited by the discourse itself (for instance, the potentially positive aspects of meeting others in a similar situation ) would make the writing richer and more complex, without relegating it to the common assumptions and stereotypes that control most cultural discourse about homelessness. Such a balance would help to bring out a fuller notion of Foucauldian discourse.

Jessica chose to interview a woman who, as the youngest daughter in a traditional Mexican family, was forced not to marry, but instead to care for her parents until they died, and, after their death, for her younger brother, who has Down Syndrome.

For my graduation from junior high, I fixed the best dress I could find among my clothing and accepted an invitation from a boy in my class to go to the party, and since all my older brothers and sisters were allowed to go, I didn't think it would be a problem. Boy was I wrong! I asked for permission to go a few days before the dance. I was never given a "yes" or a "no"; instead, my mother sat me down and told me, "You are not going to go to any parties from now on." Her eyes were so cold and hard that they froze my tears before reaching my eyeballs. I asked the burning question that was killing me in silence: Why? What came out of her lips was what amounted to a life sentence. She explained to me that since I was the youngest of all her daughters, my responsibility was to take care of her until she died. She continued, saying there was no point in my going to parties or meeting people, especially boys, because I was not to have a boyfriend and I was never to get married, because she was planning on living for a long time. [ . . . ]

I am 62 years old now and even though I don't have a family of my own, I have a miracle Down Syndrome kid under my care. He is 51 years old and still alive. That is the longest a Down Syndrome kid has ever lived. I think he is still alive because I gave him all the love that I always thought I would give to my own children.

This excerpt from Jessica's essay shows that cultural stories or narratives of power can effectively silence in ways unimaginable to a cultural outsider. Though on the one hand her narrative seems to be about the power and control exerted by a Mexican family, it is also clearly about far more: the inability of the daughter to use discourse to overcome her "life

sentence”; the relative silence, from what we can infer, of everyone around her (notably her siblings); and the way in which discourse conveys cultural stories and in doing so renders the listener powerless. In this instance, Jessica’s subject was effectively rendered invisible by discourse, evident in the passive tense in which much of her story is written. Here, then, in an instance where discourse narrows possibilities, eliminating the ability of someone to construct discourse, to shape a different world. One thing Jessica might have tried to illuminate, however, is the way her subject’s plight reveals not only the individual but the social power of discourse. Why was the woman unable to protest? What convinced her that she had no choice but to accede to the demands her mother imposed on her? Jessica’s distance from the situation might have allowed her to address these questions in her essay. In this instance, adopting the persona of a marginalized other could have created more of a dialogic relationship between interviewer and subject and produced a more interesting account of discursive silencing. In addition, one recurring question is whether the woman Jessica interviewed ever resisted her destiny and tried to escape it, possibly when she was older. If not, how does the exclusionary power of discourse—the silencing aspect of language—prevent someone from finding a voice outside strong family or social pressures?

Laura wrote this account of a young girl whose mother, an alcoholic, often abandoned the children, a situation that led county employees to place the children in foster care. My auntie and uncle took us home. When we got there I was mad because I didn’t want to stay. My house was dark; nobody was home. My uncle got mad. We went looking for my mom at the bars she goes to. We didn’t find her, so we went home with my uncle and auntie. I was so happy. [. . .]

We stayed at their house for about a week. Then my uncle took us to an appointment to see a lady. My aunt said the lady was going to ask us questions about our mom and for us to answer them honestly. We told the lady how our mom drinks a lot and how her boyfriend fights her, punching and kicking her and giving her black eyes and bruises on her body. My little brother told the lady how my mom’s boyfriend had a gun pointed at her forehead and he said he was going to kill her.

It is clear that Laura has entered the classic area of discourse’s “forbidden territory” (Foucault 225). Her account juxtaposes two difficult areas: a cultural taboo of child abandonment and the attempt to recount it through the eyes of a child. These difficulties manifest themselves in a rather unpolished writing style that imitates, in some respects, the innocent approach of a child, yet one, from the standpoint of the writing classroom, that would benefit from sentence combining or other efforts to increase writing maturity. Her excerpt reveals one of the potential dangers of an assignment emphasizing discourse: the limitations discourse imposes can result in similar restrictions on writing. Laura’s essay makes us question

whether those areas of discourse that are not “equally open and penetrable” to everyone can end up limiting the nature and quality of writing. In addition, can Laura go only so far in her writing because of the cultural taboos of her subject matter? Perhaps more important, how can discourse capture the plight of taboo areas, open them up, and allow writers to portray them in a new light when we are constrained by the limitations imposed by social and cultural stigmas?

Todd interviewed a woman, then wrote as a breast cancer survivor.

It was a warm summer morning when I first noticed it. The grass was green and the sky was blue. Birds were fluttering in the trees. That morning, like many before, was beautiful; but on that day—June 11—I found cancer in my body. [. . .]

The day began like many others, with my regular morning routine of breakfast, coffee, and a shower. My routine was pleasant and my day had begun in the relaxed style I had perfected. With my breakfast and coffee finished, I jumped into the shower. Not paying particular attention to my bathing technique, which was habit, I noticed something odd. Under my arm, on the side of my left breast, I felt a lump. It was as if that moment stood still. [. . .]

I checked and rechecked myself, not wanting to believe it was true. Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, I stared at my left breast and looked for the slightest abnormality. Although I couldn't see it, to my horror, I could feel it. A hard mass, about the size of a small marble, could be felt when I pressed it with my fingertips. It wouldn't go away despite the angle of my examination. I knew then it was real.

Todd's essay was one of the most successful in the class. One of the important elements of his essay was his use of an alternative or mixed discourse, blending elements of traditional academic discourse with the personal in a way that expresses how lives can change overnight with the discovery of an unexpected illness. The critical importance of how we react to the seemingly random nature of this type of event is the argument of Todd's essay. His use of the personal to make this argument constitutes an effective use of the new “mixed” discourse in that his overall claim rests largely in the narrative he constructs. One move Todd could have made—a move that would have benefited from greater development in all the essays—is a fuller exploration of the emotional aspects of his subject's plight. Certainly, the use of a mixed or hybrid discourse could have produced more internal reflection. One concern I have is that the nature of the alternative discourse essentially allowed, or perhaps encouraged, students to avoid some of the more complicating aspects of discourse in emotionally fraught areas. I question, too, whether this is one of the things we have to sacrifice in using a discourse approach to avoid the problematic aspects of community outlined by many scholars in the field.

## Reflections and Implications

In his landmark essay “Social Class as Discourse: Mapping the Landscape of Class in Rhetoric and Composition,” James Zebroski reminds readers of the significance of one of Foucault’s goals in developing an archaeology of knowledge: “the disabling of what is arguably discourse’s most important effect: its ability to naturalize the social world, to make its social construction invisible” (568). In their writing assignment, students came face to face with the way discourse renders others invisible and then normalizes that invisibility. By interviewing their subjects, they were able to look behind discourses of marginalization and, in turn, to reflect on the way the marginalized are excluded or silenced in our culture. Through their ethnographic writing in which they assumed the persona of someone else, thereby shifting their own perspectives, they had the opportunity to try on—and potentially disrupt—the discourses of marginalization that they had previously taken for granted.

“came face to face with the way discourse renders others invisible and then normalizes that invisibility”

Another important result of the assignment was the reconsideration of the idea of community in the classroom. The narrative essay seemed to avoid some of the negative aspects of community that Bizzell, Harris, Jarratt, Mountford, and others have delineated. In her attempt to find a way to resolve the potential problems with classroom communities, Mountford suggests that “[t]eaching culture, not community is, I think, a way to be responsible to the deep differences represented by the gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation of our students without placing individual students at risk” (307). I would revise Mountford’s goals by stating that teaching *discourse* should be the goal. I argue my assignment achieved that goal and, at the same time, accomplished much more. In setting forth her vision of a composition classroom free of student disclosures that invite recriminations, Jarratt writes:

I envision a composition course in which students argue about the ethical implications of discourse on a wide range of subjects and, in so doing, come to identify their potential interest with others, understand those interests as implicated in a larger communal setting, and advance them in a public voice. (121)

I suggest that the assignment achieved Jarratt’s vision by introducing students to alternative forms of discourse that could adumbrate a far more public circulation of their work. One change I would make is to aim for the students’ writing to reach broader audi-

ences in the public sphere.

Even though the assignment achieved a number of my original purposes, I would revise it in the future by asking students to study the discourse of marginalized groups outside of the research they conducted during their individual interviews. In other words, to help students support their claims with more evidence, I would expand the representations of marginalization to include studying a broader sample of marginalized voices. For instance, I would encourage Todd to read more of the voices of breast cancer survivors or Emily to read more about the voices of the homeless. I would also place more emphasis on reading works by Foucault to help students obtain a more thorough theoretical grounding in his theories of discourse. The reason for reading the original source is that Foucault's work in and of itself gives insights into discourse that might complicate the notions of prohibition, exclusion and taboo that he writes about. It would also help students understand discourse as "the power of language practices to constitute the object of which they speak" (Zebroski 529).

I would also include *Alt Dis* as a required class text to give students more examples or models of incorporating alternative discourses in their writing. In that way, they would have a better understanding of some types of alternative discourse already being used in the academy. In addition, I would ask the class to study more of the challenges raised about ethnographic research and writing and the problems of speaking for others; this type of research would result in more in-depth discussions of the researcher's ethical responsibilities. Complicating some of these issues would make the entire assignment more relevant to students who adopt the persona of a marginalized Other. Doing so could also lead naturally to a follow-up assignment in which students would write a narrative about their own lives. This second essay would not only address but complicate the idea of silencing voices, asking students to question whether they have ever silenced themselves through their use of discourse.

Although the intent of the assignment was to write a personal narrative by adopting the persona of another individual, the experience with discourse that resulted from group and class discussions certainly evoked Jarratt's idea of a "public voice." Under the guise of a personal narrative, students argued about public issues involving their work, the representation of their subjects' voices, and the plight of those they interviewed. Those public issues fell consistently under the auspices of "discourse," regardless of whether that discourse originated inside or outside our classroom "community." The assignment thus resulted in a greater interanimation of personal and public issues, and the deployment of discourse in a way that allowed the differences of marginalized people to be safely and passionately discussed.<sup>2</sup>

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