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“Love Letters”: Narrating Critical Literacy Theory in the First-Year Writing Class

ON ARRIVING AT NORTHEASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY, a comprehensive, open-access institution that prides itself on being the “most diverse university in the Midwest,” colleagues cautioned me against using critical literacy approaches in the classroom because NEIU students “could not handle” difficult texts. In my years at NEIU, I have fought the advice of my colleagues even as I understand the reasons for it. Many of our students come from overcrowded and underfunded Chicago public schools. A good number are the first in their families to attend college as well as first-generation English speakers; many are children of immigrants or immigrants themselves who entered the U.S. to escape poverty and violence; many are underprepared for college-level work. In other words, they are the new “traditional” college students, and their life experiences are diverse and complex.

NEIU students, however, often have deep insight into the inequities of U.S. life, and I have heard instructors say they appreciate the critical awareness our students bring as compared to the traditional skills of students they have taught at other institutions. If sometimes underprepared for traditional academic work, NEIU students have many strengths and need an education that helps them understand the multiplicity, complexity—even the difficulties—of their backgrounds as potential sources of intellectual strength rather than simply as “problems” to be overcome. Open-access students, that is, deserve the insights that critical pedagogies offer. In return, these students’ insights and experiences can enrich theories of critical literacy when we acknowledge their ability, in Nancy DeJoy’s terminology, to participate in and contribute to complex understandings of writing (1).

Along with theorists who advocate Writing about Writing (WAW), I teach students how to write, in part, by introducing them directly to composition theory, and my focus on critical literacy means that first-year writers grapple with some of the most theoretical concepts in composition. I use academic texts (from Ira Shor and others) to initiate students into this discourse, but I also rely on what I call critical literacy narratives, such as Megan Foss’s “Love Letters,” to put flesh on the abstract bones of theory. Critical literacy narratives describe characters who use language to grapple with subject formation and create change. These characters provide models of critical “writers writing” (Yagelski 14), and analysis of their experiences helps students understand some of the dialectical relationships among

reading, writing, subjectivity, and change.

Students in my classes also write critical literacy narratives, and they use academic and professional texts to help them not simply tell their own stories of literacy but also to help analyze literacy in their lives. We write two such narratives during the semester, and we also write two theorized arguments about critical literacy that use the *class's* narratives as primary source materials (that is, the students read each other's literacy narratives as they would published pieces, looking for trends or anomalies, and from analysis of their fellow students' stories construct arguments about literacy and language). By asking students to consider literacy from their own and their classmates' experiences in light of academic essays and published literacy narratives, I encourage them to imagine how they can contribute to significant discussions about writing.

Specifically, one concept I use to help students read narratives such as "Love Letters" and imagine new possibilities for writing is John Trimbur's idea that writing, the self, and culture are "leaky sites" (as quoted in LeCourt 130). Donna LeCourt explains that "a single writing context produces a variety of subject positions that have the potential to both interpellate the subject ideologically and/or provide spaces wherein that inscription can be resisted" and suggests that "the concepts available for writing subjects are probably best imagined as 'leaky sites of struggle...where no outcomes can be guaranteed in advance' (130). Enacting the possibilities for agency...relies on the subject's ability to see culture as 'leaky' by mobilizing the multiplicity [s/]he brings to...acts of writing" (*Identity* 28, citation in original).

I introduce these ideas early in the semester and "translate" them as best I can, but they remain murky for students until we encounter the leakiness LeCourt describes in Foss's and others' stories. Through Foss's description of her experiences as a sex worker/addict/writer/student/teacher, students come to better understand the possibilities of writing as both a critical act *and* as a tool that keeps us in line with dominant ideologies. The first-person narrator in "Love Letters" (who initially identifies as Mickey and later as Megan—presumably our author in this piece of creative non-fiction) vividly reflects this tension through her conflicting purposes for writing, her relationships to multiple audiences, and her understanding of writing as a tool that can intervene in the material world. Together these things mingle in complex ways to help Mickey rewrite herself and the world around her.

In the next section, I briefly look at the theoretical background informing this essay before offering a close reading of "Love Letters," broken up by "From the Classroom" sections that suggest pedagogical questions and strategies for using Foss's text. While I do not read "Love Letters" as closely as this essay might suggest with every class I teach, I have taught all the theoretical issues suggested in this reading to various classes. The depth of my reading of Foss is meant to demonstrate how narrative can offer insight into critical literacy for students

and academics alike and to suggest that students can work with concepts of the postmodern subject—still foreign in a world that depends on the presumption of the autonomous, unified self—much more readily through story. Linking theory and story in this way, I argue, offers all of us a stronger sense of the way language works in our lives and increased opportunities to pursue our own critically literate acts.

Theoretical Background

Those who espouse “writing about writing” argue that students can best learn to write through serious engagement with composition studies, and, along with these theorists, I use scholarly texts in English 101, texts that offer students complex analyses of writing rather than reductive textbook formulas. Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle argue that such work will help students see that writing is not a universal or finite subject to be learned once and for all, and they suggest that students can best learn to “think like a writer” (i.e., be attentive to issues of audience, context, purpose, etc.) when they grapple with the complexities of writing theory rather than overly simplified discussions that suggest a monolithic, decontextualized writing process (553).

In addition, Barbara Bird believes that the difficulties basic writers encounter stem not from a “lack of appropriate strategies or processes,” but “from their lack of conceptual knowledge” (2) about writing and little “opportunity to participate in the meaning making process” in composition studies (3). Such lack of opportunity, she argues, can be remedied by exposing students to the debates about writing that professionals engage in, and she recounts her own experience as a writer who flourished when she learned some of the “secrets” of the field by reading David Bartholomae and others (8). Indeed, Bartholomae is another who advocated almost thirty years ago for student participation in professional discourse when he wrote that students too often do “work that places them outside the official discourse of the academic community, where they are expected to admire and report on what we do” and, instead, should be asked to work “inside that discourse, where they can do its work and participate in a common enterprise” (632-33). Finally, Jonnika Charlton addresses a major concern about WAW when she asserts that students—instead of being turned off by reading academic texts in English 101—gain confidence in themselves as writers as they become more immersed in the field and see how writing theorists think and write about *them* and their writing processes. Charlton suggests that exposure to some of the complications of writing studies is good for everybody, and my experiences confirm this idea.

However, exposing students to composition theory, critical literacy theory, in particular, is difficult. As Joe L. Kincheloe writes:

a vibrant, relevant, effective critical pedagogy . . . must be simultaneously intellectu-

ally rigorous and accessible to multiple audiences[O]pen-access writing and speaking about critical pedagogy are also profoundly important. Such a populist form of criticality does not . . . undermine our intellectual rigor and theoretical sophistication; instead, it challenges our pedagogical ability to express complex ideas in a language that is understandable and germane to wide audiences. (10)

With Kincheloe, Eric J. Weiner (60), Luis Huerta-Charles (251), and others, I believe that the theories behind critical literacy must be made more accessible to students, particularly students at open-access institutions, if critical literacy is to become a stronger force. Theorizing about Freire in graduate seminars and in academic journals is not enough; we need to find a way not simply to incorporate practices of critical pedagogy/literacy (grading contracts, problem-posing activities, etc.) into first-year writing but also to offer students access to the critical theory that underlies what we understand about reading/writing and possibilities for change. Only then will students be ready to fully partake in Bird's notion of the "meaning-making processes" that critical literacy has to offer.

In my classes, one issue we focus on is subjectivity because, for decades, theorists have posited the downfall of the autonomous, unified individual and, in its place, suggested a fluid, multiple subject constrained by discursive and material inequities but able to best negotiate such constraints when aware of them. This notion of subjectivity has been central to critical literacy to the extent that LeCourt remarked in 1998:

Although there is no monolithic theory of critical literacy or pedagogy, a fairly coherent thread of thought has been developed under the term 'postmodern' critical literacyThis version of critical literacy . . . attempts to relocate agency within a postmodern version of the subject as multiple, contingent, and always in process. ("Reifying" 5)

In addition, DeJoy has argued that the "second phase" of process theory (which she identifies with Berlin, Bridwell-Bowles, and others) "tend[s] to center some aspect of student subjectivity as the thing being revised through composition studies" as opposed to the "first wave," which focused on "the rewriting of student texts as the locus for revision" (40). If writing instructors are truly concerned with revising student subjectivity (e.g., to help students re-imagine themselves as "writers"), and if we are serious about including students in more significant ways in "our" field, we should find ways to make contemporary theories of the subject accessible to students.

Students at open-access institutions have been left out of theoretical conversations more than most; too often, writing instruction for such students has emphasized a decontextualized writing process and simplistic forms (such as the five-paragraph theme) instead of careful engagement with ideas and the multiple potentials of writing and self. Many students

at these institutions also come from working-class backgrounds, and so are likely to have had early educations that reflect what Jean Anyon found years ago when she argued that working-class students were taught to follow instructions rather than to think critically and lead (74-5). These students need opportunities to revise the knowledge they have received and their roles in the world. They need opportunities to validate the critical acuity they possess from their lived experiences and their complex relationships to language and education. They need to see not, on the one hand, that reading/writing matter, and, on the other hand, that we are in need of a more democratic society—a reasonable message sent by many progressive writing classrooms that is limited because it implies that literacy issues run parallel to but are ultimately separate from social justice issues. Instead, students need to see how language and literacy deeply intertwine with issues of identity, difference, and access to power. Finally, while we can tell students all these things, it is more effective if students directly encounter critical literacy theory in the lives of people whose experiences embody these complex ideas: The narrator of “Love Letters,” Mickey/Megan, is one such figure.

Subjectivity and Purpose in “Love Letters”

“Love Letters” moves in a linear fashion through three moments of Mickey’s/Megan’s life (from her experience in Section I after her boyfriend/pimp has been arrested; to her own experience in jail in Section II; to her time in Section III as an English student/instructor). The story is rich in content and rich in its ability to help students understand theoretical concepts of subjectivity and writing, so much so, that I will address only parts of Sections I and II in this essay and leave the implications of Section III (which suggest the complications of combining personal success with a larger critical vision of society) for a future piece. It is important to note, also, that some of Mickey’s struggles with writing and identity continue through all three sections of the story and grow more complex over time (they are not necessarily “overcome” and are recursive processes, much like the writing process itself). The narrator, for example, both confirms her sense of self as a writer and struggles with this definition throughout the story, and it is through these ongoing moments of tension that I ask students to consider notions of subjectivity and writing.

Mickey signals her identity as a writer in the opening lines: “The first time my old man went to prison . . . I wrote Darryl long rambling letters that went on for 10 or 11 pages . . . and them tablets of paper got to be as critical for survival as black tape and crazy glue and bolt-cutters” (4). In these lines, Mickey uses colloquial language (as she does throughout her text) to define writing as a life-saving act, which immediately raises a question about the materiality of writing: How does writing help Mickey in a way comparable to such tangible tools as tape or bolt-cutters? How can it intervene in the “real world?” Subtly, Mickey address-

es this issue when she notes that, in all the years she was with Darryl, “I probably never said as many words out loud as I poured into a single one of them 10-page letters. And as long as I kept writing them I could pretend he was still there” (5).

When I ask students to examine this statement, they see the conflicts in Mickey’s words (suggesting the “leakiness” of this particular rhetorical context). Mickey’s clearest purpose for writing is suggested in the second sentence of this quote, as her “letters” (which she writes for Darryl but ultimately decides not to send) are useful because they keep Darryl present; they help maintain her status quo. At the same time, Mickey hints in the first sentence of this quote that this writing offers her a new voice. While writing to maintain her sense of normalcy, Mickey has created text that also allows her to explore an identity separate from Darryl as she pours a part of her (unspoken, maybe unknown) self into 10-page “letters.” Writing, then, helps Mickey explore a new sense of self even as it helps her imagine that Darryl is still present, and I use this moment to ask students if Mickey is using writing to reach for something new or to hold on to what she knows and to consider how these two conflicting purposes might enable each other. What does it mean for Mickey, for any of us, to embrace such conflicting purposes through writing, and how do such conflicts enable the leaky elements of writing that LeCourt and Trimbur espouse?

Through facilitating analysis and discussion of these seemingly simple lines, instructors can help students experience both writing and subject formation as recursive and often contradictory. Mickey cannot simply move ahead into a new life, but she discovers that she can toy with possibilities through language and, when she writes these new possibilities down, the materiality of her text—in conjunction with its ability to move her to generate more text—makes her textual role-playing into something more, something in between “real” life and pure imagination. Mickey’s instinct, like the instinct of most people, is to hold onto the life she knows and can maintain some control over, but her leaky writing context allows her to discover alternative, materially empowering purposes for her work.

The idea that the processes of writing and of subject formation are recursive and connected becomes clearer as I ask students to consider LeCourt’s notion that “identity formation begins with the positions a given discourse makes available” (*Identity* 38). We explore this idea through Mickey’s clash with her friend Billy Jay, who is angry when he finds Mickey ripping up letters he assumed she had sent to Darryl. Mickey responds: “I liked Billy Jay, but he was getting into shit that he couldn’t possibly understand” (6). More important, though, she does not understand her need to write, as she suggests in the following: “As long as writing had a purpose...it made sense. Writing to communicate was logical. Just wandering around scribbling thoughts...down for no apparent reason pointed to one of two things. A rat or a nut. I knew it wasn’t the former and that left only the craziness as an option” (6).

Writing enables Mickey to begin questioning who she is and might be, but the idea that she might be a critical writing subject—and that she might need to be the audience for her own work rather than do the “logical thing” and communicate to Darryl—is not available in the discourses she knows. And because she does not have a purpose for writing that “makes sense,” she cannot imagine a writing subject that makes sense. She continues:

I can't think of anything much more suspicious in that community than a hooker . . . recording things on paper. Sometimes people would watch me... like I mighta been half-crazy and ask me why I was doing it. And I really didn't have an answer . . . I remember . . . sheriffs stopping to see what I was doing and scratching their heads. . . it shoulda occurred to me that sitting there with that tablet on my lap and a...sheriff chatting me up wasn't the brightest thing I coulda done . . . I never thought about what I was putting in them tablets as information. Never thought of it as secrets. (5)

In Mickey's mind, her purpose for writing is not a public one (to provide information to the authorities, a depiction that positions her as a “rat”), and she is not writing because she is “crazy,” (a position she falls back on, though, because other alternatives do not seem to exist). I ask students to imagine how the leakiness of this particular writing context may be surprising Mickey with the possibility of new purposes and the emergence of new kinds of voices, even as she writes to keep Darryl present. We discuss and write about what it would take for Mickey to make the voices that are beginning to emerge in her letters/journals more “real” and why she seems hesitant or unable to do so.

In these discussions, I have discovered that students, while they often accept the common place that writing can be “life-saving,” have no ready answer for how writing plays such a constructive role in Mickey's life. This gap presents an opportunity for personal analysis as well as a close reading of Foss's text. While students' circumstances may be very different from Mickey's, they often face similar difficulties in that they cannot imagine multiple subjectivities (such as writer, speaker, critical citizen) as real possibilities to compete with those subjectivities made most available to them (complacent student, consuming subject, etc.). They work for their A's and see writing as practical but do not imagine that such work is positioning them in negative or fixed ways and—maybe—could position them otherwise. And, so, we consider *their* purposes for writing: who gets to choose these purposes and how these purposes are related to societal needs and interests as well as students' own sense of self, education, and agency. And we explore the multiple relationships between difference and language, critical literacy and subjectivity, more broadly.

From the Classroom

By this point in the semester, we have read the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, June Jordan, and others who foreground race and ethnicity as a marker of difference in their lives (a marker instantiated, in part, through language). As purpose, identity, and the materiality of text come to the foreground for Foss, I ask students to consider Foss's experiences in relation to Jordan's African American students—who write public letters of protest in Black English even though they know their choice of language “dooms” their goal of getting justice for Reggie Jordan, a young, unarmed Black man killed by police. Students often raise the question of why race and ethnicity are important to Anzaldúa and Jordan but, seemingly, not to Foss (who never mentions race in her text) and we consider how race is, in fact, present in “Love Letters.” For example, when I ask students what race Mickey is, they almost universally respond “White,” and this response pushes us to consider how we recognize “unmarked” racial identities through discourse and how whiteness works to maintain its invisibility. Such a response also suggests more questions: How might Foss's story have progressed if she were Black or Latina? An immigrant? Undocumented? What privilege does Mickey have by virtue of her whiteness even as she struggles greatly with poverty, addiction, and abuse? And what if, after all of our discussion of Foss's whiteness, we come to find out she's not white? What would this tell us about ourselves as readers and about the material/discursive nature of race?

June Jordan's story raises thorny issues of subjectivity and purpose as well, and read alongside Foss's, it helps illuminate the role of whiteness in “Love Letters” and in all of our lives. As I have noted, Jordan's students, after long debate, decide to write letters in Black English to the police and to New York publications protesting the shooting death of an unarmed Black man by police. This decision comes after the class has spent a semester exploring the grammar and social functions of Black English and with students' recognition that their choice of language virtually eliminates any chance that their letters will be published and read by a wide audience. Most of my students initially cannot understand why Jordan's students make such a choice, and our focus on subjectivity as it relates to a writer's purpose helps in this regard. When looked at this way, Jordan's students appear to decide that their purpose in writing is as much to own themselves, and Reggie, as “Black” linguistically as it is to protest Reggie's death.

The students choose AAVE to lay claim to their, and Reggie's, identity in response to a racist society that does not care about Reggie's death precisely because he is poor and Black. Staying racially “invisible” for these students is much more complicated than it is for Mickey, as they feel their Blackness intensely when they recognize that Reggie Jordan's encounter with police could have been their own. At the same time, they are given the message that, when addressing this issue publicly, they must choose “neutral, non-racial” voices; otherwise, the form of their language would disqualify them in the court of public opinion. The larger message received by Jordan's students, and that they eventually respond to, however, is that the White majority has the discursive ability to

make race count or make it invisible—to suit its needs—and that other groups suffer in large part because they do not have the same kind of flexibility. Therefore, Jordan's students imagine new purposes for their writing as this message becomes clear; they move from creating texts that protest a specific act of police violence to creating texts that continue to protest this act but that also materially foreground systemic issues of White linguistic supremacy.

The fact that these kinds of questions are not central to Foss's struggle may help students see that critical literacy, and possibilities for social and personal change, can look very different for different people at different times. Such discussions have opened the way for students in my classes to explore how and when we all choose to foreground our differences (linguistically and otherwise) as well as how these differences get foregrounded, or minimized, for us. For example, one trend in my classes has been for students to write narratives that consider recapturing their pasts, particularly through language. What has resulted has been class-wide verbal and written dialogues about identity, language, and difference—along with our varying ability to control these things. Briefly, these kinds of narratives go something like this: The student writes of being born elsewhere or of having a strong family connection to a linguistically marginalized culture. Those students who moved here from other countries, not surprisingly, often write about the turmoil in their identity when asked to recreate themselves within U.S. culture, while those who were born here often recount narratives of tension as they struggled from the time they were born to reconcile conflicting cultures.

Students who write such narratives, however, express what seems to be a new desire (perhaps in response to the work of the class) to recreate themselves yet again. They share an interest in “rebalancing” their sense of self as they have come to believe that one or both of their cultures has exacted too much from them. All, regardless of ethnic or racial background, mention a need to relearn their native language (or their extended families' native language) as part of this process. While narratives exploring tensions in linguistic identity have become common among writers at all levels, what has worked well about the way my classes have explored these issues is that the students have become better able to situate their own personal struggles within larger narratives of language and identity. Because my students' stories are not simply written for me, but are instead read and analyzed by the whole class as part of a larger analysis of critical literacy, many students' purposes for writing appear to evolve just as Jordan's students did. The purely individual explorations of literacy with which my students start become essays that attempt to integrate the experiences of others into their analysis—and this process of integration has been much more productive as I ask students to integrate not simply the voices of professional writers into their texts but the voices of the students sitting near them as well.

For example, one student, A, in an early essay provocatively postulates that his loss of Spanish has meant the loss of the actual experiences he had had with his Mexican cousins when he was younger, and he develops that argument in a final paper that situates his experience living

between worlds in relation to several other students' experiences. His insights, while not conclusive, begin to suggest a growing awareness of the multiple ways individuals can navigate their relationships to U.S. culture and to the cultures of their immediate and extended families:

Some students...were dealing with issues of Spanish language and trying to preserve it... Other students, like [B], knew every important aspect of the culture but struggled with simply being accepted as part of the group. He had to choose between a [Mexican] group that heavily relied on tradition and a [U.S.] one...immersed with other traditions. [C] learns that it isn't easy being in two groups and even choosing one can be hard [as he writes] "I cannot just be one race [;] I could not be white with a name like [Juan] and I couldn't be Hispanic when I failed...Spanish."

This student writer concludes that, while these issues initially seem "racial," they are ultimately more about the universal human need for acceptance, and, while I challenged this assertion as potentially limiting (ironically because it might make too universal a claim), I could not help but express admiration for the student's further consideration in this essay of the ways race and nationality intersect in different ways for different people. While he does not fully flesh out this analysis, he is beginning to think about race and language, identity, and culture as unsettled notions that can work both on and for us, and he is beginning to see in the multiple stories of bilingual, multi-national identity alternative opportunities for balancing his own world.

D, a student in a different class, proposes the term "linguistic orphans" to explain the dilemma of students who had written (like Richard Rodriguez did) about being distanced from family and often being literally unable to communicate with parents, because of language barriers perpetuated by institutions such as schools. D writes that "the idea of a language barrier manifested itself in my mind as a physical one separating me from my parents" but that "it was comforting to know that I'm not alone...and that...some of us decided to stop being linguistic orphans by embracing and strengthening our bilingual identities." Unlike Rodriguez, this student argues strongly for other ways of cultivating students' "public" voices than by orphaning them, and, in a sense, making them linguistic wards of the state—wards who find it all but impossible to achieve full membership in the dominant culture. Writers such as these students suggest multiple possibilities for their peers who may be struggling between languages and cultures as they also shed light on Mickey's need for acceptance in her seemingly "unracialized" world. Foss's story, complex as it is, becomes more provocative as her experiences speak in response to other stories, including students'.

Subjectivity and Audience

In Section II of "Love Letters," Mickey finds herself in jail and begins to attend a prison English class, and the issues of subjectivity, purpose, and difference remain central to her writing. However, another rhetorical element—the element of audience—becomes central as

well. As we read Section II, I ask students to imagine how Foss's story suggests that writers can construct new subjectivities (in part) through their relationship to audiences both invoked and addressed and how her story helps us understand and expand on these notions of audience.

Section II opens with Mickey in jail, needing to affirm the subjectivity she knows. Therefore, she writes to Darryl asking him to validate her sense of self as a subject of his world, and this time she actually mails the letters (8). She goes on to write that, while in jail, . . . all I wanted to do was sit in front the tv. I hadn't seen tv for months I mean—I'd seen the news But them people on the news then had been them and we'd been us and it was very different tuning in when I'd been clean for a few weeks because I was no longer sure where the boundary was I wrote to [Darryl] . . . to . . . document that boundary line and my position relative to it. And my world would . . . be a very different place . . . if he'd answered my letters... and confirmed my vision. But he didn't (9-10)

This passage highlights the importance of Mickey's earlier writing even as it suggests her ongoing uncertainties. Her ability to blur the lines between herself and the mainstream "them" she sees on the news has been set up by her journaling from Section I, which allowed her to begin to imagine herself less as a static entity (Darryl's subject) and more as a subject with other possibilities. Now, however, Mickey is not resisting the discourse of the streets, but is, instead, writing to restore her primary sense of self as a resident of those streets. She writes so that Darryl can affirm her stability as a subject, only he fails to do so.

My classes generally read Lunsford and Ede's "Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked: The Role of Audience in Composition Theory and Pedagogy" at this point, and we consider the idea of audience addressed through Mickey's relationship to Darryl. He is the first outside audience that Mickey addresses in her writing, and she does so with the hope of gaining something concrete from him: a stable sense of self in his world. She finds herself open to other possibilities; however, when Darryl fails to respond and "confirm her vision" of herself, the "leakiness" of this writing situation opens up new possibilities for Mickey as she confronts other audiences for her work: her English teacher in the county jail and her family.

When Mickey first mentions her English class, she notes that her only purpose for attending is to gain her physical freedom: "[W]hen I found out I could get time off my... sentence by attending classes I jumped on it" (10). Such a statement provides a good opportunity for students to again consider how Mickey's purposes for writing are in flux as they consider audience issues more deeply. For as she writes, Mickey's purpose in using writing to "con" her way out of jail (and it is important to note that Foss uses the word "con" frequently to describe the way she and others use language) evolves as her teacher becomes an

addressed audience whose ability to speak to and shape Mickey's sense of self rivals Darryl's. This evolution begins on the first day of class, when Mickey's teacher talks about "reasons for writing," and Foss writes that the teacher's discussion of these reasons is "much like the conversations I'd had with myself when I was carrying around them notebooks fulla words that weren't ever going to get read by anybody but me" (11).

I ask students to consider this sentence in relation to Mickey's earlier consideration that writing offered her only two available positions—rat or nut—because Mickey's teacher seems to be describing other possible subjectivities, possibilities that resonate with Mickey's intuition that her earlier writing mattered and was worth pursuing. Students and I speculate on how the teacher might have described the purposes of writing (writing to question, explore, imagine, change) and how a breakthrough can come when a writer sees herself reflected through an audience with the authority to name something the writer only intuitively feels. We talk about the significance of the teacher's validation given Darryl's refusal (or inability) to acknowledge Mickey's pleas to help her unify herself as a subject of the streets. Rather than reinforcing Mickey's sense of self as static and part of an absolute us/them relationship (where she is the perpetual "Other"), Mickey's teacher seems to affirm the idea that writing can negotiate new meanings and selves. It is, therefore, not surprising that Mickey's writing context becomes leaky again and we see her shift away from the utilitarian (getting time served for her sentence) and toward the critical (imagining new possibilities for language and a more fluid sense of self).

For example, as she evolves as a student/writer, Mickey asks her teacher if she can write independently to gain more time off her sentence, but her teacher is skeptical and asks for samples of Mickey's writing before approving. Tellingly, Mickey writes that, as she was composing a story to demonstrate her seriousness to her teacher, "my purpose changed.... I cared about what she thought for what it could gain me but I also started caring what she thought simply for the sake of the story" (12). The significance of the text itself begins to rival what it can gain Mickey in terms of time served. Then, once Mickey's teacher allows her to write independently in exchange for time served, Mickey notes that she "took to staying up half the night with pencil and paper" and that by morning her pencil "points were always all rubbed down to smooth black nubs" (13). For the first time since her almost obsessive writing in Section I, Mickey is writing with fervor as her teacher's validation of her text seems to open her up and help her tentatively identify new possibilities for self, possibilities exemplified when Darryl eventually visits her in prison and Mickey reminds herself that she has begun to use writing "to think about options other than returning to the back seats and the spoon and the grasping hands on my body" (13).

In this instance, Mickey is, for the first time, using writing to consciously explore

new realities and not writing primarily to solidify the reality she already knows (as she did, for example, when she wrote to Darryl so that he could reaffirm her as a subject of the streets). While both ways of writing (writing to solidify an existing reality/subjectivity v. writing to imagine new realities/subjectivities) suggest Mickey's belief that writing is a material force that can intervene in the world, only now is she consciously exploring the productive elements of critical writing: its ability not only to re-inscribe her in a dominant discourse, but also to offer alternative positions from which she might rethink and contest the dominant (in this case, the discourse of the streets that has dominated her for so long). This leakiness in her writing context helps Mickey take more and more control over her sense of self and, in turn, can help my students understand the possibilities of "audience invoked."

That is, if Mickey's English teacher is, on the one hand, an example, with Darryl, of audience addressed (she is a physical audience that Mickey attempts to read and satisfy with a clear goal in mind), she is also an example of audience invoked, as Mickey uses her text to help reconfigure her teacher from a skeptical audience (worried, correctly, that Mickey is trying to con the system) into one who believes in Mickey as a writer and, therefore, a "person of value." At the same time, this process of "invoking" is not one-sided. Mickey, the writer, is perhaps the one most affected, as her teacher—Mickey's audience—helps invoke a new sense of self within *Mickey* as well. The two transact meaning and negotiate senses of self through text. While students often see writing as a one-way street with the writer in charge of transmitting meaning (or, conversely, with audiences of power, such as teachers, in complete control), this example helps demonstrate that meaning making and subject formation are epistemic processes that do not necessarily privilege the writer and that give teacher-audiences other forms of power than the ones students usually consider (grading, etc.). In this case, I argue to students, the writer and her audience are mutually dependent on each other to make meaning (in this case, the meaning of a new subject) as neither alone can materialize Mickey into a "writer"—whereas together they have a chance at doing just that.

We see evidence that Mickey's sense of herself as a writer is far from complete, however—and that she needs further opportunities to "perform" and stabilize this role, in Judith Butler's terms (18-19)—when she writes letters to her family. At this point, she acknowledges that her first letter home is a "peace treaty after living for years as one half of a them-against-us equation" and that she needs her family to help her get out of jail, even though she does not expect her life to really change (Foss 14). In this "us v. them" metaphor (a metaphor that echoes Mickey's early experience encountering the news), the only subject she can imagine is someone who cons her family, and then uses them to con the system. Her sense of herself

as a writer (and, therefore, a person of value able to circulate through multiple layers of society) is fragile. However, this new writing performance once again seduces/entraps/empowers Mickey as she also notes at this time that her words become “girders in the formation of a straight identity” (14). This architectural metaphor stands in sharp contrast to the idea of “us v. them” (since a materialized “straight identity” would enable Mickey to cross boundaries that otherwise might seem uncrossable) as well as to Mickey’s claim that she only wants to use her family’s help to get out of jail sooner. Mickey’s purposes for writing and her relationships to audience evolve as she explores how language can affect her relationship to Darryl, her relationship to figures in authority (like her teacher), her relationship to family—and her sense of herself as a more fluid subject.

It is through this generative lens (generative in terms of words, knowledge, and self) that I ask students to view Mickey’s continuing conflicts about writing. As should be clear by now, Mickey consistently uses writing to broach new subjectivities before retreating to a sense of self she is more comfortable with,¹ but she does write one final story in jail that seems to be a textual turning point as she uses words to once again intervene in material reality:

I wrote one more story. Once I decided to leave [life on the streets], the hardest part became shoving away . . . everything . . . that would stay behind. And . . . [it] all massed in my mind as Darryl . . . I didn’t start out planning to kill him off but that’s how it worked out . . . Of course I knew it wasn’t true. But just like never mailing the letters I wrote . . . allowed me to pretend he wasn’t gone until such time as my mind could handle the reality—writing that story helped me to bury the past until it was safe to resurrect it. (16)

My focus on critical literacy in English 101 offers students tools to analyze the “problems” of purpose and audience in Mickey’s life, and, by this point, they are eager to consider how the subject who wrote to maintain Darryl in her life is now using language to construct a competing subject with the flexibility to imagine multiple futures as well as new relationships to her past. This alternative subject is under construction, and words are never simply enough to conjure her up, but Foss is asking us to believe that written texts played a key role in her ability to “kill” Darryl’s hold on her sense of self, leave the streets, and become a student, teacher, and writer. For Mickey, the multiple writing spaces she has engaged have

1. At this point, students and I often revisit the idea of audience in Section I as well and the traditional idea that writing for the self is writing “without an audience.” Mickey’s writing suggests that journal writing can invoke a different kind of audience than we are used to thinking about: a new subject **within** (in Mickey’s case, a subject who uses words to consider a self separate from Darryl). That is, Mickey’s writing for herself in Section I serves an unexpected purpose as she invokes, from within herself, a new subject who responds to her words and offers new possibilities for her own existence.

proven “leaky” indeed as she has used them to construct new purposes and possibilities for writing and used competing audiences to reshape her sense(s) of self textually and materially, and students can explore these kinds of issues in equally fascinating ways.

From the Classroom

In one of my English 101 classes, a student named X wrote an essay titled “It Lives,” which begins this way:

Writing is most certainly an entity of its own. It can help us, hurt us, make us happy or sad, etc. Although we may not realize it, perhaps we can argue that we are always writing to an audience. Who that audience is may vary, perhaps it is the reader, the writer or...perhaps even the entity of writing itself.

This essay jumps from a discussion of the independent existence of text to audience issues in a way that is a little startling. Citing multiple student texts from our class as well as “Love Letters” and other readings, this student is the first I have met to write about a “textual entity.” Foss’s comparisons of her writing to “black tape and bolt cutters,” along with the ways she uses writing to intervene in her mental and physical worlds (by, for example, killing off Darryl) seem to have inspired this student to imagine text in complicated ways and to make an unlikely connection between the materiality of text and the idea of audience. What does it mean for the text to be our audience, X seems to be asking? What happens when another subject, a textual subject, becomes a player in our efforts to make meaning? How does understanding text in this way make the writing process more “leaky,” and, therefore, able to open up space for change?

When discussing X’s essay in class, we considered how understanding text as its own powerful entity adds to our understanding of critical literacy. On the one hand, it would seem that having another “player” in this process would create more possibilities for our work as we would no longer depend simply on the writer or on the writer/reader transaction (connected through an inanimate text) to control the meaning-making process. This discussion helped students tell their own stories of when text has “acted” on them or had a life of its own and, I think, opened them to a better understanding of revision as an epistemic process, where early drafts play an active, and not always predictable, role in constructing new ideas and new texts, even new selves. At the same time, X’s idea that writing is an independent player in the meaning-making process helped students imagine that discourse also has the power to write us and keep us in line.

This line of thought prompted one student (a seemingly confident 19-year-old who is also a strong writer) to comment in class about his dislike for the traditional research paper and his growing understanding that it was the form itself, along with the way teachers and students interact around it, that is the problem. In his view, and other students agreed, the very form of the research paper suggests that student voices do not matter because students are required to “substi-

tute" expert voices for their own to achieve credibility. When I tried to explain that research papers did not have to be this way and that, at the college level at least, they are generally not expected to be that way, we had a productive class session on how such rules and regulations seem built into forms of discourse (and are part of what gives them life) and how these forms can empower and overpower teachers as well as students, "real" writers as well as novices. In particular, this discussion opened up space for me to more fully grasp and then discuss with my students why I struggle with teaching English 102 (and typically choose not to): because the power of the research paper to dominate student voices—as it is too often understood—feels greater than my power as a teacher to help students engage this form of discourse a conversation of ideas. The "entity" of the research paper does not only overpower students; it can also overpower teachers, such as myself, who too often feel helpless in the face of the way it has traditionally acted in the world.

I have long talked to students about James Berlin's notion of social epistemic rhetoric (the idea that writer, reader, text, and material world come together to make meaning in contexts shaped by history and power relations), but it was only when we started reading stories like "Love Letters" that students were able to truly engage this theory in some depth. X is only beginning when he writes that, for Foss "writing itself, without experience, without schooling and without a direct purpose (because she never sent the [initial] letters [to Darryl]), was enough for her to keep doing it. For something to be able to force people to act without even knowing why adds to the argument that writing is an entity of its own." However, because it engaged the materiality of text, X's essay was more useful to me and to the class than the typical essays I received before engaging critical literacy theory in English 101. Its complex consideration of textuality as a real player in the production of meaning contributed greatly to my efforts to bring critical literacy theory into the "real" lives of students.

Another student, Y, seemed to channel Foss in an essay that describes her experience using writing to move beyond a bad relationship. While Y cites Richard Wright's experience with reading as a primary influence for her analysis, her classmates, after reading her essay, told her to revisit Foss because the two stories address similar themes. I might note that I often ask students to reread texts that relate to their writing as well, but they do not usually jump at the chance; however, in this case, Y was provoked by the responses of "real" readers who saw her experiences and ideas reflected in Foss's text, and she ended up writing a final in-class essay that discussed how startled she was to revisit her story through the prism of Foss's when she re-read "Love Letters."

One way that Y's literacy narrative reflects Foss's is that they both describe using literacy as a way to cope with realities that feel impossible before going on to describe how literacy as a means of coping can morph into literacy as a tool for change. For example, Y initially describes using reading (anything she could get her hands on) to block all thought and feeling after ending her relationship, much like Foss initially uses writing to buffer herself from the knowledge that Darryl

was in prison. Both, however, demonstrate how initial experiences with reading/writing can open other possibilities and even new subjectivities. After writing about the way reading helped keep her emotions and her understanding of what had happened to her at bay, Y notes that she came to see that writing could also offer a tool for analysis. However, "this was not an easy process":

I would begin to type and as soon as I knew the words were leading to descriptions of pain I would...hit the backspace key.... The keyboard seemed to have its own shield that did not allow me through.....

I was afraid. I was not afraid of others reading the truth but I was worried about ME reading my own truth. ... For me, words were dangerous because they could either make me strong and restore the old me, or they could be very hurtful and break me even more.

One option that Y does not consider in her last sentence is the possibility that the act of writing—and her experience of her text as its sole audience—might have helped her imagine a new subject, an identity somewhere in between her "old self" and the frightened, depressed person she had become. Her allusion to the pain of writing is also very important as it suggests how the power critical literacy can bring often comes with risk and how fear of this risk is what often keeps us stagnant, playing the same role over and over. Seemingly in response to this issue, Y's essay ends "happily," with a discussion of how she deleted her story of her bad relationship and, therefore (like Foss), "closed that chapter in my life" (in yet another testament to the way writing can intervene in our material worlds).

However, the few sentences I cite here offer a mixed picture of the many roles literacy can play. Y writes first of using reading to tune out before she eventually confronts her need to write about her experience—a need challenged even as she wrote by the text that was created. Writing down her experience took courage, but it still was not enough, as Y goes on to acknowledge a third layer of her process when she writes that, after careful thought, "I realized that reading my story was the answer.... I read my own story for a different perspective, I was now the audience" (my emphasis). Y recognizes that she has played multiple roles in this experience, and, as a class, we discussed that it may have been this multiplicity that helped enable the leakiness of the writing context for her. She remarks that "just like Richard Wright in *Black Boy*, I came to the realization that reading can indeed be a dangerous process," and it is her ability to confront the "dangers" in this experience that give her writing context its "leakiness." In addition, Y adds a fourth role to her reading/writing repertoire in my class as she becomes a more distant observer of her own situation, an analyst with the capacity to re-imagine a fairly common writing experience ("I was in a bad situation, and writing helped me feel better") and see it as a rhetorical problem with multiple layers and nuances, as well as a rhetorical issue that could be illuminated by, and help illuminate, the stories of others.

In their narratives, both X and Y consider the power of writing and its relationship to audi-

ence in more complex ways than they had in earlier essays in my class. As they imagine how texts might have an agency of their own, they acknowledge that texts might influence the reader, and the world, in ways they had not previously considered. They recognize that the writer as audience of his/her own work can run a risk—a risk of pain or gain, or, more likely, pain and gain. Such revelations can make the leakiness of all writing situations more visible to students, as they begin to see the multiple roles they play in the writing process, as well as the multiple roles their texts and audiences play in relation to them—and how the interactions between these multiple and shifting entities contribute to the production of meaning and selves.

Conclusion

The discipline of Composition is only beginning to explore the possibilities for Writing about Writing, the potentially radical act of asking students to participate in our professional conversations and activities more fully. I submit, though, that one important way to teach students *how* to write through the study of writing is to use literacy narratives such as Foss's, along with formal theory, to engage them with critical ideas in the field. I am not a professor of rhetoric and composition because I believe everyone needs to know how to use commas correctly and that it is my mission to teach them. Nor am I a professor because I want to help students go quietly into the fast-capitalist night of the global economy and meekly take their roles. Composition Studies as a field and as a practice holds me because writing is such a complex, leaky entity. It offers us possibilities as it constrains us; helps us construct personal and public voices; offers us new subjectivities as it binds us to the subjectivities we have assigned to ourselves or that have been assigned to us. It is a fascinating cultural construction whose powers I want to share with students, including—especially—students like those at NEIU, open-access students too often shortchanged by poverty, discrimination, and educations that have emphasized submission as the key to success. In part, of course, we all have to submit in various ways, and I do not believe that any easy “liberation” will be found through stories such as “Love Letters” or through critical literacy theory. However, I have seen students who struggle with grammar and spelling come to life when faced with real ideas about writing and its many possibilities, students who conclude a semester of English 101 with thoughts like the following:

Before I started...writing and reading essays and stories that made sense to me and that seem[ed] to be real and share...a common experience, I thought that writers, especially well known writers like Richard Wright..., were born that way. I thought that it was in them to write really well.... I never thought of writers as writers, but as machines that are program[med] to say the “right” things.... After reading the essays of my classmates I... understand why writing is really important and how it can be

used to make sense of ...your world. The writers that I see as inspiration are not then machines, but people who look for change when the only thing they know best...is reading and writing.

Because my English 101 classes look at critical literacy theory through the lens of narrative, and because our narratives come from students in our class as well as published authors, students such as this one are able to begin re-imagining their relationships toward literacy as a critical act. They open up to the many things that can happen when we read and write—in and out of school, for teachers, parents, lovers, the world, ourselves. Composition Studies also benefits when we ask students from all walks of life to look at and understand their own multiplicity, their own complex uses of language, as potential goldmines of intellectual import. Asking students to “contribute to and participate in” (DeJoy 1) our efforts to utilize critical literacy in the classroom and beyond is hard work, but we owe it to the possibilities of writing to make critical literacy theory more accessible within the university and beyond.

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