Articulation Theory and the Problem of Determination: A Reading of Lives on the Boundary

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The narrativity of an individual life is a literary trope that figures across a range of genres. From memoirs, biography, the journalistic profile, and the celebrity story to the autobiographical novel and bildungsroman, the narrativity of a life is a familiar and apparently altogether consumable literary convention, turning up in bestsellers such as Iacocca: An Autobiography and popular magazines such as People. Other forms of writing, too—popular psychology books such as Gail Sheehy’s Passages and the gamut of self-help and popular advice tracts that line bookstore shelves—seem to take it for granted that an individual life not only can be narrated but that such narration can make a life intelligible and thereby subject to control and change.

Harvey Kail suggests that composition theory and textbooks likewise rely on the narrativity of a Student Writer’s life by projecting mythic quests for students to take on their road to advanced literacy. In “Narratives of Knowledge: Story and Pedagogy in Four Composition Texts,” Kail argues that we can read out the plots of standard textbooks such as Becker, Young, and Pike’s Rhetoric: Discovery and Change, Ann Berthoff’s Forming/Thinking/Writing, William E. Coles, Jr.’s Teaching Composition, and Kenneth A. Bruffee’s A Short Course in Writing in order to identify their underlying narratives and the tales they tell of the formation of a personality through emergence into literacy. According to Kail, these narratives are familiar ones, based on Christian and social traditions deeply rooted in American culture, such as the search for identity, salvation, self-improvement, and knowledge. By paying attention to these narratives, moreover, Kail suggests an alternative way to represent composition studies, not just as a series of discrete theoretical positions on a taxonomic grid (Becker, Young, and Pike are “cognitivists,” Berthoff a “neo-Cassirerean,” Coles an “expressivist,” Bruffee a “social constructionist”) but as a series of conjunctures that link scholarly and pedagogical discourses and practices to culturally sanctioned narratives, to the interests, institutions, and identities these narratives call up, and to the way these narratives make the meanings of reading and writing intelligible to students and teachers alike.
By and large, however, composition studies has paid relatively little attention to its own narrativity, to the way in which composition theory and practice are articulated to the master narratives that charter belief and action in American culture. This may appear to be surprising because the notion that knowledge is invariably authorized by its narrativity has become something of a commonplace in postmodern thought. Richard Rorty, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and others, for whatever differences may otherwise divide them, seem to agree that what we have traditionally called knowledge is in fact a "fiction," a manufactured account that legitimizes itself precisely to the extent it holds its readers in the thrall of persistent and unexamined metaphors and metanarratives.

There has, of course, been a recent turn toward narrative in composition studies, in part following Jane Tompkins' call to "unlearn" the critical essay and write in a more personal and autobiographical style. In the work of Donald McQuade, Nancy Sommers, and others, however, narrative remains separate from "thesis-driven" exposition. It figures as an academically devalued genre capable, its advocates hold, of redeeming prose by replacing the authoritarian, masculinist, and hierarchical strategies of arguing for a position with the immediacy and authenticity of lived experience rendered narratively. This turn to narrative, thus, has largely limited itself to counterposing narrativity as a way of knowing to argumentative strategies, instead of probing for the connections between narratives and other discursive forms and cultural practices—or, as Kail might put it, how the discourse of composition studies joins together with available culturally authorized narratives and the social contexts in which these narratives arise.

In this essay, I want to suggest, in the broadest sense, the usefulness of investigating the conjunctures at which discourses and practices in the field of composition studies are linked to discourses and practices outside of it. I will be looking in particular at how the narrativity of an individual life in Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* is articulated to wider cultural narratives. I have chosen to focus on *Lives on the Boundary* in part because it makes its own narrativity so explicit by relying on autobiography to tell the story of what the book's subtitle calls the "struggles and achievements of America's educational underclass." But I am also interested in *Lives on the Boundary* because its use of such a popular genre to narrate its concerns makes the book more problematical than has usually been acknowledged.

The Problem of Narrativity in *Lives on the Boundary*

Since *Lives on the Boundary* appeared in 1989, it has been hailed as the book composition studies was waiting for. Addressed to the general public, as well as to education and composition specialists, *Lives on the Boundary* seemed to do the kind of cultural and ideological work needed in the Reagan/Bush era of educational retrenchment by providing an eloquent and moving case for
expanded educational opportunity, multicultural curricula, enlightened pedagogy, and the educability of all Americans. At last, it appeared that someone had succeeded in translating the hard-won experience and expertise of writing teachers, and especially of basic writing teachers in open admissions programs, into a popular idiom capable of affecting public opinion. *Lives on the Boundary* was greeted as the book to give composition studies a public voice and visibility to counter bestsellers such as E.D. Hirsch’s *Cultural Literacy* and Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* and commission reports from William Bennett, Diane Ravitch and Chester Finn, and Lynne J. Cheney.

To bring his case to a broad audience, Rose has chosen to devote a substantial part of the book to his own life. Rose tells the story of his “passage from South Vermont [the working-class neighborhood where he grew up] to Loyola,” where Rose was an undergraduate and, as he puts it, “entered the conversation” (67). We follow Rose on a kind of pilgrim’s progress, from his struggles as a high-school student who arises, miraculously, from the slough of Voc-Ed despond, through college and the temptations of literary studies in graduate school to his redemptive work as a teacher of the neglected and underprepared. This narrative, of course, possesses enormous cultural resonance, recalling such autobiographies as Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* and Richard Rodriquez’s *Hunger of Memory*. But because the tale of a poor or working-class youth’s rising from his humble origins is such a familiar one, it also contains some political risks I think have not been adequately accounted for. To put it as directly as I can, the risk is that readers will take *Lives on the Boundary* to be another comforting American success story of an individual who, through the power of education and the guidance of more experienced teacher-mentors, takes the predictable road to self-improvement and upward mobility, from the mean streets of Los Angeles to the halls of UCLA. Such a narrative, furthermore, would seem to fit right in to what Harvey Graff calls the “literacy myth”: the moral consensus that has dominated the meanings of literacy since the mid-nineteenth century by representing the ability to read and write as a social explanation of success and failure in class society, a token of middle-class propriety, and a measure to divide the worthy from the unworthy poor.

The issue I am concerned with here is whether Rose’s decision to use the narrativity of a life backfires on him. Despite Rose’s obvious intentions to argue for fundamental reforms in American education, the question needs to be asked whether the autobiographical impulse in *Lives on the Boundary* inevitably locates the book for its readers within what Kristin Ross calls the “exemplary bourgeois cultural project” of narrating a life, individualizing a person’s fate, and positioning readers as witnesses to an edifying tale of individual initiative and the transformative powers of education and literacy. But before I consider whether Rose’s life history is absorbed, inadvertently or not, by the cultural narrative it articulates, I want first to define more
precisely the notions of conjuncture and articulation I will be using to read Lives on the Boundary.

**Taxonomies and Conjunctures**

For the most part, literature reviews and histories of writing instruction have used a taxonomic strategy to order composition by dividing and classifying its various pedagogies, rhetorics, and research programs into categories, with perhaps the discontinuity of a Kuhnian paradigm shift to demarcate one approach from another. Like any rhetorical strategy, taxonomies both enable and constrain their users, bringing some things to light while suppressing others. Taxonomies, in other words, need to be seen not so much in terms of their truth value as their uses and what they make possible.

The standard taxonomies in the field, such as James A. Berlin’s expressionistic, cognitivist, and social-epistemic rhetorics, Lester Faigley’s expressive, cognitive, and social views of composing, and Stephen North’s division of the field into researchers, historians, scholars, and practitioners are useful for the ordering functions they perform and the differences, both practical and theoretical, they bring to the surface. Particularly for a young and emerging field such as composition studies, taxonomies can codify positions that might appear otherwise to arise spontaneously from the pressures of practice. In this regard, Berlin’s and Faigley’s taxonomies especially have contributed to the professionalization of the field by giving it a shape, by identifying central issues, and by lifting the study and teaching of writing from the shared activity of a few like-minded individuals at the margins of English departments into the realm of scholarly controversy where a set of standard positions defines the context of issues and establishes the terms of ongoing discussion. From this perspective, we might say that without taxonomies it would be difficult to think and speak composition studies at all. By dividing and classifying, taxonomies create a unity of differences as the terrain of composition studies.

At the same time, such division and classification tends to make instances of intellectual work into synecdoches or labels for trends and currents in the field. The work of David Bartholomae, for example, and in particular his essay “Inventing the University,” is often cited as a founding statement of a social constructionist, academic discourse approach to writing instruction. Although, as Carolyn C. Ball argues, this conventionalized view may actually ignore or suppress expressionist or cognitivist currents in Bartholomae’s writing, the treatment of “Inventing the University” as a kind of shorthand token seems virtually to be called for by the generic function of the literature review and the scholarly convention of locating one’s work in relation to prior work, as the ground to validate new inquiries or a foil to establish counter-tendencies.

However, as Susan Miller says of North’s division of composition studies into humanistic “scholars” and empiricist “researchers,” taxonomies are
based not on "logical, but political, differences" (37). Taxonomic categories need to be seen not just as the formal defining terms of a field of study but as the result of particular conjunctures that ascribe certain cultural meanings and political valences to ideas and practices. Unlike the categories of a taxonomy, which reside in the space of logic, conjunctures are located in actual historical time. A conjuncture designates those moments when ideas (whether in the form of theories or narratives or other genres) are joined to other ideas, practices, institutions, interests, and subjectivities. Conjunctures constitute the temporal and temporary moments at which ideas take on particular social weight, cultural meaning, and rhetorical effect not because of their intrinsic or essential identities (as specified categorically) but because of the way these ideas are articulated concretely by specific men and women and take on specific identities in specific historical settings and social contexts.

To give a brief example: from a conjunctural perspective, the emphasis on the value of personal voice and individual sincerity in the work of Peter Elbow cannot be reduced simply to a category of expressionistic rhetoric that distinguishes it, say, from the emphasis on academic discourse and the kind of imitative ventriloquy Bartholomae notes in students' efforts to appropriate the institutional voices of the university. The sincerity of self-revelation that Elbow struggled to teach young men writing statements of conscientious objection during the Vietnam War carries a quite different political meaning from the usual practice of sincerity in expressionistic rhetorics. Berlin, correctly I think, sees these rhetorics as critical of "the dehumanizing effects of industrial capitalism" but at the same time indebted to "the entrepreneurial values capitalism most admires: individualism, private initiative, the confidence for risk taking, the right to be contentious with authority (especially the state)" (487). The point here is that apparently identical ideas and practices can take on quite different cultural meanings and political valences depending on the conjuncture at which (and to which) they are articulated. The rhetorical effect of ideas and practices is produced not only by reference to their logical features but also by the practical joining together of discourse, institutions, and interests that social utterances and performances inevitably enact. When sincerity of expression is linked to mass movements against war, as occurred during the Vietnam War, or invoked as a means to give voice to those who have been systematically silenced, as during the Black Expressionist movement of the 1960s (see Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka's classic essay "Expressive Language"), an expressionistic rhetoric can indeed be oppositional in effect. At other times, however, in "normal" classrooms of middle-class students, expressionistic rhetoric may well serve simply as a form of personal protest that, as Berlin notes, is "easily coopted by the very capitalist forces it opposes" or, at best, a limited means of "creative realization of the self" (487).
What I am suggesting is that there is no way to tell on the basis of a taxonomic categorization, to predict with certainty the effects. Unlike the categories in a taxonomy, which are meant to have a predictive value, the notion of a conjuncture suggests that nothing can be guaranteed ahead of time strictly according to formal or textual qualities alone. Rather effective meaning is a matter of what happens: practice takes place in historical time and social space.

Stuart Hall's Theory of Articulation
The notion of a "conjuncturalist" approach to the relationship between ideas, practices, and social formations might be seen as an attempt to formulate a neo-Marxist model of determination. As Raymond Williams notes, "No problem in Marxist cultural theory is more difficult than that of 'determination'" (83). Part of the difficulty may be attributed in the first place to the writings of Marx and Engels, which seem at times to presuppose a fixed correspondence among the existing stage of material production, social relations, and consciousness. In The German Ideology, for example, Marx states quite clearly that the "mass of productive forces accessible to men determines the conditions of society" (18). There is a tendency in Marx's writings to see human activity and historical development as governed by scientific laws of determination, a tendency that objectifies the social process and, as Engels indicates in a letter to Bloch in 1890, reads human will and agency out of history. "The historical event," Engels writes, may "be viewed as the product of a power which works as a whole unconsciously and without volition. For what each individual wants is obstructed by everyone else, and what emerges is something that no one willed" (476). At the same time, of course, one can also find equally authoritative passages that seem to affirm the creativity of human agency, even if it operates within particular constraints. Probably the best-known statement of this view is Marx's famous remark that "people make history but in conditions not of their making."

According to Williams, the confusion surrounding the problem of determination results in part from the "extraordinary linguistic complexity" of the term "determine" (84). While the term has certainly been colored in its uses within the Marxist tradition by scientistic biases and a typically nineteenth-century postivist quest for certainty, the root sense of "determine," Williams says, refers not only to an external force or authority—whether history or God—that decides or controls the outcome of an action but also to the way limits are set and pressures exerted by the momentum of the social process itself. According to the latter sense of the term, Williams says, "'Society' is then never only the 'dead husk' which limits social and individual fulfillment"—as it sometimes appears in orthodox Marxisms that hold to an abstract determinism based on isolated and autonomous forces acting upon the social formation from outside. Instead, for Williams, society "is always also a constitutive process with very powerful pressures which are both
expressed in political, economic, and cultural formations and, to take the full weight of 'constitutive,' are internalized and become 'individual wills'" (87; emphasis added).

Perhaps the fullest exploration of the problem of determination in contemporary Marxist thought occurs in Stuart Hall's theory of articulation. Like Williams, Hall wants to develop a model of determination based not upon the implacable and predictable laws of history but upon the limits and pressures of specific historical, social, and cultural conjunctures. Situating his theory of articulation within past and current critical discourses, Hall has attempted to formulate a model of determination that avoids, on the one hand, the traditional Marxist view of a fixed and necessary correspondence between cultural practices and social structures and, on the other, more recent poststructuralist views of the indeterminancy or necessary non-correspondence and incommensurability of discourses, practices, and structures. By looking at how particular ideas, discourses, and practices are linked—or articulated—to particular conjunctures in the social formation, Hall has sought to define a "Marxism without guarantees," a guide to action that relies not on the predictive certainties of classical Marxist theory but on a reading of those linkages and how they articulate, at specific times and places, interests, subjectivities, and social forces.

Hall's theory of articulation was developed as part of a larger project to define the meaning of cultural studies in relation to what Hall calls "culturalist" and "structuralist" paradigms of critical thought. Cultural studies is often seen as the effort of the Birmingham (UK) Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, under Hall's directorship, to balance the culturalist work of Williams, Richard Hoggart, and E.P. Thompson from the late 1950s and early 1960s (the period of the emergence of the British New Left) against the impact of more recent poststructuralist and postmodernist trends on Marxist thought in the 1970s and 1980s, as embodied above all in the influence of Althusser's structuralist Marxism. The usual version holds that a balancing act between the two paradigms was achieved by turning to Gramsci and his notions of hegemony and a war of positions in civil society—to account, on the one hand, for the empirical specificity characteristic of Williams and, on the other, the importance of difference that emerges from Althusser. This is a fair portrayal in a general sense but somewhat unnuanced. Cultural studies, at least in Hall's representation of it, is not so much an effort to locate a middle ground between the two paradigms as to use the two paradigms themselves as limits and pressures on each other—to hold them in dynamic tension as forms of reciprocal interrogation. To see how Hall's theory of articulation derives from this dynamic tension, we need now to look more closely at the way Hall reads the two paradigms against each other and the effect of this reading on Hall's model of determination.

First of all, the culturalist work of Williams, Hoggart, and Thompson registers a break from the reductionist economic determinism of orthodox
Marxism in the direction of a Marxist or socialist humanism that emphasizes the creativity of cultural practices and the authenticity of working-class experience. In various ways, Williams, Hoggart, and Thompson argued that the popular culture of the working class is not simply a form of false consciousness imposed from above in the interest of ruling elites but rather is a way of life and shared subjectivity that resists as much as it accommodates the dominant order. According to this view, precisely because the formation of subjectivities is linked to class position, the lived experience of the working and subordinate classes offers a grounds to measure the distorting effects of ideology against reality. The culturalist paradigm, in other words, severs the ties of the left to the mechanical materialism of traditional Marxism but preserves a necessary correspondence among class position, cultural practices, and forms of consciousness as the framework of determination.

In contrast, the structuralist paradigm argues that there is no essential subjectivity at the center of experience but that experience of the "real" is itself made available and intelligible only as an effect of ideology, already preshaped by the categories, classifications, and frameworks of culture. In this sense, the structuralist paradigm loosens the ties in culturalism between cultural practice and social position by thinking of the social formation as a unity which is constructed through the differences of relatively autonomous practices rather than an expressive totality of corresponding practices. In Hall's view, Althusser's notion of the social formation as a structure in dominance of relatively autonomous practices and institutions that cannot be reduced to a system of homologous correspondences typifies the structuralist paradigm. These structures, as Althusser has it, "hail" or "interpellate" subjects by creating subject positions which speak and place individuals in capitalist social relations. Subjects, as Hall says, are by this account "bearers of structures" rather than "active agents" in making their own history.

Hall's strategy is to use these two paradigms as limits and pressures on each other. Hall takes Althusser and the structuralist paradigm as a way to reread Williams and the culturalists, to retain the creative subject by turning it into a subject positioned not by an essential class location but by mediating social and cultural forces, a subject in ideology who lives, as Althusser puts it, in and through imaginary relations to the real and contradictory conditions of existence. Althusser's understanding of the social formation as a complexly overdetermined structure instead of a simple or monolithic one allowed Hall, as he says, "to live in and with difference," to imagine a social formation determined by a totality of relatively autonomous institutions and practices (in, say, education, culture, mass media, the rituals of everyday life, and so on) which can be reduced neither to forms of each other nor to reflexes of the economic order but which still cohere as a unity in difference. For Hall, there is no necessary correspondence between cultural practices and social structures that can be referred to the determinations of class position or authentic experience.
At the same time, Hall also wants to put a break on certain poststructuralist tendencies, arising in part from Althusser but certainly exceeding him, to think that there is not only no necessary correspondence but rather that there is a necessary non-correspondence that makes it analytically impossible to relate practices, beliefs, discourses, identities, and institutions to each other in determinate ways. According to Hall, Foucault and other post-Althusserians take the emphasis on difference in Althusser's relative autonomy of overdetermined practices in the direction of a radical heterogeneity, incommensurability, and the absolute autonomy of practices that refuses to think of determination as anything other than local and specific contingencies. In other words, Hall is prepared to follow the poststructuralists by thinking that cultural and social practices can be read as if they were textual or linguistic events. But by reaching back to the culturalist emphasis on lived experience, Hall also wants to resist what he sees as the typically postmodern abandonment of any appeal to the "real" or to experience outside of discourse. Hall holds on to the Marxist project of theorizing a complex unity of the social formation—but not by relating base to superstructure or latent to manifest content in a structure of necessary correspondence. Instead, Hall is proposing a fractured or articulated totality in which people make their own history, only under conditions not of their making.

Hall's theory of articulation conceptualizes the conjunctures at which people knit together disparate and apparently contradictory practices, beliefs, and discourses in order to give their world some semblance of meaning and coherence. Articulation theory, in other words, describes how people make a unity which is neither necessary nor previously determined. So, if Hall uses Althusser to set limits on the essentialism of class identity in the culturalist paradigm, by the same token he uses Williams and draws upon Gramsci to put pressure on what he calls the "creeping functionalism" in Althusser's structuralism, the tendency to see ideology as performing the function required of it by reproducing the social relations of production without countertendencies. In Hall's view, Althusser's "ideological state apparatus," the famous ISA, collapses the state and civil society, precisely the gap through which Hall sees the pressures of ideology from below running, in the tensions and conflict between the people and the ruling bloc. This domain of the popular is not strictly imposed from above but rather is negotiated in a contested arena where the struggle for hegemony and consent takes place. By using Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Ernesto Laclau's argument that the political connotation of ideological elements has no necessary belongingness to class or social location, articulation theory, Hall says, "enabled us to think how an ideology empowers people, enabling them to make some sense or intelligibility of their historical situation, without reducing those forms of intelligibility to their socio-economic or class location or social position" (53). The point for Hall is that one can connect cultural practices to the social formation—only not in advance. Articulation
is always a matter of struggle in a war of positions where nothing is certain ahead of time but rather a matter of practice. No outcome can be guaranteed, as it is in orthodox Marxism, by the laws of history but must be determined concretely at specific conjunctures of history.

By refusing the scientistic metanarrative of orthodox Marxism and denying the necessary correspondence between practice and class location, Hall poses instead the quite practical yet crucial analytical question: "under what circumstances can a connection be forged or made" among particular ideologies, political subjects, cultural practices, and social movements and institutions? The double meaning of articulation—to put into words and to yoke together physically—offers both "a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects" (53). The workings of articulation, as Hall describe them, are simultaneously discursive and social: articulation names those historical moments at which certain ideas are uttered and combined (sometimes by severing ideological elements from their conventional uses and recombining them with other elements) into material forces capable of binding subjects together in social identities and movements.

Articulating Lives on the Boundary
From the perspective of articulation theory, the question to ask of Lives on the Boundary is how Rose puts into words the narrativity of his own life and how this articulation is thereby linked to other discourses, practices, subjectivities, and institutions. Rose has chosen to narrate his life history, as a student and a teacher, both to indict an educational system that wastes the intellectual curiosity of young people and adults and to demonstrate the possibilities of individual growth and development within America's educational underclass. Rose wants readers to see, and to feel, how such class-based educational practices as testing and tracking produce the desire of poor and working-class students not to excel and get ahead but to be "average," to distance themselves emotionally from a reward system that neglects their talents and potential. And he wants readers to understand how the intervention of caring teachers can mobilize and cultivate the intellectual resources of non-mainstream students. This is a story worth telling, especially at a moment in our collective history when "reform" movements in education are calling for higher standards, national testing, teacher accountability, discipline, and a return to a canonical curriculum. It is a story to break the prevailing silence in public discourse about education by speaking of democratic aspirations to increase access, to open opportunity, and to remove educational barriers to the poor and working class.

The problem, though, is whether the narrativity of a life in Lives on the Boundary is adequate to Rose's purposes, whether it can adequately repre-
sent the social processes of illiteracy and school failure in contemporary America and project a compelling vision of needed change. As I have already suggested, as a coming of age narrative, *Lives on the Boundary* might be read as an instance of the "exemplary bourgeois cultural project" of narrating a life. What makes the narrativity of a life so "exemplary" as a class-based tale is the fact that just to have a life—to experience oneself as possessing a life that can be narrated in the first place—is itself a particular historical development, inseparable from the emergence of individualism and the authority and autonomy ascribed to the bourgeois subject in class society. The narrativity of a life, in other words, is not something that is naturally given but rather is a strategic trope for what C.B. Macpherson calls the ideology of "possessive individualism," in which the individual emerges as a social subject by taking on a proprietary relationship to his or her own life. The autobiographical impulse to narrate a life, therefore, is not a straightforward one but rather the result of a particularly bourgeois cultural project of making and owning a sovereign and inalienable life, free from the ascriptions of birth, status, and social obligation in traditional society.

The classic coming of age narrative, however, tends to naturalize this struggle to fashion a self-created life and an individual personality by representing the passage from youth to maturity not as the formation of a particular kind of subjectivity in class society but as a timeless biological and psychological process. The rhetorical effect is an ostensibly universal subject whose life is narratable because its meanings transcend historical circumstance by expressing general laws of development and human nature. What is disguised or mistaken to be a natural desire to tell one's own story is, in fact, a critical moment in the bourgeoisie's growing self-consciousness and cultural self-confidence, as it entitles its members to author their own life histories and to inscribe the formation of the bourgeois personality in literature and popular culture as the normative story of growing up.

Such a coming of age narrative has a fairly predictable and formulaic narrative pattern. The plot typically recounts the adventures and crises of an alienated youth and how these youthful exploits and the wisdom of older and more experienced adults enable the youth to reconcile his or her identity to the constraints of class society. Readers are often offered a vicarious experience of the transgressions and marginality of youth, but only so that such disruptions of adult order and common sense will enable readers more surely than ever to define the boundaries of the normal. In this sense, what we call the coming of age narrative enacts not only a rite of passage from youth to maturity but also a ritual of inversion that permits formulaic moments of violation in order to contain their subversive force within the hierarchical patterns of mature order and authority.

According to Marxist critics such as Georg Lukács and Jean-Paul Sartre, the classic coming of age narrative tells how the disruptive desires and the turbulence of youth are contained by class society as the central character
achieves maturity by taking on a professional calling and joining the adult world of full-fledged citizens. An atmosphere of calm typically pervades the narrative, the result of what Lukács sees as the social optimism of the rising bourgeoisie and the narrative transformation of a troubled youth into a well-adjusted and idealized bourgeois subject. For Sartre, this calm is a matter of the distanced lucidity of the narrator who represents the desires of youth as an "adventure" and a "brief distraction which is over with" (134). As the turbulent events of youth are situated narratively at the remove of time, they are relieved of their convulsive energies by the narrator's achieved stability and maturity. For this reason, the formation of a personality, as Sartre says, "is told from the viewpoint of experience and wisdom; it is listened to from the viewpoint of order" (134).

For Lukács and Sartre, the subject is shaped not only archetypally by the passage from youth to maturity and innocence to experience, but also practically by reconciling his or her youthful desires to the alienated adult world of work. In a typical coming of age narrative, a youth will wander through bohemia, want to be a writer or a painter, experiment with drugs and sexuality, travel to exotic places—and then settle down by choosing a profession, a calling, a metier. In other words, in the classic tale of the formation of a bourgeois personality, a youth comes into maturity by internalizing the necessity of work in the capitalist division of labor as a matter of personal choice, and the narrative represents this choice as a moral lesson learned from the errors and enthusiasms of youth. As Sartre says, "Neither the general nor the doctor impart their memories in a raw state: they are experiences that have been distilled, and we are warned as soon as they begin to speak that their story has a moral" (134).

Readers will recognize the classic features of the coming of age narrative in Lives on the Boundary. The book does indeed narrate a rite of passage, from a turbulent adolescence in South Los Angeles through a youthful flirtation with Beat culture and a brief literary romance with graduate studies in English to Rose's mastery of the secrets of the academy brought about by his acquisition of an identity and professional expertise as teacher and researcher. Rose's struggle, for himself and his students, to crack the code of the university appears in this narrative both as an affirmation of the (adult) authority of academic discourse and its institutions and as an act of benevolence toward the underprepared, from whose ranks Rose has risen. The question then is whether, or to what extent, Lives on the Boundary enacts the kind of reconciliation to the party of order and maturity that Lukács and Sartre find characteristic of the classic coming of age narrative.

The question of the social allegiances of Lives on the Boundary, I believe, hinges on the problem of determination I have been concerned with in earlier sections of this essay. Lukács and Sartre link the coming of age narrative, historically and culturally, to the formation of the bourgeois subject as the owner and operator of an exemplary life, an act of self-creation that culmi-
nates in the moralization of professional work as an explanation of success and failure in class society. From this perspective, the cultural practice of narrating a life seems to fit neatly with class location, and one might therefore postulate a necessary correspondence between the genre and the reproduction of capitalist social relations. There are, of course, other ways of narrating a life, as Sartre's admiration for Jean Genet in *St. Genet* indicates, that hold on to a position of marginality, criminality, and transgression that will not be reconciled to the dominant order. Mike Rose's book, however, is not written from such an outsider's perspective. But it is not written from the inside, either. Rather, as the title tells us, the book is located at the boundary of the dominant culture, at the points of intersection where the lives of the dispossessed encounter an educational system that sorts individuals into a capitalist division of labor, allotting life chances by separating mental from manual labor, the upwardly mobile from those stuck in place.

*Lives on the Boundary* is more than just an account of how Rose slips through the system, more than a tribute to the initiative (and luck) of the few who make it. What allows Rose to evade the class-bound limits of the self-made coming of age narrative—and what distinguishes his book from Wright's and Rodriguez's autobiographies—is his refusal to separate himself from the lives on the boundary and to take on the kind of distanced lucidity that Sartre finds characteristic of the genre. For Wright and Rodriguez, the cultural trajectory of personal development alienates them from their indigenous communities. In a very real sense, each confirms the adage that you can't go home again, that you can only look back. Wright and Rodriguez become professional writers, men of letters, and take on cosmopolitan identities that lead them to view their places of origin in terms of a cultural deficit, a lack of sustaining social and intellectual resources. Rose, however, despite his journeys into the wider world and his standing as a successful professional, never quite leaves his neighborhood or his youth behind. He remains open to the pressures of the milieu in which he grew up—the frustrated aspirations and ambitions of the people he knew along the way. As Rose discovers through his interactions with underprepared students and adult learners, the narrativity of his own life is articulated in terms of other lives. The veterans Rose teaches in a special program at UCLA figure as his "Voc-Ed comrades reincarnated" (137), and his work with Concepcion Baca (a student who drops out of UCLA, goes to work, and then returns to complete her degree and go on to graduate studies) causes him to register "how much of myself I saw in her" (204). Rather than calling attention to the distance between himself and America's educational underclass, as Wright and Rodriguez do, Rose repeatedly uses the story of his own personal success as a sign of the educability of all those others who have fallen through the systemic cracks in American schools.

The point is that Rose does indeed use a conventionalized and formulaic coming of age narrative, but he diverts it from the usual pattern of the self-
made success story and the edifying tale of maturity to articulate another set of social, cultural, and educational interests that offer a democratic vision of education for all. In this sense, Rose rearticulates one of the most basic of American myths by severing the cultural meaning of personal success and professional achievement from its usual conservative functions. Rose's own professional expertise appears in *Lives on the Boundary* not as a reconciliation to work in class society or an exemplary lesson in maturity but as a practice that links his own labors to those of students and adult learners at the margins of the educational system and to the popular pressures from below that have struggled to extend educational opportunity. Like Mina Shaughnesssey and Kenneth A. Bruffee in the days of open admissions at CUNY and David Bartholomae and Patricia Bizzell, Rose re-makes himself as a teacher and researcher, joining his expertise in close reading to the social force of protest movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s that fought to open higher education to those who had been excluded and, in effect, created the historical conjuncture from which the figure of the basic writer arises in composition studies.

By the account I offer here, Rose's professional expertise is not just the result of individual initiative, the accumulation of credentials, and the creation of a career. Instead, professional expertise is articulated with and to political subjectivities and social movements. Expertise is certainly coded by the cultural narratives of maturity and distanced lucidity as a particular determination of consciousness and class position. If professional practices and discourses typically represent the dispossessed as a client population in need of the intervention of expert benefactors, the political valence and cultural meaning of professional work nonetheless cannot be guaranteed in advance as an accommodation to the dominant culture and its division of specialists and laypersons. Professional expertise, as I believe *Lives on the Boundary* demonstrates, can also articulate a sense of solidarity with the aspirations and purposes of the dispossessed. It all depends on practice.

**Rearticulating Literacy**
But if the effects of professional work depend on practice, it is not the case that professional practices are themselves offered freely; nor can they be enacted simply by an act of will. While the conditions of professional work are not predetermined in a final and fixed sense, they are determinate—the result of how they are joined together with other practices in an ensemble of overdetermined social relations and cultural realities. This point is worth mentioning because one of the dangers of professionalism is its tendency to generalize the conditions of its own work into causal factors that determine success and failure in class society. On one hand, the relative autonomy of professional work—what professionals experience daily as a series of individual decisions and responsibilities—can lead them to cast success and failure as a matter of volition and individual effort. On the other hand,
professionals, especially in education, often make the forms of literacy they have mastered into causal factors that explain the fate of individuals and social formations.

Rose comes close to this occupational hazard of professionalism when he claims that his work with veterans made him realize that “education has the power to equalize things” (137). One might justifiably worry that Rose has slipped into the peculiarly American view of education as a social panacea—the great American literacy myth that the ability to read and write determines the outcome of people's lives. At least according to revisionist currents in literacy studies, this might well appear to be exactly what Rose has done.

From Lévi Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques* to J. Elspeth Stuckey's recent and provocatively titled *The Violence of Literacy*, revisionist critics have held that literacy is not primarily a means of intellectual development and upward mobility. Instead, as Lévi Strauss says, the “only phenomenon with which writing has always been concomitant is the creation of cities and empires, that is the integration of large numbers of individuals into a political system, and their grading into castes or classes” (337). Stuckey is even more direct when she says that “literacy is a system of oppression that works against entire societies as well as against certain groups within given populations and against individual people” (64). From this perspective, to speak of the transformative powers of literacy for the individual, as Rose does, at best is naive and at worst reproduces a discourse of equal opportunity and predictably unequal results, thereby turning systematic inequality into the result of differences in individual effort and talent, not of social determinations.

Stuckey is right to emphasize the connections between literacy and the way individuals are ranked in an unequal social order. At the same time, however, she seems to argue that there is a necessary correspondence between the cultural practices of literacy and social structures. According to Stuckey, people like Rose fail to see how the “violence of literacy is the violence of the milieu it comes from, promises, recapitulates. It is attached inextricably to the world of food, shelter, and human equality” (94). Literacy, for Stuckey, is determined by—or “attached inextricably” to—the reproduction of class relations in advanced capitalist society. Literacy has a locked-in, guaranteed-in-advance class character.

In contrast, Rose avoids the mechanical determinism in Stuckey's account by offering a sense of how literacy is articulated in variable and sometimes unpredictable ways to the social formation. In *Lives on the Boundary*, we do see the violence of literacy Stuckey describes. Rose's profile of the adult learner Millie and her struggle with a multiple-choice reading comprehension test demonstrates how schooled literacy disconnects underprepared students from their practical knowledge of the world and leads educators thereby to label them as cognitively deficient (216-20). Literacy does indeed function, as Rose shows, as an instrument to pathologize
subjects. But, for Rose, literacy can also function in a variety of other ways that evade the surveillance of a class-based educational apparatus. "Consider the sources of literacy," Rose says, "among the children of El Monte: shopkeeper’s signs, song lyrics, auto manuals, the conventions of the Western, family stories and tales, and more" (236). What Rose sees here is how literacy is not only a tool of a class-based ranking system but also a cultural resource embedded in and persistently available through the “pop cultural flotsam” that pervades the American landscape—“television and People magazine,” “the Bible and . . . American media illusion” (237). For Rose, literacy is a matter not simply of the limits of an oppressive social order. It is also a quite concrete pressure and sensuous activity that surrounds all Americans and can be tapped for the purposes of human development and liberation. Whether that happens or not, I have tried to suggest throughout this essay, depends not on a fixed or necessary correspondence between literate practices and the social formation but rather on how individuals and groups articulate literate practices to institutions and subjectivities.

In this regard, Rose’s sense of how “education has the power to equalize things” can be useful precisely to the extent it is detached from its usual political meaning of giving everyone an equal chance (when unequal class-based outcomes can be predicted in advance) and rearticulated as a political pressure to change the standards and practices that are used to evaluate and rank students in the first place. Investing education with “the power to equalize things” can avoid being simply another version of the literacy myth to the extent it articulates redefined standards and practices of literacy that are capable of promoting a more equal social order. Rose’s account of the popular and everyday sources of literacy begins imaginings such a redefinition and thereby contests not only the traditional view of what makes a person literate but also the current neoconservative monopoly of the public discourse on educational standards. What Rose suggests is that it is not enough just to change or expand our sense of literacy to include non-canonical and unauthorized forms of writing—and then continue to evaluate and rank students in the same old ways. Rose also wants to appropriate the “literacy crisis” from the Reagan/Bush camp, to rearticulate it as a matter not of whether standards are high enough but rather of how standards can be reconceived to serve popular aspirations and democratic goals.

Lives on the Boundary takes a lot of risks. To recount his life, Rose turns to the familiar coming of age narrative that has historically and culturally been encoded with the entrepreneurial values of individual initiative, professional maturity, and personal success. Rather than presenting a critical analysis to demystify the genre (as radical theorists typically do), Rose has sought to rearticulate the narrative from the inside—to disconnect its cultural meanings and political valence from its usual ideological function of reproducing capitalist social relations and instead to join together the narrativity of his own life to the ongoing struggle for democracy and social
justice. In this regard, Rose’s use of such a popular genre as autobiography not only allows him to speak to the public as well as to specialists; it also allows him, strategically, to locate Lives on the Boundary in the current cultural wars of position to secure popular consent and social allegiance. In Lives on the Boundary, Rose has chosen to speak in the idiom of what Gramsci calls the “national-popular,” the constellation of common sense, ideological elements, and everyday practices that shape the subjectivities of civil society. What Rose thereby seems to suggest is that the task of radical democracy is not just to speak as critics against the master narratives of American culture but to speak as rhetors through them—to rearticulate the social and ideological force of the American mythos in the name, the voices, and the interests of the many.

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Works Cited


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*RSQ*, under the editorship of Eugene Garver and Philip Keith, publishes articles on rhetorical theory, criticism, history, pedagogy, and research, as well as bibliographies, book reviews, and notes on programs and conferences.

RSA was organized in 1968 for the advancement of the study of rhetoric. The current RSA board of directors includes Lisa Ede, Michael Halloran, Nan Johnson, Michael Leff, Carolyn Miller, James J. Murphy, Gary A. Olson, Marie Secor, Kathleen Welch, and past-presidents Richard Leo Enos and Winifred Bryan Horner.

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