Taming Multiculturalism:
The Will to Literacy in Composition Studies

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Out of the woods two hulking tramps
(From sleeping God knows where last night,
But not long since in the lumber camps).
They thought all chopping was theirs of right.
Men of the woods and lumberjacks,
They judged me by their appropriate tool.
Except as a fellow handled an ax,
They had no way of knowing a fool.

Robert Frost

I certainly don't want us to get close to the culture of the undergraduate students at [the University of Virginia]. I take our function to be to confuse them by presenting them with a culture they have never seen before. We don't want to assimilate to theirs, we want to attempt to assimilate them to ours.

Richard Rorty

If we think of knowledge as socially justified belief, then to teach... seems to involve creating contexts where students undergo a sort of cultural change.

Kenneth Bruffee

Cultivating a deep-level allegiance to the evolving discursive values of dominant-culture institutions has historically been central to the work of composition teachers. "Language loyalty," what Judit Kadar-Fulop identifies as a primary societal function of literacy education, is also "a form of cultural loyalty," a consequence of the systematic reduction of "language distance" through a trained habituation to a language's written form (32-36). When we teach writing, in other words, we are also teaching a commitment a social system that frames social issues and negotiates conflict in particular ways.

What gives takes away, of course, and at least since the NCTE began drafting a resolution on dialect diversity in the early 1970s, writing teachers have struggled mightily with composition's legacy of reducing "language distance" by eradicating linguistic difference. The affirma-
tion of "students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language," the critical relationship between "identity and style," and the call to "respect diversity" embodied by the 1974 resolution on Students' Right to Their Own Language have been in many ways central to the development of contemporary composition studies. Nonetheless, these matters have not completely altered the importance, for example, of the traditional writing handbook as a model of correctness and a textbook-industry standard. In a field rife with ironies the tension between composition's heritage of dominant-culture assimilation and its more recent inquiry into linguistic difference looms large.

As a writing teacher, I find myself constantly trying to elude the ideology of literacy, the fearsome complicity of writing—and all its epistemic promises—with social restriction. I want to imagine the potentiality of a culture not divided by writing. I want to embrace the possibilities of a reconstructionist multiculturalism, what Carol Severino calls "multicultural literacy." Literacy, however, regardless of the adjective one places in front of that term, reflects the circumstances of definition—for those of us teaching in American higher education, the needs, aspirations, and technologies of the social and economic cultural center. Literacy manufactures a difference of its own, and it is by this difference—in relation to other critical differences—that we are socially arranged. Representations of multiculturalism have not disrupted the role of writing teachers in sorting students along a literacy standard that serves already-dominant cultural institutions. Literacy legitimates, as J. Elspeth Stuckey has it. And that awareness situates writing teachers out along a cultural perimeter, perhaps reluctant to use the habitual to push back or absorb the unfamiliar but institutionally constructed in a primary sense to sort diverse language users rather than validate them. My intention here is to suggest, by exploring composition textbooks and composition's professional discourse, that the transformative potential of multiculturalism is often ironically subordinated to the task of reducing "cultural distance," and that acquiring what we've come to call "multicultural literacy" may demand a long, deep, and compliant congruity with dominant-culture literacy education.

From Standard Edited English to Multiculturalism

Readers of the professional discourse of contemporary composition studies know well the field's prevailing histories. The dominant view of undergraduate composition as the distaff partner of literary studies in English departments throughout most of the twentieth century (Connors, Berlin) has been written into all corners of the published discourse, and it continues to serve as the springboard for much of the scholarship produced today. These histories typically enact a rhetoric of emergence in which the contemporary discipline of composition
studies is shown to have cast off the truncated epistemology of skills-based writing instruction—often labeled “current-traditional rhetoric.” As James Berlin has it, the privilege of literature in English departments helped to compose its opposite, expository writing, as primarily a set of skills which, when used “correctly,” could lend clarity to the results of method, “to reproduce in the mind of the reader the particular experience as it took place in the mind of the writer” (25-31). According to Berlin, the “scientistic” assumptions about knowledge that linked literary studies and rhetoric/writing early on created a hierarchical relationship between them, freezing the latter within the preparatory framework of the undergraduate college and giving writing, as a school subject, the appearance of a preliminary enterprise, a discursive boot camp where effective prose and its composers were either shaped up or shipped out.

Institutionalized as basic-skills instruction, composition as Berlin defines it constructed writing as a kind of cultural gate in the American university of the early 1900s. What later came to be known as Standard Edited English was understood as something of a “managerial art” (Berlin 42) consistent with the university’s new role as a certifying agency of an emerging meritocracy. If non-literary writing was little more than transcription of a truth external to language, then adequate teaching must focus on avoiding “distortion” at all costs. Enlightenment ideals such as Clarity, Coherence, and Unity were understood as the route to the overarching axiology for written discourse, precision. And precision could be guaranteed only through rigorous adherence to standardized usage criteria. Standard Edited English (SEE) came to be understood as a dominant “skill” or “tool,” and already by the early 1900s its acquisition had been firmly linked to the probability of success in mainstream American culture. The hardening of SEE helped define “error-free prose [as] the mark of an educated person” (Crowley 11).

SEE was framed as both the barrier before and the ticket to mainstream success, and the writing classroom served implicitly as a turnstile. While writing was understood to manage knowledge, the teaching of writing helped to manage a privileged American mono-culture by enforcing a norm by which all variations came to be judged. During most of this century, in most American colleges, writing instruction focused largely on indexing social class according to the surface features of Standard Edited English. Freshman English, once described as “the students’s first introduction to the world of the mind and the serious discussion of ideas” (Moyer 169), served for the better part of the last one hundred years as a ritual of certification at the front end of the college or university experience.

The ideological confluence of SEE and America’s meritocratic elite is starkly evident in what was perhaps the most influential Freshman English textbook between the end of Word War II and the Reagan
administration. “Non-standard English,” according to James McCrimmon, in the 1950 edition of *Writing With a Purpose*, “is the language of the farm, the factory, the mine, the lumber camp, the railroad, and, in general, of those occupations which do not require what we call ‘higher education.’” Standard Edited English, on the other hand, represents

the speech habits of those who enjoy a favored economic and social status in our society, and since this class may be roughly described as the educated class, we may say that standard English is the way that educated people speak and write. It is, therefore, the kind of English written and spoken by business executives, lawyers, doctors, ministers, teachers, writers, editors, artists, engineers, and other professional people, and, of course, by their wives. (229; qtd. in Faigley 152)

As Robert Frost’s lines show in my epigraph, criteria for exclusion obtain in the lumber camp as well. But Frost underscores McCrimmon’s point; for it is Frost, after all, who has “written the book.”

McCrimmon’s textbook remained influential and substantially unchanged long after its patriarchal assumptions had been revised away. And while many writing programs continue to expect conformity to Standard Edited English either explicitly or implicitly, McCrimmon’s legacy is nearly impossible to find anywhere in composition’s professional literature or textbooks—except the conventional handbooks. The powerfully persuasive critique of “current-traditional rhetoric” advanced by composition scholars in the late 1970s and early 1980s has bankrupt the warrants for college-level writing instruction represented by texts like McCrimmon’s. A focus on correctness gave way to the process movement and widened the field’s attention from text to context, and the list of what students were understood to lack became longer and more complex than McCrimmon might have imagined in 1950. As SEE gave way to *academic discourse*, however, little changed about the relationship between writing instruction and cultural assimilation.

In 1979, Mina Shaughnessy deployed *academic discourse* in her extraordinarily influential *Errors and Expectations* as a collective noun for the cognitive abilities non-mainstream or “basic” writers were said to lack (Mahala and Swilky), the shared discourse practices of the academic community: “way[s] of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing” (Bartholomae 135). These conventions would no longer be implicit in college teachers’ expectations for student writing. Together these practices and conceptual strategies defined a specialized discourse and means for its production that students would appropriate—or be appropriated by—if they were to expect what the dominant-culture institutions reserve for college graduates.
When Kenneth Bruffee linked social epistemology to a classroom pedagogy he called “collaborative learning,” he worked to adjust the writing teacher’s points of evaluation from surface correctness to other socially determined norms. Arguing that “there is no fixed and certain point of reference, no Arnoldian ‘touchstone’ against which we can measure truth,” Bruffee was among the first to elaborate a social epistemology for composition: “[T]he generation of knowledge, what we call ‘creativity,’ must also be a social process” (405-407). Drawing on the American pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty, who makes his own cultural work explicit in the epigraph above, Bruffee argued for the cardinal importance of adherence to “normal discourse,” a socially derived “set of conventions about what counts as a relevant contribution, what counts as a question, what counts as having a good argument.” (Rorty qtd. in Bruffee 401). According to Bruffee, “Much of what we teach today—or should be teaching—is the normal discourse of most academic, professional, and business communities. ... [N]ot to have mastered the normal discourse,” Bruffee contends, “is not to be knowledgeable” (402). The normalizing desires of Bruffee’s pedagogy are evident as well in one of the field’s best-known essays, David Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University.” As Bartholomae has it, “Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion. ... The student has to learn to speak our language, ... to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, ... reporting, ... and arguing that define the discourse of our community” (134).

From our vantage point a couple of decades hence, the assimilative potential of these early claims are both conspicuous and well noted. Taking notice of the latter’s inattention to the roles of institutionalized power in delimiting the infrastructure upon which the new is constructed, contemporary social epistemologists move to distance themselves from these early social constructionists: “Social-epistemic rhetoric challenges the status quo,” William Thelin argues, “while social-constructionist[s] capitulate to it.” Nonetheless, what often goes missing from such taxonomies are assumptions about the value of writing or literacy itself that continue to link those Thelin differentiates. The perceived value of high literacy training is a stable axiological substructure upon which the field’s theoretical positions float and collide like tectonic plates. Whether one imagines the writing class as the locus of cooptation or liberation, or defines writing as a set of jobs-based skills or a “post-biological evolutionary step” (Kaplan 12), literacy training appears to promise a world impossible without it.

McCrimmon’s textbook implies SEE as an economic and social marker; contemporary writing theorists, however, are far more likely to identify writing itself as the necessary catalyst for meaningful social and institutional involvement. As Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope have
it, the workings of western society can only be "conceived and acted upon through historically specific, abstract, sociolinguistic skills," which are crucial if one is to "achieve adequate levels of social participation" and "actively conceptualize and negotiate one's social roles and social relations" (17). Effective participation in—or resistance to—dominant cultural institutions is often understood to be dependent on synthetic, critical, and analytical operations, "metacognitive strategies and ... conceptual negotiations" that are expressly related to reading and writing—what Miles Myers, immediate former executive director of the National Council of Teachers of English, has called "translational/critical literacy" (122).

Never in the history of writing instruction has teaching writing been so crucially important in the eyes of its practitioners. As former Modern Language Association president Catharine Stimpson's apocalyptic 1990 address has it, "If the erosion of soil would concern an agronomist, if the flickering out of all the stars would concern an astronomer, so we must care acutely about the fate of literacy" (406). With that care comes a profound conviction in the implications of literacy training. Writing teachers such as Joseph Comprone contend that "what we are teaching when we teach literacy are new forms of consciousness, new ways of seeing and constructing reality" (8). Bruce Edwards argues that, through writing, "we come to know things and come to know ourselves in differing ways" (4). If the product of normal discourse is "the sort of statement that can be agreed to be true by all participants whom the other participants count as rational" (Rorty qtd. in Bruffee 401), no instance of discourse in rhetoric and composition could be more "normal" than a claim for the transformative potential of advanced literacy training.

Teaching writing changes people, but how so and along what standard? Helen Fox, in Listening to the World: Cultural Issues in Academic Writing, describes "academic discourse," the consequence of a peculiarly American high-literacy training, like this:

In short, it is at once a writing style, a method of investigation, and a world view that has been part of western cultural heritage for hundreds of years and that is learned through a process of both formal and informal socialization that begins in early childhood, especially by those who come from "educated families," go to "good schools," and aspire to positions of influence and power in the dominant culture. (xviii)

As Fox states explicitly, and as Bruffee, Comprone, Edwards and others imply, the acquisition of academic discourse is not simply the development of discursive strategies and techniques, it is a reorientation in values—a cultural conversion that Rorty, in my epigraph, acknowledges straightforwardly. Chief among these values are the preconditions of civil-society discourse Patricia Bizzell has identified as "ethical quali-
ties”: “formal courtesy,” ‘shrewd assessments of what constitutes adequate proof” (355), and the sanctity of “intellectual property”; the assumption that reasoned debate “cannot resolve controversial problems” (354). As Thomas West suggests, criteria for civil-society discourse are fully imbricated with the effective manipulation of argumentative elements: “Learning how to receive direct and critical speech, how not to take such criticism personally, to think it and not simply feel it is as important as learning how to craft critical arguments” (14). Discourse becomes civil, regularized, and institutionally managed, West shows, only when parties agree to abide by and develop commitment to its operations.

In Education as Cultural Imperialism, Martin Carnoy argues that Western schooling as a whole transmits “the social and economic structure from generation to generation through pupil selection, defining culture and rules, and teaching certain cognitive skills” (qtd. in Willinsky 107). Chief among what Carnoy calls “cognitive skills” are those Myers bundles under the rubric, “translational/critical literacy”—text-based mental operations that, as D. R. Olson points out, privilege and sustaining activities valued by dominant-culture institutions. Writing teachers can promote awareness of the way evolving conceptions of literacy are used to index social class, and they can lead their students in resistance to dominant-culture institutions through writing pedagogies. Ironically, however, the extent to which such projects are “successful” may suggest the extent to which students have become incorporated or legitimized by the very structures they are encouraged to resist. Even oppositional, liberatory, and critical pedagogies, by reflecting the deeply embedded civil-society values of their agents and the sorting function of the institution in which they are allowed to appear, inevitably necessitate that students learn resistance through patterns of conformity. Translational/critical literacy, thoroughly imbricated with the values that promote its acquisition, cannot easily be disconnected from a commitment to the sites, habits, and rituals—the culture—associated with it. And it is within this paradox that the discourse of multiculturalism has emerged in composition studies.

To write or speak of multiculturalism is to first invite a reverberation of meaning and then attempt to squelch it. In Keywords, a study of terms whose “meanings are inextricably bound up with the problems [they are] used to discuss” (15), Raymond Williams identifies the word culture as one of the three or four most problematic in the language. To attach the prefix multi- is to open up an already contested term to a broad range of social and discursive concepts and practices; to add the suffix -ism reflects a desire to reduce this range “to a formal singularity” (Goldberg), ironically, to exclude differences in service of definition. However, as one moves away from the speculative theorizations repre-
Multiculturalism is seen in transformative, pluralist terms; it is typically a “reconstructionist” procedure driven by a relatively uniform axiological consensus—value is placed on how to elaborate, investigate, and tolerate difference:

Multicultural education . . . . seeks to promote the valuing of diversity and equal opportunity for all people through understanding of the contributions and perspectives of people of differing race, ethnicity, culture, language, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and physical abilities and disabilities. (Kitano 12)

We define multiculturalism as the effort in the latter half of the twentieth century to encourage citizens in the United States to embrace the racial, ethnic, class, gender, religious, age, and physical-ability differences in our population; multiculturalism is an approach to living that respects, incorporates, and mediates the differences and similarities of our population. (Severino, Guerra, and Butler 1)

Almost invariably, in this context the possibility of conceptualizing difference and diversity is contingent on some conception of high literacy—critical, analytical, metacognitive abilities understood to emerge through the extended familiarity with “text-to-text relationships in an area of knowledge” (Myers 122). As Morey and Kitano have it, multiculturalism is dependent upon “more accurate and comprehensive disciplinary knowledge” that will emerge “through enhancement of students’ academic achievement and critical thinking applied to social problems” (12). Carol Severino defines “multicultural literacy” as “the knowledge of the beliefs, practices, and roots of the cultures in one’s environment and the ability to communicate such knowledge in . . . written discourse” (106). Effective writing instruction, then, holds the promise of a multicultural society. Yet such conceptions can place difference and diversity in front of students without explicitly disrupting the rather conservative sorting function that writing instruction continues to play in American higher education. What it means to be literate has always been tied to the needs, aspirations, and technologies of dominant sociopolitical institutions; and at least since the development of Freshman English in the 1880s, some conception of literacy has functioned as an indicator of success within those institutions while its absence has been associated with criminality and social abnormality.

As I’ll go on to show, however, a pedagogy linking a reconstructionist multiculturalism with some conception of high literacy, by placing the former in a dependent relationship to the latter, may reinscribe the same assimilationist desires and exclusionary effects of its earlier, “current-
traditional” counterpart. That is, expressly promoting literacy as a conceptual tool kit necessary for the awareness of critical difference and cultural change begins with literacy, rather than any other possibility, as the most crucial determinant of difference. It is, then, by and through conceptions of literacy that difference is constructed and coordinated—writing remains the ticket inside, and its ideological sorting function remains effectively obscured.

The Thematic Reader
Multiculturalism’s dominant presence in composition textbooks comes in the shape of the “thematic reader,” perhaps the most painful reminder of the field’s arhetorical, “current-traditional” past. Lacking a self-reflexive attention to questions of cognitive alteration and assimilative potential, such textbooks tend to present a conception of “good writing” that goes largely unexamined. When they link writing instruction with multiculturalism, these textbooks almost invariably subordinate reconstructionist intentions to a monocultural conception of literacy—one supposedly free of bias because it is pure bias. Little more than anthologies of essays and excerpts, thematic readers provide representations or models of preferred or idealized forms, typically the narrative essay. They also are repositories of “content,” decontextualized fodder that students discuss and then repackage into representations of the ideal. As this explanation from Writing About Diversity reveals, a reader’s “content” is determined primarily to serve the goals of the course in which it is deployed:

The topic of cultural diversity was selected because it is not only complex and controversial, but timely and relevant. Indeed, diversity has been referred to as the most significant issue of the 1990s and, as such, has been accorded widespread media attention and generated considerable controversy on college campuses. Aside from the “trendiness” of the topic, though, I believe that students should become aware of the conflicts associated with diversity in order to function effectively in an increasingly complex, multiethnic world. (Clark ix, emphasis mine)

This introductory statement appears to offer the axiology of reconstructionist multiculturalism—an attention to difference; what it does better, however, is frame multiculturalism as a trend composed of “conflicts” and “issues” that must be managed in order to “function effectively.” Difference, here, is a contested category to be explored first in order to be later administered. This implicit managerial approach to diversity and the subordination of difference to enculturation through conventional forms and practices is expressly evident in Connections: A Multicultural Reader for Writers:

Connections does much more than simply provide a collection of readings that represent various cultures. The introductory section demonstrates critical-reading and -thinking skills and suggests that these skills become
particularly important when readers encounter unfamiliar circumstances and ideas... The readings are divided into three sections, each of which offers selections exemplifying one aim of writing: expressive, explanatory, and persuasive. (Stanford v)

The notable feature of most multicultural readers, such as Writing About Diversity and Connections, is their startling uniformity. Anthologized writers appear to consider difference in remarkably similar fashion. In a very brief 1988 conference talk, Bonnie Lisle offered an example of how “multicultural” texts in thematic readers are made to appear “thoroughly assimilated—no different from the other ‘great works’ they rub shoulders with.” Lisle points to the headnote (or introduction) to Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” in The World of Ideas. Lisle explained that the book’s editor locates King’s politics in the white pacifist tradition of Thoreau, while it neglects his place in the black activist tradition of Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, and W.E.B. DuBois. The same introduction devotes a full page to explaining King’s indebtedness to the rhetorical tradition of European Christianity. (157)

Lisle goes on to catalog works of scholarship locating King in African-American rhetorical traditions that might have been included in the headnote but were not.

A decade later, such examples continue to leap off the shelf. James D. Lester’s Diverse Identities: Classic Multicultural Essays is one book in a series of NTC’s “Library of Classic Essays.” The tension between the book’s multicultural “content” and its inclusion in a series of “classic” essay collections is perhaps its greatest irony—Diverse Identities demonstrates the potential to safely define and circumscribe “multiculturalism,” and make room for it between Plato’s Heirs: Classic Essays and Classic Essays by Women. Lester’s collection begins with the same Preface that graces each volume in the series, which lays claim to “some of the finest essays ever written.” This preface locates the origin of the essay with Plato and Aristotle, celebrates its flowering at the hand of Montaigne, and its continuance through “the American Ralph Waldo Emerson and the British George Eliot” (ix). The “multicultural essay” here is “classic” precisely in terms of its capacity for assimilation. Through a formalist pedagogy the multicultural “content” can be emptied out to display the perceived power and potential of the “classic” narrative essay, as you like it: either a privileged, knowledge-producing heuristic or an elegant container for the West’s finest literary achievements.

The consolidation of multicultural “content” with the supposed ameliorative potential of literacy is often completed with a group of “multicultural” texts that praise the critical importance of literacy in the preferred form represented by the book. In Lester’s reader, this
section is titled "Classical Multicultural Essays about the Importance of Language," yet five of the seven texts are narratives specifically about the acquisition of literacy. In thematic readers, works such as Carlos Fuentes' "How I Started to Write," or Gloria Anzaldúa's "The Path of the Red and Black Ink," are flattened and homogenized to represent not difference, but similarity. Longer works are segmented or edited to represent the preferred form. Painful narratives of cultural assimilation, such as Michelle Cliff's or Richard Rodriguez', are bundled together apparently to demonstrate that, like Platonic truth, literacy is painful to come by but worth the effort.

While *Classic Multicultural Essays* is perhaps the most obvious example, thematic readers with a "multicultural content" reflect a paradigm of assimilation. The "multicultural" essays in these textbooks, implicitly pressed into service as models for student writing and having survived the powerful legitimizing process of publication, are intended to represent literate Western school culture through formal features—the dominant criteria for their inclusion; their "content" might well have been about handgun control, the legalization of recreational drugs, or doctor-assisted suicide. While the professional discourse of composition studies reflects an attention to rhetorical concerns, composition textbooks continue to privilege a narrow range of empty forms and stock strategies, and it is within these structures that all possibilities are incorporated; only when knowledge produced outside dominant-culture conceptions of literacy—myth; folktales; the "signifying" rhetoric of African American orality—is reproduced in preferred forms that it becomes legitimate. What justifies the presence of authors in these books is their ability to conceptualize their cultural experiences—or the editors' ability to shape them—in a way that implies a thoroughly assimilated standard-English speaker as audience. Implicit, at least, for students is the message that other forms of knowledge creation are not worthy of notice (Vandenberg, "Accounting").

**The "Benetton Effect" in Composition Studies**

In exploring the adaptation of a "multicultural logic" to the standard operational procedures of corporate and nonacademic entities, the Chicago Cultural Studies Group finds institutionalized *multiculturalism* too often reduced to slogan, what it calls "the Benetton effect" (115). Lacking critical content, "multiculturalism" can implicitly frame difference as something to manage or administer rather than as something to investigate. Writing textbooks that harness multiculturalism to conventional pedagogies without an exploration of difference enact the Benetton effect. The result can be a disturbingly monocultural or homogeneous impression of what constitutes "good writing." Consider, for example, Tracey Baker and Barbara Kennedy's *Writing and*
Synthesis: A Multicultural Approach to Writing. The Preface identifies this textbook as a "process-approach rhetoric" with a "multicultural aspect" or "dimension." Theoretically informed by "an information-processing perspective," the book is ordered according to two foundational assumptions: that "repetition of the writing process is important," and that "an awareness of ideas that both differ from, and are similar to, [students'] own"—what the authors call a "multicultural understanding"—is "essential" in a "world that is growing smaller" (xiii-xv). The assimilative ambitions of the book are apparent already here in the reduction of producing text to "the writing process," something that is achieved through repetition. While the authors assert the "essential" significance of difference, they will go on to demonstrate that difference has little if any impact on their pedagogy.

Writing and Synthesis is broken into eight chapters in which timely, uniquely Western constructions (Medical Ethics, The Environment) or widely-drawn categories (Religion, Humor, Education) are linked with the concept "Culture" for the purpose of providing "topics on which students are required to write" (xiv). Each of the chapters is intended to result in a processed essay, and each is divided by the same subheadings—Planning, Organizing, Drafting, Revising, and Editing. Each also contains several short, professional "essays," which are often excerpts of longer works, on the chapter's theme.

The authors situate the textbook in the "service course" tradition of composition immediately in the introduction. In positing that the majority of texts students will go on to write will be based on sources, Baker and Kennedy constrict the possibilities for writing to "academic" texts. According to the authors, the capable production of academic writing is dependent on exercises that "focus . . . on developing the higher levels of cognitive processes—comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation" (xiv). Chief among these is synthesis, and each chapter leads students toward the goal of synthesizing elements of the professional essays with their own responses to them. Teachers who have grown suspect of formulaic or prescriptive approaches to process have some reason to be encouraged by Writing and Synthesis. To the book's credit, the "Reading and Synthesizing" section of each chapter does not always appear at the same point. Sometimes the essays follow other invention strategies; sometimes the reading functions as an invention technique, either before or after students are asked to construct a rough draft.

Unfortunately, innovative thinking about process or the integration of texts and invention does not extend much further. Students are asked in the Introduction to recognize the controlling interrelationship of purpose and audience in planning an essay; decisions about both, they are told, "take the form of one sentence—the thesis statement" (17). Through repetition, it becomes apparent that a student's overriding
purpose should be to construct a thesis, and the book’s “Planning” sections seem to assume that discussion questions or invention strategies like “looping” or freewriting unproblematically culminate in a sentence that will control an essay. When they don’t—or even if they do—students are encouraged to think of audience to help define purpose. What audience is and how it should be considered, however, is much less than clear in Writing and Synthesis. Baker and Kennedy move among radically different theoretical conceptions of audience—as “real” readers who act passively as “targets,” and as the results of writers’ inventive strategies that help define intentions—without acknowledging or exploring this complexity. Most problematic is the conception of audience that goes unexplained and perhaps unconsidered. The authors suggest that decisions about purpose and audience “[u]ltimately . . . take the form of one sentence, the thesis statement.” When “the thesis statement” is figured as an indispensable element of any essay as it is here, audience becomes (or is limited to), in part at least, a discursive feature—“good writing” is wholly consistent with the formal features of an approved discourse.

Rather astonishingly, given their stated attention to respecting diversity, Baker and Kennedy’s normalizing intentions are finally explicit in their desire that students develop a non-reflexive, habitual, and uniform relationship with preferred ways of knowing. According to the authors, learning to write is accomplished through repetition of “mental processes [that] are most beneficial once they become automatic. . . . [A]utomatization of these processes does not take the work out of writing, but it does simplify some of the problems” (xiii). Rather ironically, the problems that are solved through Baker and Kennedy’s prescriptions all seem to involve erasing the possibilities of difference. In a section called “Understanding Writing” the authors announce that “writing well is not magical; it is a matter of learning and practicing skills. . . . [A]most everyone can learn to craft effective, clear essays that readers can understand” (16). Student writers, Baker and Kennedy assert, are all “in the same position” (24). Because Writing and Synthesis is “based on an information-processing model of an efficient and productive way for people to learn,” student writers “Joel Dixon, Muhammad Ahmadin, Michele Hites, and Jing-zhang Zhao” can all sit down together and search each other’s papers for information that “seems to ‘stray’ from the topic and thesis” (249). All this comes after the disturbingly elemental—yet effectively clear—Introduction on “Culture,” which sums up with the observation that “[o]ne way to understand the word culture, then, is to acknowledge that people of different nationalities perceive and react to situations differently” (4).

No one associated with this project seems to have noticed that the authors’ theoretical frame and the pedagogy it supports do not at all
mesh with what they call a “multicultural perspective.” Indeed, they directly contradict each other. While the readings in the book are ostensibly about understanding cultural difference and negotiating it with respect, their prescriptions for student writers both depend on and promote an alarming conceptual uniformity—one expected, no less, to become automatic. Baker and Kennedy are considerably more accurate, as well as ironic, in claiming that “this textbook aims to give an equal voice to all” (xv). The serious problem with this textbook is not the authors’ definition of multiculturalism, nor even their rather uninspired articulation of process pedagogy, it is the yawning gap between the two that students and teachers are apparently expected to ignore. Lacking a considered articulation of their informing sources, information processing and multiculturalism, their book buckles with one of the central tenets of Baker and Kennedy’s pedagogy—synthesis. Writing and Synthesis will strike some as what the historian Gary Nash has called “the powdered sugar approach”; multicultural content sprinkled over “the same old cake” (qtd. in Landers 686).

“Translation” or Assimilation?
In a genre analysis of 212 texts found in three different multicultural readers published during the late 1980s, Nancy Shapiro determined that well over 90 percent could be described as personal narratives—stories of maturation fully realized in the telos of Western literacy standards. Its “classical” essayistic implications aside, however, the personal narrative has been reframed in many composition pedagogies as a foundational writing exercise. On the assumption that narrative is easier, less intimidating, the personal essay is typically a tune-up leading to persuasion or “transactional” writing—writing with sources in support of an argumentative thesis. Such sequential writing pedagogies concentrate on weaning students off narration and on text-based activities that mean business in dominant-culture institutions: “to write to inform or persuade; to work with subject matter that is outside of personal experience; to gather and organize raw materials, shaping them into discourse that accomplishes something” (Farr and Daniels 56-57). Writing instruction, then, is figured as a sort of cultural negotiation in which students and teacher become aware of differences while swapping narratives; multicultural course content is proposed as a “bridge between home and academic cultures” (Buffington and Cai 160). “[T]eachers need to structure learning experiences,” Terry Dean suggests, “that both help students write their way into the university and help teachers learn their way into student cultures” (23). No doubt more explicitly than some teachers would like, Dean others student “cultures” against the one represented by the university. The bridge metaphor works, of course, only if one is willing to first accept a gulf
of separation. And of critical importance here is that teachers appear to only read and listen while students must “write their way” across the bridge and “into the University.”

It is in this sequencing or bridge building that the assimilative potential of high literacy training is most contestable. Students are expressly taught to abstract, analyze, reconstruct, and reconceive their pre-college “cultural” experiences, yet those who propose such pedagogies sometimes deny the capacity of higher-order cognitive processes to disrupt or conceptually alter “primary-culture” orientations. It is in these pedagogies that two powerful axiologies, or theories of value, collide. Writing teachers who employ such pedagogies deeply value the possibilities of a culture attentive to multiple manifestations of difference; however, they also are deeply committed to transformative critical processes that well may abstract and assimilate differences into a public space where they risk neutralization or absorption within business-as-usual. Given that the critical mental operations are understood to be anterior to the promise of a multicultural society, the student is initially and unavoidably subject to the diagnostic gaze of the teacher who will mediate her capacity to contribute to cultural change.

Deborah Dixon’s *Writing Your Heritage: A Sequence of Thinking, Reading, and Writing Assignments* is just such a pedagogy, one that on reflection produces considerable slippage between its aims for respecting and promoting cultural diversity and the homogenizing effects of its writing pedagogy. This short text promotes a complete course outline, a sequence of assignments that, according to the author, “expands the students’ cognitive powers and prepares them to think through and write about difficult problems when they are asked to do so in other academic courses” (36). Although students begin by writing free-style descriptions of their families’ oral histories, the stated goal of the course is “[t]o help the students cross over from personal writing to cognitive writing” (2). Citing James Moffett, Dixon suggests that “reportage and research represent an important bridge between personal writing and transpersonal writing” (2).

In an invention assignment that precedes the first formal essay, students are asked, “tell what characteristic habit or feature of your personality seems to have come most directly from your ethnic, national, or familial origins” (9). Yet while the students are being asked to consider heritage, the assignment sequence makes it clear that such experience is appropriately understood and communicated through the “rhetorical modes”—description, narration, exposition, and persuasion. Already by the second formal assignment students are told that heritage can be packaged and disseminated in a fashion alien to personal experience. Even narration, the mode most often assumed to characterize student’s communicative capacity, becomes something foreign, an
act requiring displacement; they are required to abstract themselves as narrators necessarily attentive to conventions of genre. Heritage, the concrete or tangible experiences called for in the early invention writing, is transmuted into an abstract, mental construct—historiography on a “topic”:

What you are attempting to do is . . . create a narrative history—not a story, but a telling of an historical event from a subjective point of view . . . . Students put away all notes and books, and using only a brief outline, write everything they know about their topic in fifty minutes. This difficult, even painful, process helps students to clarify what they know. (21)

It is not insignificant that this process is described as painful; students are asked to accept as clarification a retrofitting of their stories. By the time students reach the final assignment in the sequence, their lived experience and family histories are subsumed to the task of advancing a position on the generalized category of heritage itself.

Like Baker and Kennedy, Dixon doesn’t consider the disjunction between her intention to allow students to “express their individual identities . . . through the exploration of a subject that belongs to [them]” (49) and the pedagogical goal of “building the academic skills and self-confidence they need to progress from academic ‘outsiders’ to privileged ‘insiders’ of the university community” (51). While it would be suspect to say that a student somehow “owned” her heritage either before or after this sequence, one can safely say that if Dixon’s goal for each assignment is achieved—“to enlarge the student’s powers of thinking, organizing, and expressing ideas”—any sense of that pre-literate heritage has been unmistakably altered.

Dixon begins her text with an epigraph taken from My Le:

Heritage is not some little trinkets that one gets from one's great-grandmother. Nor is it material possessions that one gets from a will. Heritage is physical traits, mannerisms, attitudes, tastes, and customs that people inherit from past generations.

Ironically, she doesn’t consider that her own heritage and its will to high literacy appropriates the attitudes, tastes, and customs of her students, recasting them in its own image. Dixon’s short textbook reads like a detailed explication of the claim Richard Rodriguez makes about Alex Haley’s Roots: “That book tells us more about [Haley’s] difference from his illiterate tribal ancestors than it does about his link to them . . . . The child who learns to read about his nonliterate ancestors necessarily separates himself from their way of life” (227).

I invoke Rodriguez here because he figures prominently in Mary Soliday’s College English article, “Translating Self and Difference Through Literacy Narratives.” Soliday offers a pedagogy that revolves
around autobiographical storytellings “that foreground issues of language acquisition and literacy” (513). Soliday differs markedly from Dixon, and Baker and Kennedy, in one important respect. She defines the successful literacy narrative as a “deliberately constructed rendering of experience” that necessitates a “dynamic sense of the autobiographical self” (512), a “narrative agency” that allows writers to “articulate the meanings and the consequences of their passages between language worlds” (511); however, drawing on the literacy narrative of one of her students, Soliday wants to insist that the process of abstracting a “new sense of self” (518) from a writing pedagogy does not infect one’s relationship to a primary discursive order. Soliday’s argument emerges through liberal quotations from the writing of one of her students, Alisha. Yet there is considerable ontological discord between Soliday’s description of Alisha’s “negotiated self” (518) and Alisha’s own description of a unified, solitary consciousness. Alisha reduces to simple mimicry and imitation Rodriguez’ complicity in his assimilation, his desire to, as he puts it, “be like my teachers, to possess their knowledge, to assume their authority” (55). Despite Soliday’s stated awareness that Alisha’s “I” is multiple and constructed, Alisha essentializes herself and Rodriguez as unified, self-motivated subjects: “I totally disagree with [Rodriguez’] motives to imitate others. When you imitate others, you’re a stranger to yourself, because you do not possess your own ideas” (519).

It is unclear to what extent Alisha’s experience as an African American woman attending college in the early 1990s is comparable to Rodriguez’ experiences as a bilingual child born to Mexican immigrants in the late 1940s. It is clear, however, that Alisha emerges from Soliday’s class with a strong ideological orientation to dominant-culture institutions. Ultimately, Soliday’s pedagogy is subsumed under the trope of negotiation; “[Alisha] concludes that she has begun to develop a new sense of self that allows her to negotiate the complex demands of her cultural situation in mature ways” (518). As Thomas West points out, though, negotiation always implies congruity with dominant power structures, those that invariably delimit the strategies, protocol, and procedures of negotiation. In this case, Alisha emerges “mature” in that she possesses a strong social orientation, a vigorous belief in a unitary self and personal responsibility, and an unflagging desire to deny the constructive potential of her educational experience. “Whenever I learn something new,” Alisha writes, “I process the information for my own benefit” (qtd. in Soliday 518). Despite Soliday’s protests, it is difficult to imagine a more thoroughly assimilated college student than Alisha. Soliday presents, celebrates, and defends the transformative potential of translational/critical literacy, and then chooses not to find its effects. She claims to give her students the tools to build a bridge between cultures, and then wants to make the tools disappear.
A Conclusion

The postcolonial heritage of Western education—to adjust those outside the cultural mainstream to dominant conceptions of productivity and preferred economic and social relationships—appears to be tremendously resilient. For many, the “American University” continues to sustain a legacy of systematic oppression, functioning as a mechanism of homogenization, a site where non-dominant others are pulled into negotiation and, therefore, conceptual alignment with dominant-culture institutions; a place where differences are called out into the open and absorbed, where alternate ways of knowing, of seeing the world, are erased or neutralized.

Surely, however, no particular field of study appears to its practitioners as such a cold and involuntary ideological apparatus. And this is likely why, as John Willinsky points out, the residual colonizing functions of specific educational domains await a fuller accounting. As I have shown, the institution of college writing instruction has routinely hierarchized the student population according to whatever conception of textual literacy is dominant; however, the evolving definition of literacy is always accompanied by a deep-seated belief in its ameliorative guarantee. We tend to see a less benevolent disciplinary face only in the rearview mirror. The early Harvard writing program of Berlin’s critique and the 1950 edition of McCrimmon’s Writing With a Purpose look bad in retrospect, but our own intense idealism about literacy masks its assimilative function in the present. Even the promotion of “powerful literacy,” control of a “meta-discourse to critique . . . dominant discourses” (Gee 8), can be seen as a simple demonstration of the pliability of dominant discourses. An evolving definition of literacy functions in composition studies like a trustworthy set of disciplinary high-beams—lighting a path determined by institutional momentum, blinding us to the shadows created by our own pattern of illumination. This is surely what Stuckey calls the ideology of literacy, an instrument of awesome consequence, one so powerful it legitimates itself. Trying to dampen its glow only strengthens it. When we’re thinking about our own high literacy we’re using it. When we’re not thinking about it we’re still using it in some thoroughly integrated sense, like the map in the glove box we never unfold because we know so well the narrow roads we travel.

Whether one defines literacy as a simple ability to decode a preferred religious text according to convention, or as a complex set of metacognitive operations such as those identified by Miles Myers, it will unavoidably mean what it takes, or what it should take, to function within dominant-culture institutions. Whatever else we also do as writing teachers and theorists, we reproduce privilege. Even oppositional, liberatory, and critical pedagogies, by reflecting the deeply embedded civil-society values of their agents and the sorting function
of the institution in which they are allowed to appear, necessitate that even resistance is learned through patterns of conformity to dominant-culture values. Definitions of literacy have always been synchronized with the technologies, knowledge, and ideals of dominant-culture institutions; it is this that makes them valuable, desirable. In linking *multiculturalism* with *literacy*, composition's textbooks and scholarship implicitly make the promises of the former (whatever they are said to be) crucially dependent on the latter. Thus, literacy constitutes a mechanism of composition *and* a yardstick for preferred competencies—whether those competencies are, say, critical analysis or a tolerance for difference. When yoked to the sorting process by which one does or does not acquire writing, a primary means of cultural production, the transformative potential of multiculturalism is fully tamed.

Despite composition's growing interest in the normalizing influences of institutional power, its scholarship reflects a tendency to further delimit categories of literacy rather than investigate the enculturating function of mass literacy training. Its teaching tools tend to misunderstand preferred literacies as somehow divorced from the problems they are meant to address. We ought never become comfortable and complacent at the cultural center or about the consolidating function we serve there, but we must be careful not to imagine ourselves somewhere else, serving wholly different ends. As academic authors, compositionists might continue to explore the ideology of literacy at work in our own scholarly machinery—particularly the role writing serves in indexing writing faculty (Vandenberg, “Composing”). As teachers, we might help students more critically examine any claims, including those of multiculturalism, that propose cultural rehabilitation through dominant literacies.

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**Notes**

1 See, for example, Trimbur; Myers; Vandenberg and Morrow.
2 Parts of this section were first published as a book review; see Vandenberg, Rev. of *Writing and Synthesis*.

**Works Cited**


Heilker, Paul, and Peter Vandenberg, eds. *Keywords in Composition Studies*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1996.


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Kinneavy Award Winners Announced

The James L. Kinneavy Award for the most outstanding essay in volume 18 of JAC was awarded to Susan C. Jarratt for "Beside Ourselves: Rhetoric and Representation in Postcolonial Feminist Writing"

The award is generously endowed by Professor Kinneavy, Blumberg Centennial Professor at the University of Texas, and was presented by Professor Kinneavy at the meeting of the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition at the CCCC Convention in Atlanta.