Review Essays

The Turn to Social Class in Rhetoric and Composition: Shifting Disciplinary Identities

James Thomas Zebroski

Disciplines constitute a system of control in the production of discourse, fixing its limits through the action of an identity taking the form of a permanent reactivation of the rules.

—Michel Foucault

Education cannot compensate for society.

—Basil Bernstein

If I must be a gatekeeper, and if all teachers are by definition, I at least insist on my right to imagine a more inclusive America than the America projected by the most recent purveyors of common sense.

—Linda Brodkey

Since at least the 1970s, when the work of Richard Ohmann and Ira Shor, among others, began to point out the ways in which English (and the work that English accomplishes) is part of a wider hegemony that keeps capitalism in place in the United States with the consent of the ruled, there has been a general disciplinary acknowledgment that reading and writing have social class connections. Such social class connections seemed

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especially visible in rhetoric and composition, which was still very much a part of English in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but was in the process of shifting its rationale during this period and emerging as a discipline. Throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, rhetoric and composition mostly inculcated a citizen rhetoric that made students aware of the abuses of English in the public sphere as well as in the disciplinary domain (sociology and the social sciences in general were the frequent object of critique). This citizen’s rhetoric, promulgated by critics including George Orwell in his “Politics and the English Language,” fit well with close scrutiny of language then current in New Critical literary study.¹ There was a fit between the New Critical call for a public who could read a page, as one critic phrased it, and the wider purpose of critiquing propaganda and educating a citizenry for democracy. The abuse of the language was seen as the necessary forerunner of political oppression; writing instruction much influenced by New Criticism had as its primary rationale to make public such abuses and to engage students in writing prose that avoided these abuses and instead put forward “little” versions of New Critical ideals of clarity, coherence, unity, but also what one popular textbook of the time called a critical discrimination, indicated by a critical or even ironic tone (Brooks and Warren).

However, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, rhetoric and composition’s function in English began to shift. While the citizen rhetoric remained in place for awhile in the freshman English course, the newly created basic writing course started from another premise. The new population of college students (brought to university not only by open admissions, but also by greatly increased federal and state aid to those from the working class) needed help getting ready for college-level work, so the thinking went; the basic writing course had as its purpose to prepare the unprepared for work at university, some might say to begin to bring the working class into the middle class at least in a small way on campus. The concept of academic discourse was born in such social class circumstances in the late 1970s as a way of thinking about what it was that the basic writing course offered that the basic writers did not apparently have, but needed. Academic discourse became one term in the accepted binary of academic discourse versus basic writing, providing the new rationale for the BW course.
Time passed. By the late 1980s, rhetoric and composition, including freshman composition (note the change in its name), as a whole had been restructured with this second goal in mind. The old citizen rhetoric, which was directed to all students and which witnessed to the unique contribution that English as a discipline made to the public sphere, largely disappeared in composition, and the concept of academic discourse with its implicit valorization of middle-class language—and values—dominant at university had been constructed to provide a new rationale for teaching rhetoric and composition at every level, not simply in the general education first-year courses. Rhetoric and composition by 1990 through its new raison d’etre of being academic discourse provider—not different in kind from the cable television or Internet providers in a post-Fordist environment—became more visibly associated with social class and the hopes for social class mobility. Every time academic discourse was invoked, social class was—and is—at work.

Yet as Lynn Z. Bloom more than a decade ago noted, there was (even during the 1990s when political and theoretical critiques were more acceptable than they currently are) a curious and surprising absence of research on social class and writing. Given that social class was at the heart of the new rationale for teaching writing, and given that most scholars in rhetoric and composition acknowledged—when pressed—the centrality of social class, this absence was profound. With a few important exceptions to be sure—one being the special issue of *College English* on social class published in November 2004—social class, while acknowledged to be important to the work of the newly constituted rhetoric and composition, was not the hot new topic in research and scholarship. Despite the fact that concepts such as academic discourse are drenched in social class values, as is the pedagogy associated with its twenty-five-year hegemony, social class has been the elephant in the living room, the absent presence, the family secret, the tabu. Yet two new books that have just come out may help to begin to change this. *Who Says? Working-Class Rhetoric, Class Consciousness, and Community*, edited by William DeGenaro, and *Defying the Odds: Class and the Pursuit of Higher Literacy*, by Donna Dunbar-Odom, will give hope to scholars in rhetoric and composition who have been laboring for decades trying to raise social class on the disciplinary radar screen. These are by no means
perfect books, yet the fact that they raise social class as an issue worthy of research and scholarship in the discipline makes pale their inadequacies. That publishers such as University of Pittsburgh Press and State University of New York Press are committing to these books makes one hope that perhaps rhetoric and composition is about to initiate a turn to social class.

The books are quite different except for their focus on social class. The *Who Says?* book is an anthology that focuses on rhetoric—and *not* composition—and as such straddles several disciplines, prominently communication, English, management, and cultural studies. However, unlike most anthologies, each essay is strong and the quality of the collection overall is even and high, as is the quality of writing in *Defying the Odds*, a single-authored book, which, in contrast to *Who Says?*, is squarely in the discipline and derives its rigorous method from one of the major "schools" in composition. *Defying the Odds* is both a long meditation and a working through of the sources on literacy and class, many of which have been central in the discipline. So the *Who Says?* book looks outward at rhetoric and social class in more traditional areas of study, including revisionist histories, workplace analyses, and popular culture critiques. The works cited of each essay are worth the price of the book, for they indicate a rich matrix of studies outside of composition, especially in speech communication, that have acknowledged the importance of social class for quite a while. *Defying the Odds*, in contrast, looks inward at the narratives that mostly rhetoric and composition people, working-class folks, and their students tell themselves about literacy and the crossing from the working class to university and, presumably, to middle-class culture. Finally, *Who Says?* is, including the editor's essay, a collection of sixteen different studies that come out of the larger, mostly empirical research projects that these scholars are involved in. The rigor and depth of these larger projects, which entail intensive observations, video and audiotaping, gleaning of archives, analyses of volumes of transcripts, and other methodological labor, are impressive. The diversity of research approaches to social class itself is exemplary. *Defying the Odds*, obviously, is more focused, examining in depth the key sources from which the author wrings her voice and, in doing so, locates her position on social class and writing,
specifically her view of those who defy the odds in making the crossing.

What the two volumes do share aside from their topic is that they are research books. One will not go to these books to find new practices for teaching, nor will one probably glean any insights that will help one administer writing programs or WAC programs. In other words, these books resist the will to service so otherwise prominent in rhetoric and composition. But also they resist theory. While it is true that some of the essays in the *Who Says?* volume mention theory in their critique of representations, whether of memorials or histories or popular culture, and while it is true that Dunbar-Odom in her first chapter briefly situates her argument against those of Althusser and Gramsci and others, neither *Who Says?* nor *Defying* is a theory book per se; nor do they pretend to be. Rather, what one gets with these books are important research and scholarly studies of social class that are immersed in their “data” and are careful and rigorous in their approach. Let me now specify a bit more what each book does.

The range of the *Who Says?* anthology is indicated by the topics the essays investigate, which include rich, evocative, and moving historical accounts of strikes at the start of the twentieth century, the increasingly relevant rhetoric of migrant farm workers and a sort of discourse analysis of their narratives, the rhetoric of the long-haul trucker and of miners, the rhetoric of popular culture representations of working class in reality television shows like *Extreme Makeover* or *Manor House*, the rhetoric of fatness on television shows like those of Roseanne Barr or an early Anna Nicole Smith, the rhetoric of comic books used by the CIA in the 1930s and 1940s to educate and organize, and the rhetoric of ethnographies on the culture of the working class. Even though I would enjoy going through each of its essays, because of space limitations, I will briefly look more closely at just five of the essays in this anthology to give the reader some sense of the project the book forwards.

William DeGenero, the book's editor, provides an overview of this project in his “Introduction: What Are Working Class Rhetorics?” Too often the study of rhetoric, according to DeGenaro, has taken “the form of the study of elite figures, communities, traditions, and tropes” (1); this book he hopes
will move rhetorical inquiry in new directions and empower more
class-conscious scholars to theorize the intersections of rhetoric
and social class, to pursue historical-archival research in working-
class settings, to conduct ethnographic studies of working-class
communities, to focus critical eyes on popular culture phenomena
germane to working-class life, to conduct workplace studies, and
to critique both academic and everyday institutions with class-
conscious vigor. (6)

Drawing on critiques, pioneered by James Berlin and Thomas Miller, of
the social class bias of Aristotle and his subsequent Western rhetoric,
and work in the alternative rhetorics movement, DeGenero issues a call
for broadening and deepening rhetoric with studies of working class. To
accomplish this, DeGenaro divides the collection into three equal parts,
each with five essays: “Part I: Toward a Working-Class Rhetorical
Tradition”; “Part II: Rhetorics of the Workplace”; “Part III: Rhetorical
Critiques of Working-Class Pop Culture.”

Some of the most moving essays in the book are the revisionist
histories and, particularly, accounts of the movement to memorialize the
way of life that has basically been eradicated in the Rust Belt stretching
around the Great Lakes and across the heartland. This region, industrial-
ized along Fordist lines about a century ago, has never recovered from the
shift to a post-Fordist service economy twenty-five years ago and, in fact,
is in much worse shape now than it was during the Great Depression; the
region has basically been abandoned not only by business and global
capital, but also by the federal government, and as Anthony Esposito
notes, by the national media. James V. Catano in his essay “Articulating
the Values of Labor and Laboring: Civic Rhetoric and Heritage Tourism”
traces the still existing conflicts between those who want to put up pretty
tourist attractions and malls in Homestead, Pennsylvania, site of a famous
steel strike in 1892, commemorated by a pro-labor monument in 1941,
and those whose lives in the late 1970s and early 1980s were shattered by
the shut down of the mills and the end of that way of life. The decision
about what sort of memorial or monument, if any, to construct is
embodied as a contradiction between profit and people, between the need
to go forward, to “move on”—whatever that signifies—and the work of
mourning and memorializing. This contradiction is nowhere better por-
Catano notes, "For retired workers the only proper memorial rhetoric for such devastation is that of bereavement or, if not that, then erasure of the source of trauma. All other heritage rhetorics—historical, archival, political, commercial—attempt to keep the past alive and are thus untrue to the experience of the loss" (29). Catano's tracing of the contradictions in constructing what appears to be a simple memorial points to the complications at work in this important work to preserve this passing working-class heritage. Class struggle isn't over because the factories and mills are dead or dying; such struggle is intimately involved in the work we do, including the work we do in representing workers and working-class culture. One characteristic, which runs across Catano's but also many of the other essays in this volume that focus on worker heritage, is a prevalence of working-class voices. There are a lot of quotes, often block quotes, where workers are given a chance to speak—not simply to us, but to any who would read this work. Perhaps this is the greatest contribution we can make—and one reason oral histories are highly regarded—yet, as we realize, even representing the exact words of others is no neutral act removed from social class. The ethics of representation of working-class voices comes to the forefront as a chief issue for future work in working-class rhetorics.

One essay that would warn us of the dangers of a pluralist, individualist liberal approach to this task of representing working-class folks and which would ask us to question the altruism of our discipline is the essay "Unsettling Working-Class Commonplaces in Jane Addams' Settlement House Rhetoric" by Melissa J. Fiesta. In this essay Fiesta looks closely at the rhetoric of Jane Addams in her settlement house project in Chicago...
among new immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century. What Fiesta finds, surprisingly, given the still hagiographic response toward Addams in the general cultural, is a rhetoric that is often at odds certainly with union organizers and socialists, but also with the immigrants her settlement house altruistically served. To be sure, the lives of the immigrants were better with than without the settlement house and Addams, but there was a price to pay. Fiesta discovers a focus on similarities across immigrant cultures, an erasure of the specific cultures, an American nativism that heavily buys into total acculturation of the melting pot sort, in which immigrants are expected to give up their languages, their cultures, their heritage, all done in the name of America and altruism toward the human race. While one needs to be very careful of projecting our values on the past and finding the past deficient, what struck me about this essay was the relevance of this analysis to our current national debate both about immigration (and its mostly unspoken connection to post-Fordism capitalism) and to the altruism of recent moves in the discipline toward service learning and community service as composition. Is it possible to put forward such projects and not be bound by the liberal rhetoric that moved Addams? Does such an ideology efface differences in its very altruism? (Fiesta 85). Fiesta notes, “Unfortunately, this American settlement house rhetoric also demonstrates how Addams’s class-conscious commonplaces settle for, rather than disrupt, mainstream commonplaces” (85). Where does service cross the line and become charity, at least in the eyes of the (most often) working class and poor recipients of this activity? And finally, when does service in the name of altruism become free, unpaid labor for capitalism?

One of the great things about reading a volume devoted to rhetoric rather than simply composition is that communication rather than written words per se are the focus and that rhetorical focus can look at silence or simply the absence of words in a communicative act. As people committed to various degrees to middle-class culture and as folks who have spent decades studying words, we tend to assume that words are always good and the more words, the better. Yet as Dale Cyphert shows in “Rhetoric on the Concrete Pour: The Dance of Decision Making,” this is not always the case. A study of working-class rhetoric decenters our word-focused, some might say, word-obsessed, mind-set. The farthest thing from my
mind when I began this book was that an essay on the rhetoric of concrete pouring would be of much interest to me. What I found as I dutifully read through it, however, was an eloquent and fascinating account of a construction crew that puts in driveways, horse barn floors, porches, and such in the Omaha area. In a data-rich analysis of the crew, which was shadowed, observed, audiotaped, and videotaped by the author, we discover a different kind of work than we are used to at university. The work involves a fluid task, a kind of dance or embodied (one might say concrete) poem, that uses collective memory of the crew but that also stresses egalitarianism among the crew. The task is nonverbal, at least as the task is proceeding. In a study that verges on and cites Vygotskian activity theory, but in some ways is much better, Cyphert composes what can only be called a beautiful account of collective and contextualized decision-making that always stresses the equality of each person on the team. Also, unlike our usual work settings, the less talk the better at the concrete pour; in fact, talk most often indicates the process has gone terribly awry. The fewer words during the activity, the better. Communication is made through nonverbal and physical movements, almost a ballet, which are part of collective memory that is fed by the crews’ narration of the job among themselves after the job. The rhetoric of the workers at the concrete pour raises all kinds of questions about our most venerable assumptions about rhetoric and language. Cyphert notes:

This practice is not an abdication of rhetorical process, however, but a rhetorical process that protects and encourages autonomous decision making. The work group’s communication does not conform well to the Western model of rhetoric, which puts a premium on agonistic displays to identify the “best” solution. Instead, the resources of each individual’s knowledge are protected in a problem-solving process of constantly shifting directions that capitalizes on whatever resources are immediately at hand. (153)

The last essay I want to look at is Kermit Campbell’s “The Rhetoric of ‘I Have a Dream’: The Remix,” which examines Hip-hop music and contexts of appropriation—both in terms of the too frequent misappropriations of Martin Luther King’s rhetoric by conservatives to make arguments like those against affirmative action (which clearly contradict
King’s intent) but also in terms of the appropriation by Hip-hop artists of the culture of the current urban working class. By deeply contextualizing his “playing” of Hip-hop in both that world and in its middle-class world, Campbell looks closely at the rhetoric of DMX, especially his song, “Who We Be.” However, this is much more than a literary analysis; it is an intensive layering of interpretations that not only attends to the words of “Who We Be” but also to the visuals on the video, which begins with a shot of the 1963 March on Washington, the setting for King’s “Dream” speech. While too often assumed to be only exemplars of the discourse of race, Hip-hop and DMX, Campbell shows, are more complicated than that: their songs are as much about the working class, the ghetto underclass, “a great cultural divide based as much on class as on race; on race and class remixed” (230). Eminem’s film 8 Mile is one example of the tendency to “remix,” one might say, deconstruct race (and class) in the postmodern identity that Hip-hop privileges. Campbell shows us that “Hip-hop’s rhetors are also inventing or reinventing whiteness, a whiteness that depends on ghetto blackness for legitimacy in the increasingly vast sphere of global Hip-hop culture. So, in a way, Hip-hop’s whiteness conflicts with ‘white’ as a transcendental signifier” (235).

But Campbell goes further, making material and class connections as well, arguing that this fits with a postmodern (and I would add a post-Fordist) identity:

However, the remaining lyrics of the song suggest something less dichotomous, a less singular identity for both “we” and “they.” In fact, “Who We Be” may well signify a postmodern conception of identity—fragmented, contradictory, yet inclusive and, thus, extraordinarily close to reality. By virtue of its rejection of the rhetoric of sameness, “Who We Be” can also be read as a marker of class identity and consciousness, a radical proposition that our culture does not distribute resources and material goods equally. Indeed, Hip-hop music frequently takes up this very trope—a trope of lower working-class consciousness, a critique of material life in the post-I Have a Dream society in which we live. (229)

Campbell’s essay thus attends to working-class voices that sadly have too often been missing from scholarly work on class. Working-class studies and class studies in general do not do a very good job with race. It is the
one area in this movement that is still troubled and where silences are still “loud.” While there have been some changes in this regard from the scholarship produced in the 1970s on class, particularly Kefalas’ recent *Working-Class Heroes*, which does broach the question of race in a white working-class Chicago neighborhood, too often when one thinks of studies on working class, one thinks of *white* working class when in fact the working class was “remixed” racially from the start, certainly by the time of Fordist industrialization. Even in Catano’s essay on the Homestead memorials, race is at issue “inside of” class. Catano mentions almost in passing that

Kimberly Andrews, whose father worked and was severely injured in the mills, speaks of her concern over the SIHC [Steel Industry Heritage Corporation] tour’s elision of references to the consent decree signed by the USW [United Steel Workers] and U.S. Steel in which both organizations admitted to systematic discriminatory practices against African Americans. (22)

That decree, according to Andrews, ought to be part of the tour. Let’s face it—too much of white working-class culture during the days of prosperity from the 1950s through the 1970s was racist. This needs to be acknowledged, and work to heal this violence needs to be supported. In some respects, Campbell’s focus on Hip-hop as race/class remixed helps us to both begin to deal with race inside of class studies and to think in a new way about both of these categories. This will become an urgent task especially for rhetoric and composition, if it isn’t already, as our student populations in university become far more diverse in terms of culture, race, and class over the next decade or so. But perhaps most importantly, Campbell’s essay reminds us that not only Hip-hop but also other working-class rhetorics are material. The gap between rich and poor ever increases; the middle class continues to slide. Despite rosy media coverage of the economy, real prosperity remains mostly in a few power centers and not “out here in the field.” The study of working-class rhetorics can begin to make this material reality visible and perhaps lead to cross-class and cross-culture economic alliances.

It is no doubt obvious by now that this reviewer sees *Who Says?* as a welcome collection, one a long time coming. It certainly is accessible
to undergraduates and could be used as a core textbook in undergraduate courses on working-class rhetoric—which we should have more of. But more importantly, the book will provide graduate students, especially doctoral students, with a resource that demonstrates the legitimacy of such work for dissertations as well as provides specific topics for further investigation and sanctioned methods—including textual analysis and interpretation, discourse analysis, revisionist histories and geneologies, case studies, and ethnographies—for accomplishing such work. When one adds theory to one’s reading of the collection, one has a toolkit of methods to make social class visible and to make, hopefully, a permanent place in English for the study of working-class rhetorics.

Donna Dunbar-Odom’s book *Defying the Odds* provides the reader with quite another approach than the more social science driven *Who Says?*. In her book, Dunbar-Odom brings together a set of mostly canonical sources—if one can speak of literacy narratives and working-class narratives as canonical (which I think one can in composition)—and works through them adding her own voice and the voices of her students to this interweaving. It is a complex book that resists a straightforward formulation as thesis, claims, warrants and evidence, since the enactment of the journey through the sources and the subsequent positioning of the author by that performance as a whole is the argument. The book performs the act of locating the writer among the sources, positioning the writer’s views and experiences among those she reads. And it is a long list of people whom she reads in each chapter. A few of the notables are literacy (and narrative) researchers such as Jerome Bruner, Shirley Brice Heath, Deborah Brandt, Annette Lareau, and James Collins and Richard Blot; literacy narrators such as Frederick Douglass, Mike Rose, Richard Rodriguez, Linda Brodkey, and Victor Villanueva, but also Michael Awkward, Anna Quindlen, Sharon Jean Hamilton, and narrators of the journey from working class to university and beyond, including Rick Bragg, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, and Alfred Lubrano, among many others. Additionally, there is ample explication of relevant portions of the work of scholars at, from, or associated with what I here will call the Pittsburgh School of composition, including Joseph Harris, Richard E. Miller, Min-Zhan Lu, and David Bartholomae. What Dunbar-Odom shares with these
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scholars, aside from the community at Pittsburgh where she did her doctoral work, is a method that I will say more about shortly.

Dunbar-Odom starts this project with a puzzlement. She is interested in the why of higher literacy. Why do folks take up this literacy against all the odds? Why do they come to university and stay and survive, even thrive, when all the social science predictors would lead us to believe that highly unlikely if not impossible? Why do they beat the odds? She puts it this way:

My concern in writing this book is not with judging what constitutes successful literate practices; my concern is with the why of literate behavior—specifically, why do some of us pursue higher literacy with almost single-minded devotion. In particular, I am interested in viewing higher literacy through the lens of class. My interest arises from my twenty-plus years as a teacher of composition who continues to be puzzled by why some students succeed and others fail. My interest is further complicated and motivated by my own literacy history as a child of working-class parents whose interests in higher literacy were minimal and who found my passion for increased literacy and higher education perplexing at best. (3)

One of the best things about this book is that Dunbar-Odom interweaves her story of class crossing and literacy acquisition with those of her students. The book is as respectful of student stories as it is of those scholars. Given that there can be a panopticon effect when research overly focuses on those without power, it is to Dunbar-Odom’s great credit that an ethic prevails through the entire book, one that is not only careful with student writing, and respectful, but also appreciative, indicative of one who fully believes that students can teach us, the teachers, something important. And this is what she offers to the (teacher) reader:

This project seeks to expand what teachers know about their students’ as well as their own reading and writing to enable them to see in more complex ways what impedes or motivates their students’ acquisition of higher literacy. I want to learn more about what turns so many students off from reading and writing as they work their ways through high school and college. I want to know more of what worked for students who make it to college ready to tackle the more demanding literacy we require of them. I am
particularly interested in the stories students from nonmainstream backgrounds tell because the scholarship in my field and my own experience as a teacher of composition (with more than seven years as a teacher of basic writing in addition to eleven years as a teacher of "regular" first-year writing courses) shows me that these students are the ones who struggle most painfully in the process of acquiring higher literacy. (17)


While it is a complex book, what Dunbar-Odom basically does is, first, extensively define and situate some important terms, especially literacy and higher literacy (although it is interesting that by the book’s end literacy seems to really be literature and maybe even great literature if we take her Oprah proposal literally). Social class is not so extensively defined; when used, it usually signifies culture, occupation, education (first-generation college students), and to a lesser extent, group affiliation. However, Defying the Odds most importantly retells and then analyzes both literacy narratives from the scholars, from her, and from her students, as well as class narratives about the crossing. This is the heart of the book in chapters four and five. What Dunbar-Odom discovers is that our students’ literacy narratives are nearly the opposite of ours and those of our graduate students and that these students’ narratives—as well as those who have successfully made the class crossing and later written about it—stress stories and metaphors of literacy as obstacle and obstruction, and at their most positive tend to be ambivalent. There are important exceptions to this, of course, one being a student whose family immigrated from Mexico to the USA. One can speculate the immigrant narratives will necessarily be different. But the student stories and metaphors more often are not so positive. They often, accurately and passionately, bewail the high stakes testing that makes no allowance for students who do not do well taking tests, while at the same time affirming in the strongest possible terms that they are entirely responsible for their
own individual success (or failure); there is no intimation of a systemic or social failure in these narratives or their metaphors. Hegemony, the consent of the governed, rules. At least, officially. At least in the writing our students provide for us. At best, some students describe literacy as a means to a goal—as a wrong-shaped key to a door, as a puzzle, as a medicine (cough medicine, in fact) that while it tastes terrible is necessary for restored health (echoes of Plato). The working-class narratives of people who have successfully made the crossing aren’t much better. While reading and writing apart from school sometime receive high praise, literacy within school is either invisible in the narratives or a negative experience. One of the narratives Dunbar-Odom includes is that of Linda Brodkey, whose critique of both literacy in the schools and in university as increasingly rule-based stands out. Defying the Odds notes that Brodkey, when she looks back on the woman who went through school trying to win by playing by the rules, sees “not a trace of the woman who years later would write that school writing is to writing as catsup to tomatoes: as junk food to food” (qtd. in Dunbar-Odom 103). Dunbar-Odom in elaborating some of Brodkey’s other claims notes that “Brodkey makes serious charges here” and she “asks startling questions” and makes “harsh charges against our schools” (103–04). But Brodkey’s argument is not simply about the schools—it is about too much university writing instruction as well.

Dunbar-Odom claims that one of her goals is “to make the ‘trip’ more visible so all teachers may gain some sense of what fuels their students’ ambivalences in the classroom or why some may find their trips include a lot of detours along the way” (95). And this the book accomplishes well. She notes that the metaphor of escape prevails among those who have “made it.” But that, I think, was specifically true of the generation of baby boomers and the cohort right thereafter who came from the working class at a time when scholarships and loans were easier to get and when the working class was, as a whole, more prosperous. However, among even my successful students (at least in Ohio at Capital University), I found the escape metaphor less and less used; the metaphor of being saved, of something close to religious salvation, the saving crossing, dominated my generation and probably Dunbar-Odom’s as well, but it seems to be fading. When the working class provided jobs and a stable culture, it made
sense that those who chose to leave against great odds and without clear (to people in that culture) reason, would, of course, have to produce strong metaphors rationalizing their choice to leave what was secure. But over the last five or so years, at least in Ohio, what I often hear from students from the working class when they write literacy narratives or hometown descriptions or create metaphors of their experience is the feeling of what I would call the refugee, as one being forced to migrate against one’s will, often at the point of violence. There is such a thing as economic trauma and despite all the feel-good news in the major media, both middle- and working-class folks are increasingly trying to deal with the trauma of diminishing material resources, increasing around-the-clock work at jobs no one can make a living on, increasing cuts in benefits, and an economy that works only for the very rich. More than anything else, my students in Ohio just seemed shell-shocked, so busy working multiple jobs that they had little time or energy for anything else, let alone study. The crossing is no longer a crossing of salvation—it’s a crossing of forced circumstance, of the displaced person, of the homeless, of the emotionally traumatized, of nation-less refugee. It is the crossing of a people in the crossfire who are told that there will be no more jobs one can live on here in your hometown or in this state or region, and you must go. I wonder if that makes the university less a spiritual house of salvation and more a refugee camp.

Dunbar-Odom offers, following the wonderful student metaphor of literacy as bad tasting but necessary medicine, her own remedy. If students are so ambivalent if not downright turned off by higher literacy, what can be done? Dunbar-Odom presents a well-reasoned argument that the personal—not by any means expressivism, she and others insist, although that’s a pretty difficult tightrope to walk—needs to play a bigger role in our literacy work, as does a sense of collective ownership, a sense of being in this with and mutually supported by others to whom one reciprocally has some responsibilities. She forwards Oprah and Oprah’s Book Club as one model. While there will no doubt be academics who raise their eyebrows at that proposal, Dunbar-Odom does a very good job of anticipating and refuting such objections. In some ways, it is a reasonable, well-intentioned, and logical proposal, and I accept it as that.
But to back up a bit, what I find a little problematic with *Defying the Odds* is not Oprah, nor this book’s project, nor its arguments, nor the voices that are intertwined in the text, and certainly not the authorial persona of the text who earns my trust both as scholar and teacher. Rather, what worries me a bit is that previously mentioned method and some of the assumptions behind it, including the hegemony within our discipline that we are only a service provider for academic discourse. The method, of course, is classic Pittsburgh School method. One positions oneself through the selection (but also more importantly the omission) of passages of key texts. One wrings one’s own voice from those one arranges within the text. One does this in part because the entire text, how the text is enacted and unfolded, *is* the argument. The way the text unfolds (its form) is no less a part of the argument (its content). The Pittsburgh School in this sense carries over one of the most venerable beliefs of the New Critics. What has always made this approach *much more* than a mere review of the literature of the dissertation or research monograph is the further belief, which I accept, that straightforward and transparent language is less straightforward and transparent than we think, as William Coles and Theodore Baird and their colleagues long ago taught us. Language, slippery and sliding, eliding at the very moment of asserting, must be used with extreme care and acute self-awareness. However, language in this approach is also only known as the text, the marks on the page—seamless, sometimes to the point of feeling crystalline, multifaceted, cool, detached, disciplined, recursive, intertextual—a space as Barthes showed where pieces of other writings are cut, shredded, and threaded together. In other words, writing in this method is *a* reading. In fact, *writing is reading* by other means in this approach, one reason one suspects it remains (after nearly three decades) popular among so many of those who teach composition since so many (the majority?) of those who teach composition are teaching assistants, adjuncts, and instructors whose field of study is literature or creative writing and not rhetoric and composition.

Now certainly there is nothing wrong with this method. I am not suggesting that. In fact, it reproduces certain assumptions that were popular among the New Critics for nearly forty years and some aspects of this approach work out of the finest of postmodern theory. But there is
a tension if not contradiction between the acceptance of academic discourse forwarded by this method as our only rationale in teaching writing—we become the service provider to the university—and the surprise on discovering that many students, especially nonmainstream students, are not for the most part thrilled with this sort of literacy. Oprah is successful in part in her book club because she does not see her raison d’etre to be inculcating academic discourse. Dunbar-Odom in forwarding Oprah’s Book Club and anticipating the attitude of some academics toward that proposal argues, “Certainly, the discussion during episodes devoted to each book selection does not resemble a graduate seminar, but is that the model we wish to replicate?” (123). But of course, that is precisely what a basic writing (or first-year) course that requires Barthes, Geertz, Berger, Rodriguez, and other similar complex academic readings would seem to want. And that is what placing academic discourse—and being the service provider of it—at the center of our disciplinary identity seems to call for. Become like us, especially those of us who are professors and teach graduate seminars.

Now let me be crystal clear here. I am not arguing against teaching academic discourse, nor am I arguing for expressivism; nor am I saying that we shouldn’t recruit students to become like us—although I would note that there is a big difference between becoming like us and becoming us. What I am saying is that we shouldn’t be surprised that when we conceive our mission to be to show how difficult writing and reading always are and how labored our work on them always is that some students, especially students from the working class, are less than enchanted. Let’s face the reality that there are days when some of us who love this work in the discipline are less than enchanted. Students are not texts, and when we textualize them by incorporating their assignments (even with their permission) into our writing, we run the risk of seeing them only as workers producing never quite acceptable academic discourse. We miss the flesh and blood person who sits in front of us. Now I am not saying that Dunbar-Odom does this—far from it. But I do see a strong tension that at moments is a contradiction between the method she uses (and its privileging of academic discourse) and her obvious commitment to students not only as human beings but as intellectuals.
And that would be where I want to leave things for the moment here. With students as intellectuals. Students are already, before they even meet us, intellectuals. What would be different if we really followed out the idea, which I believe that Dunbar-Odom accepts, that students are "always already" intellectuals in exactly the same way that Gramsci argues all folks, even workers and farmers, are intellectuals, are in fact philosophers of life? This question is Defying the Odds' most important contribution to a disciplinary conversation we need to have.

For one thing, it must mean that students collectively have as much say about their intellectual projects as we do. Social class—especially work and working—provides one such meeting place between the work our students and their families do and the work we academics do in and out of disciplines. But also maybe we need to think of courses less as graduate seminars, although in the right context that is not such a terrible idea, and more as professional conferences where we all bring to the table the wildly diverse projects we all have been working on. I think something like this is behind the cutting edge idea of recent proposals by Amy Robillard and Doug Downs and a new generation of compositionists who want to rethink the composition course as the place where bona fide research is accomplished and published, that is, authored-work published in real venues, perhaps published with teachers in professional forums. But does it always have to be about literacy? It should sometimes be, but Who Says? in its broader approach to rhetoric balances what are clearly composition’s and Defying the Odds’ preoccupations with literacy. Rhetoric includes a lot more than literacy.

At the back of my mind, I still am thinking about that citizen rhetoric of rhetoric and composition before the turn to academic discourse that viewed its task to contribute in some larger way to the public weal. I wonder if that might be our next disciplinary identity. The place where the personal and public come together is discourse, not the written text per se but the support mechanisms and the network of power relations that make any language act possible. This other side of language—its enabling and disabling context and the apparatus, the groups of people, real alive people, who allow or disallow those who are crossing—has rarely received the attention in academic discourse studies that it warrants, I think because it has been seen as outside of language as political and
therefore a distraction from our charge to provide academic discourse in a narrow sense. However, discourse isn’t a distraction nor is it outside of language. Too often we look microscopically at the stylistic moves of academic discourse, but we rarely look at the class values embodied in such discourse. We study the marks on the page, but not the power relations—including social class—that are the conditions of any utterance. However, unless one is a formalist, one must situate academic discourse in an equal study of social class that drives it at all levels, including those of the student, teacher, discipline, and especially the wider society.

Even the New Critics and some their followers recognized, particularly in composition, but more surprisingly perhaps in their very rationale for literary study, a wider culture that was in trouble. That wider culture, they prophesized, had accepted too readily the justifications of the Fordist business people and its state, without acknowledging the accompanying grievous short-term and long-term wounds it inflicted on people, their culture, and their world. (Some of the early New Critics in the late 1920s prophetically argued that the new Fordist industrialism was also destroying the environment and nature with catastrophic effect. [See Ransom in I'll Take My Stand, especially 7–8 and 15–17]). Literature as they conceived it was their remedy to a broken world. Of course, that will not do for our broken world. The wounds are perhaps too different, too deep, too long running. But discourse properly understood helps us to trace out those wounds and to begin to see their sources. Discourse provides a dangerous remedy that relates the marks on the page with forces in our society. It can in the right circumstances perhaps help return us to a new sort of citizen rhetoric, one that takes the wider world and not just the university as its forum. Given that that wider world is increasingly and more deeply classed, discourse theory will bring us to social class. Both Who Says? and Defying the Odds lead us toward that goal.

University of Houston
Houston, Texas
Notes

1. The disciplinary narrative I propose here is at some odds with the prevailing ones. Let me provide evidence to warrant this new story. A welcome exception to the lack of histories on contemporary composition in US universities is the archival work of Thomas Masters in his recent book, *Practicing Writing: The Postwar Discourse of Freshman English*. Masters does acknowledge the influence of the New Criticism on the freshman English course during the post-World War II period saying, "One of the constituent forces within freshman English during the postwar era was a marked correspondence between the tenets of New Criticism, including its notions of the self, and of what constituted the teaching of academic literacy" (119). True enough. Yet as helpful as Masters’ inclusion of an entire chapter of his book to consider this is, I see a need for a wider and richer account of New Criticism and new critical rhetoric, which I believe will make visible a citizen rhetoric. In this chapter of his book, Masters relies heavily on his rich data. This is appropriate, of course. But it says a good deal about the discipline (and, to be sure, Masters’ skill as a researcher in discovering it) that Colleen Aycock’s work, as excellent as it is, is still, twenty years after it was written, just about the only in-depth study of new critical rhetoric. It seems that while Masters and others are looking at the individual trees, I am seeing the forest from one of those satellite photographs. What we miss when we are looking at the trees is that New Criticism isn’t just a force among many—it is the single most important force in English in this period. When we return to the sources like the 1949 first edition of Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s *Modern Rhetoric*, as well as the early “theory” the New Critics wrote, especially Ransom’s, I think we find evidence to support my claim for a citizen rhetoric. For example, the Brooks and Warren textbook stresses the importance of the everyday (the fact that students come to freshmen English with resources), a key theme in the philosophical basis of New Criticism (in Brooks and Warren 7–9; but also see John Crow Ransom in *God Without Thunder* on the everyday and its contrast with industrialism and science, 208–12). This everyday life is distinguished from science (which is a reduction of it) and positioned closer to metaphor (which is not decoration but meaning itself) (33–39, 403–35). The fact that Brooks and Warren include a nearly 400-page collection of readings in a 900-page textbook speaks to their philosophy, but so do the topics of those readings. We find on examining these readings titles such as, “How to Detect Propaganda,” “The Causes of War,” “The End in Sight” (about World War II), “Dawn Over Zero” (about the first atomic bomb), “Have Nations Any Morals?” “The Marxian View of History,” “A Scientist Rebels” (about the resistance among some American scientists to collaboration on further work making atomic weapons), “The Scientist Fights for Peace,” “The Threat of Science” and so forth. Of 37 readings, I count at least ten devoted to “political” or “social” issues
important in the wider world. Very important to helping us to see academic discourse (and writing across the curriculum) as recent historical constructs is the essay by Samuel T. Williamson, "How to Write Like a Social Scientist," which critiques writing in those disciplines (737–42). Right after it comes "Unripe Fruits: Incoherence in the Philosopher John Dewey," J.W. Beach's critique of the bad writing of philosophers, including Dewey (742–48). So the job of English and freshman English in this time was not to teach academic discourse as we know it (the New Critics would have thought that an abomination), but to teach professors, students, and other citizens (including government workers and politicians who were among the worst offenders) to write well—that is, to get out of their jargon and write from everyday language. When we turn to the rhetoric part of the Brooks and Warren text, we see that the first list of some 20 possible student topics in the book has 11 political or social issue topics, including topics on the United Nations, public education, communism, and less headline grabbing but no less public, income tax system, military training, and the postal service (13). Brooks and Warren, then, in their composition textbook, are essentially following out the citizen rhetoric implied in the criticism of, among others, their friend and mentor Ransom in the late 1920s and early 1930s. This criticism distinguished everyday life and language from science, not literature versus science. Literature was a return (with a difference, to be sure) to the everyday. The everyday was being transformed—the New Critics would say being corrupted—through Fordist industrialism. Literature but also freshman English were attempts to rescue the everyday and critique the effects of Fordism on the everyday. (See Jancovich on the cultural foundations of the New Criticism, especially 22, 29, 41, 43.) All of which is to say we need to match our views of the individual trees with some of the forest.

Works Cited


Some Meditations-Ruminations on Cheryl Glenn’s *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*

Victor J. Vitanza

Dedication: To Professor Irwin Corey

From so long ago, I remember reading:

“7. What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.” Ludwig