Spring 2008

“You Have to Knock at the Door for the Door Get Open”: Alternative Literacy Narratives and the Development of Textual Agency in Writing by Newly Literate Adults

Lauren Rosenberg
New Mexico State University, laurenr@nmsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy>

Recommended Citation

Rosenberg, Lauren. “Lauren Rosenberg 113 ‘You Have to Knock at the Door for the Door Get Open’: Alternative Literacy Narratives and the Development of Textual Agency in Writing by Newly Literate Adults.” *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2008, pp. 113–44, doi:10.25148/clj.2.2.009495.

This work is brought to you for free and open access by FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Community Literacy Journal* by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.

“You Have to Knock at the Door for the Door Get Open”: Alternative Literacy Narratives and the Development of Textual Agency in Writing by Newly Literate Adults

Lauren Rosenberg

This article is part of a project that involves case studies of four adults who attend an informal literacy center. I examine people’s motivations to write when their main purpose is not to gain a degree or other credentials. Here I focus on one study member and how she uses writing to gain textual agency. By composing narratives that investigate her social positioning, this woman rewrites her own story. I demonstrate how her texts and interview comments reveal a strong desire to connect with public audiences so that other people might follow her model of speaking out to change culture

The following article addresses part of a larger project that involves case studies of four adults who attend a learning center in Springfield, Massachusetts called Read/Write/Now (R/W/N). R/W/N is a small, library-based program that works with adults to address their individual purposes for literacy education. Teachers within the program help learners state periodic goals, which teachers and learners assess together every four to six weeks. In this way, adult learners are able to pursue their own motivations for reading, writing, math, and computer education. I selected the center as a site for research because learners at R/W/N attend by choice. I wanted to look outside of a school setting to find out what motivates people to seek literacy—particularly writing—when their main purpose is not to gain a degree or other credentials. An objective of my project was to understand people’s purposes for writing when they are not primarily motivated by economic forces, such as the desire to get a better job, and whether they might seek literacy for alternative purposes, perhaps less easily expressed. I decided to study adults who chose to pursue literacy after a lifetime of other experiences outside of schooling. In order to look beyond monetary motivation, I selected older adults to participate in the study.

In the title of the article, I use the term “newly literate” to name the learners at R/W/N who participated in my research. I would like to take a moment to clarify this term since it has been jarring to some readers, including reviewers of this journal. New Literacy theorists (Street, Gee) would argue that as participating members of a literate society, adult learners are already necessarily literate. Their choice to attend a learning center doesn’t mean that they experience sudden transformation into literate individuals. Certainly, my intent in using the phrase was not to take the autonomous view of literacy that

Street and others oppose. However, I want to note here that the trouble caused by the term “newly literate” highlights how ideologically loaded conversations about literacy have become. When I call learners at R/W/N “newly literate,” I am referring to various ways they identify themselves based on how they have been interpellated. One class at the learning center is called “Beginning Readers and Writers.” Many of the students in that class are learning to read and write for the first time. Despite having spent their lives enmeshed in a print culture, those learners truly are new to literacy. The four people whom I concentrated on in my study, on the other hand, are not in the beginners group. All of them had some degree of schooling, and some attended other informal learning centers before coming to R/W/N. According to New Literacy theorists, the participants in my study would be considered literate already. When I refer to them as “newly literate,” I am acknowledging the multiple, new literacies they acquire while at R/W/N, and how these literacies interact with those they used prior to coming to the center. For example, one member of the study whom I call George, a pseudonym, had a career as a smith in a forge where he worked on a crew that made precision tools, auto parts, and airplane blades. When George speaks of his former career (he is retired now) he describes the ways he taught himself specialized tasks when he had not learned math formally in school. On his own, George developed literacies that allowed him to become skilled in his work. However, George, like everyone at R/W/N, speaks of his past as a time when he did not know how to read. In this way, the learners at R/W/N label themselves as newly literate. None of them would deny their previous knowledge; nonetheless, unlike critical theorists in the academy, adult basic learners do not often know to value their own multiple literacies as such.

My study asks the essential question: What do you want writing for? If not to find a place in the workforce or the academy, then why learn to write? By looking intensively at a few people’s stories, I hoped to get a thorough sense of their motivations for pursuing literacy, their objectives for their own writing, and their sense of themselves as adult learners. I used methods of narrative inquiry to collect and analyze data.

These included observation of classes, interviews with two teachers, and extensive interviewing of the case study members. I conducted two interviews with each participant. The first interview investigated the participant’s experiences with literacy inside and outside of school, her motivations for seeking literacy, and her relationship to reading and writing at R/W/N. The second, discourse interview was designed specifically for each participant based on his first interview. My questions examined comments study members had made in their initial interview and the content of their written texts. Together, participants and I looked at their writing and at the transcript of their first interview. I also collected all the writing produced by the four participants during the time they had attended the center. I wanted to use methods that would draw out their narratives and allow me to analyze those stories—both spoken and written. As I analyzed data I was accumulating stories, then considering new data in relation to the story I understood

already. The analytic process was one of storytelling and restorying. This article focuses on one of the members of the study and how I see her using writing to gain a sense of critical agency.

Writing as an Outlaw Practice

Regardless of the discipline, much of the research on literacy theory and practice defines “literacy” as writing, reading, and sometimes computing (Selfe). But although discussions of literacy appear to address all of these aspects, they focus predominately on reading. According to Deborah Brandt in her 2001 study of people’s real-life uses of reading and writing, *Literacy in American Lives*, reading has been privileged historically as the primary literacy skill in the United States while writing has been subordinated. Schools spend

The association of writing with transgression (Brandt even goes so far as to call it “profane”) suggests that writing has the potential to subvert, to intervene, to expose, and in effect, challenge power relations.

more time and money on reading than on writing (163). In terms of the ways we come to writing as children and as adults, Brandt writes, “writing is a more ambivalently encouraged enterprise and is fraught, more than reading, with secrecy, punishment, and surveillance” (24).

Writing is the less easily measurable and less publicly acknowledged aspect of literacy. The question is *why* writing finds itself shadowed by the dominant practice of reading. I propose that reading is the process by which culture is taken in, while writing is the complicated and potentially radical act of putting something out into culture. People’s anxiety about writing, their blocks, and sense of themselves as incorrect or incapable, seem to occur in response to the unspoken power of writing. The association of writing with transgression—Brandt even goes so far as to call it “profane”—suggests that writing has the potential to subvert, to intervene, to expose, and in effect, challenge power relations. It is because of its transformative possibilities that people crave and fear writing. If you write, then you have a voice, and that voice can disrupt. It can cause change. Brandt’s findings suggest that by focusing on reading, people avoid using writing as a tool for cultural critique. When writing is made public, it has the potential to be turned toward social change. In other words, writing can, in and of itself, be used to counter hegemony.

Is writing an outlaw act as Brandt’s interviews indicate? Critical literacy theorists argue that because citizens can use writing as a means to oppose and transform society, it is generally discouraged and subordinated as a practice. Assuming that writing instruction in schools is limited in order to restrict its potential as a means for activism, Donna LeCourt expands on Linda Brodkey’s observation that writing is neither a primary focus within schools nor in the culture at large. LeCourt and Brodkey recognize how schooling and the larger culture devalue writing because it lies outside the “cycle” of

intellectual activities that translate into cultural currency (Brodkey, "Writing on the Bias" 50; LeCourt 67). If we view schooling as the main site where an ideology of literacy is disseminated, then it comes as no surprise that writing is often kicked out of the "cycle" through which school literacy acts translate into cultural currency. As Brodkey explains,

Take tests for grades, exchange the grade for credentials, use the credentials to launch a career, measure the career by the number of promotions and the size of the paychecks and the amount of the stock. Writing is only incidental in this cycle. It is incidental because the cycle deflates the value of the intellectual work of practices like writing in order to artificially inflate the value of ritual performance (achievement tests, reading scores) that can be calculated and minted as cultural currency (50).

LeCourt insists that writing must be taught because it can threaten accepted ideologies and thereby cause people to question their assumptions. It must be re-valued by educators and scholars simply because it holds so much power to challenge dominant ways of thinking and performing and because it calls into question who has the right to be heard and toward what end. Like LeCourt, I am interested in the relationship between literacy and power. As this case study demonstrates, writing must be taught within academic contexts and outside of formal settings where it can be turned toward more personal and social purposes.

While most of us accept the belief that school provides access to the knowledge and skills we need in order to function as citizens, we are not taught to question the ideology promoted by schools. My research is built on the assumption that there are dominant literacy narratives dictated by ideology. These dominant literacy narratives are played out in discourses of schooling, economics, and morality that serve similar ideological functions. When I speak of dominant literacy narratives throughout these pages, I sometimes refer to these contexts individually; however, it is important to emphasize that discourses of schooling, economics, and morality are interwoven. The difficulty of identifying dominant narratives as such reinforces what we know from Michel Foucault: all subjects understand culture through its available discourse. One of the problems with dominant literacy narratives is that they function to maintain power relations that privilege certain perspectives over others.

My research deliberately focuses on a population that has been placed outside the dominant culture of schooling. The goal of my study was to understand how people for whom literacy has been withheld relate to dominant narratives and how they act to counter these narratives through their writing. I was curious about how people use writing to negotiate the ways they have been positioned by the ideology at the root of such narratives. My analysis investigates the relationship between my study participants' motivation and the possibilities writing offers for constructing alternative narratives to those narratives that are readily available to them. I proposed that adult learners

create alternative literacy narratives as a way to counter the ways they are positioned. By telling other “stories,” I argue that “newly” literate people use writing to create a place of agency. In this way, some “newly” literate adult writers become able to alter their existing space.

Examining Alternative Literacy Narratives: A Review of Community Studies

The idea that people construct alternate literacy narratives that reflect practices outside of the dominant literacy narratives associated with school is not new to researchers in composition studies. For instance, Linda Flower, Elenore Long, Lorraine Higgins, and their colleagues have been involved in investigating community literacy practices during fifteen years of research at the Community Literacy Center (CLC) in Pittsburgh. Wayne Peck, Flower, and Higgins assert that, “In community literacy, writing is a response to crisis, to conflict or to a need for action” (3). Participants at the CLC are encouraged to use the writing process for the deliberate purpose of addressing conflict and negotiating meaning. Peck, Flower, and Higgins explain that, “The CLC’s most controversial claim was that it was writing—the collaborative work of creating public, transactional texts—that could make a new intercultural conversation possible” (2).

Research within composition studies on alternative writing practices argues that the goal of writing teachers is not merely to accommodate other discourses in our classrooms but to use our knowledge of alternative practices to change what it is that we do pedagogically. A number of other studies have been conducted (Farr, Moss, Loft, Fishman, Balester, McLaughlin, Weinstein-Shr, Cintron, Mahiri, Richardson, Young) that explore alternate narratives people produce outside of schooling. This research, which is typically conducted in community contexts, examines alternative literacy practices against the dominant ones that keep people locked into certain subject positions they may see as undesirable. In general, these studies agree that the kinds of writing people do in community settings and the purposes people have for engaging in writing are often in striking contrast, if not in opposition, to the writing, and motivations for writing, associated with school. By studying alternative narratives, literacy researchers can examine how the composition of such texts can help people foster a sense of agency that they may not have received in their lifetime. My own understanding of agency—as that which occurs when people take critical action to challenge power relations—is based on the work of these researchers.

Beverly Moss, for example, sees the need to change academic literacy so that it can acknowledge the influence of multiple literacies. She argues that church literacy is the primary model of community literacy for many African Americans, which functions alongside home, school, workplace, and other literacies. In her study, Moss examines the sermon-composing and delivery styles of three African American ministers. She also looks at the texts produced within church communities, such as weekly bulletins, and at the participation of the congregation in literacy events using bulletins, liturgy, and

the sermon (*A Community Text Arises*). Compared with Shirley Brice Heath's view of literacies as distinct (*Ways with Words*), Moss describes literacies as interacting with one another and never existing in isolation. Like Heath, Moss is interested in what happens when students try to negotiate academic and community literacies. While Heath is interested in finding ways for children to fit into the school model, Moss sees the need to change academic literacy so that it can accommodate multiple literacies. Students experience the academy as "sites of negotiation," where alternative literacies can become either "sites of conflict" or "sites of common ground." Moss argues that,

The academy should acknowledge the existence of alternative models that operate simultaneously with the essayist model and acknowledge that large segments of US society have as their primary example of a literate (formal not everyday conversational) text something other than the essayist model, or have more than one primary model of a literate text." (152)

Another significant contribution to composition studies is Ellen Cushman's project with inner-city women. Her research provides a model of how people use writing in their lives, in this case to negotiate social service agencies. Cushman investigates the rhetorical strategies community residents employ to cooperate with and undermine gatekeepers (xv). Their seeming compliance in order to work with the system and obtain what they need often masks sophisticated gestures of resistance. Because residents regularly deal with

In community settings, particularly among adults, lived experience tends to be valued more as a source of knowledge than it is in settings where students are schooled primarily in academic discourse.

institutional agents, such as caseworkers, utility company representatives, and landlords, they are constantly honing their written and oral skills out of necessity. These activities include filling out forms such as welfare and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) applications,

meeting with caseworkers, and speaking with social service agents on the phone, all of which depend on well-developed rhetorical knowledge. Cushman demonstrates how critical agency can exist even when people's uses of literacy may seem strictly functional or economic. She concludes by insisting that we need more studies of community literacy that practice activist methodology and that assume people have the critical awareness to claim agency (238).

Other community literacy researchers, such as Heath, Balester, Weinstein-Shr, McLaughlin, Cintron, Richardson, Mahiri, and Young echo the call for more studies that pay attention to the practices of people whose writing may be ignored or undervalued by schooling. Studying writing practices outside of school can radically inform our approach to teaching writing in the university.

Our goal in the university writing classroom should be to expand students'

knowledge, building on what they understand already, rather than forcing them to take on a culture of power that often conflicts with and discredits the literacies they practice. As Moss theorizes, the academy can become more of a site where students negotiate conflict as well as common ground. By recognizing and allowing a space for the alternative literacy practices students bring to our writing classrooms, teachers can help students find agency while acquiring dominant literacy practices.

In community settings, particularly among adults, lived experience tends to be valued more as a source of knowledge than it is in settings where students are schooled primarily in academic discourse. As John Szwed argues, “assumptions are made in educational institutions about the literacy needs of individual students which seem not to be born out by the students’ day-to-day lives. And it is this relationship between school and the outside world that I think must be observed, studied and highlighted” (308). We still have much to learn in composition studies about alternative narratives to academic discourse. By looking beyond a formal school institution, I believe we can get a better understanding of our own purposes as theorists and practitioners within the institution of the university.

My study looked outside of schooling at a population that has been deemed “illiterate.” I wanted to better understand why people who live outside of the culture of school pursue literacy—specifically writing. I chose to work with newly literate adults because they have had a wealth of other experiences besides literacy. By examining their motivations and desire to write, I sought to find out whether they would pursue literacy for dominant purposes (i.e., economic, personal self-improvement, etc.) or whether they might want to use writing for more activist purposes. If, as Cushman proposes, people want to make social change, then the people in my study might be looking to writing as a means of speaking out.

A Unique Perspective on Literacy Acquisition: Studying the Writing of Adult New Literates

In our highly literate culture, to be *without*—to have been denied reading and writing for whatever reason—is considered a disability, a burden that the individual carries and must often hide for fear of being judged as stupid or inadequate in a society where most people take reading proficiency for granted. The common assumption that literacy instruction is available to all fails to recognize those who either did not have the benefit of schooling or whose needs and experiences were not addressed in school. New literates frequently discuss the ways they have been situated. One man at the center who was frustrated with his writing exclaimed: “It’s unjust! I’m like a blind man.” He explained how people manipulate you when you don’t know how to read and write and how their actions can be “very hurtful.” Just because you cannot *read*, doesn’t mean you don’t *know*. C.H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon argue that:

the labels ‘literate’ and ‘illiterate’ almost always imply more in common usage than a degree or deficiency or skill. They are, grossly or subtly, sociocultural judgments, laden with approbation, disapproval, or pity, about the character and ‘place,’ the worthiness and prospects, of persons and groups of people (15).

The work of critical literacy theorists (Giroux, McLaren, Stuckey, Knoblauch, Brannon, Trimbur, Graff) demonstrates that literacy, economics, and morality are interwoven in dominant discourses. This linkage has led some theorists to suggest that literacy is violent because it forces people into an inequitable society. Elspeth Stuckey states that: “A highly literate society that withholds literacy from some of its members uses literacy as another form of exploitation” (36-37). Literacy becomes social violence when it is used as a means to wield power and inscribe hierarchies. Ideologies of literacy are used as weapons to keep some people locked into powerless positions while others succeed. For example, one member of my study commented that sometimes someone who knows that you don’t know how to read—such as a boss—will give you something to read to deliberately embarrass you and “keep you down.”

Studying adult learners, specifically studying their writing, requires paying attention to the stories people have to tell when they finally claim a page on which to compose. Within the United States and Canada, various literacy initiatives support writing by adult learners, encouraging people to write from their lived experience so that others might hear what they have to say. This invitation to write beyond merely practicing skills, such as composing a paragraph, opens up a space for adult learners to tell stories that may contradict mainstream narratives and challenge established ways of thinking. The stories adult learners have to tell are sometimes unpopular accounts of poverty, violence, and other oppressions that point fingers at unacknowledged social problems. And yet, I argue, by listening to the voices of those labeled “illiterate,”¹ people in positions of greater power, such as educators, literacy researchers, and policy makers can call attention to the knowledge witnessed by those who put their words on the page for the first time.

Writing Within Adult Basic Education (A.B.E.) Programs

Typically, adult basic education programs are measured by their ability to help participants obtain their GED, in effect, delivering them to the mainstream, and thus, overlooking the conditions that keep some people either removed from the culture of schooling or unable to function within the system when they are placed within it. Federal and state funding for adult education depends on the assessment of learners that measure “progress” primarily in terms of skill levels, disregarding the mission of some programs like R/W/N that aim to serve learners’ individual goals and needs. Similarly, adult learners’ writing is often recognized solely in terms of mastering skills that will allow authors to pass in the mainstream. Most of the literature on writing by adult learners looks only at school

writing, ignoring the realities that people use writing for various purposes throughout their day (Gillespie, “The Forgotten R” 1).

For example, in her study of letters exchanged between a group of ABE students and graduate student teachers, Brodkey describes the content of ABE writers’ letters as focused on the material circumstances of their lives. She notes that the correspondents address one another from incompatible discursive positions. The ABE students, she observes, “write most frequently about external threats to the well-being of themselves and their families or their neighbors” (“On the Subjects of Class and Gender” 684). Their narratives of materiality conflict with those initiated by the graduate student teachers who write from a professional class position and who experience anxiety and a sense of “disconnectedness” when called upon to respond to the letters produced by their ABE correspondents. This disconnection between the teachers and ABE students suggests a significant misreading of one another’s subject positions. The teachers are unable to understand that for the ABE writers, telling one’s story by writing about conditions in one’s neighborhood is a crucial means of creating self.

Literacy researcher Marilyn Gillespie points out that there is very little literature in adult basic education to support the importance of writing instruction, or, for that matter, purposes of writing beyond its most simple functional uses, such as filling out applications and forms². Adult learners’ writing is not just important for functional purposes, such as job performance. Gillespie also argues that, “For many adults, the writing they do in adult literacy classes becomes the beginning of a process of moving toward more active participation in the civic arena and the political process”(7). In Gillespie’s study of writing within adult literacy classes (“Becoming Authors”), she is interested in the sense that new adult writers gain of themselves as authors when they begin to produce texts for publication. Some of the writing she examines is published in-house at literacy centers and some is circulated to funding sources outside of the centers. Gillespie’s findings show that as adults practice writing they begin to discover new purposes for their texts. She also suggests that people use writing to interact in the world differently. Similar to researchers in composition, Gillespie insists that we need more studies that examine people’s purposes for writing. She argues that policy makers as well as educators need to go beyond looking at adult literacy in terms of functional skills.

Writing as an Articulation of Critical Agency

As mature participants in a highly literate society who have gone through their lives without the benefits of reading and writing, the learners at R/W/N approach writing from various perspectives. Many of them see themselves as so lacking in the skills they need to articulate themselves on the page that their only expressed goal is simply to learn how to write. When asked, the four people in my case study voice dominant literacy narratives regarding their motivations for seeking literacy. Typical responses are: *I want to get a better job*, and *I want to become a better person*. Since three of the four people

in the study are retired, it is unlikely that they will actually use literacy for work. What they express are dominant economic and moral discourses; they say what they believe they should say. Newly literate adults express the desire for dominant narratives in reaction to the social construction of “illiteracy;” however, they do not solely accept dominant narratives.

Gillespie remarks that people who attend literacy centers typically express the desire for acceptance into dominant culture as a way to undo the stigma of “illiteracy.” People accept that literacy will offer them the agency they have been denied as non-literate, when in fact the power they seek is not tied to literacy itself but to the cultural benefits attributed to those who have attained literacy. Gillespie notes that “For many [newly literate] authors literacy seemed to have come to stand for knowledge itself. To be illiterate was to be without knowledge, opinions, or voice” (149). The assumption that literacy is knowledge denies that social injustices occur for reasons connected to institutional power and places the responsibility for changing society on the individual.

Critical theorists would argue that the people at R/W/N are so interpellated by ideology that they can only see literacy in economic and moral means; however, I argue against this presumption. My goal in the project was to look behind these stated motivations to find what else people want when they pursue literacy later in life. Although they voice dominant literacy narratives of economic advancement, self-improvement, acquisition of functional skills, and greater civic participation, I see other desires and purposes articulated in alternative literacy narratives.

Through my analysis of their transcripts, I found that participants did not simply accept the dominant literacy narratives. On the contrary, their espousal of these dominant narratives occurred simultaneously with their opposition to them as they used alternative narratives. I found that they were, precisely because of their experience with injustice, extremely articulate critics of the dominant culture that has oppressed them. As they increased their literacy, participants called attention to a number of alternative literacy narratives. In their interview comments, they made statements that recognized, critiqued, exceeded, and resisted dominant narratives. I define alternative narratives as a retelling of culture for the purpose of articulating a different understanding of one’s situation.

The findings of my study suggest that some members of the study voice alternative literacy narratives because they have been forced into subject positions that are in opposition to dominant ones. Their perspectives are already alternative and already critical. In some situations, writing for one’s own purposes may mean critically interrogating one’s placement in society with the goal of altering that position. By suggesting that people produce types of writing counter to, or exceeding, prescribed narratives, I argue that some newly literate adults have the desire to use writing for critical purposes. My views are in keeping with Critical and Marxist theorists who believe that literacy can be taught as a means to critique culture. The critically educated

individual has the potential to counter hegemonic practices and thus change power relations, thereby disrupting the violence Stuckey talks about by granting power to the disenfranchised. Taking a Freirean perspective, these theorists rely on two premises: Critical literacy needs to be taught in order for people to counter oppressive situations, and more specifically, critical literacy needs to be taught to those who are labeled “illiterate.”

While I agree with their argument that people need to critique culture if they are to change it, my research reveals that their premise that people must be taught to interrogate culture is not always true. The newly literate people I have met at the adult learning center are certainly not unwilling dupes; rather, they are quite aware of their social position and how power has been acted upon them. My findings suggest that people new to literacy already have the critical perspective that theorists believe they must be taught. From their lived experience, they recognize how they have been constructed and how literacy has been used against them. This critical awareness is in keeping with Paolo Freire’s argument that the oppressed understand the motivations of the oppressor. They often have critical judgment. What they are lacking are the rhetorical tools to speak out and publicly acknowledge their position.

We can learn about the ways newly literate people are critical by looking at the texts they produce. When people write alternative literacy narratives, they are rewriting a story for the purpose of identifying their reality differently. I argue that some people produce alternative literacy narratives as a way to enact a kind of textual agency that addresses larger audiences than a personal one or that of one’s peers. The common goal of such texts is to communicate with a public audience in order to get people to speak back to ideology. The text goes beyond self and family to interact with others. The purpose of these texts is to encourage other people to think about something that is important to the writer, for instance, to critique ideology or to challenge people to take action.

A couple of my participants took steps in their writing to confront their social position through the narratives they created. In some instances their alternative literacy narratives tell a different version of a story from those that have been told previously. In other cases the purpose of the narrative is to give voice to a previously untold story or to draw in an audience of readers and demand that they listen. Henry Giroux contends, “oppositional paradigms provide new language through which it becomes possible to deconstruct and challenge relations of power and knowledge legitimated in traditional forms of discourse” (*Border Crossings* 21). I extend his argument by applying it to the texts being produced by newly literate individuals. By composing narratives that exceed dominant forms or ways of thinking, I suggest that people challenge the ideology that would otherwise keep them locked into certain positions.

By focusing on the following participant’s construction of alternative literacy narratives, I examine how these texts allow her to gain a sense of textual agency that she could not achieve except through writing.

Violeta: From Self-Transformation to Action: Words for an Invoked Audience³

Violeta was the youngest person in the study, a forty-year old Puerto Rican woman who lives with four of her six children and who also has two grandchildren. As a child, Violeta moved back and forth from Puerto Rico to New York City where her mother would sometimes enroll her in school. She enjoyed school, although her education was sporadic and mostly in English. But the family was always moving, and most of the time, because she was the eldest child, Violeta was made to stay home to care for her younger siblings. Her stepfather would keep her literally locked inside the house, preventing Violeta from going out in the world and getting an education. In our interviews, Violeta spoke of learning to read and write as a “door open.” She meant this statement literally as well as metaphorically.

When Violeta moved to Springfield with her children, she was assisted by a social worker at the Department of Social Services who became an important role model. Violeta’s social worker helped her to realize that as a primary caregiver she was entitled to get an education and still receive public assistance. She found her way to R/W/N about four years prior to my study with the guidance of her social worker as well as a former boyfriend who had been teaching her English. Violeta continues to struggle with spoken English, although her writing does not show signs of this same “brokenness.” To Violeta, English is the language of schooling, in the past as well as now.

Violeta is unique among the case study members in the way she relates to writing. She has found that writing enables her to position herself in a different way from how she identified herself before she attended R/W/N. She consciously turns to writing for personal purposes, for instance as a way to figure things out and self-analyze.

Like the ABE writers in Brodkey’s “The Literacy Letters,” Violeta is quite aware of her material conditions, and she does the work of critiquing them in her texts. Although she readily speaks about the material conditions of her life in informal conversation and in interviews, her comments are rarely critical. Instead, she typically positions herself as someone who is in the process of becoming increasingly able to cope with conditions in her life. The “progress” she refers to with regard to her writing reflects Violeta’s sense of personal growth. When she talks about material conditions, Violeta usually focuses on the myriad responsibilities she has as a single mother of six, such as taking her children to doctors’ appointments, writing notes to their teachers, and shopping. She uses literacy in functional ways that are connected with daily living. Violeta is certainly aware of the link between non-literacy and material conditions; however, she does not evidence the same critique verbally as she does in writing. In her written texts, she reflects on and analyzes conditions in her life for the purpose of telling her experience differently. She wants to make sense of her experiences in a new way, and writing allows her to create alternative narratives to those she has been told (and perhaps has told herself) throughout her life.

Violeta is aware of how becoming more literate is helping her to retell the story of her life. In some ways she has already arrived at a state of self-transformation through the process of reflecting on and analyzing her own writing. For instance, when she speaks in interviews about reviewing the work in her portfolio, she describes the experience of evaluating her life in a different way⁴. Her portfolio is an outgrowth of her work on material conditions. She believes that literacy is giving her new possibilities for defining her self. Violeta calls the portfolio her “life book,” and she references it frequently as a way to self-assess the “progress” of her learning and to trace changes in her understanding of herself. When Violeta asserts this sense of her own progress, she is speaking of the ability to alter her subject position through writing. We discussed this topic in our first interview:

L: What do you like to write?

V: About my life. About my life, yeah.

L: So when you do the kinds of projects that Carolyn⁵ has you doing here, are those enjoyable to you?

V: Mm hmm. I do, partly/part of my portfolio is about my life. That's what I do. Because that helping me a lot to get out what did I go in and explain to me. And I do about my life book. I want to see when I before, was Violeta before? Was Violeta right now? The progress that I make.

L: So you want to look at your progress?

V: Mm hmm.

L: Is it special to you to get down those stories too?

V: Is special for me. Porque I can see the difference. I can, when I do that, when I was writing about my life, I can see I was afraid before. I not right now. I can see the progress. I was before afraid [to] get out [in] front of the world. Before I would say, “I cannot do this. This is not for me. Uh-uh.” I don't know how to get it pero, when I get any and open the door for me and I do it, I can see the difference about my life.

This passage can be read in various ways. On one level, Violeta is simply referring to the fact that she is learning to read and write better and that she can recognize that progress in her portfolio. However, this passage also shows Violeta's awareness of a more analytical self. Her habit of rereading the writing in her portfolio suggests that she is continually reviewing the self she creates in her writing. Here she is not referring so much to the evolution of her work,

but to a shifting sense of self: “I can see the difference about my life.” Writing provides Violeta with opportunities to self-reflect and to self-analyze as well as to move toward becoming a more public person who can “get out [in] front of the world.”

When she speaks about examining her progress, Violeta refers to the self she creates in her writing: “I want to see when I before, was Violeta before? Was Violeta right now?” Through her writing, Violeta composes herself on the page. In this excerpt she discusses the process of studying her lived experience as she has documented it in the portfolio. By first chronicling and then studying the stories of her life, Violeta gives herself continuous opportunities to interrogate her life story. Each time she reads through the portfolio, Violeta is able to examine her stories against each other. More than any other member of the study, Violeta is aware of a shifting sense of self as she becomes more literate. Literacy allows her to become a student of her self so that she can understand her lived experience in new ways. By continually reviewing her own story each time she reads the collection in her portfolio, Violeta is creating an alternative literacy narrative through which she assesses herself in relation to the material conditions that affect her life.

Her sense of a shifting self resembles James Britton’s theory of the increasingly experienced writer who becomes able to move beyond expressing only the personal in her writing. According to Britton, we process our experiences through talking and writing. Initially, when we write, we retell our experiences through text by participating in them again. Writing, in what Britton has termed the “spectator” mode, provides us with a means to evaluate experience, to reflect on our experiences in relation to others, to figure things out, to act. Thus, every moment that a person writes is in response to all other moments in the writer’s life. Violeta is able to look at herself more often through the eyes of a “spectator” who can critique what she sees. The progress Violeta refers to is toward becoming not only an improved self but also someone who can evaluate her past more critically. Unlike other members of the study, Violeta uses writing in a unique way to achieve this critique of self. When she writes, Violeta is reinterpreting a dominant narrative of self-improvement through education by reading herself analytically in the pages of her portfolio. It is not just the “progression” of her learning that makes Violeta an improved person. What keeps changing is the way she interprets the narrator of her stories and the situation of her lived experience.

The first theme I identified in Violeta’s writing was a desire to document material conditions in her life. Violeta uses writing to chronicle stories of her past. The writing process allows her to retell her life story so that she can document it the way she sees it. For example, in an early piece titled “I am From,” Violeta adopted a form recommended by her teachers to recount her past in idealized images.

In this poem, Violeta constructs lovely images that recreate a culturally rich past. This is the only piece in Violeta’s portfolio where she writes uncritically. While this poem is full of sensual details, it suggests a childhood that is exotic and wonderful. Violeta does not construct her childhood in this

way again. From here, she moves into narratives about her past that contain darker stories, such as that of a drug dealing stepfather who locked her in the house so that she could not attend school and a mother who was helpless to act against him. In contrast with “I am From,” Violeta achieves a different tone in “Then and Now.” In this poem, Violeta again uses a format recommended by her teachers. The format encourages learners to construct pairs of lines that position a past of unfavorable conditions against a more informed (and implicitly, more literate) present. Although Violeta accepts the formula that compares an unenlightened past with a more self-aware present, the pairings she creates stand apart from the typical comparisons most learners make. Violeta uses “Then and Now” to critically examine conditions in her past from the point of view of a narrator who is learning to make different life choices. In comparison with “I am From,” “Then and Now”

presents a much more severe picture of the material conditions of Violeta’s life. In this poem, Violeta is concerned with crafting images as well as critically presenting a story about her life.

Violeta is not using the writing process to glorify her current situation. Instead, it allows her to spell out material conditions: she is a single mother of six children who has been abused. She attends “school” and is no longer “afraid.” On one level of analysis, Violeta’s shifting sense of herself can be attributed to the self-awareness she gains through education and the support of people like her social worker and teachers. I do not deny that Violeta is envisioning “school” as a means to reorganize her life and move toward an improved sense of herself as a better reader, writer, and speaker of English; but I also see her reaching toward writing for alternative purposes, such as self-narrating for the purpose of altering her subject position. In the poem, she examines her own experience in order to cast it differently: “I used to be in lock up, but/ Now I am not locked up anymore/ I used to be beat up, but/ Now I am not beat up anymore.”

I Am From

I am from Puerto Rico and New York too,
fruit trees, beaches, lakes, farm animals, big
buildings, school, laundromats, and farmers’ market.

I am from flying kites, shooting marbles with friends,
jumping rope, weekends at my “abuela’s” house,
fishing, shrimping and catching crabs with my family.

I am from “pastels”, “arroz con gandules,” “funche con
pescado,” “arroz con dulce,” “bianda” and “bacalao.”

I am from my mother saying “Don’t go to the beach by
yourself” and “Put your shoes on,” and my sister
saying, “Leave me alone.” The sound of the garbage
truck said my father was here.

I am from my “abuela’s” figurines, my mother’s
romantic music and “morenga”, my “abuelo’s” TV
program and lunchtime and my great-grandmother’s
picture.

I am from my mother and father, abuelo and abuela,
my uncle and aunt, sisters, brothers, cousins and
my stepmother and stepfather.

Violeta's texts suggest another kind of progression from the one she references. Her texts and her relationship to her portfolio reveal that writing is an important way for her to narrate her life for the purpose of self-analysis and that through her analysis she can try to change conditions for herself and

Then and Now

I used to be afraid of people, but
Now I am not afraid anymore

I used to have my hair black, but
Now I have my hair red

I used to be married before, but
Now I am not married anymore

I used to be without children, but
Now I have 6 children

I used to be out of school, but
Now I am in school

I used to have a father, but
Now I have no father

I used to be in lock up, but
Now I am not locked up anymore

I used to be beat up, but
Now I am not beat up anymore

others. Although she starts out with the stated purpose of telling "about my life," her purposes become more complex from one piece of writing to the next. As she continues to write, revise, and review the texts in her portfolio, Violeta's relationship to her narratives shift. For example, Violeta initially composed the following poem for the publication, *The Masks We Wear*. In "Taking Off the Masks," she is critical of material conditions just as she was in "Then and Now." However, in this poem we see Violeta more actively altering her subject position by stating the moves she makes to assert a change in her perspective.

Writing about masks was part of a program-wide unit on mask making.⁶ The reason I include "Taking Off the Masks" as an example in this article is that Violeta initially submitted this poem for the publication, *The Masks We Wear*.⁷ In addition to this piece, she also composed a poem titled, "My Mask," which she submitted to the publication anonymously. As far as I know, Violeta was the only person at R/W/N to submit two pieces for

publication. "My Mask" is vastly different from Violeta's previous writing. It is her first published piece in which she does not adopt a recommended format. Violeta tells her story as a prose narrative without bothering with the form of a poem, and in it she seems more focused on communicating the content of her piece. Indeed, her interview comments regarding the simultaneously private and public nature of "My Mask" indicate that Violeta is consciously composing for multiple purposes. She had already completed the assignment with "Taking Off the Masks," yet she was compelled to tell a different story in "My Mask." This new story is more than a confession. In it, Violeta is also demonstrating how she positions herself as a "fighter" who is "going to win." And, by composing the narrative for publication, it becomes clear that Violeta intends for the piece to be read by audiences outside herself, her family, and her teacher. She insisted that "My Mask" be published anonymously because of the content.

In "Taking Off the Masks," Violeta uses the refrain, "it was a mask" to mean, it was a bad situation. Her writing does not evidence an understanding

of how the mask functions as a metaphor. However, “My Mask” tells a much different story from the perfunctory “Taking Off the Masks,” one in which Violeta is able to investigate the idea of a mask in greater depth.⁸ “My Mask”

is a confessional narrative that uses the metaphor of hiding behind a mask to reveal a hidden story. This piece seems to be about the process of masking and unmasking. Violeta explains that she puts the mask on everyday with everyone. She must wear the mask to hide her HIV and her son’s HIV. She takes off the mask when she reads because “reading makes me feel much better.” I would like to suggest that writing also gives Violeta the chance to take off her mask. In this narrative, we see Violeta using writing in a vastly different way from the previous poems. Here she is not just playing with images or spelling out the conditions of her life. In “My Mask,” Violeta uses the metaphor of the mask

to analyze a complicated situation. The metaphor allows her to explain how she grapples with the perceived need to keep parts of her life hidden, namely her HIV status. What is most impressive about this piece is that Violeta is able to reach for language to construct the experience of masking and unmasking.

I believe this degree of self-analysis is something she can only accomplish through writing, as her interview comments suggest. Writing offers Violeta the metaphor of the mask with which to tell her story. As a spectator of her experience, Violeta is able to analyze this experience metaphorically. She can use language to investigate the notion of putting on and taking off a mask in a way that is removed from the material conditions of her life. Although she masks and unmasks in her real life, writing gives her an opportunity to go beyond material conditions by interacting with the metaphor of masking. In some of her interview transcripts Violeta talks about the need to “keep it moving” to keep her life under control. When she writes, she does not need to keep moving. She can slow down to evaluate the situation on the page and consider her life symbolically. In that way the spectator mode allows her to

Taking Off the Masks

When I couldn’t speak English, it was a mask
No more masks
No more translator

When I was with my husband, it was a mask
No more masks
No more husband

When I was pregnant with Jared, it was a mask
No more masks
No more miscarriage

When I think about my nephews, it was a mask
No more masks
No more visitors

When I lived with my stepfather, it was a mask
No more masks
No more running away

When I argued with my daughter about school, it was
a mask
No more masks
No more arguments

remove herself from the material conditions of her life in order to work them out. Understandably, Violeta chose to publish this piece anonymously. She could have submitted “Taking Off the Masks” and never written “My Masks,” or she could have kept “My Masks” in her portfolio and never shared it. However, by choosing to publish this narrative, Violeta decided to unmask the writing itself. Writing allows her to take off a mask even though the content of the piece explains that she is rarely unmasked in her daily life.

One of the shifts we see from “Taking Off the Masks” to “My Mask” is that in the new narrative Violeta makes a conscious move to tell her story to outside audiences. By choosing to publish the narrative anonymously, she is able to have the story circulate in public while protecting her identity. Violeta’s comments begin to call attention to a desire to use writing to address an audience outside of herself. That is, the writing does not solely serve the purpose of figuring out her life for her own self-analysis; she also wants her writing to reach out to other people. Here we get a more analytic structure before a narrative structure. The analysis in “My Masks,” varies from her previous analyses because Violeta intends for her words to be read and interpreted by a public who may or may not judge her. In addition to writing for personal purposes, she begins to consider the effect her writing might have on other people’s thinking. In

My Mask

I wear my mask everyday. I use my mask with my children, in this class, and with my mother and my friend. My mask hides my sadness. When I take my medicine with my son, I pretend it is a game. I do not want my son to be worried. When I read, my mask goes away because reading makes me feel much better. When I wake up in the morning I see my children and I say to God, “thank you.” I wear my mask to hide my HIV. Everyday I have to fight with HIV. Sometimes I get tired, but when I see my children, I know I have to live with HIV. My son does not know he lives with HIV, so again, I put on a mask. I know one day I’m going to win my fight with HIV. Then I can take off my mask for good.

this way the act of writing becomes more consciously critical for social as well as personal purposes. This shift in her understanding of who might think differently as a result of reading her writing suggests that Violeta has the critical self-awareness Freire, Giroux, and others claim can be turned toward liberatory action. I refer to this sense of agency gained through interaction with text as textual agency.

In one of our interviews, I asked Violeta whether there was any writing in her portfolio that she would want

to keep private. She insisted that all of her work could be shared with others; although she hoped her experiences would not be judged.

L: So, even if something’s private, in the writing?

V: Mm hmm.

L: You feel like you still want people to read it?

V: Mm hmm.

L: Uh huh.

V: Yeah, they can read it.

L: Mm hmm.

V: Okay, it's kind of —

L: If it's safe?

V: If it's safe, yup.

L: Is there any piece of writing in here that you wouldn't want people to read or it's — maybe or maybe you wouldn't put it in your portfolio then?

V: No, everything, they can read it.

L: Mm hmm.

V: I don't have a no problem with nothing.

The two different pieces on masks reveal that audience plays an important role in Violeta's writing. Although she continues to write in personal genres, we see Violeta directing her narrative toward a more public audience. She becomes even more of a spectator of her experience when she invokes outside readers. Thus, we see how Violeta uses the writing process to position herself in new ways in relation to her experience. She can create a rhetorical situation in which she positions herself as the "fighter" she wants to be, and she can assume the role of a spectator who casts her experience for the benefit of other readers.

The distinction Violeta makes in her interview comments between conditions in her life that are private (hiding her and her son's HIV) and finished writing that is public ("My Mask") suggests that audience is an important issue. Violeta's relationship to audience shifts depending on her purposes for the text. Based on her comments, I surmise that she wrote the piece as a way to analyze the concept of hiding behind a mask. It was not until later, when she chose to publish it anonymously, that she conceived of the narrative as informing a larger audience. I am making these assumptions based on the way Violeta composed some of her other writing. Typically, she writes for herself or another person, and writing provides her with a way to figure out what she is thinking. Only afterwards does Violeta consider other audiences who might be informed by her perspective.

Violeta's purposes for writing include experimenting with different genres. She enjoys different kinds of writing and seems open to trying whatever Carolyn suggests. Throughout the time of the study, Violeta spoke often about

her desire to write letters, particularly since her family lives far away, and she wanted to write to her son and mother. Some of Violeta's comments about her family constructing her as a fearful person made me suspect that she wanted to use letter writing as a way to demonstrate to them that she is not a timid non-literate person. Violeta had written in her goal statement for 2005 that her primary goal was to learn the genre of the letter. She ended up composing two letters during the period of the study, one to her son and one to her social worker. The first letter she composed was to her son, Miguel, who is in jail in Puerto Rico.

Clearly, in this letter Violeta is using writing to attempt to change a situation for herself as well as for her son. She is trying to justify her position to her son. Violeta had told me that she notified the police that her son was selling drugs as a way to protect him from getting killed and to get him off the street. I can only assume that her action put them at odds. In this example, writing provides her a means to express things she has not said—or cannot say—on the telephone. We can see how writing functions as a way for Violeta to articulate her thoughts for

herself and for an intended audience. However, Violeta has additional purposes for writing. Although the original audience was her son, during our interview Violeta said she also imagined her letter could be inspiring to an audience of mothers. Her purposes for writing are not limited to her own circumstances. When I asked her which piece in her portfolio she would most want to share with the public, she selected this letter to her son. Here is the segment of the interview where she discusses the letter:

V: [searching through her portfolio] This one.

January 19, 2005

Dear Miguel,
The reason I am writing this letter is because I love you very much. Please don't get in trouble any more. Remember God is all the time with you. I know you are now in the wrong place. You didn't do the right thing. My dear son, I think about you all the time. I hope you have learned the right way now.

I am going to P.R. this summer. I would like to see you doing excellent in your life. Remember you have children. When your children ask about your life, what answer are you going to have for you children? I will feel better if you try to do something nice in your life. When you do the right thing you will feel proud.

This is my little letter for you. I hope when you get this letter you feel good. God bless you.

Love,
Mom

L: The letter to your son? And even though that's a private letter to your son, you would, is that something that you would want —

V: Yup.

L: — people in the public to see?

V: Mm hmm.

L: Who do you imagine, who could you imagine seeing a letter like that?

V: Um, I wrote this letter for my son because I know it's a lot of mother in this world, it's the same way that happened in the life like me. It's only not me. When, you know, some children coming and giving you a hard time in your life and you try the best thing in life. I know I'm not the one, I'm not the only mother that's happened. And sometimes some mother it's very hard for her. I understand that. Maybe some mother, they can see this, and they say, "See, she did it. I can do it." Or I give them like an example, example or something that a mother can start it with the son to write it, a letter. Porque, it's a lot of mothers in the world that have their son in jail. And some time they so sad, so angry, they want it, they want to read it, they want to write a letter, and they don't know how to start it. They don't know how to say, how to explain to their son, or they afraid. And I want this: all the mothers in the world they can see this and they say, "See she did it. I can make it too."

As Violeta acknowledges in the interview segment, the letter was intended to be private, yet she recognizes that her writing might be an inspiring example for other women in her position. Notice how Violeta shifts the focus of the letter from her son to herself and to other mothers when she says, "I wrote this letter for my son because I know it's a lot of mother in this world, it's the same way that happened in the life like me." Violeta uses the genre of the letter to work through her experience as a mother of an incarcerated son. But now that she has written the letter, she is doing something more with it. Now she repositions herself as a model for other women in the same situation. By reading Violeta's letter, other mothers can also learn from the courage she expresses through writing. Now when she repositions herself, Violeta is doing it for the benefit of a new audience.

The move to imagine a public audience means that Violeta no longer frames her situation as solely personal but as an important social issue that is pertinent to a larger public audience. She re-conceives the issue as something outside of herself that she can critique, and, through her writing, attempt to change. She can also attempt to change the way others understand it. When she writes the letter, Violeta is doing something social for the benefit of others besides herself and her son. In another piece, called "The Single Mother," she takes the step to speak explicitly to outside audiences. I asked her what other audiences she imagined telling her narrative to:

L: Who do you imagine, when you wrote this piece, or even now, who did—who did you imagine you were telling this story to?

V: Every single, every single mom.

L: Every single mom. Mm hmm, mm hmm. Um... What, um, —what do single moms need to know that you can tell them?

V: Um. What I tell every single mom, that I can say to the mom is: “I know it’s hard. Very hard.” Sometime mom will say, “Oh I give up! I can’t do it. It’s not, it’s not”...

In this piece, as in the letter to her son, Violeta uses her lived experience as a model for learning how to cope with difficult situations. Her interview comments make it clear that Violeta has been aware for quite a while that writing can be used to reflect on her own experience; however, the text and her remarks reveal that she is using writing for much more. By speaking out to public audiences, Violeta is able to rewrite her own experience as well as reinterpret the larger cultural experiences of others like her. She can present her writing as a model for others to use as they approach difficult situations in their lives.

Violeta’s earlier remarks concerning her sense of progress as a learner imply that she sees her writing as a source of agency. In her interview

The Single Mother

The mother works hard when she is a single mother. She has to work even harder when she has a lot of children. She is mother and father and she has to take care of the house. When there are problems coming, she has to fix them. She feels like everything is so hard because when she fixes the problems, another is coming. When the bills come, she has to pay them. She has to buy the clothes and the food. Sometimes she does not have time for herself.

For example, I am in school now because my mother never put me in school. My life was very hard. It is hard for me because I do not know about reading and writing. I was afraid to make mistakes. Sometimes, I am so afraid to talk with people. Sometimes, I feel very confused. I do so much work with my kids in my house. We have to keep everything in order. I will never give up in my life.

comments, she expresses herself as someone who is always moving ahead and who fights to keep going. Notice that her texts typically end with a motivational statement: “I will never give up in my life”; “See she did it. I can make it too”; “When you do the right thing you will feel proud; this is important for my life.” On one level, Violeta is writing to motivate herself to carry on. In these texts Violeta extends her reflection, analysis, and motivational statement to speak out to other audiences outside herself. Even in the letter to

her son, where she is using writing to resolve a conflict, she then looks outward

at how her writing might be useful to other potential readers. Throughout our second interview, Violeta talked about herself as someone who has learned to be strong. Violeta seems to be testing out the image of herself as a fighter in her writing, both for her own benefit and the benefit of others.

By redirecting her writing to a public audience, Violeta is able to rewrite the story of her life. She is using writing the way F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin argue narrative inquiry can be a tool for restorying: “a person is, at once, engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories” (4). Violeta does the work of analyzing her life on numerous levels to “tell,” “retell,” and “re-live it;” then she takes the next step that is to narrate her story to audiences outside herself. In “The Single Mother,” Violeta instructs the public about the difficult life of the single mother. Once again, she is offering multiple messages to various audiences. Her stated goals are to speak out on behalf of single mothers and also to encourage these mothers to get an education. As Violeta imagines her texts circulating among a larger public, she envisions them motivating others to be strong, to endure their struggles as single mothers, and to resist their social positioning. Here’s what Violeta said about her purposes for telling the story of the single mother:

L: Why was it important to you to tell the story of the single mom?

V: Um...It was important for me porque I know, there’s a lot of mothers single moms right now.

L: Mm hmm.

V: Every place that I go, and I hear that: “Oh I’m a single mother, it’s so hard for me. Oh I’m a single mo — “ It’s a lot. It’s a lot of parents they do like that. And I say, let me write something about my life as a single mother.

L: Mm hmm.

V: Let me choose this *porque* I know it’s a lot of mother. It’s a really important for me. *Porque* put over there, like I’m saying before, everything. This is a part of my life, too. And I say, let me put over there. Let me, let me, let me write about how I feel single mother. Or let me take my stress out [laughs] —

L: Yeah.

V: - -a little bit about this.

L: Yeah.

V: It's really important for me. In my life. *Porque* it was not easy. I say, oh, another part of my life, is hard in my life. Let me start it again. Let me start it again, writing now.

From this passage we get a sense that by writing to “let me start it again,” Violeta is rewriting her life. Even more obvious is the way she speaks about her portfolio. In this segment of the interview, she stresses the role of the portfolio in her life. When she says, “*Porque*, put over there, like I’m saying before, everything,” she means, I put everything about my life in my portfolio. In this passage, when Violeta speaks of writing for and about single mothers, she first recognizes the personal importance of chronicling her own experience in the portfolio.

Violeta’s sense of herself as someone who is in a state of becoming and who can imagine her writing addressing different audiences suggests that it may be possible for the roles of writer and audience to shift in relation to one another. Barbara Biesecker proposes that we re-conceive the entire rhetorical situation as one that occurs in flux. Based on Derrida’s notion of the deconstructed subject, Biesecker argues that the idea of a shifting subject also destabilizes the idea of audience. What this argument means in Violeta’s case is that writer and audience are both capable of shifting. We have already seen how Violeta uses writing as a way to reposition herself in relation to material conditions. When she writes, Violeta rewrites herself. According to Biesecker’s analysis of the rhetorical situation, both subject and audience are in a similar state of flux. This theory helps explain Violeta’s changing notion of audience. It makes sense that Violeta can start out writing a letter intended for her son, but then imagine it addressing a large audience of single mothers. When Violeta imagines herself in different situations, she is able to create different audiences. If one accepts Biesecker’s idea of a deconstructed rhetorical situation, then “it becomes possible to read discursive practices neither as rhetorics directed to preconstituted and known audiences nor as rhetorics ‘in search of’ objectively identifiable but yet undiscovered audiences” (126). In other words, when Violeta reaches out to invoked audiences, she is not imagining someone who does not exist. Her writing is not a fantasy. Rather, she is engaging in the very real work of creating an audience in relation to the subject she creates in her writing. As she repositions herself, she repositions her audience as well.

In the fashion of Giroux, Violeta is enacting self—and social—transformation via her written texts. Giroux theorizes that you must work on your self critically before you are ready to take on social transformation. On her own, Violeta is already doing what Giroux and other critical literacy theorists insist we must teach people as an ongoing and recursive process. She already has the critical perspective that allows her to write to work things out in her own life and to address broader social issues. The process of writing makes it possible for Violeta to rewrite dominant literacy narratives. Violeta is attempting to rewrite narratives that keep her—and people in situations like hers—locked into oppressive positions. In this way, we see that Violeta’s writing gives her a sense of agency that allows her to speak out as a social activist.

In other words, “The Single Mother” reaches out even more broadly than simply to inspire other mothers. It reaches back to Violeta’s own social position, but it also attempts to revise dominant literacy narratives. Notice the shift in focus from the first to the second paragraph. While the first paragraph addresses the situation of the single mother in general, in the second paragraph Violeta offers herself as an example, as we see here:

For example, I am in school now because my mother never put me in school. My life was very hard. It is hard for me because I do not know about reading and writing. I was afraid to make mistakes. Sometimes, I am so afraid to talk with people. Sometimes, I feel very confused. I do so much work with my kids in my house. We have to keep everything in order. I will never give up in my life.

What is striking about this model is how Violeta constructs herself as someone who is making changes by learning how to read and write. She offers single mothers a model of herself as a woman who used to be afraid and disempowered and who is now taking active charge by getting an education. I asked Violeta why she decided to write an example. She explained:

L: Umm...Why did you decide to write an example? Why did you decide to write it like an example?

V: I decided like a example because I have a lot of children. Some mom have a lot of children. They stuck out in a house: “Oh I cannot go, I have a lot of children. How I going to make it with children and how go to school?” It’s not. You can make it.

L: Mm hmm.

V: You can go. Only the opportunity. Send the kids to school. When the kids in school, you can do it.

L: Mm hmm.

V: Go to school to get your, you can have your education when the kid have their education from the teaching school. You can do it at the same time. And, you know what? And the children see you: “Oh my mommy’s going to school. My mom wants she diploma to get her GED. See my mom’s do it, I can do it too. Let me follow my mom.”

L: Uh huh.

V: “To my mom do that, I can do it too.”

L: So the example is an example to your children?

V: Mm hmm.

L: Is that right?

V: Yup!

L: I have —

V: And right now it's so hard to teenagers go to school. If my teenagers see me: "Mommy doing this; let me follow my mother."

L: Uh huh.

V: "I can do it. Look at my ma, she's going to go too. She can do it, just go straight away this going mom." That's what I think. And I share with my kids what did I do in school. I share the book [portfolio] with my children.

L: That's so nice. Yeah, they must be so proud —

V: Yeah, my daughter live in front of me, she's married, right? I share my goals. *To everybody*. I sit down with her: "Look what Mom do in school." And when I do something in school, and I tell the teacher, "give me the copy." I like a little girl, so happy, and I share it to my children!

L: Oh, that's so nice. Uh huh.

V: I say, "Look at what your mom do." I can do. I feel proud, and I do! They say, "Ma! You look like a little girl," and I say, "I am! I am, because I didn't have the opportunity when I was little girl. Why I can't not have it now?"

As an adult learner, Violeta wants her children to see her as someone inspired by education, someone for whom "the door is now open." But here Violeta states that her audience is not limited; she is repositioning herself as someone who can speak to "everyone" about inequity. Violeta's narratives address not merely her own life but larger problems of single motherhood and public schooling—both extremely public issues. By confronting these issues in her texts for the benefit of a broad audience—albeit an invoked audience—Violeta is attempting to alter dominant literacy narratives that have inscribed her into a particular social position. She works to rewrite her own life as well as the larger narrative that affects "everyone." As her writing reveals, Violeta is not a

woman who has to be taught about critical literacy. She is already talking back to dominant culture, fighting to make changes.

We see in Violeta's texts and in her interview statements a strong desire to use writing for the purpose of rewriting her life for her own benefit and for the benefit of others. Violeta attempts to change her social positioning through that rewriting. In writing she can reposition herself as a strong woman whose lived experiences have motivated her to tell a different story that can serve as a model for other women. Similarly, in "The Single Mother," Violeta constructs herself as a spokesperson who can advise others through writing so that they too might act for social change. Although some of Violeta's activism is imagined—she is not actually standing on street corners or on a platform in her church encouraging single mothers to band together—she does make whatever efforts she can to publish her texts within the program.

Giroux argues that for a radical pedagogy to be truly enacted, it must offer a "language of possibility." He describes a language of possibility as "capable of thinking risky thoughts, that engages a project of hope, and points to the horizon of the 'not yet'" (77). When Violeta writes to an imagined audience of single mothers, she is looking ahead to the "not yet." She imagines that her writing will touch other readers so that they may reinterpret their lives as she has, and thus speak out to change things. Reaching toward possibility, toward new ways of thinking and new audiences suggests that a language of the "not yet" is: "one in which the imagination is redeemed and nourished in the effort to construct new relationships fashioned out of strategies of collective resistance based on a critical recognition of both what society is and what it might become" (78).

I want to cite one final example where I see Violeta using writing to resist her social position and thus revise dominant literacy narratives. In a fictional piece about Rosa Parks that she cast as an imaginary dream, Violeta situated herself on a bus where she and Parks are strong together.

In her imagined address to Rosa Parks, Violeta thanks her for her strength: "I am proud of you because you never gave up." Rather than simply refer to the incident that made Rosa Parks famous, Violeta acknowledges the strength of a woman who had the courage to act on behalf of others. The image Violeta creates of Rosa Parks is of a strong woman who cannot be defeated by forces acting against her. Like Rosa Parks, Violeta imagines herself acting in resistance. In our discussion of the text, Violeta explained

My Conversation with Rosa Parks

Violeta Blanca

February 18, 2004

One day I had a dream that I was sitting next to Rosa Parks on bus. I said, I am proud of you because you never gave up. You are a strong woman. You helped the black people to not be segregated. You helped the black people understand why it is important to vote. You decided to bring the people together to make a protest. You helped get justice to the black people. The white people were prejudiced to the black people. Thank you for your story because we learned about your good work.

how her own thinking was in alignment with Parks: “I going to fight like that. Got to keep it moving, what’s a matter, what happen?” I want that.” By characterizing an imagined Rosa Parks, Violeta creates an image for herself of a strong woman she wants to become. In order to become that woman, she needs to keep moving, keep interrogating the situations she is in without allowing those situations to overpower her. By re-positioning herself as a resister, instead of as the woman who used to be so afraid of being in public, Violeta is recreating herself as a figure that confronts the limit-situations of poverty, single-motherhood, and non-literacy. For her, an important step in fighting oppressive situations is imagining her self in the position where she wants to be, in this case acting in the guise of Rosa Parks.

The woman Violeta conjures up as Rosa Parks is her self, a woman who has had a difficult life yet is able to articulate: “that’s what I want. I want to learn.” Previously, Violeta had described herself as someone who used to live in fear, yet who now re-positions herself as a fighter. By creating herself as a fighter, Violeta imagines herself in situations where she speaks out against situations that oppress her as a way to keep the “door open.” Resisting situations depends on her upholding the subject position of a woman who has learned from the oppressive material conditions in her life always to fight. Violeta has taken on the role of fighter as a way to resist dominant narratives that position her as a woman who can’t make it in society because of her non-literacy. She resists a narrative of the improved self by imagining situations where she is strong and is able to fight back. By invoking a different self who is a resister, Violeta is able to confront material conditions that have oppressed her from a different position.

When we discussed this text, Violeta described herself as “magic” because she could imagine how Parks might be thinking:

I’m magic, you know. I see how she, how that happen. And sometime we talking about story, we get it in our head, and I think, oh she was like that. I knew how she was. I think she was like that. That’s the kind of imagination that you have in your head.

In this passage, Violeta talks about the sense of “knowing” that legitimizes fiction, and she shows that writing offers her the possibility to make such a leap through “the kind of imagination that you have in your head.” I call attention to this passage because Violeta does a wonderful job of describing the experience of imagining how someone else thinks. I also call attention to this excerpt because it suggests that genre can enable a kind of self-transformation. Violeta’s fictional piece about Rosa Parks is the first indication that she might be interested in experimenting with genre as a way to change her subject position in her future writing. The “magic” she speaks of points to the potential of writing for imagining situations differently and working them out through text.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Violeta's texts can teach us that writing can not only be used to challenge dominant ideology but also that the process of writing to multiple audiences in multiple genres can help foster such critical praxis. When Violeta takes the steps to speak out in her writing, she is telling a different story of culture, one that has the potential to change her subject position beyond the context of the written narrative. Creating textual agency means that Violeta can use the writing process to make several moves she couldn't previously make without writing. For instance, she can:

- Examine conditions in her own life and in the lives of others
- Use a variety of rhetorical strategies to present her writing to audiences outside of her self
- Share her writing with real and invoked audiences with the goal of encouraging other people to engage in critical self-examination and cultural critique.

If, as Giroux suggests, the first step toward agency is reflection, then what Violeta evidences are a series of activist steps forward. She extends her self-analysis by taking her writing from private to public where it can have more of an effect. When Violeta composes her texts, she is challenging dominant narratives by offering something else. That something else—her writing—results from her critique of culture and the strong desire to communicate what she sees to others in the public as well as private spheres. By reaching out publicly, she can call attention to the border that is being transgressed. She desires witnesses to her acts of transgression as well as validation in challenging borders of oppression as we see in "The Single Mother."

Narratives such as Violeta's can teach us about writing's potential for social action. As teachers in academic or informal environments, I believe we can carry back to our classrooms the knowledge that people want to use writing for social change. They want the opportunity to change their social positioning. They want to claim what has been denied them and can use writing to express untold stories and narratives the public may not welcome. As Cushman's study demonstrated, people want critical agency in order to negotiate their lives on their own terms. If our goal is to teach students to think more critically, then the next step after reading about and discussing difficult issues is to help them apply their critical perspective to real-world situations. We want students to claim what they know and to believe that their knowledge is valued in the classroom and outside of schooling.

By understanding the motivations for writing and desires exhibited in adult learners' texts, we can get a fuller sense of the multiple purposes people have for writing. As in Violeta's case, someone might begin by writing for one purpose—such as learning the genre of the letter—but might end up using that writing for an array of functions, from personal to activist. The alternative literacy narratives produced by adult learners can guide us in understanding just how writing might be used to reconfigure one's sense of self, to negotiate one's place in society, and to speak out against and perhaps alter systems of oppression.

Notes

¹ I use the term “non-literate” to name people who have not had the benefit of becoming literate and “non-literacy” to name the condition of not knowing how to read or write. When I use the more common terms *illiterate* and *illiteracy*, I refer to labels that are socially imposed. Therefore, I place these words in quotation marks to call attention to the way “illiteracy” is constructed as a social *illness*.

² At the time of her dissertation study (1991), Marilyn Gillespie was founding director of Read/Write/Now, the adult learning center in Springfield, Massachusetts where I conducted my research. Although she has long since moved on from Read/Write/Now, Gillespie’s work continues to investigate the role of writing in the lives of adult learners.

³ A pseudonym. Violeta was one of four learners at R/W/N who volunteered to participate in the study. Guided by the terms of my IRB, she gave permission for her writing and her interview transcripts to be quoted and/or reprinted in my dissertation and in any subsequent publications.

⁴ Learners at R/W/N keep a portfolio of their completed work. The portfolios are large binders that reside on a shelf in each classroom. Learners take them down and use them as they wish. All finished writing is also saved as electronic files, so the portfolio functions as a kind of scrapbook. The portfolios contain only the final version of a piece of work. For each piece included, learners attach a page on which they fill out the title of the piece and their response to the following statement: “The reason why I want to put this in my portfolio is...”

⁵ Violeta’s teacher.

⁶ During this unit, learners were involved in a papier mache mask-making project in conjunction with the writing they were doing on the topic of “the masks we wear.”

⁷ I assume that “Taking Off the Masks” was the first piece Violeta wrote on masks because it uses the format teachers recommended and because it presents topics in her life with less analysis than in “My Mask.” Unfortunately, we did not discuss the order in which the two poems were written.

⁸ Violeta had included “My Masks” in her portfolio, but the earlier poem, “Taking of the Masks,” was not in her portfolio. In our second interview, which addressed specific pieces of writing in her portfolio, we only discussed “My Masks.” During the time of my research, the program wide publication had not been released yet, and so I was not aware that Violeta had composed “Taking Off the Masks.” I would have liked to talk with her about the composition of both pieces.

Works Cited

- Balester, Valerie M. *Cultural Divide: A Study of African-American College-Level Writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1993.
- Biesecker, Barbara. "Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation from Within the Thematic of *Differáncé*." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 22 (1989): 110-30.
- Brandt, Deborah. *Literacy in American Lives*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2001.
- Britton, James. *Language and Learning: The Importance of Speech in Children's Development*. 1970. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1993.
- Brodkey, Linda. "On the Subjects of Class and Gender in 'The Literacy Letters.'" *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory*. Villanueva, Victor, Ed. 2nd ed. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2003: 677-696.
- . "Writing on the Bias." *Writing Permitted in Designated Areas Only*. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1996: 30-51.
- Cintron, Ralph. *Angels' Town: Chero Ways, Gang Life, and Rhetorics of the Everyday*. Boston: Beacon P, 1997.
- Connelly, F. Michael and D. Jean Clandinin. "Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry." *Educational Researcher* 19 (1990): 2-14.
- Cushman, Ellen. *The Struggle and the Tools: Oral and Literate Strategies in an Inner City Community*. Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 1998.
- Freire, Paolo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 1970. New York: Continuum. 1993.
- Gillespie, Marilyn. "Becoming Authors: The Social Context of Writing and Local Publishing by Adult Beginning Readers." Diss. UMass, 1991.
- . "The Forgotten R: Why Adult Educators Should Care About Writing Instruction." Twentieth Annual Rutgers University Invitational Symposium on Education. Rutgers University. 23-24 Oct. 2003.
- Giroux, Henry. *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education*. London and NY: Routledge, 1992.
- Giroux, Henry. "Literacy and the Politics of Difference." *Critical Literacy: Politics, Praxis, and the Postmodern*. Lankshear, Colin and Peter L. McLaren, Eds. Albany, NY: SUNY P, 1993: 367-77.
- Graff, Harvey, J. *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth-Century City*. NY: Academic P, 1979.
- Heath, Shirley Bryce. *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1983.
- Higgins, Lorraine, Elenore Long and Linda Flower, "Community Literacy: A Rhetorical Model for Personal and Public Inquiry." *Community Literacy Journal* 1.1 (2006): 9-43.
- Knoblauch C.H. and Lil Brannon. *Critical Teaching and the Idea of Literacy*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1993.
- LeCourt, Donna. "Beyond the Ludic: The Materiality of Text Production—A Response to Peter McLaren." *Strategies: Journal of Theory, Culture, and Politics*. 11/12 (1998): 56-68.

- Mahiri, Jabari. *Shooting For Excellence: African American and Youth Culture in New Century Schools*. NY and London: Teachers College P., 1998.
- McLaren, Peter. *Critical Pedagogy and Predatory Culture: Oppositional Politics in a Postmodern Era*. London and NY: Routledge, 1995.
- McLaughlin, Daniel, "Toward a Dialogical Understanding of Literacy: The Case of Navajo Print," *Literacy Across Communities*. Beverly J. Moss, ed. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton P, 1994. 85-120.
- Moss, Beverly J. *A Community Text Arises: A Literate Text and a Literacy Tradition in African-American Churches*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton P, 2003.
- Peck, Wayne, Linda Flower, and Lorraine Higgins. "Community Literacy: Can Writing Make a Difference?" *The Quarterly of the National Writing Project and The Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy* 16.2 (1994): 1-7.
- Richardson, Elaine. *African American Literacies*, London and NY: Routledge, 2003.
- Selfe, Cynthia L. *Technology and Literacy in the Twenty-First Century: The Importance of Paying Attention*. Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern IL UP, 1999.
- Stuckey, Elspeth. *The Violence of Literacy*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1991.
- Szwed, John, "The Ethnography of Literacy," *Perspectives on Literacy*. Kintgen, Eugene R., Barry M. Kroll, and Mike Rose, eds. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern IL UP, 1988. 303-311.
- Trimbur, John, "Literacy and the Discourse of Crisis." *The Politics of Writing Instruction: Post-secondary*. Bullock, Richard and John Trimbur, Eds. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1991. 277-296.
- Weinstein-Shr, Gail, "From Mountaintops to City Streets: Literacy in Philadelphia's Hmong Community," *Literacy Across Communities*. Moss, ed. 49-83
- Young, Morris. *Minor Re/Visions: Asian American Literacy Narratives as a Rhetoric of Citizenship*. Carbondale, IL: Southern IL UP, 2004.

Lauren Rosenberg is Assistant Professor of English at Eastern Connecticut State University where she teaches courses in composition and creative writing. She continues to be involved in literacy research with the adult learners at Read/Write/Now in Springfield, MA.