

STUDENTS' RIGHT TO THEIR OWN LITERACIES: USING MODELS OF
LITERACY IN AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERACY NARRATIVES
FOR FIRST YEAR WRITING

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ABSTRACT

Exploring the enduring implications of Paul Kei Matsuda's founding work on "The Myth of Linguistic Homogeneity in U.S. College Composition" (2006), this dissertation investigates student literacy narratives from a composition studies and translingual perspective. Despite the contributions of language theory politics from translingualism, pervasive views of language and the ways college teachers, including writing teachers, conceive of difference continue to limit the possibilities for our students and the discipline. Aware of the pitfalls of a "sameness-of-difference" notion of the diverse experiences contained within the classroom space, I am interested in the ways that the literacy narrative can help students better appreciate the larger socio-ideological forces that support and constrain reading and writing practices in material and conceptual ways.

Models of literacy can help students reflect on the literacy events, sponsors and other meta-narratives that have shaped them in their growing identities as readers and writers. African American writers, including Ellen and William Craft, W.E.B. Du Bois, Nella Larsen, and Toni Morrison, provide a framework for students' own in-depth investigation into their literacy practices through these content chapters.

While other work focuses on the role of literacy as one feature of African American literature, this dissertation shows the literacy narrative as a genre tackling pervasive notions of racialized difference and equality. In defining literacy acquisition as a socially-situated process, these narratives highlight the socio-political import of learning to read and write in America and the pivotal role of the imagination in unbinding literacy from text-based

production. The literacy narrative can help students better appreciate the larger socio-ideological forces that support and constrain reading and writing practices in material and conceptual ways.

As a reflective starting place to envision the challenges and rewards of literacy in their professional and personal lives, literacy narratives can help students decide in what ways writing matters to them. These assignments also attest to how language users shape, and are shaped by, the college literacy classroom, calling for a theory that acknowledges that the work of the First Year Writing classroom can become a productively collaborative space.

This not a story of how African American authors speak *for* contemporary students, but rather how these texts can mobilize their own understanding of the significance of literacy on people and on individuals. In harnessing these texts, the dissertation calls for a more robust praxis in assigning literacy narratives in First Year Writing composition classes and multilingual English-language learner equivalents.

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A literacy narrative, of sorts.

Sitting across from my family and friends in the intimate and semi-private spaces of dinner tables, coffee counters, and dance studios, I have deep respect for the habits of flexibility we practice and the everyday multilingual language exchanges that have taught me about other cultures and prompted my seemingly insatiable curiosity about the world and others in it. I thank all those who supported me on my own literacy quests.

The growing awareness that my interest in language politics did not predominate politically or culturally came at a critical time in my professional development, as I began reflecting on what it means to be granted institutional support and was asked to fill the role of First Year Writing and later English teacher, feeling mostly like a gangly four-year old stepping into my mom's well-worn dance shoes. The broken chalk I found in the oversized jacket reassured and challenged me, *but what would I use it for?*

If community literacy is one dimension of the field pioneered by scholars close to my home and home institution, I ask how we conceive of and draw the boundary lines around our communities, and who decides. We find homes in surprising places sometimes, and the experiences I've had and homes I've been welcomed into could not have been imagined by generations even twice removed from me. I found a home among people who deeply care about teaching, who articulate this passion, and who theorize about it.

The experiences I've had at Temple provided the conditions and constraints that gave

rise to this project. The dynamic and changing landscape of Temple and the languages it brings together gave me a place to try out my own translingual excursions, which grew under the care of the English department.

Without Roland Williams' tireless support and encouragement to "write a page a day, a sentence perhaps, to start," I would have forever been adding to my notes rather than to compile this work before you, one letter at a time. Kate Henry gave me the confidence to see my project with new eyes right at critical moments in my process and took even the most inchoate ideas seriously. She treated me as a colleague well before I saw that possibility in myself, and her approach encouraged me to keep developing. Shannon Walters introduced me to the possibilities of applying a new lens to familiar material and more generally helped concretize many of my professional aspirations. Moreover, she taught me strategies for reading student work I hope to use with my own students. My outside reader, Crystal J. Lucky, continues to push me toward new horizons and provided the foundations of this project. A few encouraging marginal comments first confirmed my passion for this work. Bolstered by her support, I took these inklings across town to ruminate further in Anderson Hall, my offices affording me a much-appreciated view of the Philadelphia cityscape.

I hope to pass on these consummate teachers' lessons to my own students, ones that extend far beyond the texts at hand. Ultimately, this is a story of transitions. It brings together my interest in students' changing identities and how they explore these through their writing and also my own changing understanding of disciplines in flux. It is also a

call to be attuned to the changes that shape our learning goals for students who are carrying their (and previous generations') lived histories with them into future spaces, yet to be imagined.

In addition to my committee, others in my department shaped my professional development: Eli Goldblatt, Steve Newman, Sook Kim, and Rachael Groner all took the time to give me suggestions at early stages and, along with my committee, inspire me to strive for excellence in teaching through their subject matter knowledge, teaching passion, and dedication to students.

There are those whose hands have shaped this work in other ways. Chiji Akoma at Villanova and Abu Abarry at Temple showed me a truly transnational approach to scholarship for the first time. Liz Eursell, Sarah Marshall, and Erin Lucas taught me about the disciplinary spaces of the Writing Center and the work that is possible inside. Michael Diezmos read early drafts more times than I'd like to admit over more years than I'll ever admit, providing cheerful and manageable feedback that gave me new insight each time I was, yet again, back at the drawing board. His music filled the protracted silences of long writing bouts on days both bright and bleak.

And my interdisciplinary colleagues I've had the privilege of working with long-term on their own professional development in a tutoring capacity, namely Biyun, Dishu, Hyunji, Jiayu, Seleme, and Arezou, and my undergraduate students I've met with as both teacher and tutor as well: they've reflected back at me my own goals in concrete ways I never could have envisioned without them. They were the daily motivation to keep going and a joy to

meet with every week. I hope in some way I helped them feel more at home even as they explored unfamiliar territory.

Deep gratitude animates each and every page of this work. The fruition of this project would not be possible without my parents', stepmother's, and godparents' encouragement, Nhung's sustenance, and Annie's whimsical diversions. It is the newest generation, Jonathan, Jenna, Connor, Declan, Thuy Vi, Thi Nung, and Else, that inspire me as they begin to learn to read and misread(!) the world around them.

Finally, there were those who began this journey with me but were not able to walk me to its end, including Aunt Yolanda, Uncle Joey, Aunt Theresa, Ann, Bob, and our First Year Writing secretary, Derrick, whose light, I find, is forever gone from his office. This list is too long by every name, but I still feel their presence: their continued influence smiles on in these pages, in fact. "How about that!"

PREFACE

Overview of Chapters

If we think of the term *literacy* as a semantic field of contradictory and repressed notions, opening that semantic field and revealing its structure, revealing what has been devalued and repressed, will help us to understand how the ideologies of literacy have limited us and how breaking open the discourse around literacy offers constructive promise. (Fernandez, *Imagining Literacy*, 19)

This project explores potent models of literacy as an important step in “breaking open the discourse around literacy.” These discourse shapes ideas about literacy’s role on both local and larger-scale levels and the models that I sketch suggest a continued investment in reading and writing as a means of survival and overcoming challenges, as well as making sense out of and categorizing surroundings.

The texts I explore in the following chapters allow for many points of entry into the literacy narrative genre. Each of these texts constitute arguments about literacy, showing a continued investment from the earliest African American writings. In response to slave laws and their legacy on reading race in America, African American authors challenged their dehumanized status in over three hundred years of written texts. The production of these texts offers evidence of a rhetorical capacity historically denied to them. Narratives detailing literacy acquisition address the enduring legacy of slave laws denying literacy to African Americans and using enforced illiteracy as proof of the slaves’ attenuated human status. Moreover, with a particular focus on the trope of literacy, it is possible through this

tradition to trace how Americans learned to “read” race in texts, the landscape, and the bodies that produced them, making racial difference legible through American letters.

After defining the literacy narrative and providing key examples of literacy narratives of survival and struggle in Chapters Two and Three, Chapter Four investigates the cultural literacy strategies that slaves used to subvert dominant systems of privilege. In *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (1860), William and Ellen Craft effectively navigate the nineteenth-century racial landscape despite their inability to read and write. As astute cultural readers, they are able to safely overcome the challenges that the racial and politicized landscape present to them. They successfully find community in a new setting, and learn to read and write in order to recount their experience. Their literacy narrative imposes a critical stamp on their environment and legitimizes their critique of slavery. Taking up issues of gender, ability, language, and race, Crafts’ narrative emphasizes how systems of privilege work together to disenfranchise individuals, as well as the potential to challenge these systems while working with them.

At the same time that it accounts for William and Ellen Craft’s long journey to both literacy and freedom, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* is unique insofar as it reveals in productive readings of Ellen Craft as white, disabled, male slave owner reliant on his manservant while travelling North via train. In their escape, William and Ellen perform their own writings from their cultural readings and the material available to them, composing alternative identities. Their cultural readings and imaginative performative act

of composing an alternative identity inform their later reflective, socially-engaged writing practices that forms the published slave narrative. This chapter employs definitions from recent work in translingualism to suggest that although slaves like William and Ellen Craft capitalize on the trope of linguistic mastery as guarantor of freedom, they also intimate their cultural and linguistic fluency through their readings of the political and cultural landscape. One major development of this chapter is considering how language is an important marker of identity that gets left out of discussions of intersectionality. Connecting identity to language politics more explicitly, I take up more recent work in translingualism to show how porous boundaries around languages disrupt the discrete categories imposed on our social and intellectual landscapes through the twenty-first century. I also envision how this model of literacy can serve First Year Writing students in composing their own literate identities for public and private audiences.

Chapter Five explores definitions of race based on blood fetish and skin color that make subversion possible. Like Ellen Craft, Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield work with this binary in *Passing* to challenge early twentieth century essentialist racial discourse. Clare and Irene perform race, and others use visual markers to make sense of it. One question this novella raises is who is the better reader, Clare or Irene. Writers of the Harlem Renaissance take up this theme of the consequences of higher education on individuals. While the role of the isolated, deracinated, mobile modernist artist has been well explored, what is less evident is the role that particular types of education have had in priming this formation. Writers like Larsen within the first decades of the twentieth century are

grappling with the expectation that a particular literate tradition could afford the same privileges to African Americans as to the larger population, drawing from the hopes of literate slaves who bore witness to their journeys toward freedom.

In this chapter, I argue that texts like *Passing* help students put pressure on the commonplaces that First Year Writers try out in their performative work of what David Bartholomae calls “Inventing the University.” Using race as a visual signpost on the American landscape, I use the well-established trope of visibility in this text to explore the novella as a literacy narrative encouraging open-ended cultural reading practices. I also examine the use of color in the novel to help me explore the potential of Larsen’s transgressive mobility. This chapter attempts to recuperate the potential of reading in the writing classroom, and the final section considers more recent contributions to First Year Writing.

Chapter Six presents a series of literacy quests that the girls undertake in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. This chapter highlights childhood literacy acquisition for children developing the skills that they will need as adults. Their misreadings are as valuable as their effective quests in promoting child development. Unlike the MacTeer sisters, who effectively learn to read their environment from these quests, Pecola Breedlove increasingly dissociates from the community of Lorraine, Ohio. Morrison shows how different Pecola’s everyday experience is from the American Dream, encapsulated in the *Dick and Jane* primer that runs throughout the novel.

By using a master text in the form of a popular American primer to structure her

first novel, Morrison highlights both the MacTeer sisters' and Pecola's readings of the dominant culture at the same time that it promises the rewards of literacy as personal and communal salvation. Although this novel focuses on children, it underscores the devastating ramifications of continued illiteracy that Pecola's demise dramatizes. Moreover, the juxtaposition of the Breedloves and MacTeers encourages a contrast in which the MacTeer sisters are able to overcome misreadings through a series of quests and survive to bear witness to, and pass on, Pecola's story.

Chapter Seven employs Morrison's neo-slave narrative *A Mercy* in order to consider the ways that historical narratives get developed and maintained. Written in the beginning of the twentieth century, it relates the story of a seventeenth-century young female slave who ventures into the woods and returns to etch her story on the walls and floor of her master's abandoned mansion in this neo-slave narrative. Florens' journey through the woods compels her confession, or in other words, her reading of the American landscape bears witness to her writing. By the conclusion of the novel, she recovers a connection with her dislocated maternal ancestry to survive the daily increasing isolation and oppression she is facing from her mixed-race community.

The opening paragraph of *A Mercy* beckons to readers with intimate urgency, as Florens taunts her beloved illiterate blacksmith: "One question is who is responsible? Another is can you read?" (3). Although she is aware of his literal inability to read words on a page, she goes on to provide a more nuanced definition of reading. Morrison provides insight into reading and writing as distinct literacy practices rather than conflating the two.

Moreover, Morrison extends her inquiry into reading practices to include reading racialized bodies. She imagines a time before these racialized literacy practices become embedded into national narratives in her retrospective novel. Like in her short story “Recitatif” and novel *Paradise*, not all of the characters in *A Mercy* are racially identified, and readers cannot avail themselves of markers they have used to assign race to individuals. Published in 2008, Morrison’s later novel signifies on twenty-first century assumptions about race in connection with literacy and other systems of oppression. In a retrospective origins story, Morrison challenges her readers’ concept of race and American origins stories told from systems of privilege.

English-language and second-language learning pedagogy remind teachers that even the most mainstream, standard, or canonical text can pose challenges to students who find it disconnected from their lived experiences. Reading and writing in academic genres is itself historicized and political, situated in the readers and writers who make meaning out of written language. The conclusion reimagines the classroom space given the increased diversity on college campuses, heeding Matsuda’s advice and the ongoing implications of CCCC’s Students’ Right to the Own Language(s) for English departments as they re-imagine the literacies they pass on to future generations.

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CHAPTER 1:
THE REWARDS OF PERSONAL NARRATIVE AND REFLECTION

Often in the first weeks of college, and sometimes as a first assignment, students are formally assigned a literacy narrative, which challenges their notions of academic writing. A common prompt might be to make a statement about themselves as a writer, an identity many struggle with or might not identify with at all. While it might seem like a prompt similar to an entrance writing sample, students may find that their professors have very different expectations for their first foray into academic writing than they were taught to expect. In fact, the very genre of personal writing can seem subjective and therefore like a relatively inconsequential assignment. Yet as a first statement, it can set the tone for later work.

Not all students acclimate easily to this assignment's demands. They might quietly or otherwise yearn for a model of literacy that seems more objective, one mastered with ease. For example, my continuing education student lamented to me that her professor did not assign a research paper instead. There was a clear structure for the research paper, she explained. She could appeal to outside claims to support her point, and, most importantly, she could quote from other texts or explain them rather than having to come up with her own ideas or reveal something about herself in an act of self-disclosure. She felt the assignment both trivial and risky. In this one conversation, my student illustrated to me some of the objections to assignments that are founded on reflection and personal experience.

Her comment highlights the struggles of the personal narrative genre. The literacy narrative often represents the first public statement that college students make in their writing courses, and can establish an ongoing reflective dialogue that can last through their academic careers. Designed to bridge their previous experiences in a way that prepares them for more academic work, it raises questions about the types of work that get valued at the university.¹

Together with their composition students, instructors and other composition practitioners can begin to explore the politics behind inclusionary and exclusionary practices in classroom spaces through literacy narratives, working from within to explore the functions of academic Discourses and contextualizing the ways that different literacies get valued.² It is not enough to invite home language into college classrooms without

¹ In “Beyond the Bridge Metaphor: Rethinking the Place of the Literacy Narrative in the Basic Writing Curriculum,” Anne-Marie Hall and Chris Minnix reconsider the placement of this assignment and call for its use throughout the first semester in a series of assignments that build off of each other.

² James Gee posits the limits of defining language in terms of only or mainly communication, highlighting its social function (1), and distinguishes general discourse from “capital D” Discourse in *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*. He describes Discourse as:

different ways in which we humans integrate language with non-language ‘stuff,’ such as different ways of thinking, acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, believing, and using symbols, tools and objects in the right places at the right times so as to enact and recognize different identities and activities, give the material world certain meanings, distribute social goods in a certain way, make certain sorts of meaningful connections

exploring the structures supporting hierarchies, privileging some language uses over others. Making these moves explicit can benefit all students. The key component in this endeavor is instantiating habits of reflective practices that can help students integrate their ever-changing literacies into their lives well beyond the semester or two they take writing classes.

In her work on *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*, Kathleen Yancey argues that when assigning reflection, it is important to think about “how we might operate without replicating ourselves” (182). In other words, for my purposes, teachers cannot assume that they understand the power of literacy in our students’ lives without asking them. “Replicating ourselves” is a danger for those who assign literacy narratives, as the same stories about literacy circulate year after year. At times, teachers prime students to rehearse their understandings of literacy that may or not make sense in students’ own contexts. For example, a student entering into college is going to have a very different understanding of literacy than his or her teacher, and in order to begin to have meaningful dialog about literacy’s role in students’ lives, it is important to start with the student’s understanding and to take these conceptions seriously.

in our experience, and privilege certain symbol systems and ways of knowing over others. (13)

When I refer to Discourse in this dissertation, I am drawing from this distinction and emphasizing the “ways of thinking, acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, believing” connected with language use, particularly as it shapes the literacy narrative.

From there, it is possible to challenge and nuance these definitions. This approach has benefits for students and teachers alike in terms of defining and participating in a meaningful learning community. Yancey posits that “we learn to understand ourselves through explaining ourselves to others. To do this, we rely on a reflection that involves a *checking* against, a *confirming*, and a *balancing* of self with others” (11). It is my contention that models of literacy from African American literature can show language-acquisition-in-process. Rather than an ideal to aspire toward, these help show language acquisition as situated in everyday experiences.

These reflective passages help provide the fodder for a reflective learning process, one that can be enriching for both student and teacher. The models can fund students’ reflective practices, by checking, confirming, and balancing, as well as distancing, qualifying, or otherwise positioning relationally within a larger learning community. Furthermore, it responds to Ramona Fernandez’ contention in *Imagining Literacy: Rhizomes of Knowledge in American Culture and Literature* that “because there exists no canonical definition of literacy, alternative definitions rarely feel obliged to make gestures of recognition toward one another” by presenting different models in responses to each other (10).

Given this potential, this dissertation revisits the place of the literacy narrative in composition, and thinks through its placement in a series of assignments. Like Vivian Zamel in her work on “Strangers in Academia: The Experiences of Faculty and ESL Students across the Curriculum,” I also want to resist definitions of academic languages as

“a monolithic discourse that can be packaged and transmitted to students” (516). Rather, these specific literacy practices and discourses are negotiated in situated contexts by users who imagine themselves in relation to others. She continues by pointing out that such definitions result in maintaining the “marginal status and that of our students,” (516). Her remark holds true for both writing, as a discipline, and teaching English-Language learners, more specifically. However, a translingual framework helps shed light on a more nuanced view of language use and users, one that benefits students and teachers alike who are laboring under these expectations.

While it has become clearer in the two decades since Zamel’s writing that the university consists of many discourses, I would like to point out that at times, these differences can get conflated in the pursuit of “good writing” housed in departments that can prepare students for the myriad ways that they will be expected to write over their college careers. However much in theory we have moved away from this attitude of a single academic discourse, I find that it is still a prevalent one in our day-to-day work and the goals we have for ourselves in the classroom. In this model of literacy, teachers pass on the talisman of successful, good, and interesting writing in unproblematic ways instead of investigating it. Reflective practices prompt students to articulate the differences between disciplines, as well as to expose them to the entrenched politics of languages in use, particularly in the largely “English-only” spaces of the university.

Literacy narratives encourage a mode of seeing the world reflectively, a habit of mind that is challenging to teach, but one that extends beyond the immediate assignment

and the pragmatics of good writing. In his work on *Writing as a Way of Being: Writing Instruction, Nonduality, and the Crisis of Sustainability*, Robert P. Yagelski defines writing in connection with ontology: “a way of being in the world. Whatever else it may be (and it may be many other things, too), writing is an ontological act. When we write, we enact a sense of ourselves as beings in the world” (3). Ramona Fernandez corroborates the connection between the act of imagining ourselves as literate beings and ontology: “Imagining literate selves allow us, whoever we may be, to envision community, nation, and ultimately world. Indeed, *imagining literacy is central to the many necessary acts of making ourselves and the world*” (11). When we write about literacy then, particularly in terms of how we have created and experienced it, we articulate a story of how we came to be and grapple with where we assumed these various identities. Moreover, we perform these identities for others within immediate learning communities and theorize what this experience means at the local, familial, communal, social, national, and global levels.

Given the contributions from compositionists, ELL theorists, and translanguaging, there is a paradigm shift in which what was once conceived of as deviance or lack is now cast as a resource, lending itself to the possibilities of exploration, play, and self-expression. Yet these goals remain elusive. In response to these challenges, the *Conference on College Composition and Communication* submitted a Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers (2001, 2009, 2014), in which one of the objectives encourages teachers to “include second language perspectives in developing theories, designing studies, analyzing data, and discussing implications of studies of writing.” As this statement

suggests, debates surrounding how to best incorporate the creative imaginings of our students have been longstanding. Some argue, for example, for more creative possibilities built into coursework as evidence of unbridled progress in welcoming diversity. In the case of First Year Writing classes, this plays out in the way departments structure courses, as well, with writing students at the outskirts of systems of privileged language use.

Translingualism allows for a more view of language situated in the real-life people who use it in everyday contexts. The focus on flux and change allows for some of these binaries to be called into question, as the theoretic grounding shifts toward a mobility that reflects the diverse experiences of twenty-first century America. However, the theoretical framework is of limited use if it does not recognize the lived experiences of its users.

Student populations are changing on American campuses, with more diverse students entering into colleges and universities. The typical response when confronted with a changing student population is to note the disparity between goal and performance and then to augur or lament yet another literacy crisis, encapsulated in popular publications striking tones similar to *Why Johnny Can't Read*. In this model of literacy, literacy becomes a standard to uphold, with individuals either meeting that standard or not. Teachers and students laboring under this definition of literacy must conform so that departments can demonstrate that their students, at least, have a certain level of literacy acquisition, a minimum threshold to show that they belong at the university.

What is appealing about this model of literacy is that it presents itself as objective and clearly quantifiable. Success, then, can be measured. This model of literacy seeks

conformity over imagination, mastery over trial or play, catering to students with backgrounds that primed them to succeed under this model.³ While how the discipline perceives and values home languages in academic contexts has changed, this early work set the stage for new ways of thinking about language use. For example, one response has been to point out the language politics inhering in acquiring new literacy skills.

Families, schools, peer groups, and home communities are sites of complex and diverse language practices influencing individual language users. However, not all language users enjoy the same prestige, and this is also true in elite circles like academia. Despite the changes valuing home languages in classrooms and writing and to not seeing rhetorical or linguistic differences as error from a pedagogical perspective, the importance of NCTE'S Students' Right to Their Own Language (SROL) 1974 resolution is still being bartered.⁴ Statements like this one underscore the function of language to organize people along lines of class and access to power, bifurcating what SROL calls the "haves" and

³ In addition, it is important to note that this priming function happens very early in life, as Shirley Brice Heath and Lisa Delpit have both shown in their work on the literacies of pre-literate and very early education aged children. In other words, students primed for success under this model of literacy come from backgrounds that fit a mainstream trajectory of education.

⁴ For example, in "African American Language, Rhetoric, and Students' Writing: New Direction for SRTOL," Staci M. Perryman-Clark highlights the "conflicting evidence of the successes associated with African American student writers who employ their own language practices," continuing by suggesting that "composition has not completely come to terms with how to affirm SRTOL in pedagogical practice" (474). She underscores the importance of teaching code-switching, in this case including Ebonics in academic English, as a "purposely informed decision regarding their language choices" (480).

“have-nots” (13). In this equation, access to privileged systems of language ensure that some individuals and groups would enjoy class markers that were themselves an argument for their position in society.

Steve Parks’ *Class Politics: The Movement for The Students’ Right to their Own Language* contextualizes the resolution in language politics and community activism, yet there is a continued disconnect between pedagogical best practices steeped in language theory and the classroom language work sanctioned in college writing classrooms. Students in transition, from home universities outside of the United States, from high schools into colleges, or from other spaces, could buy into a model of literacy that equates education with survival and even success. An aspirational view of literacy informs the ways that students participating in this model perceive and present their experiences.

Overall, a theoretic shift has resulted in writing courses ostensibly being more inviting of other and different languages into their classrooms in the past two decades. For example, home languages and dialects are used with some consistency in First Year Writing classes. The question that it elicits is the extent to which these language varieties are a resource to traditionally-underprivileged students and at what point explicit teaching of standard academic English should take precedence over an invitation to employ home languages. This unresolved tension, that has taken shape for decades with debates surrounding the use of Ebonics and later AAVE and other varieties of English in college classrooms and academic work, reinforces a privileging of standard academic English.

Translingualism helps to demystify language politics inhering in classroom spaces.

As Min-Zhan Lu and Bruce Horner point out in “Translingual Literacy, Language Differences, and Matters of Agency,” there exists an “ideology of *monolingualism*, which treats languages as discrete, stable, internally uniform, and linked indelibly to what is held to be each writer’s likewise stable and uniform location and social identity” (583). An ELL or translingual approach to writing can benefit all students rather than treating them as special cases based on difference. This approach to language can affect the way that teachers assign and value reflective work, harnessing imagination and diversity of experiences and of language use. Moreover, Lu and Horner eloquently articulate the power inhering in language use:

Until we learn to see all language practices as negotiations across asymmetrical relations of power, we cannot do full justice to the extraordinary art and risk involved in the deliberative language work of members of subordinated groups in their efforts to produce meanings and forms that seemingly iterate or deviate from the norm. (586)

The balance of “art and risk” is instructive here in this power dynamic at work. Acts of composing can involve both craft and the danger of creation, especially for the personal narrative. A hyper-focus on removing error can make composing seem less risky, but it can also flatten the artistry of expression. In making it seem less risky, it also reinforces the false but alluring notion that language is decontextualized or completely neutral and safe.

Rather than replicate the hegemonic-alternative framework that undergirds other theoretical orientations like postcolonialism, translingualism focuses on change and context, which can meaningfully reshape how we conceive of language, if slowly.

Providing more accessibility to languages and exposing politics behind language use, translingualism promises inclusion for individuals historically silenced or otherwise marginalized in both theory and in practice. One of its main theoretic concerns is to note the enduring legacies of monolingualism on individual language users participating in different communities through shared language use. There is a growing sense in recent years that translingualism is a much more nuanced view of language. If the potential for this theoretical perspective is to begin to be more fully realized, however, it must avoid potential pitfalls.

Each language variety does not grant the same access to power and prestige as others, but there is a tendency in some celebratory gestures to flatten out these differences. As is evident in many circles invested in student writing and language use, it is important to heed the individual's desire for access to privileged varieties of language, especially as evidence of the connection between certain language uses and power. In his work on "The Rhetoric of Translingualism," Keith Gilyard points to the limits of a concept of translingualism that celebrates language difference at the expense of recognizing the very different experiences that individuals and groups have. When we conclude, for example, that there is what Gilyard calls a "sameness of difference," we risk overlooking the differences and even perpetuating these same politics since undergirding this perspective is the claim that that we are all the same in our abundant resources and access to systems of privilege.

Gilyard recognizes a potential limitation of translingualism as "the flattening of language differences, the notion of language as an abstraction" (284). In addition, this

possibility becomes increasingly likely in a digital world where media for communication are quickly changing and easily accessed. Because not all language users enjoy the same privileges, it would be a disservice to stop with a celebratory “sameness of difference” model of diversity in our theorizing. It posits that we all have multiple discourses at our disposal and so all experience and explain the world by using language in similar ways. Similar approaches to language celebrating home languages and dialect were important touchstones to this more nuanced view, yet risked putting difference on display in ways that did not *necessarily* engender deeper learning for students.

Rather than let the theory speak for individuals, then, my project uses models of reading and writing from the African American literary tradition. From there, it is possible to ask students to reflect on the extent to which these models speak to some of their own understandings of the influence of literacy in their own lives. Using African American rhetorical strategies in the classroom is not new. In “Modeling Orality: African American Rhetorical Practices and the Teaching of Writing,” Lena Ampadu makes the argument for using African American texts as “exemplars of audience-involving texts” (138). Her focus on imitation strategies revolves around a Vygotskian definition, in which students do not merely rehearse commonplaces, but instead can result in “freshness and originality” (153). For Ampadu, teaching oral strategies for writing gives students another strategy for writing. I am extending this practice not to the oral tradition, but rather to a more robust definition of African American rhetorical strategies not founded in an oral/literate divide. Instead, my investigation of literacy considers reading and writing practices together, and goes beyond

texts to the culture and people they are figuring through their writings.

A more robust definition of literacy, one that goes beyond stories of reading and writing, is supported in Elaine Richardson's finding in "Coming from the Heart: African American Students, Literacy stories, and Rhetorical Education" that

Literacy, in and of itself, helped to develop and organize the thoughts of Frederick Douglass, Richard Wright, Maya Angelou, Malcolm X and others; however, it was the application of literacy in its expanded uses and senses that helped these great Americans to create new stories about their lives, by inventing lives for themselves and making life better for others. (155-156)

This textured definition of literacy can help complicate students' more basic definitions, allowing them to see how literacy affects their everyday lives, and how these practices have positioned them as readers and writers as college students. While Richardson uses this foundation to warrant a further investigation into the literacy practices of her students, I find that a closer look at key African American texts can help demonstrate how these function as models of literacy. Models provide the opportunity for reflection and a more informed positioning and presentation of the self through letters. However, as I have experienced, models can also silence or coerce students into uncritical approaches, especially when the models come from other students or the teacher, because it presents a levelling gesture to the sample that may not be reflective of the power structures at play even in a decentered classroom. This reading material can help all students, particularly in their first year in college, understand some of the politics behind literacy instruction and acquisition, so that they can better imagine their place in a world of engaged readers and

writers, both in their coursework and in their everyday lives.

Linguistic differences present the opportunity to Writing departments to think through the ramifications of English use in increasingly diverse environments, and how departments want to position themselves in relationship to language politics when setting their learning goals. While this argument is a variation of Matsuda's call to recognize the presence of language-learners in writing classrooms, I find it as compelling today as when it was written over a decade ago. Given the changing student population and more general increase in diversity in recent decades, composition and English teachers cannot continue to overlook the diversity represented in the changing student populations in college classrooms. Rather than assuming an "English only" space in which all students are native speakers, teachers can actively engage students in coursework that bears witness to their own cultural repertoires, building from the multiplicity of experiences and literacies that the classroom space brings together.

A perspective that welcomes students from a range of backgrounds and experiences must also be willing to reimagine who our students are. In an effort to challenge the ethos of monolingualism that continues to infiltrate classrooms and impact students and teachers, ELL and multilingual theorists have exposed impactful enduring linguistic hierarchies. In drawing from this theory, like others, I am not calling for the repudiation of standards completely, but for a more precise understanding of their function, particularly on student expression a critical point in their personal and professional development.

First Year students sometimes find that the types of literacies that they envision

needing based on their situated histories with texts through high school do not reflect the actual work that college instructors demand from them in the college literacy classroom. There exists a discrepancy between the types of literacies that students have been taught to reproduce, imitate, or create and the types that teachers are priming them to navigate in college and beyond.

Moreover, linguistic registers of difference get imputed to error in ways that silence multicultural voices from fully developing on college campuses. Instead of perceiving linguistic diversity as a resource, colleges and universities often treat it as an additional, if lucrative, burden or at best an ancillary activity happening alongside the “real work” of maintaining thresholds of academic literacies in liminal spaces before students fully take up college-level work. Students as well as those engaging in literacy work professionally would benefit from addressing this stigma directly. Rather than demanding conformity as a sign of belonging to the privileged spaces of the university, this approach to literacy allows for the possibility of further growth. It gives the opportunity for practitioners to explore their readings of their surroundings and the culture. Variations from that norm of standard English can be either cast as craft or deviance. As compositionists point out, there is ample room for more privileged students to experiment and explore with language differences and get rewarded for the effort. Basic writers, language-learning students, and students, however, using minority discourses face standards that still impute difference to error, and error to linguistic and even analytical immaturity, rigidity, or deficiency.

One strategy to address increased diversity has been to silo students based on

minimum proficiency levels, determined by such factors as standardized test scores and writing samples, before they are enrolled in their first semester. At first, this might seem like a strategic placement, where at-risk students can benefit from language expertise and explicit language teaching. Although work within composition studies has persuasively addressed language differences, ESL sections and sections for beginning writing still largely contain writing differences as outside of mainstream composition classes, however, and work to actually perpetuate these hierarchies from the periphery.

In other words, the changing language theory has not informed the way we organize students more broadly because of lingering practices that work to maintain a false ethos of English-only monolingualism in classrooms. Instead of confronting the challenges of multiculturalism, then, this design has marginalized academically at-risk individuals, making people conform to the environment, grouping individuals based on narrowly-defined linguistic ability, and fitting people into existing structures. Instead of maintaining this ethos, redesigning programs and assignments from a multilingual perspective makes them more accessible for all students. While a common assignment, the literacy narrative can be reconceived also along the lines of increased accessibility for all students, a topic I explore further in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2: ASSIGNING LITERACY NARRATIVES IN COMPOSITION CLASSES

Literacy is a term that seems simple, rather unworthy of further investigation, and yet can stand in for our deepest human desires: belonging, inclusion, recognition, and community to name a few. Its simplicity and universality belie the challenges of looking at it more in-depth. To get students to think more about their own literacies, reflective literacy narratives are assigned in college First Year Writing classes each year. These personal essays are often the first assignment in a sequence of scaffolded writing assignments, based on the *Writing about Writing* model or a similar variation. *Writing about Writing* calls students to engage in the intellectual work of a discipline and is a popular text to assign in First Year Writing, but I recommend using the literacy narratives themselves as models of literacy to then apply to students' own lives for their literacy narrative. In other words, my intervention into this discussion is to target the use of theory at the undergraduate level to its reflective potential. Rather than using short passages of composition or language theory that students need as background that informs their approaches, looking at examples of how authors present literacy can show students how literacy shapes individuals and the stories they tell.

The practice of assigning literacy narratives in composition classes is well-theorized and has been established over the last three decades. In fact, Caleb Corkery presents the applicability of the literacy narrative assignment for all students in "Literacy

Narratives and Confidence Building in the Writing Classroom.” The literacy narrative allows students to reflect on how schooling has shaped them, as both liberating and oppressive forces. Rather than take this at face value, for the purposes of this dissertation, it is my intention to frame this argument as models of literacy. Given its role in relationship to the rest of the university, explicitly teaching literacy through literacy narratives in First Year Writing is important because it instantiates a literate practice for students at the beginning of their college careers. In this scaffolding approach, I frame these as models of literacy, the import of which students and teachers can navigate. In calling for a deeper investigation into this practice, I contend that examining texts from the African American tradition help clarify an engagement with texts that can help students think more critically about their literate selves at a critical point in their academic development, in transition from other spaces and taking up new identities.

Translingualism views all language users as being in a state of flux and transition, lending itself to an understanding of language that responds well to the needs of students in transition. It highlights mobility, change, and engagements with varied language uses as helping shape identity. It would be possible to focus this project by using recent developments in translingualism and English Language Learning theory to celebrate diverse spaces and the students that classrooms in the twenty-first century bring together. In fact, much theoretic work has had similar aims. Yet although I am committed to showing the value of literacy narrative, I want to be careful that we position these so as not to speak for students and to foreclose on their responses, thereby replicating power dynamics in

ways that harm students. It would be a disservice, for example, to assign literacy narratives that merely repeat back our own understandings of literacy without stopping to ask students about their lived experiences as literate individuals. Instead, I am looking to restructure the literacy narrative assignment in ways that make it more accessible to all students.

In my own experiences using literacy narratives in the composition classroom, the distance between learning objectives and outcomes at times seems insurmountable. One reason for this is the way we assign literacy narratives, assuming a shared definition of literacy and its importance in students' lives.⁵ The definition of literacy does not necessarily result in shared meaning. In fact, it is a recognizable trope in literacy studies to note its capacious nature when trying to define literacy as describe its influence. In "Doing Time with Literacy Narratives," for example, Patrick W. Berry highlights the disconnect between student and teacher conceptions of literacy, focusing on "how little we understand the lives of our students and the complex investments they place in writing and literacy—and how their beliefs are often notably different from our own" (136). Despite these difficulties, Berry suggests that these assignments can result in "the construction of a

⁵ One definition of the learning goals of a literacy assignment are as follows, quoted from Stephen L. Fox's chapter on "Inviting Students to Join the Literacy Conversation":

A literacy autobiography is an account of significant factors and events that have contributed to one's development as a reader and writer. In writing their autobiographies, students are asked to explore the origins of some of their attitudes and theories about reading and writing, as well as their reading and writing practices. (27)

deeper, more useful representation” (141). This “deeper” learning is one that this assignment can engender, with the student able to better position themselves within ongoing Discourses, aware of the material factors that have shaped them as literate individuals.

Literacy narratives are seen as formative, asking students to stake their identities in ways that can liberate them from oppression. This maps onto the model of literacy as emancipatory, as acts of successfully coming to terms with literacy help mitigate past oppressive forces, including educational practices that did more harm than good. In addition to having a prominent place in college classrooms, literacy narratives have been used in community literacy programs, as well. Some of the findings from community literacy can illuminate the rewarding complexities of this assignment.

One way to help students contextualize their experiences in some models of First Year Writing has been to assign composition theory to students. Curricula employing textbooks like *Writing about Writing* help students better understand the work compositionists do, and perhaps how that work shapes the types of work they do, as well. A benefit of this approach is that it gives them a language for their personal narrative and helps concretize a diffuse community in ways students might otherwise never entertain. However, assigning composition theory has its drawbacks, as well, as the theory can sometimes speak for the student rather than helping them articulate their own experiences. In other words, composition theory early in an academic career can actually work against the goal of empowering students by conscripting their experiences in totalizing narratives.

Notwithstanding these challenges, there are ample rewards in asking students how they define themselves as readers and writers: it immediately engages them in a genre valued by compositionists and therefore lets them seriously engage in academic work, it orients them to some of the expectations they will navigate as college students early on in their academic careers, and it troubles some assumptions about what constitutes academic writing in ways that can be instructive for them over the course of their academic careers. Moreover, it values lived experiences with texts and textual, as well as extra-textual literacy practices.

Literacy narrative assignments signal an approach to teaching writing that values reflection and lived experiences. It participates in a classroom ethos of inclusion and responds ethically to increased diversity in college classrooms. As a bridge to other kinds of work, it signals a teleological progression from pre-college to college-level intellectual labor. On a developmental level, it asks students to remark on their development as a hallmark of their passage to adulthood as fully literate individuals capable of critical thinking and reflection. It is meant as an inclusive assignment that welcomes students to college life, one that draws from their diverse experiences, and one that gives space for their own voices within discursive spaces they are only beginning to participate in.

By positioning it as an early assignment in the semester and in the assignment sequence, the literacy narrative traditionally acts as a bridge to other assignments. In that transitional stage, both students and teachers can treat it as a low-stakes, easy assignment that does not quite qualify as full-fledged college-level work. In fact, it is popular as an

assignment to get students writing early in the semester as a scaffolding strategy for later learning. This is apt when the literacy narrative assignment works well, but it is also something that can benefit from a closer look. The primary problem, which I intend to address, is how the literacy narrative assignment can miss the greater theoretic underpinning when it does not employ more recent breakthroughs in composition research.

In fact, this is not a remedial, “pre-college” assignment any more than writing is pre-college work. While those designing these syllabi might be aware of this background, practitioners actually teaching composition, who hail from a variety of disciplines, and their students may simply respond to it as a hurdle on the way to tackling actual academic work. With this approach, it can act as bridge into the college classroom, but then also does little to connect the assignment to later ones that often do not rely on personal experience, such as outside research-oriented writing. In other words, it remains disconnected from the “real work” of the university and a perhaps even a poor entrance point into college writing.

Like students labeled basic writers who have to prove their insider status, the literacy narrative has also suffered from being marginalized in the liminal spaces of the academy. Its marginalized status further disenfranchises at-risk First Year students in transition. Despite these challenges, the literacy narrative has great potential to carry out the discipline’s interdisciplinary goals because this assignment demonstrates how students write across the curriculum rather than just for English or Writing classes. It allows for reflection on genre and audience expectations in order for students to assimilate new and previous knowledge, yet it often currently falls short of this wider applicability. Instead of

seeing a clear sequence, students often successfully navigate this reflective assignment only to be presented with other assignments that seem disconnected from personal writing. In current preparation for college-level work, for example, students are often discouraged from asserting their presence through the use of “I”-evidence of the more objective stance that writing in the disciplines has taken. Valuing personal experience at all can go against the grain of what they have been taught constitutes a literate act.

Although there has been a consistent undercurrent running through composition concerning the value of personal writing for deeper learning and engagement, it is overshadowed by genres seeming more universal and claiming more objectivity, especially when making claims for writing that translate across disciplines. Yet as Peter Elbow and other expressivists have shown, personal writing can be transformative and powerful, an opportunity for students to tell stories about their lives and reflect on how to use their past experiences to help shape their futures in college and beyond.

In responding to the prompt, students dutifully will fulfill the requirements of recounting a story of themselves as readers and writers, using examples from their own lives with relative ease. Yet the larger goals for reflection and deep learning can remain untouched as students can do so uncritically and without a sense of how this assignment connects to later assignments. Moreover, students suffer from an impoverished definition of literacy. Robert Yagelski, pointing to these dangers, writes about students fulfilling assignments in this way, where they have not satisfyingly engaged the assignment. Instead of a vague sense of literacy related tangentially to professional formation, he points to the

goal of defining literacy as “participation in the discourses that shape our lives” (9).

An example of this discrepancy, in the case of the literacy narrative, would be an instance where students who gives an account of themselves as a “bad writer,” using their grades and test scores as proof. They may have jumped from literacy to school success, showing the quick associations students make between school and literacy. These quick associations can remain unexamined truisms or left as aspirational statements rather than those steeped in personal experience. For example, in parsing the most common cultural narratives that students employ in their literacy narratives, Kara Poe Alexander points out the limitations of students relying on these narratives: “success narratives were most often told abstractly, without reference to a specific time, place, or instance in the student’s life. In fact, success narratives often contained broad, abstract claims about literacy,” she points out in her article, “Successes, Victims, and Prodigies” (616). In other words, students are uncritically participating in models of literacy that present arguments for its influence in a tight tautology.

Literacy, for students, is something done in school, often through rewards, competitions, punishments, and tests. In the case of this literacy narrative, the student accepts these as givens. This example points us to a disconnect in the theory and practice, or more precisely in the way this theory gets deployed: namely, compositionists ground themselves in a rich, socially-situated understanding of literacy whereas students might immediately equate it only with learning inside of school. When this happens, we may find that we think we are using common language only to find the conversation shaped by these

competing understandings. This case draws our attention to the dangers of not adequately preparing students for these assignments. They rehearse stories that they already know, in order to perform the role of student writing an assignment about his or her own literacy, but not necessarily in ways that help them develop as thinkers and writers.

Wardle and Downs make similar claims for their textbook, *Writing about Writing* in setting up the grounding claims for their pedagogical tool. Literacy narratives involve students in a mediated way of seeing and a habit of making sense out of material by way of reflection and personal assessment. It allows students to position themselves within an academic community and to reflect on where they have been, and think more about how that shapes where they are going in their educational and personal lives. As texts using pedagogical approaches like *Writing about Writing* highlight, the use of certain models for literacy narratives is not new, but the reasons for doing so can be more clearly explained.

For example, Wardle and Downs outline the different literacy narratives that they anthologize in response to increased diversity in their most recent edition, but do not make explicit why they chose these particular texts. Another example is a chapter on “Inviting Students to Join the Literacy Conversation: Toward a Collaborative Pedagogy for Academic Literacy,” in which Stephen L. Fox expounds on the value of the literacy narrative assignment (or literacy autobiography) for beginning writers based on his experiences at UW-Madison in *Teaching Academic Literacy: The Uses of Teacher-Research in Developing a Writing Program*. In the next chapter of this compilation, Katherine L. Weese notes the sequence of assignments on a course build around literacy.

In it, she points out that some sections use Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* to examine cultural literacy practice, intergenerational literate traditions, and everyday contexts for family and community literacies. Other than a suggestion that "Morrison's novel is a kind of cultural literacy bildungsroman" and offering a helpful list of guiding questions that the text evokes (55), Weese does not elaborate on the selection of this novel in particular. I argue that taken together, the texts that I examine are focused on different models of literacy because of a continued investment the African American literary tradition to investigate literacy's ongoing influence on individuals and communities.

A provocative rendering of literacy is a model showing that it connects individuals and liberates them from oppressive forces, yet the possibilities for other engagements and experiences exist, as well. Ramona Fernandez posits in *Imagining Literacy* that "The prevailing lie, of course, is that literacy indicates intelligence and worth and that compensation flows properly from this" (39). Another model begins to expose the complexities in the first model equating literacy with security. Even this assignment highlights some of the challenges of literacy acquisition since literacy narratives position students as literate adults learning to write for a college audience, often for the first time.

This assignment proves challenging for many writers because it calls for garnering and portraying evidence through personal experience. Students, particularly those outside of the mainstream trajectory of education or users of other varieties of English than privileged languages, can feel at a loss in meeting the demands of this assignment. In fact, it can isolate rather than connect, showing the influence of literacy on individual lives and

exposing the arguments for literacy as narratives that it is possible to analyze and critique. In responding to pressure to present literacy as an unequivocal social good, particularly in writing classrooms, students shape the possibilities for the kinds of models they engage and reflect on when they undertake their own literacy narratives.

In “Beyond the Dark Closet: Reconsidering Literacy Narratives as Performative Artifacts,” Shereen Inayatulla employs queer theory to liken this narrative trajectory to the “coming out” trajectory, a from darkness to light trope, highlighting the performative possibilities of closetness as a viable liminal space in its own right. For her, closetness is an important space for performance, and more importantly, she seeks to rid the term of its equation with temporariness, inauthenticity or even immaturity (insofar as the individual in this equation must cast off the darkness of the closet to seek full actualization, or in her words, “enlightenment” in coming out). She points out how the dominant narrative of coming out as a one-time, invariable, unidirectional (darkness to light) celebratory progression involving intimate details about one’s identity does not always fit the lived experience of individuals undergoing this process when “coming out,” but that the power of this narrative presents it as the only possibility. Furthermore, she charges that this is not necessarily a unidirectional process, as acts of self-disclosure continue throughout one’s lifetime. A trajectory for the coming out process, while offering clear signposts, can actually disenfranchise or silence those whose lived experiences are at odds with this powerful celebratory narrative because it does not consider other possibilities, particularly in its emphasis on self-disclosure. These signposts can force a narrative already in place

rather than invite challenging based on lived experience. Finding this narrative coercive, she focuses instead on closetedness for its performative act, where she locates more possibility for exploration.

With a focus on the liminal space of closetedness, she helpfully points out the unidirectional teleological progression of many literacy narratives in her work. In other words, her focus on closetedness underscores that there are other possibilities for a narrative progression than the trope of integration through a one-time personal experience of self-disclosure (darkness to light). In terms of overcoming challenges, it relates a commonplace story of facing challenges only to overcome certain environmental obstacles. Indeed, their prevalence in framing the self this way speaks to the potency of the narrative in choosing to present the self and literacy in these ways.⁶

Literacy shapes how individuals see and narrate their experiences and the world around them. For example, people “read” situations, people, landscapes and “write” their legacies. This insight in the narrative possibilities of literacy helps delve deeper into framing and the stories we tell about literacy in our culture. Three narratives or models of

⁶ In “Successes, Victims, and Prodigies: ‘Master’ and ‘Little’ Cultural narratives in the Literacy Narrative Genre,” Kara Poe Alexander’s article catalogues cultural narratives of 734 literacy events or “episodes” from her pool of literacy narratives, suggesting the prevalence of the student success master narrative, but also establishing lesser or “little” narratives including the most prevalent one, victimhood.

She notes that “the popularity of the victim cultural narrative is important because it allows us to understand that although students may view their literate futures in terms of success, they view their literate pasts in terms of victimhood” (618). In other words, they account for their past struggles in ways that help set the foundation for their future success, which I extend through the model of overcoming.

literacy that have gained currency have been the narratives of survival, overcoming, and sponsorship, all with resonance in the college literacy narrative assignment. From a pedagogical perspective, models of literacy can help students define and explore literacy as it signifies in texts for individuals and communities. It helps provide a common place from which students can evaluate how literacy has shaped their self-representations and analytical prowess and it provides a way of entering into conversations from this common starting place. Otherwise, it would be possible to adopt the term without a greater appreciation for the far-reaching ways in which literacy shapes the stories people can tell. In the chapters that follow, I show how these narratives can function in the literature in order to explore models that students can reflect on in their own lives, becoming descriptive of experiences rather than prescriptive.

Such an approach opens up the possibilities for more exploratory and imaginative responses, and it is important to let students explore this new terrain in responding to this assignment. Despite the paradigm-shifting social turn foregrounding process over product in composition studies, as well as post-product theorists calling this schema into question, a student-produced end-product rife with surface-level errors and inconsistencies or incorporating nonstandard academic English challenges First Year Writing teachers, and perhaps even more so the discipline-specific teachers not immediately invested in language politics. As writing process has become re-conceptualized, so have strategies for producing and refining student writing become more focused on scaffolded assignments and drafting processes. Ultimately, strategies such as separating writing into multiple stages, providing

opportunities for lower-stakes assignments, and peer review work in tandem to ideally produce a more polished end-product.

While at first this might seem disconnected from this study, it suggests that we valorize certain formal presentations of the self, both the bodies that write and the narratives that count conform to certain expectations steeped in modernist perspectives of stability, unity, and cohesion. I would argue that this tension plays out in the values of written and spoken language itself. As James Gee stipulates, “there is no real sense in which we humans are consistent or well integrated creatures from a cognitive or social viewpoint, though, in fact, most Discourses assume that we are (and this we do too, while we are in them)” (“Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics: Introduction,” 7). Therefore, the Discourse of the literacy narrative is an organizing or categorizing genre that particularly valorizes consistency, integration, coherence, and unity, even as scholarly strides have sought out more destabilized concepts of identity and self-presentation.

This assignment rewards responses that pull off the performative act of presenting a literate self, using these unidirectional progressions despite our understanding that literacy acquisition is recursive, ongoing, and non-linear, or from “have-not” to “have” or “illiterate” to “literate.” This progression maps onto participating in the American Dream, with upward aspirations ending in material security. What gets left out of such framings is the narrative choice to tell a story of individual gain, and it also obscures the damage that individuals ascribing to these ideals can incur, a concept that gets more fully explored in the chapter on *The Bluest Eye*.

Students sometimes participate in these narratives by presenting themselves as surviving, overcoming great obstacles to do so, with gratitude to their sponsors. Becoming literate in the face of material constraints is an important model of literacy that they are tapping into. In fact, it is a prevalent model in throughout African American literature. As Elaine Richardson suggests:

The Black story of literacy is one about achieving in a no-win situation. All educators should have knowledge of the basics of language and literacy acquisition and how and why students' home language patterns and ways of knowing may or may not surface in their writing. (169)

For the purpose of this project, the implications of this recommendation can be further explored through the models of literacy that African American writers present in fashioning their literacy narratives. Translingualism helps intervene into this discussion because that it assumes a more complex relationship with languages, one that underscores the mixing and shuttling of different codes in different contexts.

To apply Inayatulla's "darkness-to-light" motif, students might tell stories in which teachers saved them from the darkness of their past to bring them into the gracious light of full-fledged literacy and expect to be rewarded both for their progress and for their representation of it. In fact, I would suggest that this framing is not necessarily problematic, as long as students are aware that it is one model of literacy and make a conscientious choice to frame it this way. In part, this assignment supports a classroom ethic in which the teacher is liberating the students from oppressive forces. While this act is one of many different possibilities, it is not the only possible narrative, nor is the teacher responsible for

liberating a student by imposing a definition of literacy that the student can then reflect on and confirm as necessarily formative to their development.

While it is important to note this development in terms of how it reframes language use and the new possibilities of constituting the self through narrative and language, it is important not to get too caught up in these powerful promises, but instead to see them as arguments for these frameworks. At times, the desire to focus on liberation may prove either detrimental insofar as it resists looking at the larger power dynamics at play. This is not to suggest that the performance itself is problematic, as play and reflective space can be foundational to deep learning.

In parsing the teacher-student dynamic that this assignment sets up, Inayatulla notes that “a new falsely emancipatory dynamic takes shape in which the sufferer’s ‘truth’ is sanctioned by a savior-witness in order for the latter to be absolved and the former to be released from subjugation” (7). Bearing witness and freedom from subjugation indeed is one model of literacy that African Americans writers employ, challenge, and consider. This formation replicates power dynamics under the guise of reconfiguring them. In other words, it buys into the promises of literacy in congratulatory ways. Indeed, literacy is attributable to opportunities for success, speaking to the potency of this narrative.

However, Inayatulla suggests it as just that: a narrative or argument for literacy that can likewise prescribe roles and responses that serve not as fodder for reflection, but to reinforce the potency of that narrative. Like Inayatulla, I, too, am interested in the way that “certain acts of revelation become prescriptive” (12), as well as “singularized and

prescribed as a moral imperative” (14). What is most relevant to my study is that she uses the lens of closetness to suggest that these starting and ending points are in fact not opposites, nor do these provide signposts in a clear temporal trajectory, as “it is possible to hold multiple positions at once, as a response to material, circumstantial realities or to satisfy other pressures, demands, conveniences, and rebellious, or pleasurable yearnings” (19).

As translanguaging helps bring to light, literacy and illiteracy are not polar opposites with a clear linear trajectory either. There are other possibilities and to position an act of self-disclosure this way impinges on other alternatives. Like with passing and other performative acts, there are creative possibilities and these suggest a more slippery identity than the visual or other signifiers suggest in our short-hands for reading difference. I am interested in how these master narratives of surviving and overcoming get framed within a linear trajectory, forming a modernist representation of a literate self.

A literacy narrative demands an act of self-disclosure from students. While it is up to the individual student how to handle this demand, Inayatulla draws from the act of self-disclosure in the personal essay and contributes a better understanding of the tension between self-disclosure and those master narratives and models in place that actually silence students, or reduce possibilities to a reiteration of these dominant narratives. Indeed, there are powerful forces coercing students to “pass” under these guidelines.

Yet a more enriched understanding of literacy, what it does, and its limits, can also

enrich the possibilities for responses.⁷ Given this propensity to describe a literate self in this way, the literacy narrative genre itself can be seen as a largely modernist project that shapes and constitutes the literate self in ways that fit this framework. In asking *how* students conceive of themselves as readers and writers, the literacy narrative assumes that students already identify as literate in ways that shape their identity and in the ways they present themselves in the world and through words, which may or not reflect their worldview.

Although it can prompt the start of a reflective practice by seeing the world in a more nuanced way, the literacy narrative assignment also *speaks for* students. It values commonplace ways of defining reading and writing and valorizes certain acts of self-disclosure over others. It also replicates a modernist definition of a completely knowable and transparent self on a linear journey toward integration through narration. It signals to students that their narrative impulses are non-fiction accounts without fully considering the elements of craft involved, or the ways that this definition of the literate self exists in certain narrative structures that inform the possibilities for successful narrative practice. In other words, it values a sense of progress and linear narration in keeping with a sense of an integrated and knowable self.

⁷ Inayatulla focuses on the student responses in the literacy narrative genre, I am more invested in the details of the narrative of overcoming obstacles and survival through sponsorship in a clear progression as culturally-potent models of literacy.

Despite the consistent strains in composition leaning toward a more imaginative practice, as Lester Faigley suggests in *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition*, the discipline promulgates a “modernist tension between form and chaos, coherence and fragmentation, and determinacy and indeterminacy, consistently privileging the former over the latter” (14). This modernist juxtaposition holds true in expectations for student writing. Form, coherence, and determinacy, as objectives, continue to shape concepts of “good” writing, as well as privilege certain language uses in keeping with these objectives over less contained and quantifiable expressions. While there is some room for play, performance, and imagination, sometimes literacy is mostly about survival and the anxieties of demonstrating insider status. This is particularly true for “at-risk” or other marginalized students, and this perspective can shape the types of work that are possible to even imagine.

While many compositionists embrace writing process, it is ultimately in service of product. To put it another way, Faigley aligns the goals with a modernist undergirding of “good” student writing that “lines up squarely on the side of modernism. The postmodern qualities of antiform, play, chance, anarchy, and silence are those associated with ‘free writing’ and early drafts” (14). Interestingly, however, as Faigley and others like Lu have pointed out, we fail to extend these same creative criteria to First Year Writers beyond invention and drafting stages. Eventually, students are expected to produce linguistically unmarked texts that demonstrate linearity, focus, and control.

Linearity, focus, and control likewise are values that get rewarded in assignments

like literacy narratives. In her work examining reflective practice, in “From Story to Analysis: Reflection and Uptake in the Literacy Narrative Assignment,” Kara Poe Alexander recommends that we harness the potential in the literacy narrative, calling for more explicit instruction of “values,” or for my purposes, models—the way we frame literacy as both aspirational and inspirational through representations of it in literacy narratives (61). I agree with Alexander that students undertaking reflective work may need additional support in grounding, or at times sparking, students’ imaginative practices. In order to “reflect upon certain ideological positions” (61), students need a sense of what these positions look like. A first assignment like this could result in students being unsure where to start, especially for those who are used to seeing writing as essentially grammar first and lists of rules or things to avoid and literacy sponsorship as those individuals who taught them these rules, or shorthand guides to success.

As a first or early statement, the literacy narrative marks First Year students’ passage into college-level academic discourse. As it is traditionally conceived, it asks students to ponder their place as readers and writers and to account for how they define themselves in this way. That, or a variation of it, is the prompt: “tell a story about how you see yourself as a reader and writer, using concrete examples from your life as evidence.” The goal of this assignment is for students to think more about their identity and development into literate adults. It is a fitting assignment for the goals of many First Year Writing programs, as it instills the habits of reflection and self-presentation through writing. The literacy narrative assignment asks students to begin a process of reflection,

with the tacit objective that they continue this mode of reflection throughout the course, and perhaps even beyond.

In the first chapter of a compilation entitled *Situated Literacies: Reading and Writing in Context*, David Barton and Mary Hamilton make a direct connection between literacy and culture, arguing that “To understand contemporary literacy it is necessary to document the ways in which *literacy is historically situated*: literacy practices are as fluid, dynamic, and changing as the lives of which they are a part” (13). This dissertation, then, points to the significance of literacy within African American literature as a reflective starting place for contemporary students to make sense of it in their own lives, weighing, considering, and articulating how and where they position themselves in relationship to the various models the literacy narratives present. In using various models, students have ample opportunity to return to and revise their initial statements, benefitting from a more thorough engagement in response to their changing understandings. Otherwise, this assignment risks students falling into one of these models without appreciating that these are arguments for, rather than clear-cut definitions of, literacy. They might participate in a particular discourse without understanding the nature of competing and collaborative discourses that flow alongside, replicating subjects of literacy rather than inviting the possibility for literacy agents in our classrooms.

Therefore, it is important that this assignment sets a good foundation for this practice. The following chapters provide models of literacy from the African American literary tradition in order to help students consider what it means to be literate and a college

student in the twenty-first century. By taking a survey approach to these texts, it is less likely that students will see any one model as a clear definition of literacy, but instead they can begin to navigate the different possibilities contained in the umbrella term as they make sense of its various valences in their own lives. Rather than lamenting the literacy narrative assignment falling into obscurity, I recommend reconceiving of it, not as a one-time passage, a bridge from pre-college to college-level work, but as integral to First Year Writing design, extended throughout the semester or course sequence.

Designing More Accessible Linguistic Spaces

Linguistically-diverse students are still not adequately accounted for in our theorizing of First Year writing, despite the fact that language users with a myriad of diverse repertoires enter into both ESL and writing classes each year. Most classroom spaces are still conceived of as predominantly or even only English speaking, as ELL theorists repeatedly point out. Despite this oversight and strides to address it, students continue to be marginalized due to factors such as language use. The imagined community that we use to theorize best practice and pedagogy does not reflect the diverse linguistic repertoires each individual draws from in both written and oral communication. A multilingual concept of First Year Writing would change the very assumptions we make about our students' experiences with language, which could inform learning objectives and assignments, as well as enrich discussion.

In spite the twelve years since Paul Kei Matsuda's seminal work on "The Myth of Linguistic Homogeneity in US Composition," pervasive assumptions of English composition as what Matsuda calls a "monolingual space" continue to limit both teachers and students. Multilingual students are left struggling to fit into a composition class culture that embraces diversity only to the point that it does not threaten the pedagogical standards and expectations already in place. On a larger scale, increased diversity on college campuses in response to aggressive international marketing in recent decades, particularly in urban Mid-Atlantic institutions of higher education like mine, has resulted in a perceived literacy crisis in which students are largely unprepared to tackle college-level reading and writing.

As is the case in "remediating" underprepared students, proposed solutions often seek to close the gap between students' writing and college expectations, with a focus on honing measurable skill sets. This speaks to one enduring definition of literacy that presents it as a formula, a set of skills to master, and a formula or set of formulae to memorize and replicate. Such a definition reduces literacy to a known, set trajectory, and mastery is evident from a minimum threshold of skills and knowledge.

How does this apply to the literacy narrative assignment? In using this framework, to inform how we conceive of this assignment, we can reshape the possibilities for student responses. Disability in composition scholar Jay Dolmage compellingly conceives of curriculum design as one of three possible models in "Mapping Composition: Inviting Disability in the Front Door. The first, shown in Figure 1, is one of exclusion,

emblemized in steps on a graph, showing the effects of a disciplinary history of composition that served to keep bodies that failed to meet certain standards.

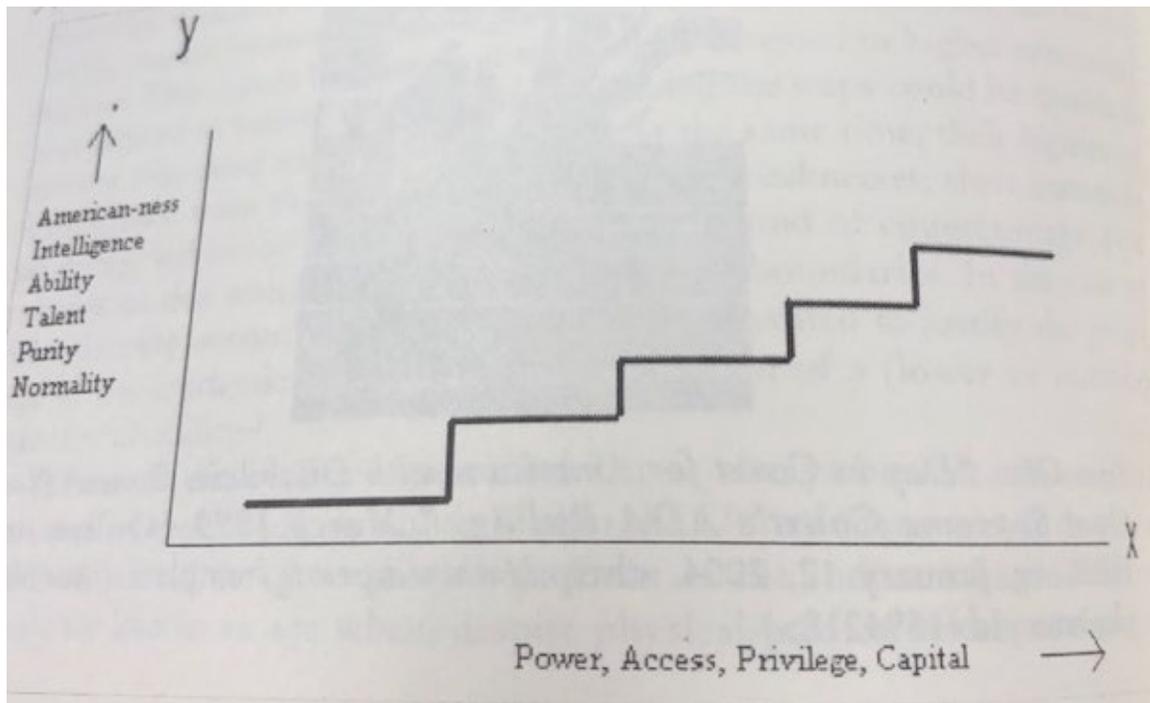


Figure 1: Dolmage's "Steep Steps" Graph, "Mapping Composition: Inviting Disability in the Front Door," p. 126.

In visually mapping this model of composition, he graphs factors such as "American-ness, Intelligence, Ability, Talent, Purity, Normality" in descending order on the Y-axis and "Power Access, Privilege, Capital" on the X-axis (126). I would add Literacy to the X-axis on this graph, and indeed literacy, can stand in for the virtues of civic responsibility, aptitude, enfranchisement, wholesomeness and universality or completeness. This sketches the values of an American Dream, which I explore further in later chapters. For historically-

disenfranchised students, the promises of literacy map onto the larger ideals of the American Dream. For those who fail, “The fault is not located in the ‘system’ that the graph reveals, but within the individual who lacks what the system values” (126). This is true for those who fail to meet certain thresholds of literacy, as well, as the failure is aligned with the individual rather than an indication of an inaccessible environment. Survival and overcoming obstacles are two narratives to which this visual mapping lends itself.

Dolmage points out the limitations of a prosthetic retrofitted to remedy a perceived problem in the environment, offering people more accessibility. Though adding to existing structures is good first step, ultimately responses like CCC’s Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers (2001, 2009, 2014) call for a complete redesign of courses and even disciplines, not in order to weaken standards but instead to challenge the workings of these standards from within and to recognize that the individual inhabits spaces that value or even allow certain moves while discrediting or discouraging others. Furthermore, insofar as the literacy narrative assignment acts as a bridge from personal to public, subjective to objective, emotional to rational, and from a liminal space outside of the university to college-level work, I am interested in reconceiving of it not as supportive apparatus for increased access but instead to move it to the center of curriculum design and critical inquiry, making it more accessible to all students.

Dolmage implicitly connects markers of difference as deviation from a norm in the language he employs, suggesting the exclusionary value of literacy and disciplinary standards that ascribe to this value: “In the case of the Basic Writer or the LD [Learning

Disabled] writer, the disability is the writer's, and the university thus marks him as foreign and irrational" (128). By equating the concepts of foreign, basic, disabled, and irrational individuals, it exposes the norm as an ideal that works against individuals who fail to conform in ways that help us question the standards it maintains. In responses to the tension between universality as a theoretic goal and the localized contexts in which we write, think, and teach, Dolmage suggests: "[Universal Design] does offer ways to move, theoretically, that have everything to do with the universal—not as a means of homogenization, but as a way to complicate the divisive notions of difference with new models of cooperation" (137). Cooperation at the local level maps onto other sites of potential struggle, including the space of the translingual classroom, as well.

"Divisive notions of difference," as Dolmage calls it, affect marginalized individuals whose very presence challenges the norm. With the rise of multilingual students, as well, colleges across the United States can respond to this change by considering how to best afford access to these privileged spaces to their students, even if it means reshaping the landscape. In their "Statement on Second Language Writers" (2001, 2009, 2014), CCCC underscores the need to "Recognize and take responsibility for the regular presence of second language writers in writing classes, to understand their characteristics, and to develop instructional and administrative practices that are sensitive to their linguistic and cultural needs." This call, moreover, is not a prosthetic to existing structures, but an opportunity to redesign spaces to ethically meet the needs of our students.

In her work on "Strangers in Academia: The Experiences of Faculty and ESL

Students across the Curriculum,” Vivian Zamel highlights a “myth of transience” which she describes as “the notion that these students’ problems are temporary and can be remediated—so long as some isolated set of courses or programs of instruction, but not the real courses in the academy, takes on the responsibility of doing so” (510). For Zamel and other multilingual language theorists, it is not sufficient to retrofit course designs to accommodate an increasingly diverse student population that then bridge to intellectually-rewarding academic labor. Remediation for Zamel carries with it a concurrent narrative, then, of overcoming.

To habituate students to a reflective practice, start with what they know. Or, provide models for further reflection in order to situate their responses in larger ongoing dialogs. Recovering marginalized texts and authors, decentering classroom spaces, attending to and valuing writing processes, exploring students’ home and public languages, and major shifts in thinking about disciplinary and linguistic boundaries all come together to set the foundation for this project. In providing this expansive list, I want to suggest that we are positioned at a crucial time where we would best serve our students by re-imagining how First Year Writing and English departments can be instrumental in twenty-first century students’ on-going literacy acquisition, and to do so from the vantage point of literacy studies.

CHAPTER 3: TRACING AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERACY NARRATIVE UNDERCURRENTS^[1]_{SEP}

The narratives of survival and overcoming are potent in African American letters. Despite a persistent investment in African American literacy practices, there exists a spirit of academic recovery encapsulated in Jaqueline Jones Royster's *Traces of a Stream*. She undertakes a response to a problem she encounters in academic circles: the protracted surprise that African American women contributed to the public arena through letters ““Oh! There you are. I didn't see you before. How long have you been standing there?”” (Royster 4). This persistence in spite of overwhelming evidence is in itself an argument against African American women's full participation in rhetorical debates, countering a perspective that is willing to minimize their contributions.

Royster points to a model of literacy that becomes a recognizable trope in literacy studies: that of overcoming obstacles. She speaks back to the critics that continue to overlook or silence these achievements. In framing her project, she specifies that she is first concentrating on this unit of analysis before it is possible to do what she imagines for the future: a cross-cultural explication or relational positioning in a larger literacy analysis. While the call from Royster remains largely unheeded despite other works centered on the literate practices of African Americans, I am attempting to begin working towards this next step by fleshing out the various valences that literacy assumes in this project.

What do African American texts in particular have to add to this discussion of literacy? As models or exemplars, the accounts from the African American literacy

narrative tradition that I begin to explore in-depth in the next chapter allow all students to better imagine their place in an academic community of readers and writers. This is because literacy is bartered, contested, debated, wrestled with, and finessed in black books. As Constance Dean Qualls points out in a chapter entitled “Public and Personal Meanings of Literacy” in a compilation entitled *Literacy in African American Communities*, “the collective tone of these accounts suggests that literacy is not only important, but is requisite for human existence and ‘successful’ survival. Literacy is powerful—it unifies, separates, liberates” (3).

African American texts attest to an intergenerational and communal connection between literacy and survival and overcoming obstacles. Literacy acquisition afforded freedom, and later, material security. Moreover, African American authors make legible a racialized history in America from the margins of a master narrative of unbridled individual progress steeped in meritocratic aims. They begin to question the fruition of its promises by the twentieth century. The texts I explore in the following chapters are unflinching visions of identity politics at play in racialized Discourses. The framework of literacy helps bridge reading and writing, and to suggest that these are more continuous than discrete processes. In terms of providing literacy narratives, the texts also work together to show how Americans read race and the political and social landscape through key points in American history, unbinding literacy from texts and allowing for a fuller understanding of racialized politics that continue to shape public and private discourses in the twenty-first century.

The texts in this dissertation, spanning from the mid-nineteenth through twenty-first centuries, share a focused concern with literacy and literacy acquisition that is attuned to the cultural significance of learning to read and write. These literacy practices, as I will show, are not just caught up in textual production, but extend to reading and writing experiences, bodies, landscapes, and communities. Writings that could be considered literacy autobiographies extend throughout African American literary and creative endeavors over a span of almost four hundred years.⁸ Emanating from the slave narrative tradition, accounts of learning to read and write were hallmarks of much African American writing and often these accounts were the first book in a series of literate production through the genre of autobiography. As a first book, literacy narratives debuted a literate self for public presentation, publicly presenting his or her literacy quests in terms of fashioning survival. In examining models of literacy in the slave narrative of William and Ellen Craft and again in twentieth and twenty-first century fictional accounts of Larsen and Morrison, it is my aim to uncover the types of arguments that these authors are making about both literacy and literate individuals in order to make visible these models of literacy for the purposes of First Year Writing.

⁸ In “African Americans in Adult Education: The Harlem Renaissance Revisited,” Johnson-Bailey helpfully identifies three waves of African American education based on archival research, focusing on assimilation, cultural survival, and resistance from 1920 to 1945. Each of these waves maps onto notions of literacy, as well. Whereas Johnson-Bailey suggests a temporal progression through assimilation, survival, and resistance, I am interested in how literacy, as an umbrella term, can encapsulate all three.

While neither a first book nor an autobiography, there are autobiographical elements contained in Larsen's *Passing*. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, as a first book, incorporates autobiographical features and her later work, *A Mercy*, as a neo-slave narrative includes the act of reading and writing as constitutive to the narrative itself. For these authors, literacy extends to the environment, as well. Which particular promises and challenges contextualize narratives of literacy acquisition, and how might these notions influence students in their presentation of themselves as college-level readers and writers? Rather than focus on an exhaustive list, poignant passages from within the African American literary tradition shed light on pervasive models of literacy that students can negotiate in their reflections. In taking up work from minority discourses, I do not claim an easy equation of experiences, rather I am interested in ways of thinking about reading and writing that can fund students' understanding of what they might understand as a neutral or even universalizing set of practices.

The potential for engaged personal writing matters at the individual, local, and community levels. What I hope to contribute is examples of literacy as all of these things through these literacy narratives, showing the interstices between the personal and political in ways that matter, and also ways that signify. Before a chapter-long investigation of a literacy narrative, the next section will introduce literacy narratives from composition studies, key terminology and show how it functions in a foundational work from the early twentieth century: WEB Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*.

Survival and Overcoming through Letters

Because the concept of a literacy narrative as I conceive of it is a term I am taking from composition studies, I will first show how it functions as reflective practice for practitioners in the field before I extend it to a seminal African American work. In composition, the shift from process to product has taken many forms, including an interest in the reflective and collaborative practices that support learning new skills and strategies. These apply to both teachers doing the theorizing and to students taking up college-level work. Survival and overcoming challenges are two tropes that come out of the literacy narrative tradition.

Rather than being indicative of failure, struggles are generative in the contact zone of the classroom, and students can learn to appreciate their position in a wider discourse of readers and writers in First Year Writing classes. When making choices about how to present themselves, writers may choose these narratives of surviving struggle and overcoming challenges. Examples of survival and overcoming challenges are two cultural narrative tropes explored by compositionist Min-Zhan Lu and W.E.B. Du Bois. These act as models of literacy acquisition that students can use to reflect on their own literacy experiences.

Composition studies, as a discipline, values personal narratives that relate experiences of learning to read and write, and sometimes teachers recount their own experiences that inform their approach to teaching First Year Writing classes. One example of a compositionist's literacy narrative is Min Zhan-Lu's seminal 1987 article on bilingual

literacy entitled “From Silence to Words: Writing as Struggle,” which she begins by invoking another famous salon, rhetorician Kenneth Burke’s parlor. In Burke’s parlor, an individual needs to listen to just long enough to be able to contribute something to it. This training legitimizes the expectation that students take control of their own learning, working with and against the currents of an ongoing conversation. For some, however, this expectation can be silencing.

Compositionists like Min-Zhan Lu make sense of these moments of struggle as generative for learning. While discussing particular trials related to schoolwork is still taboo in many disciplinary circles, compositionists often relate their personal challenges as intimate trade secrets providing a framework for better understanding the theories they are espousing and their effects on the lived experiences of students. In effect, they offer their own literacy narratives. I have chosen Min-Zhan Lu’s account of learning through a moment of struggle in China because she frames her progress in terms of what it means for her personally, for her family, and also for her immediate and academic communities, as she defines them.

In addition, she goes into detail about the internal struggle of learning two languages simultaneously, an experience that can resonate with anyone curious about the language politics behind their rhetorical choices, or how we present ourselves through language throughout our private and professional lives. Rather than an isolated account, it is clear that her coming to terms with her bilingualism has ramifications for her personally and for the larger communities she participates in. The article highlights the

struggle of learning when two different language systems are at play. This struggle is generative, and she hopes to pass on these lessons to future generations both professionally for her students, but also more personally. she sees values in the lessons for her daughter.

Later, she develops this literacy narrative in her book-length autobiography, *Shanghai Quartet: The Crossings of Four Women of China*. In this documented genealogy, she concludes with a message for her daughter, asking her to check this narrative against her experiences and relating a habit of reflection that she argues her immigrant experiences have primed her and other immigrants for:

we are in the habit of weighing each tip against the many others we've been compelled to follow or been forbidden to try out on both sides of the Pacific. We offer questions, reservations, and countertips to every tip offered, because we have learned not to expect ourselves and others to live in situations which these were originally meant for or in situations where we would have access to all the necessary resources. (292)

Lu articulates a reflective approach to these texts as models “to try out,” and it is in this vein that I imagine students harnessing these resources to consider their own locations in relation to struggle, overcoming, and survival.

Lu is a compositionist explaining the effects of learning a new language and the angst of facing confusion and possible failure. These narratives often demonstrate that this discipline is acutely aware of its gatekeeping role, inducting students into the intellectual work of the university. Language is presented in terms of master as a goal, a challenge to overcome and a skill to acquire—failure to do so indicates a failure of the individual to

acquire a basic threshold of skills. This struggle signals literacy acquisition as a high-stakes endeavor, and multilingual and non-traditional or otherwise disadvantaged students can struggle to fit into a composition class culture. This holds especially true for classrooms that embrace diversity only to the point that it does not threaten the pedagogical standards already in place. In other words, composition can work to maintain its gatekeeping role to the extent that it does not cast a critical gaze towards the lived experiences of language users.

In the narrative of overcoming, these standards or thresholds are depicted as static or non-negotiable, even as the individual works from within the framework to challenge it. Lu meditates on her own experiences as a beginning writer grappling with two languages with different approaches to literacy and ways of negotiating knowledge in her narrative of overcoming. She points out that rather than a graceful entrance and exit into the conversation, engaging in a particular discourse can be alienating, isolating, and silencing for students. In fact, the threat of silence palpably looms over her narrative, even as she recounts how she overcame the challenges. After invoking the famous Burkean parlor, she begins with her mother's decline, in which her mother expresses regret for Lu's childhood before falling silent for the last two months of her life. Lu echoes her mother's silence, unable to articulate a response to her mother while she was living. Therefore, upon reflection, she claims her essay as "my attempt to fill up that silence with words, words I didn't have then" (437). This is an intergenerational dialogue: an adult daughter's response to her deceased mother and later, Lu's concerns for the future generations of writers,

including her own daughter.

This reflective process overcomes the silencing survival narrative for Lu. In place of a notion of literacy as survival, she perceived the viability of struggle as generative for learning. In her bilingual literacy narrative, Lu demonstrates the nuance of different Discourses operating at the same time. Multiple Discourses can present challenges for multilingual learners. While moments of struggle may pose a threat to students who silence themselves by repeating back canned or safe answers, refusing to try out new literacy strategies, or even drop classes and most drastically, terminate their education, Lu is careful to point out that these important moments of struggle are also necessary for a writer's growth. Critical reflection allows for a statement of individual progress. The obstacle in the environment, at this point a threshold marker of language, exists for the purposes of learning how to navigate and negotiate the increasingly complex linguistic landscape.

By overcoming this struggle, Min-Zhan Lu successfully imagines her place within an ongoing conversation in order to be able to venture her contribution. A literacy narrative is a way of bridging the gap between student and larger discursive currents by reflecting on a student's current position in relation to their previous experiences. Taking seriously her recommendation to use composition courses as an arena in which students practice entering into ongoing discursive discussions, the rest of this dissertation will detail relationships to texts that African American writers navigate in their readings and writings of the American cultural landscapes that they inhabit. These accounts will provide material for students to reflect on the fluid place of literacy in their own lives. With this example

from composition studies, we can apply it to a closer examination of African American literature. While being careful not to argue for a “sameness of difference,” in terms of articulating struggle, these literacy narratives exhibit a double consciousness that the writer must make sense out of in the way they shape their narrative. Both Lu and Du Bois articulate an awareness of the formative influences shaping them and the conflict that they internalize as a result. While they face potential alienation, this tension holds the potential to act as building blocks for reflective learning practices.

A primary focus of formal schooling is to produce literate individuals. Although literacy acquisition happens both through formal and informal networks, and particular types of literacy are valued over others, African Americans in the early twentieth century perceived the long-withheld social good of literacy and modeled their upward aspirations on a model of literacy that vouched for individual and communal stability. W.E.B. Du Bois, architect of the Talented Tenth, held aspirations for elite African Americans at the turn of the twentieth century that helped shape the educational possibilities for future generations. In Chapter VI of *The Souls of Black Folk*, he notes the universality of his Western education with the following famous invocation:

I sit with Shakespeare, and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm and arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out of the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed Earth and the tracery of stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension. (52)

Satisfied that “they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension,” Du Bois crosses

the color line based on a shared intellectual history. This passage suggests the mobility that education affords him at the beginning of the 20th century despite living under Jim Crow. In a personal turn, Du Bois' passage comes at the conclusion of a chapter that systematically challenges the arguments against higher education for African Americans. He locates his hopes in the spaces of the Ivory Tower that he hopes others like him will be able to access in the future. Invoking Western thinkers "in gilded halls," Du Bois celebrates literate (self-)mastery. He presents a liberal arts education as an opportunity for African Americans to prove their equality, challenge enduring arguments for oppression, and to do so for the benefit of intellectuals and the greater masses primed for vocational training.

Like Anna Julia Cooper and other notable early-twentieth century figures, Du Bois envisions the capacity for a liberal arts education as resulting in racial uplift—the individual's progress through school is for the benefit of masses of educated and uneducated people alike. For the benefit of the entire community, the individual trains in a particular type of liberal education. Namely, by the turn of the twentieth century, educated men like Du Bois are responsible for countering the enduring legacy of slavery during Reconstruction. Previous organizations following Emancipation fell into obscurity as a result of a change in popular perception. Whereas there had once been some compassion for the plight of former slaves, following Reconstruction the notion that former slaves should be responsible for their own self-making gained in popularity. Authors at the time responded by envisioning what this self-mastery would look like, with different debates on the proper place of education for the children and grandchildren of slaves.

One means of demonstrating self-mastery was through letters, and a liberal arts education for both men and women would assure that elite individuals could take on the responsibilities of countering stereotypes suggesting Emancipation and Restoration misguided in their efforts. Popular stereotypes figured former slaves and their descendants as incapable, intellectually and morally inferior, and race leaders like Du Bois challenged this ethos by presenting an elite class of African Americans responsible to show restraint, ability, and intelligence, and to do so through a liberal arts education and mastery of the precepts of Western thinking.

Other race leaders examined the possibilities for self-mastery, as well, and some included aspirations for women. *In A Voice from the South*, Anna Julia Cooper imagined the place of higher education for women, and she makes the case for educated female leaders despite well-established arguments to the contrary:

if there is an ambitious with pluck and brain to take to higher education, encourage her to make the most of it. Let there be the same flourish of trumpets and clapping of hands as when a boy announces his determination to enter the lists. (35)

Determined not to rely on others, the successful education of these men and women augured the welfare of the masses in coming decades.

However, even for the elite men and women primed for this type of education, the promises of higher education were not without consequences. As Lu suggests in her focus on overcoming, with any struggle, there is the danger that the individual will succumb to

larger forces, resulting in silence, marginalization, or despair. Du Bois similarly suggests individual alienation resulting from education in “Of the Coming of John.” Both an indictment of racism and a warning for individuals shouldered with the responsibility of learning for the benefit of their community, John fails to read the dangers of his home community despite an elite education. His lessons are incomplete, as his education leads him to isolation, and ultimately social and physical death.

In “Of the Coming of John,” Du Bois recounts a fictional short story relating the details of a young African American intellectual who returns back to his hometown, Altamaha, Georgia, after a prolonged course of education. The townspeople, who have awaited his return with much anticipation, invite him to speak at a public event, but ultimately to the consternation of a community that could not accept the import of his moralistic message divorced from a recognizable theological context. He only later understood the violation and escaped with humiliation. In the exchange following this debacle, he turns to his sister for solace:

“John, she said, “does it make everyone –unhappy when they study and learn a lot of things?”

He paused and smiled. I’m afraid it does,” he said.

And, John, are you glad you studied?”

Yes, came the answer, slowly but positively.

She watched the flickering lights upon the sea, and said thoughtfully, “I wish I was unhappy—and—and,” putting both arms about his neck, “I think I am, a little, John.” (113)

John's sister learns in this exchange, and is changed by the experience, signified by her attendant unhappiness. The desire to learn is captured in this exchange. At the moment of learning about the cost of education from her brother, John's sister is overcome with the sadness and discontent that attends John and looms over the entire short story.

As a melodramatic registering of mixed but effusive emotion, this exchange also suggests a tension between the aims of education and an individual's connection to the larger community, pointing to the limits of Du Bois' Talented Tenth to uplift the race. John cannot speak for the community because he remains isolated in his knowledge and therefore cannot speak to or for the community's experiences. The consequences are dire—unable to read his home community effectively, his alienation ultimately costs him his life. Refusing to stay in the place that American society prescribes and unable to adequately read the signs on cultural and physical landscape, John is punished for his mobility. He can read the best thinkers in a Western tradition, but cannot assimilate his findings for the benefit of his community, and they cannot contain his new knowledge.

The fictional account suggests the larger stakes of learning to read and write, potentially isolating individuals from their home communities and unfitting them for a comfortable place in society. In this model of literacy, its promises for self-mastery and survival fall short of lived experience: John's education, founded on a particularly bookish literacy, ultimately puts him at a disadvantage when he returns home. John's experience belies the ongoing myth of literacy acquisition in which reaching a certain threshold ensures success. There is dissonance between his education and how this education primes

him to respond to the particular needs of the rhetorical situation at home, making him a stranger in his hometown. At best, John's (self-)mastery fails to signify for his home community. What use is Du Bois' salon in "the gilded halls" if it cannot reach John's sister and the congregation gathered in expectation to bear witness to the sacrifices they have made in hopes of priming a spokesperson?

Despite these challenges in the short story, Du Bois meditates on the ten percent of the African American population that he believes will be able to achieve mastery in a particular type of academic literacy given the opportunity. He notes the failures of the education systems set in place during Emancipation and Reconstruction. For him, the ease with which he can position himself in conversation with such lofty Western figures, as Balzac and Dumas, suggests the possibilities of an elite education for the children of former slaves that neither white patrons nor African American educators previously aspired towards. It presents him as a singular figure, but his success is an argument for others to follow his example.

Literacy is aspirational for Du Bois, and he hopes his success will influence others. The ease of securing a liberal arts education may be possible for someone like Du Bois, although he qualifies it through the character of John. Whereas entering into an academic discourse can be an inviting experience like Du Bois' Western salon, it can also be disorienting, as Lu shows and even alienating, as John's experience suggests. These are all models of literacy that students can use to reflect on the significance of literacy in their own lives.

John's struggle and demise points to the danger of individuals not overcoming these challenges, particularly when returning to home communities. Their experiences shape their readings of the environment, but not always in productive ways, or ways that foster connection and integration. However, fashioning public selves as apt readers and writers of the physical and cultural landscape was especially important for individuals denied basic human rights. Their literacy acquisition served as evidence for both their human status and their social critique. For slaves, for example, learning to read and write was a means of survival. The next chapter is an in-depth investigation into how individuals in the African American literary tradition learn to read the physical and cultural landscapes, and how they present themselves as adept readers both of letters and of their environments.

CHAPTER 4: THE CRAFT OF SELF-MASTERY AND SURVIVAL

In recent decades, the image of an inviting salon has been challenged from the margins by those who cannot confidently conjure or have no interest in figures like those represented in the Du Bois's elite circle of Western thinkers at will: "I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension" (52). The tensions in Du Bois' "Of the Coming of John" and Min-Zhan Lu's account in the last chapter make this experience explicit: it is not always as effortless as Du Bois' famous Western salon suggests. In fact, as compositionists point out, struggle is a common thread when entering into a new Discourse, particularly for those whose past experiences are at odds with the "different ways of thinking, acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, believing," of the discursive spaces they are entering into (Gee, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*, 13).

This tension draws attention to a model of literacy as facing, negotiating, and overcoming struggle, the requisite work to develop a voice modulated at a pitch the audience can hear. Whereas John's struggle resulted in silence and death, some readers learn to better read the critical landscape as a result of their struggle, and this trope spans throughout African American literature. Ellen and William Craft present literacy as a means of survival, a way of negotiating their challenges in order to secure their freedom in their literacy narrative. In so doing, they ascribe to a model of literacy that equates literacy with liberation and put faith in their efforts as guarantor of their continued freedom. William and Ellen Craft's *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860) is a study on the

transformative role acquiring letters played for individuals seeking freedom. It challenges an American social and political climate that continued to arbitrate African Americans' implicit and explicit claims for equality on the basis of the ability to read and write. In trying to gain full participation in American civic life by presenting themselves as literate, minority writers like the Crafts expose the gate-keeping function of literacy that has been used to define Americans and been used as shorthand for rational, rhetorical capacity for centuries.

An inquiry into literacy in African American letters begins with the earliest recorded texts written by or transcribed from African American testimony in America. As autobiographical nonfiction, literacy narratives span the course of American literature, scoping out the promises and challenges of learning to read and write in frequently-changing political environments and social mores. These writings are reflective of the changing climate, showing authors developing a model of cultural literacy that both responds to and challenges mainstream ethos. The slave narrative demonstrates the promises of literacy, suggesting the power dynamic at play in accounts of literacy acquisition.

As with other slave narratives, the primary argument against the couple's inhumanity was evidenced in their published and widely-circulated work. Against social and legal pressures that dissuaded it, slaves learned to read and write, challenging the arguments for slavery based on inherent intellectual capability. As historical texts like Heather Andrea Williams' *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and*

Freedom show, literacy became the bartering chip over which these issues were fought. While her focus is mostly on the years leading up to, during, and following the Civil War, Williams points to key literate former slaves, as well as freed men and women, and the challenges they posed to the larger system in early chapters. Literate slaves threatened the entire social and economic system built around it by challenging claims of slaves' inherent intellectual inequality. Yet, as scholars such as Phyllis Belt-Beyan demonstrate in *The Emergence of African American Literacy Traditions: Family and Community Efforts in the Nineteenth Century*, slaves and other African Americans did write in the nineteenth in spite of seeming insurmountable challenges, often due to formal and informal networks of literacy training at the family and local community levels. Arguments against African American literacy worked to ensure that literacy acquisition was often a clandestine undertaking, yet individuals still learned to read and write in spite of these challenges.

Those who could reason and write, according to post-Enlightenment logic, must be human and therefore deserving of civil liberties. From the nation's very founding, leaders like these disseminated notions of inherent racial inequality. To counter claims like these, narratives and political treatises by former slaves showcased their critical reasoning, analytical prowess, and rhetorical skills. This focus methodically subverted claims justifying slavery on the basis of intellectual capacity and racially-inflected scientific, religious, and political definitions of humans as a species with dominion over animals and objects on the landscape.

As a popular nineteenth-century genre steeped in the language and arguments of

literacy (equated with intellectual and personal freedom, or freedom of both mind and body), the slave narrative posited the former slaves' rights to interpret their experiences, endorsing their readings of the physical, political, and cultural landscapes in ways that also shaped it.⁹ Reading and writing were tools for an interpretive practice that endorsed former slaves' non-textual analyses through the lens of literacy acquisition. Literacy gave them a prime position from which to critique slavery. These individuals left a written record of first-hand experiences of slavery mediated in the language of the oppressor to reach out to those in a position to effect change.

Janet Duitsman Cornelius aptly posits in her chronicle of slave literacy efforts called *"When I Can Read My Title Clear": Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South*, that "For enslaved African-Americans, literacy was more than a path to

⁹ Although this chapter focuses on the nineteenth-century development of a popular genre, the slave narrative genre has earlier roots. For example, Gustavus Vassa, or Olaudah Equiano is a figure published at the end of the eighteenth century who is often cited in slave literacy studies due to his famous "talking book" passage:

I had often seen my master and Dick employed in reading; and I had great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did; and so to learn how all things had a beginning: for that purpose I have often taken up a book, and have talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me, and I have been very much concerned when it remained silent. (33-34)

Here Equiano highlights a desire for the knowledge contained in books, and approximates the reading practice he sees modeled for him before learning to later read and write in London as part of his transatlantic crossings and spiritual conversion.

individual freedom—it was a communal act, a political demonstration of resistance to oppression and of self-determination for the black community” (3). Yet their influence did not end with abolition of slaves. Indeed, their responsibilities grew. In the face of a post-Civil War political climate increasingly disenchanted with the daunting task of collaborative Reconstruction efforts, these aspirational figures, race men and women of the nineteenth century, became responsible for uplifting the communities they left behind.

What conditions made it possible for former slaves and newly freed people to challenge these larger forces in spite of these material and political obstacles ensuring their continued subjugation? Because they were already free, former slaves were able to use their newfound liberation to act as spokespeople for their oppressed family members, friends, and other slaves they left behind, and these narratives served as aspirational works in the abolition movement. Their stories stood out as exemplars, with individuals overcoming seemingly impossible odds to accomplish their goal of freedom. In terms of literacy, these former slaves bought into a model that accepted the terms of this equation, presenting themselves as literate to support their argument for equality. Later race leaders like Du Bois and Julia Cooper continued this serious investment in letters as guarantor of liberty.

Texts in this vein, then, present literacy models that ascribe to this view equating education with personal and community success, and the model of literacy as liberation continued to hold power throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, although some writers and thinkers used it to challenge its very premise and others bought into its

promises. The slave narrative genre, shows former slaves positioning themselves within this larger cultural dialogue by participating in exploring literacy's prominent position in American culture and the justifications that are possible to exploit through this lens. By the mid-nineteenth century, slave literacy acquisition in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds became a recognizable trope that in itself endorsed the narrative's authenticity. In this trope, the former slaves overcome obstacles to secure his freedom and writes of his experience.¹⁰ Some of the most prominent nineteenth-century examples of this convention include Frederick Douglass, who tricked others into teaching him to read as a child by staging competitions, and Harriet Jacobs, who refuses to engage in a letter exchange with her scorned master despite her ability to read his correspondence.¹¹ Likewise, the Crafts use their ingenuity and readings of their surroundings to avoid capture.

Although this genre has its origins in the seventeenth century biography and transcribed testimony, slave narratives by the mid-nineteenth century invariably include a detailed account of the particulars of slaves learning to read and write as a prerequisite to freedom. Once upheld as a social commodity, literacy for African American authors is a theme that carries traction throughout the literature, evident in the ways that authors both

¹⁰ Although there are some examples of female slave narratives, the male pronoun emphasizes the preponderance of male testimony through this genre.

¹¹ For an in-depth investigation into the role of literacy in the slave narratives of Equiano, Douglass, and Jacobs, see Valerie Smith's *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*.

ascribe to and challenge a threshold definition of literacy and literacy as (self-)mastery. Former slaves who enjoyed a privileged knowledge of letters were fit to recount their experiences and could expect an audience for the textual or oral performance, garnering much support and sympathy in publishing and lecture circuits. Their reflection on their literate status, then, both informs readers of the particularities of their escape, as well as positions them as spokespeople reading the injustices on the American landscape and later writing about it.

Nineteenth-century former slaves, such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and William and Ellen Craft, all secured their freedom from slavery. They act as mouthpieces arguing for social and political rights denied the slaves in the South, as well as freed black people in the North. Situated in a political climate that denied the rights of slaves (as property) to bear witness or provide evidentiary testimony, the acquisition of literacy, as a trope, serves a practical purpose of endorsing the veracity of their auto-biographical narrative, suggests the unique rhetorical capacity of a spokesperson for slaves, and argues against the inhumanity of slave codes that prohibited literacy and learning.

The very existence of slave narratives directly challenged the benevolent, paternalistic argument for slavery that slaves were incapable of learning, and thus needed *mastery* or protection. Self-mastery through letters ascribes to a post-Enlightenment ethos in which to learn to read is to tame the savage or less civilized impulses by imposing reason and order on ostensible disorder. An effort to organize and contain is recognizable in colonial efforts focusing on teaching indigenous people to read and write as shorthand for

their spiritual salvation through Church-sponsored literacy.¹² As is the case for sponsorship, it is important that the colonial forces sponsored particular types of literacy that underscored the importance of obedience and social order in terms that ensured their continued subjugated status.

Whereas literacy was moral and social imperative in colonial spaces, it was anathema for slaves on American soil according to those who sought to maintain the institution of slavery. Literacy grants access to power, and those in power recognized that literate individuals were in a more advantageous position to fight their oppression via legal and other organized communal and individual means. In reworking of literacy's role in religious practice, instead of reading the bible as a means of being saved, salvation was possible for slaves only through complete obedience to masters, including masters obeying laws that ensured their continued illiteracy.

Arguments against American slaves being taught to read and write were that they were too uncivilized, incapable of learning, and more implicitly, that continued illiteracy would keep them oppressed and relieve concerns about organized revolts. In response,

¹² Sponsorship in connection with churches is well-established. Deb Brandt focuses on African American Protestant churches as literacy sponsors, for example. Also, in a chapter on "Writing the Life of Henry Obookiah: The Sponsorship of Literacy and Identity," Morris Young examines the role of sponsorship on Obookiah's narrative, using Deb Brandt's definition to consider the influences shaping his narrative. Morris categorizes the native Hawaiian's personal writing as a literacy narrative that taps into literacy as a means for religious conversion. He points out that: "Throughout *Memoirs* we see how Obookiah acquired and developed his literacy not only for personal improvement and expression of faith but also in the belief that literacy would facilitate sharing the gospel with his people" (69). Morris argues that the narrative sponsors literacy for others in his home community.

slaves detailed how they mastered letters as a survival mechanism, assuring their passage to freedom in spite of insurmountable odds. Once again, these narratives position the individuals as unique spokespeople for their lived experiences, tapping into an American narrative of surviving incredible odds. For example, the readings that William and Ellen Craft present make legible the racialized landscape of the nineteenth century and chart slavery's demoralizing effects across state and even national boundaries.

Despite their ability to read the landscape, however, William and Ellen were not able to read and write in the conventional sense at the time of their escape, and thus did not fit the trope of having acquired literacy as a prerequisite to their escape. Instead, they present their cultural mastery in their manipulation of others' readings of their bodies in transit, using readings of race to their advantage. Indeed, due to this difference, it might seem like a strange case to call this a literacy narrative at all. However, although they were only able to cipher some letters at the time of their escape, their retrospective literacy narrative calls for a broader understanding of literacy. William and Ellen Craft demonstrate their cultural fluency while in transit by manipulating the readings of others, based on culturally-encoded visual markers of race, gender, class, ability, (hetero-)sexuality, and literacy.

The Crafts' argument for freedom rests on their ability to present adept cultural readings of their immediate surroundings that secure their freedom. In this narrative, the Crafts must account for how they ingeniously achieved their freedom while possessing only a very basic knowledge of letters, developing contrivances to skirt the issue when it

arose. For example, Ellen Craft, posing as a landed gentleman, feigned mobility, sight, and hearing issues in public to account for her inability to read travel documents or sign paperwork. As Ellen Samuels succinctly points out in “‘A Complication of Complaints’: Untangling Disability, Race, and Gender in William and Ellen Craft’s *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*,” “during the Crafts’ four-day escape, Ellen acquires new impairments whenever discovery is threatened” (17).

Ellen Craft famously performs disability to the couple’s advantage. Samuels continues: “For Ellen Craft, displacing the disability of illiteracy onto a physical impairment enables her to escape from slavery by allowing her to travel as a white man: it allows her to function as a mobile subject” (26). Performing disability affords her the mobility that her illiteracy denies her. In order to distance themselves from suspicion, the couple contrived bandaging to wrap her hands under the pretense of a disability so as to provide a visual signifier as a plausible explanation for not writing. At seemingly trivial times like these everyday exchanges, the Crafts could have been exposed as slaves due to Ellen’s inability to read.

The Crafts’ illiteracy first becomes painfully clear when they are planning their escape and cannot read their holiday passes granting them some time away (22). How they navigate their illiteracy through to freedom develops throughout the narrative. Due to the slave codes prohibiting slaves from learning to read and write in a country of otherwise

high literacy rates, illiteracy is shorthand for slave status by this time.¹³ Therefore, Ellen and William's illiteracy would have exposed them as slaves at the time of their escape. In fact, despite their ingenuity, at one point they are almost discovered when an official refuses to sign documents for them, and one passenger claims to know his family "like a book" when vouching for them when in fact they had never met before (37). This passage underscores the importance of kinship ties. In place of a signature to verify their identity in this scene, a personal reference assured their continued safety. In making this duplicitous claim, the passenger corroborates their performative personae in the language of literacy. At the same time, the wording of his guarantee, steeped in a bookish literate language, ironically points to the failures of visual markings to identify people on the basis of race, gender, class, ability, and literacy insofar as no one present can accurately read the slaves' escape.

The Crafts did not remain illiterate, and published an account of their escape to freedom after learning to read and write over a decade later. They extended their initial efforts of learning to read and write in England. Their first focused lessons, however, were on American soil, offered by members of the Society of Friends in Philadelphia. Following

¹³ The account of Margaret Douglass' indictment for teaching a slave to exposes the hypocrisy of enforced mass illiteracy, rendered in bombastic language and proclaimed on the 4th of July. The authors record an indictment that she "did teach a certain black girl named Kate to read in the Bible, to the great displeasure of Almighty God, to the pernicious example of others in like case offending" (22). Literacy becomes the grounds on which the arguments for slavery and freedom played out at this time.

their successful escape, the Crafts account for an initial focused foray into literacy. Here is an extended account of their first explorations into literacy, as later recounted by the Crafts:

After partaking of what Mrs. Stowe's Mose and Pete called a "busting supper," the ladies wished to know whether we could read. On learning we could not, they said if we liked they would teach us. To this kind offer, of course, there was no objection. But we looked rather knowingly at each other, as much as to say that they would have rather a hard task to cram anything into our thick and matured skulls.

However, all hands set to and quickly cleared away the tea-things, and the ladies and their good brother brought out the spelling and copy books and slates, &c., and commenced with their new and green pupils. We had, by stratagem, learned the alphabet while in slavery, but not the writing characters; and, as we had been such a time learning so little, we at first felt that it was a waste of time for any one at our ages to undertake to learn to read and write. But, as the ladies were so anxious that we should learn, and so willing to teach us, we concluded to give our whole minds to the work, and see what could be done. By so doing, at the end of the three weeks we remained with the good family we could spell and write our names quite legibly. (53-54)

Ellen, at first, is not a willing student because she is faced with the challenges of a new environment and is insecure in her reading practices. Unsure who she can trust, she has to be convinced that she is safe. This passage, the longest sustained account of literacy acquisition in this slave narrative, gives new information on the particulars of the Crafts' literate status at the time of their escape. Yet it comes quite late in the narrative, once they have secured their place in the North. The literacy narrative above also highlights the materiality of learning to read and write in the intimate spaces of their literacy sponsors, and the feat of learning, as adults, to "spell and write our names quite legibly."

As a first step beyond the most rudimentary ciphering, this definition evokes one notion of literate status being determined from signature tests.¹⁴ The main drama of learning to read and write happens off stage from the performance of the Crafts' escape. In fact, the more-than decade-long gap between their escape and the narrative's composition was largely due to the practical necessity of the couple gaining enough literacy to draft, compile, and publish their narrative. Therefore, the account they offer is a reflection on a pre-literate experience they had ten years before that they attempt to make sense out of through the act of writing.

This was a first foray into writing, but the couple was also welcomed in England, where they continued their lessons and increased their literacy. In "Transatlantic Interracial Sisterhoods: Sarah Remond, Ellen Craft, and Harriet Jacobs in England," Sirpa Salenius suggests that the Crafts, and particularly Ellen, found a welcoming coterie of literary figures and patrons in England, pointing out that "In the transatlantic female communities she became part of a protective sisterhood in which white women took care of her in a motherly way, in asymmetrical power relations, but with the goal of assisting her toward reaching full autonomy" (182). While Salenius focuses on the domestic and literacy

¹⁴ Now largely discredited as a marker of literacy, signature tests once used the ability to sign one's name as either the threshold definition of rudimentary literacy or as a sign that individuals who could sign their name were able to engage in higher-order literate practices, as well. These also came into play in debating voting rights.

accomplishments Ellen secured through this network, this autonomy was at least partially achieved through the couple's growing literacy, and culminated with their published work.

As literate individuals, the Crafts are able to engage social critique of the practices that enslaved them, in their retrospective autobiographical account. In their reflections, the narrative blends their public and private personae in order to argue against the atrocities of slavery that they bear witness to in this testimony:

I have often seen slaves tortured in every conceivable manner. I have seen him hunted down and torn by bloodhounds. I have seen them shamefully beaten, and branded with hot irons. I have seen them hunted, and even burned alive at the stake, frequently for offences that would be applauded if committed by white persons for similar purposes. (68-69)

In this passage, the repetition of the phrase "I have seen" posits an agency to bear witness based on personal experience, and to make sense out of the landscape for their readers despite their textual illiteracy at the time. In other words, instead of it being an obstacle to their cultural readings of the landscape, the Crafts' illiteracy signifies a mediated connection to their environment, privileging their personal experiences as evidence against slavery.

Their illiteracy at the time of their escape did not hinder their success, signifying on the trope or genre convention. The fact of their illiteracy at the time of their escape is significant insofar as it highlights their ability to adroitly manipulate their environment, producing visual markers of the cultural landscape for others to read. Not only do they successfully read their environment, but they also compose with the material available to

them in order to elicit socially-sanctioned readings of Ellen's disguised body in public, free spaces. Aware of the racialized associations entrenched on the Southern landscape in regards to literacy, they compose a figure of Mr. Johnson—a white, slave-owning, disabled young gentleman, and his attendant faithful slave accompanying him via train to Philadelphia, both hiding in plain sight through the disguise and performance. Despite being illiterate, they demonstrate remarkable cultural fluency and competency in their maneuvers towards freedom.

In addition to making visible how racialized bodies are read, commodified, and consumed through American literature, William Craft's wife's disguise maps onto how intersections of individual identity, expanding notions of literacy beyond text-based proficiency and mastery to a more fluid reading of texts, bodies, identity, and the larger environment. In a writing course, these identity politics map onto the ways that bodies signify, get read, and commodified. It offers a model of literacy as (self-)mastery for them to reflect on. It also presents Ellen as a mobile figure, passing as a literate, white, male, landowning, disabled slave owner.

Their mastery of letters warrants their social critique, insofar as they prove themselves to be rational and capable of thought. Their ability to critique the landscape, in fact, grows with their growing literate and rhetorical prowess. For example, in figuring their growing cultural fluency, they learn what the word "abolitionist" means from an ongoing discussion (30). They also exploit the readings of others, such as when William wryly interprets the question asking if he "belongs to" his master in terms of a husband

belonging to his wife (36). The responsiveness between the couple and their environment underscores their reading strategies of their immediate rhetorical situation.

Their literate status at the time of the narrative's publication legitimizes their other readings, as well. One of these critiques is their exploration into easy equations of slavery with dark skin. Ellen Craft's physical presence, and the lithograph of her image, belies this equation. Although popular conception equated slavery with dark skin, decades of largely unspoken sexual violence and oppression left a legacy of racially-mixed enslaved new generations that challenged the equation between skin color and slavery. As the Crafts point out, "There are a large number of free negroes residing in the southern States; but in Georgia (and I believe in all the slave States,) every coloured person's complexion is prima facie evidence of his being a slave" (24-25). The Crafts present an unflinching investigation into the legacy of defining racialized difference through skin color. Grappling with the equation of skin color and slavery, they revise readings of the body of the American slave, who by law "follows the condition of the mother." They underscore that due to this definition, slaves might present as physically mixed race or even white.

In fact, the major motivation influencing their decision to flee seems to be connected to Ellen's reluctance to give birth to enslaved children at the mercy of degraded landowners. Both her mother and her grandmother, as slaves, had children whose white fathers owned them. Because the children "follow the condition of the mother," they too were slaves. They stipulate, in breaking with this violent lineage, that unlike her mother and grandmother, Ellen Craft was not sexually violated and the couple at the time had no

children.¹⁵ The decision not to have children is surprising, showing the couple's resolve not to pass on a legacy of violence and oppression to the future generation. Linda Brent (Harriet Jacobs) exerts a similar agency in her choice of a lover and in repelling her master's sexual advances in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. However, unlike Ellen Craft, she must repent her fallen status and expose it as a consequence of slavery. Slavery, then, disrupts families, both by causing blood lines to mix and by individuals like Ellen Craft who decide not to have children in order to avoid propagating the misery that she and her ancestors endured.

While the couple decided not have children in the South, they later mention their many children in an aside after securing their freedom. Rights over their personal bodies were otherwise denied, suggesting a sexual agency that Ellen was able to exert in making the decision with her husband not to raise children in an immoral and degraded environment in the South. Ellen Craft's lineage reads as a literacy crisis of bodies insofar as it challenges the equation between dark skin and slave status. Her reading of the social and political landscape informed her decision not to have children, highlighting her ability to execute a plan that defies arguments for slavery on the basis of inferior intelligence reasoning capacity. It also speaks to a white, Northern American audience concerning slavery's disruption of domestic spaces and relationships insofar as it threatens both

¹⁵ Although a violation of a woman's body was lamentable for nineteenth century audiences, it would also position her as a fallen woman, compromising her credibility.

motherhood and legible paternal lineages.

Presenting Ellen Craft's genealogy in itself makes legible the systemic rape of countless slaves on the American landscape, resulting in racially-mixed progeny denied the rights of formally recognizing their white fathers. For the Crafts, this sexual impropriety marks the Southern landscape with moral danger for everyone. As evidence, they compile stories in which families get torn apart, virtuous young women commit suicide rather than succumb to molestation, dissipated young men used to being sexually and otherwise indulged die prematurely, and mistresses of southern plantations must endure visible signs of their husband's infidelity in their most intimate domestic spaces.

The listing of stories concerning the rampant immorality bred by slavery overwhelms readers with a sense of urgency to combat the rampant social disease. These stories shape the landscape as background for their escape. At the same time, they insist at the end of the narrative that these examples are not singular cases and these are by no means the worst:

I have not dwelt upon the great barbarities which are practised upon the slaves; because I wish to present the system in its mildest form, But I do now, however, most solemnly declare, that a very large majority of the American slaves are over-worked, under-fed, and frequently unmercifully flogged. (68)

These examples work together as a largescale indictment of slavery, and readers are left to imagine even worse atrocities left untold, heightening the urgency in the call to action by

safeguarding the implications within the readers' imagination.

As Ellen's genealogy suggests, reading bodies racially is more difficult as a result of slavery and the immorality it encourages. To further complicate this issue, in addition to slaves, waves of new immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century resulted in increased xenophobic rhetoric that incited the desire to locate and objectify difference in an effort to contain it. Yet the ability to read visual markers of difference as a basis for oppression becomes particularly crucial in the years leading up to the Civil War, as both sides become more entrenched in their positions. Remarkably, one of their most pointed critiques is that due to visual markers on the Southern landscape of such racial intermingling, white people, particularly foreign-looking immigrants, are also susceptible to being illegally held captive:

It may be remembered that slavery in America is not at all confined to persons of any particular complexion; there are a very large number of slaves as white as any one; but as the evidence of a slave is not admitted in court against a free white person, it is almost impossible for a white child, after having been kidnapped and sold into or reduced to slavery, in a part of the country where it is not known (as often is the case), ever to recover its freedom. (4)

To illustrate the implications of this definition of slavery, they then examine the case of Salomé Müller's mistaken identity and wrongful captivity (5-6). This case shows the extent to which, by the nineteenth century, black skin could be equated with slave status, and conversely, whiteness with rights to freedom, despite the complexity of the racial landscape that the Crafts map for their readers.

As an immigrant, Salomé is decidedly an outsider, but her presence challenges American black-white binaries. At first, it seems strange that the Crafts (as well as William Wells Brown) would focus on the enslaved whites in the minority. Yet in the tale of a German immigrant, the Crafts seek sympathy for her plight on the basis of skin color. Like Ellen, she is light in complexion, and according to the logic of the slave codes, unlike Ellen, should not be enslaved due to her European lineage. However, she cannot bear witness to her own racial origins once wrongfully enslaved as slaves cannot testify.

Such an argument against slavery parallels mid-nineteenth-century European immigrants with mixed-race slaves in terms of bartering their legal status on the American landscape in the mid-nineteenth century. As Caucasians, European immigrants would garner more attention perhaps than mixed-race slaves, even, but the use of this example also points to ethno-centric anxieties of a changing American landscape due to the mass immigration of European slaves to the United States. As unassimilable Other, these individuals reshape the critical landscape, showing signs of difference with visual markers. Still, a major charge the Crafts make against slavery as it is defined by the mid-nineteenth century is that it leaves the majority vulnerable to a legacy of legally-unrecognized racial mixing.

In using the example of Salomé Muller, whose racial identity is confirmed through a physical examination of distinguishing markers on her body, the Crafts mystify the conflation of skin color and slavery, exposing the dangers it presents to personal freedoms. In order to corroborate her wrongful captivity, her body was on display in order to show

how even though “There was no trace of African descent in any feature of Salomé Muller,” she could still be mistaken for a slave (5). There is a latent threat of exposure, as well as the desire to know definitive categories by visual bodily markings. Her personal affiliation is confirmed by the privileged bodily knowledge of her midwife when her race remains visually ambiguous and her slave status even more so. Bodies on display signify according to cultural markers, and the Crafts were able to manipulate such readings in their escape.

The Crafts show the complexity of reading race on the American landscape in the mid-nineteenth century, and they exploit social convention to their advantage in securing their freedom. By using their privileged knowledge to their advantage, in fact, they act as trickster figures and careful readers of the slave codes. John Ernest employs chaos theory as a lens for better understanding the racial and social landscape at the time in an article entitled “Representing Chaos: William Craft’s ‘Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom,’” positing that “While race is a systemic, historical construction, it is also the developing and dynamic response to the construction—the traditions, rhetorical maneuvers, and ideological methodologies of survival, resistance, and collective self-definition that operate in the racial state” (472). One of these traditions, I would add, is the literary responses and entanglements with representations of literacy acquisition: in attempting to make sense out of their environment, they point to the challenges that the environment offers in their narrative of survival and overcoming.

One legacy of slavery is that it can cause mistaken and hidden identities, and the narrative extends beyond showing Ellen’s false persona to other examples of mistaken

identity, suggesting the difficulty to know and categorize in spite of the organizing concept of race that portends to do so. In a system where individuality is denied, the consequence is interchangeability and mistaken signifiers, as well as the possibility of never knowing another's identity with certainty. For example, arguably one of the most memorable figures in the narrative, a Virginian widow, was in the process of selling the rest of her slaves that had already been granted freedom at her husband's death. In a scene looming with the danger of William's re-capture, she initially mistook William for her runaway slave, suggesting the interchangeability of slaves based on their utility as workers (39-43). Her slave Ned had run away after she sold his ailing wife, whom she was sure would remarry, as she was lighter in complexion than her owner. This scene points to the all-encompassing degradation of slavery under the guise of benevolent and paternalistic justifications. This mistaken identity shows the difficulties of categorization, and the dangers that result from mistaken identities.

The focus on slave bodies points to a desire to know and categorize that the Crafts challenge. Their bodies cannot be read according to the prevailing laws of their homeland, and they seek a protective space to enjoy the freedoms denied them, which they find in England. At the same time, there is a visual investment in putting bodies on display in an effort to contain and know, as Lisa Merrill contextualizes historically in her work on "Exhibiting Race 'under the World's Huge Glass Case': William and Ellen Craft and William Wells Brown at the Great Exhibition on Crystal Palace, London, 1851." She points out that in British efforts to prove their modernity, they invited figures such as Ellen Craft,

whose physical presence challenges definitions of slaves based on skin color. However, removed from her home country, her body assumes new meaning, disconnected from the types of racial display in America:

Whether in the streets, on the stage, on the auction block or in ethnological entertainments, black bodies were being exhibited and visually consumed in the United States in ways that were more complex, contradictory and nuanced than even the most well-meaning white British abolitionists might perceive. (327)

Ultimately, the couple reaches the North, and later England, where they criticize the demoralizing effects of slavery from a safer vantage point. As is evident in the narrative and later in her transatlantic abolitionist literary and creative work, Ellen Craft's physical presence challenges equations between skin color and slavery.

The justification for slavery on the basis of skin color was debunked by the very existence of mixed-race slaves. Ellen Craft is an example of a phenotypically mixed-race figure facing blood purity fetishes, and her engraving, published with the narrative, offers further visual evidence of racial intermixing. Her body can be read as corroborative evidence of this narrative in much the same way abolitionists provide their signatures to slave narratives. Whereas she conceals her illiteracy as a tell-tale sign of her slave status during her escape, in her recorded reprisal of the role here, she is able to write and articulate her experiences. Therefore, her bound hand is not a primary focus in the engraving of her portrayed as Mr. Johnson. The Crafts unbound literacy practices from text at the same moment that they unbind her prosthetic devices, offering her body as a site for reading of

their successful escape.

Charting Trans-Linguistic Spaces

Due to the Fugitive Slave Act, the journey to the American North did not end the couple's travels, as they found new freedoms in Canada, and later England, which they also detail in their slave narrative.¹⁶ As such, they are mobile figures seeking new opportunities in England, and in so doing they challenge the republic's ideal of freedom by reversing the migrant trajectory where America offers oppressed people new possibilities unavailable to them in their home countries. In their journey from South to North, stopping in key locations to change trains or take steamboats, the Crafts impart a sense of their fast-paced mobility across an expansive geographic region in just a few days. Using the latest, fastest, and most convenient technology, they succinctly juxtapose technological advancement with the antiquated practices of slavery. In other words, both slavery and technology shape the environment, leaving legible signs for the Crafts to navigate through their readings. They chart their progress through various locations, making sense out of the physical landscape for their readers.¹⁷ Part travel log and part jeremiad, they catalogue the

¹⁶ After the Civil War and the successful publication of their narrative over a decade after their escape, the couple eventually returns to America to open a school for former slaves.

¹⁷ Slaves enjoyed more freedom in the days leading up to the new year. The holiday allowed for slave owners to feel magnanimous for their generosity and that their slaves should feel grateful to them for their beneficence. In opposing this practice, Frederick Douglass condemns the seemingly liberal or

oppression on the American landscape for individuals constrained by an American economic and political system supported by slavery.¹⁸

In their journey, the Crafts chart a critical cartography of the American landscape, using the changing landscape as evidence to support their strong anti-slavery position based in personal experience. In their northern migration, they sharply oppose an uncomplicated trajectory from Southern oppression to incrementally measured, increased liberty on their journey, including the North in their diatribe against American political and social structures that maintain slavery. They point out that they did not enjoy the promised freedoms they anticipated at least until quitting the American landscape altogether for England. In fact, the possibility of them getting caught loomed over them in the North and Canada.

Some of the most strident criticism they provide is actually a result of prejudices the couple faced in Northern states, in fact. The Crafts deflate the idealized image of Northern tolerance and racial integration in urban settings, excoriating Northern complicity in slavery's stronghold on the American landscape. They underscore the tension between

benign practice of encouraging frivolous dissipation in the week between Christmas and New Year's in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself* (1845).

¹⁸ For a full-scale exploration into the African American jeremiad tradition, see David Howard-Pitney's *African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America*.

American liberty and slavery through official documents like the Declaration of Independence, and do so from the safe vantage point of England. They implicitly point out through this later expatriate positioning that their former colonial oppressors have already released the bonds of slavery, urging America to follow suit. England provides them a safer vantage point, a perspective from which they can critique both the South and the North in their ongoing maintenance of the social and economic status quo at the expense of the slaves still in captivity.

Their progress is measured and more clearly outlined on the Southern landscape, and more chaotic, less linear, on the Northern. Admittedly, there were digressions of the account from South to North. However, the overall narrative coheres through the first part, fulfilling the conventions of the slave narrative genre by beginning with a statement of their origins and genealogy, expounding on an indictment of slavery from personal experience and evidentiary supporting documents, detailing their escape to the North. It also includes an anecdote related to literacy to stand in for the convention of the pre-escape literacy narrative and condemn the law forbidding teaching slaves to read that directly impacts them.

Still, in terms of narration, the chronology of that shorter journey to freedom takes precedence over the spans of weeks and months on free terrain that they document in the second part. By contrast to the second part, the narrative follows a clearer trajectory in the first part of the narrative, and it as if it partially unravels at the key moment of Ellen throwing off her disguise safely in the North on the first page of Part Two (51). As John

Ernest underscores, “Craft emphasizes in part 2 what should have been clear throughout—that there was no true freedom in the North” (479). Perhaps this is because the focus is on their progress to the North as a final destination of freedom, and once they have arrived, the focus shifts to facing the realities of so-called freedom. Their narrative of overcoming has just begun, in fact, and is not complete until they learn to read and write in England.

More insidiously, this relative lack of clear physical and chronological signposts suggests the chaos of actualizing the dream of pursuing freedom once the lived reality of the task settles in. The freedom that they sought does not materialize fully in the North, prefiguring twentieth century literature in which migration northward resulted in unexpected challenges from the modern, urban landscapes. Whereas they proved insightful readers of the Southern landscape of their birth, the North offered a new physical and social context that took time to learn to successfully navigate, resulting in confusion and dislocation. Such experiences, as a literacy narrative, may relate to any initiate into a new discursive terrain. In terms of overcoming challenges and imposing a critical stamp, the Crafts continued to relate the details of their journey.

Although they focus on Southerners’ overt and systematic oppression, labelling them with a “greater want of humanity and high principle amongst the whites, than among any other civilized people in the world,” many people who came into contact with the Crafts simply hide their prejudices rather than overtly flaunt them in the North, making for, at times, subtler yet equally pervasive racial aggression (6). While there were some notable exceptions, individuals like the hotel owner who confronted Ellen about her marriage to

William wanted to appear tolerant while venting their prejudice, a worse counterpart than the Southerners who largely did not hide their hatred of others on the basis of physical difference (65).

The North should be the locus of long-awaited freedom for American former slaves in the mid-nineteenth century. However, the Crafts detail their dizzying dislocation as newly-free former slaves in these (mostly urban) Northern spaces. After the momentary Christmas thanksgiving prayer for reaching safety on free land, they found that the new challenges they encountered did not meet their expectations. They recount having to move to different locations in quick succession, suggesting the inability of the American landscape to support them.

Some of the individuals they encountered there proved at least as inhospitable as the overt oppressors in the South, as well. For example, individuals witnessing what looked to them like a mixed-race marriage had to grapple with their prejudice, often towing the line between overt racism and social expectations coercing the markers of increased tolerance in the North. These were examples of “low Yankee prejudice,” resulting in inconveniences like a landlady insisting that they have tea in their private quarters rather than in public upon the discovery that the couple was in fact married (65). In spite of these challenges, William and Ellen Craft successfully overcome the challenges of reading new landscapes, evident in their account of their successful passage to freedom, and indeed away from American oppression.

In overcoming obstacles towards freedom through mastery, these authors are able

to reflect on their experiences in order to critique oppression and mobilize change. Former slaves countered that their mastery of the written word exposed a lack of opportunity acquiring social and material equality. Former slaves, attuned to the promises of literacy in accessing both material goods and affording the vantage point from which to critique society, employed this threshold definition of literacy in making their claims for their liberation, but also adapted it for their own purposes. They fashioned their public identities in ways that spoke to larger narratives concerning language use, working from within the paradigm to participate in and challenge it.

Craft in the Composition Classroom

What function might a slave narrative such as Crafts' serve in a First Year Writing classroom? Students in transition to college must successfully execute a passing performance in their first year, at the critical time of adjusting to a new landscape. As I have suggested in scoping out different models of literacy, one way to show belonging is through language use. James Gee posits that when adopting a secondary Discourse, or one other than a home language taught by face-to-face intimate interactions with family and other caregivers, there exist a series of tests to prove to insiders that the language user in fact belongs (8).¹⁹

¹⁹ While Gee suggests that individuals from minority groups may never be able to acquire a privileged Discourse because these are often passed down in family or other intimate spaces other than classrooms and that the acquisition of a dominant discourse can result in conflict that impeded full mastery of a particular privileged discourse ("Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics: Introduction," 8), others like Lisa

One way of conceiving of First Year Writing's gatekeeping function, then, is demonstrating proficiency in a stylized discourse, or privileged reading, writing, and speaking practices in which students prove that they belong in the academic community. Although of course the strategies of former slaves are not the same as the experiences of twenty-first century college students, reading these texts can help students better understand the politics of inclusion and exclusion attached to threshold definitions of literacy and language use in connection with identity. It also opens up extra-textual signifiers for consideration of cultural fluency.

Like Ellen and William Craft and others who ascribe to this definition to the point that it enables their larger personal and professional agendas, students and teachers, too, can work from within to challenge these structures, and can do so at the level of the languages that they bring into the composition classroom. Student literacy narratives offer initiates into this academic discourses the space to reflect on their personal linguistic

Delpit have challenged that notion. Instead, Delpit argues that direct instruction of privileged Discourses is possible, and furthermore that it helps students add to their linguistic repertoires in "The Politics of Teaching Literate Discourse."

More recently, ELL, translingual and other literacy scholars have pushed for using students' previous knowledge and entire linguistic repertoire as a resource, rather than as an obstacle. Instead of an emphasis on "conflict" in switching between different language systems, the concept of code meshing suggests a more negotiated view of language in which language users possess multiple Discourses that they employ on a daily basis. These frameworks suggest not a one-time passage into privileged discourses like those spoken and written on college campuses as necessarily invoking shame on the part of the student trying to fit his or her previous experiences into a new discursive arena, but rather one in which language users can use their knowledge and "ways of thinking, acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, believing" to blur these boundaries and reshape these Discourses (Gee, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis*, 13).

repertoires as resources shaping their professional lives and the agonistic discursive spaces they enter into as students mastering, navigating, and trying out new identities through, among other things, language use.

African American authors like the Crafts, through their linguistic mastery, challenge standards that codify people and perpetuate hierarchies on the basis of gender, race, sexuality, class, and ability. However, the shift from Ellen Craft to Mr. Johnson is not smooth, made legible in the disguise and pronoun usage. Most jarringly to the narrative, William Craft shifts both to a masculine pronoun and “my master” in referring to his wife in disguise and does not return to calling her his wife and until the second part of the narrative, in which they had escaped to the North and she discards the disguise. This shift renders the performance linguistically, reiterating the visual shock of her complete transformation into Mr. Johnson. The Crafts expose how individuals perform facets of identity through legible markers.

It is important for their credibility in the nineteenth century that the immediate circumstances forced them to try on alternative personae rather than what could be construed as a personal desire that would be cast as perverse or deviant in the nineteenth century. For that reason, the Crafts specify that Ellen was reluctant to execute the plan involving her disguise (24), and her feminine-typed tears, hesitancy, and submission reinforce the binary that she ultimately exploits from within (27). While the possibilities of transgressing social norms lead to freedom for the Crafts, they still must articulate an essentialist definition of identity: although she is really black, female, illiterate slave

according to the logic of the narrative, she sacrificially and reluctantly performs the role of white disabled slave-owning gentleman in order to secure her freedom. Marcus Charles Tribbett suggests the danger of Ellen's gender performance for nineteenth-century readers in particular in "Three Williams and a Subversive Text: Collaboration, Communal Agency, and Resistant Identities in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860)": "she can easily be labeled as sexually perverse and relegated to the poll of black female sexuality as the antithesis of the true woman" in she is too keen on the plan (22).

Even though the signifiers remain stable, there is a first step at calling these markers into question. In other words, there is freedom and further possibility in the spaces between binary categories that get dramatized further in the early twentieth century, which I flesh out further in the next chapter on Nella Larsen. This narrative pushes toward a more liminal positionality, with possibilities that challenge fixed categorizations. Whereas individuals could ostensibly be grouped on the basis of categories such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, ability, and language use, an investigation into any one of these nodes reveals the rich possibilities for performance for individuals seeking self-definition.

Rightly so, most of the scholarship concerning this slave narrative and identity politics has focused on race and the passing figure, and much engaging work is also starting to emerge in the areas of ability and gender politics, as well. Ellen Samuels, for example, goes so far as to connect literacy and ability in provocative ways, showing literacy as the *ability* to read and write in ways that connect different textual engagements with disability. What I hope to contribute here is a push toward considering language use at the

intersections of identity, much like the other categories. This trajectory helps inform our own understanding of literacy work, both in larger community contexts, and in the privileged spaces of the classroom and the university.

An explicit examination of language use in this narrative might seem at first to directly represent nineteenth-century language politics in uncomplicated ways, or perhaps ways that might even overturn my major premise. For example, much of the Craft slave narrative sustains an elevated, castigatory tone, reinforced by breaks in the prose for transcriptions of legal, epistolary, literary, and media documents or to render a scene poignantly through dramatic poetry. Indeed, this pastiche serves to present the text as emanating out of ongoing, circulating, and relevant discourses in order to corroborate the personal narrative from a larger socio-political perspective. The form asserts control through a particularly literary mastery of different genres. Like the motion of the detailed escape, the larger narrative also participates in a transnational debate on the topic of slavery. The intertextuality adds to the vivid details of physical, social, and technological flux that challenges the status quo of enslaved bodies unable to claim self-mastery, in letters or otherwise.

Given the destabilized terrain of identity politics in the narrative, it seems fitting, then, that the language use within the narrative would be fluid, as well. While much of the narrative remains primed by a particularly elite language use, evident most strikingly in the references to such English literary figures as Milton, Shakespeare, and Bunyan, there is also regional American dialogue that interrupts the larger pastiche. Two exchanges in

which the couple's language use is at odds with their interlocutors show this tension. For example, William and Ellen translate dialect for their audience, suggesting their privileged position to speak to both slaves and white audiences:

On arriving I found two or three servants waiting on him; but as he did not feel able to make a very hearty dinner, he soon finished, paid the bill, and gave the servants each a trifle, which caused one of them to say to me, "Your massa is a big bug"—meaning a gentleman of distinction—"he is the greatest gentleman dat has been dis way for dis six months." I said, "Yes, he is some pumpkins," meaning the same as "big bug." (36)

In this case, William is able to convey his insider knowledge by translating for his audience and even supplying "pumpkins" as a synonym for "bug." The couple's language use claims a unified voice in presenting the narrative to the public. In contrast to the elevated language of most of the narrative, some slaves and Southerners engage in dialect at odds with the tone of the larger work. Their language use stands out as quaint, geographically circumscribed, and even antiquated. In the following passage, the Crafts first set up the exchange before transcribing it in hindsight:

I may state here, that on the sea-coast of South Carolina and Georgia the slaves speak worse English than in any other part of the country. This is owing to the frequent importation, or smuggling in, of Africans, who mingle with the natives. Consequently, the language cannot properly be called English or African, but a corruption of the two.

The shrewd son of African parents to whom I referred said to me, "Say, brudder, way you come from, and which side you goin day wid dat ar little don up buckra" (white man)?

I replied, "To Philadelphia."

"What!" he exclaimed, with astonishment, "to Philumadelphly?"

"Yes," I said.

"By squash! I wish I was going wid you! I hears um say dat dare's no slaves way over in dem parts; is um so?"

I quietly said, "I have heard the same thing."

"Well," continued he, as he threw down the boot and brush, and, placing his hands in his pockets, strutted across the floor with an air of independence— "Gorra Mighty, dem is de parts for Pompey; and I hope when you get dare you will stay, and nebber follow dat buckra back to dis hot quarter no more, let him be eber so good."

I thanked him; and just as I took the boots up and started off, he caught my hand between his two, and gave it a hearty shake, and, with tears streaming down his cheeks, said:—

"God bless you, broder, and may de Lord be wid you. When you gets de freedom, and sitin under your own wine and fig-tree, don't forget to pray for poor Pompey." (35)

In contrast to William Craft, the other interlocutor in this dialogue, this slave's language use signals his connection to the physical landscape. In other words, it positions the Crafts as spokespeople for individuals like Pompey, but also re-inscribes distance from him on the level of language. This linguistic register proves the couple's exceptionalism, which is an American theme that they use to show the particulars of how an illiterate slave couple could find their way to lasting freedom. They are not like Pompey, and his use of dialect proves his connection to the Southern landscape.

As race leaders primed for freedom and to later write about it, they are not like poor illiterate Pompey, and yet the languages that the locals use are not pure: a "frequent

importation, or smuggling in, of Africans, who mingle with the natives” results in a creolized language that the narrative documents through his use of dialect. It further describes language differences by showing a perversion of English and African, as if these were the two languages involved. To make this claim, the Crafts invent “African” as one language, rather than explore the complex systems in this creolization. In so doing, it obscures the origins of this language use, letting it serve as counterpoint to William Craft’s mastery of “pure” language, admittedly a difficult dichotomy to parse from a translingual perspective.

As Maisha L. Wester helps illuminate in parsing the genre in *African American Gothic: Screams from Shadowed Places*, “While slave narratives explicitly challenge the notion that blackness signifies savagery, they often participate in and accept dominant (oppressive) readings of other racial minorities” (52). From a language perspective, I would take this a step further: the Crafts buy into a model of exceptionalism in priming themselves as spokespeople in ways that actually distance them linguistically from other slaves, and this is evident through the use of learned literary references and fluent elevated language contrasted to slave dialect.

Indeed, this presents a problem to how they figure their self-mastery insofar as it replicates these hierarchies. They seem to internalize and ascribe to the very oppressive attitude that they challenge. Although the narrative presents it as a corruption, this passage offers insight into definitions of language relying on discrete categories and literacy as belonging to particular groups. It also shows an approach to language that values purity

much like the blood lines in anti-miscegenation laws. The boundaries around languages should remain discrete according to this argument, which William and Ellen ventriloquize in pointing out the seeming linguistic corruption.

In another example of language use and group affiliation, the Quakers signal their insularity and difference from the rest of the world by their antiquated language use and Ellen learns to read this difference as a sign of their trustworthiness despite her initial hesitation. Thinking their guide Barkley Ivens black, she soon learns otherwise when meeting his Quaker family:

We got out, and the gentleman said, "Go in, and make yourselves at home; I will see after the baggage." But my wife was afraid to approach them. She stopped in the yard, and said to me, "William, I thought we were coming among coloured people?" I replied, "It is all right; these are the same." "No," she said, "it is not all right, and I am not going to stop here; I have no confidence whatever in white people, they are only trying to get us back to slavery." She turned round and said, "I am going right off." The old lady then came out, with her sweet, soft, and winning smile, shook her heartily by the hand, and kindly said, "How art thou, my dear? We are all very glad to see thee and thy husband. Come in, to the fire; I dare say thou art cold and hungry after thy journey."

We went in, and the young ladies asked if she would like to go upstairs and "fix" herself before tea. My wife said, "No, I thank you; I shall only stop a little while." "But where art thou going this cold night?" said Mr. Ivens, who had just stepped in. "I don't know," was the reply. "Well, then," he continued, "I think thou hadst better take off thy things and sit near the fire; tea will soon be ready." "Yes, come, Ellen," said Mrs. Ivens, "let me assist thee;" (as she commenced undoing my wife's bonnet-strings;) "don't be frightened, Ellen, I shall not hurt a single hair of thy head. We have heard with much pleasure of the marvellous escape of thee and thy husband, and deeply sympathise with thee in all that thou hast undergone. I don't wonder at thee, poor thing, being timid; but thou needs not fear us; we would as

soon send one of our own daughters into slavery as thee; so thou mayest make thyself quite at ease!" These soft and soothing words fell like balm upon my wife's unstrung nerves, and melted her to tears; her fears and prejudices vanished, and from that day she has firmly believed that there are good and bad persons of every shade of complexion. (53)

It is clear by the language that they are far removed from Pompey or other slaves at this point in the narrative. Yet this transition is difficult for Ellen, who is unsure whom to trust. Ellen Craft must learn to read the new linguistic landscape in the North, much like the physical, and the Quakers' language use signifies difference from the dangerous white bounty hunters to the Crafts. To survive, and later to write about it, she must acclimate to her new environment and learn the lessons offered her there. Namely, she must learn to accurately read the new environment and the people who inhabit it in order to survive. The Quakers' language differences intimate their trustworthiness as benefactors providing material support and intellectual stimulation through conversation and teaching them to read and write.

Self-mastery and survival through struggle is one model of literacy I am proposing in my examination of the Craft's slave narrative. In this chapter, I explored how the Crafts present themselves as survivors and credible readers of the political landscape. To do so, they gesture towards larger language politics in which fixed selves argue for freedom on the basis of their mastery of a particular discourse. In an article entitled "Language Difference in Writing: Toward a Translingual Approach," Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster and John Trimbur point out the problems with monolingusitic notions of linguistic mastery: "Myths of unchanging, universal standards for language have

often been invoked to simplify the teaching and learning of language. But these have often resulted in denigrating the language practices of particular groups and their members as somehow ‘substandard’ or ‘deviant’” (307). Language differences are not equal in this paradigm, and an example of this can be found in both Pompey and the Quakers in the previous section. Their difference registers as less pure than William’s in the case of Pompey or perhaps purer than other white people’s in the case of the Quakers, insofar as their language stands in for their morality. When purity gets aligned with language use, it maintains notions of discrete borders, and this is true for First Year Writing, as well. In this approach to composition, teachers are the gatekeepers for sanctioned language uses.

In highlighting the Crafts’ choices of self-presentation and their fluidity and mobility, it is my hope that this approach troubles some of the assumptions about language that have gained currency in students’ lives and in academic circles. In this literacy narrative, the Crafts conform to the linguistic expectations, echoing the strategies individuals use when trying to pass into a particular discourse and show insider status. Much like the Crafts, whose new physical landscape proves challenging to their known, situated literacy skills, Min-Zhan Lu testifies to the place for struggle in learning and argues against “purified” language use in purified classroom spaces (447).

This model of literacy, surviving and overcoming disorienting struggle, may be one that students would not have considered without examples of other readers and writers grappling with challenging material. The Crafts both offer a translingual approach to language that challenges clear boundaries between private and public spaces, for

example, suggesting a more fluid relationship between languages and discourses with their users. To take the implications of this argument a step further, it is not enough to make home languages appropriate for classroom contexts—a pedagogical approach that gained currency in important debates surrounding the value of different language systems. While this might have been an important first step, even this seemingly welcoming approach risks reproducing hierarchical structures that it sets out to merely explain by maintaining the rigidity of language boundaries.

Minority writers challenge this ideal by pointing to the real gains that can result from participating fully in a privileged Discourse. In terms of turning to this text in the college classroom, Matsuda underscores that “implicit in most teachers’ definitions of ‘writing well’ is the ability to produce English that is unmarked in the eyes of teachers who are custodians of privileged varieties of English” (640). Composition studies and classrooms can benefit from revising a view of language that maintains clear boundaries around languages and discourses, but must do so in a way that acknowledges the power in certain language uses.

Much like other work in identity politics in other areas in recent decades, the intersections of identity nodes also invoke language use in connection with a more fluid sense of identity, which has implications for the work teachers do at the university level with students, as language gets shaped by its users, as well as it shaping what is possible to articulate within a particular Discourse. A translingual approach to First Year Writing would re-envision the possibilities for language use in ways that bear witness to how

language users shape discourses. It would allow for greater accessibility into these discursive spaces. This position suggests the limitation of James Gee's foundational work on Discourse. Gee describes language's influence on the individual in ways that seem discrete and rather disconnected from the language users crafting it. While it is true that we demonstrate affiliation and identity through our language use, discourses (and Discourses) overlap and multiple Discourses can operate at one time.

This is true in First Year Writing classrooms, and rather than a burden to try to address, it is a resource to acknowledge and tap into. Paul Matsuda notes in his work on "The Myth of Linguistic Homogeneity in College Composition" that "the ability to speak privileged varieties of English was often equated with racialized views of the speaker's intelligence" (643). Deeply-entrenched identity politics debates inhere in language use, and employing this text in the college classroom can begin to show students the stakes of taking up privileged discourses, and the significance for other discourses in linguistic repertoires.

Dissatisfied with these discrete categories in regards to language, Horner et al. qualify:

While it is both accurate and useful to identify the language strategies by which specific collectivities have tried to resist domination, the aim should be to honor their linguistic ingenuity and to encourage other innovative strategies—not to reify a set of forms that supposedly have intrinsic power. (308)

The Crafts offer examples of linguistic ingenuity in their seemingly transparent recount of their escape to freedom. In slave narratives like Crafts, the presentation of the self is

an argument for self-mastery and a narrative of overcoming. Their mastery of letters endorses their critical stamp on their surroundings, as well as argues for their freedom. In this way, education affords them the hope of freedom from oppression that writers like Du Bois and Cooper later build upon. By later in the twentieth century, however, African American writers begin to question this equation.

This model of literacy gives students insight into one pervasive argument for literacy: as a mode of survival and a means of overcoming challenges. It is a tool for handling life's challenges and to put a critical stamp on a sense of individual progress. Former slaves like the Crafts and their descendants bought into the promises of literacy as guarantor of (self-) mastery. While this chapter focuses specifically on the Crafts' narrative, it is important to point out that this model of literacy resurfaces throughout African American literature. It is a potent model with and against which authors position themselves as they tease out its social and cultural currency. Recognizing our students as translingual practitioners and providing them these models for reflection, teachers can use the space of the composition classroom to hone students' "linguistic ingenuity." The next chapter explores another example of literacy as survival, as African Americans migrated North in the twentieth century and faced the challenges of urban environments.

CHAPTER 5: READING BEYOND BLACK AND WHITE IN *PASSING*

In the last chapter, I began to parse how language use functions in connection with identity, which this chapter extends by exploring self-representation through language. Students in transitions are tasked with the frequently disorienting work of writing for a new audience at the college level, and the chasm between reader and writer can seem wide for students coming from a wide range of backgrounds, with different priming that sets them up for their first semester. Writing for a new audience is a difficult task, one in which the writer must imagine the rhetorical situation, including their readers' interests and assumptions. It asks them to make an imaginative leap in considering their audience.

In "Inventing the University," David Bartholomae accounts for this tendency as one strategy of assuming authority when asked to participate in an unfamiliar discourse—it is a strategy for overcoming a challenge that fails to accomplish its purpose. He teases out the tension in the rhetorical situation that students are responding to in the form of a command or ultimatum: "appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse" (9). Sometimes, he contends, faced with the overwhelming task of claiming authority over a subject matter in front of experts in the form of their teachers, students take on the role of figures of social authority. They glean these from their own communities, sometimes assuming the tone of a parent or older community member passing down received wisdom. These figures hold a key place in their lives, but students use these models inappropriately by equating one authority figure with another. Such a strategy responds to a perceived unequal power dynamic in which they are performing a task in front of experts, their teachers already

established in the academic community.

Writing is always an exercise in imagination. However, beginning writers, or those in transition, may not have a clear sense of their audience, making the gap between writer and reader even greater. As a strategy for survival or for performing the role expected of them, beginning writers tend to use commonplaces, social wisdom, and the most evident arguments rather than delving into the intricacies of a given text to show us what is interesting, complicated, or unresolved. In making the safe choice, they sometimes present arguments in their writings that do not count as academic argument.

For example, students might state the obvious or assume a tone not fitting for the rhetorical situation, particularly in personal academic writing. Whereas students might state the obvious in their essays, Bartholomae shows that this strategy is less effective because academic writing is invested in making the familiar or commonplace strange enough to more effectively consider it from a different angle. Such strategies for close reading into texts and cultures are not honed, especially in this educational environment of standardized testing that primes students to look for the “correct” or easy answer. This is true for the literacy narrative, as well, as past success interferes with a more in-depth investigation into literacy, showing one limitation to the overcoming narrative. Instead, commonplaces take the place of new insight, as students defer to recognizable bits of wisdom culled from the culture.

Bartholomae makes evident the liminal position of students passing into a particular discourse. The problem is not so much that they are trying on identities in relationship to

texts as much as they adopt one from their repertoire at the expense of more nuanced positions. Perhaps, in fact, there is important work being done in the act of trying on different identities, as well. In adopting a tone from their immediate social network, they are harnessing strategies that could work for other rhetorical contexts.

However, as Bartholomae suggests, this approach limits what it is possible for students to claim or imagine and they can become stultified in this identity. They can ultimately fail to pass into academic discourse in employing this strategy. An example of this would be the literacy narrative that does not really develop the concept of literacy in any meaningful way. In terms of a bridge assignment, it might read more like a personal statement for a college application essay despite a change in audience and rhetorical situation. An early-semester literacy narrative might make the case that the student is a “good” reader and writer in a way that seems to argue for a grade in a tight tautology because he or she has a history of being rewarded with high grades for their efforts. Conversely, a student might admit to being a “bad” writer in a way that reinforces unhelpful labels at odds with a more in-depth inquiry. This type of response can be particularly frustrating, as it performs the role perfunctorily without using the occasion for reflection to begin to trouble some of the writer’s assumptions. Instead, it rehearses tired commonplaces. However, it is possible to teach students to harness the familiar and every day and to consider why commonplaces exist in the first place.

Because a strategy that new students may face is to assume a less complicated new terrain and to fail to imagine the assumptions of their needs of their audience, one

intervention that First Year Writing can offer to students is to work against a flattening of nuance or only presenting problems with clear, easy resolutions. This speaks to a model of the First Year Writing classroom as a site in the contact zone. While a contact zone might not always be comfortable, it accomplishes the important work of reconsidering ideas from other perspectives. Because First Year Writing brings together students from a wide range of backgrounds, combining many different disciplines, it offers a unique learning community in which to explore commonplace assumptions.

In a levelling gesture, Horner et al. stipulate that “we are all language learners, and that learning language is necessarily continuous precisely because language is subject to variation and change” (308). A more fluid approach to language use attests to the ever-changing work of the First Year Writing classroom, as we try to respond best to the changing needs of our students in the literacies that will best serve them in their personal and professional lives.

Despite evidence to the contrary in media and protests, students today might declare that many of the racial debates of the twentieth century are settled or stagnant, and therefore no longer in need of further examination. They see evidence, for example, of increased representation of harmonized racial diversity in media, conflicting with the messages of debates surrounding political and ideological boundaries of nationhood and Americanness. Delving into African American literature of the twentieth century, and in particular the artistic and literary works of the New Negro Movement, later known as the Harlem Renaissance, helps students to better understand the ongoing dialogues

surrounding racial debates. This material provides important background for all students. For example, African American authors in the first half of the twentieth century examine the nuances of racial difference beyond black and white in ways that can help students complicate some of their assumptions about race and its ongoing significance on the American landscape. It can also help them think about the act of analysis, or making sense out of the critical landscape.

In grappling with the particular histories behind racial representations, students can understand these as contextualized arguments in response to ongoing, high-stakes dialogues rather than facts either no longer in need of further discussion or as well-rehearsed social aphorism. For example, students might be surprised by the conflation of racial diversity in America to a polarized black or white dichotomy that undergirds current debates surrounding racial protest and other demonstrations of civil unrest. Students' home lives, communities, mass media, and schools have all served to shape their understanding of race in America, and the extent to which they think about its ongoing influence at all. Working against black/white thinking that gets dramatized in early twentieth-century debates is precisely the role of First Year Writing, particularly as it further plays out in beginning student writing.

Passing is a novella that nuances critical approaches by refusing clear resolutions. As a literacy narrative, it functions to show the place of reading in the twentieth century as viscerally connected to survival and overcoming the challenges of a new, modern environment. However, this short novel is notoriously complex: an allegory into the

impossibility of cultural mastery based on signs. It flouts its sense of twentieth-century modernity by exposing the complexity of the American critical and racial landscape and the challenges of (self-)mastery. Like Ellen Craft, who must learn to quickly read her surroundings to survive, and whose very body challenges clear racial categorization, Larsen points to the possibilities for creative performance based on these complexities during the Great Migration northward of masses of people from rural areas to big cities. Reading race became at the same time more complex due to increased diversity and, for those invested in maintaining clear ideological boundaries between the races, seemingly more important.

In addition to better appreciating reading practices and the act of interpretation, students can better appreciate the contours of racial discourse in America by having the opportunity to read texts that will challenge commonplace assumptions through this novella. Larsen's *Passing* explores the height of the cultural, social, and artistic movement of the Harlem Renaissance. In addition to enjoying a more international community due to the transcontinental artistic networks, Harlem and northern urban spaces enjoyed increased artistic freedom that pushed on social constraints at the same time that they reinforced them. For example, there were more possibilities for social interaction across racial lines, but often only to the extent that these upheld segregation mores. White patrons and race men and women constrained the types of art that sold or were disseminated, influencing production and exploiting indigenous or primitive art as a testament to their ethos of modernity.

Published in 1929, *Passing* celebrates a New Negro modernity that is both urban and educated, peeking into the social networks framing the personal interactions of Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield, and showing the complexities of reading race on the American urban landscape. Ostensibly, Clare's transgressions lead to her demise, while Irene proves an astute reader, and later narrator, of Clare's misreadings of the racially-segregated society she aspires to participate in as both black and white woman. Irene and the various social circles literally cannot contain Clare, leading to her downfall.

Clare and Irene are former classmates who get reunited by chance, precipitating a series of exchanges over two years. Clare, not fully satisfied by her life passing as a white woman, forces her way back into African American society through Irene. Clare's insouciance ultimately ushers in her demise. For the mixed-race figure, Clare's progression follows a recognizable trajectory in which the decision to pass racially has lasting, deleterious effects on the passing individual. Most often, as the literature espouses, there is no going home again.

Akin to the fallen woman in nineteenth-century imaginings, passing figures suffer increasing isolation and possibly even death as a result of their social transgression. The politics of passing further underscore certain social expectations that assure the passing figure's safety insofar as others know not to betray their confidence. For example, Irene feels insulted that Clare should doubt her discretion in making sure not to inadvertently expose Clare as African American to her husband. Through this narrative arc of passing, readers are thrown into the heyday of Harlem's social networks. Yet the relative freedom

of places like Harlem still ascribe to oppressive social constraints like patronage, segregation, and staid gender roles and sexualities. Larsen offers her readers a new racial landscape in Harlem, but one in which anxieties of racial mixing lurk in everyday exchanges.

Not everyone can be easily contained by modernist presentations of the self, resulting in a crisis of representation. Marginalized writers write back on these issues throughout the decades, with a focus on mixed race characters continuing throughout the twentieth century. Mixed race characters are by definition problematic in a segregated and polarly-racialized America and in response. Like with African American female sexuality more generally, their bodies become the sites on which ongoing racial debates get played out. Larsen employs and signifies on the convention of the tragic mulatta figure in this novel. In this trope, the mixed-race character cannot fit in either black or white society, and unable to belong, faces increasing isolation in both white and black societies, as scholars such as Cherene Sherrard-Johnson establish. On a new terrain as a result of the Great Migration, it becomes even more important to assign people to polarized conceptual categories “black” and “white” in order to fix identity to recognizable categories. As such, it is much like Ellen Craft’s experience of the North, in which overt oppression in the South gave way to more insidious forms in the North.

Especially for those individuals who do not fit comfortably into either category, like for the fictional Clare Kendry, it becomes increasingly important to demonstrate their trouble belonging anywhere in a bifurcated society. Like Pecola Breedlove’s problematic

physicality metonymized in her pregnant pot-belly in *The Bluest Eye*, mixed race characters at the beginning of the twentieth century threaten efforts to contain and coerce female bodies into prescribed roles. Although she is not a mixed-race character, Pecola's inordinate desire for beauty literally pushes her to the margins of society.

Clare's 'having way,' a term Irene uses to describe Clare multiple times, is a lot like Pecola's insatiable desire for milk. They literally cannot contain their desire, and so their physicality pushes the boundaries of polite society, encapsulated in Harlem for Clare and Lorraine, Ohio for Pecola. Moreover, both ascribe to white standards and suffer as a result. Their bodies prove powerful in their potential, but dangerous or unsettling in their form. In terms of parsing Clare's physical presence, Irene is repeatedly awed, insistent that Clare's beauty is too much. She associates her with a dangerous but irresistible and self-effacing allure. Both Clare and Pecola threaten middle-class African American social convention; their physical presence is itself a site of renunciation (and scapegoating). Yet both attempt to read the world around them. Neither has the "right" to aspirations legible as white and middle-class, and they suffer as a result of their unrelenting insistence in trying to lay claim to their desires. They refuse to see the value of staying in their place, and their mobility is read by others as transgressive. In addition, their very presence challenges the either/or ideology and coercive bounds that segregation encourages.

Mixed-race characters show the impossibility of blood purity fetishes despite potent narratives of racial segregation. Reading race accurately is a dominant and pervasive cultural myth in spite of racial mixing. Furthermore, insofar as African American female

sexuality is caught up in ongoing discursive dialogues influenced by slavery, the mixed-race female character is granted at best a hotly-contested sexuality often presented in the polarizing eventuality of expressing an inherent hypersexuality according to essentialized sexualized racial politics or, as the problematic bestial term *mulatta* suggests, asexual. Irene and Clare trouble this line, as well as the place of mixed-race characters more generally on the twentieth-century American landscape.

In fact, much scholarship on the novella has focused on the nature of forbidden desire between the two female characters. Their mutual infatuation and sometimes aversion rehearses America's prurient interest in categorizing, and thereby making safe, knowable, and containable, their hybridity, read as unsafe, unintelligible, uncontainable, and an abstraction. Efforts to read their bodies are efforts to both contain and master their form. Another locus of identity (and its relationship to the body) not fully addressed in dominant narratives or even scholarly trends: language as a means of making sense of, ordering, and the politics behind language use.

The trend in scholarship that explicates their same-sex desire is important and timely, and it builds from much theoretic work that set the foundation to even make the possibility of a love interest between the women clearly articulated. At the same time, it also attempts to frame the complexity of their dynamic in ways that risk undercutting it by reducing it to a purely or primarily sexual interest. As Rafael Walker contends in "Nella Larsen Reconsidered: The Trouble with Desire in *Quicksand* and *Passing*," "These characters' transgressive desires to abandon the strictures of racial identity produce a

collision between racial binaries and other foundational organizing principles in American social thought, including gender ideology” (177). Forbidden desire can be made legible through the lens of queer theory, and it also maps on to other marginalized narratives that challenge normative definitions. For that reason, theories that also underscore mobility in relation to identity politics also provide a useful lens to situate the novella, insofar as it works against any clear labeling.

For example, Sami Schalk persuasively captures this possibility in “Transing: Resistance to Eugenic Ideology in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*.” She mines the possibility of this lens on the basis of “race, gender, sexuality, and class” in order to consider the effects of intersectionality more fully (149). Clare and Irene exhibit a physicality that proves uncomfortable to readers and resists clear containment on the register of sexuality and physical presence, and I am suggesting that the impulse to work against this unintelligibility speaks to our strongest desires to know, and thereby master. What we are left with is a consideration of the body, and how it works as a battleground for intellectual categorization and signifying. As a representation of the self, it resists clear categorization. *Passing* is an allegory of reading in twentieth-century America.

As a reader, Irene attempts to master or make sense out of her environment, but Clare challenges a clearly polarized or demarcated reading, which causes problems for Irene throughout the novella. As Eric King Watt convincingly argues concerning Clare’s visceral effect on Irene in *Hearing the Hurt: Rhetoric, Aesthetics, and Politics of the New Negro Movement*, “whiteness, beauty, mobility, and consumption make up a discursive

formation responsible for a model of attraction that is palpable to Irene. Her body ‘wholly rebels,’ but not from passing; Irene’s body revolts against her repressive mastery over it” (181). Mastery here works to organize and contain desire, but is at odds with a bodily sensibility or knowing. This tension suggests different modes of knowing that the novel explores, both physical, embodied knowledge and cognitive processes. For any composition to take form, both are necessary.

Insofar as this can serve as a literacy narrative offering a model of how to read the cultural and racial landscape, Larsen resists complete mastery or full intelligibility. Yet as Miriam Thaggert suggests in a chapter entitled “Reading the Body: Fashion, Etiquette, and Narrative in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*” in *Images of Black Modernism: Verbal and Visual Strategies of the Harlem Renaissance*, “Larsen’s novel suggests that, indeed, there are codes that are not ‘essential’ qualities of race but are usually easily imitated, mastered, and performed and just as easily signify one race (or gender or class) rather than another” (70). While I take issue with the ease Thaggert highlights given the cost of passing to both Irene and Clare, her notion of race as “easily imitated, mastered, and performed” extends to the realm of literacy as strategies for composition. Imitation, mastery, and performance are all models of literacy that Larsen tries on in this narrative through the trope of racial passing.

Imitation, mastery, and performance all suggest clearly contained processes, while her mixed-race characters’ rhetorical capacity derives from their mixing and blending of known categories to create new possibilities. Rather than a cerebral exercise, Larsen invites a more situated response to the texts she presents, attuned to the amorphous or ambiguous

character of her work. She presents a framework for interpretation that goes beyond prevailing binaries, and does so by exploring the slippery mobility of the early twentieth-century biracial woman as imagined in literature. Furthermore, the place in society that such figures were assigned gets dramatized even in recent literary scholarship on mixed-race women. Whereas some scholars assume that Irene and Clare are black by default, others point out this assumption, often in trying to position mixed race figures in a liminal space that challenges this binary. This critical strategy for categorization is in keeping with historical arguments regarding mixed-race figures, akin to the intellectual work of offering another box to check in the census surveys, but still asking an individual for a choice.

Whether positioned as a third hybrid race or *de facto* black, the passing figure and tragic mulatta are not the only tropes defining mixed race figures. A third option is a culturally-redemptive role: the socially-engaged race woman responsible for social uplift. This mobile figure responds to the demands of early-twentieth century America following the promise of Reconstruction, in which it became increasingly clear that the potential for inter-racial collaboration in addressing the legacy of slavery would go unrealized by the second decade of the twentieth century. This third role posits an identity between black and white in the mixed-race figure that brushes up against the possibility of a third race. Because it also focuses on bloodlines, however, it presents signs of racial difference as fodder for categorization, showing the limitations of this third space insofar as it accepts race as a biological category.

Mixed race women in particular, the allegory goes, enjoy social refinement and

debonair graces that it is their duty to pass on to other people. At times in this history, this trend suggested that the best hope for African Americans more generally was by “lightening up” the race, a theme I will explore further in the next chapters through Soaphead Church’s colorism in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. However, while some historical figures continued fetishizing their blood line by expounding on the benefits of marrying “up” for the good of the entire (hybridized) race, others participated in their communities through other means.

It would be an oversight of the novella’s nuance to finally assert Irene as a race woman and Clare as a tragic mulatta. Through these characters together, I would venture that Larsen explores both of these roles. Clare can enjoy more freedom relative to her counterpart precisely because she rejects the role of race woman that proscribes the options available to Irene. Although Irene more clearly aligns herself with Harlem community through her family life and social network, her ambivalence in her social position is clear. It gets dramatized in her increasing jealousy in regards to Clare, who seems to easily and haphazardly transgress the bounds that constrain her former classmate. She strains under the burden of such high expectations and daily life is little more than a dissatisfying series of tea parties and social events to evade, attend, and organize.

While not explicitly spelled out, the role of race women invokes debates concerning education at the turn of the twentieth century. For some, it was a means of survival and a culturally-approved means of overcoming the challenges faced by home communities and individuals to combat systemic racism. Race leaders like Du Bois and Cooper rely on

promises that endorse a particular type of literacy for the most capable individuals to influence public policy and inspire the disenfranchised. At the same time, race leaders show awareness of the individual isolation education can engender. In Du Bois' short story at the turn of the century that I explored in Chapter Three, John's experience exposes the ongoing myth of literacy acquisition in which reaching a certain academic threshold ensures success, for both individuals and, by extension, the home communities that nurtured them. In addition, writers of the Harlem Renaissance take up this theme of the consequences of higher education on individuals. While the role of the isolated, deracinated, mobile modernist artist has been well explored, what is less evident is the role that particular types of education have had in priming this formation. Irene enjoys a transcontinental education that assures her comfortable, middle-class lifestyle. However, it is not always the case that this kind of education leads to security and contentment for the individual or for social uplift of the community. Much of African American literature in the first half of the twentieth century exposes the fallacy of this myth and at times its devastating consequences.

In another example from Larsen, Irene's husband, for example, dissatisfied with his life, longs for an escape to his primitive, exoticized notion of South America. Such dissatisfaction denotes growing disillusionment that writers like Du Bois and Larsen express. Whereas writers seem to buy into the idea passed down through slavery that literacy led to freedom and happiness through (self-)mastery, the inequalities and ongoing oppression these writers are navigating are increasingly harder to overlook. Writers within

the first decades of the twentieth century largely grapple with the expectation that literacy could afford the same privileges to African Americans as to the larger population, drawing from the hopes of literate slaves who bore witness to their journeys toward freedom in the form of slave narratives, as well as Reconstruction-era autobiographies detailing their literacy acquisition.

In this top-down racial uplift strategy, castigated by some for its inherent essentialist elitism, mixed-race women were responsible for securing African Americans a more privileged place in twentieth-century America. In “‘A Plea for Color’: Nella Larsen’s Iconography of the Mulatta,” Cherene Sherrard-Johnson finds that “These popular images of the New Negro woman enforced a genteel standard of behavior, appearance, and vocation that restricted real women’s gangly and artistic expression—and ran counter to the modernizing impulse of the era” (835). The roles of mixed-race women, positioned against stereotypes of promiscuity, gained currency from nineteenth-century Angel of the House Victorian mores, in which domestic, refined women were responsible for the larger moral bearings of society. Yet as Sherrard-Johnson points out, these tropes coerce conformity in ways that stifle individual expression. What Larsen contributes through these characters is a more situated knowing, a less-clearly defined boundary, and a more nuanced appreciation for ambiguity and unresolved tension in these roles. This unresolved tension principally shapes the urban American landscape visible in Larsen’s novella.

The twentieth-century cultural landscape that Larsen’s characters encounter offers possibilities for nuanced and layered readings. What might look like a series of rather

inconsequential middle-class pretensions and tea parties in a short novel is actually an in-depth investigation into the significance of race in America. Surface markers are not to be trusted as clear sign posts, showing the complexity of language and extra-semiotic practice to make sense out of the environment. Larsen's literacy narrative opens up alternative hermeneutic frameworks for the readers to make sense of at the same time that it rebuffs exact categorization. As Thaggert astutely claims, "Despite critics' celebration of 'undecideability in the novel, analyses of *Passing*, ... often reveal the reader's complicit desire 'to know.' In this sense the novel raises metacritical concerns of reading, language, and interpretation" (86). How far are readers willing to go to gain closure? In exploring Clare and Irene as readers, it is these concerns I am interested in further building on.

Critics tend to weigh who the better reader proves to be, Clare or Irene. Much like her dubious claims to an insider knowledge of race, Irene attempts to make sense out of and exert control over a troublesome environment that refuses to behave the way she wants, with examples including her children, her husband, and even the unseasonable weather. Clare also reads both Irene and her surroundings. One question throughout the novel is whether Clare accurately reads or misinterprets her husband. However, the lack of consensus in this comparison of the two readers points to the various lenses that critics use in making these claims. Their findings on the better reader have less to do with the evidence at hand and more to do with what it signifies, according to the framework that they set up. The novella puts pressure on the act of interpretation itself in ways that make analysis particularly ripe for ongoing dialogue. Extended to an exploration of reading practices in

action, the novella offers a unique opportunity for students to investigate the act of forging interpretative frameworks.

The desire to know and the cost of uncovering evidence is one unifying theme of the novella. Reading gets unbound from texts and maps onto bodies, blending boundaries with prurient intrigue. For example, an allusion to the Rhinelander case shows how women's bodies are a site for sexual and racial policing. Irene makes reference to the Rhinelanders in a brief, broken off aside as she imagines the possible result of a divorce. She privately muses on the precedent of this transatlantic court case before dismissing divorce as not in her best interest since it would assure Clare more time and freedom to spend in Harlem (261).²⁰

Most twenty-first century readers would overlook this aside, but it speaks to how race is made legally and visually legible. A quick reference in the novel to the Rhinelander Case inspired important critical work that relates the novel back to the historical court case. A socialite man divorcing his wife claimed publicly that he did not know she was mixed race as grounds for annulling the marriage. Because his wife Alice did not testify, the

²⁰ This reference is just one example of Larsen's use of intertextuality, lending realism to the text by introducing sensationalized media stories. Connected to Larsen's use of intertextuality, Irene's husband tutors his son in reading practices in a domestic scene in which the son asks about why African Americans were getting lynched (262). A newspaper article prompts this discussion. An affront to her middle-class domestic sensibilities, Irene quickly cuts off further dialogue, sparking an argument between the couple concerning childrearing. Irene sees her parental role as her sons' protector, while her husband thinks it necessary to explain the world to the children.

findings were based on a public examination of the woman's body and her private letters. "Reading Race in Nella Larsen's *Passing* and the Rhinelander Case," Rebecca Nisetich sets it up in dramatic terms: "The verdict had the potential to challenge the conception of race as a physically visible fact, or to further reinforce it" (346). Here, the audience in the courtroom claims knowledge through the transgressive glimpse at a woman's body, reinforcing the visual signs of race. For Irene, these visual markers of racial difference are not enough to ensure her safety from Clare. As a passing figure, she challenges Irene's relative safety, speaking to Irene's desire to contain the threat of Clare's transgressive mobility. The danger she perceives in Clare lends credence to the commonplace interpretation of the ending that Irene is responsible for Clare's death. In any case, however, Irene's reading of Clare does not fully account for her slippery, shapeshifting nature.

Irene and Clare also serve as readers of both each other and the racialized landscape. Irene, for example, suggests a privileged knowing as a mixed-race figure who passes for convenience at the beginning of the novel. Concerned that she has been discovered by another woman that she initially reads as white (who turns out to be Clare), she reassures herself that "White people were so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, finger-nails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot" (178). Here, she calls into question the visual signifiers of race at the same time that she claims insider knowledge. While it is provocative that Irene misreads Clare as a white woman who has discovered her passing in a segregated white hotel rather than as her former classmate, it is equally important to

point out that Clare is performing whiteness in this scene. Whether or not Irene is a good reader of race, she thinks of herself as enjoying a privileged position due to it, working within the very binary opposition that she exploits for her benefit.

The characters both perform race and exploit racialized readings of the body to their advantage. They do so in order to survive and overcome the challenges they face. Both Irene and Clare are adept readers of twentieth-century racialized landscapes, still grappling with different definitions of race, such as lineage, bloodline, and phenotypical expression. At the same time that they claim to know how to manipulate other people's readings of their bodies, Clare and Irene also claim insider knowledge. Secure in her Harlem social circle and her position in the Negro Women's League, Irene explains to her friend that there exists an intrinsic but allusive (ineffable) quality that identifies as "ways. But they're not definite or tangible" (236).

Claims like these reinforce essentializing definitions of race. Larsen works to challenge these definitions within the larger framework of the novel through the issue of passing, as well as the failure of these characters to always accurately read their racialized surroundings. As Eric King Watt suggests in *Hearing the Hurt*, "Passing is an intense performative act that undermines the law of racial and sexual order, showing identities to be held together by matrices of desire and anxiety" (169). In fact, the very image of the passing figure exposes race and other identity categories as allusive, a category increasingly difficult to contain, and legible only through the shapeshifting definitions signifying on human difference.

Recent scholarship has used the framework of race as a social construct to more fully examine the role of the mixed-race character in American literary imagination. Taken together, the scholarship points to various ways of assigning race in America: by skin color, by other phenotypical characteristics, by family of origin, by self-definition, by matrilineal genealogy, and by blood. In fact, Nisetich also offers another possibility for defining race that this novel flirts with, racial ties through association. She comments on “Clare’s awareness that one’s identity is determined by one’s associations: she refuses to hire black maids not because she dislikes them but because she fears being aligned with them through association” (352). While amorphous kinship ties are something that Irene explicitly denounces (178), it is interesting that Nisetich posits the possibility of racial affiliation through larger networks of kin in her reading of Clare.

However, I do not agree with Nisetich’s suggestion that Clare refuses black maids as a denouncement of her race more generally, staking claims to identity by cutting off the possibility of such ties. Rather, this evidence is in keeping with her hypervigilance against being found out, particularly in the vulnerable, close intimacy of her own home. To support this point, she relates her desire to not have more children following a harrowing pregnancy plagued by the prospect of her child’s skin color categorically exposing her black ancestry. Her husband already noted an inexplicable change in her skin color as she ages, suggesting a gradual understanding that he sublimates in the jovial, horrifying nickname for her, “Nig.” With this corroborating evidence, it is more probable that she would not have black maids, if her racist husband would even allow them in his house, to avoid having them near

her as a point of comparison, so that their bodies and hers would not be on constant display for her husband's assessment. As this evidence works to underscore, visual markers become signs for making sense out of difference in this racialized framework, and the stakes can be quite high. Yet its significance can get lost and transmuted to twenty-first century readers.

Loosely defined, race is an ideological means for organizing people into groups based on difference, and Larsen exposes how it constrains individuals more intimately as well. For example, identifying as an African American women and contemplating exposing Clare's African American family of origin to her racist husband, Irene laments "She was caught between two opposing allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! That thing that bound and suffocated her" (258). She articulates the tension between individual and community desire, suggesting that the individual does not always fit neatly into categories. Irene wishes for Clare's freedom at the same time she seeks to constrain it. In articulating that conflicting desire as the narrator of this novella, it leads her readers to question whether she is a hypocrite or reliable at all, adding a layer of doubt over the entire plot that further complicates commonplace readings. The novella questions again and again whether Irene is a hypocrite or just a poor reader of her immediate social context.

Clare and Irene's positions in relation to their self-chosen and socially-designated racial categorization prime them to read the environment in particular ways. In "Transing," Sami Schalk grapples with their mobility in relation to their capacity to read themselves and others, connecting literacy and race. The recognizable trope concerning this literary

figure tentatively suggests that their mixed-race identity and passing experiences afford them a privileged position from which to read the environment, but must make that claim on qualified terms to avoid becoming overly celebratory, essentializing, and flattening of individual differences.

The intrigue into this possibility of a privileged position sparks ongoing debate into racial categorization. In terms of more recent criticism on the novel, some scholars still attempt to use advancements in our understanding about race to prove that Irene and Clare are actually black, white or mixed race. However, Larsen works within this polarized framework to mystify it. However, critics continue to attempt to read Irene and Clare's body through new racial lenses, speaking to the potency of racial definitions on the American critical and social landscape and the desire to know and contain. This tendency to push against the novella's limits speaks to the enduring desire to know and categorize according to prevailing definitions and critical trends *du jour*. It also highlights the potency of race as a meaningful visual sign highlighting and valuing difference, working to create and maintain a deeply-embedded narrative of social hierarchy.

I do not align myself with Rebecca's Nisetich's critique of Butler and others that she claims do "not account for the different ways each woman defines her self. Under the spell of the one-drop construction of 'race,' these critics become trapped in normative definitions of 'passing'" (351). Within the organizing logic of the early twentieth-century text, steeped in segregationist ideology, it is true as Butler claims that these women are *essentially* "black," but I am surprised that almost a century later, Nisetich and others are

still using these arguments to discover what these characters “really” are. When examined more closely, such categorization breaks down under scrutiny, yet its shapeshifting nature does not mitigate its ongoing effect on the American imaginative and ideological landscape.

Irene and Clare are both stifled by the options available to them even in a place as ostensibly liberating as Harlem. Sherrard-Johnson demonstrates that “[Larsen’s] fiction is anchored in a critique of the visual images of African American women then circulating throughout the culture and limiting the ability of the New Negro woman in the intellectual and artistic communities of the ‘talented tenth’” (836). Concurrent literary tropes worked to enforce social coercion, offering a caveat to readers concerning the viability of mixed-race characters in a deeply-divided post-Reconstruction society. In other words, Larsen uses a familiar figure to tease out some of the signs of racial difference that get reinforced through this trope. Although Clare dies at the end, the persistent lack of a linear progression through the narrative culminates in a conclusion that denies closure, opening up various readings of the text. For twenty-first century students, particularly those looking for the evident answer, this novel might prove particularly challenging. Tragically, it might also read as commonplace.

“Nice Study in Contrasts, That”²¹

Although she destabilizes the concepts of white and black as bifurcated racial categories, Larsen provides her readers with signs of a deeply-divided society through her use of primary colors. She signals the place of racialized visual signifiers on the twentieth-century American landscape. For my purposes, I am interested in building from Cherene Sherrard-Johnson’s visual tableaux of mixed-race women by artists at the time to contribute to the visual imagery in the text. She highlights that “There is evidence of a common grammar of representation around mixed-race, black, female bodies that is intrinsically bound to textual as well as visual narratives” (836). In her exploration of “a common grammar,” she unbounds literacy from text, reading the American racial landscape in the early-twentieth century through visual representations of mixed-race figures. Sherrard-Johnson further suggests that “Recognition of the passer as either white or black is reliable only to the extent that the observer has a trained eye sensitive to the visual encoding of race” (852). I argue here that through the use of color, Larsen is training her readers’ eyes to pick up “the visual encoding of race” on the American landscape.

While Sherrard-Johnson delves into the imagery in the paintings and Larsen’s painterly vision, I am focusing on situating my study in the primary colors blue and red in making race more legible in this text. Larsen seems to use these colors strategically, methodically aligning red with African American society and blue with Caucasian. It this

²¹ Larsen, *Passing*, 235.

study of the “black” *Redfields* and the “white” *Bellews* (read blue), Larsen splits the world down the middle along this polarized color line. Black and white are most often used to describe physical features like eyes and skin. Instead of using these racialized colors to reinforce her reading visually, she artistically muses on divisions based on color through a study of red and blue.

In her chapter on “Reading the Body: Fashion, Etiquette, and Narrative in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*,” Miriam Thaggert posits that fashion, as a signifier for something seemingly inconsequential, is a useful way to think through the racial relations in the novella. However, her primary focus is not on color but on detail in fashion. Color also comes into play in Larsen’s work. In fact, the precision with which Larsen employs these colors, particularly in fabrics, is unwavering. She uses the mixture of blue and red, purple, exactly twice—in the first and last page of the novella to describe Clare’s handwritten letter and Irene’s husband’s cold lips. During the heyday of a critical interest in the possibility of a love affair between Clare and Irene, the purple passage opening the novella suggested illicit desire and sublimated aversion.²² It also speaks to the mixed-race figure’s capacity to articulate or make sense out of the environment, for my purposes connected to literacy. I am more interested in the position of this color choice in the text, suggesting the method Larsen used in employing color. Interesting, there is not much possibility for “and,” or

²² I conjecture that a final focus on her husband’s lips could also be read along these lines of sexual politics in the novel.

multicultural celebration of racial mixing within the logic of the novel. Instead, red and blue for the most part remain discrete categories, making legible the larger mores of Jim Crow segregation on society and designations of race that arbitrarily force an individual to choose one over another.

The bookend position of this color choice when blending these boundaries alerts readers to the blue/red color study within.²³ Irene and Clare identify as either white or black, evident in the blue and red environments surrounding them. Larsen meticulously tutors her readers on the divisive ideology through the use of color in the novella. Irene first remembers Clare as a child, “a pale small girl sitting on a ragged blue sofa, sewing pieces of bright red cloth together” (172). Here, Larsen introduces an imagist color study that shapes the rest of the text. Clare, materially supported by her claims to white ancestry, legible through her position on the worn-out blue couch, seeks to create something new, tapping into the potential of African American artistry in Harlem.

Although at this point it is not clear what Clare is crafting, her artistic project also prefigures the storyline of Clare’s adult life in which she attempts to realign herself with the black community, buying the makings of a red dress in order to attend her school picnic (172). However, her position in the community became precarious after she was sent to

²³ Whereas she consistently uses the colors red and blue to divide the book along racial lines, she uses the color yellow only once, to describe flowers on a windowsill during an exchange in the middle of the novella between Clare and Irene. Other than this singular example, yellow is used only to shade blue. There are four examples of green in the novella, that I mostly decided not to detail here. As a mixture of blue and yellow, however, the scenes with green can still be read as typed “white.”

live with pious white aunts who treated her more like a servant than a relative. Her initial divorce from her home community, therefore, was occasioned by a family tragedy not in her control. Living with white aunts, she had the opportunity to identify as a white woman. Marrying Bellew secured her social and racial position. In fact, it echoes the ethos of social clubs such as “Blue Veins,” in which members qualified based on tests that measured their lightness. These clubs show the tension in the African American community for race leaders in community centers like Harlem and Chicago. Later, the prelude to the final scene describes Clare’s re-assimilation into African American community accomplished, insofar as Irene notices that she is “radiant in a shining red gown” (265). Her re-entry in African American social networks is ostensibly complete.

Contrasted to these scenes, Clare’s married life with John Bellew steeps her in shades of blue. She is wearing green, in the blue family, and her husband dons a blue tie the first time she runs into Irene at the white-segregated Drayton Hotel in Chicago (177). Her parlor, in which Irene first learns the extent of Clare’s husband’s race and color prejudice, is decorated in blue, as well. Blues and greens provide the background for both the white-typed hotel and for Clare’s living space. To confirm a personal connection to her surroundings in this scene, in which Clare must signify as white in her husband’s presence, the narration specifies that “Clare was wearing a thin floating dress of the same shade of blue, which suited her and the rather difficult room to perfection” (194). Clare performs race as an aesthetic here. She also enjoys taking on and off these roles, epitomized in haphazardly throwing off her blue hat once she reaches the relative safety of Irene’s

bedroom.

Clare seems both aware of the possibility of discovery and largely unaffected by it, immersing herself more and more in the red verve and energy of Harlem's social networks, until finally the white snow extinguishes her flame, much like Irene's cigarette just moments before. Although Irene successfully performs whiteness impromptu at Clare's residence for the benefit of Clare's unknowing husband, she is unable to hide it on the city streets. Larsen riffs on a familiar narrative arc of unavoidable revelation for the passing individual in the street scene. In this case, Bellew discovers that she could be either black by association, or at the very least, have black friends, both of which would be problematic for him. In this scene, Irene encounters John Bellew when shopping with a friend from her social network who, unlike Irene and Gertrude, could not pass as white. Following the scene of recognition by association, in which Irene potentially inadvertently "outs" Clare, a red coat captivates Felise, diverting her teasing inquiry into Irene's passing habits (260). The color red serves as a sign for danger in this passage, exposing Clare to possible violence, as much as it stands in to highlight the racialized color divide.

Slippery Reading Practices in the Writing Classroom

Larsen uses red and blue as legible signposts for readers invested in reading race on the urban, northern landscape, but challenges discrete categories positioned as binaries. The sign posts in *Passing* guide readers to a more complex understanding of both race and

acts of critical interpretation. More than a reference to the craft of interpretation, this perception demonstrates the disorientation of not knowing where to look for visual signs in the environment. Passing figures both use the commonplace assumptions about race and challenge them through the act of passing. However, what counts as evidence for this interpretive framework, or what signifies, changes according to the definition that one uses, suggesting the illusory, dynamic nature of identity frameworks. While much important theoretic work has been accomplished in recasting notions of identity in recent decades, language use is not a prominent identity category that comes across in extant work exploring other issues of intersectionality, usually defined in terms of gender, race, sexual orientation, and class. Translingual studies and an English-language learning perspective can contribute to these ongoing critical discussions, identifying an approach to identity that is contextualized, fluid, and mobile rather than essentialized components of identity.

The novella resists generic labelling as much as Irene and Clare defy clear-cut racial categorization, suggesting the shapeshifting nature of the text. While its pages are relatively few compared to Larsen's *Quicksand* or other Harlem Renaissance novels, *Passing* opens itself up to seemingly countless interpretations that defy secure claims to categorization. To use a shapeshifting Larsen metaphor, readers of *Passing* are ultimately struggling in the *quicksand* of racial landscape in early twentieth-century America. It harkens back to the Craft's journey North, as well. Structurally, the novella works against linear mapping. Readers of *Passing* are confronted with the challenge of piecing together the story from a series of memories prompted by an exchange of letters:

It was the last letter in Irene Redfield's little pile of morning mail. After her other ordinary and clearly directed letters the long envelope of thin Italian paper with its almost illegible scrawl seemed out of place and alien. And there was, too, something mysterious and slightly furtive about it. A thin sly thing which bore no return address to betray the sender. Not that she hadn't immediately known who its sender was.... Furtive, but yet in some peculiar, determined way a little flaunting. Purple ink. Foreign paper of extraordinary size. (171)

The correspondences from Clare both structure and loom over the novel, causing tension for Irene. Her "almost illegible scrawl" in "purple ink" disturbs Irene's claims to domesticity. Readers attempt to make sense out of this disorder and Irene's overall discomfort stands in for the work of making sense out of the novel. It assertively challenges conventional (or received) wisdom and asks her to make sense of new information. As such, it challenges the position of initiate writers who ventriloquize received wisdom according to Bartholomae's findings.

Making sense out of a disorienting landscape is challenging. However, although not always comfortable, this endeavor is on par for the course of engaged critical practice and learning. As Catherine Prendergast articulates in a chapter entitled "In Praise of Comprehension" in *Cross-Language Relations in Composition*, "Though the current political climate may strive to convince us otherwise, incomprehension is not simply lack, the absence of comprehension. Incomprehension is generative—of longing, of effort, of meaning" (234). The act of "making something out of nothing," whether through craft or interpretation, gets both rewarded and challenged in this text, making for a shapeshifting literacy narrative. It seems one interpretation is not possible, but opens itself to a

multiplicity of perspectives. Taking up the contours of racial discourse, it exposes how people interpret visual signs of difference. *Passing* can serve as allegory for critical practice itself, privileging bodily knowings and situated readings of America's sociopolitical landscape.

In providing material that pushes on preconceived notions of race, *Passing* posits a challenging relationship between individuals and their readings of the American landscape. As a literacy narrative, this novella exemplifies how readers make sense out of complex material, sometimes at odds with previous interpretive frameworks. Readers ultimately have a choice, both for the novel and for the landscape: to reject or attempt to assimilate new information. Of course, twenty-first century students can choose to read this novel in its most linear trajectory: Irene's guilt-ridden confession of killing her former classmate due to suspicions of an affair with her husband. In this reading, in addition to her extinguished cigarette, Irene shattering an heirloom white teacup, its dark contents seeping onto the floor (254), foreshadows her pushing Clare out of the window: "One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone" (271).

The entire text, in fact, can be viably read as a confession of extinguishing sublimated desire in an effort to contain it.²⁴ An example of the viability of this possibility

²⁴ For more on gothic elements in *Passing*, see Sherrard-Johnson's "A Plea for Color."

is Irene's response to Clare's letter. She evaluates and judges the letter's genuineness:

The letter which she had just put out of her hand was, to her taste, a bit too lavish in its wordiness, a shade too unreserved in the manner of its expression. It roused again that old suspicion that Clare was acting, not unconsciously, perhaps—that is, not too consciously—but, none the less, acting. (212)

Irene faults Clare on grounds of the authenticity and reserved social mores that the larger novella works to challenge. Although Irene attempts to finesse a direct connection between identity and its expression, the larger work explores the possibilities of a de-essentialized definition of race through the performative act of passing.

Tired commonplaces perpetuate powerful master narratives. With this approach, teachers can help recuperate the validity of assigning literature in the First Year Writing classroom, as a means of negotiating and co-constructing meaning within the discursive space of the classroom. Tompkins suggests the crossroads of teaching and activism, and texts like Larsen's demonstrate the possibility for engendering discussion in a socially-engaged classroom. In addition, I have begun to suggest in this chapter that this novella in particular primes students not just for imitation and mastery, but for invention and possibly even for trying out their own shapeshifting rhetorical capacity. This novella teaches students how best to make sense of the visible signs on the landscape for their own lives, and how to refine their arguments through engaged discourse in ongoing debates in classrooms and other facets of their daily lives.

While difficult to contain or categorize, it is precisely this incomprehension that

students can harness when positioning their own arguments, not as passed down wisdom or commonplace but situated in response to their environments and lived experiences. Larsen offers a model of literacy in which readers are constantly negotiating the environment, reading the landscape and the bodies that inhabit it. Teachers in First Year Writing can use texts like this to explore reading practices in new ways. This negotiation is the space of engaged and meaningful reflective learning. For Irene as sometimes narrator, the potential for critical interpretation gets exemplified in the epistolary form of the novel's nonlinear sequencing. She tries out her musings only to later revise or reject them based on fragmented memories and broken off asides, suggesting an attention to the composing process.

Prendergast's notion of incomprehension as generative speaks to the process of trying out different arguments in exploratory ventures, in the serious work of everyday life. Irene tries out and tries on different interpretations, modelling the composition process for constructing and positioning various interpretive frameworks and arguments. Trying on and participating in various discourse(s) is a performative act, and students attempt to pass into identities related to language by mastering, inventing, and performing these roles. Literacy narratives help students reflect on these identities related to the politics of language use.

As narrator, Irene illustrates how incomprehension and trying to make sense out of the landscape is ultimately constructive, and she shows the limitations of frameworks that close off or otherwise silence alternative readings. Like Ellen Craft, she survives both

through her reading practices and by exploiting the readings of others, suggesting a literacy tied intimately to the social and political landscape. Whereas the last two chapters detailed adult literacy practices, the next two will focus mainly on children and youths learning to read and write, with a particular investment in sites of misreading as potentially generative of learning and struggle. The next chapter focuses on a series of quests that lead to intergenerational overcoming and survival through sponsorship, and takes into consideration those who fail to survive to adulthood, as well.

**CHAPTER 6: “I WILL SMILE ANYWAY! HOW ABOUT THAT!”:
INTERGENERATIONAL LESSONS AND CULTURAL QUESTS**

Given her literary career spanning almost five decades, it is easy to overlook that Toni Morrison, critically-acclaimed and Pulitzer and Nobel Prize-winning writer of eleven novels, as well as other works of fiction and non-fiction, is also a rather prolific children's author. Co-writing with her son Slade, Morrison reimagines traditional fables and folktales for a twenty-first century audience in *Who's Got Game?* (2007), for example, and recounts the everyday frustrations of children, cataloging a series of intimate, albeit strained, relationships with grandparents, mothers, siblings, teachers, and babysitters in *The Book of Mean People* (2002). These intimate connections should be a source of support for the young protagonist in *The Book of Mean People*, yet the family members, guardians, and teachers all challenge and provoke him. As Valerie Smith points out in *Toni Morrison: Writing the Moral Imagination*, these types of tensions result in mixed reviews of her children's books insofar as these challenge the conventions of the children's story genre (100). At the same time, it is important to note for my inquiry into literacy narratives that the main character is able to better navigate these relationships because of the lessons he learns as a growing reader and writer.

Toni and Slade Morrison, along with their illustrator Pascal Lemaître, tell the story of an anthropomorphic rabbit that possesses familiar hallmarks of modern childhood: he is learning to play games, watches cartoons, has leisure time to draw and play, and, most important for this study, he is learning to read and write. The bunny's growing literacy

becomes a theme throughout the story, and throughout most of the pages, Lemaître depicts the bunny carrying a copy of *The Book of Mean People* with him through everyday life. In this materialist focus on the presence of books, it becomes clear that the bunny carries the lessons in the book with him, literally and figuratively, and that the book instructs the child protagonist in productively navigating his closest social relationships.

At times breaking from the more linear narrative of the young rabbit's frustration in *The Book of Mean People*, the children's book also incorporates more meditative and lyrical moments. For example, the bunny counters the babysitter's admonition against wasting time with "How can I waste time if I use it?" and musing after his brother insists that "The knight can't go there" in a game of chess that the brother in fact "knows the knight goes everyday" (Morrison and Morrison). Such passing musings and word play add a rich texture to the epistemology of the book, which privileges the child's knowing over the social rules he is learning to navigate. The alternative possibilities that the bunny suggest thread through the narrative and allow him to conclude that despite the coercive social expectations imposed on him through a litany of mean people, "I will smile anyway! How about that!" (Morrison and Morrison). The young bunny learns how to meet these challenges adroitly, cataloging and critiquing perceived injustices in order to assure conflict resolution and further growth.

In light of his resounding resolution, of particular importance at this point in my reading of *The Book of Mean People* given its conclusion is the choice of a rabbit to narrate this story, evocative of other trickster figures like Br'er rabbit offering a different

hermeneutic framework for judging actions. In this vein, this children's book invokes a transatlantic African American folklore tradition. As Susan Willis helpfully elucidates in a chapter entitled "Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison," "The problem at the center of Morrison's writing is how to maintain an Afro-American cultural heritage once the relationship to the black rural South has been stretched thin over distance and generations" (309). One recuperative act that Morrison invokes in her storytelling is to pass these traditions on to future generations, underscoring their ongoing cultural relevance in twenty-first century America. Such a project reclaims African traditions that have also been shaped and reshaped on American soil. Morrison shows how these crucial cultural tropes transform, rather than face erasure, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.



Figure 2: Cover of Morrison and Morrison's *The Book of Mean People*, illustrated by Pascal Lemaître.

In the case of the children's book, this trickster figure uses his imagination to learn to articulate his voice in light of coercive pressures from close kin. Earlier African American tricksters in this tradition include the loquacious storytellers and speakers of regional southern dialect in Charles Chesnutt's "Goophered Grapevine," such as Uncle Julius, for example. While African American tricksters are often associated with close ties to their physical environment and capitalize on an insider knowledge of it in ways that offset their lack of formal schooling, Morrison and Morrison, over a hundred years later, figure text-based and storied literacy as foundational to the trickster's rhetorical prowess. They present a literate trickster for their twenty-first century readers. A growing immersion in the lives of books equips the young reader with the resources to critique oppressive forces from the vantage point afforded by the margin.

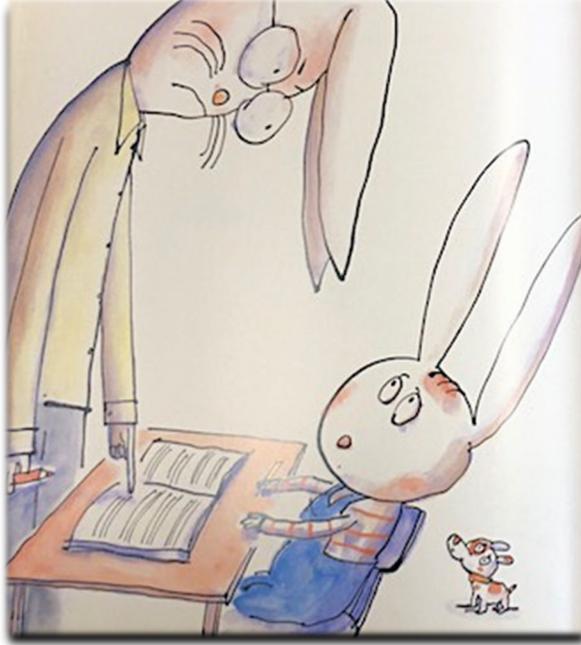


Figure 3: School-Based Literacy in *The Book of Mean People* by Morrison and Morrison, illustrated by Pascal Lemaître.

In *The Book of Mean People*, Morrison and Morrison highlight literacy as a meaningful endeavor, helping to make sense out of the young character's life. In one illustration, the bunny is looking up at a disapproving teacher pointing to the ruled lines of paper in the child's notebook. The pupil insists: "My Teacher is mean. / He says my letters are not on the lines" before protesting on the next page "But his letters are in the spaces on top of mine," referring to the correction of the bunny's "poor spelling" sprawled in red pen over the pupil's attempt at writing "i luv red hats (Morrison and Morrison).

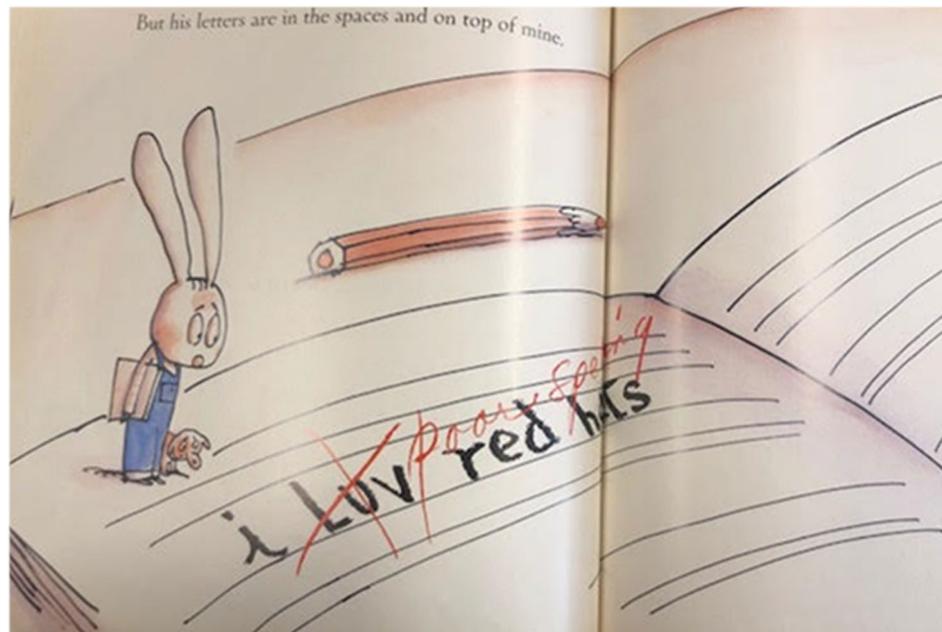


Figure 4: Teacher's Correction in *The Book of Mean People*

In a leveling gesture critiquing the power dynamics of student and teacher through a shared literacy, the bunny questions the validity of the teacher's advice to adhere to orthographic conventions by pointing out a paradox: the teacher overwrites the student's fledgling attempt and therefore does not stay within the prescribed lines either. He plays with the teacher's rule in order to point out that the teacher also is not following it. It is noteworthy that in the illustration, the bunny, armed with his copy of *The Book of Mean People*, is now standing on the margins of the page, diminished in size and showing signs of dejection, fixated on his teacher's error correction. The import of this literacy exercise is not so much in the bunny learning how to spell "love" correctly, but rather it grants the opportunity for him to register and make sense out of a seeming contradiction. Rather than passively accepting the received wisdom, the literal margins of the page offer him a vantage

point for critique.

For readers familiar with the corpus of Morrison's better-known work, this young bunny learning to productively read his environment through a series of literacy exercises presents a theme throughout her novels' treatment of children. Other examples include Milkman Dead uncovering the missing pieces in his genealogy by learning to parse a popular children's song in *Song of Solomon*. According to the trajectory, as children mature, they learn to navigate the physical landscape through their readings of it. While Milkman ultimately reconnects with his ancestors following his journey, Florens' journey through a racialized colonial American landscape increasingly cuts her off from her mother who sacrificed her to a slave trader and her intimate community of orphaned women in *A Mercy*, explored in the next chapter. The potential of literacy to connect and isolate are both explored in Toni Morrison's first novel, as well, in which, arguably, she is instructing her readers on the literacy practices they will need to navigate her body of work. At the same time, she offers a series of readings and misreadings through the lens of children learning to make sense out of a world that proves inhospitable to their dreams.

Unlike Florens in *A Mercy*, Claudia and Frieda MacTeer productively make use out of the details of a communal tragedy in *The Bluest Eye*. Although the narration is rife with examples of limited memories, false starts, imaginative gestures, and re-visions, as credible adults who learned to survive their upbringing, Claudia and Frieda collaboratively work to bear witness to a story of a social pariah that might otherwise remain untold. The retelling of Pecola Breedlove getting raped by her father, beaten by her mother, losing her baby as

a result, and gradually breaking from reality gives voice to a young girl whom society silenced. The MacTeer sisters' cultural literacy rescues Pecola's fractured voice from complete obliteration. They stand as her mouthpiece, making sense out of a fractured story in their adulthood while Pecola's development stagnates.

Towards the end of the novel, the MacTeer sisters "listened for the one who would say, 'Poor little girl,' or 'Poor baby,' but there was only head-wagging where those words should have been. We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils" (190). Here, individual and communal veiling and fracturing evoke the devastating ongoing effects of Du Bois's double consciousness in the mid-twentieth century, which as Du Bois famously posits:

the Negro is a sort of seventh son born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. (*The Souls of Black Folk*, 4)

Morrison, through the adult Claudia's narration, invites her readers to accomplish what most of her characters cannot: a critical investigation into the ongoing effects of double consciousness in the twentieth century.

In addition to falling victim to incest at the hands of her father, Pecola suffers as a result of ascribing to an unattainable beauty standard. In this respect, she reads the culture well, but this lesson ushers in her demise. She idolizes a mainstream concept of beauty as a remedy to her suffering. Following her repeated rape by her father and her mother's

beatings, she becomes fixated on attaining white-typed beauty: “It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different” (46).

Unlike Claudia, who from a young age actively hones her analytic prowess on critiquing socially-prescribed norms, Pecola’s wholesale passive acceptance of socially-prescribed standards, or uncritical acceptance of her cultural readings, leads to her downfall. Unlike Pecola, who drinks white milk from a Shirley Temple cup, trying to ingest her whiteness, beauty, and lovability, Claudia critiques the mainstream definitions of beauty, reveling in her own unique quirkiness, even as she tries these on and learns how to use them for her own artistic project:

When I learned how repulsive this disinterested violence was, that it was repulsive because it was disinterested, my shame floundered about for refuge. The best hiding place was love. Thus, the conversion from pristine sadism to fabricated hatred to fraudulent love. It was a small step to Shirley Temple. I learned much later to worship her, just as I learned to delight in my cleanliness, knowing, even as a learned, that the change was adjustment without improvement. (23)

Because of Claudia’s awareness that this shift is “adjustment without improvement,” she can make sense out of these standards that the Breedloves uncritically accept, with devastating consequences.

“Who Will Play with Jane?”²⁵

In a materialist focus on children’s books that serve to instruct (and, as she shows, sometimes destruct) similar to the bunny carrying the book with him throughout his journey, Morrison brings her first novel with iterations of a twentieth-century primer, Dick and Jane, using excerpts of this text to head some chapters. Morrison’s first novel opens with the words: “Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty” (3). At first glance, the semantic and structural simplicity of the form works to reinforce the simplicity of the meaning, before Morrison then removes marks and orthographic conventions familiar to modern readers.

The standard readings of this opening by the majority of critics, in which she presents a clean copy before eliding punctuation and capitalization in the second iteration, and spaces between words in the third in order to damage to a master American text, presents an interesting parallel to Claudia and Morrison as storyteller, and many critics have examined the damage parallel to Claudia’s dismemberment of white baby dolls. The final iteration opens:

hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddooritisverypretty (4).

Repeating the words of that first version, it is increasingly hard to read. Both Claudia MacTeer, as narrator, and Morrison expose the working parts of white ideals inscribed in

²⁵ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 3.

the American Dream, and in so doing, dismember them, according to the standard critical readings of this opening passage.

While this is an important foundation for much theoretic work on this novel, the ubiquitousness of this reading in Morrison scholarship mostly forecloses alternative options. Reinforcing this reading, Claudia's insistence concerning white baby dolls that "I had only one desire; to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me" (20). This connection informs critical readings of Morrison's use of a *Dick and Jane* primer, in which Claudia stands in for Morrison doing damage to pervasive, alienating White ideals of beauty, propriety, family, and community. By juxtaposing the novel with her children's books, I would like to foreground another option: that Morrison also presents this text in order to immerse her readers in a children's world, orienting them to the cultural landscape of the novel, and moreover, to *play* with a familiar text, opening up imaginative alternatives at the same time that it exposes the damage such mainstream narratives.

The novel's opening plays off of this comforting notion of idyllic childhood. Like in *The Book of Mean People*, Morrison presents a world of children—play, school, and family life—through a series social interactions and literacy exercises, but for an adult audience. Through the *Dick and Jane* narrative at the beginning of her novel, Morrison confronts her readers with whitewashed images of the American Dream, through a primer in which white, middle-class children explore their surroundings. As Barbara Christian quips, "Where do Dick and Jane exist? Probably only on the pages of that primer" (63).

Christian shows that this idealized world stands apart from the lived experiences of the primer's readers, particularly those who are not white, middle-class, suburban, or from nuclear family with mother, father, and siblings all playing out prescribed gender-typed roles.

Although Morrison focuses only on the textual narrative of the primer, and not on its illustrations, Jervette Ward's article on "In Search of Diversity: Dick and Jane and their Black Playmates" examines the history of racial tension through a visual analysis of the historical primer's illustrations through decades of racial tension in the first half of the twentieth century. It chronicles editorial attempts to be more racially-inclusive with diverse characters, but, as she argues, these attempts actually served to homogenize differences and perpetuate stereotypes by idealizing a white norm. Even in presenting increasingly racially diverse characters, these illustrations only paid lip service to diversity:

The Dick and Jane world became the Utopian ideal of black and white children living together in racial harmony. To achieve this harmonious ideal, the black culture and identity were erased. The children were equal, but it was on a white-colorless playing field. ...The loss of their racial identity allowed for them to become just an extension of the white family ideal. (23)

In this passage, Ward suggests that, in addition to this repetitious pedagogical approach to reading falling out of favor when phonetics rose in popularity, the black characters also precipitated the series' unpopularity among educators and students. Although Morrison only focuses on printed material in her consideration of this pedagogical tools, inquiries

such as Ward's gesture toward the evocative associations between word and image, especially in graphic texts such as primers in contexts in which imagination arguably could be counterproductive to the pedagogical goals of learning to read. In other words, if these narratives and attendant images are at best lifeless representations and at worst, further disenfranchising students through the very reading practices they teach, it is important to highlight their cultural function as pedagogical material, and to see this text as one widespread means of inculcating literate practices for generations of American students.

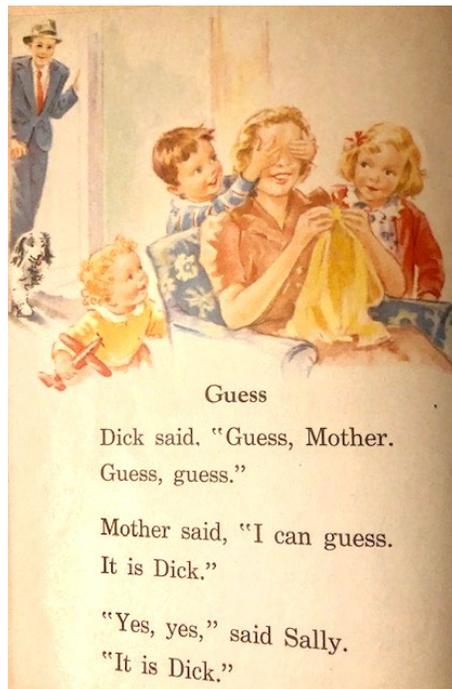


Figure 5: Dick and Jane Example, *Fun with Dick and Jane*, by William S. Gray and May Hill Arbuthnot, illustrated by Eleanor Campbell and Keith Ward, 1940 edition, p. 12

As Figure Five above shows, the repetition of the words in simple sentences in the series teach children to read by sight. This method of teaching reading through repetition

of sight words can be both isolating and boring, relying on rote memorization to gradually expand word lists. Morrison's narrative replicates the disinterest engendered through rote memorization techniques, showing how the act of reading can further disenfranchise children outside of this white, middle class suburban ideal taking center stage in each story.

The repeated question "who will play with Jane?" goes unanswered until the appearance of her friend, highlighting the importance of female support systems. In other words, the other family members refuse to engage with the young female protagonist, and she ultimately finds community in her friend, outside of the nuclear family, lending weightier import to the function of *play* in terms of developing supportive female bonds. The narrative trajectory introduced in *The Bluest Eye* through the primer follows the larger novel's thematic progression, in which Frieda and Claudia MacTeer bear witness to Pecola's pain when the rest of the community abandons her, and Claudia takes up Pecola's story as an adult narrator reflecting on her childhood. In contrast to Pecola, who ascribes to the ideals encapsulated in mainstream media and texts, the MacTeer sisters survive their upbringing, learning alternative, situated reading practices that support their maturation to adulthood.

While this reading highlights the potential of female support systems, the repetition of "Who will play with Jane?" also points to Pecola's vulnerability, leaving her available for anyone to trifle or "play with" for their own amusement or satisfaction. Instead of a justification for aberrant behavior, the detailed narrative descriptions of Cholly Breedlove and Soaphead Church's past histories give even more gravity to their manipulation of

Pecola, showing how easily a girl like Pecola can become a community pariah through victim blaming.

However, other characters like the MacTeer sisters learn to function in society. As an alternative to the literacy practices that disenfranchise them emblemized from the outset in the *Dick and Jane* primer, the young girls are exposed to a series of cultural literacy exercises, and their success depends on learning to read their social environment productively. Morrison suggests that acquiring cultural literacy becomes the litmus test for the girls maturing to adulthood. Through Pecola's demise, she provides a detailed investigation into those individuals who remain culturally illiterate and unable to critique mainstream standards. These standards become inscribed in the textual reading material that structures formalized education, which Morrison riffs off of in her three iterations of the *Dick and Jane* narrative.

According to Marc C. Conner's chapter on "From the Sublime to the Beautiful: The Aesthetic Progression of Toni Morrison," "As this chant is repeated in subsequent paragraphs, it becomes a frantic, unpunctuated stream of language without order, suggesting that behind this myth of a comforting, nurturing home lies a reality that is disordered and disrupting" (53). While Conner's reading helps elucidate the dangers attending a seemingly benign myth, his focus on a "frantic, unpunctuated stream of language without order" seeks to contain unconventional language play, diagnosing difference and marking it as linguistic outsider. It evokes the convincing arguments undergirding conventions of our print culture, setting the standard through

repeated exposure. In fact, many critics respond to the variations in ways that work to reinscribe the primacy of print culture through using its conventions as standard bearers for order and measured rationality, focusing on the "damage" that Morrison inflicts on the master text, dismantling it with its own tools and technologies. In other words, the second and third iterations read as textual errata, and critics are left to make sense out of streams of language that challenge the typographical standards that print culture have disseminated.

Because my primary interest lies in the use of this text as trope for literacy acquisition, however, my reading of this passage is more in line with Sam Vásquez's article "In Her Own Image: Literary and Visual Representations of Girlhood in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*," in which she posits:

As language breaks down, Morrison encourages the reader to be critical of Western narratives, much like the young Claudia questions representations of white beauty in *Bluest*. The choice of transcription and the foregrounding of oral strategies dramatically make the case for infinite possible readings of the passage. (69)

Here Vásquez alludes to possibilities of other readings, and does so by pointing out that Morrison gives an oral transcription of the pedagogical text. Vásquez also points out that "The author's attention to typesetting forces a recognition of the literal and ideological machines that produce such literature/literacy, and by extension, readers are compelled to contend with the impressive industrialized era and the attendant politics that influence representation" (68). In light of this quote, it is clear that literacy acquisition for Morrison is not a neutral event. The seeming neutrality of the subject matter belies the political,

social, and cultural histories undergirding literacy in America. Morrison questions the social mores inscribed in seemingly banal tasks as learning to read and write in her first novel.

Ostensibly, unlike the flux and growth of lived experiences, the children in the primer exist in a static ideal, causing Kathleen Kelly Marks to contend that “Whereas the rape has a context—at least something of a how and a why—Dick and Jane do not. Their story is without history” in a chapter entitled “Melancholy and the Unyielding Earth in *The Bluest Eye*” (184). Claudia attempts to account for how Pecola became scapegoat and pariah in retelling her history. By contrast, idealized narratives like Dick and Jane attempt to present themselves as ahistorical, apolitical, and culturally-neutral. At the same time, literacy itself, at least insofar as it has been invoked in America to justify and perpetuate social hierarchies, is often presented as a culturally-neutral inevitable standard, when, as individuals such as Pecola and the MacTeer sisters force Morrison’s readers to face, literacy is neither neutral, standardized, nor inevitable.

Also like in the children’s book, the “mean people” that the children encounter are their most intimate connections doing their best to raise them with the resources that they have available. The MacTeers have more material resources than the Breedloves, and Morrison comments on the deleterious effects of mass media in disseminating ideals associated with the American Dream. In fact, Pecola’s mother “was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen” (122).

Although Pecola's mother did not excel at school, and had to leave at a young age to tend to her younger siblings, she learned through the movies as an adult to value white beauty standards. While the focus for much of the novel is on Pecola, this quote suggests an intergenerational obsession with beauty standards, and it positions the Breedloves as avid consumers of dominant culture through mass media. Mrs. Breedlove, as she is called by her own children, rejects her daughter's "ugliness" for not living up to White female beauty standards, and Pecola remains passive in her acceptance of these damaging standards as a child.

The Breedloves, namely Mrs. Breedlove and Pecola, give insight into the disenfranchisement that poor African American women faced in schools, often in conflict with their personal development rather than acting as a support for it. Classroom education provided these individuals with lessons in their own unworthiness, and for Mrs. Breedlove and Pecola in particular, the mastery of these lessons circumscribed their growth. For them, school was not a place where they could reach their full potential. While there are no references to actual learning material or lessons insofar as the plot occurs in the hallways and on the way home from school, school structures their time, evident in the chronology of the novel that begins with the Autumn section, and it opens with the familiar words of a primer. Formalized school teaches them more about the inequality they will face outside of the school's walls.

Whereas the MacTeer sisters seem to take these lessons in stride, the Breedloves suffer as a result. One reason that the novel offers for this difference is that the characters

learn to navigate beauty standards, as social convention, differently. Mrs. Breedlove blames so much of her suffering on her physical differences—a limp resulting from a childhood accident and a missing tooth lost during pregnancy—that it shapes her identity. Furthermore, in a novel that examines the variations of skin color within the African American community in connection with damaging beauty standards that equate whiteness with beauty, Pecola’s dark skin stands in as testament to her ugliness and undesirability.

As a young child, Mrs. Breedlove finds meaningful work within the home, tending to the younger children going to school instead of continuing her own education. Taking on domestic responsibilities at a young age, Mrs. Breedlove never found lessons that could help prepare her for the life as mother and domestic servant: “During all of her four years of going to school, she was enchanted by numbers and depressed by words. She missed—without knowing she missed—paints and crayons” (111). This quote highlights that art education would have better developed Mrs. Breedlove’s interests and strengths, and points to how some students’ propensities and inclinations can be better nurtured by exploring subjects beyond reading, writing, and mathematics. Her penchant for organization and precision at home never carried over into her academic lessons, and therefore she found relief in finally staying home at the abrupt end of her partial education.

Mrs. Breedlove represents those children whose interests remain uncultivated by school lessons, replicating the disconnect between the repetitious whitewashed primers and the more colorful, engaging, and imaginative outside world. When materials fail to train children for the lives that they will lead as adults, their disenfranchisement can manifest as

a lack of investment in the lessons disconnected from their situated experiences. In fact, none of the students are ever doing homework or reading for school in the novel. In the case of Mrs. Breedlove, her early domestic life prepared her for the demands of raising her own children, in addition to a white child in the role of housekeeper. Only in that role can she begin to bridge the distance that she blames on her physical deformity, notably being called Polly by the fair white child when even her children refer to her as Mrs. Breedlove.

Her employer's child, due to the privilege of her class and race, assumes the right of familiarity denied her own children. Also troubling is her complete acceptance and joy in assuming her domestic servant role. At the same time, the pride that Mrs. Breedlove takes in her pristine uniform, bubbling fruit cobbler, the comforts of the house that she sees as extensions of herself, the girl's dress, the floor that she calls hers in a fit of outrage, and even the laundry mitigate this stance. She also finds belonging in her role as housekeeper, fulfilling a wish for familiarity through a nickname and idealized domestic intimacy. In this way, she finds a place for herself within the American Dreamscape, however tangential to the main protagonists in the primer pages, writ large. Where school failed her, then, was in the untapped potential to explore other avenues of fulfillment.

Morrison underscores the intergenerational alienation that early to mid-twentieth century public schooling provides for the most vulnerable members of American society through the Breedloves. While there exist only tangential references to Mrs. Breedlove's early education, her daughter Pecola's experiences with formalized education is much more developed in the novel. Pecola suffers isolation from her classmates due to her skin

color, and boys taunt her with the jeer “Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked, Black e mo black e mo ya dadd sleeps nekked. Back e mo...” (65). As the adult narrator translates for her readers, they combined a joke about her father with her skin color:

It was a contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. They seemed to take all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness and sucked it all up into a fiery cone of scorn. (65)

On the playground, Pecola falls victim to the insidious beauty standards that the boys appropriate and cast onto her.

As Claudia’s interpretation helps elucidate, this scene provides one example in which Pecola serves as scapegoat for the community’s fears. It is important to note that the children in this novel are grappling with the very beauty standards that get reinforced in school, through reading material like the *Dick and Jane* primer presenting a whitewashed world and through the older generation insisting on perpetuating these standards. For example, Mrs. Breedlove intimately confides in her child throughout her pregnancy, but experiences immediate detachment from Pecola once she assesses her ugliness (read blackness). In addition, even the teachers in the school reinforce this hierarchy in their classroom seating arrangements, in which Pecola sits alone at her double desk despite her last name near the beginning of the alphabet. The narrator suggests that “Her teachers had always treated her this way. They tried never to glance at her, and called on her only when everyone was required to respond” (45-46). Pecola can find no solace or protection in the teachers when her classmates bully her, and this quote also suggests that the teachers

perpetuate these alienating hierarchies. Teachers create the learning environment that legitimizes the boys' jeering insults. They are responsible for passing on the very hierarchy that the boys are playing with in making a Pecola a scapegoat, to the detriment of all of the students mastering this hard lesson. For students like Pecola, school becomes a place where they learn the value of mainstream beauty standards materially affecting everyday life, and individuals become inscribed in the hierarchy through the process of formalized education.

This novel underscores the cultural lessons that become the lifeblood of education. In addition to alienation, some characters find acceptance and community through formalized schooling. These characters tend to matriculate in institutions of higher learning, in contrast to those with little formal schooling. These institutions serve to formally inculcate these lessons in social hierarchies on the basis of skin color. For example, Maureen Peal, after an elaborate show of magnanimity in compensating for Pecola's bullying by buying her ice cream, asserts her superiority and desirability, leaving the MacTeer sisters to ponder:

If she was cute—and if anything could be believed, she *was*—then we were not. And what did that mean? We were lesser. Nicer, brighter, but still lesser. Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peal's of the world. (74)

This hierarchy continues beyond early schooling, as higher levels only further ingrain the lessons:

They go to land-grant colleges, normal schools, and learn how to do the white man's work with refinement: home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black children in obedience; music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul. Here they learn the rest of the lesson begun in those soft houses with porch swings and pots of bleeding heart: how to behave. The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. (83)

Education for twentieth-century African Americans mostly revolves around fitting these students for white society, and their finishing instructs them in "how to behave" in order to support white dominance. As J. Brooks Bouson clarifies while grappling with the Breedlove's ugliness in *Quiet as It's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, individuals who do not conform to mainstream values are stigmatized as inferior Other so that "as Gilman explains, the dominant group is assured of its 'sense of control'" (25). While Bouson's primary interest is in how individuals like the Breedloves "internalize stigmatizing stereotypes projected by the dominant culture" (25), I would add that Morrison also focuses on how those who conform to these standards also internalize damaging stereotypes, exposing the ongoing effects of double consciousness in America. From a young age, the students with lighter skin tones in the novel are rewarded for their unwitting conformity to white beauty standards and middle-class mores. The very existence of individuals like Pecola challenge this standard through their difference.

Here, Morrison clarifies that it is largely by virtue of class, skin color, and beauty standards steeped in a history of slavery politics that some students like Maureen Peal find community and acceptance in school, rather than due to any innate aptitude. This

challenges the notion of meritocracy undergirding the American Dream, which leaders such as Du Bois ascribed to earlier in the century. Morrison exposes the uneven playing field that individuals encounter in institutions of formalized education. In mastering such lessons, students become part of this system that perpetuates self-alienation and marginalizing others.

Even though the novel does not give details of Maureen Peal's development beyond childhood, it is possible to envision that she would enjoy similar privileges and education to Geraldine, who attempts to pass on the propriety she learned by only allowing her pampered, entitled, and friendless son to associate with people enjoying the same education and class background. Following an incident in which her son torments Pecola, Geraldine reads Pecola's body unfavorably, focusing on:

the dirty torn dress, the plaits sticking out on her head, hair matted where the plaits had come undone, the muddy shoes with the wad of gum peeping out from between the cheap soles, the soiled socks, one of which had been walked down into the heel of the shoe. (92)

In a *contreblazon*, she reduces Pecola to body parts and clothes before focusing on her disturbing eyes: "Eyes that questioned nothing and asked everything. Unblinking and unabashed, they stared up at her. The end of the world lay in her eyes, and the beginning, and all the waste in between" (92). Tellingly, Geraldine starts with an examination of Pecola's body and focalizes last on her eyes, which act as mirrors for Geraldine to examine her own image.

In this scene, it is clear that Geraldine's education refines and systematizes her hatred for blackness, much like Soaphead Church's patchworked education, which I investigate further in a later section. Whereas Church pities Pecola in a perverse demonstration of his superiority over her, Geraldine despises her, and she becomes a scapegoat, the very projection of the blackness that Geraldine deems unacceptable. Pecola exposes Geraldine's ugliness, caught up in the politics of skin color, both through her body's presence in Geraldine's house and in catalyzing her visceral reaction to the child.

By contrast, Pecola learns to read her body's growing social undesirability through the lens of her ugliness, and she becomes obsessed with attaining impossible beauty through the acquisition of blue eyes. It is clear that as an avid consumer of damaging ideals, her misreading of her own body's changes reflects a larger cultural obsession with white beauty standards. One example of this is in the primer excerpt that mimics the *Dick and Jane* narrative opening the novel: "*Pretty eyes. Pretty blue eyes. Big blue pretty eyes. ... They run with their blue eyes. Four blue eyes. Four pretty blue eyes. Blue-sky eyes. Blue-like Mrs. Forrest's blue blouse eyes. Morning-glory-blue-eyes. Alice-and Jerry-blue-storybook-eyes*" (46).

As social pariah and outcast, Pecola yearns for community, and the unattainable ideal irrevocably damages her fragile identity, culminating in a fractured monologue in which she perseverates over whether in fact, she possess The Bluest Eye, "Prettier than Alice-and-Jerry Storybook eyes?" (201). Untutored in facing the harsh reality of her father's sexual transgressions, her mother's betrayal, and the community's rejection of her,

Pecola takes refuge in such idealized narratives of beauty, to her own detriment. In the final pages of the novel, Pecola reassures herself: “I was so lonely for friends. And you were right here. Right before my eyes” (196). Her fractured monologue at the end of the novel signals that her alienation is complete. She becomes increasingly isolated in her obsession for blue eyes. Increasingly detached from her body and beaten by her mother, she loses the child she is carrying, and lives as outcast on the outskirts of town through adulthood, signifying on the question “Who will play with Jane?”

Cultural Literacy Quests: “Refuge in How”

Morrison famously presents readers with iterations of the *Dick and Jane* narrative both in the beginning of the novel and repeated as chapter headings. Through the novel’s structure, Morrison further underscores the centrality of school life for her young protagonists at the same time that she explores those lessons navigated outside of a formal institutional setting. In her first novel, she unbinds literacy from the strictures of school in order to thematically investigate how children learn to read their environments. One vein of critical inquiry into this novel is to explore the differences between Pecola and the MacTeer sisters, and I would like to extend this interest to examine how their developing literacy practices helped shape their relative growth.

One example of this difference, for instance, is in how the children define love. In this model of literacy, the girls learn to articulate their understanding of words and

concepts, and even seemingly simple words take on nuanced and complex valences. For example, Pecola ventures that “Maybe that was love. Choking sounds and silence” in making sense out of her parents’ sexual encounters in their overcrowded apartment (5). Her ensuing confused quest for love conflates it with her growing sexual presence as a developing adolescent. Love ends with Pecola, much like the self-reflection in the mirror: her desire for beauty, for someone to love and accept her, and to see her beautiful blue eyes. Because she does not see her beauty reflected back at her, Pecola becomes tutored in her own undesirability.

Claudia, on the other hand, articulates a much more layered understanding of love, as a progression sublimating hate:

When I learned how repulsive this disinterested violence was, that it was repulsive because it was disinterested, my shame floundered about for refuge. The best hiding place was love. ... It was a small step to Shirley Temple. I learned much later to worship her, just as I learned to delight in cleanliness, knowing, even as I learned, that the change was adjustment without improvement. (23)

Defining love for Claudia centered not on taboo musings on parental sexual relationships, but instead on safer expressions within same-sex circles. Even in learning to love Shirley Temple and tend to her baby dolls in socially-sanctioned ways, Claudia maintains a distance from this “adjustment without improvement,” enabling her to preserve her own critical evaluation of these damaging standards at the same time that she learned to navigate the social convention.

Juxtaposed with Pecola's stagnation in her desire, the MacTeer sisters grow and mature, learning to effectively read their environment. This maturation is evident in Claudia's acuity for bearing witness to their friend's demise as an adult looking back and reflecting on Pecola's story, noting at the beginning of the novel that "*There is really nothing more to say—except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how*" (6). This passage evokes a confessional tone, delimiting the narrative scope and insisting on pushing past threats of erasure for society's most vulnerable members. In grappling with such difficult issues, Claudia and Frieda blame themselves for the marigolds not growing as children looking for a cause at the same time that Claudia as an adult narrator suggests that the environment was not conducive to growth. This stance effectively addresses the role that the community played in both creating and destroying Pecola.

Once establishing her credibility as narrator, Claudia continues to reach out to a wider audience in gestures such as describing the "difference between being put *out* and being put *outdoors*," which she describes as "the real terror of life," continuing "If you are put out, you go somewhere else; if you are outdoors, there is no place to go. The distinction was subtle but final" (17). In gestures such as these, not only does Claudia learn to read her environment, but as adult narrator she becomes translator for those outside of her circle, validating the distinctions she is making as well as corroborating her interpretive abilities. In addition to framing a story with a narrator looking back on a significant episode in her childhood, the novel carefully accounts for how the adult Claudia learned to read her own environment, in contrast to Pecola's alienating and obsessive focus on damaging master

narratives outside of her community.

The adults in the novel during their childhood try to pass on valuable, intimate, face-to-face lessons to the next generation, and these are not limited to their biological children. Women take on surrogate roles in introducing children to cultural literacy expectations, as well, and they expect children to adeptly navigate nuanced uses of spoken language. Although classmates, Pecola Breedlove and the MacTeer sisters become better acquainted through Pecola's placement in their home as a foster child before her demise, forming a more intimate bond in which Pecola has the opportunity to learn from Mrs. MacTeer, for example.

The girls welcome Pecola, but it becomes apparent that their hospitality oversteps their mother's expectations when Pecola, enamored by their Shirley Temple cup, drinks the family milk, causing Mrs. MacTeer to complain: "I don't mind folks coming in and getting what they want, but three quarts of milk! What the devil does *anybody* need with *three* quarts of milk?" (23). As an adult reflecting on the scene, Claudia clarifies that she is singling out Pecola for her tirade, couched in the term "folks" and then expounding on breached social conventions. Through Mrs. MacTeer's use of indirection, an elocutionary performance, Pecola, the accused party, is not directly challenged, but still informed of the breach in etiquette. The children are expected to quietly listen, and much scholarship addresses the intergenerational wisdom that older generations pass down to younger members of the community in Morrison's *oeuvre*. Against the backdrop of the decontextualized *Dick and Jane* primer iterations, these intimate moments provide

valuable lessons that the girls use as resources in imaginatively exploring their environments.

In order to hone their exploratory skills, passive, detached listening to their elders is required to first achieve a certain threshold of cultural literacy, insofar as Claudia insists that “We do not hear their words, but with grownups we listen to and watch out for their voices” (14). Both the repeating instances of the adult conversations and the repeated, simplified words in the primer encourage the girls to commit such lessons to memory by rote, in attempts to garner text-based and extratextual literacy. In contrast to a rich, albeit one-directional, social interaction highlighting lessons passed on through oral exchange and participation, the simplified words of the primer combined with images to reinforce the text focus exclusively on the visual shapes of words, which the children must learn by sight. However, there are limitations to this approach to learning, as the seminal work on school-endorsed literacy entitled *Why Johnny Can't Read* in a chapter critiquing sight word primers entitled “Oh, Oh! Come, Come! Look, Look!” elucidates, for beginning readers, “there isn't a single book on the market that they can manage to read the words themselves. Instead, they are taught to memorize the words contained in their readers” (79). Such an approach to learning through repetitions fostering rote memorization forecloses the imaginative exploration through literacy narrowly defining literacy as the repeating shapes of words on pages.

With adults such as Mrs. MacTeer, Claudia specifies that “It was certainly not for us to dispute her. We didn't initiate talk with grownups; we answered their questions” (23),

such a learning process does not invite further critical inquiry; instead it closes off dialogue. Like the primers in early American history, the adults like Mrs. MacTeer engage in secularized, call-and-response catechizing, in which responses work to solidify social convention.²⁶ As such, the adults sponsor children's literacy. This perspective highlights the intergenerational passing on of literacy narratives to young children, and yet this focus on intergenerational wisdom as a surrogate for institutionally-backed literacy oversimplifies literacy practices in this novel. Rote memorization, with a focus on the oral nature of memorizing, provides the foundation for additional exploration and self-initiated occasions for learning. The children gradually expand their literacy beyond the more passive acquisition through cultural catechisms and textual primers. As witnesses to adult conversation and by parroting expected responses, the children's cultural literacy prowess grows, endorsing more imaginative literacy quests as they develop.

There are other examples in the novel in which adults apprentice children in adult discourse in order to prepare them for more elaborate quests, where children can test their readings and misreadings. In addition to Mrs. MacTeer's indirection, for example, Pecola bears witness and acts as unwitting participant in the three whores' nuanced conversations,

²⁶ Primers have religious origins, in which learning to read was tied to Protestant goals of salvation and worship by reading the bible. As such, questions and answers related to religious doctrine were an integral part of primers, distilling key foundational tenets of faith. Children would typically rehearse these lessons aloud with an adult present. For a compelling work questioning the seeming secularization of primers, see Stephanie Schnorbus' 2010 article entitled "Calvin and Locke: Dueling Epistemologies in The New-England Primer, 1720–1790."

in which the interlocutors humorously take turns playing language games, recounting tall tales and expertly playing the dozens. While they do not expect that Pecola fully understand their sexually-explicit, bawdy banter, they also do not censor their quick-paced conversations, but instead invite her to participate in their conversations. Pecola, however, assumes mostly a passive role in these conversations, as neophyte to the complexities of adult speech.

Even though the MacTeer sisters are prohibited from visiting the three whores, they also learn the cadences of adult conversation that they do not fully understand in their mother's home. Focusing on the speech patterns rather than the content, Claudia recalls:

Sometimes their words move in lofty spirals; other times they make strident leaps, and all of it is punctuated with warm-pulsed laughter—like the throb of a heart made of jelly. The edge, curl, the thrust of emotions is always clear to Frieda and me. (15)

Although the children are sheltered from the full meaning of these adult conversations, they learn to study important extralinguistic cues. She continues “We do not, cannot, know the meanings of all their words, for we are nine and ten years old. So we watch their faces, their hands, their feet, and listen for truth in timbre” (15). In this passage, it is clear that the children act as active observers, indicating that their tutoring in non-semantic meaning requires a less passive role than the term witness generally conveys.

Another example of exerting agency in order to become more culturally-literate is through Mrs. MacTeer's singing, which Claudia describes:

If my mother was in a singing mood, it wasn't so bad. She would sing about hard times, bad times, and somebody-done-gone-and-left-me times. But her voice was so sweet and her singing-eyes so melty I found myself longing for those hard times, yearning to be grown without 'a thin di-i-ime to my name.' I looked forward to the delicious time when 'my man' would leave me. (25-26)

In this exchange, the MacTeer sisters learn more about romantic love through popular song. While the messages in these songs are potentially as dangerous as Mrs. Breedlove's obsession with beauty and romantic love that she garnered from the movies, it is important to note that Mrs. MacTeer uses song productively, in order to better deal with her current circumstances. She escapes the dogged realities of her life through music, only to process her frustrations and return to managing her household. In so doing, she teaches her children how to survive by actively expressing emotion in socially-acceptable ways.

This growing literacy protects the MacTeer sisters, as well, but as children, these lessons are often incomplete. When the MacTeer's tenant lies to the girls about entertaining the whores at their house (78), they read his uncomfortable gestures well enough to associate it with the other times that adults have lied to them in the past, but as children, they do not fully understand the sexual undertones of this scene. Their incomplete knowledge of the import of this scene prevents them from seeing it as a warning to them for later danger. Morrison introduces Mr. Henry's sexual impropriety through his affable display of deception to the children, and this transgressive behavior later culminates in him touching Frieda inappropriately. While this scene may have served as warning to the children, they were unable to read the signs.

This scene, and the way that the girls decide to confront it, point to their growing, but incomplete, ability to read the world around them. They try to piece together what they collectively understand about the incident, going on a quest to prevent Frieda from being “ruined” like the three whores after being touched by the tenant. Unable to parse the meaning of the word ruined, however, they associate it with becoming as corpulent as one of the whores, and amusingly decide that whiskey, a common drink in the whores’ household, must be the antidote to ruin. They begin their quest to find Pecola, whose father drinks alcohol, in order to procure some of the antidote to ruin. Their misreading of this situation emanates from their incomplete cultural literacy acquisition, in which they attempt to fill in the gaps from partially-gleaned conversations, with comic effect. As this quest illustrates, the girls attempt to navigate increasingly adult topics as they mature in this novel, which is also evident in the ministration’ scene, in which the MacTeer sisters get accused of “playing nasty” by a meddling young neighbor for tending Pecola’s menarche (30). The girls’ misreadings of such comic situations show their resolve to deal with adult issues, using the resources available to them as children. As such, these function as cultural literacy exercises, in which imagination plays a key role in the children trying out more complex readings and misreadings.

Another example of a journey rife with misreadings takes place when Pecola, Claudia, Frieda, and Maureen Peal walk home from school. Following some teasing from male classmates that served to unite the four girls, their light banter exposes their incomplete cultural readings. For example, Maureen Peal talks about “menstration” rather

than menstruation, or as the girls refer to it in an earlier passage “ministration,” in inaccurately explaining to the others where babies come from (70). In addition, Maureen also imprecisely defines the function of lawsuits, which she claims as a family pastime (68). She also refers to “beared the witness” rather than “bore witness” (68), decries a classmate as “incorrigival,” and incorrectly associates Pecola’s name with the main character in the film *Imitation of Life* (67), confusing her name with the protagonist, Peola. While such misreadings may seem to primarily serve as inconsequential levity, it acts as evidence of the children attempting to make sense of the world from the information they have. It also implies their vulnerability, particularly as young African American females susceptible to the confounding world of adults.

Not all literacy quests happen in groups, as some learning experiences are individual. One of the pivotal moments in Pecola's development happens during her solitary trip to the candy store, which tutors her in her own undesirability. Taken together, this foils the MacTeer sister’s literacy quest against ruination, which they resiliently survive, relatively unscathed. Pecola is transformed in this simple journey, evident in her changing view on dandelions, which she learns to hate by the end of the scene. This change signals her transformation in this journey, and she quickly determines that “Nobody loves the head of a dandelion” (47), which she now reads, like the rest of the world, as a weed.

Before her literacy quest is complete, Pecola is able to appreciate the subtle beauty of an overlooked flower growing in an urban environment, suggesting her capacity to develop analytic prowess like Claudia’s demurring over the adults’ preference for white

baby dolls. Both girls start to cultivate a personal aesthetic and artistic sensibility that supports their ongoing development, but where Claudia learns to moderate her response for the purpose of fitting in society, Pecola does not withstand criticism and instead ascribes to the prescribed reading. Learning to resist popular consensus and convention can be both dangerous, as in the case of Cholly's Aunt Jimmy dying from eating peach pie when she had a cold in her womb, and potentially liberating, such as Claudia imagining the perfect gift, a sensory experience, "with a taste of a peach perhaps, afterward" (22), rather than a physical object like a baby doll. Morrison suggests that children try out these readings in a series of increasingly elaborate literacy quests, and that they learn to make sense out of their environment by learning to both accept and challenge received wisdom, much like the young protagonist in *The Book of Mean People*.

Claudia's lessons prime her as future narrator bearing witness to Pecola's story. Michael Awkward argues in a chapter entitled "'The Evil of Fulfillment': Scapegoating and Narration in *The Bluest Eye*" that the "adults' gifts of white dolls to Claudia are not, for the young girl and future narrator, pleasure-inducing toys but, rather, signs (in a semiotic sense) that she must learn to interpret correctly" (184). Awkward's focus on the semiotics of the passage at hand is illustrative, gesturing toward what I would call Claudia's extra-linguistic literacy exercises. Likewise, Pecola attempts to navigate signs in the physical environment that surround her. Pecola's experience on this journey tutors her in culturally-sanctioned readings that are personally devastating to her own developing aesthetic.

It is important to point out that this learning takes place again outside of the classroom setting, in which she engages with the physical and cultural environment on the walk to the store. The narration in this scene highlights that Morrison unbinds literacy from text, extending literacy to readings of the environment:

These and other inanimate things she saw and experienced. They were real to her. She knew them. They were codes and touchstones of the world, capable of translation and possession. She owned the crack that made her stumble; she owned the clumps of dandelions whose white heads, last fall, she had blown away; whose yellow heads, this fall, she peered into. (48)

As “codes...capable of translation and possession,” these interpretations show her growing mastery over her external world. However, this scene is rife with subtle conflict that suggests her mediated position as a poor, young, African American girl.

During the transaction with the middle-aged, white, Catholic, immigrant shopkeeper, she sees her reflection distorted by hatred:

She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things in her are flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread. And it is blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes. (49)

The scene may seem to report a trivial commercial transaction, yet Pecola literally becomes momentarily devoiced when she cannot immediately answer the shopkeeper’s inquiry (49), and only regains momentum after consuming the Mary Jane candies, since “To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane” (50). Pecola senses the emptiness of this exchange in the shopkeeper’s eyes, and instead

cultivates her own loving exchange with Mary Jane and her inviting eyes, “Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking out at a world of clean comfort. The eyes are petulant, mischievous” (50):

By contrast to Mary Jane’s beauty, she revises her initial conciliatory reading:

Dandelions. A dart of affection leaps out from her to them. But they do not look at her and do not send love back. She thinks: ‘They *are* ugly. They *are* weeds.’ Preoccupied with that revelation, she trips on the sidewalk crack. Anger stirs and wakes in her; it opens its mouth, and like a hot-mouthed puppy, laps up the drags of her shame. (51)

Pecola imagines possibilities in her alternative reading of the dandelions tenaciously growing in sidewalk cracks, only to foreclose on these possibilities and agree with the conventional reading, punctuated by her tripping over the physical terrain. This passage marks her disillusionment with an unsupportive environment.

However, this tension does not prompt mediated agency and creative renderings like with the MacTeer sisters, but instead marginalizes her and portends her role as community scapegoat. In contrast to Pecola’s demise, Claudia explains her growing narrative capacity:

Or maybe we didn’t remember; we just knew. We had defended ourselves since memory against everything and everybody, considered all speech a code to be broken by us, and all gestures subject to careful analysis; we had become headstrong, devious, and arrogant. Nobody paid us any attention, so we paid very good attention to ourselves. (191)

Some critics read this passage as Claudia's unreliability as narrator looking back on her childhood, but I am interested in how this passage showcases her capacity for bearing witness to Pecola's story, as someone who "paid very good attention" to girls like her. Even in her arrogance of youth, fine-tuned in "all gestures subject to careful analysis," Claudia offers a unique critical perspective that even the adults miss, positioning her as Pecola's credible witness once she loses her voice.

Much like Pecola's initial reading of the dandelions, Claudia finds redemptive qualities in Pecola, who is overlooked. Claudia finds herself identifying with Pecola much the same way that Pecola initially identifies with the resilient flowering weeds. However, Claudia's narrative, although it briefly considers the shame that she feels for not protecting Pecola, does not constitute a confessional purgation of her shortcomings, but instead shows how she was able to grow from the painful experience. She learns to productively read this situation in a way that endorses her own literacy narrative. As an African American woman, she no longer needs the white corroborating evidentiary materials that bear witness to her story. Instead, she unflinchingly bears witness to Pecola's story, noting with the clarity of hindsight and reflection:

And fantasy it was, for we were not strong, only aggressive; we were not free, merely licensed; we were not compassionate, we were polite; not good, but well behaved. We courted death in order to call ourselves brave, and hid life thieves from life. We substituted good grammar for intellect; we switched habits to simulate maturity; we rearranged lies and called it truth, seeing in the new pattern of an old idea the Revelation and the Word. (205-206)

This passage attests that there is more to good reading and writing practices than cultivating “good grammar...to simulate maturity.” Insofar as this novel serves as a bildungsroman, Morrison insists that the most important lessons in acquiring literate practices occur outside of the classroom setting, and that, at times, formalized grammar instruction can masquerade as intellect or reasoning capacity. Here, Morrison puts pressure on the facile equations between privileged varieties of English that become reinforced in an educational focus on grammatical correctness and intellectual prowess, asking readers to reconsider alternative ways of knowing that find value and beauty in dandelions growing in the sidewalk, as well as in the most vulnerable members of society.

Other Readings at the Crossroads

*This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 206)*

Survival and death are set up in dramatic terms from the beginning of *The Bluest Eye*. Pecola Breedlove, unable to make sense out of the recent changes in her body and the way that the townspeople are reacting to her, reads her growing isolation from her home community as evidence of her unlovability and ugliness rather than as a result of her unmistakably pregnant body confronting the town with evidence of her father’s sexual transgression. Rather than cast her as unwitting victim, the town distances itself from her, further ushering in her demise by increasing her obsession with white beauty standards.

While the main focus is on the children, it is important to note that Soaphead

Church's literacy narrative is also present toward the end the novel, standing in as a justification for his actions. As perpetual outsider and one primed by a very different education, his reading of Pecola differs from the rest of the town. When Pecola turns to Soaphead Church in order to be granted her megalomaniacal wish for blue eyes, he uses it as an opportunity for personal gain. He further victimizes Pecola, highlighting her vulnerability as a child impregnated by her father and increasingly isolated from the larger Ohioan community of Loraine. Her failure to read her surrounding ensures her stagnation and downfall. Morrison recounts a narrative in which "A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment" (204). Pecola Breedlove consumes and is consumed by white beauty standards, signified in her repeatedly drinking in white milk in a Shirley Temple cup. Though her demise, Morrison asks at what cost such standards get rehearsed and perpetuated.

Church's disdain for the old, decrepit dog that he has Pecola sacrifice could extend to Pecola herself in the unsettling pathos she evokes, but in place of derision, he feels pity for her and wants to help her. Following the act of self-sacrifice that he ritualistically exacts from Pecola, he writes a letter to God clarifying his motives and absolving himself of responsibility. This closing gesture to the sacrificial rite introduces another, more intimate and situated model of writing: reflective personal letters. While clearly pointing to the problems within the town and the townspeople's contribution of Pecola's isolation, Morrison also examines the transmuted possibility of community-building through letters

in the face of threatened isolation and continued exclusion. Just as her memory of Pecola's demise haunts Claudia MacTeer through adulthood, Pecola also continues to loom over the town as a living specter, a reminder at the crossroads "among the garbage and the sunflowers" of her undeveloped potential and the town's complicity in scapegoating her (206).

Psychically fractured by violence and neglect, she devolves into talking to, and responding to, herself, in a chorus of call-and response that replaces actual dialogue with others. By novel's end, Pecola's deterioration shows her full-fledged fixation on purportedly having obtained her obsession: the blue eyes that she learns would make her lovable and safe from harm. Morrison provides a cautionary tale warning to be careful what one wishes for. The enduring legacy of white beauty standards also looms over the novel, packaged and disseminated for a mass audience in the twentieth century through popular media, but locating its origins in systems of privilege harkening back to the nation's founding and its dependence on slavery for realizing the American Dream.

While the above opening rehearses a well-established foundation for Morrison's first novel, and perhaps her entire *oeuvre*, what is most suggestive for my purposes is that Morrison asks her readers to reconsider the effects of such ideals on individuals and communities. Katherine Stern suggests a viable nuanced reading of beauty in the text in a chapter on "Toni Morrison's Beauty Formula." She argues for a definition of Morrisonian beauty "not as visual, but as tangible, improvisational, relational, contextual" that challenges "the very notion of standards" privileging an aesthetics based on sight (78).

Instead of a fixation on the visual end product, in words evocative of artistry, Stern contends that “beauty depends on the beholder’s craft or intention and results from the labor upon the body either by the hands or the imagination” (79). She further highlights that “When Morrison explores the aesthetics of touch, she connects tactility to reciprocal, reflexive sensations” (84). “Reciprocal, reflexive sensations” also inform Morrison’s approach to personal writing like letters in her novels, as a mediated experience between writer and recipient. Because these letters remain unread, the writer positions himself or herself within an imagined community.

A mediated focus on imagination and craft in reconciling standards is illustrative for this study, in which the relational handiwork of writing challenges the very existence of such idealized, unmediated standards. It places bodies at the center of inquiry. In highlighting “imagination’s part in elaborating the handiwork” (86), such reflective exercises emphasize the physicality of the letter writer, which get reproduced in their handwriting, for example. The responsiveness that Stern underscores brings into focus the rhetorical acts in Morrison, of both beauty and letter writing. Stern concludes that “If there is a universal recognition of physical beauty, ... it has more to do with the commonality of physical suffering than with commonalities of taste, more to do with how all bodies feel rather than how they individually look” (90). This commonality also maps onto how they work out these experiences in their intimate writing. In intimate spaces, these self-reflexive exercises position them to participate in, and challenge, community life.

Mediated handicraft stands in opposition with print technology’s history steeped in

Enlightenment-age linear rationality, standardization, and widespread dissemination of set, easily reproducible text. While it is possible to standardize print material, handwriting is more individualized, and makes a stronger argument concerning the *ethos* of the writer. The person producing the text in private letters maintains or imagines a social interaction with the intended receiver, and thus by extension, with a wider community. Furthermore, in a modern culture inundated by print materials, handwriting personalizes the message on the level of the body as a physical act reinforcing the connection between sender and recipient.

At times, however, these bodies can “touch” each other inappropriately, both figuratively and literally, violating socially-enforced boundaries and emphasizing the social function of maintaining standards. Carrying her readers beyond the limits of polite discourse in her first novel and even confronting them with the erasure of victimized histories, Morrison provides a unique opportunity for critical analysis that pushes past socially-prescribed bounds in the character of Soaphead Church. As another adult entrusted with caring for, but ultimately betraying, Pecola, Soaphead Church is a major catalyst of *The Bluest Eye*'s plot, and one that warrants further investigation.

While most critics pay lip service to Church, in “Naming Invisible Authority: Toni Morrison's Covert Letter to Ralph Ellison,” John N. Duvall underscores Church's role as a letter-writer, and therefore an often-overlooked partial narrator in *The Bluest Eye*. Duvall is primarily interested in how Church works out Morrison's anxieties as new author in her first novel, while my interests center on how Morrison figures writing as a creative, self-

exploratory act. I do not agree with Duvall that Church's self-reflexive exercises gesture toward a burgeoning self-critique that mobilizes Morrison's own literary career.

It is important to remember that Church remains at least as smug in, if slightly unsettled by, his misanthropic nature at the end of the chapter dedicated to him, and for that reason, any aspirations for reading this chapter in terms of his character development seem too generous. In other words, Church's growing insight is foreclosed on or circumscribed by the particulars of his character, and thus I find that a strong argument for a parallel to Morrison's authorial persona is limiting both the character and the author. Instead of a focus on the possibility of self-critique that ties in with Morrison's growing authorial identity, I would like to build from Duvall's interest in Church's self-fashioning, with a particular investment in how he establishes his identity through the act of letter-writing.

The mixture of pity and disdain for Pecola that Soaphead Church registers mirrors how Morrison depicts him in the novel. Church is a nebulous character and it is uncomfortable to try to characterize him, or even to seriously consider at all, accounting perhaps for the relative lack of sustained critical inquiry into his character. In fact, the word that first introduces him is "misanthrope," accompanied by a meditation on the various valences of the word and how his interest in it as self-descriptor manifests in a full exploration of misanthropes. Through a third-person literacy narrative that gives access into his inner world, it becomes clear that Church's leisure reading represents an attempt to better understand the label "misanthrope" and contain his nefarious impulses.

Like the children in the novel, he is coming to terms with a deeper understanding of the world around him. Studying psychiatry, sociology, and physical therapy at various times, he eventually spends six years “palming himself off as a minister, and inspiring awe with the way he spoke English,” for which he picks up the last name Church (171). Ultimately, he makes his living as part of the occult: ““Reader, adviser, and interpreter of dreams” (166), as his business card that he later encloses in his letter to God stipulates. His academic language use and schooled background bestow on him a social position leading an unknowing congregation that believed he had the educational credentials, and he exploits this position further in professed connections to the spiritual world. A character willing to take advantage of ignorance, he does not molest Pecola when in isolated proximity to her, but he does take advantage of her innocence.

Church’s sexual deviance, with a predilection for pedophilia and an aversion to reciprocal adult relationships, defies the social norms of the novel exemplified by the nuclear family in the *Dick and Jane* narrative. Whereas the adult men portend danger for the girls, Soaphead Church seems relatively innocuous. Tellingly, his revulsion related to human bodies centralizes on their overwhelming, uncontained physicality: “The sight of dried matter in the corner of the eye, decayed or missing teeth, ear wax, blackheads, moles, blisters, skin crusts—all the natural excretion and projections the body was capable of—disquieted him” (166). Perhaps this disgust reconciles why he chooses to write to God, a disembodied figure that does not suffer the inconveniences of physical embodiment.

The unease associated with Church’s character speaks to the complexity of his

characterization, questioning the limits and use of empathy in reading him. For Katherine Stern, she suggests that “The vulnerability of the flesh is its true claim to beauty, that which compels our imagination to invest the body with beauty is the feeling, literally the *pathos*, we share with others” (84). With this definition, then, Church deems such vulnerability ugly in developing his own aesthetic. Much like Cholly Breedlove, his past history unflinchingly humanizes an incestuous father and attempts to “take refuge in how” this victimization could occur (6). Morrison asks us how far we are willing to enter into this uncomfortable space in order to reconcile our tendency to judge and condemn with our desire to better understand the forces that shape, and eventually destroy, Pecola. What is perhaps hardest for readers to understand is that Pecola and Church, bound by their transgressive appetites, are both certain that he grants Pecola her blue eyes during their exchange, bringing readers to the limits of rational discourse in requiring us to suspend disbelief or reconfigure the scene within the larger narrative in order to demystify it.²⁷

In focusing on the limits of social discourse, Morrison gives voice to characters otherwise at the seedy margins of community life. Church’s personal history embodies the transnational flux of American immigration and foundations in slavery through a particular fixation on lightening and ennobling the race by “marrying up” carried through generations (167). And this “ennobling” is literal: his ancestral origins story begins with a landed

²⁷ Such moments are the toughest to convey to students, and sometimes the suggestion of such a possibility is enough to spark, or stifle, lively conversation.

English gentleman's dalliance in an exotic foreign land. The next generation in the West Indies, the male product of the gentleman and a local woman thankful he granted her some money for the child, marries a woman who also learned "to separate herself in body, mind, and spirit from all that suggested Africa" (167), and this lineage becomes a family fixation that children inherit. Although this genealogical study is steeped in degeneracy, Church continues to ascribe to the value system that privileges his European and white ancestry. Even Church's sobriquet "Soaphead" (born Elihue) recalls an image of "the tight, curly hair that took on and held a sheen and wave when pomaded with soap lather. A sort of primitive process," for example (167). Such a name evokes the very beauty standards that Morrison challenges in this novel, and she balances the male counterpoint of Pecola's investment in blue eyes through Soaphead Church's name.

Interestingly, this hair processing highlights the mediated beauty that Stern defines, and this novel further examines those standards that seek conformity to a white ideal. In noting the family's success in school, the narration underscores that the family attempted to "prove beyond a doubt De Gobineau's hypothesis that 'all civilizations derive from the white race, that none can exist without its help'" (168). The family enjoys the status associated with a mixed-race ancestry, evident in the advantages that the children enjoy, and this privilege is augmented through beauty rituals that ascribe to white ideals of straight hair and light skin. Like with the classroom politics discussed in the last chapter, this detail suggests that their advancement has less to do with academic prowess and more to do with institutions of learning perpetuating systems of privilege based on skin color. Such beauty

standards reap material rewards for children portraying mixed race phenotypical attributes in contrast to those students who are darker in skin tone. Although they are not visually similar, Church, like Pecola, has uncritically internalized the damaging beauty standard, delineating a parallel between the two characters' deracination. Neither is critical of the conventional, intergenerational wisdom that serves to isolate them.

Church's origins and familial literacy practices are evident in his extended family literacy narrative. These practices were passed down to him. As might be expected from his lineage, complete with a schoolmaster father, his was a particularly classical early-twentieth century liberal arts education, evocative of the program recommended by Du Bois for training the Talented Tenth. At the same time, however, Church's education was piecemeal and home spun in order to indulge his own biases inherited from a long and storied family history. While Morrison herself is classically-trained, she is also critical of its limited influence in Church's life, as his education shows. A passage evocative of DuBois' Western salon recounts his reading list:

Little Elihue learned everything he needed to know well, particularly the one art of self-deception. He read greedily but understood selectively, choosing the bits and pieces of other's men's ideas that supported whatever predilection he had at the moment. Thus he chose to remember Hamlet's abuse of Ophelia, but not Christ's love of Mary Magdalene; Hamlet's frivolous politeness, but not Christ's serious anarchy. He noticed Gibbon's acidity, but not his tolerance, Othello's love for the fair Desdemona, but not Iago's perverted love of Othello. The works he admired most were Dante's; those he despised most were Dostoyevsky's. For all his exposure to the best minds in the Western world, he allowed only the narrowest interpretation to touch him. He responded to his father's controlled violence by developing hard habits and a soft imagination. (169)

Church's reading practices foreground his interpretive framework set in "hard habits and a soft imagination." Intractable in his views, Church lacks the critical prowess to question conventional social wisdom, although his reading background suggests he is educated. Through his selective reading practices "that supported whatever predilection he had at the moment," he begins to fashion an identity that gets further established in his letter to God.

Highlighting his piecemeal education, Church conflates different conventions of letter-writing in his personal writing. Following the rite in which he believes he granted Pecola blue eyes, Church employs a style of letter-writing complete with subject line heading and statement of purpose in business-like language before then justifying his transgressive act to God. Completing his letter, he reveals his awareness of the genre of letter-writing and its attendant rituals once again: "Although he had no seal, he longed for sealing wax" (182). He wishes for an act of ritual closure through this desire. Even in formally addressing his letter, he intimates that he equates himself to a God-figure: "ATT: TO HE WHO GREATLY ENNOBLED HUMAN NATURE BY CREATING IT" (176). In fact, the corporate language he chooses suggests not even addressing an equal, but a subordinate in memoranda following executive decisions, adding further complexity to his character. He stridently continues in the same tone: "The Purpose of this letter is to familiarize you with the facts which have either escaped your notice, or which you have chosen to ignore" (176). He positions himself through this letter as an omniscient co-creator through the act of granting Pecola blue eyes and ultimately, his prayer of gratitude and reverence is to himself for acting as boundary-transgressing Father figure, ennobling

the next generation by “lightening up” her eyes.

In addition to conflating various conventions of letter-writing, Church also shifts genre convention, beginning with the familiar fairy tale opening “Once upon a time” (176). This shift denotes that he employs the resources within his piecemeal reading repertoire, at the same time that it suggests that he is crafting a story. Through craft, he aspires to God-like creative feats. Claiming responsibility, he later asserts:

I, I have caused a miracle. I gave her the eyes. I gave her the blue, blue, two blue eyes. Cobalt blue. A streak of it right out of your own blue heaven. No one else will see her blue eyes. But she will. And she will live happily ever after. I, I have found it meet and right so to do. (182)

In this passage, Pecola’s focus on “eye” becomes transmuted into Church’s self-fashioning “I” through repetition, culminating in blasphemously-evocative biblical language. He is as isolated from his community as Pecola, evident through his act of self-reflective letter writing. Insofar as the letter to God acts as a prayer, Morrison’s focus on its materiality shows that it remains an unsent object, suggesting his inability to communicate to either his fellow humans or God.

Steeped in the traditions of ministry, Soaphead Church transgresses the Christian bounds of human testimony in claiming a creative agency reserved for God and worshipping his own creative act. Furthermore, in prophesying that “she will live happily ever after,” he again engages the fairy tale conventions of storytelling. Through his invocation of the phrases “Once upon a time” and “happily ever after,” Pecola’s tale gets relegated to the

relatively safer space of children's storytelling. In this case, Church's narrative strips Pecola's desire for blue eyes of its more unsettling origins: a child increasingly dissociating from her body as the victim of incest and her resulting pregnancy and it becomes a story to pass on to future generations.

By exposing the blue eyes as a transgressive desire, Morrison show how it results in both misery for Pecola and self-fashioning an authorial identity for Church. This narrative gesture of fairy tales also arguably culminates in the end of Pecola's childhood. Morrison shows how some individuals do not learn navigate the dangers and precariousness of childhood in order to reach the maturity necessary for adulthood, resulting in stagnation. In his letter to God, Church re-victimizes Pecola, appropriating her narrative in order to control it and indulge his delusions of super-human agency. Insofar as this interaction exists as a "laying on of hands," Church's self-transmutation exposes the dangers of the rhetoricity of transactional beauty, or any definition of beauty as conforming to an external, politicized standard. In terms of connecting this novel to literacy narratives, this damaging standard, self-effacing desire to conform, and an appropriated narrative can also highlight the ways in which literacy gains currency in academic communities. In the next section, I will explore how such standards can respond more ethically to the situated experiences of individuals rather than coercing conformity at the expense of vulnerable individuality, so that the effects of exclusion are minimized.

The Bluest Eye in the Writing Classroom

The Bluest Eye is both a novel of education and of migration. As Valerie Smith

contends, the novel is “born out of the racial self-consciousness of the 1960s. But the novel also evokes the advantages and liabilities black migrants from the South encountered as they adapted to their new lives in the North” (19). As a migratory narrative, then, this novel can provide insight into the experiences of students on the move between physical and ideological spaces, and the ways they navigate new challenges. In addition, this novel can speak to a readership immersed in school-based literacy. It encourages readers to reflect on their own process of literacy acquisition.

In her work in response to this preface, for example, Barbara Christian dramatizes this personal response to the opening. She nostalgically muses in a chapter on “The Contemporary Fables of Toni Morrison”:

Yes—the prose of our very first primer as we sat at our very first desk in our very first school and had our very first lesson in reading. There are pictures of Dick, Jane, Father, Mother, the cat, the dog, accompanied by simple punctuated sentences that are drilled into the mind as we first learn to read. Words have power. Pictures have power. Five-year-old children have heard these words, saw these pictures across the landscape of America and even the Virgin Islands where I was born, perhaps more than any other single word-picture image. (60-61)

The repetition of “very first” underscores the primacy of this text in Christian’s education, and she highlights the oral and semiotic nature of learning to read in pointing out that generations of young children “have heard these words, saw these pictures across the landscape of American and even the Virgin Islands where I was born.” Her personal connection to the text, as well as the extent to which it was used in transatlantic and colonial agendas, is palpable in this passage. At the same time, it is important to remember that this

widespread pedagogical tool is less familiar with many twenty-first century readers, for whom Dick and Jane do not evoke the same visceral reaction eliciting nostalgia, or sometimes loathing.

For more contemporary readers, particularly college students educated in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, there will be even more cultural gaps to fill in. As Yvonne Atkinson, astutely notes in a chapter entitled “Language That Bears Witness: The Black English Oral Tradition in the Works of Toni Morrison” “She knows that there will be ‘holes and spaces’ in the text that are caused by writing down an oral language, but Morrison also expects the reader to fill in those gaps with communal knowledge” (14). With her focus on the Black English Oral tradition, she continues by limiting the audience who can fully appreciate the richly-textured oral traditions that Morrison foregrounds in this text:

The reader who is aware of the Black English oral tradition is also are that he/she is obligated to participate in this conversation. The participation could be a ‘huh’ at the end of the dialogue signifying understanding and appreciation, or it could be a smile, a laugh, a head wag, or it could put you in the mind of other women who shared their lives through conversation with friends. (15)

While I agree with Atkinson that Morrison elicits an engaged and active response from her readers, and that these gaps can be filled in with communal knowledge by readers immersed in an African American oral tradition, I am also interested in the responses from students across a wide range of lived experiences in twenty-first century classrooms today. By extending rather than limiting the audience in this way, I hope to open up reading

practices to such personalized responses to those within and outside of this particular tradition. This project is particularly informed by what Smith calls Morrison's "way of writing about race without reproducing the tropes of racism" (2). This novel can be the backdrop of rich discussion as students delve into their own lived histories with pedagogical texts.

Some teachers have expounded on the pragmatics of teaching this novel in the classroom, and have noted the challenges of choosing a book with such difficult topics as institutionalized racism and individual trauma. For example, Rafael Pérez-Torres defines *The Bluest Eye* as "A text that raises critical questions about identity construction. Because facing such issues can be painful, threatening, or alienating, the book can touch non-European American students who have had to live within a culture that consistently devalues their aesthetics," and Pérez-Torres advises that "instructors can turn the thematic difficulties the novel presents to good use by addressing them explicitly" in a chapter on "Tracing and Erasing: Race and Pedagogy in *The Bluest Eye*" in *Approaches to Teaching Toni Morrison* (21). I would add that private or ungraded writing can be a space for students to more fully explore these challenging topics, particularly in their own literacy narratives.

There is some critical disagreement about whether *The Bluest Eye* is a bildungsroman, or novel of education. From the perspective of its animating forces, its takeaway lessons occur outside of the classroom, and the critical work of these lessons gets tested in Morrison's readership. As critics point out, Morrison demands that her readers participate in making sense out of her work. Invoking and disrupting an iconic pedagogical

text in the opening page of her first novel invites readers to respond at the very outset, a good place to focus discussion in classrooms. Donald B. Gibson convincingly suggests in a chapter on “Text and Countertext in *The Bluest Eye*”:

The difference between the first and third versions is that the third forces us to participate in the reading in a more active way by demanding that we identify individual words and supply them from our past experience of reading the first version the proper punctuation. The reader is, in the very act of reading, taught to read. (161)

Morrison demands her readers’ participation by disorienting the visual terrain of text, forcing them to make sense out of incoherence.

In the writing classroom, in which a focus on reading can seem rudimentary to the goals of many FYW programs, Morrison can help students and teachers alike reflect on their own reading practices, helping bridge reading and writing for her readers, and expand these definitions beyond text-based endeavors. In addition, through her use of the Dick and Jane narrative to structure her novel, Morrison helps her readers to contextualize reading and writing practices within the cultures that these circulate, as well as gesture towards the important cultural role pedagogical tools play. In so doing, Morrison’s novel requires a more in-depth investigation into the literacy practices that thrive by promoting themselves as apolitical, ahistorical, and acultural, by drawing attention to the situatedness of readers exposed to these visual, historical, and cultural text.

In terms of providing a model of literacy for students in First Year Writing programs, it is clear that Morrison is invested in unbinding definitions of text-based literacy

and show what is at stake at learning to productively read. It further develops issues of reading race by showing the effects on individuals and highlights literacy quests as a means of overcoming challenges. Morrison gives a myriad of literacy practices in her first novel that expand beyond the dull, decontextualized reading and writing exercises of the *Dick and Jane* primer. In the next chapter, I will build from this notion of cultural literacy in a more thorough investigation into the enigmatic character of Florens, the literate slave in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*. As the next chapter shows, writing practices can be self-reflexive exercises that provide writers the space to make sense out of their pasts and imagine new possibilities for their futures, an important position for students in writing classes.

**Chapter 7: “MY ARMS ACHE BUT I HAVE NEED TO TELL YOU THIS”:
SPONSORING TRANSFORMATIVE REFLECTIVE WRITING**

Soaphead Church acts a spokesperson for his community, but develops his personal identity at the expense of its most vulnerable members through his private letter-writing. In Morrison’s *A Mercy*, Florens, a young seventeenth-century female slave, painstakingly etches her personal narrative onto her master’s abandoned mansion, persisting through discomfort to write: “my arms ache but I have need to tell you this.... You read the world but not the letters of talk. You don’t know how to. Maybe one day you will learn” (160). Florens is writing to her beloved, free, but illiterate African American blacksmith, of her journey through a disorienting American colonial landscape. While the two fictional letter writers, Soaphead Church and Florens, are writing in different centuries and from different perspectives, their letters remain unsent (and unsendable), and thus their letters’ importance focalizes the transformative role of the writing itself.

Like with Soaphead Church, Morrison draws her readers’ attention to the physicality of writing throughout her later novel, intimately connecting text to the bodies that produce it. Moreover, Morrison re-imagines American historiography, placing it in the belabored hands of a literate female slave. While letter-writing’s public role in establishing the republic has been well-recognized in history, Morrison imagines a more intimate act of personal writing that charts and documents the early American political landscape through Florens’ literacy quest, one that hardens her feet and sharpens her critical capacity through reflection. Morrison’s American spokesperson in this novel is black, female, adolescent, and a slave. The blacksmith’s illiteracy adds to his physical distance and emotional estrangement by the end of the novel: hers is a letter that will never reach its intended

recipient.

Florens writes in order to assert her own identity, much like Soaphead Church in *The Bluest Eye*.²⁸ Through letters, Morrison questions the role of the individual within a larger community, and for Florens, she asserts her tenuous, developing voice into the ways that American history gets imagined for later generations. The connection between letters and developing a mythic origins story for nationhood has been well-documented. My particular interest lies in private letters constituting a sense of self within the community, as is the case with Florens. These letters fashion both a stabilized sense of self and nation, and so the details of becoming literate help fix larger narratives of individualism and progress. In the case of America, the resounding theme is its exceptionalism and uniqueness, and these tropes even extends to the way that literacy is cast in the growing nation.

In a chapter on “The Nineteenth Century Origins of our Times,” Harvey Graff elucidates “The educational imperative that accompanied nationhood in the early American republic is among the factors typically associated American ‘uniqueness’” (211). Literacy rates, for example, in the colonies and early republic set America apart from Europe. Yet these statistics are notoriously problematic, as figures regaling widespread literacy acquisition fail to account for other uses of texts or textual encounters not measured in such studies. This obstacle dramatizes the umbrella term of literacy, which can mean different things in different contexts. To further complicate this problem, literacy and illiteracy,

²⁸ Other African American authors use letters in similar ways, as well. For example, Celie in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* keeps connected to her sister through her letter-writing habit, and later uses it to commune with God and nature.

despite what the terms suggest, are not clear-cut binaries, but are instead situated and negotiated, with a wide range of abilities falling under the umbrage of literacy. In New Literacy studies, provocative work is being done with different entanglements with texts well beyond that of the signature test or school-based literacies. Furthermore, a commonly-rehearsed truism is America's uneven literacy distribution, with groups of people and individuals learning to read and write for different purposes, to different extents, and some remaining disproportionately illiterate and disenfranchised. As I explored in the fourth chapter, slaves like Ellen and William Craft worked to challenge their subjugated social status through public works such as slave narratives. Set in an era that predates both a popular historiography and the particular valences of race in America, Morrison's neo-slave narrative uses generic conventions of early American slave narratives. As a counternarrative to American history and grounded in historical events such as Bacon's Rebellion, a seventeenth-century uprising in Virginia, this novel imagines an America before definitions of race and nation were defined and codified in particular ways.

Since *A Mercy*'s publication in 2008, much scholarship has tapped into its ties to instantiating an American myth, focusing on how Florens' unique personal narrative mirrors American exceptionalism writ large. Less robustly theorized is Florens' surprising role as Founding Mother of the American colonies through her private writings of a transformative errand through a disorienting American landscape. Even as she becomes personally estranged from her beloved blacksmith, Florens articulates her self-fashioning through her ties to the community and the physical environment that support her writing endeavor. Florens certainly defies expectations as a literate female slave able to both read and write, but she also further challenges her readers with her non-standard language use.

In fact, Florens consistently confronts her readers on a linguistic level, and I would go so far as to argue that Florens' idiosyncratic language use, as well as the hazy physical landscape that Morrison presents, can account for the novel's relative unpopularity and obscurity.

Faced by the unique challenges that her writing represents, readers may disengage. However, a closer investigation of the novel reveals a situated model of literacy that can help flesh out the role of reflective writing, and particularly in the First Year Writing classroom. As Peter Elbow reminds those of us invested in teaching literacy in *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*, "Meanings are in readers, not in words" (315), suggesting the labor of reading and the potential rewards of sticking with difficult texts. Even as Florens apologizes for her failure to meet a rationalized standard, she demands that her reader engage fully with her text, having to "crawl perhaps in a few places" in order to bear witness to it (185). Morrison includes a fuller repertoire of reading practices by demanding that readers engage with the surface-level challenges of this text.

In presenting a translingual writer, Morrison resists pressures to visually and linguistically standardize her narrative, endorsing her voice and legitimizing her right to write her story against fixed standards. By way of literacy narrative, Florens' private letter writing provides an account of how she, a dislocated and orphaned adolescent slave, acquired the skills to later inscribe her narrative onto her deceased slave master's abandoned mansion's walls and floor. She does so in language unlike the other sections of the novel, so that her unique voice counters the other linguistic registers in the novel. Critics grappling with Florens' voice must come to terms with idiosyncratic word choices and confused verb tense, and attempts at categorizing it range from celebrating its uniqueness

to pathologizing and even diagnosing her based on language difference.

For example, Jean Wyatt in an article on “Failed Messages, Maternal Loss, and Narrative Form in Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*” ventures so far as to evaluate Florens for autism, a diagnosis that has gained currency in recent years. Wyatt concludes that even more than this diagnosis, her reliability as narrator is uncertain on grounds reduced to linguistic difference, and ostensible neurodiversity:

Florens's prose is marked by two peculiarities—a lack of the temporal ordering ordinarily provided by past, present, and future tenses and a lack of speculation about the feelings and desires of others; both testify to the arrest of her development at the moment of rupture with her mother's care. (145)

While indulging the desire to categorize, pathologize, and diagnose a fictional character is in itself strange, this passage is illustrative of deficiency models of difference that uphold linguistic standards at the expense of personal expression. While this critic is seeking to explain a fictional character, historically disenfranchised individuals are still experiencing the effects of deficit linguistic models and normate standards that maintain a concept of the norm through highlighting difference. As Wyatt helps dramatize, any writing outside of these conventions is quickly dismissed, marginalized, and questioned in order to maintain linguistic standards in this model of literacy.

However, perhaps to the consternation of those critics seeking to maintain such differences, Florens does write. In keeping with the conventions of the neo-slave narrative, Florens includes a detailed account of her literacy acquisition, in fact. Florens’ is a story of migration: from her home with her mother to the Vaark estate, on her errand through the American wilderness, back to the Vaark estate, and arguably reclaimed by her estranged

mother. Through her circular quest, Florens is associated with mobility. Her name, with its connection to the Italian currency *florins*, highlights this mobility, and through her narrative, she participates in a literate economy. At the same time, it is important to remember that her beloved free Blacksmith is illiterate and moreover, does not fully ascribe to the promises of literacy as a guarantor of freedom, a model of literacy I explored through the slave narratives.

Given the particulars of Florens' status as an orphaned female slave, one might ask how she is writing an account of her experiences at all. She informs her reader of her literacy acquisition:

We are baptized and can have happiness when this life is done. The Reverend Father tells us that. Once every seven days we learn to read and write. We are forbidden to leave the place so the four of us hide near the marsh. My mother, me, her little boy and Reverend Father. He is forbidden to do this but he teaches us anyway watching out for wicked Virginians and Protestants who want to catch him. If they do he will be in prison or pay money or both. He has two books and a slate. We have sticks to draw through sand, pebbles to shape words on smooth flat rock. When the letters are memory we make whole words. I am faster than my mother and her baby boy is no good at all. Very quickly I can write from memory the Nicene Creed including all of the commas. Confession we tell not write as I am doing now. I forget almost all of it until now. I like talk. Lina talk, stone talk, even Sorrow talk. Best of all is your talk. (6-7)

Like Soaphead Church's wistful interest in sealing wax to complete his ritualistic letter to God, this literacy narrative draws attention to the materiality of writing and the affordances that support this endeavor, encapsulated in phrases like "two books and a slate" and "We have sticks to draw through sand, pebbles to shape words on smooth flat rock." The frequency of lessons "Once every seven days" aligns it as a particularly religious endeavor,

carefully presided over by the Reverend Father.

This passage further calls attention to writing as a situated, physical experience, supported by everyday material supplied from the natural landscape and surrounded by family and other close associates. Once torn from her family and estranged from her beloved, Florens later seeks to make sense out of her environment through the act of writing. The details of her personal writing relating her journey into the confusing, untamed American landscape provide the experience for her reflection, etched into the physical space of her master's abandoned mansion.

Florens' personal writing suggests that language is a tool for her reflective practice, one that she has not "mastered" like in the case of the Crafts' demonstration of language, but instead shows her freedom and personal growth through her writing habits. Her expression is unbound by a standardized form, and Morrison pushes on the literacy as (self-)mastery model in her twenty-first-century variation. As an unmastered slave, Florens works within her immediate material constraints. Her unpolished voice produces a mythic national narrative, scrawled over the walls and floors of the abandoned mansion. Toward the end of the novel, again focusing on the materiality and physicality of writing, Florens laments to her beloved blacksmith:

There is no more room in this room. These words cover the floor. From now you will stand to hear me. The walls make trouble because lamplight is too small to see by. I am holding light in one hand and carving letters with the other. My arms ache but I have need to tell you this. I cannot tell it to anyone but you. I am near the door and at the closing now. What will I do with my nights when the telling stops? Dreaming will not come again. (185)

The curious and compelling urgency of writing, "My arms ache but I have need to tell you

this,” written to her illiterate blacksmith who will most likely never return and cannot read her words, gets further highlighted as she continues:

If you are live or ever you heal you will have to bend down to read my telling, crawl perhaps in a few places. I apologize for the discomfort. Sometimes the tip of the nail skates away and the forming of words is disorderly. Reverend Father never likes that. He raps our fingers and makes us do it over. In the beginning when I come to this room I am certain the telling will give me the tears I never have. I am wrong. Eyes dry, I stop telling only when the lamp burns down. Then I sleep among my words. The telling goes on without dream and when I wake it takes time to pull away, leave this room, and do chores. (185)

Here the confessional tone of Florens’ literacy narrative, “I am certain the telling will give me the tears I never have. I am wrong. ... The telling goes on without dream,” again invokes the origins of the slave narrative genre as a contested space for public acts of bearing witness and intimate sharing of private histories.

Like in *Beloved*, “this is not a story to pass on” (324): a phrase at the crossroads of silencing psychic damage and desire for healing trauma through its revelation. Florens imagines the postures of her reader’s body in an intimate gesture, taking satisfaction in the fact that her writing would put her words in close proximity to her estranged beloved blacksmith. This mix of personal and public suggests the function of mythic narratives to people a history and historicize a group of people, with aims of unifying individuals in community in the face of increasing division. Morrison here asks us to imagine the countless untold personal stories marginalized in scoping out the contours of American historiography.

Like in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison is tutoring her readers in the reading practices

necessary for making sense out of her fiction, as well as indicting those literary and historical practices that censor or marginalize dissenting voices. Yet Florens astutely acknowledges that this narrative is potentially as uncomfortable to read as it is to write in this passage, apologizing for her reader's physical "discomfort," a word which also suggests a meditative entry point into Florens' personal memory of learning to read and write, with a particular focus on order and legibility under the threat of corporal punishment at the hands of the Reverend Father.

This above passage also reinforces learning to read and write as a subversive, even illegal, act, for those at the margins of American history. The Reverend Father, although spatially and temporally removed from Florens as she writes her narrative, continues to preside over this passage and her writing project, highlighted by her consistent use of the present tense in relating her lessons. Florens sheds light on the Reverend Father's process of teaching her family how to write, a method by which "when the letters are memory we make whole words." In focusing on a particularly religious teacher, she suggests the different stakeholders involved in bartering for an individual's literacy. While literacy is a power to conserve, so is passing on literacy to the young and less powerful an act of power and prestige, particularly when it maps onto larger institutionally-backed socio-political goals like the colonial mandate of converting indigenous peoples.

Of course, for those who sought to subjugate individuals and groups, literacy and its attendant claims to rational, ordered, and recordable, linear thinking, was a powerful weapon that revolting slaves could use against them. However, as a member of the Catholic clergy, the Reverend Father ascribes to personal spiritual salvation by spreading God's word, here encapsulated in culminating feat of writing out "the Nicene Creed, with all of

its commas.” From a composition studies perspective, these passages also figure the Reverend Father as Florens’ literacy sponsor, and sponsoring slave literacy is one area that is often cited as an example of sponsorship.

Deb Brandt defines literacy sponsors as those who use their resources to inculcate reading and writing to initiates, and for whom the benefactors often feel life-long, profound gratitude towards. Since Brandt coined the term in this way, sponsorship has shaped the way literacy has been studied because it provides a personal, institutional, and economic framework for thinking more about the practice. In her groundbreaking work, Brandt originally completed a series of case studies of people born in the 20th century (the oldest born in 1895) and analyzed them, noticing a trend of what she later called *sponsorship*, with a focus on the economic, political, and social forces at play in teaching and learning to read and write. Her major contribution is noting that a lot more goes on in teaching and learning to read and write than an on the localized or individual level, but it still impacts individuals and institutions. Far from the altruistic act it is often presented as, however, Brandt is clear that the institutions and individuals who pass on this social and cultural capital to less powerful individuals reap rewards, as well.

In a response to Ann Lawrence’s more recent reflection on the role of sponsorship as it has influenced the field, both published in a 2015 volume of *Curriculum Inquiry*, Deb Brandt notes that the concept has “turned into a more benign concept than I had imagined it” (330). She continues by qualifying sponsorship’s seeming neutrality or even beneficence:

Sponsors are entities who need our literacy as much or more than we do. They are investors, cultivators, exploiters, proselytizers, innovators, and

they are in competition with other sponsors for the formidable powers and benefits that can come our way via our literacy. (331)

Brandt defines sponsorship as including “people, commercial products, public facilities, religious organizations, and other institutional and work settings” (376). Lawrence later points out that studies invoking sponsorship as a lens mostly focus on sponsors as people rather than institutions. She ventures that this narrowing definition might come from the narratives themselves, in which those recounting the literacy events in their lives reflect back on the people who taught them to read and write, much as Florens’ narrative focuses on the Reverend Father rather than his colonial or spiritual imperative.

Most work on sponsorship has focused on non-fictional, real-world lived experiences with reading and writing, and I am interested in extending this notion for the purposes of fiction. As Morrison shows, the Reverend Father’s sponsorship also reinforces particular types of reading and writing practice, to the exclusion of others. Although not specifically using sponsorship as a framework for investigation, Valerie Smith points out the salience of the Reverend Father looming over Florens’ neophyte writing exercises in *Toni Morrison: Writing the Moral Imagination*:

On the one hand, by teaching Florens to read and write using the Nicene Creed and other sacred texts, the Reverend Father contributes to her autonomy and intellectual independence. But on the other hand, his teachings about the need to accommodate oneself to the conditions of one's captivity implicate him in the practice of domination. (121)

The role of sponsorship is complex, as initiating someone into literate practices is contextualized by larger forces that can both liberate and constrain. Literacy inculcation nuances the kinds of reading and writing that students will engage in over a lifetime, as

well as how they interpret the world.

This result is evident in the following passage where Florens first tries to make sense of a new environment in eschatological terms:

Reverend Father is the only kind man I ever see. When I arrive here I believe it is the place he warns against. The freezing in hell that comes before the everlasting fire where sinners bubble and singe forever. But the ice comes first, he says. And when I see knives of it hanging from the houses and trees and feel the white air burn my face I am certain the fire is coming. (8-9)

Like in other places in the novel, Florens highlights the utility of being able to read the physical environment, much like the young girls' reading quests in *The Bluest Eye*. From this passage in particular, it is clear that despite the tension between Catholics and other religious groups vying for power in uncharted land presented throughout the novel, Florens' readings and writings are informed by the Reverend Father long after her lessons are finished, and so the readings and reading practices that they endorse live on through her.

Unmastering Standards in the Writing Classroom

Florens' unsent letter etched onto the mansion is not the only letter in the novel. Florens sets out on her journey to her beloved in search of a cure for her ailing owner. Armed with a letter written by her Mistress endorsing her errand, she later loses it in an encounter with a family that prognosticates America's burgeoning hagiography. Immersed in a world that values linear reason, conformity, and order, denouncing the threat of

witchcraft goes hand in hand with developing more strident nationalistic and racial boundaries, all of which are in their formative, but still extant, states in the novel. Morrison appropriates imagination, disorder, and subversion as legitimate values for instantiating an American origins story. Florens chillingly implores in the opening lines: “Don’t be afraid. My telling can’t hurt you in spite of what I have done” (3). Yet this counter-writing in itself seems dangerous, and the marginalized narratives are disorderly and chaotic.

Through letters, Morrison focuses on the bodies producing texts and languages that fail to meet reproducible standards, signified in the materiality of handwritten letters. The sealing wax from the concealed letter troubles her foot during her peripatetic journey. This letter legitimizes her errand into the wilderness with a European mail-order bride’s hand. Yet Florens’ literacy practices imbue the landscape with her own particular stamp, and it is her America that her readers become gradually introduced to through her errand and letter. She endorses her own errand through the act of reflective writing, calling into question the legitimacy of her Mistress’ evidentiary documentation. Despite her role as guide who effectively navigates disorienting terrain to reach her beloved blacksmith, she returns to her master’s estate, and scrupulously registers her experience and her literacy narrative with the writing materials available to her. Surprisingly, despite her feat, Florens’ literate status is still a topic of critical debate, particularly in light of her non-standard language use. For example, Stefanie Mueller’s “Standing Up To Words: Writing and Resistance in Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*” suggests that “The origin of her *inability* to read the world lies in her first and most dramatic failure at reading the world: her misreading of her mother” (76). Here Mueller seems more focused on her failure than her learning, and she credits her completed literacy inculcation with her ability to read her environment.

Morrison offers a different type of relationship to literacy than that offered in *The Bluest Eye*, in which I agree that she posits an equivalency of textual and cultural reading practices insofar as the school-age MacTeer girls learn to read their environment productively while Pecola Breedlove does not. The whimsical misreadings in Morrison's first novel give way to critical reading prowess sharpened by experience. In this later novel, although Florens also undertakes an errand or quest, I would suggest that the focus is not so much on her misreadings as how she learns to make sense of the signs that she encounters. In other words, Morrison crafts a neo-slave narrative in which we are challenged not to look for corroboratory supporting material, assessing her skill set, but instead to bear witness to Florens' lived experiences as she presents them.

For this reason, I am less interested in diagnosing the superficial linguistic differences that she challenges her readers with, unlike Mueller who suggests that "her disregard for grammatical past tense leaves us reeling in the face of an ever-present *now*, heightened by the fact that Florens is standing among her words and, as I want to argue, stands up to them" (74). Although I agree with her conclusion that Florens comes to articulate an alternative narrative through her growing literacy, Mueller's choice of "disregard" here intimates her assumption that Florens made a conscious choice that flouts convention in an attempt to make sense out of Florens' "failure" to conform to expectations registered on the level of language.

On a larger scale, this assessment also highlights the normative assumptions underlying diagnostic linguistic practices. Difference is assessed from degrees of deviation from the norm. In composition studies, debates surrounding standards and individual expression have played out in many arenas as more diversity has infiltrated the writing

classroom, from Ebonics (later African American Vernacular English) to the place of home languages in a multilingual classroom. In the hyper-literate, text-based economy of the university and higher education institutional settings, basic or developmental writers have traditionally suffered stigma from not achieving a certain threshold of linguistic mastery, and composition studies has elaborated on the politics of this position, as well as attitudes toward language differences.

Two seminal compositionists who have argued for reconsidering standards are Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae. Teaching such gatekeeping courses as composition, teachers act as arbiters of who is in and who is out, often at the university level. Working against the deficit model of linguistic difference, Bartholomae defends students with the insight that “‘basic writing’ is something our students *do* or *produce*; it is not a kind of writing we teach to backward or unprepared students” in *Writing on the Margins: Essays on Composition and Teaching* (his emphasis, 21). He is careful not to conflate identity with writing practices, and the fact that such a qualification is necessary seems telling, especially for marginalized students like basic writers, English-Language Learners, and students from underprivileged backgrounds. In working toward largely revising what counts as error, Bartholomae argues against the tendency to equate difference with deficiency and to conflate users of nonstandard language with their prowess and mastery of set language conventions. This caveat is even more important as multilingual language users continue to diversify college campuses. It raises questions about how readers learn to make sense of challenging reading, which is true at the university level. At the level of scholarly criticism, it is an interesting area for further exploration-how far are readers willing to work to make sense out of texts that fail to meet a certain linguistic proficiency, how far can they endure

the physical discomfort of meeting the writer in these reflective spaces? Morrison challenges her readers on the level of language—a language that is at once in flux, hybridized, and fixed, literally, onto her master’s house.

Florens, aware that her writing is circumscribed by its material manifestation in her master’s house and far removed from her estranged, illiterate beloved blacksmith, still insists on inscribing her narrative. She crafts her narrative with an urgency of self-expression that also highlights the physicality of writing: “My arms ache but I have need to tell you this” (185). This sense of urgency compels her writing to its completion. Ultimately, Florens fashions herself through this writing project, claiming her identity as unlikely literary foremother for an inchoate nation without fixed political, social, and linguistic boundaries. In many ways, *A Mercy* can be best understood through the lens of the unsent letter lost in transit with sender and recipient both in flux, highlighting the novel’s potential for further exploration using a transnational and translingual framework. Her language use challenges readers due to its visual markers of difference, calling for an audience willing to construct meaning with her. Collaboration is necessary for her solitary writing project. Because of her beloved blacksmith’s illiteracy, her writing project lacks an immediate audience, and “these careful words, closed up and wide open, will talk to themselves. Round and round, side to side, bottom to top, top to bottom, all across the room” (188), just as she fears. Dissatisfied with this inevitability, she then brazenly ventures:

Or. Or perhaps no. Perhaps these words need the air that is out in the world. Need to fly up then fall, fall like ash over acres of primrose and mallow. Over a turquoise lake, beyond the eternal hemlocks, through clouds cut by rainbow and flavor the soil of the earth. (188)

Here she suggests a future for her inscription that is unbound by the physical constraints of her master's house. In its transformation, this recycled letter will fertilize the American landscape.

I do not agree with Jean Wyatt's reading of the conclusion of this novel as a harbinger of unmitigated isolation and breakdown of the community, but rather I see it as a challenge to redefine communities through imaginative writing practices that can bridge distances and create or reinforce familial, communal, and national ties. Focused on enduring individual, familial, and communal fracturing as a result of slavery, Wyatt strongly argues that "Florens can never receive her mother's message; it is irremediably blocked by the forced separations of slavery. ... And as a consequence of her separation from her mother, her capacity to read the meaning of others' words is partially disabled" in "Failed Messages, Maternal Loss, and Narrative Form in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*" (128). Even the ableist language Wyatt chooses is troubling, a failure of the overcoming narrative.

In framing *A Mercy* as a literacy narrative, I contend that Florens gains stride in asserting her unmediated agency by the end of the novel, and is no longer constrained by the oppressive forces of the mother who ostensibly abandoned her, her master, or her beloved's failed coercion when he bitterly charges "You are nothing but wilderness. No Constraint. No mind" in their final exchange (166). Florens acts through writing, making sense of a traumatic personal history and organizing the landscape to support this endeavor. Rather than conforming to standards that might silence her at critical point in her development, her crafty writing project allows for her to participate in an ancestral female community unbound by constraints of time and space but contextualized in her lived

experiences.

Culminating in an act of reclaimed agency, Florens names herself and notes her experience gained through her journey. “I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last” (189). Through a transformative errand, Florens becomes “A minha mae, too” (189), connecting her to her estranged mother and moreover to her dislocated female ancestors. In coming to terms with her personal development and seeking to close the distance between her and her mother, she finally laments that because she was sold from her childhood home, she is unable to communicate her maturation to her mother. Although this novel began as a letter to her illiterate beloved blacksmith literally etched into her master’s abandoned mansion, it transforms into a letter to her mother detailing her errand through the wilderness. Furthermore, this letter gets answered in the final chapter.

Florens’ narrative culminates with her “In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving” (189). Morrison includes the last section of the novel as a mother’s dislocated response to her daughter’s call, suggesting she has heard her daughter’s plaintive tale through the woods. Just as Florens’ physical letter will remain unread, however, Florens will never be consoled by her mother’s atemporal justification or unspoken warning. The final words of the novel, “Oh Florens. My love. Hear a tua mae” (196), serve to reinforce her mother’s claim that she sacrificed her daughter to an unknown master in order to protect her. She justifies “To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below” (191). Morrison shows the intergenerational devastation of slavery, which breaks families apart and silences meaningful dialogue. At the same time, she shows how writing can help recuperate dislocation and mitigate trauma by insisting on articulating

the ongoing legacy of coercive silencing forces. As Morrison helps elucidate, such silences and writings have implications for both individuals striving to make sense out of their own environments, and for communities that are coming to terms with years of individual, familial, communal, and national dislocation.

CHAPTER 8: RECONCEIVING THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

“What we have done historically is to focus on a literacy defined by the minimal skills needed to assure an adequate workforce. This is a serious error, for we cannot say what our future work will be” (Fernandez, *Imagining Literacy*, 7)

This project, then, is an attempt to begin providing college classrooms with material from readers and writers that take seriously models of survival and overcoming, working from within to affirm, challenge, and qualify based on lived experiences, so that these students can position themselves within these ongoing dialogues. Ideally, this literacy narrative will instantiate a habit of reflection that continues far beyond one semester or year, and helps students tell meaningful stories about their lives. Like Florens, for some, the telling “goes on without dream and when I wake it takes time to pull away, leave this room, and do chores” (185). In fact, for some like those I’ve explored in this work, perhaps the telling is the most important act that they can imagine, a continuation of the dream, leaving a legacy for future generations to pick up where previous ones left off.

The collective imagining of this future is realized in the everyday collaborations and conversations we have with our students, both in the classroom and in responding to their written work. Meeting students where they are as a first step for meaningful learning requires that teachers work to bridge the gap between their own understandings of literacy and the ones that students bring with them to college. Literacy and various entanglements with textual materials are common experiences that offer the background for important conversations. In later versions, students can better articulate their own literacy narratives after exploring the texts in this dissertation or others like them.

This dissertation focuses on the literacy models provided by three key authors: Craft, Larsen, and Morrison. It imagines their place in a translingual college writing classroom in order to explore the definitions of literacy that they engage in their writings. However, as I noted earlier, this is just one small part of this history. In fact, there are other, equally compelling models of literacy that students can explore, such as Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, and Malcolm X. These autobiographical authors all engage models of literacy in order to explore its role in their own lives. In choosing Larsen and Morrison for this project, I want to suggest that this trope is evident in fiction, as well, and forms a key mode of inquiry, a searching for belonging and way of knowing and coming to value with particularly literate roots.

It is not sufficient to show the African oral tradition, a common critical gesture, or to briefly show an early investment in literate practices, without also showing how literacy has shaped what is possible to know or present, and the rhetorical moves that are valued by individuals in the community. This is not an either/or gesture, but a both/and approach. Translingualism helps articulate this positioning by fashioning language users that are always using multiple discourses and language systems at their disposal: a more negotiated view of language, to be sure, and one that challenges the enduring English-only ethos prevalent in disciplinary spaces like college classrooms.

With these texts as reflective material, students can begin to negotiate their own relationship to the prevailing models of literacy that the texts demonstrate. First, it is my hope that a deep exploration into these texts can provide models of literacy that students and teachers can think through at the local level, at the level of individuals doing the everyday intellectual work, in order to engage in more fruitful discussions of the

significance of reading and writing in their own lives. Such a practice can help bridge the disconnect between students who are first trying out college-level reading and writing and the many different individuals entrusted with measuring their progress.

Second, approaches to teaching these texts can be tailored to the particular needs of instructors facing an ever-changing student population. This project allows for enough flexibility that instructors will be able to incorporate as much or as little as they find helpful, and to be able to adapt their own approaches to teaching these texts as their students' needs change. For example, I imagine that a few pages of a given text might be enough content to engender a lively discussion leading toward an informal reflective exercise, all the way through a more methodological approach to these texts helping with teacher training for new composition instructors enrolled in practicums or instructors' independent or departmental professionalization groups. Because many of the teachers first starting to teach writing have a literature background, and it is one of the less-kept trade secrets that many charged with this task have never taken composition classes in their own undergraduate experiences (due to college-equivalency credits or testing out of these levels, for example), they could benefit from textual exploration of the models of literacy offered in these texts to prompt their own reflections for their personal and professional goals as teachers.

Finally, this project helps to reimagine the place of the English department and the work that is possible to accomplish there. Curricular histories like David Russell's seminal work on *Writing in the Academic Discipline, 1870-1990: A Curricular History* and Sharon Crowley's more recent *Composition in the University: Historical and Polemical Essays* define the pivotal place of education in instantiating a literate citizenry. Most notably for

this study in particular, despite cosmopolitan universities welcoming visual representations of diversity to campuses and marketing more internationally in the past decade, a meritocratic narrative continues to shape academic standards, as institutions strive to respond adequately to changing student populations and malleable demarcations of America's socio-political and ideological borders. At the heart of this project is the potency of narratives that gloss over the lived experiences of marginalized individuals and homogenize the particulars of oppression based on difference.

Teachers assume that students read like they do, that they would be able to do so given the opportunity, and that this is good preparation for them. Such an approach to teaching does not nurture the possibilities of a diverse learning community because it replicates existing literacies rather than opening up the possibility for new relationships to texts.²⁹ This project advocates a particular technique for an advantageous use of literacy narratives in First-Year Writing classes. Through an examination of four major African American literary works, I provide models of cultural literacy that students and teachers can think through at the local level, in order to explore the significance of reading and writing in their own lives. At the university level, theoretical frameworks in recent decades have helped bring historically-disenfranchised peoples and marginalized narratives into the center of scholarly activity, exposing power dynamics at work. This shift has happened across disciplines, and affected the ways we think about the individual in relation to larger structures and institutions, as well as communities of individuals grouped by affiliation,

²⁹ For an in-depth investigation into using a translingual framework for teacher training, see Suresh Canagarajah's "Translingual Writing and Teacher Development in Composition."

common histories, location, and other facets constituting identity.

The ways that students are reading and writing are constantly changing, and interactions with physical and web texts shape what is possible to imagine in the future. As Ramona Fernandez posits, “Imagining literacy allows us to project a future self with yet-to-be acquired skills and a yet-to-be-defined professional life” (11). Yet the image of the literacies passed down through generations are slower to change, speaking to the enduring myths of literacy in both popular and academic imaginations.³⁰ In other words, literacy itself can seem outmoded in the twenty-first century if we do not attune to the ways in which it has changed over time. Digital and multimodal literacies, which have grown in popularity over the past decade, acknowledge the shift from more antiquated forms. An outmoded or antiquated model of literacy is one that English departments and liberal arts schools work against, as this model of outmodedness itself can contribute to the image of English departments as not meeting the needs of its students in the twenty-first century. Compounding this image problem is a disconnect between the way students read in their

³⁰ The gap between embodied or lived literacy practices and the ways people think about their literacy practices creates a certain conservatism, even among younger generations. Notions of literacy among students also reflect a slower change in the ways they think and write about literacy and their lived experiences with various multimodal texts.

Jenae Cohn shows this disparity in her study entitled “‘Devilish Smartphones’ and the ‘Stone-Cold’ Internet: Implications of the Technology Addiction Trope in College Student Digital Literacy Narratives,” Cohn points out that the student digital literacy narratives in her sample replicate “an understanding of literacy not as a fluid construct, but rather as defined by the rigid categorization of acceptable and unacceptable social situations,” highlighting the recurring theme of addiction and the dangers of isolation and distraction (85). She calls for more pressure to be placed on reductive binaries and commonplace assumptions in First Year Writing, “helping students to recognize how virtual interactions and tools can not only detract, but can also augment and supplement embodied interaction” (93).

daily lives and the expectations professors may have for the students in front of them in the classroom.

The English department, and the various related disciplines it houses, is perpetually investigating its learning objectives and most recently is reflecting on how to best prepare students in a digital and increasingly ethnolinguistically-diverse age. Discouraging death tolls of this department major chime periodically in sources like the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, oftentimes resulting in anxious soul searching from students and professors in the field. From a more optimistic perspective, the flux of the discipline is a strength rather than evidence of its failing, and is changing further as a result of this dialogue.

In material and theoretic ways, hopes lie with First Year Writing branches and departments to reimagine how to best reach the greatest numbers of students. When writing courses are considered, there is even more urgency that the literacies in our classrooms prime our students for the work that they do in both college and beyond. As a required gatekeeping course, First Year Writing promotes itself as teaching the reading and writing skills that students will need to succeed in college. However ambitious this goal may seem, the types of reading and writing that students accomplish in these classes can set the foundation for their academic careers, and First Year Writing departments have responded by opening up their practices to those with currency in a digital and increasingly-diverse world.

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