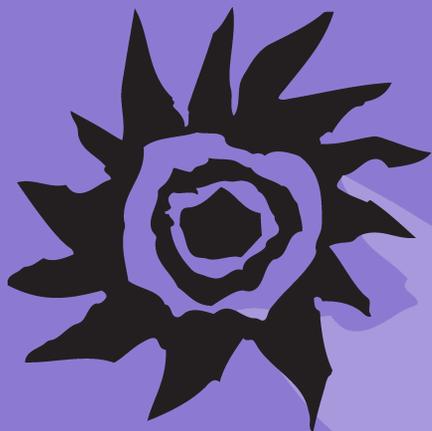


# THE DESIRE FOR LITERACY

## WRITING IN THE LIVES OF ADULT LEARNERS

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## Resisting Nonliteracy: Adult Learners Restory Their Narratives

GEORGE, A SIXTY-YEAR-OLD AFRICAN AMERICAN man who has been learning to read and write during the last few years, recalls an interaction he had with a nonliterate woman while waiting in the cashier's line at the supermarket:

I think it was the store somewhere, and um, the person was ahead of me. She didn't know what she was doing because—see this big sign right there? But it's just like I say: You don't know how to read and write; . . . you don't know what that sign up there saying. And I was able to assist [her], to show her. I didn't do it in a way to make myself look big, doing the way to try to embarrass her 'cause of other peoples behind me. . . . I put it in a way, like, "Well, you just didn't see that, didn't see that word." But I know she saw that word; she didn't know what it is. You don't do it [help someone read] to try to harm someone else, make yourself look big; . . . you do something to try to help somebody . . . in a way that you won't embarrass the person; you know what I mean? . . . 'Cause you got to look at the time when, when you couldn't read or write. I look at it myself . . . somebody had embarrassed me too. Oh yeah, I been embarrassed. It got to the point: "Well, can't you read?" And do you know? I can't. [*laughs*] . . . "You can't read!"

This is George now, proud that he is literate and able to help someone else in the way he would like to have been helped himself, telling yet another story about a time he spent at the store and what

goes on there. He loves going to the supermarket and walking the aisles, and he loves reading the labels on things.

George's memory of intervening in a nonliterate woman's shopping experience to prevent a painful encounter exemplifies the kind of restorying that the four adults in this book engage in as they become more literate. Here, he expresses his awareness of how non-literacy operates. Now that he is able to read and write, George has the confidence to flip the incident into a narrative in which he can be compassionate and act on someone else's behalf.

His display of sensitivity and action also reveals a benefit I gained from working with him. Testimonies like George's helped me, a researcher studying people's experiences of acquiring new literacies, understand why and how people claim literacy for their own purposes. I learned from George and his peers to read carefully between and underneath the layers of stories like this one to look for multiple expressions of how people respond to the ways literacy is used to manipulate and denigrate, as well as to look for what motivates individuals to confront the subject position of "illiterate."<sup>1</sup> Over the years of my study, and afterwards when I extended my work into a longitudinal project with two of the original participants, I found that adult learners already possess critical awareness of how an ideology of literacy has positioned them as less than whole. I also learned through this project that their motivation to seek literacy later in life comes from a long-term desire to read and write that is not necessarily linked to material or ideological aspirations.

This book is the result of a qualitative study of the motivations and writing practices of adults who pursued literacy education by their own choice. Though the project began as an investigation into the reasons people might have for becoming literate, my focus on a few adults' experiences led me—along with them—to look more widely at the roles literacy has played throughout their lives and into older adulthood when, as people who are no longer active in the workforce, they now choose to study.<sup>2</sup> I discovered that the four participants pursue literacy despite material conditions that have repeatedly reminded them that literacy is not for them. Their stubbornness, resilience, and continued desire to right something

in their lives intrigued me as I observed students at the Read/Write/Now Adult Learning Center and eventually settled on the learners who are the subjects of this book.

They go to a learning center situated in an urban public library in Springfield, Massachusetts, a location that is easy enough to get to by bus or car, but a place apart from their prior lives, which contained little print text. The participants provide compelling narratives, yet their stories carry more significance than simply conveying how they dealt with hardship and confronted adversity through literacy education. Their unrelenting wish to become more literate over the course of their lives suggests that the desire for literacy is intrinsic, transcending other, more obvious motivations, such as economic and personal improvement. The accounts of nonliterate Americans tend to go unheard in the mostly literate mainstream because this population is rendered voiceless by a society that equates education with cognitive ability.

To this extent, nonliterate Americans satisfy Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's definition of a *subaltern class*, that sector of the population whose experience counters the dominant and who are, therefore, shut out from dominant ideological concerns. Spivak asks, "Are those who act and *struggle* mute, as opposed to those who act and *speak* . . . ?" (275). Her question,<sup>3</sup> though originally directed at postmodern intellectuals, asks most importantly: Who has the right to speak? Can those people whom hegemonic culture has positioned as voiceless find a space to resist their positioning and speak out?

The common presumption that a person who can't read is a person who can't know invalidates the experiences of some Americans and denies that they have critical perspective. Just because a person doesn't know how to read or write doesn't mean that person is unable to think. Mike Rose has argued that "to be literate is to be honorable and intelligent. Tag some group illiterate, and you've gone beyond letters; you've judged their morals and their minds" ("Language" 354). This judgment is at the root of the embarrassment George speaks of, which he will go out of his way to help another person avoid. In his account of how the woman in the

supermarket was treated, he acts to maintain her dignity. Yet, while he may be motivated primarily by an impulse to protect her from being insulted by the condescending behaviors of more literate cashiers and customers, George also knows from his own experience that even though some people might be unconscious in their judgment of others, at times people are deliberately demeaning and will purposely hurt others by insulting their abilities.

#### ACCEPTING AND RESISTING DOMINANT DISCOURSES OF LITERACY

When adult learners come to literacy centers, they express their experiences in terms of scripts that have positioned them as “illiterate,” a label they have applied to themselves. Wendy Hesford uses the term *autobiographical scripts* to name the narratives projected onto people by institutions, culture, and ideology, “the culturally available models of identity and narrative templates that surround experiential history” (xxi). Dominating discourses do not exist solely in culture outside of ourselves; we also embody them. As Frantz Fanon observes, the colonized individual internalizes the way culture has been imposed on him as he “passes from psychological dependence to psychological inferiority” (*Black Skin* 98). External agents and institutions, such as schools, employers, and church, then reinforce our scripts. In Louis Althusser’s terms, these institutions and organizations inscribe the ideology of the State upon its subjects (128). For example, both George and one of his peers, Lee Ann, speak of themselves as a “dummy” when they reflect on how they were gazed upon in school. When we tell our stories, we (all of us) perform our autobiographical scripts. Experience cannot be expressed outside of socially dictated scripts unless individuals consciously work to construct their autobiographical scripts differently.

Marilyn Gillespie, a researcher in adult basic education and the founder of the center where this study is based, observed that people who attend literacy programs typically express the wish for acceptance into dominant culture. Learners believe that literacy will offer them the agency they have been denied, when actually the power they seek is not tied to literacy itself but to cultural benefits

afforded to many of those who are already literate. Gillespie notes that “for many [newly literate] authors literacy seemed to have come to stand for knowledge itself. To be illiterate was to be without knowledge, opinions, or voice” (“Becoming Authors” 149). But I found that even nonliterate people know there is more to power and social injustice than the written word. George dances around this presumption when he shields a nonliterate woman from an attack on her dignity, using his own literacy to keep her from being targeted.

In spite of his restorying, George, like all of the people I studied, is concerned with accommodation as well as resistance. Part of his drive to become literate is about fitting into a dominant culture of literacy that has excluded him. Finding a place is not simple; there is an unclear line between assimilating practices because they might give people a different role in the social order and opposing practices because people are keenly aware of how those practices have been used against them. As outsiders to the literate mainstream, nonliterate want acceptance; yet they also criticize, resist, and sometimes seek to change an unjust system. Their efforts to strike a balance between accommodation of and resistance to dominant discourses as they become more literate were a compelling feature of the participants’ spoken and written stories, and ones that I examine in these chapters.

In looking at George as someone who shuttles between accommodation and resistance, I find it useful to think through Geoffrey Chase’s explanation of accommodation, opposition, and resistance. Opposition, according to Chase (informed by Henry Giroux’s resistance theory) moves against the dominant, but it isn’t *toward* anything. It remains attached to dominant ideology, in contrast to the disruption that accompanies resistance. Chase’s terms help illustrate the concepts that are so important in Antonio Gramsci’s work, particularly how opposition maintains hegemony whereas resistance has a counterhegemonic “revealing function” (Giroux qtd. in Chase 20); this is what Chase calls the “sustained refusal [that] constitutes resistance” (21). Opposition is still tied to hegemonic practices, while resistance reaches toward something else, opposing

or contradicting with the intent to change. Throughout this book, I examine incidents when adult learners exhibited the “sustained refusal” of resistance. I see such moments as expressions of a turbulent flow that I associate with naming and reacting to conflicting discourses.

Competing pressures to accommodate and resist reflect the contradictions people struggle with as subjects of and to ideology; in the case of adult learners, their experiences cause these oppositions to collide in a turbulent flow. Collisions of discourses create turbulence as people navigate their everyday experiences. In fluid dynamics, *turbulent flow* names an irregular or chaotic movement that causes ongoing, persistent mixing rather than linear or predictable patterns. Turbulent flow is the effect of disruption in moving bodies; it arises naturally yet is necessarily tumultuous. Dominant and alternative discourses are always mixing in adult learners’ experiences of relating to literacy and cannot be separated out.

Most of the time, however, in their daily conversations, the participants in this study express their desire for literacy as Gillespie (“Becoming Authors”) describes it, in terms of dominant ideology, with the hope that education will undo “illiteracy.” They convey a dominant assumption of nonliteracy as a pathology that causes social problems, and of the nonliterate individual as a person who should be treated with remediation, rather than considering nonliteracy as symptomatic of a society that places blame for its problems on certain citizens.<sup>4</sup> According to critical educators Giroux (*Border Crossings*, “Literacy”), Peter McLaren, and Ira Shor, the problem of dominant ideologies is that they do not encourage people to critically interrogate culture. If adult learners were simply to accept dominant ideologies concerning literacy unquestioningly, they would reproduce the very system that constructed them as “illiterate” and go on to subjectify others, thus reinforcing rather than altering their autobiographical scripts.

But the desire to become more literate is often fraught with equally strong competing impulses to quit, to denigrate oneself, to change one’s mind, to remain grounded in work for wages rather than permitting oneself to value studying. Affective reasons for be-



coming literate are even more turbulent than the social and material forces we have come to expect. In their struggle to cope with competing discourses, adult literacy learners sometimes respond in provocative, unpredictable ways that reveal their refusal to comply. The spaces of resistance they create suggest the possibility for counterhegemony within a turbulent flow.

The idea that adult learners might disrupt patterns of accommodation to change their autobiographical scripts may seem out of reach for learners at a literacy center, but that is precisely what the participants in this study did. When the four people talked about their literacy histories, and even more so when they restoried their experiences in writing, they transcended dominant discourses by expressing alternative reasons for pursuing literacy. They did this because their experience continually places them in opposition to the mainstream, which is not necessarily a position they choose. But as people who *have* deliberately chosen their literacy education (sometimes at emotional and social risk), they do have convictions about their decision to study.

They also at times doubt the culture that has marginalized them. I see both contradiction and irony in the possibility that people

who are acquiring new literacies might exercise agency over aspects of their lives in which they have been oppressed. In Spivak's terms, the question is whether the subaltern has the ability to critique her position, which has little agency. Since nonliterate people have been rendered without voice, knowing how and when to speak for themselves (and with what language) is necessarily challenging. Spivak argues, "For the 'true' subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself" (285). The subaltern is limited by her social position, which restricts her ability to speak.

But I have seen that when people do get the space to speak out by constructing narratives counter to those that have been scripted for them, they sometimes want to express a complex critique of how culture operates and how they have been positioned. Through their newly acquired literacy, adult learners become able to voice their analysis in previously unavailable ways.

Their experience on the margins puts people in a position where they, more than many, are willing to question dominant views. At bottom, underneath the predictable moral and economic reasons for becoming more literate, is something else: desire rooted in an affectual motivation to read and write. For two of the participants in the study, Violeta and Chief, the ability to claim text as their own—to have textual agency—and to use it for social action is at the heart of their motivation to become more literate. The potential to act and express themselves differently matters more than what they might gain materially. The other two, Lee Ann and George, reach toward new relationships with writing, yet the act of writing remains daunting and is often a source of frustration. They resist dominating perspectives primarily through their oral critique, by articulating a counternarrative.

The counternarratives people express result from their affectual experiences. Sara Ahmed offers a perspective not unlike Fanon's about the effects of power on individual and social identity. Informed by feminist and queer scholars, she examines how "emotions can attach us to the very conditions of our subordination" (12). In Ahmed's view, affect is itself a form of capital that resides

neither solely within individuals nor with society but rather with both simultaneously. Affect comes from society in toward the individual and from the individual outward, reflecting the power relations that shape society and that also create the concept of Other. Our individual emotions reflect the way power has been acted upon us. This gives us the turbulent flow that we see performed as the result of people's embodiment of their experience, including their desire for literacy.

In the stories that the four participants I focus on tell about their literacy histories, they usually voice dominant views of education, economics, and moral self-improvement. They talk about becoming a "better" person through literacy, but what "better" means varies from person to person and reflects these overlapping discourses. Literacy offers the possibility to become more "independent" (Lee Ann); to "depend about myself" (Violeta); to become "self-sufficient" (George); to "better myself" (Chief). This idea of an improved individual suggests that becoming a better person depends on self-care that one accesses through education. Michel Foucault states that within a society, individuals will take it upon themselves to construct an acceptable subject that fits in with the dominant moral code ("Ethic" 14–15); and Donna LeCourt explains how "the goal of this care [of self] has shifted. Rather than seeking to attain freedom through transforming oneself into a moral subject, the individual believes the route to freedom is through transforming herself into a *knowing* subject" (*Identity Matters* 91–92, emphasis added). Education has become the currency with which a person improves to become a better subject of culture.

#### LOCATING THE ANALYSIS IN NARRATIVE

Literacy scholars may know already that people sometimes want literacy for alternative purposes, but we haven't yet examined the actual narratives people create as counterhegemonic gestures. Spivak points to people in the "margins (one can just as well say the silent, silenced center) of the circuit marked out by this epistemic violence, men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of the urban proletariat" (283), as those whose experience

must be represented differently—by them and according to their own view of their conditions. The parentheses in this statement are crucial: the subaltern position is not adequately represented, except perhaps in a utopian way, as hope for a more literate future. Spivak's question of whether the subaltern can speak points to problems of representation both from the outside and from within.

Concern over representation of marginalized people spurs Spivak's essay; her worry (derived from Gramsci) is with "the intellectual's role in the subaltern's cultural and political movement into the hegemony" (283), a well-intentioned role but one that further essentializes the Other because professional critics tend not to recognize their own subjectivity as influencing their construction of the subaltern. I am aware that I too, as a literacy researcher foregrounding the experiences of a vulnerable population, run the risk of essentializing because of my own conflicting roles as a first-culture person who can both disable and enable the people in this book from speaking. Yet I have tried to be mindful of my own position and not assume its "transparency" and to take responsibility for the work of presenting other people's words, as Spivak insists: "The subaltern cannot speak. . . . Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish" (308). Because I come from the outside and am now publishing other people's stories, I always risk speaking for them. However, the four people in this book are not simply subject to my representation. Their narratives create a performance of self-representation. My (re)presentation of the participants is mitigated by their own accounts, which they present in their own words.<sup>5</sup>

For the subaltern to have the possibility of speaking, it must be by changing the terms of language, speaking on one's own terms and for one's own purposes. Ultimately, Spivak looks for "slippage" in language, places of counternarrative as the spaces of resistance, where terms can be defined differently. Such counternarratives genuinely challenge dominant representations of the Other. Moments of slippage—or even stoppage—in language, when discourses are disputed and cannot be reconciled (this is Jean-François Lyotard's

concept of *les différends*), are instances of turbulent flow, and it is within these moments that people might construct experience differently. This is where there may be possibility for the subaltern to speak.

Studying the writing of adult learners challenges all of us to read a different way because when the four participants restory, they are theorizing. The narratives are not a device to illustrate a theory residing outside of the text. Rather, I would ask that we listen for the analysis embedded within the narratives in much the same way that Krista Ratcliffe and Jacqueline Jones Royster insist that we must listen to our students: intently, honestly, and with the courage to continually interrogate our own assumptions as listeners and readers. One of the types of rhetorical listening that Ratcliffe identifies involves scholars and teachers seeking “opportunities for listening to the stories of others—all others” (39). Radical listening of this sort suggests a deeply reflective approach to the research process, which Royster and Gesa Kirsch term *strategic contemplation*. In defining her project of “listening to speak” to the subaltern woman, Spivak takes a similar position that she claims as the responsibility of female intellectuals. (See Chapters 2 and 3 for a fuller discussion of rhetorical listening and strategic contemplation.)

Conventional literacy narratives tout the goodness of literacy and its potential to convert struggling “illiterates” into more high-functioning contributors to society. Kirk Branch warns of the seductive power of the common literacy narrative, which simultaneously reifies a prevailing view of education as capable of creating an improved citizen and ignores the actual stories people have to report of pain or difficulties associated with their learning experiences (“In the Hallways,” “What No Literacy Means”). The traditional literacy narrative, with its underlying goal of promoting mainstream literacy, may be important for maintaining support for social programs and agencies, but Branch warns of “romanticizing the experiences of these students beyond recognition” and in the process losing sight of the counternarratives people sometimes express (“In the Hallways” 16). What follows is an attempt to call attention to that restorying as a form of theorizing.

George calls it embarrassment, the particular exposure of a person caught naked without “word.” Branch writes about the absence of literacy as a literacy event itself, highlighting the “control, domination, and/or oppression” that surrounds reading and writing, especially when they are denied (“What No Literacy Means” 53). Branch and I discuss this when we write a conversation together. He says: listen to adult learners because they are the real literacy theorists, exceeding the work of published scholars “in the form of the narrative, which come[s] laden with fairly detailed analysis and interpretation” (Rosenberg and Branch 125). The four participants’ voices guide this book.

In the following chapters, then, I take up the task of “seeking to learn to speak (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject” in the way Spivak proposes, through an “unlearning” of privilege (295). This book features the participants speaking for themselves, often without my intrusion. Understanding their accounts relies on readers to interpret their words not simply as uncomplicated stories, or as the work of very basic writers, but as narratives that carry a significance that I do not wish to appropriate.

I think of the four participants in this book as intellectuals in the way that Gramsci believes ordinary people are capable of deep thought even when they are not attributed the social role of intellectual. He writes in *The Prison Notebooks* that “all men are intellectuals . . . but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals[;] . . . *homo faber* cannot be separated from *homo sapiens*.” The one who works (the tool-bearer) is not disconnected from the one who knows (the thinker) (9). This idea of the people as intellectuals appears again in Spivak’s push for the subaltern to represent herself and in Paulo Freire’s argument (“Adult Literacy Process,” *Pedagogy*) that education should be designed by the people based on what they know from their experiences as *thinkers*—a philosophy adopted by the Read/Write/Now center at its inception.<sup>6</sup>

I share the belief that ordinary people have the greatest knowledge of their own needs, and that they sometimes articulate that knowledge by theorizing about their literacy experiences. When I say that they are literacy theorists, I am obviously not referring to

the kind of work that is done by professional intellectuals. I am not defining theory as abstract and generalizable. Theory is, in my view, about people challenging ideas, disrupting them, and finding a kernel of something else, that something that suggests a different way of looking at things based on a set of consistent guiding principles. When people articulate ideas that reflect those principles, and when they reach out to share their conceptual thinking about literacy with various publics, they act as theorists. The four participants theorize about literacy based on their experiences throughout the book and most explicitly in Chapter 5, where we see Violeta and Chief writing with the intent to persuade public audiences.

#### LAUREN: THIS LITERACY WORKER'S STORY

At first my students do service-learning projects with newly arrived immigrants in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Sometimes I go with them into the schools and community centers, where they mostly tutor or do child care. They bring the challenges of their experiences back to class, and this becomes the center of our discussions—the complexity of writing and assimilating: who gains literacy in a new country and who is denied. Along with my students, I volunteer, working with a Haitian woman who is learning to read and write in English. The woman I tutor has never been to school, has never written in her native Creole. She's older now, and as a nonliterate immigrant, the work she can get is cleaning tables and floors at Burger King. We meet at a Catholic agency that provides classes and child care to women and their children. Later we meet at the woman's home. Our sessions are difficult. She needs to pay bills and fill out medical forms. Both she and her husband have health problems. But gaining literacy is hard; the instructions on forms confuse her; she cannot remember how to spell *Bridgeport*. Even shaping letters on the page is a difficulty. We both feel frustrated when she cannot complete functional tasks. I begin to understand how it works: how nonliteracy, coupled with immigrant status (complicated by age, race, and poverty), maintains her habitus (Bourdieu, *Distinction*).

I meet another woman through a library ESL program. She is well employed as supervisor of a university food court, and she en-

joys the benefits of middle-class life. Still, as a food service employee with basic literacy, she is locked in. She cannot advance to head chef, nor can she get out of kitchen work. Even though she has lived in the United States all her adult life and is a fluent speaker of English, her experience of quitting school in Korea in sixth grade leaves her feeling unable to learn. She has developed a system for seeking opportunities to gain literacy but then quitting as soon as she feels threatened. Our tutoring relationship goes on for four years. It is often turbulent because of her pattern of quitting and returning. During that time, I am a graduate student. I do a pilot study for a seminar on Kung Suk's cycle of pursuing and rejecting literacy instruction, and I learn that she is subjected to an ideology that excludes her as a semiliterate immigrant and also that she self-subjects, portraying herself as "stupid" in her own mind. She's acting out Foucault's two meanings of the word *subject*: "subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to" ("Subject" 212). By internalizing these contradictory definitions of discourse, Kung Suk simultaneously maintains and subjugates herself.<sup>7</sup> Her quitting cycle reflects Fanon's description of how colonialism is internalized as a force that one turns upon one's self. When confronting his Otherness in white culture, Fanon notices about the black man: "A feeling of inferiority? No, a feeling of nonexistence" (*Black Skin* 139). By the end of the project, I know that I will continue to work with adult learners, that I am compelled to understand the turbulent opposing impulses that draw people to literacy and also repel them.

I want to work with nonimmigrants, though, because gaining literacy in adulthood is a different problem when it is not about second language acquisition. Then it is about the politics of an educational system that has withheld its promise from some citizens. It is almost kept a secret that many Americans are unable to read and write. Victoria Purcell-Gates reflects on this when she writes about a mother and son who live in "a world without print." There is a

good deal of reporting and analysis in adult basic education, but the topic of adult nonliteracy is rarely addressed in writing studies.

In this book, I deal with that absence and its effects—literacy when it is withheld—and what it means to gain literacy under unconventional circumstances. I write now to highly literate readers, people who make their living by words, by the power they possess to use, even play, with language. I want to tell you about the lives of people who come to writing and reading an alternate way because they value literacy differently from most of us. When I talk about my project with another community literacy researcher, someone who knows my work well, he gives me this imperative: No one has heard these people's voices. If you don't get them out there, they will continue to be unheard.

#### METHODS: USING NARRATIVE INQUIRY TO CONSTRUCT STORIES OF EVERYDAY LIVES

My fascination with the two immigrant tutees' relationships to literacy led me to a larger study of adult learners (all of them US citizens) who attend the Read/Write/Now Adult Learning Center. Learners go to this center by choice, unlike many programs where attendance is mandated by court order. Read/Write/Now is not a workplace training center, nor does it prepare students to take the GED exam. The curriculum is designed by individual teachers to reflect the interests that students express in their monthly written goal-setting statements. "People are serious here," the program coordinator, Pamela, told me when we first met. Despite the need of the center, like most programs, to satisfy some federal and state requirements for funding, she stressed that their overarching objective is to meet learners' individual wishes based on what learners deem relevant to their lives.

Going into a community in which I did not initially belong, I had the responsibility, like Shirley Brice Heath, Linda Flower, Ellen Cushman (*Struggle*), Caroline Heller, Paula Mathieu, and others who have done ethnographic literacy studies in communities beyond their own experience, of making the strange familiar (Sullivan). All of these women researchers have studied literacy practices

in environments they approached as outsiders, whether their difference was marked by place, race, class, or gender (usually it was a combination). The eight months that I spent observing at Read/Write/Now before and during the data-collection period, plus the additional four years I spent volunteering at the center and conducting informal follow-up research, were important for establishing and maintaining relationships with the learners and teachers. I spent the first few months just getting a sense of the place, sitting in on classes and talking with people. Sometimes I took notes, but I was never anyone's teacher. As Cushman points out, the roles researchers inhabit in community settings can "contradict each other in important ways" ("Rhetorician" 21). How would it play out to be a hyperliterate researcher in a community of developing literates? A white woman from the university in a setting of working-class black, brown, and white people? Each time I walked through the doors of the library and entered the learning center, I was "the Other," yet in my academic work the people I studied became "other." Each time I changed roles, I was aware of my own shift in subject position. I am aware now of how the four participants take on a new role as the subjects of this book. Even though they represent themselves in their spoken and written narratives, I write along with them and am ultimately the author of this book. To what extent could my presentation of the people in this study benefit them, and to what extent was the knowledge I gained from them useful only to an academic community that kept them situated as Other?

I did not begin this research intending to study adults age forty and older; however, as I began to seek participants who had demonstrated that they would be reliable case studies, older learners emerged as the most stable population. Their teachers recommended them because of their dedication and reliability. Age turned out to be a significant factor in shaping the study since I was looking at a population for whom literacy was not conflated with work. Case studies of an older population allowed me to probe the question of motivation more deeply because participants were not constructing themselves primarily as workers.

This project went through two distinct phases. Most of the data were gathered during the initial period while I was visiting the cen-

ter a couple of times a week. The four participants were involved in two interviews each, an initial discussion about their educational history and motivations for pursuing informal literacy instruction and a second discourse-based interview. The first interviews were all conducted at Read/Write/Now. The second interviews were designed for individual case studies based on their responses to the first interview and their writing samples. Most of these interviews were conducted at the participants' homes. I continued to collect writing samples from the participants throughout the time I knew them. For two people, George and Violeta, who volunteered to participate in a longitudinal study, this meant an additional two to four years. I also conducted interviews with their teachers.

Narrative inquiry was my primary methodology.<sup>8</sup> Rooted in narrative psychology, narrative inquiry operates from the premise that we craft our experiences by creating narratives to explain them and by listening to and living by the stories of others around us. As F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin describe it, "a person is, at once, engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories" (4). According to narrative psychology, it is possible to therapeutically alter one's life by telling different, emotionally corrective narratives. Throughout my analysis, I used Connelly and Clandinin's concept of "restorying" to examine where participants were reacting to the turbulent flow of their own narratives and how they were respinning their experience by telling a different story.

The close reading of stories is a major analytical technique in psychology, philosophy, literature, anthropology, and other fields in which stories are examined repeatedly in varying contexts. Michel de Certeau explains that interpreting stories is the basis for theorizing about everyday life practices. Researchers rely on the case study and other ethnographic methods to provide narrative models on which to theorize; these narratives allow us to understand how people make knowledge in their everyday lives: "[In other words,] 'stories' provide the decorative container of a *narrativity* for everyday practices. . . . [T]hey represent a new variant in the continuous series of narrative documents. . . . A similar continuity suggests a certain *theoretical* relevance of narrativity so far as everyday practices are concerned" (70).

Working out experience by constructing narratives, and *restoring* experiences through the act of *restorying*, is unique—often essential—to the act of writing. As it is remembered and retold, a story changes, reshapes itself to meet shifts in the writer’s sensibility, an experience that is valued among experienced writers but brand new for people who are just coming to writing. Victor Villanueva reflects on the significance of reconstructing memory in narratives, especially for people of color for whom individual identity is infused with cultural memory. Noting that many other authors have argued for “the need to reclaim a memory, memory of an identity in formation and constant reformation, the need to reclaim a memory of an identity as formed through the generations,” Villanueva indicates how writing can become a means of preserving the memory of identity that has been shaped by colonization (12). In Chapter 4, I examine the ways that the participants restory their experiences, particularly as their representations of memory allow them to create themselves as knowing subjects.

During the literacy history interviews, my objective was to find out why the participants sought literacy as adults. I wanted to understand the purposes they believed writing served and how that understanding had led them to Read/Write/Now. These interviews provided a full literacy biography of each participant and a lens for me to understand the themes in their written texts more fully. Everyone spoke extensively about a longtime desire to read and write better. Their responses typically addressed material conditions in their lives that had prevented them from becoming more literate when they were young. Participants were especially enthusiastic about telling the stories of their previous experiences with schooling. They were also willing to speak about their position as people labeled “illiterate” and to discuss their reasons for wanting to read and write better.<sup>9</sup> Besides questioning motives, some of my inquiry pointed specifically to writing. In general, participants reported that they did not use writing much outside of the program. Most agreed that writing helped them to express themselves and also that it could be a struggle.

The four participants’ written texts and interview transcripts were my main sources of data, and I analyzed the narratives from

the interviews and written texts against one another. I wanted to understand the connection between motivation and agency and how it is linked to power relations. To do this, I designed questions that probed areas of the first interviews where I thought participants might be articulating something more than a dominant narrative. Their texts especially suggested areas of possibility where they were expressing something in writing that was different from what they had said in interview responses. To thoroughly address the features of their writing, I shaped sections of the second interviews that pointed to individual pieces of writing in relation to other written texts and interview remarks.<sup>10</sup>

Connelly and Clandinin note that as research proceeds, participants and researchers engage in mutual storytelling. In their discursal (second) interview, participants and I had a conversation about our previous conversation. My questions centered on participants' interpretation of their own texts and interview comments. Together we looked at pieces I had coded for various features that had emerged in the texts. Although the interpretation wasn't fully collaborative, I did include the participants in the process of analyzing their previous comments and writing (see Chapter 3, in which I talk with participants about their interview transcripts, especially the section on George's discursal interview). In this way, I was able to dig deeper into their purposes and speak with them about impulses underlying the ambitions they expressed.

In his book on in-depth interviewing, Irving Seidman considers the ethical dilemmas and implications of the interview process and especially the relationship that develops between interviewer and participant. Although interviewers typically gain more than their participants in terms of the products of the interview, Seidman explains that there is something significant for the participant that is often overlooked. This is "the type of listening the interviewer brings to the interview. It takes the participants seriously, values what they say, and honors the details of their lives" (92). By attempting to listen without interruption or to steer the conversation, I hoped to acknowledge that each person's experience had worth. The program coordinator and the teachers at Read/Write/Now also encouraged this process. When they recommended case study

participants, they spoke about the benefits their students would gain. It was apparent to them that the opportunity for adult learners to participate in interviews and to have conversations about their writing would be validating.

Once I had finished observing and interviewing, my role at the center shifted from researcher-observer to volunteer. By that time, I was a familiar face, and I came in periodically to help with writing projects. I would speak with people about their writing and review drafts with them; however, I kept some distance so that none of the learners at Read/Write/Now would think of me as their teacher or tutor. I didn't want to reproduce the traditional power dynamic of the educated outsider who has knowledge to impart to the poor "illiterates." By maintaining instead a casual relationship with learners, I was able to interact with them primarily as a researcher who was interested in listening to their stories rather than as a bearer of academic knowledge.

For more than four years after the original data collection, I continued a longitudinal case study with George. A couple of years into this project, another of the participants, Violeta, returned to Read/Write/Now after "stopping out"<sup>11</sup> for a time, and she rejoined my study. This second phase involved one or two interviews a year and ongoing collection of George and Violeta's new writing. During this extended period, I incorporated grounded theory (Charmaz) as an additional methodology because it provided a lens for approaching the data again. As I added new texts and transcripts, I picked up threads of the research that I had not yet analyzed, and I looked for shifts in participants' writing and sense of themselves. The longitudinal studies ended when George and Violeta stopped attending Read/Write/Now for reasons unrelated to my project. In all, I worked directly with learners for more than five years, nearly a year for the original study and about four years for the longitudinal project.

What started out as four case studies changed. Initially, I collected the participants' narratives as data, I coded for themes that emerged in their writing, and I reshaped my interpretation based on what they had to say. But the material took on other meanings

as I used it for presentations and articles. In each new form, with every rhetorical purpose, the analysis changed. The value of the four people's texts changed. I changed. I continued visiting the center and talking with learners about their writing. What started out as a research study ended up as an engaged conversation with these four participants. Even now, when I revisit their transcripts and our discussions of their writing, I can ask myself: What's there that I haven't noticed before? How do I restory the participants' accounts as I continue to shape the narrative of my relationship to them and my own story as researcher, theorist, and teacher? I am not apart *from* but a part *of* the stories. This book is my story of their stories.

#### COMMUNITY LITERACY PERSPECTIVES

Within writing studies, community literacy researchers make the distinctive argument that we pay careful attention to the words of people outside of the formal institutions that ignore their experiences and constrain their voices (George; Gere; Goldblatt, *Because*; Grabill; Parks; Rousculp). Linda Flower distinguishes community literacy from other "discourses of engagement" because of its commitment to exploring discourse "with" and "for" others, rather than representing people by folding their views into existing discourses (2, 19). I agree with Flower's imperative, that community members must convey their concerns in their own voices. The four people I focus on have taught me more from their narratives about how nonliteracy operates and why they now take action to resist their positioning than I could know from another source. Through the process of challenging the scripts imposed on them by restorying their narratives, they theorize about their own experiences, thus moving toward the "rhetorical agency" that Flower claims is attainable.

Other community literacy researchers such as Paula Mathieu also stress the need for critical, honest engagement with those whose experiences are outside of the mainstream and whose voices are usually unheard. In the Chicago-based StreetWise writers group that she researched, vendors who sold street newspapers, many of whom were homeless themselves or who had been homeless, met to

discuss the social and political issues they wanted to make public in their writing. Mathieu shows how by representing their own concerns in their own writing, vendors provided themselves the “hope” of making changes within their own communities.

Concern for the knowledge that people create when they represent themselves is common among community literacy researchers, though competing pressures to comply with their sponsoring agents make it difficult for literacy programs to keep their attention focused solely on learners’ wishes. Jeffrey Grabill makes the important point that literacy programs, whether institutionally or community sponsored, usually “enforce this separation between literacy and life by the ways in which we design literacy programs because we rarely ask students and workers what they need. We rarely ask them to make their lived experiences the center of our collective educational experience” (x).

I engaged with learners in a community outside of formal schooling because I wanted to understand how “literacy and life” are linked. Through their writing and their oral critique, the participants who tell their stories in this book create narratives of resistance in which they become able to revise their own lives and influence the ways they are gazed upon by others. They do this by telling what Flower calls the “story-behind-the-story” through the act of restorying, which does more than expose: it recasts the terms of experience and in this way has the potential to disrupt dominant literacy narratives and create the possibility for social change.

#### LIVING A LIFE OF VALUE

Adult learners are already critical subjects. Their understanding of how they are affected by power may be enhanced by their education, and their literacy studies will certainly give them tools for articulating their knowledge differently (Cushman, *Struggle*), but they are not unknowing dupes who need to be taught how to evaluate their experiences, as some critical theorists suggest. Their critical awareness confirms Freire’s assertion that the oppressed understand the motivations of the oppressor; adult literacy learners already possess “their own thought-language at the level of their perception of the world” (“Adult Literacy Process” 619).

One example that has particularly encouraged my research is Caroline Heller's study of the Tenderloin Women Writers' Workshop in San Francisco. The workshop writers wanted to change conditions for people in their neighborhood, and a few of them consciously sought to influence local public policy. But Heller observed that for the most part, the women writers "came to the workshop not to change the world or even to complain about it. They came to be reassured that they had lived lives that were of value and that could be—through the precision of their own words—felt, understood, and remembered by others" (18). In Heller's writing group, and in their classes at Read/Write/Now, people engage in a community where they are reassured and affirmed. For adult learners, a profound aspect of their education is the validation they gain when they begin to identify as literate. Their work with the student-centered curriculum at Read/Write/Now, their interactions with peers and teachers, and their writing and discussions all contribute to a revised sense of self in which they come to acknowledge that they are not "dummies." Instead, they interact in an environment in which their intelligence is recognized rather than denigrated.

Mathieu and Heller both call attention to the "conflicts of identity" that many people grapple with as writers. The competing impulses they struggle with in their lives are not distinguishable from the conflicts they bring to their literacy studies. This again is the turbulent flow of material and ideological conditions that bubbles up in the form of conflicting discourses when they write. It is what makes their desire for literacy so complicated and so important.

I have found, as others have (see Cuban; Daniell; Horsman; Ray; Rockhill; Sohn), that the yearning for reassurance that they have "lived lives that were of value" is especially meaningful for adults who are in a reflective phase of their lives. The four participants you will meet in this book already have a perspective from which they examine culture, and especially their own subject position as nonliterate. What they are lacking are the rhetorical tools to speak out and publicly acknowledge their position. The narratives that Violeta, Lee Ann, George, and Chief share about their experiences with education, work, parenting, and society exceed the boundaries of what critical literacy can tell us. They also exceed the work of

other community studies that have theorized about learners' lives more than they have considered the participants themselves as experts who can theorize about their own literacy. By acknowledging the ways they construct their everyday experiences, we can get to know adult learners better as authors whose wisdom informs their determination to gain and use their literacy.

Violeta, Lee Ann, George, and Chief: they unfold their stories throughout the following chapters. By listening to these participants speak, we can move beyond conventional expectations of the meanings and purposes of literacy and rely on their words as our models when we shape our literacy programs and curricula.

Adult basic education for older learners remains a vital but largely unexplored area for literacy studies. Rosenberg approaches the people in this excellent book with that most precious human instrument for researchers and novelists: an attentive ear.

—Eli Goldblatt, Temple University

Rosenberg reminds us that even those who are nonliterate have a relationship to writing—usually one charged with violence. Yet she also reveals how that relationship can change, even late in life. Keenly observed and gracefully written, this book enriches our understanding of the extracurriculum of composition.

—Tom Deans, University of Connecticut

The literate tend to take their literacy and all it affords them for granted; they are equally likely to assume that nonliterate people do not know, think, or understand in the ways they do, that the silence of nonliteracy is both intrinsic and deserved. But as Lauren Rosenberg illustrates, marginalized adult learners are quite capable of theorizing about their position in society, questioning dominant ideas, disrupting them, and challenging traditional literacy narratives in American culture. In *The Desire for Literacy: Writing in the Lives of Adult Learners*, Rosenberg takes up the imperative established by community literacy researchers to engage with people in communities outside of formal schooling in an effort to understand adult learners' motivations and desires to become more literate when they choose reading and writing for their own purposes. Focusing on the experiences, knowledge, and perspectives of four adult learners, she examines instances in which participants resist narratives of oppression, particularly when they become authors. Rosenberg's qualitative study demonstrates that these adult learners are already knowledgeable individuals who can teach academics about how literacy operates, not only through service-learning lenses of reflection and action, but also more radically in terms of how students, instructors, and scholars of composition think about the meanings and purposes of literacy.

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