



## *Shaping the Study*

*The choices children make every day about literacy have deeper personal and social significance than we usually imagine. For in their choices, children are defining who they are and who they are becoming.*

JUDITH W. SOLSKEN, *Literacy, Gender, and Work: In Families and in School*

It may seem odd to open our study of college students with a quotation describing the literacy choices made by young children. However, in our own work with the four young people who are the focus of this book, we have found that what Judith Solsken says about children is valid as well for young adults, and perhaps for adults of all ages: they actively use writing—including the sorts of public writing often required of them in college—for the ongoing development of their personal identities, including their sense of themselves in relation to others. Through our study, we have come to understand that this is more the case than we had previously imagined. We have come to realize, too, the significant and inescapable role we teachers have in our students' ongoing self-definition.

In the chapters that follow, we relate stories of these four students—Nam, Lawrence/Steven, Rachel, and Francois—during their college years, using extensive interviews and the writing they did for their courses as the focal points for exploring their development as writers and as people, their interactions with specific teachers, and the nature of the discourses they encountered. In the concluding chapter, we discuss more fully what we learned from these students about teaching and learning as they

are carried out through the writing that students are asked to do at a large university. In this introduction, we introduce key themes, tell the story of our research, and provide our own individual narratives as well as our shared narrative in order to explain the theoretical perspectives that shape our work and how we each came to the understandings we present.

## Writing as a Self-Constituting, Relational Act

As Solsken describes the difficult course that student writers negotiate through their learning and growing processes, Nancy Sommers both highlights and problematizes our involvement in those processes, as she describes the equally difficult course we instructors negotiate throughout our teaching:

Some colleagues fear that if we don't . . . teach [students] to write as scholars write, we aren't doing our job. . . . [I]t is one of those either/or propositions: either we teach students to write academic essays or we teach them to write personal essays—and then who knows what might happen? The world might become uncontrollable: Students might start writing about their grandmother's death in an essay for a sociology course. Or even worse, something more uncontrollable, they might just write essays and publish them in professional journals claiming the authority to tell stories about their families and their colleagues. The uncontrollable world of ambiguity and uncertainty opens up, my colleagues imagine, as soon as the academic embraces the personal. (30)

In setting the terms of public debate between those of us who teach students to write “academic essays” and those who admit “personal” essays into our curricula, Sommers's statement suggests the poles between which a good many of us privately navigate our own self-definition as writing instructors. For even though, like Sommers, we may decry the polarity of either/or propositions, that is, of “academic”/“personal” definitions, believing full well that the academic can embrace the personal—believing that, indeed, all writing inescapably *does* contain filters of subjectivity, whether those filtering lenses are formally and

intentionally evidenced or not—it is still only a very few of us who never harbor doubts, who have managed to silence completely the authoritative voices from our own schooling that associate “process-based,” “student-centered” pedagogies not only with notions of uncontrollable student chaos but also, in some dark recess of our minds, with suspicions of teacher—of our own—laxity and ineptitude. The result of this private struggle is not infrequently some measure of defensiveness in the public debate.

Sommers’s comments resonate not only with current dialogues about the roles of writing teachers but also with historical discussions regarding the role of education generally. We need not be familiar with nor even particularly appreciative of Freud’s entire oeuvre to hear his remarks echoed in Sommers’s; here, for example, is Freud discussing education:

The child must learn to control his instincts. It is impossible to give him liberty to carry out all his impulses without restriction. . . . Accordingly, education must inhibit, forbid and suppress, and this is abundantly seen in all periods of history. But we have learnt from analysis that precisely this suppression of instincts involves the risk of neurotic illness. . . . Thus education has to find its way between the Scylla of non-interference and the Charybdis of frustration . . . which will enable education to achieve the most and damage the least. . . . [H]itherto education has fulfilled its task very badly and has done children great damage. (613)

That we seldom think of Freud as a teacher matters little. His gift was to express, with great clarity and to lasting effect, the sentiments of our modern age, including the sentiments that have prevailed among educators for the last half century. Hence the statement central to his remarks quoted here—that “education has to find its way between the Scylla of non-interference and the Charybdis of frustration”—both reverberates with the “either/or propositions” to which Sommers refers and underscores the inescapableness of our current debate as its terms are defined. That is, if in speaking of education’s necessary “suppression of instincts” among its school children Freud implicitly justifies the Victorian repudiation of Romanticism, so do we. We do so both

when, as Sommers says, we worry that our students' personal essays might erupt in an "uncontrollable world of ambiguity and uncertainty" and when we hope they do.

Such is the paradox in which process-based writing teachers find themselves, and such are the "either/or propositions" in which we are caught, whether the debate they define be public, private, or internal. The Victorian era has come and gone but with the enduring effect of having established its predecessors as "Romantics." So we are called by some whenever we choose Scylla over Charybdis, however we phrase it, whether we opt for a "student-centered classroom" of nonjudgmental peer response or otherwise leave our students writing without a teacher's repressive force; so are we called by others whenever we give students license to define for themselves, in Solsken's words, "who they are and who they are becoming" (2). Over and over we find ourselves made to take a "Romantic" position in a debate of binary oppositions, the terms of which have been defined by our "Victorian" colleagues, including the central term and subject at stake, the student "self." Viewed from either side, that "self" remains seen as a font of irrepressible drives toward self-expression to be or not to be checked by the counterforces of audience and outside authority, and by the durable defenses of academic discourse—in the case of us process-based teachers, not to be checked. But having left the polarities intact, we also leave the impression that, left to their own devices, our students would indeed write only naively "personal" pieces about family and self. Worse, we leave ourselves, as their instructors, with the single unsatisfying (and, again, often doubt-ridden) choice of withdrawing from rather than frustrating those we mean to instruct.

Our work with the students whose stories are contained in this book tells us something quite different. Though they all, in their own diverse ways, speak of the desire for "self-expression," for a voice expressive of their "selves," they are not what we might call "self-content." They do write most easily *of* personal experience, in the same way that most young writers seem more easily to compose narrative rather than analytical pieces. They do write most confidently *from* personal experience, as that seems to be where not just their principal interests but also their primary stores of knowledge, and therefore authority, lie. Nor is the

personal wholly absent from even their most apparently public, academic writing: For each of these four writers, a single impulse born of personal experience seems to motivate writing done for the most apparently distant and disparate assignments. In looking down through the drafts of a single essay or across each student's full oeuvre and in listening to their reflections on the composing process, we discovered that deeply private impulse, often articulated in their "personal essays," suspended like the tenor of some obscure metaphor beneath the academic: beneath, for instance, Nam's writings for his Psychology Methods course, his sense of alienation as a Vietnamese speaker in an English-speaking world and as a devout Catholic in an adamantly humanist culture, or, for another example, beneath Lawrence's analysis of the biblical book of Job, his sometimes suicidal and sometimes death-defying will to construct a viable gay self through writing and therefore in ongoing relation to a volatile, essentially untrustworthy audience and world.

But if the personal is seldom absent from their public writing, neither is a more public concern ever truly absent from their most private composing. All four students speak of the wish, the tendency, to write from personal experience toward something more public, toward essays addressed to an audience capable of understanding and for a kindred group capable of identifying with them. Nor are these young writers—even "basic" writers—so naively "self expressive" as student writers are often assumed to be. A desire, need, or, in Francois's terms, "struggle" to make themselves understood in their writing and, quite literally, to remake themselves through the understanding achieved—to communicate and, through that act of communicating, to construct coherent selves acceptable to others—links the four individual themes. That variously phrased wish to compose a coherent, intelligible self intimates to us a discomfiting awareness these students share with deconstructionists and poststructuralists alike: a perhaps not quite articulated, yet no less real, knowledge that in the absence of any intrinsic, fully formed "self" ready to be communicated, writing becomes less a self-expressive performance than a self-constituting, relational act. Meeting their wish implies for us, in our relationship to them as teachers and as readers, a different role that is neither Scylla nor Charybdis.

## **Our Story of the Research: Methods, Encounters, and Evolving Perspectives**

Like most research projects, this one is as much a story of the “researchers”—Anne Herrington and Marcia Curtis—as it is a story of our “subjects”—Nam, Lawrence, Rachel, and Francois. And so we begin with a brief history of our work together at the University of Massachusetts.

The collaboration that led to this project began in 1988. That year, Anne received a Lilly Fellowship—a University teaching fellowship sponsored by the Lilly Foundation—that gave her two courses of release time for the 1988–89 school year to study some topic related to her teaching. At the time, Anne’s teaching responsibilities included teaching in our College Writing program and supervising ten graduate instructors of College Writing. Marcia was then assistant director of the Writing Program and director of its prerequisite Basic Writing component, serving some eight percent of the entering first-year class, many of them from nonmainstream social and academic backgrounds, and all of whom were required to take an extra semester of writing as a result of their performance on the Writing Program Placement Test. She was also supervising graduate instructors of Basic Writing and teaching one class each semester herself. Given our shared sense that the Basic Writing curriculum needed to be revised, as well as our shared interest in that project, we agreed Anne would use her teaching fellowship to join with Marcia to that end. We worked during the summer months to revise the course curriculum, influenced in large part by David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky’s *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts*. During fall semester, Anne sat in on Marcia’s class and observed its implementation; during spring semester, Anne taught a section of Basic Writing as well. From this project grew our interest in understanding more about the writing experiences of Basic Writing students when they went on to other courses, including College Writing. In learning more about their experiences, we hoped as well to learn more about our curricula, for both Basic Writing and College Writing. To that end, we applied for and received a grant from the National Council of Teachers of English for the 1989–90 school

year. The product of that second, extended study, begun nearly a decade ago, you are about to read here.

While our initial interest in the experiences of basic writers persisted throughout our years of work on the project, our ways of conceptualizing the study and our particular focus changed as we changed and learned from the students participating in the study. Perhaps it was fortunate that our lives as teachers and administrators kept us from finishing the study as soon as—and in the way that—we first anticipated. Time, which always seemed against us because it was in too-short supply, also worked for us in that it both forced and allowed us to stay longer with the four students we write about here, learning more from them as we followed their experiences in various settings in the University, watched their growth and personal self-definition, read their writings, and talked with them throughout it all.

### ***Initial Phase and Changes in Direction***

We did not begin with the intention of studying a small number of students over time or studying their self-composition. Our initial focus is evident in the questions we posed in the proposal submitted to the National Council of Teachers of English to request funding for our project. Interested in learning from the students themselves, we intended these questions to give us entry into their experiences and perspectives:

1. What is entailed for basic writers in learning to write in college? What type of writing is asked of them?
2. What is the nature of this discourse as perceived by basic writers and demonstrated in their writing? How do they perceive themselves as writers and learners? How do these perceptions compare to those of students who were not judged to be “basic writers” when they entered the University?
3. How are individuals in both groups and their writing perceived by their writing instructors and other instructors?
4. How do the basic writers change in their writing and in their perceptions of themselves as writers during their initial three semesters at the University?

Our aim was to learn more about the experiences and writing of students placed into basic writing by studying a number of them in relation to a number of students who, on entering the University, were judged as not needing basic writing. To that end, during the first year, we surveyed a large number of students in both groups (a total of 1630 students)<sup>1</sup> and followed closely a case study group of nine basic writing students and nine nonbasic writing students. During the first year, the research team included Marcia, Anne, and Elizabeth Bachrach Tan, a doctoral student in English who was serving as our research assistant.

We began in the fall by focusing on Marcia's section of Basic Writing. On the first day of class, Anne and Elizabeth were introduced, and Anne explained the study and asked for volunteers, stressing that the aim was "to learn how teachers can teach better and make writing experiences more positive for students." She asked for volunteers, saying, "You need not perceive yourself as a good writer to volunteer; you need only to be willing to help and talk about your experiences writing." And she stressed that participation in the study was not at all tied to performance in the class: that she and Elizabeth would not be talking with Marcia about what was said in interviews until long after the course had ended. Here are Anne's notes on how she concluded:

What's in it for you? Not a lot.

—\$5.00 per interview—a small token to recognize the time you'll give us

—a chance to reflect on your writing

—knowing that you're contributing to a study that aims to help others.

Essentially, we were asking students to be "expert witnesses": to help us understand how they experienced our instruction and what they were trying to do as writers. Also, given the way we presented the reward for them, it was clear that we planned little by way of external compensation for those who volunteered. We say that to stress our belief that those who volunteered did so more out of internal than external motivations—to have some attention paid to their writing and their experiences, and to have a chance to help others by having their views passed on.

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All nine volunteers passed Basic Writing and during second semester entered sections of College Writing, with each student enrolling in a different section. Among the original nine, Nam elected to take a section taught on computers, Lawrence enrolled in the section Anne was teaching, and Francois chose a section offered in his residence hall. In each section, we asked for an additional volunteer, someone who had entered College Writing directly without taking Basic Writing. Rachel was one of these students—although not from a section that Nam, Lawrence, or Francois was in.

During this first year, we collected information from various sources: interviews with students, two per semester; interviews with the teachers of their writing classes, two per semester; single interviews with teachers of a few of the students' other classes; observations of the writing classes students were in; documents from these classes; all of the students' essays for their writing classes—with drafts and any preliminary notes and written peer reviews—and any writings from their other classes the students gave us. All eighteen students signed releases allowing us to use their writings and interviews for our project.

During the first semester, when we focused on Marcia's Basic Writing class, Elizabeth and Anne did all of the classroom observations, sitting in on nearly all class sessions, and conducted all of the interviews, with Anne interviewing Nam and Lawrence twice and Elizabeth interviewing Francois and Marcia twice. During the second semester, the three of us divided the responsibility for following the original nine students plus the additional nine who volunteered from the sections of College Writing. We interviewed all eighteen students and their teachers twice, and observed classes for two three-day periods (one early and one toward the middle of the semester) for a total of six observations.

We did not plan to follow these students' experiences any further than their first year. Indeed, from following the nine students for two semesters and the other nine for one semester—covering ten writing classes—we felt we had more than enough information to work from and more than enough of a challenge to determine how to proceed. During that first summer, we be-

gan organizing the information as we also attended to our usual summer administrative responsibilities. We—Elizabeth included—were looking to identify categories that we could use to analyze and interpret the experiences of each student in ways that would allow us to generalize about connections and differences among them: their prior experiences as writers, their experiences in their writing classes at the University, their perceptions of themselves as writers, and their writing and its change over time. We were hoping to use these categories to code the interviews in such a way that we could use a commercial research software program to help us sort through all the interviews. To that end, we began reading through our folders of interviews with and writings by a few specific students, focusing initially on a handful of them, trying to describe what we found and, as we talked together, to identify categories.

Time pressure crystallized our focus on that first selection of students even as it pushed us forward in our research. With a new school year beginning, our assistant Elizabeth was engaged in other projects for her doctoral studies and no longer available to work on ours; the two of us each had teaching and administrative responsibilities. The only way that we were able to keep working on the study was by proposing conference papers that served to set deadlines for each bit of interpretive work to be accomplished. Essentially, the conference papers kept us working through our individual student folders, shaping and testing our interpretive view. When in the fall of 1991 we were invited to do a presentation of our research project at the June 1992 Association of Departments of English (ADE) Conference in Waterloo, Ontario, we selected three of the four students you will read about here. We used the presentation as an occasion to focus more intensively on Nam, Lawrence, and Rachel, choosing them because they interested us and were quite different from one another, and because Anne had learned, quite by happenstance, that Rachel and Nam had taken the same Psychology Methods course. Having recently presented a conference paper using Nam's experiences in that course, Anne found the intersection of his and Rachel's experiences potentially intriguing. Marcia chose to present a brief sketch of the portrait of Lawrence elabo-

rated here, believing his nascent awareness of the possibility of “re-storying” himself through writing would interest ADE members.

Marcia’s predictions proved right—and wrong. In the question-and-answer period following our presentations, group members, almost to the one, riveted their attention on Lawrence and, with unabashed hostility, attacked his effort to compose himself as a publicly gay person in his writings. Some termed it “expressivism” and “naïve Romanticism”; others, the sort of “confessionalism” that results from “watching too much Oprah.” The words they spoke effectively reenacted Sommers’s warning. Though by and large the language of academic theory, its intensity signaled, to us at any rate, something akin to the more deeply private fear of an “uncontrollable world of ambiguity” Sommers describes as opening up when, quite literally, the academic meets the personal.

En route home from what we came to call “our Waterloo,” we talked about the ways in which our audience’s preoccupation with Lawrence not only demeaned his efforts but, by ignoring Rachel (a woman) and Nam (a second-language English speaker), silenced them both beneath the weight of so much theory. And we asked each other, in our own fumbling words, the question so many writers, especially women writers, find themselves asking: as Nancy Hartsock, for one, phrased it, “Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?” (163). We did not have an answer, but we did have new resolve to pursue the telling of Nam’s, Lawrence’s, and Rachel’s stories and make them the center of this book. To these three, we later added a fourth, the story of Francois, who faithfully maintained an interest in our project and a desire to be included in its publication, yet who also remained, throughout the years of our study, in large measure elusive, and perhaps determinedly so. By then, we had implicitly given up trying or wanting to write about all eighteen students. We had stumbled—or been pushed—instead into what could be called a “longitudinal” study of four students, though perhaps not the kind of purposive longitudinal study done by Marilyn

Sternglass in *A Time to Know Them* or by Richard Haswell in *Gaining Ground in College*.

### ***Later Phase***

Even in the first phases of our research, sorting through students' folders for ways to categorize them and their experiences, we found that aside from the most general terms—e.g., prior experience, perceived purpose for writing—we could not distinguish categories that were useful without being overwhelming. More important, differentiating categories for sorting was leading us toward a kind of atomistic analytic approach that failed to capture the meaning of a given statement for a particular student because it took it out of the context of that student's experiences and perceptions. Generalizing to groups, we were losing what seemed most significant about how each individual was using writing. As Shane Phelan argues in reference to classification based on race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, to understand social identities in other than totalizing ways we need to get specific, "both to specify, through categorical reference, our location in various systems of power, and to insist that there is more to us than the categories, that we have an integrity that cannot be captured in those terms. . . . Specificity demands the simultaneous exploration of categories of social marks and orders and attention to the unique or the individual" (8). And the more we attended individually to Nam, Lawrence, Rachel, and Francois, the more we found that Phelan's skepticism regarding social categories applied to our own initial grouping of basic and nonbasic writers and to distinctions among discourse communities generally.

Certainly the social and linguistic marks these students each carried with them were, to varying degrees, palpable and distinct: Nam, a Vietnamese speaker who immigrated to the United States at age eight; Lawrence, a native-born English speaker, white, male, and quite apparently gay; Rachel, a woman of Anglo-Irish descent, a native English speaker, and from a working-class community; and Francois, a black male who immigrated to the United States at an unspecified age, and a second-language English speaker (though fluent in spoken English). And just as certainly,

commonalities among Nam's, Lawrence's, and Francois's writing performances—which no doubt would have marked them as “basic writers” in most any academic situation—distinguished them from the nonbasic writer Rachel. But the evident cultural, linguistic, and academic distinctions among them were transcended by similarities in the ways all four students regarded writing and themselves as writers, the ways in which they came to claim writing for themselves even as it was required of them by others, and, above all else, the ways in which they saw themselves using writing at once for participation in the University world (i.e., as a mediator between self and others) and for self-reflection and self-fashioning (i.e., as a mediator between self and other selves). Thus the more alike they became for us, the more each emerged as unique.

When we began following the students' work, all four of them were first-year students, and, as a result, they were all persons in transition—and their private as well as shared struggles to find some stability as they moved from past circumstances to University contexts were also clear in their essays and conversations. Writing was part of each individual's personal struggle, and each individual's struggle with writing was part of that larger effort to find a comfortable place in this new, often discomfiting world. At a time of change, they were all developing new writing skills as they were recomposing themselves as human beings in response to other human beings, and, according to their testimony and the content of their papers, what they experienced as student writers had much less to do with any particular sequence of writing tasks or teaching methods than with how they felt they were expressing themselves and being responded to as people. Writing was not a purely academic matter for any of the four.

This is not to say they were careless of their performance as writers, of the formal aspects of writing, or of the forms their writing took. All four cared about writing, worried about writing, and attributed to writing an almost anthropomorphized power to expose them to shame: “my essay was alone,” my writing “had trouble displaying its purpose,” my paper “came out dissatisfied.” Nam worried that at the University he would be identified and excluded by others on linguistic grounds: “If I write, I'm going to mess up.” He also characterized himself as “stupid

in English, but intelligence in native language.” Lawrence, who “hated” to write as a high school student, said in an interview, “I still have a lot of shame about who I am when I write.” Though admitted directly into College Writing, Rachel indicated that, despite the positive reception her writing enjoyed among teachers, she “almost never” felt it was as good as other students’ writing and “often” believed it fell short of the standard: she could recall just one essay she’d “been happy writing” in high school. And Francois, who of the three young men most adamantly resisted identification as a basic writer, yet whose writings perhaps most clearly identified him as such, worried that, if he gave free rein to his writing, he would be taken as “crazy.”

The four also saw, however, even in its failure, language’s potential to reveal them to themselves. Francois, for instance, recalled his confusion after moving to the United States (from an unnamed country of origin, perhaps in the Caribbean) and its English-language culture in childhood; not only did others misunderstand him, but “sometimes I could not even understand myself.” Similarly Nam, feeling constrained by his limited grasp of both Vietnamese and English, expressed how essential language is to self-understanding: “Emotion cannot be truly understood if there is no language to express it.” Similarly, Lawrence, commenting specifically about written language, observed that sometimes he did not realize what he was thinking or feeling until he wrote. And Rachel returned often, in various essays for various courses, to the related topics of adult alcoholism and child abuse in order to understand, through writing, her own family history and, by reflecting on it, to move beyond her high school identity as an abused, self-contemptuous adolescent.

Listening closely to these four young people, we began to sense that it was indeed the very real personal importance writing held for them that occasioned moments of what we might before have identified as simple *resistance*, especially to the sorts of depersonalized “academic” writing that some courses required. Throughout Basic and College Writing, Nam, for instance, used writing to work out private decisions about behavior and about religion: how to acquire self-discipline, for example, and whether to withdraw from secular life to the more meditative setting of a seminary. He also, however, valued writing’s ability to link him

to other human beings and recalled in particular an instance of praise and recognition that Marcia had given one of his essays because it “meant people got what I was trying to say.” Simultaneously freed and bewildered by the encouragement he received from her to move beyond the bounds of the five-paragraph essay learned in high school—an essay structure particularly suited to the sorts of homiletic pieces he customarily read and wrote—he attended Anne’s composition class during the spring semester and read various books on writing, including Peter Elbow’s *Writing Without Teachers*, in an effort to discover new forms to replace the old, and to move beyond what seem to have been for him the comforting limitations supplied by the old forms’ structures. Yet he quite consciously disengaged himself from his Psychology Methods course where, in his estimation, form was all—and therefore empty. And while Lawrence, as you will see, presented an apparently willful determination to compose all personal, self-revelatory essays, we learned in our interviews with him that what might have seemed on the surface mere willfulness was, in truth, an almost obsessive need literally to contain and compose himself by writing, a need at times worrisome to him as well. So, too, for Francois, who seemed of the four most “resistant” to formal instruction, only to reveal in talking with us that his “resistance” was born not only of real confusion but also of an equally real fear that in taking on the style required by others he might lose himself. Even Rachel, who adapted to the impersonal academic mode so readily that she appeared almost to take refuge in it, expressed in her own way similar concerns about ultimately developing a style that would not be “cold writing” but would reflect “who I am as a person.”

Reading the four students’ early essays brought challenges to old definitions as well. In particular, their use of various forms challenged any easy delineations we might have made between “academic” and “personal” writing. An example is Nam’s essay “The Lord is My Shepherd,” written for College Writing and based on his reading of Thomas à Kempis’s *The Imitation of Christ*. Like so many of Nam’s essays, this one may have been a deeply personal and highly personalized exploration of how he might become a better Christian, but it also fell squarely within a long tradition of meditative essays by Catholic scholars and think-

ers, in whose shadows Nam intended to walk. Similarly, the final draft of Rachel's research paper on child abuse, her "documented essay" for College Writing, may have marshaled material from a variety of professional psychology journals to analyze the case study of an abused acquaintance. But in her first draft, the "case study" was not of an acquaintance but of Rachel herself, suggesting that the more objective, less personalized research paper was also a private, self-referential exploration. Her substitutive, metaphoric use of an acquaintance indeed suggested a purposeful technique not altogether different from one Lawrence employed in "Breaking Traditions." Unlike Rachel's "The Psychological Effects of Child Abuse," Lawrence's piece could only be called a "personal essay." Yet, seen in its full context of drafts as well as companion essays, "Breaking Traditions" appears a mirror image of Rachel's documented essay, as in it Lawrence, much in the same way Rachel used her acquaintance's childhood abuse, used his own "coming out" as a vegetarian as both a means and a pretext for widening his discussion to encompass the public health and ethical benefits of vegetarianism—and simultaneously, as we knew and he acknowledged, as a metaphor for his own more profound coming out as gay.

In that first year of our study, Nam, Lawrence, Rachel, and Francois—as writers and as people, as a group and individually—met their various writing tasks with varying degrees of comfort as well as success. And the tasks required of them were various indeed. They faced assignments in courses outside their writing courses that ran the gamut from strictly "academic" to highly "personal": critiques and reports demanding that, in adherence to traditional "academic discourse" conventions, they avoid first-person references, directly stated opinions, and overt connections to individual experiences altogether (for courses in psychology, sociology, and comparative literature); research analyses requiring that they situate themselves explicitly in relation to their subject (for courses in anthropology and education); and unabashedly personalized essays asking that they make themselves the explicit subject of reflection (again for courses in education and comparative literature). Time and again, we were struck by the contrasting and sometimes conflicting demands that these four

first-year students were called upon to negotiate (and by the truly slippery nature of “academic” writing, if it is to be defined by what is actually written in today’s academy).

Yet as tricky as the route through his or her courses was for each of them to navigate, equally tricky was the use to which each student put the writing that he or she was required to do. In their own ways, each seemed intent upon making her- or himself the “subject” of the composing processes in the full sense of the word. However “personal” or subjective their essays may have seemed, each sought a sense of agency through the writing, a sense of both speaking for and speaking to others whose thinking, if not behavior, they might in some way affect. And they used what they knew best, as any of us would, to demonstrate their truths—in the case of these entering first-year students, the experiences they brought with them from home. But they all sought as well to make themselves subjects of change through writing, choosing and sometimes creating new ways to present themselves to others, new ways to represent themselves in the presence of others, new ways to be in the future without losing the thread of who they were and had been. In short, each expressed through writing, and at times articulated in an interview, an impulse to act upon the world even while being formed by it. They were, indeed, not just writers but persons in process.

As we followed Nam, Lawrence, Rachel, and Francois closely throughout their singular and collective struggles during that first transitional year, one truth emerged as clear: Their experiences along with our experiences of them exceeded our own preliminary expectations and previously established categories, including the polarities of basic/nonbasic writers as well as personal/academic writing within the larger academic setting. Therefore, we chose to alter the set of questions originally guiding our study. Though we would continue to address characteristics that led these four students to be identified as basic or not, we would neither compare them according to these categories nor, by comparing them, risk constructing them within the framework these categories established. We would focus our research and its interpretation on two broader, more encompassing and, we hoped, more revealing questions:

- ◆ How are these students developing as writers and people? Specifically, how are they using writing and what are their projects as writers?
- ◆ What specific kinds of writing are they asked to do by instructors across the curriculum, and what sorts of relationships between student-writer and teacher-reader are established within and through the writing process?

We further determined that in order to be true to our originally stated aim of learning from the students “how teachers can teach better and make writing experiences more positive for students,” we would have to continue studying them—studying with and learning from them—not only through their first year but through their entire time at the University. Nam left the University at the end of his first year to enter a seminary in California, but with Lawrence, Rachel, and Francois we did just that, continuing to amass essays written both inside and outside their majors, interviewing each student annually, and speaking with their instructors when we could. We would also have to let Nam, Lawrence, Rachel, and Francois each step forward as the “expert witnesses” we had originally promised they would be. By devoting a chapter to each of these four persons and by allowing each one, through extensive interview as well as essay transcriptions, to speak directly to you, we hope we have kept that pledge.

## **Composing the Narrative—and Its Composers**

We two narrators are not altogether unlike the four students we present to you here: we know that even as we try to let them show themselves, as well as us and their other teachers, through their particular lenses, we also show them through particular lenses of our own. They are not “Nam,” “Lawrence,” “Rachel,” and “Francois”; each has another, “real” name—or, in “Lawrence’s” case, as you will see, another set of given and self-claimed names. “Nam,” “Lawrence,” “Rachel,” and “Francois” are pseudonyms, protecting the students along with their families and teachers—and no doubt us, too—from exposure but also highlighting the inescapable fact that the images you receive of them will bear

our own idiosyncratic tints and colorations. As Judith Solsken writes of the learning biographies she composed from her extensive study of children's literacy acquisition, so too for the stories we have composed of Nam, Lawrence, Rachel, and Francois: they "are more like an artist's sketches than a photographer's snapshots; they represent the vision of particular adults who had particular relationships with the [students] (and with each other) under particular circumstances" (222).

As the particular adults who composed these stories, we believe our interests and histories as people and as teachers of writing, more than anything else, have motivated us throughout our study, from its original design through composing the interpretive stories that follow. And in composing this section, we discussed what aspects of our identities and histories we should make known to you to help you understand how we have approached this study and these four students. That we are both Anglo-American Protestants, of middle-class families, and lesbians certainly contributes to the interpretations we share of the world and of our own as well as others' positions in it. Our color, class, religions, and families marked us for the "mainstream." At the same time, each of us in our own ways experienced disjunctions with the predominately male, heterosexual world in which we grew up. These awarenesses of both disjunction and relative advantage influence how we understand our students. As teachers, we each developed, over time, a particular interest in students who, for reasons of class or race or other factors, are not "schooled" to succeed in college and are treated as "other" by many students and faculty. Between us, by choice, we have devoted significant parts of our careers to teaching and developing curricula for writing courses, including courses identified as "developmental" or "basic": Marcia for fifteen years at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, working consistently with basic writing; Anne, having a more checkered career, including eight years teaching in a developmental writing and reading program at Johnson State College in Johnson, Vermont, and ten years at the University of Massachusetts. We both have an interest in the expectations and purposes students encounter for writing in all their courses in various disciplines. As teachers, we believe in the validity of and seek to understand students' perspectives on their

writing experiences in order to learn more about our own work with them, about the nature of the academic world, and about the discourses students navigate.

We are thus alike in many ways—physically, philosophically, and professionally—enough ways that students and colleagues occasionally mistake one of us for the other. Still, these identifiers of our apparent similarities—like the classification identifiers of which Phelan writes—do not account for our distinct ways of seeing and speaking. Anne tends to foreground context—viewing the actions of individuals as situated in and influenced by social and discursive forces. Marcia tends to foreground each person’s inner life—viewing their texts and interactions with others in relation to their psychological life. We began this study less aware of our differences than we are now. But as it was in our work with the four students, so it was in our work together: the more closely we listened to each other, the more our differences emerged—only to blend again as complements rather than contradictions.

We have tried to leave sufficient tracings throughout this introduction for you to perceive both our shared and our distinct interpretive standpoints and our positions in relation to each student. The distinctions will become more apparent, we believe, as you read the following chapters, since the two on Nam and Rachel have been composed by Anne, and those on Lawrence and Francois by Marcia. These chapters are distinct not only in stylistic ways but also in what we foreground in the interpretations we shape and in the ways we have been trained (in theory and in practice) to shape those interpretations. In order not to impede the students’ four narratives, we have consciously left most theoretical references out of our chapters, choosing instead to outline briefly here, each in her own voice, some of the influences—the other voices—behind our teaching and our descriptions of our students’ learning.

### *Marcia’s Narrative*

Both Lawrence and Francois were members of my Basic Writing class in the fall of 1989, and so, as their teacher, I am very much a part of each young man’s classroom experience and of the nar-

rative I have composed about their experiences. No doubt my presence in Lawrence's and Francois's stories is equally a result of my own style and inclinations, too. Though I have been teaching basic writing for the past fifteen years, my original training was not in composition studies but in literary criticism, with special emphasis on contemporary critical theory and, aptly or ironically, British Romanticism. My doctoral dissertation on the poetry and letters of John Keats drew heavily upon the work of Margaret Mahler and other object relations psychologists of the time. Since completing my degree work in the late 1970s, I have maintained an interest in the field, attending local and national psychoanalytic conferences, lectures, and seminars; participating in psychoanalytic supervision groups; and taking occasional courses at our neighboring Smith College School of Social Work.

I began teaching basic writing quite by happenstance—and, as I see now, quite unprepared. Having finished a three-hundred-page thesis on Keats, I doubted I had another word in me to say about him and could hardly imagine a lifetime ahead trying to discover one. Moreover, job opportunities in the field were slim at the time, and, like many others who come to the Pioneer Valley for school and develop deep ties here, I preferred to find work locally rather than seek a faculty post wherever it might take me. Happily, I was hired on as a teacher and administrator by what was then the University of Massachusetts Freshman Rhetoric Program, just as it was being dissolved and replaced by the current Writing Program with its new and directorless Basic Writing component. With little more preparation than a few semesters of teaching *The Rhetoric of the Social Sciences* as a largely untrained lecturer, along with some previous experience as a graduate student teaching literature, I volunteered for the task.

A “student-centered” curriculum and “process-based” method provided the foundation of the evolving Freshman Writing Program, and while today its approach might be called “untheorized,” its emphases on writing from personal experience and on drafting offered real practical help. Developing topics out of their own interests and knowledge bases gave students a sense of ownership over their own composing processes and, with that, a feeling of authorship as well; revising relieved them of the anxiety of “getting it right” the first time as early drafts

afforded them private places out of which to construct more public—and publicly acceptable—forms; and student-centered classes removed, or at least lightened, the strictures of “teacher authority” and provided the wider, often more receptive audience of peers. But for all the virtues of the process approach, there remained a singular fault, or, more accurately, default: it left any positive teacher role undefined. I was to retreat from the center of my classroom, but to where? I was to abdicate authority to the students, but what was my responsibility to them? Many of them still perceived me not only as the authority in the classroom but also as the authority on exactly the sorts of writing matters they wanted to learn. I was the one who knew what they wanted to know. My retreat frustrated some students and made others more anxious than they already had been. I often found myself frustrated and anxious, too. The drafting process opened a space for learning and teaching to take place: for the students to learn about their subject and their own conscious relationship to it, and for me to teach them ways to communicate that relationship to others. But how was I to enter? In the strictly student-centered classroom of those early days, a colleague and I often joked that, after a seemingly endless line of nondirective questioning and subtle prodding, when we and our students had reached the end of our mutual tethers, we would finally point at their essays and say, “Do this and this and this!”

Despite our joking, I remained uneasy, and, despite their evident desire for more pointed instruction, my students were frequently unsettled when they got it. I have never believed that even so sensitive a writer as Keats could be killed, as Lord Byron claimed, by a harsh review; nonetheless, like most writing teachers, I occasionally discovered myself, to my surprise, embroiled in struggles with students whose rage or reticence suggested they had been deeply wounded by what seemed to me only the slightest, most reasonable critique of their writing—even the hint that their meaning or its phrasing was unclear. Talking with other teachers about such “resistant” students, along with reading in composition and teaching journals about ways to help them—insist that they—recognize their audience’s needs along with their own responsibility to make themselves more easily understood, seemed only to separate me further from them: They were the

students, and I was the teacher; they were the writers, and I was their audience; their job was to communicate, mine to indicate where they succeeded and often where they failed; they were resistant, and I was reasonable; they were sometimes rageful, and I was now as frustrated by my action as by my inaction.

The old, traditional notions of the student-teacher relationship that were still in the air, and in my own consciousness, clearly proved an inappropriate substitute for the amorphous model that “student-centered” teaching provided me. My students were not writing out of any willful solipsism: they were struggling to build their own bridges between private thought and public expression, between their own concrete experiences and the shared world of abstract issues. And they were in little need of a more corrective audience to compel greater clarity and coherence, a sturdy “academic” style. Most of the students, in fact, wrote under overwhelming, even silencing, pressure from an audience they perceived all too acutely to be not just “corrective” but potentially punishing: teachers who judged them “deficient”; English-speakers who judged them “stupid”; the Anglo, middle-class majority who judged them “inarticulate” and whose accepted language system misrepresented and denigrated their experience; and a whole host of figures from the adult world, even family members, who had implied by action or word that they were not worth listening to. As I continued to read their papers and hear them describe their efforts at writing, what seemed to me to distinguish these “basic writers” from more effective writers was not the presence or absence of an intended audience but the character of the audience intended, and the effect it had on them as they wrote. And what they needed, perhaps what all of us need, seemed to be not a “corrective” audience but a receptive and therefore “constructive” audience that they could imaginatively carry with them long after their writing course had ended. According to that need I perceived in my students, I determined to design my role as their teacher.

Over the succeeding years, as I became more immersed in my work with basic writers and in reading the literature on basic writing and composition generally, I found the various strands of my life intertwining in strange, sometimes confounding ways. By the mid and late 1980s, strains of the French post-Freudian

Jacques Lacan and the social historian Michel Foucault, along with echoes of bygone poststructuralist deconstructionists and intimations of social constructivists to follow, were being sounded in various psychoanalytic conferences, lectures, and articles. These same formulations that had gripped graduate studies in critical theory when I was a graduate student in the mid 1970s were beginning simultaneously to take hold of composition theory and to set the base for a series of now “postmodern” theories to come: the derivatives of Foucault, social constructivism, cultural studies, and critical pedagogy. What struck me as most interesting, however, was the split these theories effected between the professional psychologists, whose work was with people, and the psychoanalytic academics, whose work was with theory. Moreover, the rift I witnessed then between psychoanalytic practitioners and theorists was nearly identical to what Kurt Spellmeyer recently identified as “the real split in our profession . . . not between practice and theory *per se*, but between two different versions of professional authority” (“Out of the Fashion Industry” 427), that is, between the experience-based knowledge of writing teachers and the text-based authority of composition theorists. The psychoanalytic theorists seemed not just to describe but insistently to prescribe ways of being in the world that the practicing therapists sought daily to help their clients overcome: ways that took the form and feeling of desperate fragmentation, isolation, alienation, helplessness, and anger. And those therapists’ arguments, with only the slightest changes in terminology, might have been summarized again by Spellmeyer when he elsewhere asked of cultural studies and other “post-theory” theorists whether, “at a moment in our history when many observers have commented on the accelerating breakdown of communities and the spreading mood of cynicism . . . , learning as we now imagine it helps to strengthen our students’ sense of agency and self-worth while replenishing the fragile sources of compassion and mutual aid. Or have our ‘projects’ actually served to discredit local ways of life on behalf of the knowledge society?” (“After Theory” 904).

Despite my own penchant for theory, my own private need to find some larger thought system in which to locate myself generally and my identity as a teacher specifically, I stood then with the professional psychologists, as I would stand with

Spellmeyer now, on the other side of a widening divide from most theorists. This is not to say I saw myself as my students' therapist. A client's way of "being in the world" is the psychotherapist's domain; a student's way of "being in writing" is mine. Yet teachers and therapists alike are both educators as well as interpreters of sorts, and the separate contexts in which we work seemed to me parallel, if not entwined. In the essays of basic writers with whom I worked, I often saw expressed—either implicitly through form or explicitly through content—much of the same fragmentation, isolation, alienation, helplessness, and anger that therapists reported their clients were bringing with them to their sessions. Like Nam, Lawrence, Rachel, and Francois, many other students wrote of the dispiriting or enraging alienation brought by racism and homophobia, the profound helplessness enforced by adult assault and childhood abuse; they spoke of isolation and fear that their ideas, not "good enough" or well-expressed enough, would be dismissed or misunderstood; and the same halting diffidence came through in their writing as a lack of structural coherence, truncated development, fragmented sentences, sheer brevity or plain silence altogether. And as the therapists I listened to at various conferences and meetings were seeking ways to be with their clients in therapy in order to help those clients be in turn less fragmented, more whole and resourceful in the world, I was searching for ways to be with my students in their learning that would help them exhibit greater coherence, agency, and understanding both of and for their subjects in their written expressions.

The array of composition theories then just beginning to challenge process-based teaching seemed particularly inappropriate to my needs and the needs of my students. Straddling cultures and classes, speaking a variety of languages and grappling with their various discourse demands, struggling to locate themselves among often-conflicting familial, social, and academic worlds, these young people were intensely aware of the contingency of their own identities and hardly needed their sense of "self" challenged by me. Theirs were already the very same alternate stories Foucault himself claimed should be told—the "buried" truths to be unearthed, the "local" knowledges to be resurrected, not "interrogated" and replaced by my own. More to the point, sitting

beside them in our computer classroom as they labored to compose, revise, and edit, I felt increasing responsibility for the intimate, inescapable connection inevitably occurring between us. It was a humbling experience for me, and I had no desire to take a position as elitist and, it seemed to me, fundamentally vicious as many of the new theorists proposed.

Then, in the summer of 1990, as a break from my administrative chores at the University, I enrolled in Heinz Kohut and the Principles of Self Psychology, a course offered through the Smith School of Social Work. Conducted by an extraordinary teacher and therapist, Mildred Moskowitz, it left an indelible imprint on my perceptions and teaching practices. It was not that Kohut's views differed radically from the psychological theories of earlier as well as contemporary object relationists; in fact, though Kohut himself seldom acknowledged his connections with others in the field, the bridges are apparent. Nor did his principles contradict the prevailing climate of opinion outside psychology's domain; Kohut's concept of a "self" inextricable from the "selfobjects" surrounding it suggests numerous parallels with recent poststructuralist and social-constructivist thought. But in these terms, as used by Kohut and his successors, I found a theoretical vocabulary with which to speak and think about my students' "self-expressions" (at a time when "selfhood" was quickly falling out of fashion), and, in the conceptual framework this vocabulary defined, a metaphor for the kind of constructive audience I hoped to provide.

Kohut first distanced himself from and then challenged Freudian drive theory, rejecting what he perceived to be its mechanistic foundation, its bulwark notion of a primary, all-determining conflict between instinct and reality. In the place of Freud's ego-id-superego triad, he proposed instead the self-in-relationship-to-its-selfobjects as the core of individual personhood. With this substitution, Kohut simultaneously replaced Freud's notion of instinctual aggressive and sexual drives, and their critical suppression, with the more hopeful vision of a "self" flourishing from birth onward amid, to borrow from D. W. Winnicott's "good enough mothering," a world of good enough selfobjects. Distinct from the "person," "individual," or "subject" *per se*, the

“self” can be defined as a mutable yet enduring psychological structure experienced by the subject as a center of unity and initiative, evoked and maintained throughout life by its harmonious relations to selfobjects. In *How Does Analysis Cure?* Kohut describes the three-part involvement of the felt self and its selfobjects:

Throughout his life a person will experience himself as a cohesive, harmonious, firm unit in time and space, connected with his past and pointing meaningfully into a creative-productive future, only as long as, at each stage in his life, he experiences certain representatives of his human surroundings as joyfully responding to him, as available to him as sources of idealized strength and calmness, as being silently present but in essence like him, and, at any rate, able to grasp his inner life more or less accurately so that their responses are attuned to his needs and allow him to grasp their inner life when his is in need of such sustenance. (52)

In turn, Kohut defined the “selfobject” not as an “object” per se but as an object in a particular functional relationship with the self: in simplest terms, an object is a “selfobject” when experienced by the individual as contributing to his or her sense of self. Though the nurturing parent is almost always the first selfobject, she or he is by no means the last. Kohut insisted, over and again, that the need for selfobjects is normal, humanly natural, and life-long. And the host of potential selfobjects is limitless. Restricted to neither the familial nor even the human realm, it may include such persons as one’s parents, peers, mentors, sexual partners, and personal heroes, or such abstract entities as religious or political symbols, pictures, philosophies, texts, and even self-sustaining discourse most often encountered, Kohut observed, in the “reassuring magic of hearing one’s mother tongue on returning from foreign language excursions” (200). Indeed, any and all of these objects may function as *selfobjects* so long as they enhance one’s sense of a cohesive, enduring *self* by providing a “mirroring” responsiveness to the person’s presence, a source of “idealized” strength in their own presence, or a felt sense of “twinship,” what Kohut elsewhere called the all-important affirmation of one’s existence as a “human among humans.”

“Twinship” selfobject relationships involve people or their symbolic representatives who, by their likeness, affirm one’s sense of belonging—to a family, to a group, to a society, to the world as a whole. The presence of such selfobjects—most often conveyed via the multiplicity of familiar cultural constructs such as religious, political, and linguistic systems and signs—results in a sense of competence and confidence in the social world. Their absence, Kohut hypothesized—resulting from the absence of “*human humans*” from the home environment of children (*How Does Analysis Cure?* 200) and the subsequent absence of kindred humans from the social environment of adults—leads to something far more dire than a lack of competence. It leads to what Kohut envisaged as the central problem and personality distortion of the Western world today: not, that is, to the guilty and hysterical symptoms of Freud’s oppressive Victorian society, but to the “crumbling, decomposing, fragmenting . . . empty self”—the not-quite- and sometimes far-from-human self—epitomized in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, inscribed in almost every great art work since, and alternately described and demanded by many poststructuralist theorists:

The musician of disordered sound, the poet of decomposed language, the painter and sculptor of the fragmented visual and tactile world: they all portray the breakup of the self and, through the reassemblage and rearrangement of the fragments, try to create new structures that possess wholeness, perfection, new meaning. (*The Restoration of the Self* 286)

With his emphasis on the essential continuity of selfobjects through each stage of life, Kohut also redefined the course of “normal” development: Maturity is marked neither by the suppression of infantile instincts, as in Freud’s paradigm, nor by a repudiation of self or selfobjects. Rather, Kohut concludes, as “we must have a healthy biological apparatus in order to utilize the oxygen that surrounds us, but we cannot live without oxygen,” so the healthy progress of a self does not diminish but instead increases its natural capability to use, freely choose, and, when necessary, even envisage or create selfobjects for its own sustenance (*How Does Analysis Cure?* 77). “Conflicts in the realm

of object love and hate,” he observed, are not, as they are in traditional Freudian theory, “the primary cause of psychopathology but its result” (52). Depression, fragmentation, rage, and the like all arise, that is, when present selfobject failures threaten to repeat deeply felt selfobject failures of the past.

The shifts Kohut’s theories produced in psychoanalytic inquiry replaced the essentially adversarial model of classical analysis with another model and shifted the position of analysts themselves from outside to inside the psychoanalytic process. Fully implicated in the analysis, self psychologists have come to see the analytic process as a fully intersubjective experience between analyst and patient. No longer charged with leading the patient from merger to independence or, in more classical Freudian terms, from infantile narcissism to mature altruism, they no longer see themselves as “interrogators” of their client’s various “defenses” and “resistances.” Their role, instead, is to remain interpreters of their client’s observations, but always to interpret empathically, that is, from the client’s point of view. Resurrecting Freud’s own earliest injunction to *listen afresh* to the patient, Kohut emphasized “sustained empathic inquiry” and what he called “vicarious introspection” as the primary therapeutic technique. This mode of understanding requires that analysts be, as clinician E. A. Schwaber put it, “tuned more sharply to how it feels to be the subject rather than the target of the patient’s needs and demands” (qtd. in Bacal and Newman 247) and more ready to acknowledge that confusion, incoherence, and fragmentation of the client’s self might well be protective reactions to the analyst’s own actions, to his own present failure to fulfill the selfobject functions essential to fruitful analysis and growth. For when empathy is sustained, the act of interpreting becomes as therapeutically significant as the material content of interpretation. Responding empathically, the analyst comes to function as a selfobject to the patient’s self—*mirroring* the patient’s unique capacities and needs and thereby affirming the self’s inherent worth; providing the trust-evoking, soothing experience of an *idealizing* relationship; affording a sense of *twinsip* from which the patient might gain a feeling of being a competent and skilled presence among kindred presences—thereby restoring to the patient, through the in-

ternalization of these functions, the enduring and resourceful structure of a healthy self.

The impact of Kohut's principles on therapeutic practice was profound. As Robert Stolorow *et al.* have written:

Once an analyst has grasped the idea that his responsiveness can be experienced subjectively as a vital, functional component of a patient's self-organization, he will never listen to analytic material in quite the same way. (*The Intersubjective Perspective* 17)

Nor do I read or respond to student writing in quite the same way since applying Kohut's concept of the self-selfobject relationship—not as a model perhaps, but certainly as a metaphor for the teacher-student and writer-audience relationship I enter every day that I enter a writing classroom. Even the very phrasings of Kohut's theory seem to lend themselves as metaphors for teachers, especially teachers of writing, and to suggest new meanings for common phrases of our own. For when Kohut defines the healthy felt self as “a cohesive, harmonious, firm unit in time and space, connected with his past and pointing meaningfully into a creative-productive future” (*How Does Analysis Cure?* 52), it takes but a small stretch to recognize a structural likeness not only in what most of us would want for our student writers but also in what we want for the writing they produce. It also suggests redefining our notion of “self-expression,” including self-expression manifested in writing, not as solitary act of Romantic self-revelation or even discovery, but as the sort of self-constituting act intimated in the “struggles” carried on by the four young writers of our study, carried on always in a relationship—in a readership—with others. Hence the step to seeing the likeness of a potential selfobject in the audience addressed, whether an audience present or imagined, becomes equally short. And in accepting my place within my students' audience, often as the representative member of that audience, I acknowledge my responsiveness as vital to their written expressions. Again I want to emphasize that I do not see myself *as* an analyst. But *like* an analyst, I am, by my position as a teacher, among each student's limitless host of potential selfobjects. The analyst's role is to be a

successful selfobject where others have failed; the analyst's job is to restore to her patient, through her own effective responsiveness and the patient's resultant internalization of effective selfobject functions, an equally successful self structure. Whether I succeed or fail in my role may well depend upon how effectively I help cultivate in my students similarly enduring and resourceful structures capable of recognizing, seeking out, and even imaginatively re-creating for themselves as writers successful *and* success-producing selfobject audiences (audiences for whom they can write purposefully, coherently, and gladly) in and beyond my classroom. To do so, again like (not as) the analyst, I make every effort to employ "sustained empathic inquiry"—more than either "non-interference" or suppressive instruction—as my primary pedagogical technique, "reading afresh" students' writings, standing alongside them in their quest for coherence and "self-expression," tuning in more sharply to "how it feels to be the subject rather than the target" of their communicative efforts, and generally following the advice Mina Shaughnessy gave basic writing teachers twenty years ago: searching "in what students write and say for clues to their reasoning and their purposes, and in what [I do] for gaps and misjudgments" (*Errors* 292). In doing so, I often discover that the resistance I meet in students is really my own.

Recognizing the fully relational self behind every act of written or spoken expression does not mean unflagging approval and endless nods of comprehension. Kohut was at pains throughout his career to separate "empathy" from any sort of "I'm-okay-you're-okay" empty agreement. Teachers should be, too. Empathy requires the more complex, honest act of truly listening for the meanings behind our students' written and oral expressions in order to convey a sense of true understanding—an understanding that recognizes when to mirror their successes along with their struggles, when to offer the idealizing force explicit instruction can supply, when to acknowledge the alienating as well as sustaining powers held by new and old discourses and discourse communities. It requires, in essence, modulating our instructional responses according to our students' personal and educational needs rather than according to our own personal, theoretical, or institutional desires. But while empathy requires all this of us, it

may well present in return a place for students and teachers together beyond Freud's Scylla and Charybdis.

### *Anne's Narrative*

I am drawn to studies of writing in contexts, studies that observe how texts are used and that seek writers' and readers' understandings of those texts and their interactions around them. I am drawn to such studies both as a teacher-reader and as an educational researcher seeking to answer questions about teaching and learning, in my own and others' classrooms. As a charge to myself, I often return to Mina Shaughnessy's injunction that to understand the challenges facing students as they learn to write, we need to turn to "the careful observation not only of [our] own students and their writing, but of [ourselves] as writers and teachers" ("Diving" 236). My research interests have also been influenced by Janet Emig's general claim that "writing represents a unique mode of learning . . . active, engaged, personal . . . in nature" ("Writing" 122, 124), and by Lee Odell's more specific questions about the relation between writing and learning: "What does it mean to learn history? What does one have to do in order to think and write like a biologist?" ("Process" 49).

I was drawn to such studies, in part, because of my formative teaching experience in a developmental program at Johnson State College in the 1970s. With an M.A. in literature and my own life's background, I was not prepared for the students I met in my classes. Like them, I was the first generation in my family to attend college; unlike them, I was from a middle-class family and had been "schooled" fairly well for college. In contrast, many of my students were from low-income families; many had received a poor education, some dropping out and completing GEDs; and many were not familiar with essay forms and felicities of grammar, let alone accustomed to reading college-level textbooks and doing research papers. While I was searching for where and how to begin teaching in our writing and reading classes, I and other colleagues were simultaneously seeking ways to reinforce and extend students' development as readers and writers beyond our classes. As we talked with colleagues from other departments, we became interested in writing across the

curriculum (WAC) theory and practice because of the promise it seemed to offer for helping our students develop as thinkers and writers. Looking at assignments from courses in such disciplines as economics, geology, and history underscored for me the variety of kinds of thinking and writing that students are asked for across disciplines, and also the variation in conventions. From students, I learned of the value they felt writing contributed to their learning in some (but not all) courses and of how influential teachers were in shaping their perceptions of the relative value of writing in both positive and negative ways.

The more I observed and heard from teachers and students, the more I wanted to know: What kind of learning was occurring for students in their courses across the college? How were they experiencing that learning? How did our interactions with our students shape their learning experiences? With those questions in mind, I went back to school for a Ph.D. in composition and rhetoric.

Reading the work of James Britton, with his dual focus on social and psychological perspectives, had a formative influence on me. His conception of writing in terms of the personal, developmental functions it can serve for writers, as well as its public functions, guides my thinking as a teacher and researcher. Further, I continue to find validity in his notion of the spectator stance for writing. Drawing on the work of psychologist D. W. Harding, Britton theorizes that the spectator stance is that stance in which we attempt to make sense of our lives by stepping back, contemplating experiences and the feelings associated with those experiences, and even *reconstructing* them. The personal function of such writing is, he writes, “to preserve our view of the world from fragmentation and disharmony, to maintain it as something we can continue to live with . . .” (117). While Britton links this stance and function only to children’s make-believe stories, gossip, poetry, and fiction, it is evident in other genres as well, notably personal essays and journal writing. Kohut’s theory offers a fuller articulation of this psychological need to quite literally *make* sense of our lives by creating coherence and continuity, a function that writing can sometimes further. This conception of writing has played an important role in my teaching although it did not figure in my earlier studies. Its presence is more evident in

this study, including as it does our own writing classes and, more important, considering these students' experiences over time.

In earlier studies and this one, I have also found social perspectives particularly valuable for understanding what students are being asked to learn through the writing they do and how that learning is shaped in specific courses. Sociolinguistic theory (e.g., Halliday, Hymes) offers a lens for viewing contexts for learning from two perspectives: (1) the disciplines and institutions from which derive many of the values and genres that students are asked to learn; and (2) specific classrooms where those values and genres are articulated by teachers and learned by students. From my earlier studies, drawing also on rhetorical theory (Bazerman, *What Written Knowledge Does*; Bizzell, "Cognition"; Toulmin), I have seen how, through the writing they do, students are learning ways of thinking (e.g., formulating issues and making and justifying claims) as well as ways of presenting themselves (e.g., social roles and purposes for writing).

My interviews with students—including those in a class where revising was stressed (see Herrington, "Composing"; Herrington and Cadman)—underscore that for some students, more than for others, this learning was not a passive acculturation process, but a negotiation where they were actively considering how they would position themselves in relation to teacher and disciplinary expectations. These expectations are experienced with varying degrees of force, depending not only on the learner but also on the teacher. Drawing on Foucault, poststructuralist and critical linguistic theories of language stress these questions of power in relation to language. For these theories, the key term is discourse, instead of speech communities. I find this a useful term for thinking about writing in college because it focuses on how beliefs, ways of thinking, and social subjectivities are embedded in language and maintained and learned through language. As we inhabit discourses, we take on "particular orientations to the world" (Luke 15). A discourse could be a general social perspective—e.g., conservative Republicanism or feminism—or a more specialized one associated with academic pursuits—e.g., poststructuralism or student-centered process theory. Further, and I realize I am simplifying here, we can consciously intermingle these orientations (e.g., a feminist poststructuralism), and we can

contribute to changing discourses as we use language.

To say that these theories stress the constitutive power of discourse is to say that the link between identity and learning to write a given genre involves much more than just learning neutral intellectual and writing strategies, and is much more intimate than learning to take on a particular persona or mask that is somehow easily separated from identity. When we read and compose specific texts and use particular kinds of language repeatedly—particularly those associated with an established genre—we inhabit particular ways of making sense of things and thus we inhabit a particular subjectivity, a particular position. As Allan Luke writes, “through texts, social identities are constructed and remade. . . . It is through texts that one learns how to recognize, represent and ‘be,’ for instance, a ‘rapper,’ a ‘learning disabled,’ a ‘loyal American’” (14)—or, I would add, a certain kind of composition teacher-scholar, biologist, anthropologist, or student. Taking on this orientation as a teacher has made me more reflective about essay projects I assign, particularly the discourses that may only be implicit in those projects. In turn, I now also try to teach students ways to be more aware of the discourses that shape their own thinking and better able to identify discourses they are asked to learn.

When we attempt to learn a new discourse, particularly as writers, we are entering a subjectivity, and how we experience that subjectivity depends on how it fits with our private/personal sense of identity and values. When the fit seems quite natural, we may take on a particular orientation without critical awareness that we are doing so. At the other extreme, if we are asked to take on an orientation that violates our basic sense of self, then we may feel assaulted. For instance, if I were asked to take on, through writing, the language and orientation—the social subjectivity—of a homophobic person, I would resist aggressively. Far from feeling a compatibility or shared identity, I would feel an extreme disjunction, an assault on my identity. In the writing we ask students to do in our courses, they face similar situations, situations where trying to do a particular writing assignment is far from a detached activity and where questions of personal identity can be at stake. As the experiences of all four students illustrate, they negotiate these situations with a good deal of awareness

of what is happening: they are not shaped in deterministic ways by disciplinary discourses, although they definitely feel the force of those discourses. (See Thesen for a related critique of deterministic views of discourse forces.)

Awareness of this link between personal identity and the social subjectivity created and maintained through writing requires us, as teachers, to be more reflective about the nature of the genres we assign, how they position writers, and the ways in which we present them. More powerfully than the rhetorical and sociolinguistic theory I had read in graduate school, critical discourse theory and what Brodkey calls critical literacy offer a frame for this reflection. Arguing that the force of discourse is defined by how it is presented in specific situations, and, particularly, by the power dynamics associated with that language use, Norman Fairclough writes,

Language use is . . . constitutive in both conventional, socially reproductive ways, and creative, socially transformative ways, with the emphasis upon the one or the other in particular cases depending upon their social circumstances (e.g., whether they are generated within broadly stable and rigid, or flexible and open, power relations). (131)

The social circumstances we focus on here are college classrooms, including the power relations between students and teachers and, linked to that, the implicit power relations between students and the genres/discourses they are asked to inhabit. In Fairclough's continuum, at one end, the teacher holds all the power, and genres are presented with determinative force to be reproduced rigidly by students; at the other end of the continuum, students also hold some power and genres are presented as more flexible and open to creative reworking by students.

In *Textual Orientations: Lesbian and Gay Students and the Making of Discourse Communities*, Harriet Malinowitz critiques scholarship in composition that views the learning of academic discourses in socially reproductive ways, posing these questions that parallel Fairclough's concerns:

What are our students learning when they learn to mimic a discourse, a posture, a stance? What aren't they learning? Might

they learn something very different if they were to examine the ways in which the privileged discourse of the university represents particular agendas, perspectives, and principles and contrasted these with the ways other discourses—in which they play a part—represent particular agendas, perspectives, and principles? (83)

Malinowitz, with others, is stressing the importance of naming discourses for the socially and institutionally powerful constructs that they are and making room for students to question privileged discourses and consider alternatives.

Lisa Delpit makes a related point, stressing the connection between discourses and how speakers/writers experience the worldviews and social subjectivities those discourses may ask them to take on. Speaking specifically of the importance of teaching African American students to speak and write in the language of “the culture of power,” she implicitly distinguishes between learning to use the “superficial features”—i.e., the grammar and locutions—of the dialect that is called Standard English, and using that dialect and associated genres in transformative ways. As examples of those who do the latter, she cites Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, Martin Luther King Jr., and bell hooks. As Delpit argues, the alternatives are not solely to resist and remain on the outside or capitulate and be colonized. Resistance can also be coupled with efforts to acquire and reshape the dominant discourse.

Delpit recognizes as well, however, that, in some instances, trying to take on a certain language and/or discourse may pose too great a conflict with or violation of one’s personally felt identity. In this situation:

[Teachers] must understand that students who appear to be unable to learn are in many instances choosing to ‘not-learn’ as Kohl puts it, choosing to maintain their sense of identity in the face of what they perceive as a painful choice between allegiance to ‘them’ or ‘us’. The teacher, however, can reduce this sense of choice by transforming the new discourse so that it contains within it a place for the students’ selves. (*Other People’s Children* 163–64)

Here, and throughout her work, Delpit stresses the important role of the teacher at the point of articulation of a discourse: in a

classroom working with specific students. In some instances, the degree of transformation may be limited: for example, for Nam, I doubt any teacher could have transformed the research paradigm taught in the Psychology Methods course so that it would have provided a place for his sense of himself as a devoted humanitarian and deeply introspective Christian. In this instance, as in others, a choice has to be made between discourses that may be experienced as incompatible. Still, that choice can be represented by teachers as a viable choice, and room can be made for respectful discussion about the differing alternatives, particularly their basic orientations and epistemologies. Further, when students seem to be choosing to “not-learn,” we should recognize that the choice may be related to their sense of personal/social identity, and may even be a defense against an assault on that identity, as was the case for Francois when asked to represent a racist discourse in a writing assignment for a sociology course.

Discourses can also be felt to enhance oneself. Here, I find Kohut’s notion of the selfobject particularly powerful in explaining why any one of us finds a particular worldview or discourse attractive: it offers a feeling of identity, a fit with who we feel ourselves to be. Drawing on poststructuralist theories of discourse instead of psychological theories, Linda Brodkey writes, “a discourse is attractive because its worldview and subject positions defend us against our experience of being at odds with ourselves, others, and the world” (18–19). Eli Goldblatt makes a similar point. In *Round My Way: Authority and Double-Consciousness in Three Urban High School Writers*, Goldblatt theorizes that we all need a sense of a sponsoring institution from which to speak, an institution to *authorize* our speaking. As I interpret him, I believe he is using *institution* as analogous to *discourse*, i.e., to indicate a cluster of beliefs and ways of seeing. Referring to the situation facing anyone who seeks to write, Goldblatt explains:

As authors, they must feel a sense of identity with the sponsoring institution itself, so that to elaborate institutional categories is a satisfying and personal goal for the writing. To function as an author, the writer must become more and more fused

*Shaping the Study*

with the life of the institution itself and feel her or his “work” contributes in some way to the “body of knowledge”—the institutional substance—in the field. Writers need to feel a stake in their writing project. . . . (46)

In a comment that refers specifically to students identified as “basic” writers but that pertains, I believe, to all, Goldblatt argues:

What is “basic” about basic writers is that writing for them involves a fundamental power negotiation with the institutions that live by and for writing. They hold the tickets that admit them to classes and reserve rooms for them in the dorms, but the crucial question of their entrance into the discourses of college life revolves around whether or not they can see themselves, or be seen by others, as representing the institutions they are required to serve as authors-in-training. It is one thing to buy the sweatshirt of your school; it is quite another to be asked to think of yourself as a sociologist, an astronomer, or a literary critic. (45)

Whether they will be able to find or create this “institution” that provides them with a sense of responsiveness and that they can imagine themselves a part of is a crucial question for all college students. Goldblatt points to the integral role teachers play as gatekeepers and to the question of whether they are able to see students for their potential rather than solely for their initial skills and command of the surface features of written language. From Kohut, we see the important role teachers can play as mentors, as ones to imagine oneself joining with. Another determining factor will be whether students can imagine that “institution,” that discourse, as helping them further important personal goals—in other words, whether that discourse offers a way of joining with others and linking private with public interests.

Saying that we composition scholars need to reconceive how we think of the relation of *personal* to *academic* writing, Malinowitz argues that the question is not whether references to personal experience are present in a text, but whether the writer feels the text serves as a way “to relocate the articulation of this experience from private to public realms” (*Textual Orientations* 172). Students—as were Nam, Lawrence, Rachel, and Francois—

are seeking to make this move as they learn and create for themselves ways of thinking and writing, as well as social subjectivities, that will enable them to accomplish personally important projects in public forums. In so doing, they are, as Solsken writes, “defining who they are and who they are becoming” (2). To understand this becoming and our implications in it as teachers, Marcia and I have come to believe—as we aim to demonstrate in this book—that it is important to view our students’ learning and our work with them from dual psychological and social perspectives.

### *Common Ground*

We began this study without being so conscious of these differences in theoretical perspective and discourses. Indeed, we began because of our sense of shared values in teaching and a shared interest in learning more about students’ experiences from their own perspectives. That common ground remains and has broadened. Along the way, as we began to interpret interviews and texts, discuss possible key themes, and compose drafts, we became more conscious of our distinct perspectives, and we have worked since to understand their relationship. Most often, we have been struck by how our approaches often lead us to the same conclusions—certainly to the key themes that trace through our chapters—yet each with insights not brought forth by the other. At a few points, when we discussed something one of us questioned or did not understand, we came up against the anxiety that perhaps our views were incompatible. We no longer have that anxiety. Through talking and listening, trying to think through the language and gaze of the other, translating into our own language and saying back, questioning, we have come to a fuller understanding of what we had felt in the beginning: the compatibility of our social and psychological perspectives. Most important, we have learned from each other in ways that have shaped and enriched each of our interpretative approaches, so that what is foregrounded in one chapter is also present as a harmonic counterpoint in the next. Because we honor each other’s approach and voice, we have chosen not to try to write each chapter in a merged voice, although each of us has contributed

to the chapters authored by the other. For each case study, regardless of who was the primary author, both of us have read through all interview transcripts and the students' writings and collaborated in shaping emerging interpretations. Further, for each case study, we have also read and given feedback on draft after draft, revising interpretations through the give and take of discussion and reading drafts of other chapters. In short, while we divided up responsibilities for primary authorship of the chapters, we collaborated throughout.

A common stance that has guided both of us in composing our interpretations has been to read each student's work with the same respect that we would accord established authors. While we were already personally inclined to this approach as teachers and researchers, it became more imperative to us after the chummy laughter from some of the ADE audience that greeted the comment from the man who introduced us by saying, "All of us enter this profession loving the world's greatest literature, but some of us end up reading the world's worst—freshman essays." As we drove the many miles home from Waterloo, Ontario, to Amherst, Massachusetts, we wondered what produced for them such an irreducible division not just between "real literature" and "freshman essays," but also between the sorts of personal pieces they enjoyed—the essays and stories of, for instance, Martin Amis or bell hooks or Raymond Carver or Amy Tan or Henry Louis Gates—and the "confessional" pieces of Nam, Lawrence, and Rachel that they disparaged. We wondered what it was that prevented them not just from regarding these student efforts as literature, but from treating them as they would literature. Was it something in the style? The content? The person within the personal? Or was it something in our audience that refused to accept these first-year writers as saying anything worth hearing, writing anything worth reading, thinking or feeling anything felt in ourselves?

We write against this attitude, conscious that what was spoken and assented to at that conference is also manifest in the attitude and practices of too many teachers in too many classrooms. We write to those not entrenched in that attitude, teachers of literature, writing, and other subjects who enter the profession for a love of their students as well as their subject. We

aim to show what we can learn from students when we accord them the same respect and the same authority we would establish authors. We share Steve North's view, as articulated in his 1986 study of writing in a philosophy class, that such an approach is as generative for researchers and participants in their studies as it is for teachers and students. In practice, in this study, it has meant that we have made the students' writings our primary sources, viewing their texts, as we would a writer's collected works, as an oeuvre. Further, we have tried to read this oeuvre—in-process drafts and final drafts—to reconstruct each writer's self-understandings, particularly as they relate to central issues and themes that recurred throughout each writer's work. In this way, we have wanted our project to be the kind of hermeneutic project characterized by North and, more recently, Kurt Spellmeyer. We tried, that is, to make our study

[a] project of reconstructing, always admittedly from an outsider's perspective, the self-understanding of its subjects, but instead of doing so for the purposes of therapy, it would seek to promote unobstructed communication between reader and texts, writers and writers, writers and teachers. (Spellmeyer, "Being Philosophical" 27)

While our project was not therapy, our approach shares with therapy the technique of empathic listening, trying to mirror what we read in order to reconstruct it as faithfully as possible and interpret it in the light of each student's intention and understanding. Through such a reading, much as through a hermeneutic reading of Andrew Marvell or Emily Dickinson, we are able to see how these students are using writing—over time and across their various courses—to pursue personally important projects and seek ways to authorize their views through a socially shared discourse.

We aimed to be empathic listeners not only as readers, but also as interviewers, our goal in the interviews being primarily to further the students' self-understandings and their reflections about themselves as writers and thinkers, about their writings, and about the contexts out of which their writings arose. From these interviews, we gained something of the writers' perspec-

tives on their texts, and we used these interviews, as fully and faithfully as we could, to shape our own interpretations. Still, our interpretation and a writer's are not always the same. For this reason, in the chapters, we quote extensively from the interviews in order to present both our own understandings and the writer's self-understandings of her or his texts. With Spellmeyer, we believe:

While the self-understanding of novice writers is no more definitive than anyone else's, their voices, heard in counterpoint to ours, can challenge methods, assumptions, and hidden agendas that have hitherto authorized profoundly disabling—and profoundly dishonest—"constructions" of the student and the student's language. ("Being Philosophical" 27)

As our ADE introducer reminded us without intending to do so, those who voice disabling and dishonest constructions have all-too-easy access to public forums, while students have too-limited access.

Our role has not been solely that of empathic listeners. While striving to honor that role, as reader-interpreters with particular interests, we have also stepped back to interpret students' experiences in relation to the questions that guide our inquiry, questions about these students' individual development as writers and persons and questions about the academic culture they experienced. To answer these questions, we have drawn not only on our primary sources—the students' writings and interviews—but also on secondary, contextual sources where available: interviews with teachers, notes from class observations, teachers' written responses and peer responses, and other students' writings and interviews. Our aim has been to create textured stories that situate students' actions and perceptions in their immediate classroom contexts. (See Appendix A for a fuller explanation of our interview methods and interpretive approaches.)

While Solsken calls her case studies "artist's sketches," we have chosen to call ours "stories," connoting that they are interpretations in words, composed by a teller. They are also narratives told in time. Calling them stories or artist's sketches does not mean that they were not rigorously thought out and com-

posed: we have tried to be thorough and fair in our interpretation of the piles of interviews, writings, and observation notes, testing out our interpretations against alternatives with one another and with others (i.e., listeners to our conference papers and readers of our drafts). It does mean, though, that we recognize that we cannot represent the students' experiences and views in an unmediated way (Herrington, "Reflections"). Further, we do not choose to do so: in our roles as researchers and tellers of these stories, just as in our roles as teachers, we have particular aims that shape our interpretations and interactions with those participating in a study or working with us in our classes.

Having recognized this shaping role as interpreters, we turn to the question that Jacqueline Jones Royster posed in her Chair's address at the 1995 Conference on College Composition and Communication: "How do we negotiate the privilege of interpretation?" ("When the First Voice" 36). Royster, an African American woman, was speaking of the anger and violation she feels when others appropriate black experience and presume to speak for it: "when the subject is me and the voice is not mine" (31).

We recognize that to have been able to conduct this research study is a privilege granted to us by Nam, Lawrence, Rachel, and Francois. Each has given us a good deal actually, sharing with us their writings, their views, and their time. We feel privileged to have read their work and gotten to know them as writers and as people. For all of that, we are very grateful.

We hope that the giving has not been totally one way. We hope that our interview conversations have served some function for each of the students as well, offering occasions to reflect on experiences, to shape understandings by articulating them, and to receive some validation. We have also tried to give something back to them, as we would have anyway in our relationships with them as teachers—reading drafts of papers for other classes when requested, writing recommendations when requested, and advising informally. We also enjoyed their company—enjoyed seeing them and chatting, even when not ostensibly "interviewing."

As the ones conducting a study—as "researchers"—we have tried foremost to listen, to listen with respect and as believers, as

Royster calls us to do, “treating the loved people and places of Others with care” (33). We are aware that we cannot fully know or speak for another individual’s perspective, and particularly not for others whose experiences of the world are quite different from ours for reasons of culture, race, class, childhood abuse, or different childhood experience. In “Geography Lessons for Researchers,” Kaitlin Briggs offers the metaphor of “border crossers” for conceiving of how to negotiate this privilege. Drawing on the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, Renato Rosaldo, and Hannah Arendt, Briggs examines the research relationship, considering extremes of the overidentification that masks differences, particularly ones of class, gender, race, and power, as well as the extreme of the overdistancing that positions a researcher at too great a distance to cross over a border to understanding. She calls instead for an approach that aims to respect our own and our subjects’ humanity, with researchers being aware of both the possibilities for identification across a border and, given the presence of differences, the limits. As she writes, “much depends on the consciousness of these border crosser researchers, their ability to consider and to empathize with their border crosser participants, and their commitment not to dismiss difficulties” (20). Out of that consciousness and respect—treating the loved places of others with care—can arise not only an ethical research practice, but also a fuller understanding of ourselves and others. We do not claim to speak *for* Nam, Lawrence, Rachel, and Francois, but we do aim to speak *with* them: it is to this end that we include long passages from their writings and their interviews along with our interpretations. We hope that each would say, “The subject is me, and the voices are mine and Anne’s and Marcia’s.”

In writing about these four students, we are writing about some of their teachers, including a few Writing Program graduate teaching associates. We recognize that we present a partial view of them—in comparison to the students—and offer only a limited glimpse of their perspectives, given our focus on the students’ writing and their perspectives. Having acknowledged this choice, we want to stress that with few exceptions—which we believe you will recognize from our representations—we found the teachers we write about to be conscientious, caring, and helpful to students. Still, even with some of these teachers, we point to

some ways in which their practices may not have been perceived as helpful or may not have been understood by a student. We include ourselves amongst this group and admit that seeing our own limitations has been painful. For this reason, we want to stress that in noting a difficulty in another teacher's practice as experienced by a given student, we are not implying any more of a judgment than we would apply to ourselves: that we need to keep learning from and working on our teaching. We feel this particularly strongly in relation to the graduate teaching associates who figure in these case studies. They were still developing as teachers, and, for ones teaching in the Writing Program, we were in positions of authority over them. For these reasons, we appreciate all the more their openness to us. All were thoughtful about their teaching and respectful of their students' intelligences and capabilities. By having the opportunity to look in on their interactions with these four students, we learned things we could not learn about our interactions with students in our own classes. Finally, as ones implicated in the training program for teaching associates in the Writing Program, we accept partial responsibility for the preparation these teachers had.

The stories follow. For each, we begin with a brief background narrative as we learned it from each student, focusing on their experiences of learning English and of writing in high school, and then move to their experiences of writing for their college courses, beginning with their first-year writing courses. We recognize that the curricula of these courses contributed—just as the curricula of their other courses did—to what they wrote and to the genres they used. For that reason, in the first chapter, on Nam, we introduce the Basic and College Writing courses to give readers a sense of their curricula and pedagogy. Course syllabi are contained in Appendix B. We have chosen to keep both the syllabi and the courses they represent in the background because our purpose has not been to make a case for these particular curricula. Indeed, both have changed since this study, Basic Writing most notably (see Curtis *et al.*). More particularly, as we will discuss in our closing chapter, our own views and teaching practices have changed since this study began—and in ways informed by it.

## **The Stories**

### ***Claiming the Essay for Himself: Nam***

With Anne's story of Nam, our group narrative begins. A refugee with his family from Vietnam and now an American citizen, Nam stayed at the University for only one year before entering a Catholic seminary and fulfilling a wish he had had even before arriving in Amherst. An original member of our study group, Nam was enrolled in Marcia's fall 1989 Basic Writing class, which Anne observed. Anne conducted most of the interviews with Nam throughout both the fall 1989 and spring 1990 semesters, and, though she was never his teacher, it is clear that he became quite attached to her as a sort of de facto mentor: during his second term, he sought her out, not just for his regularly scheduled interviews but for bits of academic advice; often, as you will see, feeling quite lost and alone in his own College Writing class, he occasionally sat in on Anne's; and some months after completing Marcia's course (and much to her chagrin), it was to Anne he went with his confounding question, "What is an essay?" His story speaks persuasively of the power of language as experienced by a person in a new culture, with a language and race setting him apart from that culture. His writings provide a window into his thoughts: his struggles with feelings of being apart from others because of language and culture; his struggles to reconcile his own desire to be in the world with others and his belief that God called him to retreat from that world; his struggles to transmute feelings of powerlessness and selfishness and, at times, a desire for revenge into some "better way." For him, Biblical tenets and language seemed to offer this better way, to speak with and for those who, like him, were the objects of others' prejudices; in addition, the essay, as he would come to understand it, offered a means "to make what I experience helpful for others." In his Basic and College Writing classes, Nam experienced two different classroom worlds: one where he felt part of a learning community, as one among others of different races and languages, and the other where he felt apart from others, as *the*

one with a different language and color. A final section in this chapter focuses on Nam's negotiations with his teacher in a psychology course, *Methods of Inquiry in Psychology*. His experience shows the challenge—one often unrecognized by teachers—that students face when a discourse they are asked to learn conflicts with their basic values; for Nam, the conflict was between the positivist epistemology of the course and the epistemology of Catholicism, his faith, and between the laboratory report genre and the essay genre of his writing classes. As his other writing makes clear, Nam understood the nature of the challenge far better than his teacher did. Although he passed the course, he rejected this discourse and used other writing, including his journal and essays in *College Writing*, as vehicles for expressing these conflicts.

### *Composing a Self He Can Live With: Lawrence/Steven*

Lawrence was enrolled in Marcia's Basic Writing class during the fall of 1989, and, beginning in the spring of 1990, she conducted our interviews with him throughout his remaining four and a half years at the University, including interviews with Lawrence when he was a member of Anne's College Writing section. In this chapter, Marcia presents a student who, among those we have met, could be characterized as most likely to antagonize the colleagues Nancy Sommers described as fearing an "uncontrollable world of ambiguity and uncertainty" opening up "as soon as the academic embraces the personal." At the least we can say that Marcia's story of Lawrence's own self-storying, barely outlined in 1991 and more fully narrated here, most antagonized those attending the ADE conference in Waterloo with its tales of Lawrence's intractable insistence on writing for and about himself, and his unflagging drive to compose a viable gay identity by every means of signification—every discourse—available to him. Throughout nearly all his writings for both Basic and College Writing, Lawrence revisited the scenes of his preadolescent and adolescent years, scenes fraught with abuse, homophobia, and his own suicidal impulses. But he did so always in the effort to convince himself as well as his readers that "gay is good" and thus to create both a self he could live with and a sympathetic

audience he could live among. His efforts met with varying degrees of success, as shown by the responses he received from fellow students in these two classes and from instructors in courses he took at the five system campuses including the University as well as Amherst, Hampshire, Mount Holyoke, and Smith colleges. This is not to say Lawrence was altogether comfortable with his own self-preoccupation. As he sought to compose not just a private but also a public gay identity, he struggled as hard as most students—perhaps harder than many—to compose in a less personal, more public “academic” style. And, paradoxically, of the four students we followed, Lawrence, whose writing was demeaned by the majority of ADE members as “expressivist” and “confessional,” finally found what seems the happiest niche in the academy’s “discourse community”—or at least a segment of it. Designing his own interdepartmental, Five-College major in gender studies, he surrounded himself with kindred gay students and teachers and immersed himself in the language of social constructivism; following what was truly his own curriculum vitae, he peopled his world with audiences willing to believe that gay is, indeed, good, and speaking a language that accommodated easily the full complexity of homosexuality and the irony of drag.

### ***Understanding Personal/Academic Connections: Rachel***

Having tested directly into the required College Writing course, Rachel did not take Basic Writing her first semester but volunteered to join our study during the spring of 1990, when she was enrolled in the College Writing class Anne observed. Consequently, Anne, who wrote this chapter, conducted our interviews with Rachel and chose to focus on her because, as we have mentioned, Rachel happened to be enrolled in a class Nam was taking that spring, *Methods of Inquiry in Psychology*. In contrast to Lawrence’s writing, Rachel’s is, for the most part, the sort that would be welcomed by those who want to maintain the illusory divide between academic and personal. The tensions (in her writing and in her mind) around this division (as maintained and bridged in specific courses) are the focus of this chapter. Rachel was born and grew up in the United States, speaking English as

her primary language. Yet, like Nam (and like many women students, both first- and second-language English speakers, whom we surveyed), she entered the University lacking confidence in herself as a writer. During her college years, however, she grew in confidence and in her sense of herself as a woman, a writer, and potentially, a clinical psychologist, completing her degree with an honors thesis in psychology. Throughout her studies, Rachel found ways to pursue questions and topics that allowed her to keep composing herself—reflecting on her past and present, working to contain past hurts and create a healthy self-image, and acquiring a discourse from which she could speak with authority—attempting to speak of past pains, not as an individual victim, but as a spokesperson for those who might be victimized. That discourse was the discourse of behavioral psychology, one which allowed her to write about past pains, while also veiling her own involvement. Though Rachel, unlike Nam, took on this discourse, she would, by her senior year, critique conventions that could “depersonalize” subjects, and she would speak insightfully about how personal involvements can contribute to and shape knowing. While the discourse of the detached knower predominated Rachel’s academic experience, two of Rachel’s elective courses called for self-reflective and empathic knowing where one’s personal involvement in knowing is acknowledged. The separation, interaction, and tension between these two stances for knowing are a focus of this chapter.

**“A BILINGUAL AND SOCIAL STRUGGLE”: *Francois***

This chapter introduces Francois and concludes our group narrative. In his first interview for our study, conducted by our research assistant, Elizabeth Bachrach Tan, Francois expressed the intentions behind his writing and, wittingly or unwittingly, set the tone of his relationship with Marcia, both in her work with him in Basic Writing and in her rendering of him in this chapter:

Just because I’m a student, you might want to read something, and not understand it, and then comment on it, and then come back the next day, and tell me, “I didn’t understand this, I didn’t do that.” Well, if you read a piece of literature, then you would

just break it down. I want people to do that to my writing. . . . You might have to read a paper of mine more than once to understand it, not because it's not clear, but because you just need to do a little more than that.

With these words, Francois asked, perhaps demanded, that he be read like a book, that he be fully understood but not in the way one of those easily accessible popular pieces is so readily and immediately comprehended. Francois set himself before Marcia and other instructors as a “piece of literature,” a literary work with all the hidden meanings that students and teachers alike struggle to understand—and appreciate. “A BILINGUAL AND SOCIAL STRUGGLE” is, therefore, equally about Francois’s struggle in the academy and about Marcia’s struggle with Francois, not in combat with him but in an effort to accede to his wishes, in the classroom and in this chapter. Here, as in *Basic Writing*, the effort to understand Francois has truly been a “struggle” of comprehension: a struggle for Marcia as his teacher to make a comprehensible writer of him, and now for Marcia as writer to make something comprehensible of him for herself and for you reading about him, and a struggle for Francois to make himself intelligible to others without forfeiting his own intentions to his readers’ interpretations. The arena of struggle has at times seemed boundless, extending far beyond the classroom and written page. When asked where he was born, Francois replied, “It’s kind of hard for me to say.” When asked where he lived as a child, he responded, “I was at a distance, a long way.” And when asked whether English was the only language spoken in his home, he answered that he heard spoken a combination of French and Spanish but considered English his own language “because I’m Americanized, that’s why. That’s why I consider it, because that’s the place that I’m at.” Yet following Francois through his courses in writing, education, and sociology, one sees what had originally been cast as a personal struggle with his reader over meaning making and self-definition evolve into a broader, social struggle shared with other minorities and women for the power of self-determination—the struggle to inscribe, over and over, their own stories on what Francois himself called the ever-erasing “governing palimpsest” of a society which “unlike my last takes notice

of your skin color.” By his final interview, conducted just prior to his graduation, the terms of struggle had changed from literary to social, from personal to universal:

I do talk about struggles a lot. Maybe because I’m personally experiencing struggles in my life, . . . but I think everyone is experiencing struggles. I mean, struggles on the street: you turn on the TV, you see struggles. You go into a new family, you open up the door, you take a look, and you see struggle. . . . You see problems everywhere. . . . I mean, everyone is not living in La-La Land.

## Note

The survey was administered to students in ten sections of Basic Writing and seventy-five sections of College Writing. The survey asked a series of closed-ended questions about students’ perceptions of themselves as writers (e.g., confidence, attributes, attitudes) and three open-ended questions:

1. What are you most confident of or pleased with about your own writing?
2. What are you least confident of or pleased with about your own writing?
3. Please list what you believe are two or three of the most important characteristics of good writing in college.

In order to follow possible changes in perceptions, we administered this questionnaire at the beginning of the first semester in Basic Writing sections and at the beginning of the second semester in College Writing sections. The case-study group completed the open-ended section again at the end of second semester.

The questionnaire yielded statistically significant information that confirmed some of our hunches and other research findings: e.g., females were less confident of their writing than were males; students for whom English is a second language were less confident than were native English speakers; students placed in Basic Writing (as compared to those placed directly into College Writing) and females (as compared to males) reported having more trouble writing on issues that have many interpretations. Most striking to us, the majority of students—with no statistically significant difference among groups—indicated that they liked to express their ideas in writing. The questionnaire offered no

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further insight into this attitude and, given what we were learning from individual students, we felt it failed to do justice to the impulses that draw students to writing. For these reasons, we have chosen not to make the survey results a major part of this book.