

5 Teaching Others

Ethnography and the Allure of Expertise

My descriptions of teachers are still from a distance; they ring true, but not true enough. Only after I have really been there with teachers will I be able to show how sensible is the system of unexamined conventional teacher wisdom when viewed from within that system.

(ERICKSON 61, ORIGINAL EMPHASIS)

In this passage, the ethnographer Frederick Erickson points to the gap that exists between his success at describing what teachers actually do in the classroom and his goal of understanding why it is that teachers think and act in such ways. Erickson has faith that there is some animating hermeneutics behind the seemingly irrational, often counterproductive behavior in which teachers engage, a system that makes such behavior seem “sensible” to the teachers themselves. For this reason, Erickson believes that his research will be of value only after he has found a way to see events as his subjects do—only, that is, when he has shown that “teachers, students, administrators, parents, politicians, businessmen, are motivated by good as well as ill, guided by wise as well as foolish elements in their conventional wisdoms, often confused, sometimes acutely aware of what is happening, muddling through” (61). And given that ethnographers are trained to be sensitive to the logics of cultural difference and to attend to the complex interplay between cultural production and societal constraint, it might well seem that ethnographic work on schooling—at least the kind that Erickson strives to produce—would be well suited to the task of solving the problems uncovered in the preceding chapters. That is, from a methodological

standpoint, ethnography seems guaranteed to provide an informed, respectful account of students' and teachers' ways of knowing the world that could, in turn, serve as a firm foundation upon which to build a sustainable project of educational reform.

Yet we can be seduced by this rosy account of the ethnographer's privileged access to "the native's" point of view only if we ignore the firestorm of criticism that has, of late, overwhelmed the ethnographic project. Indeed, there is hardly a crime that ethnography has not been accused of committing over the past two decades: ethnography has been described as *the* paradigmatic instance of the "metaparanoia" that is at the root of all humanist practices (P. Smith 97); it has been seen as the work of tourists (Grossberg 388); it has been said to promote "collusion between mass cultural critic and consumer society" (Modleski xii); and, finally, it has been dismissed as a pseudo-science that grants the observer "all of the problems of selfhood," while depriving the subject under observation of such a self (Spivak, "Multiculturalism" 66). This frenzy of criticism is not being produced just by those who don't do ethnography and don't think it should be done; not surprisingly, it's also being generated from within the field itself. There have been calls to recuperate ethnography as "an explicit form of cultural critique sharing radical perspectives with dada and surrealism" (Clifford 12); there have been counterarguments for a fully historicized ethnographic approach that can "penetrate beyond the surface planes of everyday life" (Comaroff and Comaroff xi); there have been efforts to reclaim ethnography's status as a science through the collection of "reflexively cleaned data" that can be interpreted, tested, and challenged by others (Aunger 98). Finally, there has even been a proposal to abandon the term "ethnography" altogether, on the grounds that it denotes neither a "separate category" of research nor "a distinct method" and therefore cannot reasonably be considered a "useful category with which to think about social research methodology" (Hammersley 603).

Amid all this recent controversy, ethnography has, perhaps paradoxically, enjoyed a period of fantastic growth, particularly at "home"; according to Michael Moffatt, anthropologists have "done more research in the United States in the last dozen years than in the entire previous history of the discipline—far more, perhaps twice as much" ("Ethnographic Writing" 205). The reasons for this increased interest in studying the cultures of the United States are not hard to determine: Moffatt gives credit to an overproduction of anthropologists and to "declining transnational access and funding" (205). With more anthropologists and less money to go around, one way for ethnographers to make themselves appealing to government fund-

ing agencies, school administrators, and the business community at large is to focus on the educational process: so, during this boom time for anthropology at home, ethnographies of schooling have proliferated in part because, as we will see, they provide the nervous collectivity of parents, school officials, and future employers with ways to come to grips with changes in modern American schools, particularly the consequences of desegregation.

For our purposes, what is significant about the corpus of schooling ethnographies done over the past thirty years is that very little sustained work has been carried out on the culture of undergraduate education, broadly conceived. This may well be because “undergraduates,” as a group, appear too well-known to warrant additional study, unlike the more familiar subjects of ethnographies of schooling—marginal high school students, women trying to break into the sciences, or any other structurally disempowered group moving through or outside of the educational system.¹ In other words, the experience of being an undergraduate may seem, on its face, to be universalizable and unchanging over time and, thus, not a fruitful area for ethnographic investigation. Moffatt’s *Coming of Age in New Jersey: College and American Culture* stands alone in trying to provide a comprehensive picture of, as he puts it, “the students’ mentalities” during their four years at college (xv). Although Moffatt did not pursue his project in the interests of advancing any particular education reform, he warrants extended attention here for three reasons: his work is devoted to gaining a better understanding of the figure who stands at the center of the enterprise of higher education—the undergraduate; his research has since been recommended to professors and administrators as a guide for understanding student experience;² and, finally, as a result of the publication of *Coming of Age in New Jersey*, Moffatt was regularly invited by administrators and student organizations from around to country to speak about “college life” and “college fun” in the late eighties. Thus, though Moffatt never intended it, his research led to his becoming a recognized expert of sorts on student culture.

While Moffatt provides us with the opportunity to reflect on one ethnographer’s effort to gain “direct access” to “the undergraduate,” the work of Shirley Brice Heath, which I discuss in the second half of this chapter, allows us to consider how ethnographic data on students can be used in the service of educational reform. Heath’s specific area of concern was to study how language use in three different communities in the Piedmont Valley of the Carolinas differentially influenced the school performance of children from these communities. Once Heath determined that their different “ways with words” led to school failure for children not from the middle class, she set out to train students and teachers to become ethnographers of their

home cultures in hopes that the resulting insights would promote the academic success of children from all the communities.

Between them, then, Moffatt and Heath give us two concrete instances of ethnographers at work trying to understand the culture of schooling and the challenges that face those committed to changing that culture. And, because both Moffatt and Heath place “the student” at the center of their investigations, their projects differ considerably from the ones discussed in the previous chapters. They will, for this reason, be treated differently. Specifically, by attending to how Moffatt and Heath read their students and by noting moments in their discussions that reveal contact with, conflict between, or blindness to different ways of knowing the world, I will be working against the grain of their ethnographies, making them tell us what they can about how teachers are trained to see students and the pedagogical consequences of that training. Thus, while I have been concerned in the preceding chapters with reading along the margins of the archive to evince the student’s role in the educational process, here the material itself requires a different approach, since the ethnographically oriented classroom places the student center stage. With the student so placed, we might ask, What is there for a teacher to do? What is the content of such a course? That is, what does an ethnographically informed pedagogy look like and to what degree does such a pedagogy truly represent a change in the quotidian practices of the academy?

Before setting out to respond to these questions, I want to make it clear that I take as given that the ethnographer objectifies the Other, usually in order to transform this entity into a unified and stable subject for study and, furthermore, that the end result of this objectifying process is always and inevitably the ethnographer’s interpretation of the construction of the Other and not the Other as it is “in itself.” While this familiar line of critique is sufficient reason, as we have seen, for many in the academy to reject ethnography on principle, such a response disables the crucial enterprise of assessing the relative merits or failings of any particular ethnographic attempt. And as interest in doing ethnographies of schooling increased dramatically once the effects of federally mandated desegregation policies began to make themselves felt in the sixties, it should be clear that distinguishing between the various uses to which ethnographic findings have been put is not an idle exercise. In any event, making such distinctions certainly was a pressing concern for the many teachers and school systems who turned to ethnography during the sixties and seventies for the conceptual tools and the empirical data they needed to understand, contain, and respond to life in the newly integrated classrooms, where racial difference had

suddenly become an inescapable, embodied reality.³ Indeed, as Dell Hymes, the pioneer of ethnographic work focusing on speaking and communication, saw it at the time, ethnographies of actual language use would help battle the prejudices that surround variant language use among marginalized communities and the prevailing “sense that most people do not deserve better because of linguistic inadequacy” (71). As far as Hymes was concerned, then, ethnography *could* further the ends of democracy by ensuring that people were not discriminated against because they relied on a linguistic code other than Standard English. As we keep Hymes’s sense of the promise of ethnography in mind, it seems best that we consider how, in specific instances, ethnographers have addressed the “problem” of racial difference in the academy, if only to better understand the forces that continue to produce this encounter as a “problem.”

Coming of Age in New Jersey: Sex and the Student Body

The cover of *Coming of Age in New Jersey* depicts an exasperated student, seated at a desk, head thrown back. Copious tears propel themselves from the student’s eyes straight into the air. This abject image comes from a series by Lisa David, who set out to represent what it means to be a student at Rutgers University, the site of Moffatt’s research into undergraduate culture and home to his anthropology department.⁴ Other images from David’s series grace the opening pages of Moffatt’s book: there’s a student at a desk, head down; a student running to catch a departing bus; a student in bed, saying into the phone, “Mom? Help!”; a student standing before a mountain of books, a clock, and a calendar; a small, featureless, human figure (a student, in other words) propped up in bed, with open books, papers, pencils, glasses, and a coffee cup strewn about. The images, in sum, depict undergraduate life at a large, research university as a solitary, sometime frightening endeavor, where every waking hour is spent either preparing for class, getting to class, falling behind in class, or recovering from class.

In stark contrast to David’s—perhaps predictable—images of the loneliness and desperation of undergraduate life, Moffatt offers the reader entry into a thriving world of undergraduate social relations that revolve around the “friendly fun” afforded by “spur-of-the-moment pleasures,” such as “hanging out in a dorm lounge or a fraternity or a sorority, gossiping, wrestling and fooling around, going to dinner with friends, having a late-night pizza or a late-night chat, visiting other dorms, going out to a bar, and flirting and more serious erotic activities, usually with members of the op-

posite sex” (33). The average student, Moffatt discloses, spends about four hours a day engaged in such playful activities and only about two hours a day studying. According to the students’ way of counting, though, such statistics are misleading, since they consider the four hours a day they spend in class as time spent studying (33). However one tallies the figures, Moffatt discovered that as far as the students were concerned, “even the fun of college life was a learning experience. And with this claim, the dichotomy between formal education (work, learning) and college life (fun, relaxation) collapsed entirely for the students” (61). Although the students’ reasoning here is sure to give traditional educators reason to rage, Moffatt calmly observes that “anthropologically speaking, [the students] were not far from wrong” in claiming that they learned from everything that happened to them in college (61). In fact, what Moffatt sets out to establish in *Coming of Age in New Jersey* is that the most important reason undergraduates pursue higher education in the first place is “college life”: this is “their central pleasure while in it, and what they often remembered most fondly about college after they graduated” (29).

Moffatt didn’t commence his research with such anthropological insights into student culture in mind, however. Rather, as Moffatt tells the story, he decided to move into the dorms and pass himself off as an older, out-of-state student for a few days in the fall of 1977 “on a whim,” partly because he felt, at the age of thirty-three, that he “no longer understood” his students (1). By going under cover in this way, Moffatt hoped to gain a “worm’s-eye view” of what it was like to be an undergraduate at Rutgers and to find a way to reconnect with his students now that his own experiences in college “were beginning to feel like very distant times indeed” (1). And, though he little thought this whimsical attempt to reach his students would develop into “serious research,” he ended up devoting years to the project:⁵ he spent a night a week in the dorms during the academic years 1977–78 and 1984–85; throughout this time, he taught courses that solicited response papers from students on their thoughts about sexuality and the life of the mind; and he put together *The Rutgers Picture Book*, a coffee-table photo album depicting how student life had changed over time at the university. As a consequence of having been so unexpectedly taken with this research, Moffatt came to see that his results had an important role to play in providing an alternative to the mass of “moralizing literature on students and colleges floating around at present.” Specifically, he hoped his research would contribute to “a different kind of understanding of what college, college adolescence, and contemporary American culture are all about, from a less-than-elite undergraduate perspective” (xvii).⁶

Before determining exactly what “different kind of understanding” Mof-fatt wants to communicate, it is worth considering his project in relation to the anthropological ur-text and international best-seller alluded to in his title—Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa*. To make sense of this allusion, we need to recall that Mead herself was very interested in educational issues and had gone to Samoa in hopes of contributing to the nature/nurture debate that then (as now) preoccupied the human sciences. Mead returned, of course, having learned that “adolescence need not be the time of stress and strain which Western society made it; that growing up could be freer and easier and less complicated; and also that there were prices to pay for the very lack of complication I found in Samoa—less intensity, less individuality, less involvement with life” (Mead x). Once she has weighed the benefits and the demerits of living in such a “primitive” society, Mead concludes her book with a call to reform educational practice in the West:

We must turn all of our educational efforts to training our children for the choices which will confront them. Education, in the home even more than at school, instead of being a special pleading for one regime, a desperate attempt to form one particular habit of mind which will withstand all outside influences, must be a preparation for those very influences. . . . The children must be taught how to think, not what to think. And because old errors die slowly, they must be taught tolerance, just as to-day they are taught intolerance. They must be taught that many ways are open to them, no one sanctioned above its alternative, and that upon them and upon them alone lies the burden of choice. Unhampered by prejudices, unvexed by too early conditioning to any one standard, they must come clear-eyed to the choices which lie before them. (137)

It’s a stirring peroration, one that captures Mead’s conviction that social forces are entirely responsible for shaping individual actions and beliefs. Given the manifest differences that exist between our complex society and the “simple” society of the Samoans, what we must do, according to Mead, is educate our children at home and at schools in ways that will prepare them for an experience unavailable to such primitive folk—“this possibility of choice, the recognition of many possible ways of life, where other civilizations have recognized only one” (138).

That it’s hard to imagine arguing against the notion that students should be taught “how to think, not what to think” is proof that Mead’s “radical” proclamations have become commonplaces in our time. Be that as it may, Derek Freeman, one of Mead’s harshest critics, has devoted a good deal of

his life to assailing the data that led Mead to make such claims about the power of culture and of education. Deploying a methodology that is alternately obsessed with detail and borne aloft by polemical zeal, Freeman sets out to locate Mead's research in its historical moment and to challenge her findings. In so doing, Freeman conjures an image of Mead as a graduate student determined to find evidence that would please her teachers, Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict—evidence that would settle the nature/nurture debate with the eugenicists of her time once and for all. While Freeman devotes much of his book to contesting Mead's observations about life in Samoa point by point, for our purposes his most important work involves historicizing the popular and academic reception of Mead's work, which reveals how it came to be that research done in such apparent haste ended up enjoying lasting, worldwide acclaim. As Freeman would have it, Mead's work has never been subjected to a sufficiently rigorous review because, from the beginning, her depiction of Somoa as a "sexual paradise" engaged the desires of a nation of readers desperate to believe that such sensuous abandon and carefree existence could be found not only halfway around the globe but also somewhere deep inside themselves (Freeman 97). Thus, once *Coming of Age in Samoa* was picked up and cited approvingly by such critics as Bertrand Russell and Havelock Ellis, it wasn't long before Samoa was transformed into an idyllic paradise free of all pain; by the early 1950s, Freeman asserts, Mead's "conclusion about adolescence in Samoa came to be regarded as a proven fact which had demonstrated, beyond all question, the sovereignty of culture" (103).

Whether Freeman succeeds in disproving this "proven fact" is not our concern here.⁷ More to the point is how Moffatt responded to the national debate that Freeman's critique sparked. By the winter of 1983, Freeman's critique had been picked up by *Time*, *Newsweek*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and a host of daily publications; Freeman himself had been interviewed on national television and, according to Roy Rappaport, had contributed to creating a situation where "if anthropology was not thrown into public disrepute, it was shadowed by public doubt" (316). Moffatt's own research was carried out during these difficult times and, when he completed his book, he thanked Mead, "her reputation bloodied but still unbowed after the attacks of pygmies, for her original title, which inspired [his own]" (*Coming of Age* xi–xii). By so responding to this important academic debate about Mead's work, Moffatt inadvertently demonstrates his affinity with the subjects of his study, who—he would have us believe—also rely on this discourse of "Undergraduate Cynical," where "moral, ethical, and intellectual positions are rapidly reduced to the earthiest possible motives of those who

articulate them” (90). Yet this affinity is not something that Moffatt openly acknowledges. To the contrary, Moffatt is quite concerned throughout his research to establish his own moral, intellectual, and professional superiority to his subjects.

Insisting on this superiority requires a certain amount of deft maneuvering from Moffatt, particularly at the beginning of his project, as he struggles to justify the fact that he *knowingly* misrepresented himself to his subjects by posing as a student. This ruse worked for a few days, allowing Moffatt to live in the dorms, where he could secretly study the intimate life-ways of the undergraduate. It wasn't long, though, before Moffatt's roommates grew suspicious of this older guy who regularly bought the *New York Times*. When confronted, Moffatt immediately confessed that he was actually a professor doing research and presented a letter from the dean verifying his story. To his great relief, his roommates responded as follows:

None of my five roommates seemed ethically concerned that I had violated their privacy. None of them voiced any formal protest against my methods. They were thrilled when I told them I might write about them, but they seemed a little disappointed when I assured them I would change all their names to protect them. They did feel, a lot less theoretically, that I *had* tricked them, however; and in the next two days they pulled four practical jokes on me. (11, original emphasis)

And, once Moffatt survived this ritual of being “busted” by his roommates, he was welcomed into their community as a “friend” and the viability of his research project was assured (11–12).

It's a happy enough initiation story and as such it fulfills the generic demands of the ethnographic tale, capturing the researcher's transition from unknowing outsider to welcomed participant-observer. But as much as Moffatt would like us to join him as he quickly escorts the ethical concerns raised by his study from the stage, on the grounds that such matters were outside the experience of his “less theoretically” inclined subjects—a group he refers to elsewhere as “my natives” (18)—it's worth pausing to consider why he would expect entering first-year students to feel they could confront him with their “ethical concerns” about his clear violation of their privacy. After all, once Moffatt had established his superior position of authority, shown his credentials, and provided proof that his actions had already been sanctioned by the university's administration, what exactly is it that the students could have said?

But even if the students were publicly silenced by the official approval of Moffatt's actions, they were able to voice a less “formal protest” about Mof-

fatt's intrusion into their world by drawing on what James Scott has elsewhere termed "the arts of resistance" available to all who find themselves in structurally disempowered positions. In this case, Moffatt's roommates stole his clothes, which resulted in the professor appearing naked on a balcony; they filled the professor's shoes with shaving cream; and they put bottles in the professor's pillow so he would deliver a beating to himself when he covered his head to sleep (Moffatt, *Coming of Age* 11). On two other occasions, Moffatt reports, "the wedgie patrol" threatened to pay him a visit (130 n. 16). In other words, the students drew on a repertoire of potentially shaming and certainly annoying antic behavior that they could always say was nothing more than innocent fun. As Scott's work suggests, to see such jokes simply as the kind of "fun" subordinates naturally indulge in is to miss the point that they can also express "a politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of the actors" (Scott 19). If we turn Moffatt's initiation story on its head, then, we can argue that it captures the students in the act of establishing *their* dominance over their superior, since Moffatt cannot get angry with them about their "native" behavior unless he's willing to expel himself from the very society he hopes to enter.

For whatever reasons, Moffatt doesn't entertain the possibility that the manifest power differential that exists between him, as the professorial, administratively sanctioned observer, and his subjects—the newly arrived undergraduates who find themselves, through no choice of their own, placed under his surveillance—might alter what the students say and how they say it to him. Consequently, Moffatt loses sight of the fact that he hasn't gone out "into the field" so much as he has compelled a certain group of unwitting students to enter his field of expertise. For this reason, he doesn't realize that the students might be studying him, trying to get some purchase on the customs of the peculiar native population he represents. Although the students try repeatedly to reorient Moffatt to the reality of their situation by making it clear to him that, in fact, it is *they* who have arrived to study the ways of the culture *he* represents, the anthropologist turns a deaf ear to his informants and inevitably begins lecturing them on the inadequacy of their perceptions.⁸ Ultimately, he's not interested in their ideas, which he already knows too well, or their "artistry," which is, after all, just friendly "busting," but in their social behavior—how they interact as a group, what their rituals and rites of initiation are, and, most important, what they are and aren't up to sexually.

While the notoriety of Moffatt's book is largely the result of what it discloses about these social aspects of student life, the drama of the work is to

be found in those moments when the students take control of his project by presenting their version of what being an undergraduate entails. That such moments populate *Coming of Age in New Jersey* is to Moffatt's credit, for he includes much material that attests to the students' dissatisfaction with his representation of their experiences. Indeed, he thanks the students for having improved his analysis, particularly "In continually protesting that the students were generally more variable than I tended to represent them as being during my earlier, participant observation research; in listening to the sexual materials in chapters 5 and 6 with an interest and openness that contrasted strongly with the reactions of many older readers[;]...and in protesting against certain ways in which I denigrated them as intellectual beings [in the final chapter of the book]" (329–30). The students' appreciative listening aside, our concern is with the degree to which their protests were heard and addressed.

It is clear enough why students would have cause to protest Moffatt's portrayal of them as generally shallow beings with little or no interest in the life of the mind when one learns his approach for soliciting the information that led him to this conclusion. Moffatt reveals that his "standard opening question" when interviewing students was to say he "was a man from Mars" and then to ask them: "Why did young Earthlings leave big comfortable homes a few miles away, where all their needs were provided for by their parents, and come to live in these crowded, noisy confines, packed together like sardines?" (92). This is a remarkable way to begin an interview, not only because it draws on a style of questioning best suited to a much younger audience, but also because it reveals the questioner's own assumption that students at a large, public university share a common suburban heritage, including two parents with disposable income, spacious living quarters, and a quiet home life. Moffatt's question shows just how distant he is from the culture he is studying and his sense of how great an imaginative leap one must make to construct students as experts worthy of attention. And, as it turns out, Moffatt's study inadvertently reveals that undergraduates are about as likely to be asked to speculate on the overarching significance of their actions as they are to be interviewed by a Martian.

Despite these manifest problems with Moffatt's method for interviewing his subjects, on one occasion at least, when Moffatt conducted an interview in the public space of a student lounge, his line of questioning led to an engaged argument between two students: Louie, who described coming to school as an opportunity "not only to grow intellectually but to grow independentlywise," and Carrie, who said that college was "a place where suburban brats come, to hang out for four years" (92). Moffatt records the ensu-

ing interchange, intervening only to provide the event with its loose narrative structure: we listen in as the two speakers develop their positions; we are privy to a failed effort by a passerby to derail the discussion; and we are treated to the appearance of “the Stranger,” who “had a certain hypnotic charm, reinforced by the reiterative phrases he used, and a man-of-the-world authority reinforced by the density of his easy vulgarisms” (94). But once Moffatt has finished transcribing the Stranger’s contribution to the discussion, he abandons the scene, observing only that the Stranger’s “tone poem” had “popped the ‘cosmic’ bubble” produced by Louie and Carrie’s concerted efforts to articulate why going to college should matter (94).

Though much that happens during this public argument about the importance of education might be considered banal or overly theatrical to an outside observer, one would expect an anthropologist to mine this scene for what it reveals about alternative conventions for carrying out intellectual work in the dorms, where, unlike the classrooms, participants can openly express passionate beliefs, abandon unpopular positions in the face of skepticism, change the subject, and return to voicing their initial beliefs when the heat has died down. Or the scene might have been examined for what it has to say about internally enforced restrictions among undergraduates that prevent public displays of intellectual engagement, with particular attention paid to the two outside “interruptions” as males sought to engage the attentions of the female discussant, one by speaking of her physical appearance and the other by laying claim to greater knowledge and verbal facility. Or the discussion between Carrie, an African American student, and Louie, whom Moffatt describes as “hustling as usual” (91), could have been analyzed for what it had to say about the public personas students assume when called on to explain their reasons for attending college. Moffatt pursues none of these interpretive routes, however, motivated perhaps by his desire that his chapters be “as open as the state of adolescence itself ideally ought to be” (xvii). Whatever the reason, he leaves it up to the reader to sort this scene out, while he heads off for still greener pastures.

When the reader arrives at Chapter 5, “Sex,” and Chapter 6, “Sex in College,” it becomes clear that Moffatt includes the business of slogging through life in the dorms to justify his exploration of undergraduate sexual activity. From the moment Moffatt commenced his whimsical project, sex was everywhere: as he says, “in my first couple of days in the dorm, I was finding the generally suppressed sexuality of the coed dorms, which I had never experienced in my own college years, a steamy business, [and?] more than a little stressful for my thirty-three-year-old libido” (9). He introduces the first of his two chapters on undergraduate sex, “Since I had started teach-

ing at Rutgers, I had sometimes wondered what really went on in these new institutions, the coed dorms,” and then goes on to observe that an “inevitable middle-aged fantasy about the coed dorms was they were ongoing sex orgies” (181). To his dismay, possibly, while living in the dorms Moffatt found little evidence to nourish this fantasy. Instead, “the undergraduates maintained a set of conventions among themselves, with no detectable adult influence, in which sexual expression and sexual behavior were restrained—if not actually repressed” (182). Unwilling to accept these appearances and armed with statistical information from the university health centers regarding the number of pregnancy tests and abortions performed in a given year, Moffatt set out to devise a way to ask the students about undergraduate sex, their “sexual mentalities,” and their sexual behaviors in “safer ways than those provided by the social gossip and by the occasional confidences of dorm ethnography” (186). Incredibly, he finds the safer route to be having students write “anonymous sexual self-reports” for credit in a course he was teaching on the anthropology of sexuality and eroticism.

Here, in part, is the assignment Moffatt presented to his students:

I'd like you to write a *confidential* paper about your own sexuality. You may write about any aspect of it, in any linguistic style you choose: feelings, behavior, fantasies; best sex you've ever had; worst sex; no sex; frequency of sex; development of your own sexuality through time; pleasures and pains; sex and love; sex and other emotions; anxieties; techniques.

If you're not especially active sexually, don't be intimidated by this assignment; try to write about your eroticism in any way you can. If you *are* sexually active, frank descriptions would be of use to my own research—but I leave such descriptions up to your own choice.

I leave the form of this assignment to you, but I do ask you to be as truthful as possible. For most males, this means avoiding braggadocio; for most females, this means avoiding undue discretion. If you choose to write about fantasies, let me know they're fantasies. (236 n. 17, original emphasis)

This prompt reveals Moffatt's exclusive interest in having students report what they do with their bodies or minds—in having them, in other words, produce the required data (i.e., “frank descriptions”) for his research.⁹ What the students are not asked to do, tellingly, is to become ethnographers of their own cultures, or to report on what *they* think about what they do or why they think they do it, or even—remember, this assignment does occur

in a course on the “Anthropology of Sexuality and Eroticism”—to situate their experiences in relation to the other cultures discussed in the course. In fact, the assignment reserved such comparative work for those squeamish students who found writing the sexual self-report to be “too personal or too excruciating.” For this group, Moffatt provides busy work: “compare and contrast the sexual practices of *two* of the *four* cultures on whom we’ve read ethnography to date” (237 n. 17, original emphasis).

It is reasonable to ask, What was this assignment teaching the students about the culture of schooling? One possible answer is that within this pedagogical approach, the students were being trained to see that their use to the discipline was as “sources of information.” For a student to be treated as a data provider and not a knowledge producer is hardly a unique experience in the academy, of course, and thus it should come as no surprise to learn that all but one of the students presented with Moffatt’s assignment elected to write about their own experiences rather than write a report on the course lectures—the lone, recalcitrant subject being a “single male, from an east Asian background” (235 n. 15). The rest of the students clearly relished Moffatt’s assignment, giving him exactly what he asked for and more. Regardless of whether the responses were frank or not, Moffatt concluded that “most of them sounded true, or they appeared to be fictional in the constructive sense of the term: they employed well-known writing genres to construct and to comprehend experiences that their writers themselves considered to have been real” (189). With this sleight of hand, Moffatt declares his data to be inescapably authentic, showcasing student papers thanking him for the assignment, others testifying to the assignment’s having improved the students’ own sex lives, and one female student’s extended—no doubt reassuring—fantasy about seducing her *French* professor. In each instance, Moffatt bids us to read the student work as “unavoidably honest at the level of values, attitudes, and sexual ideation and as relatively honest at the level of behavior,” a move that allows him to argue that the students partake in what he calls “the new sexual orthodoxy,” where sex is seen to be *the* central concern of everyone’s life (193, 195).

It’s a curious argument, given that Moffatt himself provided the prompt that ensured the production of data supporting his conclusion. And, in fact, in his final chapter, “The Life of the Mind,” Moffatt cites—but does not respond to—two students who give reason to doubt the overwhelming evidence Moffatt has offered concerning the dominance of this new sexual orthodoxy. The first student, when asked to self-report on her intellectual life, observes that “the opportunity to write about my intellectual life I find even more gratifying than an invitation to anonymously discuss my sexuality. . . .

I've been reading since I was 3 and only started having sex since I turned 20. [So] my 'life of the mind' is also more central to my personality" (271, original ellipsis and brackets). The second student cited comments that "one's study habits [are] just as touchy a subject as one's sexuality and maybe more so" (271, original brackets). Moffatt reveals just how little credence he gives to such statements in a footnote, where he explains that these self-reports were solicited in "large classes in 1986 and 1987" by an assignment that "resembled the one for the sexual self-reports . . . , though the topic was not as sensitive, and these reports were not anonymous" (311 n. 2). Indeed, Moffatt seems unaware that the student comments he has placed at the opening of his final chapter contradict his assignment's assumption that discussing the "life of the mind" is a less "sensitive" topic for students than "the life of the body."

One could easily argue that these student comments *should* be disregarded, on the grounds that the very publicness of Moffatt's assignment on the life of the mind guaranteed responses that took for granted the importance of thinking: after all, who would openly tell a professor, in a paper for credit, anything else about schooling? Once again, though, rather than entertain the possibility that his students might be responding to the assignment's implicit constraints, Moffatt provides the following account for the students' general satisfaction with the education they had received at Rutgers:

Like adult ideologues of higher education, most of them believed or hoped, one way or another, that a college education would be a civilizing experience. College should broaden their intellectual horizons, they believed; it should make them into better, more liberal, more generally knowledgeable human beings. At the same time, however, college should have a useful vocational outcome for them. . . . And this second, vocational meaning of college was—unmistakably—its much more important purpose for most Rutgers students in the late twentieth century. (274–75)

The students, in effect, are understood to be mere functionaries of American ideology about higher education, espousing beliefs that are undercut by their more venal desires for vocational training. And, while Moffatt admits that his presence in the dorms must have restricted the kinds of "spontaneous student-to-student intellectual talks" that undergraduates claimed to value so highly and that they insisted occurred "all the time among themselves, about all sorts of fascinating things," he had reason to believe that "not all the youths who represented themselves as friendly toward the life of

the mind in papers like these were real student intellectuals or highly motivated scholars” (298–300). Thus, whereas Moffatt lobbied to establish the unavoidable authenticity of the students’ responses about their sexual practices, here he labors in exactly the opposite direction to establish the inauthenticity of the students’ experiences with the life of the mind.

But what does Moffatt mean when he insists that there are so few “real student intellectuals”? In a footnote, he guesses that no more than 20 percent of the student population would fit into this admittedly imprecise category, and he goes on to explain that those students he deems “real student intellectuals” were those “youths for whom intellect somehow seemed to be at the core of their identifies, . . . youths who, if I had a chance to know them as a teacher in a small seminar class, I thought might impress me as outstanding or unusual students” (325 n. 38). To put it another way, because Moffatt couldn’t get direct access to the students’ experiences of intellectual talk and because he mostly encountered students in large lecture courses, he decided that only a handful of students actually experienced “the life of the mind.” While this insight into the declining quality of undergraduate life is meant to be disheartening, Moffatt does his best to conclude his book on an upbeat note by providing portraits of two “student intellectuals, both of them seniors, a male and a female, looking back untraumatically on what they recalled as four happy academic years at Rutgers” (306). There’s Joe, an English major and “reformed nerd,” and Susan, whom Moffatt describes as “our second and last student pilgrim through the dungeons and dragons of the undergraduate college” (306–7).

It’s a striking image to close on, with the student cast in a sacred quest, passing through a fairy-tale landscape filled with the creatures of fantasy. And what this pilgrim has to say about her experience of undergraduate life contradicts much of what Moffatt has presented in the preceding chapters. While she acknowledges the role of college fun and games in her life, she talks also of wandering through the library on her own: “Sometimes I think I learned as much in those hours lounging on the floor between racks as I did in the accumulated classroom time” (309). Such learning never directly registers in the dorms or in the classrooms, of course—or even, apparently, in studies of undergraduate life. Aware of this, the student openly challenges Moffatt’s “statement that freshmen and sophomores spend little time discussing anything serious. I’ve spent every year here involved in late night conversations about a lot more than who was sleeping with who” (308). A page and a half later, Moffatt brings his study to an end, without responding to the student’s remarks or commenting on her observation at the conclusion of her undergraduate work that the idea of becoming a professor,

specializing in the same subject for thirty years, “bores and terrifies” her (308). In many ways, this student’s revulsion at the thought of the life of the professoriate provides a fitting end to Moffatt’s study, in which his desire to have students discuss their sex lives has overwhelmed whatever counter-vailing desire the students had to discuss what being an intellectual might mean under their circumstances.

Before leaving Moffatt’s book, though, we must attend to the issue that neither Moffatt nor his students were comfortable addressing—race. The place to begin such a discussion is with Chapter 4 of *Coming of Age in New Jersey*, “Race and Individualism,” where Moffatt recounts his year visiting an “integrated” coed dorm, Erewhon Third, and the problems he encountered in doing so.¹⁰ The situation on Erewhon Third was as follows: Rutgers had begun admitting significant numbers of minority students between 1968 and 1972. Eventually, leaders from these student populations called for separate dorms to promote a sense of community and to ensure the academic success of minority students. The administration balked at such efforts to “self-segregate” but, in the spirit of compromise, allowed special interest groups to live together. In this case, “the Robeson unit,” with a special interest in black culture, was allowed to occupy one part of Erewhon Third; the other part of the floor was taken up by white students who “were there either because the housing computer had placed them there or through a combination of the housing lottery and much more reluctant choices than the Robeson members had made” (145). The floor, in effect, was to serve as a racial crucible for working out relations that have yet to be resolved either in the communities that surround the academy or in the academic departments that surround the dorms.

As one would expect, Moffatt encountered a number of obstacles when he tried to find out what students on the floor thought about race. To begin with, he had difficulty gaining the confidence of the Robeson students:

Even as an older white male, safely encased in my identity as a researcher, I sometimes felt intimidated on the Robeson side. Some of the Robeson residents were as amiable and open with me in private interviews as any of the white, low-side residents; others were only grudgingly helpful; and one or two of the older, tougher-looking males on the floor frankly scared me a little with their monosyllabic replies and what struck me as baleful stares. (155, original emphasis)

While Moffatt acknowledges this discomfort with the black students, he sees himself as having no similar difficulties with the white residents on the floor; and, in the absence of such discomfort, he assumed that he could hear

and understand what the white residents were saying to him when they spoke of race. Thus, for example, he doesn't hesitate to label the following response to the question "Do you have any problems with blacks on the floor?" as "notable both for its racism and for its sense of illegitimacy of the same":

I went to a [high] school and I guess I wasn't stuck with college people, and they were very uncivilized, very rowdy and gangy, and . . . you know, saying they—you say one thing wrong, and forget it! You had fifty of them on your back after school! So I came in with a very bad attitude about them and it's just not getting any better . . . [The ones at Rutgers] are a lot nicer than just regular ones, cause I guess they're smarter and they know a lot more. (149–50, original ellipses and brackets)

After pointing to the "conflicting attitudes" evident in these remarks and observing that the student described herself as "prejudiced," Moffatt moves on to another example of white students' ambivalence about race (150). What Moffatt overlooks, in the process, is that the student's prejudice arises in response to a particular conjunction of race, class, and educational background: drawing on a long tradition of discrimination, this student distinguishes between "college people" and the masses of "very uncivilized, very rowdy and gangy" folk. While the student initially assumed that this distinction correlated with racial differences, her experiences at the university have brought her original point of view to crisis. In fact, now that she's lived in the dorm, she's been confronted by blacks who are "smarter and . . . know a lot more" than the ones she encountered in her high school where, it turns out, she was a member of the minority student population.

By labeling this student's response "racist," Moffatt removes it from its complex cultural and historical background. He also avoids drawing attention to the kinship between her discomfort and his own unease with those "older, tougher-looking" black males on the other end of the hall. Given this approach, it seems foreordained that Moffatt would discover evidence that the typical college student has an impoverished notion of culture: indeed, as a result of his investigation, Moffatt concludes that "most of the white students" assumed "people had the right to different opinions . . . but in many everyday behaviors—those of friendliness, for instance—all normal human beings ought to act similarly, for many daily behaviors were 'natural'" (152, original emphasis). In other words, most of the white students felt that everyone, regardless of race, should be friendly in the same way, have fun in the same way, express themselves in the same way. One could see this as a sign that the students have a "not especially deep or sophisti-

cated” understanding of how culture works, as Moffatt does (153). Or one could argue that the students’ shared assumption about “natural,” normative social behavior simply reflects the overarching values of the containing institution, which expects all students to demonstrate their intelligence in the same way, regardless of cultural background. To pursue this avenue of thought, though, one would have to be willing to entertain the possibility that it is the institution itself (and the people it most highly rewards) that lacks an “especially deep or sophisticated” working concept of culture.

Rather than go down this perilous road, Moffatt opts instead to hazard yet another “deliberately imprecise” guess about the student population—this time estimating that “between a tenth and a quarter of the white undergraduate student body” were “real racists” at the time he did his study (164). It’s hard to know what to make of a methodology that depends on such deliberate imprecision; what is clear, though, is that when it comes to *specific* interactions between students Moffatt knows well, he is reluctant to find evidence of racist intentions. We see this, for example, in Moffatt’s reaction to a fight he witnessed on Hasbrouck Fourth in 1984 between Carrie, “a lively black woman with a punk haircut,” and Art, a “tall, intense, unpredictable [white male], and every bit as vivid a personality as Carrie” (78). Carrie and Art had once been friendly, but a simmering antagonism had grown between them after Art had complained to the hall preceptor about Carrie’s loud music. Carrie responded by threatening Art that she would get some friends “to take care of him” and then allegedly said—within range of Art’s hearing—that “you’ve got to kick [white folks’] asses a few times to make them respect you.” A shouting match ensued, spilling over into the lounge and climaxing when Art went “impressively, quivering off his head. He screamed at her for what seemed like five minutes. The rest of us went into mild shock” (113).

Moffatt concedes that by the time he wrote up the event, he “had not retained anything of what anyone had actually said, only the emotional tone and the moves the various actors had made” (114). He continues, in a footnote, that “to be fair to Art, I think I *would* have remembered it if he had said anything blatantly racist during his diatribe” (136 n. 38, original emphasis). Although Moffatt does his best to contain the possibility that race figured in the white student’s response during this fight, in the end, his efforts fail. In fact, when Art and four other ex-residents of the floor later enrolled in a course where Moffatt presented his preliminary findings about life in Hasbrouck, Art rejected Moffatt’s “soft-pedaled” version of the fight and “brought it up again in all its vivid detail” in the class: “He was still angry with Carrie; he apparently still felt that she had introduced racially

based threats in an inappropriate way. But after he told the class his version of their fight—referring to Carrie with the phrase ‘let’s call her *Grace Jones*’ and giving her a stereotypic black accent, which she didn’t have at all—I felt that I had to make some strong comments from the podium about undergraduate racism at Rutgers” (138 n. 46, original emphasis). Moffatt’s response is so automatic that this reaction to his informant’s alternative account of the event’s significance no doubt felt natural to him. And thus, though Moffatt has tried his best to be “fair to Art,” in the end the student has *forced* him to fall back on his professorial authority. The form that authority takes in this instance is, tellingly enough, not a revised analysis of the significance of the event in question but rather another in a long line of lectures from the podium meant to teach students that racism is bad. It’s hard to see why this is an appropriate line for an anthropologist to take in this situation, and it’s even harder to understand why Moffatt continues to insist, after Art’s remarks in his course, that “race was only incidentally important on Hasbrouck Fourth in 1984–85. It was one *possible* subtext of Art and Carrie’s fight, though Art was probably just as upset with Carrie as an assertive woman as he was with her as a black” (141, emphasis added).

Moffatt doesn’t say how his students reacted to his outburst from the podium. But, it’s easy enough to imagine that when Art and his classmates dragged themselves from the lecture hall, some may well have felt duly chastened by their teacher’s oration, others may have been puzzled by the animated interchange, and still others might have been angry about what had happened. And, of course, it is not impossible that some students may have left feeling that they had witnessed yet another dramatic performance of the tenuousness of anthropological knowledge, as the teacher attempted to compensate for this necessary uncertainty by laying claim to a higher knowledge and a greater moral authority. We don’t know what the students made of this spectacle, but there are very good pedagogical and anthropological reasons for trying to find out. Indeed, as we will see in the second half of this chapter, ethnographic research itself can provide both the method and the materials necessary to engage in more successful interactions with students than we’ve glimpsed here.

To be fair to Moffatt, though, he is not concerned with pedagogical reform of this kind. In fact, he concludes his study despairing of the possibility of meaningful educational reform. To begin with, he sees Rutgers as typical of American higher education at the end of the century “when it comes to the nature of its current trade-off between research and teaching and when it comes to the often only marginally intellectual mentality of many of its students” (310 n. 1). Thus, after his years “in the field,” Moffatt sees

only a corrupt industry and inferior human resources. In the face of these apparently overwhelmingly dismal working conditions, he can barely muster the energy to voice approval of the most familiar reform objectives: “more money and social prestige for undergraduate teaching, revised institutional relationships between research and the rest of college in all or most American colleges and universities, and tougher-minded stratifications of research-oriented and teaching-oriented institutions and professors” (310 n. 1). To put it another way, after all his years studying student culture, Moffatt surrenders the possibility of meaningful cultural change, for what else could it mean when an *anthropologist* calls for the spontaneous generation of “more social prestige for undergraduate teaching”? Moffatt doesn’t discuss how this increase in prestige would come about, nor does he explain why a “tougher-minded,” even more rigidly stratified academic culture is to be desired. Instead, under the smoke screen produced by this empty rhetoric, he retires from the scene of effective political and pedagogical action, but not before he makes the final, obligatory declaration that he would welcome the opportunity to teach differently. The problem, he confesses in his final footnote in the book, lies with the students themselves. While he would love to present them with a more complex picture of what politically critical anthropology looks like, for example, he knows this “doesn’t sell nearly as well at the undergraduate level . . . ; the average Intro student seems to like the fairy-tale approach much better. And it is often hard to resist providing what the market demands, especially when one is continually being judged for one’s enrollments” (326 n. 43). In the end, then, the students, with their “marginally intellectual mentalities” and their attraction to “the fairy-tale approach” to culture, are the ones ultimately responsible for bringing higher education to its knees.

Ways with Words:

Complicity and the Possibility of Reform

Shirley Brice Heath’s work with three separate language communities in the Piedmont Valley of the Carolinas from 1969 to 1978 bears a superficial similarity to Moffatt’s project studying undergraduate life at Rutgers. Like Moffatt, Heath was interested in learning more about the culture of schooling and about students’ experiences of that culture, though her interest is primarily with elementary education rather than college-level instruction. Past this point the similarities end, for Heath both participated in and generated efforts to reform the educational system in the Carolinas. Heath’s interest in such work was fostered, in part, by local responses to the federal

mandate regarding desegregation. In the wake of this legislation, communication problems proliferated at the schools and the workplaces: the poor white residents of “Roadville” and the poor black residents of “Trackton,” the principal subjects of Heath’s study, seemed to have diametrically opposed ideas about the best ways to learn, teach, and use language. To make matters worse, neither group seemed to fare well when asked to function in “the townspeople’s” world, particularly when it came to school achievement. As a part-time teacher at a local state university in the late sixties, Heath could see that “Communication was a central concern of black and white teachers, parents, and mill personnel who felt the need to know more about how others communicated: why students and teachers often could not understand each other, why questions were sometimes not answered, and why habitual ways of talking and listening did not always seem to work” (*Ways with Words* 2). Heath’s task, as she saw it, was to come to an understanding of how these three communities used language, to describe their differences in detail, and to train teachers in such a way that they would be prepared to introduce appropriate curricular reforms and teaching methods to address these breakdowns in communication.

Perhaps because Heath’s research project set out to determine and, to the extent possible, remedy the consequences of desegregation, she insists that *Ways with Words* not be read as saying that racial difference explains why the poor white residents of Roadville and the poor black residents of Trackton use language in ways that conflict. A reader who reaches such a conclusion, Heath maintains, would “miss the central point of the [book’s] focus on culture as learned behavior and on language habits as part of that shared learning” (11). Such a reader would also have failed to understand that the people of Roadville and Trackton do not use language differently *because* they are racially different but because they have had “different historical forces shaping” their language use (10).¹¹ Having ruled out race as the transcendent determinant of language use, Heath proceeds to do away with “socioeconomic” explanations as well, on the grounds that over half the families in the area qualified for in-state social services. And, finally, given that almost all of her students, regardless of race or class, could shift among a range of dialects, she joined her students in concluding that “to categorize children and their families on the basis of either socioeconomic class or race and then to link these categories to discrete language differences was to ignore the realities of the communicative patterns of the region” (3).

By neutralizing race and class as explanatory categories from the outset, Heath was able to shut down those explanations for academic failure most ready to hand prior to desegregation—that is, “they” speak differently be-

cause of their race or because of their poverty, the other sure sign of “their” innate inferiority. This rhetorical decision also served pedagogical purposes, since it created a classroom agenda that meshed with the needs of the students in Heath’s graduate courses—“teachers, who came to advance their degrees and pay levels, and businessmen and mill personnel”—who were fully committed to finding other explanations for the communication problems that confronted them (2). In evaluating Heath’s work, then, we must start by noting that her methodological and interpretive decisions were forged in response to a shared need to find a way to talk about race that wouldn’t give offense or give rise to violence. Thus, ruling out race and class as determinants reflects an overarching desire on Heath’s part and on the part of her students to hold fast to the belief that education has the power to produce a coherent polity, which it achieves by assimilating those outside the system into the system’s stable core.¹²

Heath’s further determination not to examine as closely the language use of “the townspeople”—the racially mixed middle class living throughout the Piedmont Valley—is clearly related to this need to establish the middle class as the fixed point to which all others, without question, aspire. While Heath studies the language habits of the residents of Trackton and Roadville in great detail, she devotes only one chapter to the ways townspeople use language—a chapter, she assures her readers, that does not repeat the mass of material collected on the middle class by traditional social science but that does verify “the similarities of the lives of [the] townspeople of the Piedmont to those of their counterparts elsewhere” (12). It is against this backdrop of understanding the language use of the middle class as normative and homogenous that *Ways with Words* was written.¹³ The first six chapters are devoted to articulating a series of differences between Roadville and Trackton in terms of how the two communities define success, how they teach and learn languages, and how they constitute their oral and literate traditions. The seventh chapter—the one separating the sections titled “Ethnographer Learning” and the “Ethnographer Doing” and the one standing symbolically between the lower-class communities and school success—is the sole chapter on the middle class. The story of *Ways with Words* is, perhaps inevitably, the story of how best to move the masses (in the front of the book) to accept and mimic the values of the middle-class townspeople who live in “Gateway” (in the middle of the book), thereby providing them with a better shot at school success, full employment, and assimilation (at the end of the book).¹⁴

Heath’s work on the differences between how language is used in Roadville and Trackton and how those differences end up producing failure in

the schools for children from both communities is a tour de force of ethnographic insight unlikely to be equaled. No other work on schooling is comparable in scope; no other study delivers such a steady stream of pedagogically useful observations about the dynamic interplay between failure in the classroom and success in the home community. This granted, it is worth resting for a moment on the seam in Heath's book where the lower-class communities join with mainstream education, as the juxtaposition of this most familiar object—the middle class—with the foreign worlds of Roadville and Trackton foregrounds education's inescapable role in the business of assimilation. One of the most powerful instances of this juxtaposition occurs when Heath discusses the child-rearing practices of the middle class. Heath casts the differences among the three communities in the following way: in contrast to Gateway, where almost "from conception, the baby [of a townsperson] is treated as a potential conversationalist," babies in Trackton are not understood to be information givers and thus are rarely asked information-seeking questions, while babies in Roadville are addressed almost exclusively in baby talk (245). The difference, then, is that "[Middle-class mothers] assume the baby is attending to their talk, and any response is interpreted in *intentional* and *representational* terms by the mother. . . . They restate the infant's utterance as they believe the infant intended it, acknowledging that though the infant is not old enough to say what he intends, he is capable of having intentions which can be interpreted by others" (248, original emphasis). In other words, from the moment the newborn enters the middle-class home, the child is constructed as an "intending subject." Unlike residents of Roadville and Trackton, members in these households occupy their time with divining the child's true intentions and representing themselves to others as people who are principally concerned with the business of determining and articulating intentionality. Such an upbringing, as Heath makes clear, is excellent preparation for success in the school system, dovetailing perfectly with an institution whose primary concern is with training students to think about who did what to whom and why.

We can also see a connection between the ethnographer's preoccupation with uncovering intentions, finding patterns, and delineating systems and the child-rearing practices found in the domestic sphere of the townspeople. That is, by teaching teachers and having them, in turn, teach their students to attend to matters of intentionality, Heath effectively is teaching everyone involved in the project how to assimilate the values and lifeways of the middle-class townspeople. Thus, when Heath observes that "in attempting to understand the unconscious rules members of a group follow

in their lives, we often look for patterns and themes of behavior which are carried from the home life into other institutions community members themselves control” (201), her formulation dramatizes, in miniature, the set of relationships that underwrite *all* ethnographic projects—there are intending subjects who know and are interested in knowing more (Heath’s “we”), and there are others who don’t know and who act according to “unconscious rules.” With regard to the townspeople, Heath sees little need to elaborate on or to question the links between their ways of using language and the institutions they control. For Heath, her students, and, undoubtedly, the vast majority of her readers, the connection between constructing children as intending subjects and creating classrooms that reward the ability to divine the teacher’s intentions is bound to seem obvious, natural, and thus implicitly “known” by all at some unconscious level.

While Heath has little trouble evincing the unconscious rules governing language use in the middle class by having teachers look at the institutions they control, she faces insurmountable difficulties when she pursues a similar strategy with the residents of Trackton. Thus, when Heath turns to the local black church as an example of an institution Trackton controls, she finds herself confounded by the way the church functions and by how hymns get “raised” during the service. Since interviewing both educated and uneducated members of the congregation proves fruitless, Heath’s only recourse is to blend the language of her informants with her own critical discourse. So, to explain what happens in the church, Heath writes: “It is a ‘sump’n’ which allows the raising of hymns that leaders and congregation compose during, in, and for the performance. It is a ‘sump’n,’ which cannot be articulated by the members that accounts for the process and force by which they sing, tell a tale, compose a story, or pray a prayer” (208–9). Whereas Heath is able to draw on the combined insights of anthropology, linguistics, and education elsewhere in *Ways with Words* to bring to light the rules governing language use in Roadville and Trackton and to tease out the social and cultural forces that redundantly support and reinforce those rules, she hits a wall when it comes to the black church. Her mastery unstrung, Heath can only repeat a term from the Trackton community (“sump’n”) in lieu of providing what would look like an “explanation” to someone outside that community.

Thus, despite the best of intentions, Heath’s work in the black church would seem to have led her back to the very thing she and her students wanted to avoid—namely, irreducible racial difference, since the church members appear not to have been “taught” how to perform the way they do in church, at least not in any way that either they or Heath would charac-

terize as instruction. In other words, they “just know” and how they know or what they know can’t be articulated either by the church members or by the ethnographer of their community—it’s just a “sump’n.”¹⁵ While Heath tries to cordon off this moment of irreducible difference by restricting it to the relatively secure realm of the sacred, this sense of the unknowability of the Other seeps out into the rest of her work, where the children of Trackton are repeatedly cast in the most favorable light: their learning styles are remarkable for their “flexibility and adaptability,” their stories are seen as “highly creative fictionalized accounts,” and their relationship to the written word is understood to be one that “opens alternatives” (111, 184, 235). The children of Roadville, by contrast, are described as coming from a community that “allows only stories which are factual” and emphasizes “the teaching of fixed and memorizable statements and labels”; for them, “the written word limits alternatives” (184, 140, 235). One begins to sense in such categorical statements the inevitable reproduction of a set of familiar stereotypes—the crafty, creative, intuitive Tracktonian and the slow, rule-bound, unimaginative Roadvillian.¹⁶

As troubled as we may be to find these stereotypes confirmed and reinscribed by Heath’s research, we should still recognize that by refiguring these stereotypes as the by-products of learned linguistic behaviors, Heath was able to foster the development of desegregated classrooms that afforded the children of Trackton and Roadville a better chance at academic success. In other words, Heath’s “complicity” with dominant ideology—her opening move to contain the threat that an emphasis on race and class would have posed to her study, her consignment of irreducible difference to the spiritual realm, and her discovery of literate behaviors that did not openly contradict dominant stereotypical assumptions—allowed her to remain in the educational system and to alter its effects by influencing the thoughts and actions of those who lived and taught in these communities. It is Heath’s complicity that makes it possible for her to speak with those in local positions of power; it also enables her to preserve the possibility of meaningfully intervening in the education of the disenfranchised. To accomplish this deft political act, Heath does something unique among the educators we have examined: she openly acknowledges her lack of expertise about the lifeways of the communities her students come from and she then sets out to get her students—who are themselves teachers and managers—to become ethnographers of schooling, researching their own assumptions about appropriate language use in the classroom and in the community at large.¹⁷

In so doing, Heath not only revises the traditional power relations in the classroom, but she also violates the assumption that the ethnographer should

avoid, to the extent possible, changing the actions of those being studied. Consequently, Heath's commitments to her discipline, on the one hand, and to meeting the needs of her students, on the other, come into conflict, which results in a temporary, productive suspension of the distinction between her research and her teaching. We can see this in the final section of *Ways with Words*, where Heath looks at the direct, institutional consequences of her work and tracks the individual initiatives of the various teachers who attempted to design classrooms where they and their students from Roadville and Trackton could "bridge their different ways" (265). In Heath's recounting, once the teachers realized that "they had previously judged their students' habits by the norms of the interactions of the townspeople," they were able to modify their teaching practices and institute curricular reforms that made it possible for the students from Trackton and Roadville to succeed in the classroom (266).

It's a thrilling account, one Heath herself has subsequently deemed "more celebration than description" ("Madness(es)" 265). But, as Kathryn Flannery has noted, the conclusion to Heath's book is more likely than not to be read as "a place where hope for change is dashed," since the creative pedagogical initiatives begun in these heady, tumultuous days—initiatives that allowed previously excluded students to find a voice in the classroom, produced rising test scores, and sustained a vision of eventual school success—all collapsed once Heath left the area (209). Heath attributes the failure of the reform efforts to sustain themselves not to her departure but to larger systemic changes; along with a growing lack of faith in the school systems in the 1980s, there was "a decrease in the autonomy of teachers as competent professionals and an increase in the bureaucratization of teaching and testing" (*Ways with Words* 356). With the crisis transferred to this bureaucratic level, the teachers felt an abatement of "the concrete realities of the new experience of facing black and white students in their classes" that had originally impelled "creative output from teachers and students alike" (357).¹⁸

Given that Heath's efforts had no lasting outcome, Flannery's insistence that the project *not* be judged a failure is sure to come as a surprise. Flannery argues that while "ethnography as a system of inquiry" was adequate to its particular historical moment, the conclusion to *Ways with Words* shows that "new conditions and new students require some other tactical use of other knowledge attentive to the local, the decentered, the different" (212). In other words, she is suggesting the possibility that the time when ethnographic work was capable of generating insights that would advance efforts to reform the academy may have passed. Though Heath has not embraced

this vision of ethnography's limited utility, in reflecting back on the demise of her project she has concluded that it is vital to work against "the holding power of the myth that reform should both improve and persist" ("Madness(es)" 260).

When we keep these recommendations in mind, it seems the only option available to us for assessing Heath's work is to attend quite closely to what she herself defined as success within the moment of her project. In "Ethnographer Doing," Heath tells us that the teachers "used the challenge of integration" to refine the "intuition-based practices" they had used with particularly difficult students in the past and that, once they realized they "had learned unconsciously what to expect of their students so that the classroom could operate in an orderly way," they were then able to provide overt instruction in the codes of politeness that must be respected if the classroom is to function properly (*Ways with Words* 272–79). The story is believable enough: once the teachers began to be able to better articulate what kind of work they wanted their students to do and how they wanted their students to behave, they also began to develop alternative teaching practices for achieving these goals, most notably allowing students to bring their own ways of using language at home into the classroom to be investigated. And, as the story goes, by revising their expectations accordingly, the teachers were able to solicit work that gave nonmainstream students the opportunity to succeed in school without the teachers having to alter or degrade the standards of evaluation. Thus, within this definition of success, the reform effort is seen to have failed once teachers stopped soliciting different kinds of student work and returned to their former ways of teaching.

It's important to recognize what is at stake in this insistence that reigning standards of academic excellence were never put at risk by the teachers' initiatives. Its significance becomes clear when Heath describes how getting the students to become ethnographers of their own cultures helped transform the classroom into a place where the students themselves provided the material to be studied and then participated in producing the interpretations of that material. In one such classroom, we are told, "many [of the students] were 'turned on' to writing in ways which surprised themselves, but this writing was their own, generated by them for purposes which both met their needs and allowed teachers to emphasize school skills of spelling, punctuation, and requirements of style for different purposes" (314). Such claims about student excitement and interest are, of course, generic to arguments in favor of pedagogical innovations. But tellingly, Heath's version of this claim includes the proviso that student enthusiasm did not derail teachers from the serious business of ensuring the continued production of

good clean prose. Whether such claims are believable depends on the evidence presented and, in this case, there is less evidence than, as Heath herself has said, “celebration.” Thus, in a study that grows out of the conflicts produced by the implementation of desegregation—a study, furthermore, that goes to great lengths to show how stories are differently valued in three competing communities and the consequences of these differing valuations—the classroom is suddenly transformed, in the final instance, into a place where all these conflicts can be erased and all the differing systems of evaluation can peaceably come together. And for this to happen, the teachers needed only to “alter their methods of teaching, but not their standards of judging the mechanics of writing and clarity of writing” (314).

Heath’s own research makes it hard to believe that “clarity of writing” could have remained a fixed standard, given the three very different ways that the residents of Roadville, Trackton, and Gateway use language. Yet Heath makes this assertion repeatedly, not only in *Ways with Words* but also in the work that has followed.¹⁹ Thus, when Heath offers a selection from the journal of Zinnea Mae, one of the children from Trackton, she focuses only on the correct spelling and the “seemingly random use of apostrophes and other punctuation marks” in the piece (335–36). What Heath leaves unaddressed is the content of Zinnea Mae’s journal: “Childrens back in [the old days] got a lots of education and didn’t go to school much. But we go to school nine months and still don’t learn too much” (335). Attending only to the surface features, and bidding the readers to do so as well, Heath leaves untouched Zinnea Mae’s critique of the school system, with the curious result that her journal entry is showcased as an example of the virtues of pursuing Heath’s line of educational reform. Within an educational and investigative system so concerned with *how* things are said—with delineating and transmitting “the unconscious rules” governing the production of proper, error-free language use—*what* gets said is always in danger of being lost or misplaced.²⁰

If one similarly scrutinizes how student work is read and understood in the closing section of *Ways with Words*, Heath’s claims to have achieved a measure of pedagogical reform seem less grand and the “failure” of the reforms once she departed seems less surprising. For despite Heath’s repeated assurances that teachers provided students with a “metalanguage” that allowed them “to talk about acquiring, integrating, and controlling knowledge in school” (342), she provides little evidence to support such a claim, nor does she establish that the teachers themselves had control of such a language. Indeed, if the teachers had gained access to such a metalanguage, why were they unable to find ways to explain the significance of what they

were doing in their classrooms to those people who ultimately had the power of determining their working conditions? What the evidence does suggest is that the teachers did not question their own evaluative rules once they had articulated them and that they failed to become conversant in the languages and protocols of their bosses—those bureaucrats who exercised such substantial control over what they were allowed to do in their classrooms. This is, to be sure, an odd fate for a reform program bent on trying to teach the disenfranchised how to read and understand the “ways with words” of other peoples, particularly the ways of those in the dominant classes. Seen in this light, Heath’s book presents an important concluding paradox for us to consider: what are we to make of the fact that the teachers in Heath’s study asked their students to develop the ability to speak and write across a range of contexts and to think self-reflexively about their own language practices and then didn’t hold themselves to the same standards? The answer to this question, as we will see, is to be found not in the weakness of individual teachers but in the cultural norms of the academy, which exert considerable force on our expectations of what may reasonably be asked of a teacher.

**Studying Up on Academic Culture:
“The Mystique of Interpretive Authority and
the Illusion of Scholarly Objectivity”**

In the mid-1980s, Elizabeth Sheehan set out to do an ethnographic study of “Irish academics’ participation in the public sphere of politics, social reform, and cultural debate” (252). This hardly seems like a project meant to offend the academics involved and yet, from the beginning, Sheehan’s research ran into trouble because, as she puts it, “There is some suggestion of bad taste in the notion that one academic should study another, a delicacy of feeling rarely extended by social scientists to the rest of the world” (255). In her case, Sheehan realized that she had upset the refined sensibilities of her subjects in a number of ways: she was a younger, female graduate student studying older, established members of the academic profession; she was a foreigner constructing a reading of indigenous scholars, some of whom were themselves “engaged in developing alternate analyses of their own societies” (253); she was an American anthropologist interested in culture and thus represented both a methodology and an academic tradition that together were stereotyped as “better funded, more influential, but less competent in their research than their Irish or British counterparts”; and finally, her focus on the quotidian concerns of Irish intellectuals was seen to

undermine Ireland's claim to "international scholarly prestige, the production of great literature." Thus, as far as Sheehan's informants were concerned, she had put together a project that was a direct threat to "their own status and interpretive authority" (254). As a consequence, Sheehan found she had to contend with a good deal of antagonistic behavior: dismissive responses, repeated requests to show her credentials and prove the depth of her knowledge, the intentional transmission of misinformation meant to mislead her or to damage other informants in the project, and "friendly threats" about the ease with which she could be met at the airport on her return should her write-up prove unfavorable to the concerned parties.

This story takes its shock value from its revelations that trained academics would willfully obstruct efforts to produce knowledge and insight and that they would treat a junior scholar and aspiring colleague with such glaring acts of disrespect. For any student who has been on the receiving end of a teacher's wrath, though, whatever power this story has to shock is quickly replaced by puzzlement that anyone would *ever* think that academics might act otherwise. Indeed, to be truly shocked by Sheehan's experience is to imagine, as teachers and intellectuals are given to doing despite considerable evidence to the contrary, that being educated somehow lifts one up above the reach of material concerns. It is also to imagine that the academy really does provide a collaborative environment populated by colleagues both self-aware and fully humane. The incredible persistence of this vision of academic culture is the subject of the next chapter; here it will suffice to consider Sheehan's conclusion that "the study of intellectuals and their institutions . . . requires that critical attention be paid to the nature of *our own investment*—as academics and intellectuals, as well as social scientists—in the mystique of interpretive authority and the illusion of scholarly objectivity" (258, emphasis added).

Sheehan ran into such trouble because she was laying claim to a level of expertise that every highly credentialed academic is understood to fully possess by virtue of his or her training—interpretive authority and scholarly objectivity. Consequently, it's not really all that surprising that her subjects responded as they did: after all, what could *she* possibly have to say about them that they couldn't already say about themselves *for* themselves? As an ethnographer, Sheehan had to assume that her subjects might not be fully aware of the forces that controlled their actions, that they might not be the ones best suited to provide an overarching narrative of the codes and conventions of their belief systems, and that they might not be able to achieve the kind of distance from their own situations that enables critical reflection. In other words, she assumed what any ethnographer must as-

sume about her object of study if she is going to do more than simply record and repeat the words of the people being studied. And while the people on the ground in any ethnographic study may well feel the kind of animus and violation that Sheehan's Irish intellectuals felt, usually the research situation itself prevents this discomfort from making itself known, since the researcher is generally "studying down" on subjects who are from a lower class, have less status, or have fewer intellectual accomplishments. By "studying up," Sheehan disrupted what Scott calls "the elite-choreographed public transcript," which consists "of visual and audible displays of rank, precedence, and honor" (Scott 105). For those who believe academics to be free of such "petty," earthbound motives and for those who know otherwise, but say so only in private, the scandal of Sheehan's project lies in its apparent disrespect for the particular "displays of rank, precedence, and honor" that structure academic culture. By asserting her interpretive expertise, despite her status as a young, female, graduate student, Sheehan effectively publicized what Scott calls "the hidden transcript," revealing what is known, but rarely said aloud—namely that academics, too, are consumed by greed, territorial interests, pride, and self-importance.

Scott's analysis of the interaction of dominant and subordinate groups is particularly relevant here, since his research has led him to the surprising conclusion that if anyone can be said to have "false consciousness," it is the members of dominant groups, who dependably show themselves to be the ones "least able to take liberties with those symbols in which they are most heavily invested" (106). Applying this insight to Sheehan's work, we can see that the areas of heaviest investment for academics are those that symbolically represent the academic as the expert, objective interpreter, outside and above the demands of the workaday world. This has certainly been borne out by the preceding discussion of Moffatt's and Heath's research projects, since both studies have been shown to illustrate the degree to which certain founding assumptions about academic expertise must remain unquestioned if the research relationship is to be maintained. In Moffatt's case, we saw how he repeatedly had to reassert his own professorial and moral authority in the classroom and in the dorms when students articulated apparently odious positions that he felt required an immediate response. Heath never acts with such open disregard for her subjects' points of view nor does she adopt a morally judgmental stance when confronted by lifeways that do not accord with her own. And yet, she too could not escape the restrictions of her position as a teacher-trainer—restrictions that required that the normative standards used to evaluate student performance remain unchallenged.

It should be clear that stronger people or better researchers or deeper thinkers could *not* have escaped this structurally produced bind. Heath's example is most instructive in this regard, since it was her very willingness to work with and within the structural constraints of her institutional setting that actually allowed her to open up new teaching and learning possibilities. That Heath's undisguised complicity with (or we might say respect for) the dominant educational system prevented her from making claims about the "radical" aims of her reform project is sure to disturb those who would only be satisfied with a more ambitious program for revising the entire system. With such critics in mind, one could argue that the real threat of ethnographic work like Moffatt's, Heath's, and Sheehan's is in offering incontrovertible proof that the notion of interpretive mastery is always an illusion—an illusion, furthermore, to which academics, regardless of disciplinary affiliation or level of achieved self-reflexivity, can't avoid succumbing. And it is precisely because this illusion is so central to the academic's life that the ethnographic enterprise has attracted so much critical energy over the past two decades. The accusations and recriminations are evidence that academic culture, with its growing commitment to the notion of credentialed expertise, is made frantic by a disciplinary approach that endlessly disproves the long-cherished ideal of the academic's interpretive mastery and objective distance. In this light, much of the animated discussion about the viability of the ethnographic project cited at the opening of this chapter is best read as a sign of a shared desire either to put an end to the production of material evidence that substantiates the limits of academic expertise or to transform that evidence into the kind of highly textualized objets d'art that reconstitute the need for the academic's learned gaze.

Eschewing these modes of response, but granting the possible validity of Flannery's hypothesis that the ethnographic moment may have passed, I would maintain that the pedagogical value of ethnographic work currently lies in its ability to provide such remarkably vivid accounts of the researcher's limited expertise and of the impossibility of ever fully mastering any social situation. When ethnographies are read with these concerns in mind, as I have done here, they can be shown to detail how the "expert observer's" understanding of the observed event is inescapably circumscribed by disciplinary and personal commitments that, in turn, reveal the research project's equally inescapable complicity with dominant systems of constraint. Such an approach is particularly productive when directed to ethnographies of schooling, giving the lie to the seductive vision of the educator as a free-floating entity and providing in its place a more grounded, perhaps even "fallen," account of how educators and their students work

within and against reigning material and discursive conditions. As we have seen in considering the ethnographies written by Moffatt and Heath, the most important and most insistent constraint for research-oriented academic work is that there must come a time during the collection of the data when those being investigated are found to be unable to explain why they are doing what they are doing—a time when their testimony alone cannot make their actions legible to the academic community at large. If no such moment were to arise, no meaningful, interpretive academic labor would be understood to have occurred—one would merely be seen as collecting and preserving materials, archiving resources for future generations to interpret.

When Heath confronts such interpretive moments, she turns to the work of sociolinguistics and anthropology to provide her with the means to transform perceived unconscious behavior into a series of learned rules for social interactions within a given cultural context. And although Moffatt tries to avoid placing himself in this interpretive position, doing his “best to keep [his] tone neutral, to try to describe the students’ lives from something like their own attitudinal stances,” he acknowledges that his “own moral tone does break through” (*Coming of Age* xvi). This is especially true, he concedes, in the chapters on sex and the life of the mind and whenever fraternities are mentioned. For both ethnographers, it is what might be called the metadiscourse of last resort that plays the greatest role in structuring the imagined program for reform emerging from the study. In Heath’s case, the reliance on sociolinguistics translates into providing students with the tools for investigating language use in various contexts so that they can begin to articulate and master the rules deployed within the school system. In Moffatt’s case, the struggle between his commitment to descriptive anthropology and his desire to provide a moral response to what he has seen and heard produces occasional pedagogical interventions in class and a general sense that “the problem” is too big to be solved.

What these two examples have shown quite clearly, then, is that using ethnographic techniques does not (and *cannot*) generate the kind of utopian, collaborative interchange evoked at the conclusion to the preceding chapter, where students realize “their more basic right to define the questions,” as Raymond Williams put it (“Future” 157). Instead, the subjects of study end up, at one point or another, being transformed into the objects to which questions are posed and upon which reforms are enacted, a process that Gayatri Spivak has described in another context as mingling “epistemic violence with the advancement of learning and civilization” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 295). If such “epistemic violence” is an ines-

capable aspect of institutionalized learning at this time, as I believe it is, then one could argue that this violence occurs within the ethnographic project at the moment the metadiscourse of last resort is brought in to explain and assess the behavior of the subjects constituted by the study. I would even go so far as to locate the specific benefit of ethnographic work—and the force of its threat—in its necessarily making available as texts to be read the voices of those under investigation, *even if those voices must be read in and for their absence*. The multidisciplinary, multidiscursive character of ethnographic work all but guarantees the production of a polyphonic text that can never fully succeed in covering over the epistemic violence that arises in the struggle between the ethnographer's interpreting voice—with its ultimate interest in assimilating the Other—and the voice of the Other that is to be interpreted, whose interests are never and can never be known for certain. The ethnographer may seek to regulate how that material is read in any number of ways (e.g., through selective citation, elision, erasure, translation), but he or she can never fully succeed, because the social context surrounding the collection of the statements can never be fully described or accounted for, nor can the differential in the power relations between the observer and the observed ever be completely stabilized. Consequently, what ethnography endlessly records is that the observer can never, finally, control the unruliness of the observed's text.

Obviously, this situation presents itself whenever any reader confronts any text. But ethnographic work on the culture of schooling is particularly appealing because such work can be made to foreground the pedagogical consequences that follow from the fact that the relationship between teacher/expert and student/text never is "pure" or "unmediated." In other words, the ethnographic approach always embodies the author's attempt to control the rebellion of the material, and the outcome is always a visible, suspicious, often clumsy attempt to master that material and make it behave. This very clumsiness is ethnography's virtue, for in its clumsiness it repeatedly exposes the essentially social mission of the educational enterprise—which is, as the studies discussed here have shown, to acculturate and assimilate the masses, to change the people in the system and not the system itself, and to develop and reinscribe a hierarchy of expertise rather than to recognize the way expertise figures across a broad range of social and cultural practices. If these are, indeed, the reigning ideological constraints that serve to regulate who gets to work in the academy and what work they will do there once admitted, then the question that remains for the final chapter to address is how far these constraining conditions permit the possibility of meaningful educational reform.