EDITORS' COLUMN

Recent theory and scholarship in literacy and basic writing have greatly expanded our professional understanding of how arenas for the teaching of reading and writing are constituted. As we recognize reading and writing as social and political activities, we perceive our classroom roles as collaborative and transactional: in teaching, we are affected, and directed, by our students—their interests and competencies—as much as we affect them as learners. It is no longer possible to teach by way of presuming a linear trajectory for learning; that is, to subscribe to what Brian Street calls the "autonomous model of literacy."[1] Students bring their social worlds, engaged ideologically, to the classroom. We do the same, ostensibly representing the university, a bastion of ideological limits as both our students and colleagues regard it.[2] But it is not that students represent many worlds, their teachers just one. The Spring 2009 issue of *JBW* makes clear that the cross-cultural nature of both students' and teachers' experiences, in and outside of the classroom, offers teachers the perspective by which to invite an ever greater range of students' extracurricular interests, practices, and beliefs into the classroom—with the goal of strengthening students' capacity for social critique. Another result also obtains: students come to realize that their social, extracurricular worlds are sometimes also ours, and that we as their teachers can be partners with them in exploring these same worlds we share.

It is this very sensitive understanding of the range of experience encompassing students' so-called "private lives," and thus their ways of being in the classroom, that inspires Donald McCrary to argue for religion as a relatively untapped framework by which to help students examine their process of identity-formation and coming to know society. In our lead article, "[Not] Losing My Religion: Using *The Color Purple* to Promote Critical Thinking in the Writing Classroom," McCrary helps us to see students beyond gender, race, and class distinctions, as he recognizes their great efforts to determine their own futures. Religion, he asserts, is part of this endeavor, indeed the push "that allows some students to get out of bed in the morning, encouraging and supporting them to struggle through another day." Noting that religion is generally seen and discounted by the academy as a tool for reinforcing limits, McCrary explores the

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[1] Brian Street, "Autonomous and Ideological Models of Literacy: Approaches from New Literacy Studies," *Media Anthropology Network*, 17-24 January 2006 <http://www.philbu. net/media-anthropology/street_newliteracy.pdf>.

[2] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge Press, 1994) 168.

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social, political, and hermeneutic traditions by which African Americans have used religion as a powerful social critique. Thus religion, a putatively private discourse, enters McCrary's classroom in the spirit of black religious leaders and interpretative tradition, offering a model by which to subject other largely unexamined fields of oppressive experience (patriarchy, traditional religion, attitudes toward homosexuality) to open critique. Using *The Color Purple* as a palimpsest upon which to write new interpretations of shared experience, McCrary's students gain a critical lens on society and onto their own lives.

Our next article, "New Worlds of Errors and Expectations: Basic Writers and Digital Assumptions," by Marisa A. Klages and J. Elizabeth Clark, similarly deconstructs the notion of private and public lives as they concern students and teachers in the classroom. Klages and Clark note the increasing pervasiveness of technology in everyone's lives. Students' engagement with technology spans the entire day, whether privately at home or leisure, or publicly at work or in the classroom, thus creating the impression of students' digital literacy. But Klages and Clark argue against such an assumption. Unless students are purposely directed to engage technology in ways that will also allow them to operate in the academy from positions of power and competence, students will continue to find themselves caught in what the authors recognize as a new "digital divide," a realm which separates students who are able to translate digital literacy to academic contexts from those who cannot. The task of "code switch[ing] between informal cyber-situations and the expectations of academic and professional cyber-literacy" is paramount. As the authors assert, "The digital divide is no longer about access to technology, but rather a more complex divide of those who have had the educational access, training, and critical engagement to use technology well as literate cyber-citizens." This situation makes a compelling case for the use of ePortfolios as they are implemented at Klages' and Clark's institution, LaGuardia Community College/ CUNY. Their article documents the successes of students who negotiate the multiple demands for literacy in a technological age through ePortfolios. At the same time, students are able to mine the experience to bridge private and public worlds.

Our third article, "Writing Partners: Service Learning as a Route to Authority for Basic Writers," by Catherine Gabor, highlights the presumption of private versus public lives from the perspective of students who, through an innovative project of letter-exchange, get the chance to step back from course requirements and assessments in order to engage the questions and interests of elementary school children—"partners" whom they similarly help to contemplate a future college career. Gabor shows that even as her basic writing students remain aware of their tentative status within the college (as most of the students are at risk of

institutional disenrollment), they are able to personally connect with their partners, who view their academic status with curiosity and esteem. The joining of the private and public worlds for Writing Partners happens on several levels. The college and elementary students are from similar socioeconomic and demographic backgrounds: home lives and the "public" world of the university are bridged in students' memory of, and current relationship to, the communities which their young partners come from. The private worlds of friendship and neighborhood, including rhetorical and interest markers typically eschewed by the academy, are given recognition and reign. In addition, basic writers are invited to engage the voice of reflection on the many transactions enabled by the Writing Partners curriculum; epistemologically, some might ascribe this voice to a "private" self, one now writing in a public, academic context. However, as Gabor demonstrates, Writing Partners elides such distinctions by creating a space to explore the social and political influences that determine experience, always lived simultaneously in (what is only our perception of) private and public spheres. As part of such a dynamic, students are able to assume new positions of authority, as writers, experts, and members of more than one discourse community.

Martha Clark Cummings' article, "*Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You*: Self-Disclosure and Lesbian and Gay Identity in the ESL Writing Classroom," strikes the heart of supposed private versus public notions of self, doing, and being for both students and teachers. As Cummings shows, a range of perspectives influences teachers of the gay, bisexual, transgender, and lesbian community as to when, how, or whether to disclosure their sexual orientation to students. While aware of the social and political impetus for disclosure, Cummings recognizes the potential of such an act to "conceal more than it reveals." She cites Judith Butler: "For it is always finally unclear what is meant by invoking the lesbian-signifier, since its signification is always to some degree out of one's control. . . . If I claim to be a lesbian, I 'come out' only to produce a new and different 'closet.'"[3] These issues especially concern writing classrooms which aim to engage students in the active construction of meaning since the negotiation of identity is both a goal and an effect of constructing knowledge. Cummings also recognizes the multiple orientations toward identity held by ESL students, as when doing does not always equal being; or when the limits of one's culture and upbringing permit exploring one's identity only so far. A well-chosen classroom text is thus crucial for permitting a range of discourse around identity issues, including

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[3] Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories,* ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge Press) 18.

sexual orientation. Cummings finds such a text in *Someday This Pain Will Be Useful to You* by Peter Cameron (much as Donald McCrary has done with *The Color Purple*). Her narrative of her ESL students' responses to the main character, James, who is gay, embeds the powerful story of her questions of disclosure and provides a model for supporting all teachers' efforts to teach with integrity and respect. Cummings' essay is a powerful end piece for illustrating how the best teaching and learning erode the margins that falsely divide our experience into public and private worlds.

As the *Journal of Basic Writing* goes to press, we say a fond farewell to Karen Weingarten, who has worked with us as an editorial assistant since 2003. Karen's generous support for *JBW* and her careful work in formatting the journal have been greatly appreciated over the years. We congratulate Karen on completing her PhD in English at the CUNY Graduate Center this spring, and we wish her all the best in her new position as an assistant professor in the English Department of CUNY's Queens College.

Beginning with this issue, the Sheridan Press in Hanover, Pennsylvania, will handle printing and subscriber services for *JBW*. Sheridan's contact information appears on the journal's inside cover.

We hope you enjoy the articles in this issue!

— **Hope Parisi** and **Rebecca Mlynarczyk**