Beth L. Virtanen

# Brad, Sean, and James: Saying What They Mean in Voices that Sound Like Themselves

THE EDUCATION SYSTEM WEEDS OUT MANY WORKING-CLASS STUDENTS BEFORE WE, COLLEGE educators, ever see them. Open admissions programs, however, give some of these students a chance. When we find such students in our classrooms, we must understand that their discourses might strike us as rough or even oppositional. These students might challenge us as, through abysmal high school grades or dropping out all together, they have already refused once to cooperate with the system that asked them to give over their senses of self, or identity, that firmly underpin their means of expression. Paulo Friere teaches us that such resistance might stem from a student's decision "not to accept what is perceived as violating his or her world" (123). Our challenge, then, is to make curriculum meaningful to this population by integrating their worlds into our courses and by fostering their development of methods of negotiating positions for themselves in our classrooms and in the academy at large. To examine how such students can apply tenets of their world into their course work, I conducted case study research on three young men who had been expelled from their high schools and entered college after earning GEDs.

I have known Brad, Sean, and James for a long time and met them through my friendship with their families. I did not teach them freshman composition nor did they take their composition courses at the same time. Brad and James attended the same college while Sean attended a different one, but all were open enrollment institutions. Brad and James started college at the "normal" time, at eighteen and nineteen, the year after they would have graduated from high school. Once Sean earned his GED, he enrolled at his college a couple years after he would have graduated from high school. After they finished their first year at small colleges in the Upper Midwest, they all transferred to a larger regional university, again in the Upper Midwest, where they continued with their studies. The change, they said, was to pursue programs that were not offered by the smaller schools.

I visited with them repeatedly during the course of their composition classes in casual circumstances over coffee at their homes and mine. We discussed all aspects of their courses as we visited and often discussed more than writing courses. During the heart of this study, I direct-

DOI: 10.37514/OPW-J.2006.1.1.02

ed and redirected questions to them and collected papers from them. They did not, however, provide me with extensive drafts as they did not save versions of their work as they composed. Nevertheless, I was able to call them by phone for clarification of any detail and did so often.

All three grew up in homes headed by single mothers and have had limited contact with their fathers. Financial support was unavailable or limited from their absent parents, so the issues of living were rendered more complicated than they might otherwise have been. I think that the significant impediments to these students' successes in life early on have seriously impacted their educational careers, for they bear attitudes of hostility toward those in authority and tend to want to force issues of equity and social justice in a system that often seems to care only for orderly conduct and their overt conformity to the social order that has neglected their own basic needs. Nevertheless, these three young men, with dogged determination, refused to give in to the system that appeared obviously to be failing them and, thus, they continued challenging that education system to be able to say what they meant while they attained certification of the knowledge they acquired within that system in the form of a diploma. Students who have come through such hardship are indeed different from mainstream students; nevertheless, they can and do succeed in spite of the impediments to their success in and outside the classroom. They are, finally, remarkable in their persistence—both in pursuing what they term as a "true" education and in resisting its authorship of them in terms of conformity to an elite or mainstream, middle-class way of being or in removing themselves from the system.

In essence, these three young men may have wished, as David Seitz suggests, "to distance themselves from the social capital of mainstream education and its form of institutional identity, even while they work for the economic capital they hope will come with a degree" (221). Simply, the ways of being made available to them by their high school reinforced only options for lives suited to manual labor of one sort or another. The discourse of college presented another option, albeit one closed to them via their high school, but one they encountered upon entrance into higher education. The values underpinning this identity incorporate the social capital of the middle class which is embedded in "a middle class point of view, the one privileging so-called rational discourse and argumentation" (Linkon, Peckham, and Lanier-Nabors 151). In negotiating their entrance into academia, Sean, Brad, and James tried to create a balance between the competing discourses, a balance respectful of their own senses of self (see Tingle 224). However, their identities should not be construed as static because of lack of exposure to a "multiplicity of social situations" as has been suggested by Linkon, Peckham, and Lanier-Nabors in their summary of Tingle's work (152), for Sean, Brad, and James moved geographically and intellectually with their mothers who had sought higher education and had some inkling of its worldview and the trade-offs that were expected of them

and even taken for granted by the educational system before they arrived at university. Like Tingle, Brad, Sean, and James were "rewriting" their relationship to the working class from which they originated, and they were also selecting from the array of possibilities made available to them via the middle-class enterprise of higher education (see Bloom).

In spite of everything, Brad, Sean, and James were optimists. They believed that the education system, at its origin, was designed to be fundamentally fair and that it has somehow been twisted into its current state of unfairness and "bastardization," obviously accepting on some levels the mythology of the American Dream. In their utopian notion of higher education, however, adoption of a "new" set of cultural capital ("baggage") was not their desired outcome. Instead, they defined the goal as a "developing" of self and an acquisition of "knowledge" that would allow them greater control over their work and leisure. They fully believed that education should and eventually will embody the utopian spirit that is particularly American; their interactions and writings in college composition courses reflect that utopian aspiration and that dogged determination to see the project to fruition.

James, Sean, and Brad are charming young men who have worked very hard to find what they needed from education—specifically, classes that were interesting and challenging and extracurricular activities that did not involve aggressive and physically punishing activities. Of course, they did not follow rules of behavior that required their compliance with tracking into vocational courses. Instead, they sought to argue with instructors about the content of their courses. Brad, for example, insisted that the art teacher define the nature of art. James simply would not go to auto mechanics class, and Sean wanted to take issue with the presentation in his US History class of the Americas as a "vacant continent" that Columbus discovered.

Issues with regulations also impacted these young men's academic opportunity. Eventually, Sean was forced, because he was caught smoking, to sign a contract that if he were caught smoking again he would be expelled. When the assistant principal smelled smoke on him at a later time, he was expelled even though he had not had a cigarette or been caught with one in his possession. Each in his own way contributed to his expulsion. James and Brad spent the remainder of that school year "in heaven," playing music together eight to ten hours each day. Sean became employed as a night shift delivery person. Each finished only his sophomore year of high school before expulsion. Thus, they had little formal education of any sort, vocational or academic. Their attitudes toward academic knowledge remained as they were—opposi-

"blanket opposition to giving over authorship of their compliance"

tional—and those attitudes which may have caused much of their difficulty in high school remained the motivation for their success in college. The opposition, however, was not blanket opposition to the culture of school. It is best understood as blanket opposition to giving over authorship of their compliance to the strictures of education. As Tingle says of his own working-class experience in higher education, "I would conform but in my particular way" (224). Simply put, Sean, Brad, and James wanted to be in charge of their individual compliance and the shape it took.

## The Literature

As working-class students, Brad, Sean, and James's roles as authors were informed by their relationship to the academic community, where they tried to arrive at truths that are operable for them within the "universe of discourse" in which they found themselves (see Berlin 244–247). As authors of freshmen essays, students' work is determined in their struggle to negotiate their eventual positions in the larger world. What they say, how they say it, and their reasons for saying it are related to their prior educational experience, their ability and desire to produce Standard English, their sense of fitting into the social and cultural milieu of higher education, and their goals in life. Composition researchers have noted this relationship. Lynn Z. Bloom's "Freshman English as a Middle-Class Enterprise," Mina Shaughnessy's *Error and Expectations,* and J. Elspeth Stuckey's *Violence of Literary,* as well as the works of Ira Shor and Mike Rose, all discuss the aspects of negotiation working-class students undergo in their composition classes in order to pass through these gates which have the potential to exclude them from higher education. Most specifically of interest here are discussions of attitudes—both of professors and students—which have consequence for how these three young men were received in higher education.

Regarding Brad, Sean, and James's perceptions of themselves in higher education, prior research suggests that working-class students often see themselves as "unique individuals" (see Fox 81–88; see also Shor *When Students Have Power* 6–7; Hourigan 50, to name a few). But in the analysis there tends to be a sense that such perceptions are ill-conceived or simply wrong. I think, however, that Brad, Sean, and James, although not unique in the world, are in many ways "unique" in terms of subjectivities expected to be constructed by students in the process of their educations. I am arguing that they are in some ways unique when compared to others occupying the same classrooms. To understand Brad and James's senses of being "unique individuals" in "sink or swim" situations (Shor, *Empowering Education* 61), it is important to understand their prior histories to a degree. In *Literacy as Social Exchange,* Hourigan explains how students themselves help us to understand how they develop writing abilities. (See "The Case of Ms. L" 109–124).

In Brad, James, and Sean's cases, all three attended the same high school, and all three belonged to the sector of society that has not traditionally attended college—the working class. I am suggesting that, within the mindset of working-class students, the attainment of a college degree is not presupposed as it might be for students from other backgrounds. These young men also attended open enrollment, public institutions that have traditionally, according to Soliday, provided education to working-class students who sought higher education (732). The relationship between working-class status and the attainment of a university education is a complex issue as is demonstrated by the educational attainment of these young men's mothers. All three had mothers who had successfully earned undergraduate degrees and sought white-collar employment. Nevertheless, their mothers all maintained strong identification with their working-class families, perhaps because those families had provided them the impetus to seek out higher education in the first place. Both Sean's and Brad's mothers were in graduate school, living in poverty and trying to manage. James's mother became ill and was confined to a wheelchair and dependent on disability services for their maintenance.

In the midst of this, all three attended a high school that was located in the rural area near the institution where Sean's and Brad's mothers pursued advanced degrees; thus, the school system serviced the local community, including those from the lowest to the highest sectors of society. These three young men, in high school, belonged to the poorest sectors of society in spite of the fact of the "bootstrap" efforts of their mothers. Because the three young men were from the working class, school advisors tried to track them into vocational pursuits and into sports where some administrators felt they might excel. Even in early high school, Sean and Brad neared six feet tall and were built large. James was shorter and huskier, appearing the typical football linebacker. None of the young men, however, was particularly interested in vocational pursuits or sports, and all smoked cigarettes. Brad and James, interested in music, concerned themselves with protecting their hands from the punishment of manual labor and American football. Sean simply did not like either.

The uniqueness they felt in college, I think, came from their knowledge of how slim their chances were for being there and how tenuous tolerance for "their kind" was in education overall. Throughout high school, they were repeatedly suspended for a variety of transgressions, many stemming from pranks enacted because of the boredom of their classes. Many of the pranks, however, did not warrant suspension, according to the young men. Each, after many suspensions, was expelled, and each entered an alternative high school to take courses toward graduation. Each completed a GED and enrolled in a junior college or small private college where he began education in earnest. College, finally, allowed them to select more challenging classes than the "appropriate sections" they had experienced through the

tracking system in high school. If they are unique, it is in their explicit and reflective knowledge of the sorting mechanism of education whose determination as unacceptable they narrowly missed.

By talking to Sean, Brad, and James, I also came to a greater understanding of how they positioned themselves in the composition classroom in order to maintain their own senses of self while at the same time complying to the demands on them vis-à-vis the class. Their responses to the demands on them in the classroom add a new dimension to the research that asserts that working-class students use mimicry to facilitate their success in the academic environment (See Hoggart; Rodriguez). In fact Sean, Brad, and James engage in measured compliance to demands of classroom only to the degree that they determine within strict limits that they set for themselves through their own idiosyncratic determining principles. Sean said, "I do what I need to do, but not necessarily exactly what the Prof. wants me to do."

"explicit and reflective knowledge of the sorting mechanisms of education"

Spellmeyer suggests, for working-class students "[T]he experience of higher education was an ordeal of the most radical dissociation, an experience that obliged them to make choices more costly and irrevocable than any faced by children from affluent families" (58–59). This concern resonates throughout the narratives of academics with roots in the working class, particularly Hoggarts' *The Uses of Literacy* and Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory* as well as the accounts collected in the work of Dews and Law. Sean, Brad, and James, however, work to limit the dissociation they undergo as they consistently demand accommodation of their points of view, and they have gotten into trouble when teachers reject working-class students' work *because* of class issues embedded within them and the language in which they are presented, as is documented in Brodkey's "Literacy Letters" and my own "Working-Class Students." Like Finn's students, they have "attitude," that is, "varying degrees of oppositional identity" (x), the kind of demeanor that rejects the teachers before the teachers can reject them and that can disrupt a classroom; they assert that attitude, pressing their instructors to accept language that might not be accepted by the elite social order of the academy while trying out the rhetorical moves of engaged critical thinking in presenting their cases. Brad said, "I sit in the back of the room so I can see what's going on and talk when I need to. . . . Most of the time, though, I don't feel the need." His bravado does not cover up the joy he felt when his English professor *wanted* to discuss the nature of art.

As well, Sean, Brad, and James's behavior in the classroom contradicted or at least complicated research that shows that working-class students' comply with teacher authority in order to get good grades, as is suggested by Hoggart and Rodriguez. These three tended to conduct themselves more like Herbert Kohl's students who engage in sabotage in order to disrupt the class when it ignores their points of view or as Patrick Finn's students who formulate oppositional identities to resist conforming to the unacceptable ones presented within the discourse of education (x). As well, the three complicate Bloom's assertion that working-class students "want and expect their work to be done in Standard English" (670). These three want to use Standard English when they want to use it, and they want their own languages validated in the classroom when they choose to use them.

Like Ira Shor's students who exist in deep Siberia, that is in self-imposed isolation from the interaction within the classroom in response to years of not having their concerns addressed there, Brad, Sean, and James can only be lured into participating in the classroom discourse when it addresses their own interests and does not censure their points of view (see Shor, *When Students* 61–101). Their inclination did not suggest that agreement is synonymous with not being censured, for they did not want to be placated. These three young men perceived disagreement with their points of view as a matter of respect, for censuring a point of view is preventing it from being articulated or dismissing, rather than engaging, it in discussion. Like Kohl's students, however, the three often preferred to challenge the dominant point of view. In addition, while Brad, Sean, and James wanted models of what might be done in terms of argumentation and rhetorical strategy, they needed to choose to accept those models as valid in developing voices they could trust in higher education, in such a way as Villanueva recounts in *Bootstraps*. The struggle, according to academics with roots in the working class, is to find room for their home languages and knowledge in the academic environment. The examples by academics from the working class serve here. Dews and Law; Shepard, McMillan and Tate; Ryan and Sackrey; Zandy; Tokarczyk and Fay—all cite working-class experiences in higher education in which they negotiate how they will position themselves in relation to the pressure upon them to conform to certain ways of being. For James, Sean, and Brad, the struggle was how to make the academy make room for them and their own voices without too directly risking the threat of expulsion.

When Fox insists, citing Hoggart and Sennett and Cobb, that for working-class students, "academic success depends on breaking these important and potentially enriching class bonds," he makes an assertion that endangers Brad, Sean, and James's well being (88). Like any students from working-class backgrounds or not, they needed to maintain vigorous and intimate bonds with their families as a normal course of living. Further, these young men

needed these nurturing and supportive relationships in order to be able to deal with the challenges of higher education. "Knowing," says James, "surely can't mean forgetting half of what you started with."

## Processes of Writing

Because the three did not complete their high school education, they had not written any papers prior to college. They had no experience in the abstract discussion of the rhetorical function of essays, so they knew neither the form nor the function of an essay. In order to understand the product they were supposed to produce in their composition classes, they needed explicit instruction. Because of their extra-curricular writing experiences, however, they understood relatively quickly the function of the parts of the essay. In Emig's terms, they used their "reflexive" process to inform their "extensive" work. James, for example, likened the introduction to the "intro" to the songs he commonly wrote, in which the tempo, melody, key, "riffs," and interest were established, before the lyric began. In relating the two, composing popular music, including composition and lyrics, he incorporated a strategy from prior knowledge to understand the abstract function of the introduction to the essay.

The conclusion, James likened again, not to chorus, but to the finale of a musical piece in which the significant rhythms and lyrics are emphasized, to highlight the "essence" of the work. By drawing a correlation between two divergent genres, James used prior knowledge to inform himself in completing the writing task. In doing so, he reported the exercise as mutually informative to both his musical compositions and his essay writing skills.

In terms of the body of his essay, James construed its structure as similar to the verses of a song. Each verse moves the meaning of the song forward, with the chorus functioning as connective between and separator among the parts, as well as a repeated reference to the overall point of the composition, much like the references to the thesis that occur within the body of an essay. Drawing upon his knowledge of composition in one genre, James quickly came to understand the function and "movement" of the essay. In addition, he quickly developed a sense of competence in writing that was quite profound, considering his lack of formal education in the academic essay.

Typical of the three students under study, James's writing process began with brainstorming to find a topic, for he preferred to generate his own rather than to write on one assigned by the teacher. He called his brainstorming looking for a topic that "inspires" him. To get inspiration, he said he tried to focus on a single idea that he liked, which could lead to his inspiration. When he was inspired, he found it easier to generate ideas to direct and support his topic. Once he felt he had generated "a fair amount" of information, he moved to the writing phase where he developed paragraphs around the ideas he had generated and a work-

ing thesis that tied the paragraphs together. In his own words, he said, "I play around to see what works." And he said, "It works when it makes sense, the sense I'm trying to make." Thus, he wrote for his own ear, rather than for the ear of a critic or instructor.

Once he had a draft, he began a process or reading, criticizing, and correcting it with an eye toward what he wanted to say. His focus was on capturing his meaning in a way that expressed clearly his intentions. In his first drafts, he reported excessive repetition, which he eliminated in succeeding drafts, "tweaking with" the paper. He called it "listening" to his work as he develops it, adding, deleting, rearranging, and rephrasing. Once he was satisfied with his own work, he considered the assignment to make sure his work would satisfy his instructor and made modifications he thought necessary.

He did not consider the language of his work until the last, editing phase. At that point, he felt he had critical distance from his work, as he generally set it aside for a day or two. In this final phase, he "listened" to the work as though he were the audience, hearing inflection and rhythm, and tried to anticipate which phrases and words might offend his audience. In his essays, he generally left in such words as "bullshit" or non-standard figures of speech, for example, "put a buck in my pocket," because he did not think they are difficult to understand. However, he "translated" some colloquialisms he believed would cause his reader difficulty in terms of understanding or that could be overly offensive. For the most part, however, he resisted changing his language because he felt that some changes result in differing emphases or a lack of exactitude. In his own estimation, Standard English was sometimes too "sterile."

Finally, James reported that writing essays was a foreign activity. Even at the close of his composition class, he said that essays are difficult for him to write because of his lack of familiarity with them. In contrast, he noted that he has written more than a hundred songs, but at the close of his composition course he had written only four essays. He believed that he would get more comfortable writing essays as he went through school, but he did not think he would ever be as comfortable with that genre as he was with the more creative genres, including music, poetry, and short stories.

Sean, unlike Brad and James, did not write music or lyrics and did not play an instrument; nevertheless, his writing process bore a strong resemblance to theirs. He looked, for example, for inspiration through consideration of the potential of possible topics, listing and generating ideas until he found one subject that motivated him. If he was given a topic, he began by brainstorming about it directly at the keyboard, taking a couple of hours to write "whatever comes to mind on the topic." Then he printed the "draft," and read what he had written to find what he believed he "had to say about it." His approach, typical of these three students, resembled Peter Elbow's "expressive" writing. Next, he considered the organization,

cutting and pasting his work until he organized paragraphs by topic and section into coherent units, and then wrote a thesis statement and introduction. Finally, he wrote a conclusion, which he considered his "final word on the subject." Generally, he liked to disperse his writing into blocks of no more than two hours spread over the course of three or four days, but often time constraints required him to compose a paper in two days. In that case, he generated all his information on the first day and revised and edited on the second.

Like James, he did not compose with the teacher in mind and did not worry about grammar, mechanics, and punctuation until the proofreading stage, which, he believed, is after the revising stage. Sean, however, was a little less concerned with offending his reader and was therefore much more likely to use expletives and slang. As transitional material, he used expressions, such as "to criticize this puppy" or "getting the ball rolling." He responded to his instructor's comments on his language, with little concern, noting "no one was ever killed by a word," and suggested that English professors should "get over it," meaning that instructors should accept his voice as it is, caustic, sarcastic, curious, and lively.

"his voice as it is, caustic, sarcastic, curious, and lively"

When requesting instruction of their teachers, these three students, at the beginning of the course, were intent on coming to understand the form of the essay, its rhetorical moves, and its substance, and they did not concern themselves with the length of their work. Because they sought comprehensive coverage of a particular issue, they exhausted the topic; therefore, they tended to overrun the page requirement, for which their composition instructors did not penalize them. The average paper written by these three students exceeded six pages, with the shortest being five and the longest nine.

## Their Topics

In their composition classes, Sean, Brad, and James wrote on the topics of censorship, the effects of pornography, the problems of propaganda, personal voice, the importance of freshman composition, and responses to literature read for class, including a novel. Except for the paper on the importance of freshman writing, no topic was specifically required, although the issues they discussed were introduced in the classroom.

In terms of choosing topics, all three students sought out controversy. They looked for challenges at every turn, and each paper they wrote strives to challenge the dominant point of view and to provide thorough coverage of an issue or problem. Cursory examination of their writing bears this out. Instead of coming to premature closure or offering simple

solutions, these three were apt to point out the complex nature of both the problem under consideration and a variety of solutions that have been proposed. For example, when discussing the problems of pornography, the class pointed out its damaging effects on women. Contrary to that point of view, James pointed out in his paper the damaging effects on men because of the underlying assumption that men are supposed to enjoy abusing and subjugating women, something he found profoundly disturbing and which was ignored by the dominant discussion.

Discussing sexism, Brad pointed out the need to see beneath the surface of gender-biased words and affirmative action policies, for these correctives fail to acknowledge the underlying problem, which according to Brad, functioned at the level of the everyday. He used, for example, the reality of growing up in a world where he had been expected to "take it like a man" and where women are supposed to "look pretty," expectations that guarantee the propagation of an underlying sexism. He concluded this paper with a recommendation for education about both the causes of and solutions to sexism, not in a "quick-fix" manner, but one that truly examines—in the context of its creation—the sexism from which we are striving to emerge. He wrote,

> What we need is not a quick fix to cure the right now. What we need is a cure that will last a long time so that the future Americans won't have to deal with the problems created by sexism and so that future generations don't have to deal with the problems created by the solutions to the problems of sexism today.

In this essay, Brad seeks not to validate his point of view by comparison with the dominant nor to validate the dominant by comparison with his point of view. He looks to correct the oversimplification evidenced in the dominant point of view and the possible correctives to it.

These three also relied on explicit personal example to demonstrate personal struggle with the dominant discourse. To illustrate, I cite Brad's work at length because it speaks to his knowledge of the power of the dominant point of view and the consequences of not espousing it:

> I have seen censorship in the schools I went to as a child. The teachers and staff would not let the students speak up about what was going on in the classrooms or the hallways, the sale of drugs, the intimidation. Even the Superintendent of schools encouraged people to drop out of high school to keep up the school's appearance, so the school would look like a nice place where all the children got good grades and went on to college.
>
> I think that one of the main reasons I'm a high school drop out is because of the censorship that my school placed upon me and my peers. We were censored in many ways. We were not allowed to speak out about any of the injustices we wit-

nessed because we did not appear to be ideal students. We could offend somebody. I say that censorship, as a whole, is wrong. People need to know what is going on in their world.

Brad's honesty in this essay was typical of him, but his reality is not typical of students in higher education. Given his background in education, he also knew that disclosure opened him up to potential repercussions from others in the class as well as the instructor, but he offered the information in spite of that risk. Many working-class students would not have opted for the risk and would have covered over the fact of the GED rather than announcing it. In some ways, Brad perversely tempted fate and almost asked others to make negative judgments so that he could take issue. In this instance, nothing resulted in response to his disclosure, but he wanted sometimes, in some way, to challenge the pat assessments educators often make about students' suitability for learning, assessments that they have wrongly made about him based on characteristics such as class affiliation and its accompanying vernacular.

Further, Brad relied on his own local knowledge to inform the support for this essay, drawing other examples from the O.J. Simpson trial, the adult cartoon *Beavis and Butthead,* the lawsuits filed against the rock star Ozzy Osbourne and Judas Priest, the rumors of government cover-ups of the existence of extraterrestrial life, the Vietnam War, and the programming policies of cable companies. He drew together support from a variety of sources to place the topic of censorship in a relatively comprehensive backdrop as a means to analyze the problems inherent in its practice, seeking, not closure, but greater understanding of the issue, a tactic demonstrated consistently by these three students.

In addition to critical analysis, James included the following poem, which he first wrote for a creative writing class, as an illustration in his essay on personal voice. I cite it here:

***Slightly Obsessed Woman***

I watch you every day
secretly and silently,
hoping you won't recognize me.

I hold onto your picture at night,
caressing and smashing it
with the same delight.

I've listened to you talk on your phone
with other women.

It doesn't bother me anymore,
I have moved on. (Haven't I?)

I watch you every day
secretly and silently.

It keeps me whole.

Here, James demonstrated the variety of voices at his disposal, which are typical of these three students who are not willing, in expression, to maintain the limitations that are set out by the instructor that would suggest he follow the constraints of the assignment. James's use of poetry within the required essay is a subtle form of resistance to the strict requirements of the essay genre, but one that he thought the instructor was likely to accept. His explicit goal was to push past the limits without upsetting the instructor. Through our discussion, I got the sense that James wanted to demonstrate a kind of voice that would both surprise and please his instructor, who had not been expecting that type of writing from him. In some ways, it could be construed as an overture of friendship or an acknowledgement of the possibility of their mutual respect for one another, that he indeed did possess a subtle skill that warranted such respect. He also characterized it as a conversation starter that could lead to a greater conversation about voice, one that could link writing to verse, to lyric. Underlying the overture, however, was James's understanding that this type of writing was not expected by the instructor and that it might be unwelcome in an essay assignment.

James's sense of reality required him to have an ability to think beneath the surface of the problem and to incorporate more than one voice in his endeavor to communicate in the academic environment. As he wanted to connect his home and academic lives, so too did he want to make linkages among and within his intellectual projects. Thus, discourse could be said to accommodate verse and prose, the argumentative and the lyrical. The communication to which he aspires is founded on equal footing between communicants with each respecting the other's abilities and loyalties.

Together, the three demonstrate a high level of self-disclosure through their writing because they cannot seem to limit themselves to taking a prescribed stance toward any issue. They always seek to upend a pat answer, looking for complexity that may reside beneath the placid surface of a simple solution. In essence, however, they put every point of view at risk, their own and the dominant. To illustrate, Sean calls into question the dominant ideology and his own biased response to it in the following example:

I turned the television on last night and watched the latest missile strikes on Iraq. As

I watched I realized the only way I have encountered Islam was through bombings and war. And it started to bring to mind all the news features I had ever seen on or about Islam and its people, and I realized that a good eighty percent of them had to do with terrorist attacks and the subsequent retaliatory attacks launched at those who were international "aggressors." It's interesting to see and hear only the terrible things a people does. This kind of bad press gives such a negative view of this very religious people that when one encounters an Islamic individual, particularly in the U.S., one thinks "freaking terrorist" or maybe "killer," or maybe even in terms such as "camel jockey." What affects these people's judgment is a propaganda war waged by the United States that reflects its foreign policy in that area. And what I find the most terrible part of this is that I personally feel that Islamic people tend to favor fanaticism. Realizing this makes me uncomfortable because I'm not informed, yet I make a generalization about it, so I'm going to learn why there is no god but god.

Again, Sean calls into question both the dominant and his own personal knowledge, in some senses demonstrating his willingness to explore all points of view, interrogating publicly even his own. Through his rhetorical tactic of naming the slurs, he does not back away from the ugliness of the words. Instead, he uses their power to reinforce his point that stereotypes are ugly and need to be critically deconstructed to examine and neutralize their power. His concession, from "fu—ing" to "freaking" was based on his assessment of his audience. He felt that his "middle-aged male, conservative and God-fearing" professor from a very "yuppy" background would reject his use of the former. Had the instructor had other characteristics, he said, he might have left in the other word, using quotation marks as he had with "freaking."

"he does not back away from the ugliness of the words"

All three believe that any point of view worth espousing can withstand challenge. In issuing challenge, they rely on a variety of sources, validating their points of view in a global sense rather than by relying on a single context. Thus, it comes as no surprise that Ozzy Osbourne is cited next to the authors of the Warren Report in a discussion of censorship.

When I read their work as a whole, I have to wonder if it would not have been easier for them simply to pick a point of view and support it rather than to present such complicated arguments instead. For these three, the straight forward reply to the assignment is not appropriate, however. Only when we understand that their writing reflects their views of the world, I think, do we begin to get the point. For Sean, Brad, and James, the world was never straight forward. On the one hand, they are persons in their own rights

at home with their own opinions and places in their families. On the other, school required them to pretend that they were something they were not: (a) they were middle-class students with the appropriate language and worldviews, (b) they were working-class students with corresponding vocabularies and vocational aspirations, or (c) they were aspiring to leave behind the working class by excelling in sports. None of these options fitted the young men who wished for something other. The three were connected both to the academic and the working class, and they were wishing to assert those connections in their work. Thus, it is small wonder that the points they asserted complicated, rather than simplified, the matter.

## Conclusions

Brad, James, and Sean's orientations toward the subject matter in writing courses seem to correlate with their sense of acceptance within higher education. These students were expelled from high school and felt they had to make their education responsive to their needs in order to meet their own goals, for easy acceptance of the dominant point of view would have in some way negated their own struggle to be true to themselves while they were attaining an education. In asserting themselves, they risked a lot as they revealed truths about themselves that marked them as different from the mainstream and called into question customary ways of thinking.

They began writing with a general topic of personal interest in mind and developed their arguments in relation to the issue that they saw underlying that topic. They oriented this writing to their perceived audience, which is public, but they relied on themselves to guide the assertion of their positions. Once they exhausted the points they want to assert, in revision they addressed those objections they anticipated their audience would make. These three students did not resent the constraints of Standard English, as do some students from the working class, because they did not always choose to conform to those standards. During proofreading, they made changes only to reduce confusion or when the other word choices were certain to alienate the audience (the instructor) and necessarily detract from the work; however, they often chose their own idiom instead of the more objective tone sanctioned by Standard Academic English when that tone did not include vulgarity. They agreed on one point: it is good to "bother" your readers with your tactics because they will then think about your arguments, but it is not productive to alienate them. Thus, they strove for a tense middle point in their work.

Essentially, these three, regardless of their similarity to other students, were fundamentally different from most in their experiences with education. They were, from their own and most other perspectives, "unique individuals in sink or swim situations." But that does not mean we can pretend their perspectives can be ignored or discounted because they are

either working class or troubled. Instead, we need to see them as variations of the typical student—multipli-informed, curious, grounded in specific knowledges, and willing to wrestle with new ideas. While their writing processes are relatively straight forward, their continued reliance on their own "ears" for guidance in what they want to say, rather than on a developing sense of SAE discourse, is remarkable when they have faced so much pressure to conform. In their insistence on their own authorship, on their own perspective, on representing in their works the complexity they know about the worlds they occupy, they weave together multi-vocal works in which we hear their complex realities rather than artificially simple ones designed to placate.

Their writing strategies remind us as instructors of English to be aware of the individuals who populate our classrooms who are and are not working class, who embody complicated and difficult educational and personal histories, and who have overcome a lot in order to sit in our classrooms. They are there to engage in discussion with us and not to be dismissed because their allusions are raw or novel. Posing themselves as our other intellectual rivals, they also expect us to engage with them in debate and not to dismiss them because their accents sound of a different class or an outside region. When we interact with and guide our students from working and complex families, we need to keep in mind that there is more than one way that they will attain academic success, including modeling on our ways of being in some instances and rejecting or reformulating those ways of being in others.

The issue here is not whether individual instructors in some ways have squelched the voices of these young men. Quite the contrary, these young men, regardless of their instructors' best intentions and good will, need to be able to push against the limits of what they perceive can be articulated in the classroom. After years of being thwarted, they want to engage in the critical thinking necessary to satisfy their own curiosity and the rigors of higher education. Our classrooms need necessarily to maintain space for those who find some of our exercises and "obsessions with perfection" as the "pains in the ass" that they may sometimes seem, and we must also remember to encourage that daring-to-disclose and daring-to-entertain spirit that Brad, Sean, and James so readily exhibit in the classroom. In spite of their troubled academic backgrounds and their adamant maintenance of a multiple-class family allegiance, they have proven themselves to be the kinds of students I have come to enjoy—those who truly engage the discussions presented by the class.

## Works Cited

Berlin, James. "Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories." 1982. In Villanueva. *Cross-Talk*, 233–248.

Bloom, Lynn Z. "Freshman Composition as a Middle-class Enterprise." *College English* 58.6 (1996): 654–72.

Brodkey, Linda. "On the Subjects of Class and Gender in 'The Literacy Letters.'" 1989. In Villanueva. *Cross-Talk*, 639–58.

Delpit, Lisa. *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom.* New York: New Press, 1995.

Dews, C.L. Barney, and Carolyn Leste Law, eds. *This Fine Place So Far from Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class.* Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1995.

Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers.* New York: Oxford, 1973.

Emig, Janet. *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders.* Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1971.

Finn, Patrick. *Literacy with an Attitude: Educating Working-Class Students in their own Self-Interest.* New York: SUNY Press, 1999.

Fox, Thomas. *The Social Uses of Writing: Politics and Pedagogy.* Interpretive Perspectives on Education and Policy Series. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1990.

Friere, Paolo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* 1970. New York: Continuum, 1997.

Hairston, M. "Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing." In Villanueva. *Cross-Talk,* 659–75.

Hoggart, Richard. *The Uses of Literacy.* 1957. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1992.

Hourigan, Maureen. *Literacy as Social Exchange: Intersections of Class, Gender, and Culture.* New York: SUNY P, 1994.

Kohl, Herbert. *"I Won't Learn from You" and Other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment.* New York: The New Press, 1994.

Linkon, Sherry Lee, Irvin Peckham, and Benjamin G. Lanier-Nabors. "Struggling with Class in English Studies." *College English* 67.2 (2004):149–153.

Rodriguez, Richard. *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez.* New York: Bantam, 1982.

Rose, Mike. *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America's Educationally Underprepared.* New York: Penguin, 1989.

Ryan, Jake, and Charles Sackrey, *Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working Class.* Boston: South End, 1984.

Seitz, David. "Making Work Visible." *College English* 67.2 (2004): 210–221.

Shaughnessy, Mina. *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing.* New York: Oxford, 1977.

Shepard, Alan, John McMillan, and Gary Tate. *Coming to Class: Pedagogy and the Social Class of Teachers.* New Perspectives in Rhetoric and Composition Series. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1998.

Shor, Ira. *When Students Have Power: Negotiating Authority in a Critical Pedagogy.* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996.

—. *Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change.* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992.

Soliday, Mary. "Class Dismissed." *College English* 61.6 (1999): 731–741.

Spellmeyer, Kurt. *Common Ground: Dialogue, Understanding, and the Teaching of Composition.* Prentice Hall Series in Writing and Culture. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993.

Stuckey, J.Elspeth. *The Violence of Literacy.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann-Boynton/Cook, 1991.

Tingle, Nick. "Opinion: The Vexation of Class." *College English* 67.2 (2004): 222–230.

Tokarczyk, Michelle M., and Elizabeth A. Fay, eds. *Working-Class Women in the Academy: Laborers in the Knowledge Factory.* Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1993.

Villanueva, Victor. *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color.* Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1993.

—. ed. *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader.* Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1997.

Virtanen, Beth. "Working-Class Students in Higher Education: Playing on an Uneven Field." *Michigan Academician* 34 (2003): 445–475.

Zandy, Janet, Ed. *Liberating Memory: Our Work and Our Working-Class Consciousness.* New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1995.

**Beth L. Virtanen** *is Associate Professor of English at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez, where she serves as the director of the Department of English. Her research interests include writing theory and pedagogy, equity in education, and Finnish immigrant and Diaspora Literature in North America. (This photo comes courtesy of 8th Street Photography, Calumet, Michigan.)*