

Lynn Z. Bloom

## The Ineluctable Elitism of Essays and Why They Prevail in First-Year Composition Courses

*Class is academe's dirty little secret, its last taboo, that about which we dare not speak.*

—Patricia Sullivan, “Passing”

*The introductory composition course is crucially implicated in the process of cultural reproduction.*

—Alan W. France, “Assigning Places”

**F**RESHMAN COMPOSITION IS A MIDDLE-CLASS ENTERPRISE OFTEN BASED ON ELITIST READING matter, the belletristic essays that constitute the essay canon, actual or prospective. Such essays, the staple of freshman composition, are an elusive, elitist genre difficult to write and nearly impossible to imitate. Nevertheless, their classroom use replicates the normative practice in college literature courses, which also focus on elite literature. Academic discussions, even when written by authors themselves from the working class or addressing working-class issues are invariably conducted in standard English, often academic jargon, and are addressed to fellow academics and other educated readers. They model the middle-class attributes of the normative language in which composition classes are conducted and students are taught to write. Given the conservatism of many curricula, this pervasive split-level practice, using elitist material to teach middle-class writing and style, seems likely to remain normative in American college composition courses for the foreseeable future. There is no viable alternative in an academic culture that reinforces the upwardly mobile aspirations and values of students and faculty alike.

### Essays as an Elitist, Elusive Genre

Belletristic essays are an elitist genre. They are not utilitarian; they do not get to the point with speed and efficiency. Despite radical changes in subject and form in recent times, and increasing democratization, the term *essay* still “conjures up the image of a middle-aged man in a worn tweed jacket in an armchair smoking a pipe by a fire in his private

library in a country house somewhere in southern England, in about 1910, maundering on about the delights of idleness, country walks, tobacco, old wine, and old books" (Good vii). Nevertheless, the up-to-the-minute *Encyclopedia of the Essay*, which has the latest word (in fact, 973 very large pages of latest words) on the subject, observes that "even if it lives in disguise" or what Elizabeth Hardwick calls "a condition of unexpressed hyphenation: the critical essay, the autobiographical essay, the travel essay, the political" (Hardwick xiii), "the essay seems more alive than ever. . . . Whether it is labeled New Journalism, creative nonfiction, or just nature writing, the American essay has . . . been moving inexorably toward subjects that are at once more intimate and more public than the safe and chatty reveries of the genteel essayists of the late Victorian era. Today the most respected American essayists write uninhibitedly and skillfully about issues as personal as their own addictions . . . and as public as women's liberation and environmental awareness" ("American Essay" 22).

As I have demonstrated elsewhere, the essay canon—the only game in town as an index of an essay's popularity—consists of works by today's most respected essayists that are reprinted time and again in freshman composition readers and used as exemplary models for student writers ("The Essay Canon"). I derived this canon by collecting and analyzing twenty percent of all the readers published in the United States for the past half-century, 1946-96, with ongoing updates. This means every reader published in four or more editions, fifty-eight titles in 325 volumes. These canonical readers contain approximately 21,000 reprintings of some 8,000 different essay titles by 4,246 authors. I've used viability—rather than, say, supreme quality—as the major criterion for determining who the canonical essayists are, those whose works have been reprinted one hundred or more times during this fifty-year span. That only 175 authors have emerged as canonical may seem a surprisingly small number, but it's on par with the theoretical explanation of canon formation in, for example, poetry (see Rasula; Bloom, "Once More" 21-22). The hands-down favorites are George Orwell (1,785 reprints), E.B. White (1340), Joan Didion (1,095), Lewis Thomas (1,020), H.D. Thoreau (900), Virginia Woolf (885), Jonathan Swift (865), Martin Luther King, Jr. (825), James Thurber (790), Mark Twain (715), Annie Dillard (680) and Thomas Jefferson (660). Lest these authors strike contemporary readers as a quaint, slightly anachronistic, assemblage, all are alive and well and living in *The Norton Reader*, 11th edition (2004), the most enduring Reader (published since 1965) and major canon-making textbook; and in many of the *Norton's* numerous rivals. The endurance of these authors over time does not mean that the essay canon (or any other literary canon) is a rigid, unchanging assemblage, just that change at the

canon's central core is glacial, while the peripheral authors who comprise the "nonce" canon spin in and out with much greater rapidity (Harris 113).<sup>1</sup>

Even when the essay canon is expanded to include distinguished journalistic pieces by authors such as Russell Baker and H. L. Mencken, and excerpts of illustrious autobiographies by Richard Rodriguez, Maxine Hong Kingston, Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, and Mike Rose—all of whom came from working-class origins—the essay canon itself remains upper to upper-middle class in form, language, and authorial panache, if not always in substance. These canonical authors, like most belletristic (and academic) essayists, are writing for an audience of their intellectual and educational peers, and take their sophistication for granted. Consequently, ideal essay readers are expected to match the authors' wide range of reading, however eclectic and quirky; their world travels (even if by armchair) provide understanding of diverse cultures, histories, and philosophies. Readers are also expected to appreciate the essayists' wit, allusiveness, odd angles of vision, engagement of sensory stimuli of all sorts, and the enjoyment of going along for the pleasure of the ride itself as the essay meanders into engaging byways and scenic overlooks rather than sticking to the superhighway to the main idea. Thus the authors' and anticipated readers' common cultural repertoire, rather than intrinsic difficulty of the ideas or relevance of the topics, serves as the barrier between middle- and working-class readers.

Whether belletristic, journalistic, or more academic, essays are transplanted into readers for a variety of purposes. They can be perused as exemplary models of both form and substance. They can be read as sources of insight or inspiration or philosophies of living; as social, political, or aesthetic analyses; as jumping off points for argument, for reading against one another or against the grain; as vicarious autobiography, immersing readers in realms or problems far beyond their immediate experience. It would be hard for many students—freshmen or more advanced (even graduate students in English)—to successfully imitate these elitist models or even to use their rambling and protean shapes as vehicles for more conventional content. For confident essayists break all the rules and provide inimitably human faces and human voices. They re-create themselves as *personae*; E.B. White correctly claims that the essayist "can pull on any sort of shirt, be any sort of person, according to his mood or his subject matter"—Proteus incarnate—"philosopher, scold, jester, raconteur, confidant, pundit, devil's advocate, enthusiast" (vii). They write in the first person, which as Thoreau acknowl-

---

1. Thus Norman Mailer and a number of other white male essayists popular in the 1950s and 60s are out, while pushing open the canon door, in addition to Dave Eggers, Jonathan Franzen, Jon Krakauer, and Scott Russell Sanders, are a variety of women and ethnic essayists, as well as representatives of gay and disability culture—Mark Doty, Louise Erdrich, Anne Fadiman, Atul Gawande, John Hockenberry, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chang-rae Lee, Anna Quindlen, Ntozake Shange, David Sedaris, and Abraham Verghese.

edges right up front in *Walden*, “is always . . . the person that is speaking,” the person any author knows the best (107), someone who uses contractions as well as metaphorical language. Athletes of style and substance, they leap about in time, place and topic instead of marching through Georgia in straight lines, as Adorno says, “co-ordinating elements rather than subordinating them” as argumentative academic writing usually does (169-70). Essayists write, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis says, “on the side, through the interstices, between the pages, on top of the text, constructing gestures of suspicion, writing . . . over the top” (18). Essayists

“often an alien genre  
for first-year  
composition students  
to read, in substance  
and in style.”

are gamesome and allusive, with whole cultures and world libraries, print and newer media, at their disposal—for reading, reference, quotation, allusion. The belletristic essay, says William H. Gass, “browses among books; it enjoys an idea like a fine wine; it thumbs through things . . . proposing possibilities, reciting opinions” (25). Essayists roam the world, literally and of the imagination, traveling to locations exotic or familiar—the lake, once more. Mun-

dane matters such as whether the essayists will make money (they probably won’t) or schedules (such essays take a long time to jell and are often written according to the essayist’s elastic timetable rather than the publisher’s firm deadline) are irrelevant to the writers’ quest for the novel perspective that tames the exotic and makes familiar strange. Scott Russell Sanders, himself an exemplary practitioner of this elusive art form, summarizes the essay’s *modus operandi* in “The Singular First Person”: the essay “is an arrogant and foolhardy form, this one-man or one-woman circus, which relies on the tricks of anecdote, memory, conjecture, and wit to hold our attention” (31).

Thus belletristic essays are often an alien genre for first-year composition students to read, in substance and in style. Given their wide range of allusions, most of the canonical essays (let alone the more esoteric works that are seldom if ever included in freshman readers) would require a thicket of footnotes to be readily comprehensible to contemporary undergraduates. Consider, for instance, the following references in the first two paragraphs of “Shooting an Elephant” by George Orwell, the most widely reprinted canonical essayist: Moulmein, Lower Burma; a sub-divisional police officer; betel juice; baiting; football field [in Burma]; young Buddhist priests; British colonial imperialism; flogging with bamboos; “the utter silence that is imposed on every Englishman in the East,” the dying British Empire; “the younger empires that are going to supplant it”; “the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to

make my job impossible"; the British Raj; Anglo-Indian (42-43). Orwell himself, writing in 1936 for an educated British audience, would have considered this writing the embodiment of the clarity, brevity, simplicity that he advocates in "Politics and the English Language," as would his readers. But times and culture, politics and the English language change, and today's students require explanations—not just of essays written with Orwellian clarity, but of many more complex works as well.

In the works of many essayists, these aspects of style and allusiveness restrict to well-educated readers the accessibility of the genre that Cristina Kirklighter lauds as highly democratic in her compelling study, *Traversing the Democratic Borders of the Essay*. Therein, she reads the academic writings of Latin American and Latino/a essayists Paulo Freire, Victor Villanueva, and Ruth Behar alongside canonical essayists Montaigne, Bacon, Emerson, and Thoreau to demonstrate how "the essay's elements of self-reflexivity, accessibility, spontaneity, and sincerity . . . offer hope for democratizing academia through the personal essay" (124). Yet these essayists, like their canonical counterparts, are adult professionals writing for an audience of their peers, not students—again, using sophisticated language and a wide range of allusions, as this single sentence from Ruth Behar's *Vulnerable Observer* indicates:

At the same time, I began to understand that I had been drawn to anthropology because I had grown up within three cultures—Jewish (both Ashkenazi and Sephardic), Cuban, and American—and I needed to better connect my own profound sense of displacement with the professional rituals of displacement that are at the heart of anthropology. (21)

Behar takes for granted that readers, presumably well-trained and thoughtful anthropologists, will have some sense of what it means to grow up in Cuban, American, and Jewish cultures; that they will be aware of salient differences between Ashkenazi and Sephardic Judaism; and that, in addition to whatever these cultures may have in common, readers will understand the disparities and points of cultural conflict that contribute to the writer's "profound sense of displacement." Moreover, Behar's readers are also expected to understand the "professional rituals of displacement that are at the heart of anthropology" and be able to compare and contrast these with the causes of the author's sense of cultural displacement.

For all of these reasons, belletristic essays are an elusive genre for first-year college students to attempt, as readers and writers, for neither their life experiences nor education before they enter college prepares them with the freedom, fluidity of style, wide-ranging cultural background, and personal ease with the essay form necessary to read or write with authority in this belletristic genre. Belletristic essays are not part of the customary writing repertoire in American high schools, particularly in curricula dominated by five-paragraph themes and driven by the "teach to the test" nationwide impetus of mandated mastery tests

under "No Child Left Behind" legislation. Belletristic essays are very hard to write, as anyone knows who's ever tried it, for they are not amenable to rules, formulas, prescribed formats; the drum they march to is the distinctive beat of the essayist's heart. These difficulties, present for readers and writers alike, don't mean students shouldn't have to deal with belletristic or more conventional academic essays—just that they'll have to work to move easily in and among them, whether reading with or against the texts; using them as stimuli for debates, projects in or out of class or in the larger community; imitating their form or style; or debating their subjects.

## **The Elitism of Discussions of Class in the Academy**

Like belletristic essays, discussions of class in the academy are elitist in form and language, if not in substance. As recently as 1998, Patricia Sullivan observed, reaffirming Paul Fussell's 1982 social analysis in "Notes on Class," class "is America's dirty little secret. Sex has nothing on class in America: We are far less squeamish talking and hearing about 'the act' than we are about class," in the academy as throughout the culture. "Class," she continues, "almost never appears in the disciplined, sanctioned discourses of the academy but as that category of social analysis 'studied' by sociologists. When class is spoken of at all, it hitches itself to gender and race, [and] is subdivided into the familiar triumvirate of income, education and occupation . . ." (239).

In the past decade, the taboo identified by Fussell has largely been overcome. Discussions of working-class faculty origins and working-class students have burgeoned recently, most of these written in standard English (if not academese) by academics for other academics. Reinforcing Sullivan's observations, most exhibit great sensitivity to and understanding of their working-class subjects, and often anger at the economic inequities fundamental to class distinctions. For instance, in "Stupid Rich Bastards," Laurel Johnson Black recounts the masterplot, "a very simple one: a young woman goes from poverty to the middle class using education to move closer and closer to the stupid rich bastards she has heard about all her life. She finds ever larger contexts into which she can place everything, can get perspective . . . Until someone says 'Fuck you!' and it all collapses" (14). As the family member designated to go to college and earn the money that would be her family's salvation, she would thereby be empowered to give "the stupid rich bastards what they had coming to them." She would "speak like them but wouldn't be one of them" (17).

Black eloquently expresses the conflict inherent in the lives and loyalties of working-class faculty, whose positions as college teachers and researchers remove them from the working-class origins that are often the subjects of their academic work: "I cannot move among the rich, the condescending, the ones who can turn me into an object of study with a

glance or word, cannot speak like them, live in a house like them, learn their ways, and share them with my family without being disloyal to someone. I thought learning would make it easier for me to protect and defend my family, myself, but the more I learn the harder it is to passionately defend anything" (25). Black's stance, attitude—and adherence to the conventions of Standard English—are representative of the twenty-four essays in *This Fine Place So Far From Home* (1995), though some substitute academic jargon for Black's elegant eloquence (Pelz; Piper). The twenty-one more-or-less personal essays in Shepard, McMillan, and Tate's *Coming to Class: Pedagogy and the Social Class of Teachers* (1998), while focusing on pedagogy as much as on class, do so in conventional academic language and article formats. Although Kirklighter, in *Traversing the Democratic Borders of the Essay* (2002), argues for more democratic, essayistic writing in the academy rather than the "detached form of academic mimicry" that prevails and stultifies minority students in particular (129), her argument—derived from her 1999 dissertation—follows academic form, language, and conventions.

Likewise, even Patricia Shelley Fox's "Women in Mind: The Culture of First-Year English and the Nontraditional Returning Woman Student" is written in conventional academic form and language, though she is defending, with nontraditional students' autobiographical writings (all depicting working-class experiences), the obligation of first-year English courses to allow students to "work within and among the competing discourses in their lives to offer us an oppositional world view" (202). In fact, Fox is also mounting an argument for the efficacy of personal writing in academia. She intends to solve the problems Gerald Graff identifies in "The Academic Language Gap" when he argues,

Some . . . current educational progressives go so far as to maintain that the primacy of argumentation in composition classes is a form of repression, from which students are to be liberated so they can discover their own authentic voices. This attack on argumentation—which does not hesitate to avail itself of aggressive argumentation to make its points—has led some "expressivist" composition theorists to try to shift the emphasis in writing instruction from exposition, analysis, and the thesis-driven essay to creative self-expression and personal narrative. . . .

. . . Though these views often present themselves as "highly transgressive," their effect ultimately reinforces the old genteel assumption that advanced literacy is for the few—as it can only continue to be if students are deprived of the argumentative skills needed to succeed. (27)

Even though some authors (such as Fox) advocate that their students write personal essays, only one of the works about pedagogues and pedagogy identified here recommends particular essays, working-class or otherwise, for classroom use. The exception is Kirklighter's article on "The Relevance of Paulo Freire on Liberatory Dialogue and Writing in the Classroom."

There she recounts teaching successes with essays by Patrick Welsh (from *Tales Out of School*) and chapters of Patricia Williams's *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, which are often reprinted in textbooks as free-standing essays. Sections of other autobiographical works written with a class orientation, such as Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, are also reprinted as essays (viz Wright's "The Library Card," alternatively titled "The Power of Books," and Rose's "I Just Wanna Be Average," all titles supplied by the textbook editors).

In general, pedagogical articles addressing class never mention essays in the same breath. When referring to student writing—either composing processes or products—they generally emphasize the topics and perhaps attitudes engendered by the readings, but seldom the written forms in which the students are expected to respond to them.

### **Freshman Composition: A Middle-Class Enterprise Built on Elitist Readings**

The academy has—and perpetuates—high-brow taste, in music, cinema, and literature, including drama (no soaps), poetry (no verse or jingles—and limericks only sub rosa), quality fiction<sup>2</sup> and other classics—actual or potential—of all sorts. Thus it is not surprising that

a preponderance of freshman English programs continue to use elitist essays, many of which constitute the essay canon, as they have done for some 125 years (see Brereton, *passim*; Connors). Despite the acknowledged difficulties in teaching students to write belletristic essays, these materials retain vigor as models for student discussion, if not emulation. Indeed, personal essays and excerpts of autobiographies treated as essays provide expert witness for many of the political agendas and theoretical orientations that underlie the first-year curriculum. Thus these readings support agendas oriented to issues feminist (Mary Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Gloria Steinem); multicultural (James Baldwin, Linda Hogan, Gary Soto, Judith Ortiz Cofer); queer (Paul Monette, Kate Millett); post-colonial (Edward Said, Jamaica Kincaid, Paule Marshall); or disability (Brenda Bruegemann, Georgina Kleege, Andre

"generally emphasize the topics and perhaps attitudes engendered by the readings, but seldom the written forms in which the students are expected to respond to them."

2. High quality fiction dominates undergraduate literary curricula, despite the occasional genre courses devoted to science fiction, mysteries, or comic books. As a rule, only more esoteric graduate studies (mostly dissertations) allow examination of popular, formulaic, genre, and pulp fiction.

Dubus); as well as to matters of class (Richard Rodriguez, Mike Rose, Esmerelda Santiago), with which they often overlap. Those working-class authors who never left the working class as a consequence of their education and/or writing (most major authors, such as James Baldwin and Maxine Hong Kingston, changed class though not necessarily class loyalty) and whose work nevertheless become canonical are few; Judy Brady's "I Want a Wife" is the most conspicuous illustration. Other canonical representatives of non-traditional backgrounds,

"the people who  
read *The Atlantic*,  
*The New Yorker*, and  
little magazines—  
intellectually cultivated,  
widely read, with  
sufficient leisure time  
to read, and enough  
disposable income  
to buy books  
and magazines."

such as Sojourner Truth ("Ain't I a Woman?") and Chief Joseph ("We Will Fight No More Forever"), were actually illiterate. The pieces attributed to them were composed by journalists, and are not included in textbooks to serve as pedagogical models but as token items to raise the readers' awareness of issues of gender, ethnicity, and social and cultural marginality, rather than class.

As explained earlier, the contents of virtually all textbook collections of essays (readers), including discussions of class written by canonical authors, such as George Orwell or Barbara Ehrenreich, are composed in standard English. All of these essays in their original context are intended for a middle-class or academic audience, the people who read *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, and little magazines—intellectually cultivated, widely read, with sufficient leisure time to read, and enough disposable

income to buy books and magazines. If working-class readers encounter essays actually or potentially canonical, it is likely to be in college textbooks, rather than in their publication of origin, since textbooks are the primary places where essays are reprinted and are the source of the canon.

Moreover, the pressure to teach the essays, from the writing programs that adopt the textbooks and from the textbook publishers who respond to the demands of their potential adopters, is to ensure that the essays, however elitist in form, may be understood in terms of middle-class values and experiences, even those that discuss working-class life. Thus, both the

bestselling *Norton Reader* and the *Bedford Reader* include "Aria," the chapter from Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory* that uses his own childhood experience as a native speaker of Spanish, the "private language" of home, to argue against bilingual education: "What I needed to learn in school was that I had the right—and the obligation—to speak the public language of *los gringos*" (*Norton* 9th ed 572). Both Readers ask students to comment on public and private language ("Was there a language in your home that was similarly private? Did you and your family speak a language [or dialect] other than the dominant one . . . ?" (*Bedford* 582)) and to assess Rodriguez's arguments against bilingual education ("Is he claiming that other non-English speakers would have the same gains and losses as he did? What evidence does he base his case on?" (*Norton* 578)). *The Bedford Reader*, using the essay to reflect on "The Power of Family," asks additionally for a commentary on childrearing practices: "Rodriguez's mother and father seem to have had a definite idea of their parental obligations to their children . . . What, for example, is the connection between good parenting and teaching one's child to conform?" (582). While questions such as these are designed to accommodate a range of responses drawn from the spectrum of the students' class experiences, it is understood that they will be writing in the lingua franca of the academy, as *The Bedford Reader* implies in asking for an essay "defining the distinctive quality of the language spoken in your home when you were a child . . . Do you revert to this private language when you are with your family?" (582).

Most textbooks are commissioned by the editors of major textbook publishing houses. The authors, usually nationally known for their innovative composition studies research (think Connors, Ede, Lunsford), propose radical books, innovative readings, imaginative pedagogy. Yet their textbooks—and I speak from repeated personal experience (see Bloom, "Making Essay Connections")—are invariably pushed toward traditional middle-class pedagogy with relatively modest innovations. The publishers' perceptions of the market, buttressed by surveys of prospective adopters of the books (freshman composition teachers), tend toward cloning of successful books already on the market, which are usually centrist in content, as Kuhn argues in "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions." They contain 50-75% canonical or pre-canonical essays (Bloom, "Making Essay Connections" 141) and are middle class in pedagogy. The textbook author or editor is thus caught in a double bind: to insist on dramatic innovation is to greatly diminish sales; yet to succumb to cloning is to further glut the market already saturated with middle-class values.<sup>3</sup>

---

3. The exceptions may be found in the often confrontative, oppositional readings encouraged by the editors of the widely-used *Ways of Reading*, David Bartholomae and Anthony Petroskey, who begin their Introduction with "Reading involves a fair measure of push and shove. You make your mark on a book and it makes its mark on you. Reading is not simply a matter of hanging back and waiting for a piece, or its author, to tell you what the writing has to say . . . We have not mentioned finding information or locating an author's purpose or identifying main ideas, use-

For the teaching and writing of essays in the academy is by and large a middle-class endeavor, as I've argued elsewhere, particularly in "Freshman Composition as a Middle-Class Enterprise." The academy—buttressed by handbooks, grammars, style manuals, and computer checkers of spelling, grammar, style, and other types of errors—is virtually uniform in its insistence on clean, respectable, orderly, well-documented, thesis-driven, author-effacing

"virtually uniform in its insistence on clean, respectable, orderly, well-documented, thesis-driven, author-effacing prose."

prose. And these are some of the stylistic features that the apparatus (consisting of those special textbook features, the "head-notes" and "study questions" designed to provide easy access to each "selection," as well as to determine how each essay is read) addresses in calling attention to vocabulary, usage, and conventions of writing. Indeed, in fairness to the students, virtually all of whom are aiming for middle- and upper-middle-class employment and its accompanying lifestyle upon graduation, there is no viable alternative. The

view of the authors of the 1974 CCCC position paper on "Students' Rights to Their Own Language" (see next section), that all dialects are created equal, accompanied by exhortations to "avoid judging students' dialects in social or economic terms" (16), has received virtually no reinforcement either inside or outside the academy since its inception (see Parks, *passim*).<sup>4</sup> This is not likely to change as long as standard English remains the dominant and normative

---

ful though these skills are, because the purpose of our book is to offer you occasions to imagine other ways of reading. We think of reading as a social interaction—sometimes peaceful and polite, sometimes not so peaceful and polite" (4th ed., 1. In this article, I am intentionally using the most recent editions of books published during the time frame of my essay canon research, 1946-96/7). Nevertheless, the readings of essays by the only canonical authors in the 4th edition which Bartholomae and Petroskey encourage—Richard Rodriguez, Alice Walker, and Virginia Woolf—do not seem idiosyncratic; the considerations they raise about these texts are common concerns of textbook editors (and composition teachers) nationwide. One example should suffice: "As you read her essay ['In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens'], observe Walker's methods of working. How does she build her arguments? Where does her evidence come from? her authority? To whom is she appealing? What do her methods allow her to see (and say) and not to see? And, finally, how might her conclusions be related to her methods?" (648).

4. *It's Mine and I'll Write It That Way*, by Dick Friedrich and David Kuester, the textbook that wholeheartedly embraced this philosophy, was published by Random House in 1972, the year that CCCC first addressed "Students' Right. . . ." It should be noted that the authors were colleagues of Elizabeth McPherson, promulgator of the resolution, at Forest Park Community College, St. Louis. That the book was published in only a single edition implies that it was not widely adopted.

dialect of the members of society with status, power, mobility, authority, and esteemed jobs—qualities students and the academic culture (and beyond) expect to be embedded in a college degree. Yet the students' cultural horizons are broadened by virtually all readers on the market today, through the cultural and ethnic diversity of their authors—all writing in standard English—that replace the hegemonic collections by upper-middle-class white males that dominated the readers of fifty years ago.

## **Freshman Composition, Conservator of Middle Class Values—Ever and Always?**

In substance, as in style, says Alan France in "Assigning Places," "the introductory composition course is crucially implicated in the process of cultural reproduction. Its content is the set of discursive rules that assign students to their proper place in the institutional hierarchies of corporate capitalism . . . [W]riting assignments should be seen not only as work that the instructor is empowered to impose on students, but as a temporary grant of the instructor's power to 'speak,'" and thereby to determine the students' "'proper' place in the social distribution of power" (593). The gray sameness of many freshman compositions makes it clear that instructors don't expect their students to speak out of turn. Despite the prevalence of elitist essays as textbook models, teachers don't expect students to produce elitist essays but a variety of non-literary forms, ranging from five-paragraph themes to analytic arguments. As a rule, these turn out to be fairly formulaic pieces of prose, a form that Robert Scholes labels in *Textual Power* "pseudo-non-literature," produced in "an appalling volume" in freshman courses. "We call the production of this stuff 'composition,'" he laments. And nobody writes "compositions" out of school. For "compositions" are not works of literature but academic exercises, pedagogical products designed for heuristic purposes—either to enhance students' understanding of the subject at hand or to provide practice in how to write an academic essay (5-10). Despite Scholes' searing critique—now nearly twenty years old—and the publication of three editions of Scholes, Comley, and Ulmer's *Text Book*, a clear and readable application of an antidote—"writing through literature rather than writing about it, and on learning literary theory by emulating literary practice" (3rd ed. iv-v)—New Critical writing assignments asking students to "unlock the text" continue to prevail as composition teachers replicate the culture in which they were taught.

To the extent that the academy remains middle class—in reality and in the prevailing cultural expectations of academic writing—there will be little incentive to re-orient composition pedagogy to challenge these middle-class values and aims. Creative writing students may be encouraged to aspire to literary elitism, even if their characters are proletarians. But most other students are not concerned with working-class readers; they are

trained to write serviceable prose aimed, in accord with the goals of their college education, toward academic goals and an academic audience.

Although academia has never been otherwise, in 1972, responsive to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication took issue with acceptance of standard English as the normative language for college level work, passing the following resolution: "We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which their own identity and style . . . We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language" ("Students' Right," 2-3). An amplified version was published two years later as a special issue of *CCC Students' Right to Their Own Language* (Fall 1974); it is still in print and may be purchased from NCTE. The policy remains on the books—but, as Stephen Parks's *Class Politics*, a comprehensive analysis of the history of the "Students' Right" advocacy demonstrates—it is not in the books. Handbooks, rhetorics, and readers all reinforce standard English in all academic situations, as they have always done. Thus despite this call for democratizing the language of and in the academy, echoed in a variety of CCC committees for a dozen years, by 1983 discussion was tabled, no action was taken, the "Students' Right" proposal "became history" (236). Thus France's revisionist suggestions to make freshman composition readings more proletarian and thus Marxist, and therefore more sensitive to the working class (593), remain essentially ignored. By whatever means students develop a social or political consciousness, they will do so in standard English.

It is the rare composition program, or course, that incorporates what Henry Giroux calls critical pedagogy, "in which the knowledge, habits, and skills of critical citizenship, not simply good citizenship, are taught and practiced. This means providing students with the opportunity to develop the critical capacity to challenge and transform existing social and political forms, rather than simply adapt to them" (74). Yet programs that have the potential to be transformative of both social values and student writing exist, primarily as alternative freshman curricula based on service learning—in which students collaborate with members of a variety of real communities to accomplish real projects, from literacy tutoring to building Habitat for Humanity houses (see Cushman; Flower). Thomas Deans's *Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition* highlights Eyler, Giles Jr., and Braxton's comprehensive study of service learning programs affecting 1500 students in twenty colleges. They conclude that these programs significantly affect "students' attitudes, values, and skills, as well as . . . the way they think about social issues," and found that service learning was "the only significant or best predictor of . . . the capacity of students to see problems as systemic, and the ability to see things from multiple perspectives" (3, ital. Deans). Deans' analysis of four exemplary

service learning programs provides the theoretical and pedagogical rationale for the curriculum he addresses in *Writing and Community Action*, derived in part from the program he directs at Haverford. The readings and writing assignments begin with personal reflections on literacy, and writing in academic communities, before moving to "Literature, Culture, and Social Reflection" and writing about, for, and with real world communities. The writing projects thus include informational brochures, proposals to address "community problems and injustices," and oral histories (see Chaps. 8 and 9).

Service learning curricula and community involvement require strong, committed, tireless leaders and continual oversight. Thus unless universities and their faculties—either the Freshman English directors or the TAs—have a significant Marxist or service imperative (how likely in today's corporate universities?), the pervasive middle-class orientation with an emphasis on elitist reading material is likely to prevail, particularly if part-time teachers are constrained by full-time faculty overseers to follow a common syllabus. Textbooks may and do include a variety of essays that support confrontation or resistance to establishment views. Yet only a few essays have become canonical because either their philosophical breadth or style transcends the topicality of most commentaries on current events: Swift's "Modest Proposal," Orwell's "Politics and the English Language," Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience," "The Declaration of Independence," and Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Even "The Declaration of Independence" may be generalized from and read out of or beyond its historical context.<sup>5</sup>

Thus while we may hold these truths to be self-evident, that all students are created equal, that they are endowed by their country and their culture with certain unalienable Rights, these Rights do not include the opportunity to exercise either working-class locutions or upper-class elitist literary strategies. The relatively recent acknowledgment of student and faculty obligations to the wider community, the larger world as represented in service learning programs and other types of real-world writing, exemplify alternatives awaiting larger-scale application. That nearly all available options for college level reading and writing are conducted in standard English is predictable, inevitable, and most would argue, desirable.

## Works Cited

Adorno, Theodor. "The Essay as Form." Trans. Bob Hullott-Kentor and Frederic Will. *New German Critique* 32 (1984): 151-71.

---

5. Many articles (not usually belletristic essays) in current Readers address contemporary issues of social and political policy and social reform. Because these works tend to be very context specific and related to contemporary politics or current events, they are unlikely to become canonical unless, like Swift's "Modest Proposal," some distinguishing features of style and mode override the temporality of their concerns.

"American Essay." In Chevalier, 14-23.

Bartholomae, David and Anthony Petrosky, eds. *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers*. 4th ed. Boston: Bedford, 1996.

Behar, Ruth. *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*. Boston: Beacon P, 1996.

Black, Laurel Johnson. "Stupid Rich Bastards." In Dews and Law, 13-25.

Bloom, Lynn Z. "The Essay Canon." *College English* 61 (1999): 401-30.

———. "Freshman Composition as a Middle-Class Enterprise." *College English* 58 (1996): 654-75.

———. "Making Essay Connections: Editing Readers for First Year Writers." *Publishing in Rhetoric and Composition*. Eds. Gary A. Olson and Todd Taylor. Albany: SUNY P, 1997. 33-44.

———. "Once More to the Essay: The Essay Canon and Textbook Anthologies." *Symplok* 8 (2000): 20-35.

Brereton, John, ed. *The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College, 1875-1925*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1995.

Chevalier, Tracy, ed. *Encyclopedia of the Essay*. London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997.

Connors, Robert J. "Invention and Assignments." *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1997. 296-327.

Cushman, Ellen. *The Struggle and the Tools: Oral and Literate Strategies in an Inner City Community*. Albany: SUNY P, 1998.

Deans, Thomas. *Writing and Community Action: A Service-Learning Rhetoric with Readings*. New York: Longman, 2003.

———. *Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2000.

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.

DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. "f-words: An Essay on the Essay." *American Literature* 68 (1996): 15-45.

Flower, Linda. *The Construction of Negotiated Meaning: A Social Cognitive Theory of Writing*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1994.

Fox, Patricia Shelley. "Women in Mind: The Culture of First-Year English and the Nontraditional Returning Woman Student." In Yagelski and Leonard, 183-203.

France, Alan W. "Assigning Places: The Function of Introductory Composition as a Cultural Discourse." *College English* 55 (1993): 593-609.

Friedrich, Dick and David Kuester. *It's Mine and I'll Write It That Way*. New York: Random House, 1972.

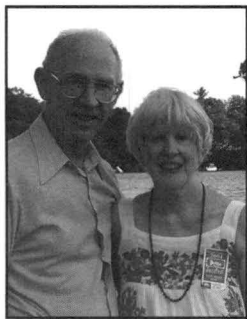
Fussell, Paul. "Notes on Class." *The Boy Scout Handbook and Other Observations*. New York: Oxford UP, 1982. 46-60.

- Gass, William H. "Emerson and the Essay." *Yale Review* 71 (1982): 321-62. rpt. *Habitations of the Word: Essays*. New York: Simon, 1985. 9-49.
- Giroux, Henry. *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Good, Graham. *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay*. London: Routledge, 1988.
- Graff, Gerald. "The Academic Language Gap." In Yagelski and Leonard, 23-33
- Hardwick, Elizabeth. "Introduction." *The Best American Essays 1986*. Eds. Elizabeth Hardwick and Robert Atwan. New York: Ticknor, 1986. xiii-xxi.
- Harris, Wendell V. "Canonicity." *PMLA* 106 (1991): 110-21.
- Kennedy, X.J., Dorothy M. Kennedy, and Jane E. Aaron, eds. *The Bedford Reader*. 6th ed. Boston: Bedford, 1997.
- Kirklighter, Cristina. "The Relevance of Paulo Freire on Liberatory Dialogue and Writing in the Classroom." In Yagelski and Leonard, 221-234.
- . *Traversing the Democratic Borders of the Essay*. Albany: SUNY P, 2002.
- Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 2nd ed. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1970.
- Orwell, George. "Shooting an Elephant." 1936. *Essays*. Sel. and Introd. John Carey. New York: Knopf, 2002. 42-49.
- Parks, Stephen. *Class Politics: The Movement for the Students' Right to Their Own Language*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2000.
- Pelz, William A. "Is There a Working-Class History?" In Dews and Law, 277-85.
- Peterson, Linda H., John C. Brereton, and Joan E. Hartman, eds. *The Norton Reader*. 9th ed. New York: Norton, 1996.
- Piper, Deborah. "Psychology's Class Blindness: Investment in the Status Quo." In Dews and Law, 286-97.
- Rasula, Jed. *The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects, 1940–1990*. Urbana, Ill: NCTE, 1996.
- Sanders, Scott Russell. "The Singular First Person." *Essays on the Essay: Redefining the Genre*. Ed. Alexander J. Butrym. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1989. 31-42.
- Scholes, Robert. *Textual Power: Literary Theory and the Teaching of English*. New Haven: Yale P, 1985.
- , Nancy R. Comley, and Gregory L. Ulmer, eds. *Text Book*. 3rd ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2002.
- "Students' Right to Their Own Language." *College Composition and Communication* 25 (1974). Rpt. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1974.
- Sullivan, Patricia. "Passing: A Family Dissemblance." *Coming to Class: Pedagogy and the Social Class of Teachers*. Eds. Alan Shepard, John McMillan, and Gary Tate. Portsmouth, N.H.: Boynton/Cook, 1998. 231-51.

Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden and Other Writings*. Ed. William Howarth. New York: Modern Library, 1981.

White, E.B. "Foreword." *Essays of E. B. White*. New York: Harper, 1977. vii-ix.

Yagelski, Robert P. and Scott A. Leonard, eds. *The Relevance of English: Teaching That Matters in Students' Lives*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2002.



**Lynn Z. Bloom** (shown here with husband Martin), Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor and Aetna Chair of Writing at the University of Connecticut, has published some one hundred twenty-five personal/academic essays, including "The Essay Canon" (1999), "Living to Tell the Tale: The Complicated Ethics of Creative Nonfiction" (2003), both in *College English*, and "Voices" (2004). Twenty are collected in *Composition Studies as a Creative Art* (1999). Her other books include a biography *Doctor Spock* (1972), editions of two American women prisoners' diaries (1980, 1989), *Composition Studies in the New Millennium* (2003), and numerous essay textbooks, most recently *The Essay Connection* (8th ed. Houghton Mifflin 2007).