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David L. Wallace
University of Central Florida

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Cover Page Footnote

David L. Wallace is professor of English at the University of Central Florida where he teaches a variety of courses that explore the intersections of the personal and the academic and that bring alternative perspectives to bear on the study and practice of rhetoric. With Helen Rothschild Ewald, he is author of *Mutuality in the Rhetoric and Composition Classroom*.

Shallow Literacy, Timid Teaching, and Cultural Impotence

David L. Wallace

As a discipline, we have known at least since we started reading translations of Bakhtin in the 80s that acts of literacy depend on much more than a set of linguistic decoding and encoding skills. Instead, speakers and listeners, readers and writers are in dialogue with other individuals, with their discursive histories, and with cultural values and institutions. In 1983, Shirley Brice Heath's seminal *Ways with Words* invited us to consider that literacy is always historically, socially, and culturally situated and that the dominant discourse practices in American schools can misinterpret and fail to engage the discourse practices of those who learn to speak in economically or racially marginalized communities such as Trackton and Roadville. A decade earlier, linguists such as William Labov and Geneva Smitherman helped us begin to see that low-prestige dialects of English such as Black English Vernacular had sophisticated grammars and were informed by a complex set of cultural values.

Yet in 1996 Lynn Z. Bloom could still write in a leading NCTE journal: "Yes, freshman composition is an unashamedly middle class enterprise" that rewards such values as self-reliance, responsibility, respectability, decorum, moderation and temperance, thrift, efficiency, order, cleanliness, punctuality, delayed gratification, and critical thinking (655). Yet as a profession we require our students to spend millions of dollars every year on prescriptive grammar and usage handbooks that rarely bother to nod to the complexities of language use in their rush to encourage students to write as if they are all aspiring *New Yorker* essayists. And, yet, as a discipline, we still embrace—in practice if not in theory—the Shaughnessy party-line that the best we can do is be culturally sensitive to students' diverse literacy backgrounds as we assimilate them to our understandings of academic and professional discourse.

Despite decades of scholarship that invite us to move beyond an understanding of literacy as more than a neutral set of basic skills, the discipline of rhetoric and composition remains largely impotent to challenge the dominant view of literacy because our teaching is timid, because in our composition programs, in our rhetoric classes, and in our disciplinary practice we fail to embrace the basic understanding of literacy as situated in our lives, in our students' lives, and in culture-at-large. Why are we so tentative? We know that privileged forms of discourse—including the academic discourse practices that give us status in our schools and our society—have contributed to the marginalization of women, people of color, working class people, people living in poverty, lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgendered people, and those physically and mentally abled in other than the

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expected ways. Yet we seem to be of two minds: prying open the rhetorical canon to include the previously ignored and silenced and yet also clinging to the forms of traditional argument and to handbook versions of standard usage as our guarantee to society-at-large that we have the right and the expertise to decide what constitutes acceptable discourse in the academy and which students have demonstrated sufficient fluency to be admitted to the ranks of professionals. I believe that we adhere to this almost schizophrenic duality because we are afraid to do otherwise and that—even though there are several reasons why this fear is rational—we must find ways to move beyond it.

One reason we have been slow to develop and embrace alternative forms of discourse is that we understand all too well that there are consequences to giving up our status as the purveyors of a single, definable privileged language because the academy and society-at-large expect us to provide this. Indeed, too many of our colleagues across our institutions see guaranteeing a minimum level of linguistic competence as our primary (if not our only) reason for existence. The situation we face is akin to that faced by postmodern feminists such as Chris Weedon, who argues that although getting beyond the notion of the objective, Cartesian self is critical for women, it is also dangerous because it involves giving up the possibility of a privileged position that most women have never achieved. Another reason we fear embracing alternative discourses is because it requires us to engage our students in a view of language that, in most cases, runs against their previous assumptions and educational experiences. As Laurie Grobman explains, creating a “postpositivist realism” in our classrooms involves helping our students move beyond “the paralysis of relativism” as well as “an uncritical understanding of multiculturalism” and toward “a more reflective and complex awareness of ethical issues and multiculturalism itself” (208). This is no easy task; it requires major changes in our pedagogy, giving up tried and true methods and moving into unfamiliar ground. Finally, a third fear is that engaging in such a journey will pull us too deeply in the personal. Our fear of a return to a naïve, romantic expressivism as well as our fear of getting drawn into endless counseling sessions during our office hours have kept us from embracing—in practice—our new view of rhetoric as situated, as embodied.

Put most simply, my points in this article are two: first, the personal is unavoidable in rhetoric and composition and, second, we have not seriously considered the ways in which we serve as a cultural force that preserves the status quo rather than challenging it. In the pages that follow, I develop these points by examining what I will refer to as *shallow literacy*, *timid teaching*, and *cultural impotence*. However, before I go any further, I must acknowledge three things. First, engaging in the kind of pedagogy I advocate in this piece is far from safe; it involves both personal and professional risk. Second, fomenting cultural change through pedagogy is a tricky business that must always be carried out in dialogue with the culture-at-large and within the specific constraints of the institutions that employ us. Indeed, getting beyond timid teaching requires continual articulation of what it means to teach and learn literacy; it means existing in the constantly shifting ground between serving simply as facilitators of the status quo and pushing the pedagogical envelope so far that we fail to offer our students the chance to develop culturally relevant discourse abilities. Third, as a tall, thin, white, male, middle-class, Ph.D.-holding, tenured professor, I am shielded from much (although not all) of the risk of engaging in bold teaching. Therefore, in

this article, I offer not only my version of traditional academic argument but also incidents from my teaching and from my life that illustrate what it means for me to engage in the pedagogical struggle that I recommend to others.

Shallow Literacy

As a discipline, we've identified a number of problems in our conception and practice of literacy. Jane E. Hindman argues "our professional discourse and practice are 'masculinist' and therefore confining" (98). Glynda Hull has documented how a view of literacy as simply the "texts that workers read and write" rather than as "the social relationships and activities that guide and influence the use of texts in a work environment" can lead to assumptions about immigrant workers that underestimate their abilities and the complexities of their work networks and can also result in production problems (382). Similarly, Resa Crane Bizzaro has documented the obstacles that teacher-scholars of color in composition have had in overcoming negative expectations about them during their schooling. Lisa M. Gonsalves has reported, "The Black male students I spoke with tended to describe faculty members as not caring at best and racist at worst" (436). Mark Mossman explores the complex ways that visible physical disability denies disabled people normality in college classrooms "through exclusion and othering" (655). And Linda Brodkey proclaims, "Composition courses are middle-class holding pens populated by students from all classes who for one reason or another do not produce fluent, thesis-driven essays of around five hundred words in response to either prompts designed for standardized tests or assignments developed by classroom teachers" (135).

Although some of these issues have only recently been raised (heterosexism and ableism), others (gender, race, and class) have been surfacing in the pages of our journals for decades. The question, then, is why have we been slow to develop alternative rhetorics and pedagogies? As I've already noted, composition teachers and writing program administrators (WPAs) do not have magic wands that can sweep away institutional constraints or instantly transform standard curricula. Indeed, a few hours of reading the WPA listserv makes it clear that composition specialists are engaged in active and, at times, contentious discourse with those who enforce institutional constraints at our teaching institutions. Yet beyond declaring that students have a right to their own language, we've made little progress transforming our discipline and its curriculum. I believe that one important reason for this failure is in our own investment in the status quo.

Some of us were born to linguistic privilege, growing up in houses where books abounded, NPR played on the radio, and parents led discussions of current events at the dinner table. Some of us were born to literacies of the working classes, of ethnic enclaves, or of immigrant bilingualisms, and we've worked hard to gain our linguistic privilege. Shouldn't others work as hard as we have? Some of us are men who got called on by our teachers more than our sisters did and who got called "honey" only by doting aunts bringing us plates of Toll House cookies with tall glasses of milk. Some of us have skin and hair and eyes whose colors and textures have never marked us a potential threat or as dismissable to strangers who have never even heard us speak. Some of us grew up watching movies in which we were invited to cheer as pale-faced cowboys and infantry men slaughtered savage Ind-yuns. Some of us have never been truly hungry or

spent a cold night without adequate shelter. Some of us are straight and have never had to translate the pronouns in the latest pop love song to make it relevant or sit at the receptions of siblings' weddings and fend off the inevitable when-will-we-be-attending-your-wedding questions from relatives who should know better but don't. Some of us bound up stairs two at a time and let our glance linger a millisecond too long on a curved spine or the blanket covering the atrophied legs of the person in the wheel chair passing us in the mall before we turn our heads.

Some of us are tenured professors who step away from our reading and writing to teach overcrowded first-year composition courses only when the calls of smaller sections of graduate students, upper-division English majors, or honors students leave us an awkward hole in our teaching schedules. Some of us are writing program administrators who must pretend that we can achieve a curricular consistency which guarantees that all students will meet some minimum set of requirements despite the fact that most of our teaching staffs are under-paid and turn over every couple of years. Some of us are temporary-adjunct-visiting-lecturer-instructors or brand-spanking-new teaching assistants who are crammed into trailer offices on the far side of campus and carry home bags bulging with student papers.

Although we are very different people who engage in literacy instruction under divergent circumstances, we are all invested in a culture and in an educational system that marks our language use with enough privilege that we are paid to pass on our understanding of language to others. We are invested with the right to judge others' literacy abilities and to grant or withhold the cultural capital of grades and course credit. Any attempt to move to a deeper notion of literacy in our theory and pedagogy must—among other things—involve us facing our own self interest and expecting disruption not only in the inequities that are too often invisible in dominant culture but also in our practice of rhetoric and pedagogy: disruption in our own classrooms, departments, and universities.

I'm more tired than usual as I walk through the rows of computers and students sliding back and forth on wheeled chairs to look at e-mails and drafts. I'm tired because I don't sleep well with Paul any more, tired because I got up early with him, followed him across town to his work exit and then drove on as the pale pre-dawn light grew bright on miles of recently emptied fields to the quiet street and my little house where I showered and ate cinnamon rolls and scribbled in my journal before heading off to meet my students.

"Before we start the workshop today, I want to read you something I wrote at breakfast this morning." I walk up and down the aisle, folding back the stiff cover of my journal as the students settle in.

"We can't have sex."

"Don't worry; it's not going to happen."

"No," I put my hand on the smooth skin of his cheek and turned it gently toward me, "I mean, if we had sex it would be forever."

But it's not forever; I knew this morning when I woke beside Paul's long body that it was over, that I wasn't in love with him any more, that I could finally let go. I need more; I need someone who will not hold back, who will trust himself to me.

The mists laid heavy on the fields this morning, cold fog dampening the wheels of hay parked on the stubbled ground. The sun hung low in the haze, pale purple,

streaked with gray cirrus, rising to ruby red, tangerine, and orange. My love is gone and yet I still feel his kiss, wet hungry lips, tongue pressed in and down and then softer, tender touch that won't risk lingering.

The room is quiet now. "Despite all the things I've shared with you this semester, reading you this journal entry is risky. It makes a part of my life that I'm just now figuring out concrete in ways that probably makes some of you uncomfortable. My hands are shaking a bit. The next starting point that I'm going to give you asks you to take a risk, to get out of your comfort zone. Excuse my French, but fuck the grade. Write your body. As always, you don't have to write on this starting point, but, if you do, consider writing about something you haven't dared to say before."

Timid Teaching

If we begin to understand that literacy learning always entails negotiation of identity in culture (even when that negotiation remains largely invisible to the participants), then we may finally have a real basis for moving beyond our timid teaching. By *timid teaching* I mean the kinds of pedagogical practice that treat language learning as if it can and should be divorced from who and what we are as teachers and students and where skills and heuristics are treated as if they will automatically lead to socio-cultural and economic empowerment. If we are to move beyond this status quo, we must immediately give up the idea that we know in any absolute sense what is best for our students. This is not to say that we have nothing of value to offer our students; rather, as Richard E. Miller has argued, "It is of paramount importance, I believe, to begin where students are, rather than where one thinks they should be" (402).

As my coauthor, Helen Rothschild Ewald, and I have argued elsewhere, true mutuality in learning occurs at the intersections of students' knowledges and experiences and teachers' representations of disciplinary knowledges and of their own experiences. However, accepting students where they are cannot be a grudging admittance of practicality (where else is there to start if one really cares about learning?). Rather, we must embrace not only these variable starting points but also variable end goals. That is, we cannot simply sigh heavily in recognition that we have a wide range of students to try and turn into the objective, detached, dispassionate authors that many of us were schooled to be. Instead, we must be ready to support our students' attempts to go places that we cannot yet conceive of, and we may need to admit to our students, to our colleagues, and to ourselves that, in some cases, we don't even know exactly how we will help our students get to these new ends.

So then how do we do things differently? How do we escape the phallocentrism that has been entwined with rhetoric for 2500 years? One way that the scholars and teachers who I've been reading lately frame this problem is in reconsidering the goals for rhetoric and composition courses. For example, Susan Wells has explored what it means to train students to speak and write in the "public sphere." She borrows this term from Habermas, arguing that public discourse "is a complex array of discursive practices, including forms and writing, speech, and media performances" and argues further, "[S]peakers and writers come to the public with a weight of personal and social experience" (328). For Wells the ultimate goal of a composition course is not to prepare students to take up the

roles that dominant culture has set up for them, nor is it limited to the kinds of critical awareness often proposed as the ultimate good in cultural studies approaches. Rather, she argues that composition pedagogy must address the issue of “how students can speak in their own skins to a broad audience, with some hope of effectiveness” (334). She argues that we must move beyond the binary of assimilation or resistance to a place that helps students develop voices that are authentic in the sense that those voices are explicitly connected to who the students are and reflect their unique social, cultural, and historical backgrounds as well as being cognizant of the values and constraints of public spheres in which students speak and write.

Translating the desire for pedagogy that helps students resist assimilation and develop voices that are connected in concrete ways to their unique backgrounds involves risks at various levels. First, as I have already noted, such pedagogical goals may run contrary to institutional expectations for composition courses and programs. Second, engaging in pedagogy that explores alternatives to traditional academic and professional discourse also involves risk for our students. As Russell K. Durst argues, many of our students come to composition courses with a “pragmatic orientation,” wishing “to learn a form of literacy that will both make their lives easier and help them to become more successful in their careers” (3). Thus, many students may not see the relevance of examining the underlying power relations in culture and language or of developing alternative discourse strategies and hybrid voices that address those new understandings. Third, if we are to get beyond timid teaching and into the difficult business of developing and teaching alternative forms of discourse, we must also recognize that we are intervening in ways that will expose our own and some of our students’ participation in systems of privilege that are inherently unfair. Such pedagogy will not always feel safe.

Two days after I read my journal entry to the class, I pick up a journal response from Timothy in which he tells me that sex is not an appropriate topic for class discussion and that he was disappointed in himself for not walking out of class in protest to my journal. I’m not surprised because Timothy has been challenging me all semester arguing that I must admit that Truth exists even if I believe that the only truth is that there is no truth and that I should accept his re-examination of Bible verses about homosexuality as looking at more than one side of an issue. I’m angry, and I want to write back to Timothy, telling him that he’s missed the point—that he’s misreading me through the inaccurate stereotype of gay men as promiscuous sluts who deserve to get AIDS. Instead, I write in the margin, “But, Timothy, the point of the piece was that we didn’t have sex.” The rest of the journals are better, most of the students understood, even appreciated, the risk I took, but Timothy’s response stays with me. I wonder what he will write on the course evaluation that my department chair will eventually read. I wonder if I’ve gone too far this time, shared too much, been too self-indulgent.

I’m through the journals now and begin the thicker stack of essays from the class. Beth writes in her self evaluation: “As soon as I was given the invitation to ‘fuck the grade,’ this popped into my head almost instantaneously—I knew I had to go out on a limb and write this.” In her paper, she writes:

I’m eighteen now. Eighteen and eight months to be exact, and I’ve finally resigned myself to the fact that my breasts will never grow. This does not, by any stretch of the truth, mean that I

now regard my extremely small chest with even moderate acceptance....

Most people do not want to hear a 110-pound girl say she dislikes her body. Most people would be thanking the powers that be if they could eat like I do and never gain weight. But most people do not find themselves standing in front of a full-length mirror with a pile of rejected shirts scattered on the floor around them, running late and in tears because they hate the way their chest looks in each and every one....

I place the brunt of the responsibility for my self-revulsion on my own thin shoulders, but I do not deny that the culture in which I live contributes as well....

My big brother lifts all the time and has developed massive pecs: "I've got bigger boobs than you," he jokes. I feign laughter....

In my most rational moments, I try to convince myself that the size of my chest does not devalue me as a person, but it is near impossible to step back from this body I am in to think objectively. I run stand sleep dance eat listen think feel live breathe in this body; it is more than just a shell encasing the person inside, and my insecurity about it has become an integral part of who I am.

I sit staring at Beth's paper, stunned by her honesty, flattered at her trust, shocked that such doubts live in the bright young woman I could always count on to challenge the straight, white, middle-class, dripping-with-privilege guys in the class when they spout off about how everyone can succeed if they just try hard enough. I read back through Beth's paper, gratified to see her using some of the techniques we've worked on in her previous papers but also recognizing that my biggest contribution to this paper was simply to open the door and get out of the way. I give Beth an outstanding evaluation—the first one I've ever given without asking for at least some revision.

Beyond Cultural Impotence

Shallow literacy, timid teaching, and cultural impotence are of a piece in our discipline. They are bound together in our views of who we are as people, as teachers, and as theorists that allow us to hide in our professionalism and in our surety that our liberal politics and our marginalized position in the academy means that we cannot possibly be participating in systems of domination. In one sense, we can hardly avoid some participation in systems of oppression because we are caught up in a culture in which higher education serves a gatekeeping function, and I don't mean to underemphasize the difficult work of challenging the institutional constraints that we must engage to create real change. However, I contend that rhetoric and composition (and perhaps English Studies and liberal pedagogy as well) has remained largely impotent in its attempts to address the inequities in culture-at-large because we have failed to engage fully in a new understanding of our educational mission that entails a substantive reexamination of the inherent colonialism in the Greco-Roman, Western European tradition of rhetoric that we hold so dear and because we refuse to embrace a pedagogy of the personal, a pedagogy of risk.

Creating a more inclusive understanding of rhetoric is a difficult business that will not be accomplished overnight. Fortunately, the (relatively) recent work of feminist rhetoricians, queer rhetoricians, and rhetoricians of color have provided a number of important starting points for such work. I'm thinking here (among others) of Virginia Woolf's calls for women to kill the angel of the house, of Judith Butler's notion of the performativity of sex and gender, and of Scott Lyons's argument that the accounts of experiences of American Indians in boarding schools illustrate the problematic relationship that American Indians have had to English literacy. Lyons argues for "rhetorical sovereignty" as a new goal for literacy instruction, which he defines as "the inherent right and ability of peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desires in this pursuit, to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and language of public discourse" (449-50). Lyons's notion of rhetorical sovereignty suggests that one important and immediately useful starting point for exposing the imperialism inherent in our disciplinary practice and pedagogy of rhetoric is to acknowledge our continuing participation in systems of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and ableism. In the terms I'm using in this article, Lyons calls us to examine how our rhetorical practice is shallow because it is one-dimensional, monocultural, and, as a result, our timid pedagogy may serve as an impediment to our students' development of rhetorical sovereignty, leaving them unprepared to engage in the difficult business of contributing to cultural transformation.

One important way that we can begin to break this pattern of white, straight, male, middle-class, Western dominance of rhetoric is to recognize that being fluent in the prestige dialects of English and commanding the usual literacy practices of the academy and professions will not be enough to meet the demands of teaching deeper literacies. Many of us need to retool, to learn to speak and write in dialects and discourse practices that are new to us. In addition, we will also need to change our graduate curricula. Most notably, we must recognize that the Western tradition of rhetoric—which we have revered as much for its rigor and longevity as for the disciplinary status we gained by reclaiming it—serves as a powerful remnant of colonialism. We must not only deconstruct this tradition to reveal its misogyny, its complicity with Christianity in silencing other expressions of spirituality, and its embrace of enlightenment notions of knowledge to the exclusion of other ways of knowing, but we must also change our courses. We must see that we have multiple heritages: as Gloria Anzaldúa counsels, "Let's all stop importing Greek myths and Western Cartesian split point of view and root ourselves in the mythological soil and soul of this continent" (1593). Opening the canon of rhetoric means hard work and hard choices. We cannot fall back on our familiar courses and on the theorists covered in our comps whose books already sit on our shelves. Including Ida B. Wells means less time for George Campbell; opening ourselves and our courses means loss of things familiar and loved.

Moving beyond timid teaching and cultural impotence means being in continual dialogue about the substance of our curricula at the institutional level with administrators who will likely need help in getting beyond shallow notions of literacy, at the disciplinary level with our colleagues whose help each of us needs in broadening our limited understandings of literacy, and at the classroom level with our students, many of whom will not immediately see the need for literacy beyond traditional academic and workplace practices. Of course, there are many kinds of rhetorical and pedagogical strategies that can be used in such

dialogues, but my focus in this article is on the use of the personal. Indeed, I included Timothy's and Beth's responses to my journal entry because I wanted to put the most controversial instance of my use of the personal in my classes in recent years on the table for disciplinary discussion. Therefore, in the few pages I have remaining, I turn from discussing the need for curricular change at the disciplinary level to the need for each of us to develop a pedagogy of the personal, a pedagogy of risk in our own classrooms.

First, I want to make it clear that I am not counseling that everyone should make the kinds of personal revelations that I did in Timothy and Beth's class. Engaging in a pedagogy of the personal will mean different things for different people. There is no simple answer to the question of which teachers should take which kind of risks, but recently I have been able to articulate three questions that anyone who wants to move beyond timid teaching should consider.

Question #1: *To what extent do you see the need for alternative rhetorics, for hybrid discourse practices?*

I considered this question directly for the first time when I read Sidney Dobrin's chapter in a recent collection about alternative discourse (see Schroeder, Fox, and Bizzell). In the chapter, Dobrin wonders about the usefulness of designating some discourses as alternative or hybrid when, from a theoretical stance, "we must understand that all discourse is hybrid" (46). I saw Dobrin's point immediately: each of us constructs our own versions of discourse based on our unique set of interactions with culture. Yet Dobrin's point angered me, too, because it seemed to me that he was reducing alternative rhetoric to such considerations as whether or not he should submit his chapter "with the Works Cited page on the first page" because when he served as editor of JAC "the first thing I would read was the Works Cited page to see what the author was working with—an alternative way of reading" (54-55). Dobrin's argument bothered me because he seemed to be treating alternative patterns of discourse as the flavor of the month, as something that he could take or leave, something that he didn't need. As I examined my response to Dobrin's chapter, I realized that for me writing and teaching hybrid genres was more than just a practical means of expanding my own and my students' writing repertoires. Instead, I was teaching myself and trying to teach my students to take up a new kind of authorship that called us to narrate ourselves against the cultural forces that had formed us. This realization led me to a further question.

Question #2: *What is your experience with systemic difference?*

Dobrin's chapter also angered me because it failed to account for that fact that some of us have been systematically silenced because of our race, class, gender, sexual identity, ethnicity, age, religion, lack of traditional physical abledness, or mental/emotional struggles. Perhaps he would understand the need for alternative discourses better if he had been called a "fag" in a high school locker room as I was or if one of his composition students had written that while just about everyone belongs in his circle of humanity, the first people who do not are homosexuals because of their "sick and perverted acts." After my anger passed, I realized two things that are relevant here. First, if it is true that Dobrin has not personally experienced systemic marginalization (and I realize that it is dangerous to assume he has not based on what he reveals in this one chapter), then he may indeed not see the pressing need for alternative discourses that is crystal clear to me every time I watch a movie in which men only kiss women or hear a benefits counselor refer to "spousal benefits." Second, my willingness to share oral and

written instances of marginalization with my classes serves as an important tool for helping them see what it means to speak back to a cultural narrative that defines one in problematic ways, and Dobrin may not have such a tool to use.

The underlying issue that this example speaks to is who can or should engage in pedagogy that uses personal risk to help students see the need for alternative discourses and models the process of finding voices that can speak back to patterns of cultural inequity. For pragmatic reasons, I am sorely tempted to propose that only those who've experienced systemic oppression by culture in some form and who can stand back from those experiences and analyze them with some insight should attempt such pedagogy. If teachers have not lived through experiences of oppression, I worry that some might use their classes as therapy sessions without considering the benefit to students, without connecting the experiences they share to systems of oppression in substantive ways. Worse, I worry that some people might use their experience to unintentionally reinforce sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism, and the like. And so a part of me says, "don't do it unless you know what you're doing."

But another part of me says "ignorance is no excuse." This other part of me remembers my own stumbling first attempts to understand how to make my struggles with oppression through language relevant to my students. It also remembers the work it took for me to begin understanding the struggles faced by students of color on predominantly white campuses (see Wallace and Bell) and the many hours I spent reading feminist theory and talking to my women colleagues, students, and friends to begin understanding gender issues. This part of me doesn't want to let anyone off the hook because language cannot be other than socially, culturally, and historically situated and because the broad social issues of race, class, gender, sexual identity, and physical and mental abledness are embodied by our students and ourselves in our classrooms even if we are not aware of them. This other part of me hears Jacqueline Jones Royster explaining that if we hope "to dismantle the mythology of rightful stronghold and invading hordes," then we must see literacy instruction as "a people-driven enterprise" which means that we must "pay attention to who people are in the arena, to their personal, social, institutional, and public locations; to students as subjects in the classrooms, not objects" (26). This other part of me recognizes that none of us has arrived and that engaging in the struggle to understand more is the heart of responsible pedagogy.

Question #3: *What are your motives for sharing the personal?*

To be honest, this is the hardest question for me to answer. Sharing my writing and myself with my students has become such a natural part of my pedagogy that, as I was drafting this article, I didn't even pose the question of whether or not teachers should do so until the responses of friends and journal reviewers raised the issue of whether I had gone too far in sharing my journal entry with Timothy and Beth's class. One anonymous reviewer for a journal that rejected an earlier version of this article cited my pedagogical decision as a clear "abuse" of power, arguing that I was unfairly using my students as a captive audience for a review of my life. Another reviewer suggested that this article performed an important therapeutic function for me and that he or she would be interested in reading my next article, the one I would presumably be able to write now that I'd worked through these emotions. A third, more supportive reviewer reasoned that because my students "were forced to hear, in public" my journal entry about Paul,

reading it to them crossed a line and became “incestuous and aggressive, seductive.”

These responses genuinely surprised me because—even though I knew my choice to read that journal entry to the class was risky—I presumed that it would be read by my colleagues in the field as an act of bravery. The week before that morning in class, I had been reading Hélène Cixous, and I saw myself as following her advice to women (and men) to write their (our) bodies—I felt like the woman who Cixous describes as gaining a public voice by throwing “her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it’s with her body that she vitally supports the ‘logic’ of her speech. Her flesh speaks true” (1528). It should have been no surprise to me that others read my recounting of that pedagogical moment differently than I did, that they resisted my neat and self-congratulatory reading, but it surprised me nonetheless.

I realize now that part of my surprise at these negative responses is because I presumed that it was natural for writing to have a therapeutic effect for both teachers and students and that the alternative to timid teaching is a pedagogy of risk. I am not arguing here that we should try risky things in our classrooms just for the purpose of being outrageous or entertaining or that we should force our students to listen to accounts of our personal lives on a daily basis. Because of the institutional power that we have to make our students into captive audiences, there is a real danger of abuse and, as Timothy’s response illustrates, of misinterpretation. Given these dangers, wouldn’t it be more prudent to remain detached, neutral, and objective? My answer is an emphatic no because literacy is not neutral and safe and because teachers cannot ask students to engage in a pedagogy of risk unless they do so themselves. Of course, pedagogical risk should be taken thoughtfully. For example, I share as many as half a dozen of my pieces with my students in the course of a semester. Before I use one of my own pieces, I ask the same questions that I ask about the many professionally published and student writings that I use in class: what does this piece show about writing techniques and what does it show about what it meant for this person to take authorship? However, at some point, usually past the midpoint of the semester, I make it a point to share something new with my students, often something that no one else has read yet and always something that I’m unsure of. My purpose in using such pieces in my classes is to allow my students to see that I am a writer who knows firsthand what it means to take risks and to create a cultural space in my classroom where they can do likewise.

I sit at a table in my favorite lunch place on a Saturday afternoon alternating spoonfuls of broccoli/cheddar soup with bites of my cinnamon crunch bagel. I’m drawn into the draft of the masters thesis I’m reading. The author, Jill Dopf, relates the story she’s been told of her mother—pregnant with Jill—happily opening presents at her baby shower until she notes the funny gait of her mother-in-law’s walk and the slight curve of her spine as she leans to pick up a plate. I read on. Jill’s mother is telling her that her father won’t be able to pull Jill on her sled any more and that she shouldn’t ask why. Jill goes to cheerleading camp where she learns that she can’t straighten her arms out the way the other girls do.

My stomach rumbles and I spoon up now cold soup as I read of Jill watching her younger sister develop the full breasts and hips that she will never have. I’m standing with Jill in front of a full-length mirror in a department store as she

holds up prom dresses against her tiny frame when a loud laugh distracts me. Annoyed to have my concentration interrupted, I turn toward the source of the noise and see a pale, white-haired boy with thick glasses and facial features that seem too mature for his tiny frame. "Not an albino," I think as I notice his blue eyes. He shuffles across the floor, smiling widely and holding his mother's hand. "He doesn't have the heavy Mongoloid features; no braces, so it's not muscular dystro—" I looked down at Jill's text and blush, ashamed at the thoughts that ran through my head too quickly to verbalize, at my glance that lingered too long.

Jill writes of her nervousness as she drives hundreds of miles to meet the woman she has been exchanging e-mail messages with for weeks—the only other person she knows with the same rare form of muscular dystrophy that Jill inherited from her father and grandmother. I see her through Jill's eyes as a woman adored by her husband, as the mother of a beautiful child, as the center of a set of family and friends who no longer see her as diseased and different. She is older than Jill and less physically able, dependent on a pacemaker to keep her heart beating, and she knows that she will never see her daughter graduate from high school. And Jill makes me see her beauty.

Another loud laugh pulls me up from the text. The little boy and his family sit two booths away. The grown-ups are finishing the last bites of their sandwiches, and the boy is standing on the seat of the booth, leaning out in the aisle, calling out to the people standing in line. He, too, is beautiful, straining against the wood wall, delighted by the occasional returned smile, unaware of the frowns that move from him to his parents when his attention has moved elsewhere. Suddenly I want to put my body between the boy and the line, to warn him: "Don't let us change your beauty; don't let us pathologize you with our abled stares." I want to tell him that he is beautiful, but my guilt is too fresh and so I sit ignorant and impotent but resolved to face my complicity in ableism, to retrain my gaze, to find ways to identify and address ableism as I have sexism, classism, racism, and homophobia in my classes, in my life.

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