



Retelling Culture Through The Construction Of Alternative Literacy Narratives: A Study Of Adults Acquiring New Literacies

Lauren Rosenberg, Eastern Connecticut University

... This project investigates how a group of adult learners who are acquiring new literacies articulate their relationships to dominant ideologies of literacy. My goal is to look beyond typically expressed motivations for becoming more literate to understand how people see the roles of writing and reading in their lives. I argue that adult learners can teach scholars and teachers something about dominant ideologies from their unique point of critique. Another goal is to examine how learners use alternative literacy narratives to define a place of agency. By examining interview transcripts and written texts, I investigate the ways that one adult learner uses alternative narratives as a means to alter his subject position and disrupt dominant literacy narratives.

... if you and I go to court right now. Let's say we have to stand up in front of the judge and, and plead our case... Quite naturally you are going to plead your case twice time better than I plead mine. Thing is I might wants to say, and I might, you know; but I don't know how to put it in the proper word or --. So, the judge ain't going to listen.

George

A beginning reader is not a beginning thinker.

Read/Write/Now brochure



George Speaks Out

George,¹ an African American man in his early sixties, was raised in the pre-Civil Rights South on a sharecropper's farm where, as a boy, his access to school was limited by the demands of farm work. He recalls his brief time at school as "terrible." On the occasions when he did go to school, he had to walk about two miles to get there. Once he arrived, George and the other boys were required to haul and chop wood to heat the building. Under those conditions, George insists:

School wasn't really, then uh you know, like when you go once or twice a week, you don't learn nothing, you can't learn nothing in that knowing two days, if you go two days, you know. So, it was really hard, I didn't learn nothing.

As a young man, George moved up north to Springfield for economic opportunity. For many years he worked at a forge, making airplane blades, car parts, and tools. He described his work as physically demanding and extremely precise, and he spoke proudly about the level of respect he earned in the workplace. The sense of having "accomplished something" both in terms of recognition by the workers in his department and economic reward suggests that George measured himself according to how other people valued him. He claims that people at the forge did not necessarily know that he couldn't read and write, and he implies that he was able to keep his non-literacy covered up by his outstanding workplace performance. In a series of interviews, George continually contextualized his life experiences in terms of work, and he frequently referred to himself as someone who enjoyed the challenges of work. He typically cast issues of education and literacy in terms of their economic exchange value.

While he is proud of his ability to have achieved economic success despite his inability to attend school with any regularity, in his interviews George frequently mentioned how his non-literacy always



gnawed at him, “back in my mind.” He is very clear that his lack of reading and writing experience was linked to economic conditions, yet his comments also suggest that he constantly struggled with the burden of being deemed “illiterate.”²

George speaks of different situations where he recognizes how the label of “illiteracy” operates. When he tells his stories critically, he is recognizing the limitation of the position of “illiterate,” thus undermining its ability to have power over him. I turn now to an interview segment where I see George recognizing how power is used to privilege some perspectives, while denigrating others. Prior to this interview excerpt, George had been talking about the benefits of getting an education. At the point where this section begins, he is discussing the economic benefits one gains when one is educated.

G: You got an education; you can fend for yourself. You know, you know, I mean, a person don’t. You can’t really write, you don’t know whether it’s right or wrong; you know what I mean?

L: Mm hmm, mm hmm.

G: But, if you, um, got, you know, you can figure it out for yourself, you know, you’ve got to learn, you know, you know, get an education.

L: So, it sounds like, it sounds like you’re thinking that it sort of gives you a way to be in the world, like, a way of approaching situations and dealing with the world.

G: Mm hmm, mm hmm, yep. If you, if you go to court right now, if you and I go to court right now. Let’s say we have to stand up in front of the judge and, and plead our case.

L: Mm hmm.



G: Quite naturally you are going to plead your case twice time better than I plead mine. Thing is I might wants to say, and I might, you know; but I don't know how to put it in the proper word or --. So, the judge ain't going to listen. How, what can I say, you know what I mean? I can't say something, I [can't] speak the word that I don't know, you know? When you say something, you got to know what you saying. You know what I mean? To understand what you're saying.

L: Because someone like me has, has—you're assuming—has access to more vocabulary?

G: Yeah.

L: And I know how to speak to that judge?

G: Yeah.

L: And what that judge is expecting to hear?

G: Right!

Although he doesn't state these identifying markers directly, George implies that when I speak, as an educated white woman, the judge listens to me because race and education are written onto my body and speech. I have the "proper words" available to talk back to the judge. Not only do I know the proper vocabulary, I know how to play the game because of my social position. I have the cultural capital to negotiate with that judge. On the other hand, George presents himself as someone operating from a very different subject position. George may know what he thinks, but he doesn't have the words to express himself persuasively in this context to affect the person in power.

What strikes me most poignantly in this narrative is that George sets up a hypothetical situation for the purpose of displaying his skill for interpreting the social performances available to himself, the judge, and



me. He is saying that particular autobiographical scripts are available to each of us, and that we will each perform those scripts differently. He will perform the script of the non-literate—the man who does not have the “proper words”—because that autobiographical script has been imposed upon him. And yet, he has the critical perspective to both conjure this scene and analyze it in order to show how some voices get heard while others become habitually silenced. When he speaks of not having sufficient words, he seems to be pointing to his lack of cultural capital. Words in this case refer to his subject position as an uneducated black man. He stands before the judge, but he cannot speak because he does not have the cultural capital that will demand that the judge listen to him. Still, he knows what he thinks even though he doesn’t have the ability to make himself heard. He argues that “you will plead your case twice time better than I plead mine” because I have the capital to stand before that judge and be recognized.

George’s hypothetical courtroom scenario puts a different spin on the traditional literacy narrative of the improved individual. Because of his race, education, and especially his inability to use the “proper words,” George has been positioned in a particular way, as a non-literate citizen. When he acknowledges this situation, George is able to tell a different story about his experience. In this way, he creates the space to gain greater agency. His comments show the acuity of his critical perspective, yet much of the time George speaks in dominant terms. He is quick to fall back on clichés such as, “the more you learn the more you earn,” and similar remarks that connect education with economic reward and social improvement. He talks about the good job he will get once he is more literate; but George is a retired man in his sixties. It is unlikely that he will actually use his improved literacy for employment. I see George developing a sense of himself as a literate individual while he tells competing stories. Marxist scholars remind us that agency often lies in such spaces of contradiction. In other words, even though George sometimes articulates alternative literacy narratives, and at least as often subscribes to dominant



literacy narratives, on the whole he is moving towards greater agency. Throughout this article, I trace the ways I see George articulating alternative literacy narratives by naming, critiquing, and exceeding dominant narratives; however, his relationship to literacy is complex since he also wants to fit in as an upwardly mobile citizen. George is obviously aware of a border between non-literacy and literacy, and he crosses that border back and forth continuously. In the course of his crossing, he also confronts his shifting identity and his knowledge of how people “judge” those who are non-literate.

Framing The Study

George was one of four people whom I interviewed for a qualitative case study I conducted of adults who have been attending Read/Write/Now (R/W/N) for at least one year. I chose to research writing produced by people outside of a formal school context because I wanted to understand their purposes for seeking literacy when they are not motivated primarily to receive a degree or certificate. I wanted to study adults who chose to pursue literacy after a lifetime of other experiences besides schooling. In this way, I sought to find out to what extent people’s motivation to learn was strictly functional (i.e., “I need it for work,” “I want to get a better job”), and whether they might seek literacy for other purposes, perhaps less easily expressed. I did not approach the project intending to study adults age thirty-nine and older; however, conducting case studies of an older population allowed me to probe the question of motivation more deeply because participants were not necessarily constructing themselves primarily as workers.³

In this article I focus on how George articulates his experiences with literacy and how his remarks evidence alternative literacy narratives, which he uses to counter and to rewrite his social positioning. Although he has gone through most of his life enacting the autobiographical scripts of the non-literate, George reveals a keen understanding of the construction of “illiteracy” in his interview



comments. Within composition studies, Shirley Brice Heath, Brian V. Street, Ralph Cintron, Ellen Cushman, Beverly Moss, Elaine Richardson, and Morris Young have examined the ways alternative literacy practices challenge dominant discourses. They insist that people, such as George, may have alternative stories to tell that challenge dominant paradigms. One study in particular, conducted by Marilyn Gillespie,⁴ looks into the writing practices of adults in informal educational settings. Gillespie's findings show that as adults practice writing they begin to discover new purposes for their texts such as the desire to use writing to interact in the world differently. Gillespie argues that we need more studies that examine people's purposes for writing. My objective in this study was to take up the challenge of these critical educators to investigate what other narratives people might be telling that subvert dominant narratives of oppression.

This research, then, is built on the assumption that there are dominant literacy narratives dictated by ideology. When I use the term "dominant literacy narratives," I refer to widely accepted assumptions



about culture, specifically in relation to literacy education. The idea that the role of schooling is to transform individuals into qualified members of the workforce is an example of a dominant narrative that links literacy with economic gain. I was curious about how people use writing to negotiate the ways they have been positioned by the ideology at the root of such narratives when they choose writing for their own purposes later in life. While adult learners have an investment in acquiring dominant literacy narratives for functional purposes (filling out applications and forms), as well as expressive purposes (telling their story or writing informal letters), I theorize that some adult learners may want to use literacy for additional purposes that exceed dominant literacy narratives.

Like Gillespie, I believe the invitation to write opens up a space for adult learners to tell stories that may not agree with dominant literacy narratives, and which may challenge established ways of thinking. The stories they have to tell are sometimes unpopular accounts of poverty, violence, and other oppressions that point fingers at unacknowledged social problems. My study reveals that adult learners sometimes articulate alternative literacy narratives that critique, challenge, resist, and oppose dominant discourses, thus using their newly acquired literacies as a means to enact more critical expressions of individual and social agency.

Assuming that adult learners, when asked, would probably talk about their motivation for seeking literacy in terms of acquisition of functional skills and economic gain, I designed the study to probe into people's expressed desires and draw out their multiple purposes for pursuing literacy. I anticipated that through multiple interviews about people's literacy history and motivation for studying, as well as an examination of their writing, I might be able to uncover more complex expressions of purpose and desire than they could articulate initially. When I began my analysis, I assumed that case study participants would articulate dominant narratives that were either economic or



moral and that both of those would be linked to the cultural values one learns in school, as the scholarship suggests (Trimbur, Stuckey, Knoblauch & Brannon, Giroux, McLaren, Richardson). As expected, study members all expressed dominant narratives and anticipated that society would grant them the cultural capital literacy promises.⁵ I found that adult learners often articulate the desire for dominant ideologies of literacy because the experience of being positioned as “illiterate” has taught them to make up for their loss by assimilating dominant culture. In general, people are overwhelmingly accustomed to telling the stories that have been culturally scripted for them. However, through my analysis of their interview transcripts and written texts, I found that participants did not simply accept dominant narratives. On the contrary, their espousal of dominant literacy narratives occurred simultaneously with their opposition to them as they used alternative narratives. I found that they were, precisely because of their experience with injustice, extremely articulate critics of the dominant culture that had oppressed them.

The Construction Of Alternative Literacy Narratives

On one level, study participants’ interviews and writing show that they subscribe to dominant narratives, however, the same story resonates in a number of ways. Elaine Richardson argues that people need to see that there are more narratives available than the dominant ones attached to schooling: “Literacy acquisition is not a set of skills to be mastered. It is looking inward into one’s own thought and cultural/language patterns and history, while looking outward into the world’s, seeking to intervene in one’s own context” (116). When people complicate dominant narratives to produce a different kind of story, they are creating what I call an “alternative literacy narrative.”

When I speak about alternative literacy narratives, I am not referring to a conscious retelling of culture. On the contrary, often when people tell a different story, they are not aware that they are contradicting



a dominant narrative. Their objective is simply to tell their story as persuasively as possible based on the authority of their experience. For people who have lived experiences that are alternate to the dominant, the way they have negotiated their lives has given them opposing stories. I see these alternative narratives as a retelling of culture for the purpose of articulating a different understanding of one's situation.

When they negotiate the construction of non-literacy, people in the study confront what Paolo Freire calls their "limit-situation." Freire characterizes these instances as "directed at negating and overcoming, rather than passively accepting, the 'given'" (99). He explains that people can take action to confront oppressive circumstances and to productively alter their situation. An alternative narrative is also a critique of, or ability to see how, ideology works. As Freire suggests, recognizing one's subject position within certain situations is an important step towards critical action. In this way, the expression of alternative literacy narratives is a move towards agency.

While my understanding of agency has been informed by critical researchers such as Freire, Cushman, and Henry Giroux, the definition of agency I am most concerned with involves the ability to critique material conditions, including the situations in which one was oppressed, and begin to take steps to rewrite those stories. When I speak of agency, I am thinking of how the alternative narratives people may express hold the potential for new ways of thinking about culture. Agency, in my view, involves the critical awareness required to speak out—in speech or in writing—to alter one's subject position.

The critical agency I speak of relies on Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony. Victor Villanueva interprets Gramsci's hegemony as "the ways in which ruling classes affect a society's moral and intellectual leadership so as to have the rulers' interests appear the interests of other social groups" (625). People who occupy low status positions within hegemony are serving the dominant classes; however, they perceive



their choices as being made in their own self-interest. Thus, they speak the dominant narratives of the hegemony. What makes Gramsci's concept of hegemony relevant to my argument for alternative narratives is the idea that within an apparatus of consent, people still find the space for contradiction. As Villanueva explains, "Hegemony contains the possibility for counterhegemony" (625). Alternative narratives are the articulation of counterhegemony.

Based on the data, I identified four alternative literacy narratives that case study members articulated. These are:

- Naming Power: "Illiteracy" as a Social Violence – a narrative of recognition
- Material Conditions: Complicating the literacy myth – a narrative of critique
- Pleasure versus Self-Improvement – a narrative of excess
- Getting by Without Schooling – a narrative of economic literacy

In the pages that follow, I explore the notion of alternative literacy narratives by highlighting statements made by George in his interview transcripts. My purpose here is to reveal when George expresses alternative literacy narratives and for what purposes and to show how these narratives function to counter dominant ideology. I have chosen to look closely at George's transcripts because he was extremely vocal about confronting ways he had been oppressed. At the same time that he speaks out easily, George's relationship to power is complex and often contradictory as he challenges hegemony while simultaneously subscribing to dominant ideology. I will focus on George's comments far more often than I reference his writing, simply because at the time of the study he was able to articulate his ideas verbally, yet he was not confident in his ability to use writing in non-prescribed ways.⁶ Two other members of the study, Violeta and Chief, were using writing for multiple purposes including social action. Their texts are the subject of other articles.⁷



Naming Power: “Illiteracy” as a Social Violence – A Narrative of Recognition

In one of his interviews, when George discusses how literacy becomes social violence when it is used as a means to wield power and inscribe hierarchies, he unknowingly echoes Elspeth Stuckey’s theory of the “violence of literacy.” Stuckey states that: “A highly literate society that withholds literacy from some of its members uses literacy as another form of exploitation” (36-37). Kirk Branch extends Stuckey’s theory when he argues that, “undereducated adults, and children, commonly experience the power of literacy as a violent force that enacts physical and social injuries, injuries that ultimately lead to their exclusion from the classroom” (17). Together, they show that ideologies of literacy are used as weapons to keep some people locked into powerless positions, while others are free to succeed. George talks about some of the ways literate people will intentionally embarrass you if you are non-literate by calling attention to your inability to read and write as a means to keep you denigrated in the position of “illiterate.” He provides a keen example of Stuckey’s argument, thus making it clear that non-literate individuals can have a critical perspective on “illiteracy” that is as sophisticated as that of a critical theorist like Stuckey. George’s comments suggest that non-literates understand how literacy is used to denigrate, stratify, and exclude. He is able to name this situation and critique it. What George and other adult learners often lack is the voice to be acknowledged. For George, literacy provides an opportunity to begin to speak out and perhaps change his subject position.

In the following excerpt, George has just described an occasion when he was standing on line at the supermarket and realized that a woman ahead of him could not read signs at the register. He explained how he was able to help her get the information she needed without embarrassing her, and how he felt good about himself knowing that he could use his literate ability to help out someone else.



G: Let's say a group of people sitting around. He or she know some of these people can't read or write. Now, why give a person, let's say a sheet of paper like this with all these word on it? Now, you know good and well he or she could not read this paper, and you know it in your heart that they couldn't. Why would you do that [ask them to read the paper]? You know, to embarrass these people around the other people?

L: Mm hmm.

G: Now, I'm not talking about in class, I'm just talking about, you know?

L: Right.

G: Right. And while this may embarrass you, and you know they couldn't, you know, couldn't read. You know, I could see somebody do that that didn't know, what do you say, uh, "Well, I didn't know he or she couldn't read. Or, I wouldn't have never, you know, given, you know, given them word." But, somebody do it intentionally, knowing that person can't read, I think that's a shameful thing to do to a person; you know what I mean?

L: I think, I think I know what you mean. I think you mean if somebody intentionally-

G: Yeah! Intentionally!

L: -- gives you something that you can't read, it's like, it's like they're sort of pulling a power move on you. Like --

G: Yeah!

L: -- Like, they're putting you down.

G: Yeah.



G: I wouldn't do it because... everybody—just like I said before—everybody wasn't able to get a ed- a education. And, because you got it, that don't mean you supposed to put somebody else down because you have it; you know what I mean? If anything, you do anything; you try to do something to help somebody else. You know, help somebody else. Pull them up, not try to, you know, push them down. You know?

L: That's really interesting. There's something that I was reading. Um. I'm not going to describe too much. But, where this person talks about, how in this country sometimes people use literacy—reading and writing—almost as a weapon. It's almost like --

G: Mm hmm.

L: -- I think that's what you're talking about.

G: Yep.

L: Like, it's used to divide people --

G: Mm hmm, yeah.

L: -- and to divide like haves and have-nots.

G: Yeah.

L: And to give some people power and take away power from other people. It sounds to, it sounds to me that that's what you're talking about.

G: Yup. Yep.

L: And some people get to have it [literacy], and some people get it taken away.

G: Mm hmm. Yep.



Obviously, George has spent a lot of time thinking about the relationship between literacy and power, both in terms of his own experience and in broader terms of how people are gazed upon by society. His comments indicate that literate people who are aware of another person's non-literacy can choose to treat the non-literate person with respect by using their ability to be helpful, or they can use their position of greater literacy to embarrass and subjugate. The person who has had the benefit of education is always in control according to George's example. The way he sees it, it is the responsibility of the literate individual to think about power relations for the purpose of changing things. Thus George demonstrates how he, as someone crossing a border between non-literacy and literacy, has the responsibility of enacting social change.

The examples that I have considered thus far demonstrate how George easily recognizes power and how it has been used against him. During a second interview, which involved a discussion of his first interview transcript, George had an additional opportunity to explain how he saw literacy operating in relation to power. He expressed the desire to use his increased literacy to act differently from the ways people in positions of power have acted towards him. In this way, I see George enacting a kind of agency that begins with critical awareness and leads to self-transformation, as Giroux theorizes. According to Giroux's model, before a person can actively effect social change, he must first have a critical understanding of himself. George's narratives reveal that he has the perspective necessary to analyze power and his relationship to it. He wrestles with his subject position as a border crosser as he tries to come to terms with his critical knowledge and how he can act upon it as a more literate individual. His analysis of "illiteracy" as a violence against him and others shows how critically aware George is of the ways power operates. By naming power he recognizes how a dominant ideology functions. His narratives challenge the ideology that has labeled him "illiterate," by rewriting the autobiographical scripts that have constructed him as oppressed and unable.



Material Conditions: Complicating the Literacy Myth – A Narrative of Critique

If recognition of limit situations is a beginning step toward challenging dominant narratives, then the ability to critique material conditions follows. Once a person has recognized the way power operates, he or she can proceed to speak against oppressive situations. Everyone in the study voices some form of critique of material conditions, ranging from pointing to poverty as oppression, to expressing awareness of how they have been judged because of their position as “illiterates.” An alternative narrative that critiques material conditions centers on people’s awareness of how they are gazed upon by culture and how that social gaze translates into a form of oppression. In many cases their ideals reflect dominant narratives whereas their lived experience contradicts those narratives and inspires them to be critical.

In the excerpt below, George expresses an alternative narrative that complicates what Harvey Graff calls “the literacy myth;” however, in voicing his critique, George still speaks primarily in dominant terms. I had asked him about a comment he made in his first interview: “Education for everybody help to make a better world.” In that remark he obviously speaks the myth of a society improved through literacy. Yet he complicates the myth when he looks at the differences between the educated and uneducated man.

L: Um, so, when you say here, you say, “Education for everybody help to make a better world” --

G: It does.

L: Is that, is that sort of what you’re thinking?

G: Yup. You know, if everybody in the world have an education...

L: Uh huh.



G: ... it'd be less crime. There'd be less people on welfare. There'd be less people in, in the shelter.

L: Mm hmm.

G: And this country would feel better.

L: Mm hmm.

G: And would, even though it is a wealthy one, this one, it's the wealthiest country in the world, but it would still be a better world. And then the person that got an education again, they think before they act...

L: Mm hmm.

G: You know? But it, you look at nine out of, nine out of ten person, even look at them today, a person got an education. He's going to think twice before he make a move, but a person that don't have an education --

L: Mm hmm.

G: -- he's going to do something dumb. You know?

L: Mm hmm.

G: Before, because he, he don't think like the man that got the education. He don't think the consequences, what his reaction is going to cause, is going to be afterwards. You know? He don't think until it too late. That person who got an education, he going to think before he react. All ninety-nine percent of them would do that, would think before he say nothing. So, it pay off, you know, an education pay off in so many different ways. A lot of different ways. Ways that I can't even explain what, you know.



L: But it sounds like you're thinking of education as, like, this set of skills --

G: They are tools!

L: -- or tools- I was just going to say, "tools" for how to deal with the world.

G: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

George describes the educated person as someone who has control of his thoughts and actions. He has learned to construct thought differently by considering the consequences of his actions before he makes a move, in contrast with the uneducated man who just acts and reacts. While George clearly accepts a dominant construction of the non-literate "dummy" who gets into trouble because he doesn't use his head, the way he tells this story demonstrates that he has a thorough awareness of the ways one person's actions are socially gazed upon in relation to another's. Although he is talking about cultural capital in this passage, he is also critical in his remarks about the way the non-literate person is positioned as unable to speak "proper words" or control his behavior. George is critically analyzing the subject position of "the illiterate." His comments reveal that he is acutely aware of the ways different individuals are gazed upon—and judged—by culture.

Throughout both interviews, George acknowledges that he has begun to think differently since he has become more literate. Literacy has given him a perspective from which he can consider his experience and his processes of figuring things out in new ways. By becoming more literate, he becomes the man who thinks before he reacts. In the above passage, he explains the positions of both the educated person who considers consequences as well as the uneducated person who moves through life by reacting to it. George is able to place himself in both positions and to weigh them against each other. Thus, we see how George is aware of two sides of a border where he resides as non-literate and literate.



In some ways, George's actions exemplify Giroux's idea of the postcolonial border crosser who moves "in and out of borders constructed around coordinates of difference and power" (30). Giroux developed this concept in response to critical theorists' call to resist the dominant ideology attached to schooling. As he explains: "The category of border also prefigures cultural criticism and pedagogical processes as a form of border crossing. That is, it [border pedagogy] signals forms of transgression in which existing borders forged in domination can be challenged and redefined" (28). I extend Giroux's concept of the postcolonial border crosser to include people acquiring new literacies who are conscious of moving back and forth across discourses. Border crossers like George are able to critique discourses on either side of boundaries of race, culture, sexuality, class, or education. In this way, Giroux believes that power can be transformed, leading to a more democratic society (136). When George constructs the story of a scene before a judge, or when he measures the educated man beside the uneducated man, he is actively challenging oppressive systems by telling a different story.

Another way that George resists dominant narratives is by refusing to accept non-literacy as any failure or fault of his own. He denies the piece of the dominant ideology that puts the blame for "illiteracy" on the individual. George wavers in his conviction a bit when he mentions that his mother did not want any of her children to be a "dummy," and when he comments that now he knows more than he used to. But overall he attaches non-literacy to material conditions.

Richardson argues that for the African American community, literacy takes on an added imperative as historically important for freedom from domination. As long as they are without literacy, non-literate individuals remain enslaved by literate culture, thus continuing the trope of slavery. The pursuit of literacy is in itself a gesture of denying domination. George echoes this point when he describes conditions of his childhood:



It's almost like with slavery time because you most have to do what, you know, the person that place that you living on, what they want you to do. That's one of the reasons why I couldn't go to school. And it used to hurt me so bad that to see this man I used to work for; he had three kids, and I used to see his kids go to school. Bus used to come pick his kids up, take them to school, bring them home. I had to work in his field, and his son was almost my, around my age. And they was going to school when I had to go to work in this field. And I couldn't go to school.

George's tone does not always sound critical. At times he seems to be simply reporting on conditions. His reportage could be used to reinforce a dominant narrative that argues for an improved South where material conditions are no longer the way they were in the 1950s. But George's stories are critical because they come from an alternative experience. His lived experience has given him an opposing story.

Everyday life has given George the perspective that critical educators argue must be taught. He does not need literacy to interpret his situation; he has the critical abilities already. What literacy education can offer is the "proper words" that will help him to voice his stories differently. When participants tell a story differently, as George does in these selections from their interviews, it is often because he has the rhetorical ability to express a critique of his lived experience. He can now articulate and share the "proper words," in his writing and in the discussions documented in these interviews, that allow him to comment on his lived experience and to have that material reality acknowledged by outside listeners and readers.

Pleasure Versus Self-Improvement – A Narrative of Excess

The two alternative narratives I examined in the previous sections suggest that people can recognize and critique ideology when they tell a story that constructs reality in different ways from the dominant. In addition, some narratives are alternative because they exceed dominant



ideology. There is no designated place for them within a dominant framework. Pleasure is one such concept that neither contradicts nor opposes dominant narratives but does not fit into them either. During the period of the study, participants sometimes expressed delight, either in their verbal comments or in their writing. These expressions did not fit into any of the categories I had designated as dominant literacy narratives. I began to consider how to code reading and writing experiences that participants valued because they gave them enjoyment. In the passages that follow, I investigate the way George articulates pleasure as an alternative narrative that exceeds the dominant.

George expressed an alternative narrative of pleasure in one of his texts and in our discussion of it. At the time, I had been observing his class for a period when they were writing about their educational history in preparation for a publication. George had seemed to enjoy the opportunity to tell the story of his literacy history in a piece he wrote titled, “My Life as a Child.” He was especially pleased when, during the writing process, he remembered his experience raising pigs. He added the paragraph about the pigs to a late draft of the story. Here is George’s narrative:

My Life as a Child

I started working when I was ten years old. I had no time to go to school. It was hard to see other children go to school while I couldn’t. I had to work, that was back in the 50s and 60s. Those times were very hard for me because there was no time for learning.

My family was poor and we all had to work, but all of my family members are hard working people. I loved to work too. But I also wanted to learn how to read and write so I could be self-sufficient. I planted corn, cotton, beans and all kinds of vegetables. The work was very hard but that’s the way life



was. My father did not like farming but he had no way to earn a living. My brother, sisters and I had to work. But my mother work harder than all of us.

I remember when I was a little boy; an old man gave me a pig. I took that pig and bred her to raise many other pigs. My whole family was so proud of me. We did not have to worry about meat. But there was a time when I hated those pigs. Those pigs would get out of the pigpen and I would have to go and get them. People used to get angry with me, but I made it work for me. I raised a lot of pigs and I sold a lot of pigs. I made money from those pigs. I miss all of those years that I spent with the pigs. Sometimes it was good. Sometimes it was bad, but if you would put it all together you would see how good it really was.

One day shot my father the mule, and that was the end of the farming. As time passed by, we made more money and our lives got better and better. Things begin to change after I turned the age of fifteen. Good things began to happen. I left home and move to Springfield. There, I met my wife, and together we have two children. I was making more money and living better. Everything got better. Today my wife, children and grandchildren are my life.

George and I discussed his decision to add the section about the pigs. I was particularly interested in the addition because he had recalled the incident after he had written a full draft, and he seemed excited about including it. His teacher, Melissa, had also been encouraged by George's enthusiasm. Here is a section of the interview where we discussed the pig narrative:

L: Let's look at the part about the pig.

G: Oh yeah, now [laughs].



L: The pig, I love this [laughs]!

G: Melissa!

M: [distant] What?

G: I'm going to, I'm going to talk about that pig!

L: [laughs]

M: [approaching] What?

L: We're talking about the pig [laughs]. Okay. So, I remember that Melissa said that, uh, she kept telling you to say more in your writing. Is it hard for you sometimes to keep going in your writing?

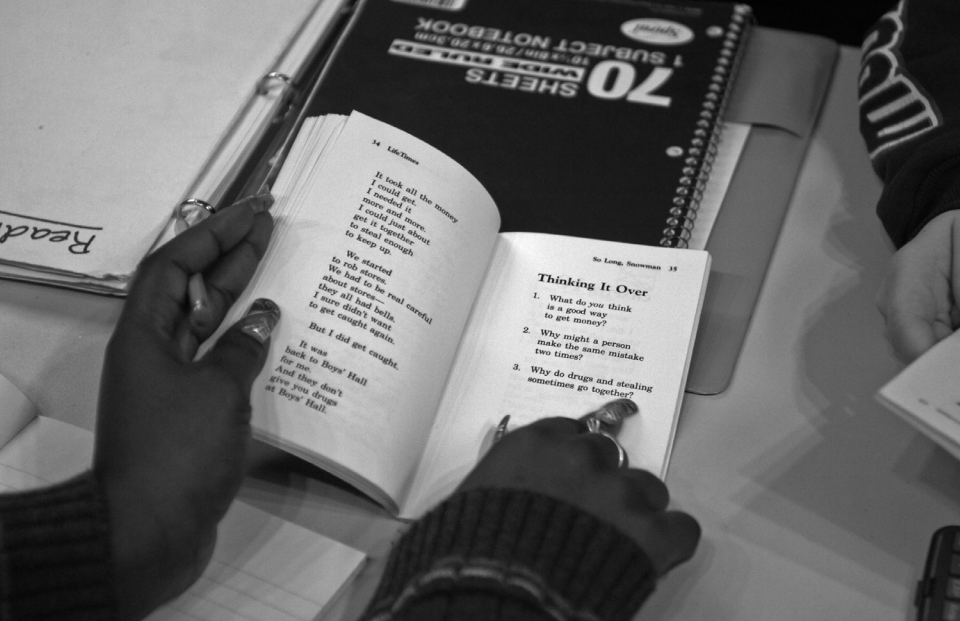
G: Yeah, it is. It is. Yeah, it is. It's, you know, 'cause I had to come back to that because I had already forgot about that and left it out.

L: Mm hmm.

G: But um, that was really a piece I - an interesting piece because it was a old man, he was old man, I know, and he gave me a little baby pig. A little baby pig. And he put him in, into my arms...

I've included this section of his transcript to show that George was quite impressed with his own story, as he demonstrated when he invited his teacher into the room. The story of the pig showcases George as a storyteller. It is an especially flattering tale because it characterizes him as funny and business savvy. On the surface it points to a narrative of economic gain.

However, George is also expressing an alternative narrative of pleasure. What started out as a chore for him—the obligation to write—became less tedious when he became involved in telling his own literacy history. When he gets to the section about the pigs, George delights in discovering a new story. The pig narrative is one that he relishes,



both verbally and in writing. Although he describes it in the interview as something he originally left out, the way he embellishes the story by adding a longer account of his pig business shows that it is quite meaningful. George expresses pleasure in the narrator he creates: a boy who has the intuitive sense to raise pigs, start a business, and in this way make his family proud. He shows off his ability to reposition himself within the context of the story. The suffering child turns himself into a successful businessman. Through his retelling and his rewriting, George demonstrates his ability to alter his own story. His apparent pleasure in literacy allows him to reimagine the purpose of writing. By performing the limit-act of rewriting his story, George creates a different version that gives him pleasure.

When George talks about the pig story, and when he invites Melissa to listen in on his conversation with me, he is calling attention to his own pleasure in having told a new narrative that amuses, informs, and positions him the way he wants to be seen. He is not denying the rest of “My Life as a Child,” but George is pointing out that there are other



narratives available beside the one of the child oppressed by poverty and racism. By highlighting the role of pleasure in self-narration, George restories his life. He does not need to contradict dominant narratives because he is creating a completely different story outside of the dominant.

Getting By Without Schooling – A Narrative of Economic Literacy

As we have seen in the alternative narratives of naming power, critiquing material conditions, and expressing pleasure, George's lived experience is a source of critical power. Each of his narratives points to a kind of agency he gains from speaking out, whether it is in recognition, critique, or excess of power. When he articulates alternative narratives, George is using language to oppose dominant narratives. In this way he becomes able to reposition himself in relation to his life experience. I would like to consider one more alternative narrative, that of economic, or workplace literacy, in opposition to the autonomous literacy connected with schooling.

Conversations with study members repeatedly reveal that increasing one's literacy does not provide the means to critique one's experience. Indeed, George's narratives are already critical. His lens for critique does not necessitate his becoming literate. To this extent, George supports Graff's historical research, which showed that non-literate workers in nineteenth-century Canada were successful economically and did not need the literacy that was promoted by public school reformers. Graff argues that a certain form of literacy was attached to schooling for the purpose of institutionalizing ideological principles. George's comments and his writing show that his material experience is already oppositional. I want to highlight here the contradictions between what George says when he links literacy and occupational success and what his experience reveals.

G: ... I had a job at Mordrop [Forge] working for seventeen, almost twenty years there... making different things for airplanes and Ford



Motor company and Sears, wrenches and one type or another. Wasn't a whole lot -- they didn't know I couldn't read and write. Far as um, you see, you had to set up a job, like you know. When you set up a job, you got to be, like, you got to set up by a thousand, ten thousand, fifteen or twenty thousand, or either half a inch, a inch or whatever; you know, you got to be exactly right. But see, I learned this from working with people, you know, from experience. I learned 'cause when you couldn't read and write, you have to make sure you know, you keep, you see, what you see, you know, in your head. You got to know what you learn, what you see other people do, and I learned. I was one of the highest paying, the second highest paid man on the job [laughs]!

L: Wow! Because you were paying attention and you were taking everything in.

G: Yeah! You know I used to work, you see, hard work never bothered me because I learned how to work hard when I was living in the South... You know hard work didn't bother me so, and that was a hard job. But I learn... how to do the job. You know, and it wasn't a whole lot of reading and writing in the job. It's most something like was math. That's what you had to, kind of deal with most of the -- math. And I learned... I was, I tell you out of three hundred people in my department, I was the second highest paid man.

L: Wow! [George laughs]

G: They post it on the board, you know. That made me feel good because a lot of people didn't know I, didn't know I couldn't read and write; and being one of the second highest paid man in the shop, out of all those people, it made me feel good, and I felt to myself like I had accomplished something, and I know how to do my job. You didn't have to tell me I know how to do it, you know what to do, so it made me feel good; but it still back in my mind, in the back of my head I wanted, you know, when I really thought about, really



wanted to learn how to read and write. When, when, uh, they closed up -- they were going to close up their department... And, it didn't real dawn on me because I always worked, and I never, been in school, I didn't know nothing, but it didn't really bother me, until, I was getting older then, and I really realized when, when I lost that job... I realized then that I need a education. And, you know, I felt bad and I miss out and didn't have a education and I really started thinking and wondering...

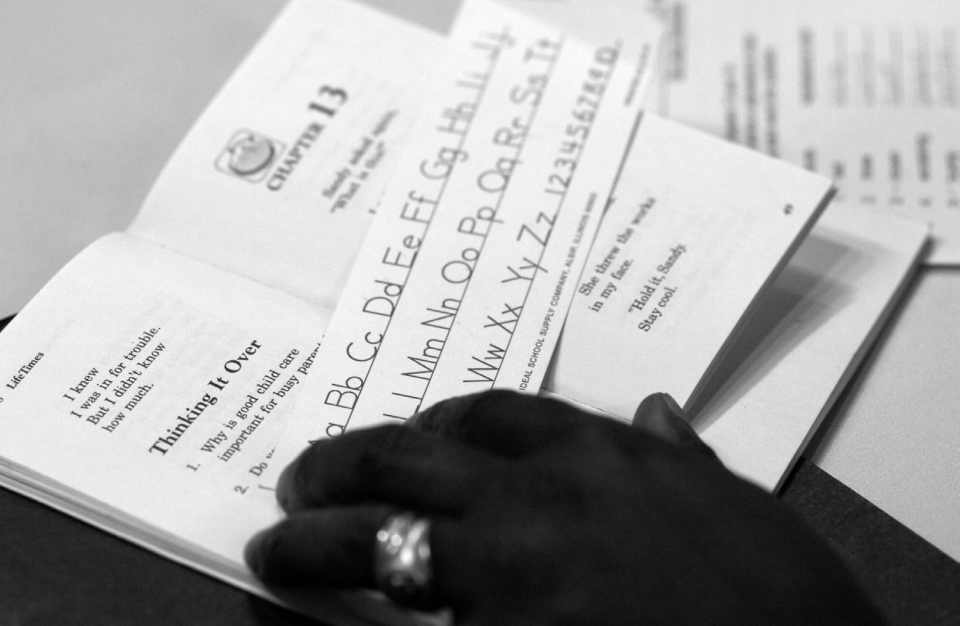
George's comments make it clear that the knowledge associated with schooling was not relevant in the workplace. In fact, as he remarks, "They didn't know I couldn't read and write." In the "drop shop" at the forge, George already had all the capital he needed. He was rewarded economically for his knowledge, and his achievements were publically posted. George's example makes it clear that literacy, specifically the knowledge associated with schooling, was outside of his workplace. Within the workplace, he had developed the knowledge to do his job "exactly right." I often contemplate this example because it is so impressive that George was able to teach himself how to make templates and do such precise work without any formal math training. His comments suggest that the skills he had to teach himself in order to "set up a job" were far more complex than formal schooling could have prepared him.

It was not until the shop closed down and George was forced to think about his employment options, that he, "felt bad and I miss out and didn't have a education." In contrast, while he was working, "being one of the second highest paid man in the shop, you know, out of all those people, it made me feel good, and I felt to myself, like you know, I had accomplished something and I know how to do my job" (my emphasis). Although George's remarks suggest that non-literacy continually gnawed at him somewhere "back in my mind," the social and economic capital he received through work often trumped his lack of formal education.



Although George certainly buys into a dominant narrative that connects education and economic progress, his comments also override that narrative. George continues to validate his motivation to pursue literacy in later adulthood by speaking in dominant terms; however, in reality, he probably won't be using his increased literacy for work. The part time jobs that he does at this point in his life tend to be light physical labor, such as maintenance jobs at his church. Even though George speaks the narrative that he expects people will want to hear, he also tells a more compelling story of getting by without literacy. This story supports Graff's conclusion that the contradictions between the "promoted values of literacy" and its actual use in everyday life, both in the workplace and out in the world, "allows us to assess the relationship of literacy to life and culture" (293). The ways people use literacy are not necessarily the ways they are taught to use it in school. Graff suggests that there are contradictions between the vision of school promoters and "society and industry's behavioral requirements" (206). George's narrative exemplifies Graff's argument that, "Experience, knowledge acquired from others, and common sense are ignored, relegated behind the promoted benefits of schooling" (206). The pride George expresses in his recognition in the workplace suggests that in practice, George did not need literacy in order to make a decent living. In his recollections of himself as a worker, he never talks about being at a disadvantage because of his non-literacy. His performance gave the impression that he was literate.

Public impressions are important to George. The way that he is viewed socially matters more than taking a position that resists or publically critiques dominant practices. Thus, George can often be seen as embracing dominant paradigms even when his experience suggests something different. Once again, we see George expressing contradictory narratives. Although he does not typically present himself as the most critical citizen or as someone concerned with developing an activist consciousness, George's competing stories show that he is aware of his contradictions. He speaks the dominant narrative that



education will make him “feel good” and lead to a better job, yet when he reflects on his lived experience he reveals an alternative narrative of citizenry without literacy.

Enacting Critical Agency Through Alternative Literacy Narrative

Although George typically relates to dominant literacy narratives, he also makes statements that challenge those narratives. Through alternative narratives, he gives voice to other stories in which he is sometimes able to express the ways power has been used against him. His retelling of culture allows him to gain a kind of agency that grants more validity to his lived experiences. As an individual who is acquiring new literacies, George begins to identify himself as able to access the “proper words” that will allow him to retell his experience. Increasing his literacy provides George with the rhetorical tools to speak out and publicly acknowledge his position. He is moving towards a position of greater agency by recognizing how power operates



and challenging the way he has been positioned because of material conditions. In this way he challenges a dominant narrative of economic gain that overlooks the ways certain people's experiences are privileged over others'.

Critical and Marxist theorists (McLaren, Giroux, Freire, Knoblauch & Brannon, Richardson) believe that literacy can be taught as a means to critique culture. The critically educated individual has the potential to counter hegemonic practices and change power relations, thereby disrupting the violence Stuckey talks about, by granting power to the disenfranchised. These theorists rely on two premises: that critical literacy needs to be taught in order for people to counter oppressive situations; and specifically, that critical literacy needs to be taught to those who are labeled "illiterate." While I agree with their argument that people need to critique culture if they are to change it, George's comments show that these premises are not always true. Based on his narratives, I argue that George already has a critical perspective from his lived experience that he expresses through the telling of alternative literacy narratives. He is able to reposition himself in his stories, thus articulating a different reality in which he gains critical agency. By telling a different story from the prescribed autobiographical scripts that position them as "illiterate," George has confronted that positioning, challenged its validity, and suggested alternative ways that he might participate in the world. He constructs different autobiographical scripts from the ones that have been imposed upon him. In this way, George is gaining more agency as he becomes increasingly literate. The various narratives he tells about his literacy experiences sometimes conflict, and yet George's contradictions are productive overall. His revised stories give him new opportunities to self-reflect and to speak out critically to others as he grapples with the border between non-literacy and literacy.



Conclusion

As George's story reveals, learners at Read/Write/Now are admitted to the center with a wealth of knowledge from their lived experience. They pursue literacy already understanding how power operates and how they have been positioned in relation to it. Teachers at R/W/N are committed to honoring learners' experiential knowledge by addressing learners as bearers of wisdom. In this way, their knowledge becomes less subjugated. My findings suggest that when participants vocalize alternative narratives, they are able to restory their experience and thus alter their subject position.

I have identified four alternative narratives that George engages in and discussed how these narratives challenge dominant conceptions of literacy. These are narratives of recognition, critique, excess, and economic literacy without schooling. George is continuously recognizing power and its ill effects. He complicates the literacy myth when he reflects critically on how material conditions imposed non-literacy upon him. George grew up under conditions that gave him an oppositional view. Certainly, this is apparent when he remembers his childhood experiences with poverty and segregation; yet he is still oppositional when he speaks positively about the new South. He doesn't simply accept a narrative of social progress and reform. We see a narrative of pleasure operating in George's writing about his childhood. His pleasure is emphasized when he reflects back on his writing process during his interview. George also asserts himself as a successful worker who did not need literacy in order to function in society.

As a whole, the alternative narratives that George expresses tell different kinds of stories from the dominant tales of the individual who is broken because of non-literacy and then transformed by the magical power of literacy. As Branch suggests, "we should also recognize these stories as lived correctives to the bliss of the literacy narrative" (22). George is hardly duped by the expectation that his life will change



dramatically when he becomes more literate. At the same time that he can be oppositional, George is very much a member of mainstream culture who subscribes to dominant paradigms.

My analysis of case study members' writing shows that, in actuality, dominant narratives can be helpful. Although I am critical of dominant narratives when they are accepted without question, sometimes a participant's increasing sense of himself as an improved individual allows him to approach literacy studies with greater confidence and thus take greater challenges. Thus, in my critique of dominant narratives I do not mean to suggest that we counter them for the purpose of getting rid of them; rather, I argue that we interact with dominant narratives with a critical understanding of how they operate.

Compositionists such as Moss, Richardson, and Cushman have already made significant contributions to the conversation about how multiple literacies can enrich academic environments. Building on Street's notion that there is no single "autonomous" literacy that people master—rather individuals employ a range of literacies—Richardson has argued that an African American perspective, specifically the use of African American Vernacular English, does not deny dominant knowledge; instead it broadens and enriches the scope of academic learning. Richardson states: "This search for Blackness should not be seen as a rejection of Whiteness. It is not. In fact, such exploration in the literacy classroom helps us to understand the depth of race and just how influential Whiteness is in African American experiences" (143). When multiple literacies are given a space within our classrooms, a space where alternative experiences can be addressed as "sites of negotiation," to use Moss' phrase, autonomous literacy is disrupted. As the data has shown, alternative literacy narratives can be located within other literacies. Once expressed, alternative narratives can cease to be subjugated if they are recognized, and classrooms, whether they are within community literacy centers or more traditional academic spaces,



can become opened up to other voices and other constructions of reality that challenge dominant narratives.

In this article, George demonstrates how powerful literacy has always been in his life. When he was non-literate, literacy was wielded against him as an instrument of oppression, reflecting unjust material conditions in an unequal society. All four members of the study have wrestled with the desire to become more literate partly in resistance to the ways “illiteracy” has been used against them. Their complex relationship to literacy is wound up with their relationship to the dominant narratives of literate culture and the desire for greater cultural capital.

If I were to look at my study through a dominant lens, I might deem it irrelevant for university students who are motivated by grades, credentials, and workplace preparation. However, my selection of older adults allowed me to reach past expressions of economic gain and towards other narratives people express outside of an economic narrative, such as the desire to resist one’s social positioning and the desire to read and write for pleasure. I believe a study of older adults is relevant to the teaching of traditional age university students for a few reasons. The difficulty of separating out dominant narratives reinforces what we know from Foucault: that all subjects understand culture through its available discourse. Yet, as I have shown, people also articulate alternative narratives that oppose dominant ideology. What we can import to the academy from this study is an understanding of why and how people articulate alternative literacy narratives. As teachers, whether we work in more formal academic spaces or in informal community settings, the first thing we can learn from George is that some people have the desire to relate differently to power. The people in my study want to become more literate for the purpose of changing their subject position in a culture that has oppressed them. They often pursue literacy with the goal of changing society as well as their individual position within it. We can use this understanding



of what people want from literacy to continually question our own objectives as teachers. What knowledge is valuable for our students? Is our job simply to give them the currency of the university, or can we have a larger goal of helping them to voice the critical awareness they may possess already?

More so, as my case study members demonstrate repeatedly, people in “marginal settings” can become the teachers. When we enter the spaces where they read and write, we can begin to understand other functions of literacy besides gaining academic capital. Studying with people outside of the academy can broaden our understanding of the uses of literacy and the ways people can claim agency through literacy. As Carolyn Heller notes: “Seldom has the academic world looked to such settings to witness the power literacy can have in people’s lives” (160). We can learn by considering the perspectives of people in positions that are not traditionally in power in relation to the dominant stories that are culturally available. We can guide our students in “reading” people’s stories as texts in a similar way to what I have done with the interview transcripts. I am suggesting that more of our teaching focus on interrogating power relations, including the study of how we reproduce dominant culture within the university. I propose that we look more deeply into the construction of dominant narratives and how they operate.



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Endnotes

- 1 Names of study members and teachers at R/W/N are pseudonyms.
- 2 I use the term "non-literate" to name people who have not had the benefit of becoming literate and "non-literacy" to name the condition of not knowing how to read or write. When I use the more common "illiterate" and "illiteracy," I am referring to labels that are socially imposed. Therefore, I always use these words in quotes to call attention to the way "illiteracy" is constructed as a social illness.
- 3 I chose a qualitative case study approach for the project so that I could focus intensively on a few people's stories. I conducted the study at R/W/N, an innovative, library-based program, because participants at the center chose to attend rather than being mandated by institutions such as school, court, or welfare as was typical of other potential sites. When I first met with the program director at R/W/N, she insisted that, "People are serious here." What attracted me most about the center's mission was that curricula emerge from learners' desires and interests, and that learners write daily for a number of purposes. After observing at R/W/N for four months and interviewing two teachers, I selected participants who represented the demographics of the center and a range of experiences with literacy. Two study members were women and two were men. One woman had been in the program for a little over a year, while the other three had been attending for four to six years. Two participants, including



George, were black men, representing the largest demographic of learners. One participant was white. One participant was Puerto Rican and the only non-native speaker of English in my group. One participant was approaching forty. The other three were close to sixty. None of the participants worked full time. Three people called themselves “retired,” (two on disability), while the fourth was a full time single parent of six. All participants had had some schooling as children.

4 ⁴ At the time of her study (1991), Marilyn Gillespie was founding director of Read/Write/Now [R/W/N], the adult learning center where I conducted my research. Although she has long since moved on from R/W/N, Gillespie’s work continues to investigate the role of writing in the lives of adult learners.

5 ⁵ Participants’ remarks in their transcripts demonstrated that they actually articulated four dominant literacy narratives. With the help of Pierre Bourdieu’s “The Forms of Capital,” I was able to identify narratives of:

- Functional literacy: what one needs to live in US society.
- Economic gain: material acquisition, such as buying a house or a car.
- An ethic of self-improvement: expectations of what constitutes self, which depend on a society’s moral ethic for what defines a “good” person. In US society, education is assumed to provide a route to self-improvement.
- Citizenship – having a voice in culture: the assumption that a literate individual has the potential to become a more involved citizen.

6 ⁶ The data for this project was collected during a six-month period between March and August of 2005. Since this period of research ended, I have continued to work with George on a longitudinal study



in which I examine shifts in his writing and in his overall sense of himself as a literacy learner.

7 ⁷ Violeta's writing is the topic of an article in the spring 2008 issue of the Community Literacy Journal. In that piece I argue that Violeta writes for multiple purposes, some personal and some social. She also reaches out to numerous audiences ranging from actual readers (i.e. family members) to invoked readers who might be transformed by h