

# 1



## Learning the Work of Composition

### I. Starts

Doing the work of composition began for me during my first job, in the complicated context of life as a faculty member. I learned to do this work just as I learned other faculty responsibilities, and in the context of what it meant to be a faculty member, more comprehensively, which at my job included the teaching of writing. It is no exaggeration to say that this book is an exploration of what I learned at that time, what that learning has helped me to learn since, and its possible relevance to the work of composition today. To understand the larger purposes of this book, then, it is best to start where my learning began, and how. So I begin with a poem by Claude McKay (*The Selected Poems of Claude McKay*), considered from the perspective of how, many years ago, I prepared to teach the poem for the first time.

#### IF WE MUST DIE

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
Making their mock at our accursed lot.  
If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
So that our precious blood may not be shed  
In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
O kinsmen we must meet the common foe!  
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!

What though before us lies the open grave?  
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!  
(1922)

In preparing for that class, I wanted specifically to emphasize the poem's conventional features as a sonnet and its particular successes as a poem. I thought, first, to cover some basics (fourteen lines in iambic pentameter; the rhyme scheme that locates it in the Shakespearean and not Petrarchan tradition). From there, we would move to higher things, looking at its effective use of apostrophe, phrasal repetition, and other literary figures and tropes and its use of enjambment in the first two quatrains to suggest the struggle, while using final closure in the sestet to suggest resolution, in both senses of the term. We would be sure to discuss how carefully the poem dramatized the emerging nobility of the speaker and those he addresses while persisting in the use of the canine imagery describing the attackers. To intensify our recognition and appreciation of this differentiation, we would pay close attention to the poem's off rhyme of "hogs" and "dogs," a phonic dissonance that calls attention to the distinction, and the way differentiation is poetically realized in the contrast between the simile (like hogs) and the more powerful metaphors (dogs, cowardly pack). Through this analysis, we would be able to unveil the universal appeal of this poem, its way of speaking to those who seek to preserve their humanity through acts of courage and defiance. We would note, in closing, how the simile "like men," in line 13, echoes and transcends by undoing the simile of line 1, "like hogs."

At the time I first taught the poem, this was the kind of reading I had been trained to do as an undergraduate and a graduate student. A particular pedagogy and the dominant curriculum of undergraduate education from the postwar period were built upon this way of reading and the students' writing that reflected and emerged from that way of reading. And so, thus prepared and sanctioned, I was ready for class.

I taught this poem to an introductory, experimental class in a special program at Lincoln University, the oldest historically black college in the United States.<sup>1</sup> It was at Lincoln that I discovered for the first time (and not the last time) my unreadiness as a teacher (and learned to embrace such unreadiness for all its possibilities). For my students, who read neither more nor less intelligently and critically than I, read differently. They positioned themselves through resistance to some texts in a way that enabled them to offer complex readings of these works. Their readings differed from and

profoundly complicated the ways of reading I was used to in graduate school.

The critical questions students brought to our class discussion of Claude McKay's poem ultimately addressed the universalizing tendency of my own way of reading, which they understood quite clearly as located within and made possible by the rhetoric of aesthetic analysis and the de-contextualizing of the poetic text from its social circumstances and its implied and real readership. In particular, they wanted to focus on the turn that occurs at the beginning of the third quatrain, which opens with the apostrophe, "O kinsmen, we must meet the common foe!" Who, they inquired, were the kinsmen? Who is the "we"? And they asked me where I located myself in my reading of this? In my own way of reading, I was transcendently there with the "we," and it was called to my attention that perhaps that was a slightly optimistic, politically naive, and self-deceptive way of construing McKay's placement of me. Moreover, they wanted an answer to the most fundamental question, "Why are we reading this?" Their concerns were not narrow, but rather emerged from a curiosity and critical suspicion: why, for example, had I chosen McKay's poem, a poem that, however radical its content, was written from within a European tradition that seemed more harmonious with my own ways of reading than not?

What students did during class that day and on many other days thirty years ago was to enact a way of reading, critically contrary to my own at the time, that has by now become a *dominant* way of reading in my discipline. They brought into the class ways of examining texts that are now at the center of the profession of literary studies. Because they were able to contextualize the texts we read, placing them within and against their own experience and thought, they could articulate and argue for a more complex understanding of the social construction of reading and readerships, and the political consequences of this social process. When necessary they would press against the text or against the institution (the school, the teacher) that was constructing these texts in what to my students were inadequate ways—ways seemingly intent on mystification rather than illumination.

In brief, thirty years ago they brought from their lived experiences and intellectual lives structures of inquiry that characterize cultural studies and rhetorical analysis. Issues of gender, class, and race were important parts of virtually every discussion. While we all regret the time it has taken for their way of reading to become authorized by the academy, this way of reading indeed has become authoritative. And it has become so—not entirely, but

still in no small measure —because students like those at Lincoln pressed this method forward with an intellectual excitement that was compelling. The important, historical role that new student populations have played in the shaping of the intellectual work of the disciplines has been suppressed, perhaps even erased, both in students' challenges to prevailing orthodoxies and their collaborative exploration of alternatives. Wherever else their origins, these ways of reading have come into the U.S. academy from somewhere very close to home.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to recognize, of course, some differences here. My students, though seriously committed to discussion of these issues, were not operating with the elaborate and complex critical framework now marking cultural and rhetorical studies, or with the sense of a larger critical/theoretical enterprise to which their thought contributed. (Of course, at the time, hardly anyone else had this framework either) My point though is, first, the classroom was, in Mary Louise Pratt's sense ("Linguistic Utopias"), a contact zone where competing and unequal paradigms of critical practice met. Second, this contact zone was damaging to their education —it is where their education (my teaching, specifically) failed them, because it (I) was unready to clarify, elaborate, and support the possibilities of their ways of thinking.

## II. Encountering the Pedagogy of the Contact Zone: "We have met the enemy and they are us"

When I started teaching in 1968, it was assumed by almost everyone that teaching was as natural as breathing and so required little thought or preparation. So I began by teaching the way I had been taught. I had prepared (as noted above) what I considered some truly brilliant questions, or at least topics, and I had equally brilliant answers in mind, just in case. And because of that, I ended up having a wonderful conversation with myself. I would ask my question, pause, flash a glance about the room, and then provide the answer. I took no pleasure in this process, but at least it filled the fifty minutes with talk. I can say that partly I was motivated by a tyoutter nervousness. But primarily I was motivated by an understanding of the university as a site of initiation, with students as apprentices. I thought I was teaching them what the right questions were, and in isolating their best answers or giving them my own, I would be teaching them how to gain authority in that institution.

That this pedagogy did not succeed can be explained in a number of ways, perhaps the most important being that while I may in some sense

have been inviting them to talk within the university I was in no way inviting them to talk with one another and so was directing them away from the very thing they thought at that time most important to do. The classroom was an encounter marked by power relationships that I did not even recognize. Mine was a pedagogy of delivery, what Paulo Freire calls the banking model of education, a kind of depositing, and it did not suffice. Its insufficiency deserves careful consideration.

It is hard to recover the details of that period, but I have at least one document that can help: it is a report that I was asked to prepare, very early in my career at Lincoln, describing and explaining a two-semester humanities course I had invented and taught.<sup>4</sup> The tensions evident in the report—the sense of the difficulties I encountered in teaching and the difficulties I faced (or avoided) in interpreting that teaching—offered then and now an insight into the culture wars of the time and some of the ways I learned to think about the work of composition.

I hope by looking at four brief sections of that report to clarify the contradictions and describe the uneasiness that finally compelled me to rethink my own purposes and to ponder in new ways the work of my discipline. In the confusions and even self-deceits evident in this document, it is possible to see why the development of what I call an interpretive pedagogy was necessary if I was to make any headway at all in overcoming the profound misunderstandings—of educational purposes, pedagogical principles, critical theory, and the relationship of reading and writing—evident in my work and the work of the field. My concern here is to trace the conditions that led me finally to see that composition, understood as a response to a difficulty of writing operating within a pedagogy interpreting difficulty as difference, was not a “problem” for English Studies but a highly desirable, even necessary way to rethink English Studies. This emerging reconceptualization represented, at least for me, the genuine promise of composition at that time, a promise (as I will explore in chapter 2) that perhaps has not been kept.

1. *The central theme of the first semester was an exploration of certain basic human concerns as they are treated in the arts of four different “cultures” or “subcultures.”<sup>5</sup> There were essentially two basic human concerns which gave some structure to the course:*
  1. *Sociopolitical—how man perceives himself in relationship to his society.*
  2. *Epistemological—how man perceives himself (period). They are obviously interrelated.*

My effort to open the course to diversity reinscribed (*immediately*, through the quotation marks disowning the concepts of culture and sub-culture) an essentialist aesthetic, simply locating this abstraction in a wider set of contexts—a project of expansion that I now see as both desirable and insufficient. While I undertook this work with a conviction as to the importance of diversity, this pedagogical and hermeneutic project served me primarily to sustain the very possibility of belief in “certain basic human concerns” that became “essentially two basic human concerns.” This project also sustained the possibility of retaining the distinction between the epistemological and sociopolitical, even while granting the crucial importance of the latter and asserting (vaguely, actually incomprehendingly) the interrelationship of the two. The point is that the two were not “*obviously* interrelated,” that their relationship was complex and—in my own thinking and writing at the time—rendered invisible until I was forced to represent them here.

2. *The semester began with a consideration of The Harlem Renaissance which lasted for several weeks. After considering W. E. B. Du Bois's work for background, we turned our attention to the prominent Black poets of the decade: Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes. While these poets are similar, each of them has a "distinctive voice," and the purpose of our discussions was to explore both the similarities and the distinctiveness of the artists. This led to considerations of traditional versus innovative forms, and "debates" among the students over degrees of anger and rage which the poets felt. There was a tendency to see an aesthetic treatment of these poems as being off the mark, an invalid way of treating the material. I don't know precisely how to account for this. At any rate, I think that I should have de-emphasized critical vocabulary in favor of expressing the same ideas about poetic technique in ordinary language. This might accomplish the same end without sounding so damned academic.*

As I reread this passage, I am astonished at how thoroughly even compulsively I sanitized serious and intense disagreements through my use of phrases like “considerations” and “even some ‘debates.’” I translated difficulty—stress, severe challenges, resistance—into a discourse of conventional academic and public civility. My operative interpretive categories,

while carefully (and genuinely) refusing the terms that would construct the different reading I encountered as deficient or *lacking*, were nevertheless so devoted to erasing conflict that they refused as well the terms that might have conceptualized difficulty as difference. There is no clear agency ascribed here, except perhaps to the course itself (“This [what, exactly?] led to considerations”).

I go on, agentless still: “There was a tendency to see an aesthetic treatment of these poems as being off the mark, an invalid way of treating the material.” Students’ individual judgments refusing a dominant hermeneutic are recast as a “tendency” not of judgment but perception (“a tendency to see”), just as the work of criticism is depicted (for my own purposes here) as nothing more than a “treatment” and “way of treating.” Though it was the only way I could understand their views at the time, in fact my students were *not* merely asserting that such an interpretive model was “off the mark” or “invalid.” Having read Du Bois themselves as more than just “background,” they were challenging the very assumptions that restricted critical work to technical marksmanship aiming narrowly at validity. The point I am making here is not to privilege their interpretation (though, as I say, later developments in literary studies have in some ways done that) but simply to note the impossibility at the time of my understanding *their* projects. That is where their education failed them. I really had no idea “precisely how to account for this.”

My understanding at that time of how to address this difficulty points, however inadequately, toward issues that still occupy my attention as I work with the discipline of composition. My solution included altering the discourse of textual study: “I should have de-emphasized critical vocabulary in favor of . . . ordinary language.” My “solution,” that is, fundamentally condescends because it interprets the difficulty not as a theoretical difference but as a problematic of conversational exchange, presuming underlying possibilities for agreement that simply erased difference. However inadequate, though, it points to a dawning realization that the key question here has to do with the language of the classroom. What was behind this realization—though inchoately—was my recognition that an altogether different discipline of work—what I now understand to be the discipline of composition—was needed if the methods for undertaking textual study were to become adequate to the students I taught.

It is not surprising (at least in retrospect) that, for the first time, I begin here in this report (and at this point in my career) to interrogate the com-

petence of my writing assignments and more generally my work with student writing.

3. *I tried an experiment at this point in the semester which proved effective—a multimedia experience using a video on Hoddid poem, a Munch painting, and an a-tonal jazz work by Cecil Taylor that got many of the students writing poems and essays and stream-of-consciousness fiction. This, in one sense, was the high point of the semester, for the writing that was done was really imaginative.*

This experiment emerged from my (developing) sense of the importance of writing in the class—my desire to work more on writing, to work with it, and to value it as a sign that important things were going on. Students were writing imaginatively (within literary, mostly fictive forms) in order to engage the material of the course—to care about it and learn it. Clearly, I did not know quite what to make of all this. My reflections on writing, which itself gets ignored entirely until the end of the report, simply stop at my pleasure in the students' engagement with the writing I asked them to do here.

While inviting such writing as this was hardly adequate to the situation, I was at least taking a step in a different direction, and I learned from it. The wonderful personal and imaginative writing I got through this experiment helped me to clarify that the *difficulty* their writing presented for my teaching was not some general “writing problem.” Having discovered very quickly that my students read and discussed intelligently and critically, I came also to realize that these smart and thoughtful readers did not lack but rather had been and were still being denied the possibility of developing their observations within the kind of academic writing required by the institution. They were, in the presuppositions about critical work underlying the formal writing I required, rendered by institutional circumstances voiceless (in the sense that Patricia Williams has elaborated with regard to law students), and their discourses could not—or more accurately, I could not help them—reflect the quality of their minds (Williams, *Alchemy*). At least I was, however slowly, beginning to understand that.

4. *I haven't touched on my greatest deficiency yet. And this has to do with assignments. God, they were awful. I failed to encourage enough imaginative writing—both in fiction and in essay form. And*



*so, except for a few interesting photography assignments, the work done was rather unexciting. And this was all my fault. I am still rather at a loss as to how to create imaginative student expression.*

It began to dawn on me that the most serious problem I had as a teacher concerned the teaching of writing, which I understood naively to be a problem with the kinds of writing I required. While I cast the problem initially (and I think presciently) as a problem with my “awful” assignments, which—like a good Irish Catholic—I justly characterized as “all my fault” and redeemable only by divine intervention, I looked for a solution *outside* of the assignments. That is, I wanted to respond to this difficulty *not* by rethinking the terms within which I taught and invited my students’ critical challenges to prevailing ways of reading and making sense of cultural texts (which is precisely what the situation demanded) but by situating engaged writing outside of such work—in effect, and again, denying it to my students. I do not mean to say that providing students with a wider range of genres wasn’t appropriate or valuable, but my analysis here failed to recognize—more exactly, it labored to misrecognize—the *cause* of my students’ resistance to dominant critical modes. In fact, my analysis interprets theoretical resistance as boredom (student work is seen as uninteresting and unexciting), thereby suppressing the dimension of their dissent. I appropriate all agency here: it is “*all my fault*”; it is entirely up to *me* to “create imaginative student expression.”

I don’t want to dismiss as unimportant any of the strategies I tried but want rather to emphasize that my efforts only fiddled with and did not question the dominant paradigm with which I had begun teaching and the intellectual work of the humanities. I had come to understand how to interpret my students’ difficulties (with the material, with the work I assigned, and also the difficulties their work presented to and for me) as something other than lack; but that was as far as I could go. I wanted the difficulty of it all to just go away to become absent. And while it felt for the moment like change, and was genuinely meant to make things better, it would not suffice. Rather than rethinking the traditional (inherited) professional paradigm of pedagogy, literary-critical work, and educational purposes with which I had begun my teaching, it only sustained that paradigm.

The report represented a turning point in my work because I knew it was wrong—knew it even as I was writing it. The report came out the way it did because it was what I *could* write then; perhaps more exactly, it was what could get written, what a report could be, as composed within—in a

sense *by*—the paradigm I brought to teaching, a paradigm that felt inadequate even as the writing emerged and developed.

In short, I did not just teach basic writers. I was one.

### III. Exploring Alternatives

Composition emerged for me through a disruption of my certainties about reading and, gradually as a way of rethinking all the work of my professional life. I think the dislocation of reading practices that I experienced and my interpretation of the consequences of that dislocation differed from those of others who were teaching (and in far more compelling and consequential ways *inventing*) composition at that time. Briefly examining two of these differences might be helpful at least in clarifying the views I came to hold and the place of the work of composition in my own professional commitments.

In general during this period, composition developed as a dislocation, or at least a relocation, of reading practices. Taking, for example, the quite different work of Ann Berthoff and Mina Shaughnessy, one can easily see that their work, though in different ways to be sure, is founded on a reconceptualizing, or perhaps more exactly a *redeploying*, of received literary-critical practices. Here are fairly representative passages from their work.

For students to discover that ambiguities are [in I. A. Richards's phrase] the "hinges of thought" we surely will have to move from the inert, passive questions that we inscribe in the margins of papers and which we direct to student readers: "What do you mean here?" "What is the author trying to say?" Those are not critically useful questions; they elicit insubstantial responses or "I-thought-that-was-what-you-wanted" or, on occasions, students simply cast their eyes heavenward. We should focus on the shifting character of meaning and the role of perspective and context, and we can do so by raising such questions as these: "How does it change your meaning if you put it this way?" "If the author is saying X, how does that go with the Y we heard him saying in the preceding chapter—or stanza?" "What do you make of passage A in the light of passage B?" Students learn to use ambiguities as "the hinges of thought" as they learn to formulate alternate readings; to say it again, watching how the "it" changes. In my view, from my perspective, *interpretive paraphrase* is another name for the composing process itself.

Berthoff, *The Making of Meaning*, 71–72

[O]ne knows . . . that a teacher who would work with BW students might well begin by trying to understand the logic of their mistakes. . . . [A] careful reading of an incorrectly punctuated passage often reflects a design which, once perceived, can be translated into conventional punctuation. The writer of Passage 4, for example, appears to have used periods and commas interchangeably as terminal marks, showing no awareness of their different functions.

Passage 4

I remember working on a new puzzle father bott for me one summer. It was fun finding the different parts of the puzzle, this was an animal puzzle with jungle animal from the African continent. My mother came into the living rom where I was working on my puzzle, She looked over the puzzle and said to me “are you having difficulties with this puzzle? I answered no ma. She look around for a while then she called my brother to come and help me anyway. This took all the fun out of this activity, I was angrey but no matter what I said and did, mother always had the last word. I know my brother did not care to help me, he is three years older than I am and had his own intereses. After a while I became very dependent on my brother for almost everything, my brother too was very displeas but he went along, and he told me, I am going to help you because mami wants it that way and if I don't help you I wouldn't be able to go to the movie next saturday . I know my mother did not mean to harm me in any way , but I needed the time and independence to work out my own problems, I learned more when I did things on my own.

A closer look, however, suggests that the commas do serve a different purpose from the periods. Both marks, it is true, are used to terminate sentences, but the commas hold closely related sentences together whereas the periods mark the ends of the sentence clusters or terminate narrative sentences that advance the anecdote:

*Narrative opening:* I remember working on a new puzzle father bott for me one summer.

*Description of the puzzle:* It was fun finding the different parts of the puzzle, this was an animal puzzle with jungle animal from the African continent.

*Narrative:* My mother came into the living rom where I was working on my puzzle, She looked over the puzzle and said to me “are you having difficulties with this puzzle? I answered no ma. She look around for a while then she called my brother to come and help me anyway

*Writer's response:* This took all the fun out of this activity I was angry but no matter what I said and did, mother always had the last word.

*Brother's attitude:* I know my brother did not care to help me, he is three years older than I am and had his own intereses.

*Subsequent relations with brother:* After a while I became very dependent on my brother for almost everything, my brother too was very displease but he went along, and he told me, I am going to help you because mami wants it that way and if I don't help you I wouldn't be able to go to the movie next saturday.

*Writer's response:* I know my mother did not mean to harm me in any way but I needed the time and independence to work out my own problems, I learned more when I did things on my own.

Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations*, 13, 21-22

Both Berthoff and Shaughnessy take ways of reading quite clearly derived from literary formalism and map them onto student texts in pedagogically (and I would add socially) responsible and astonishingly productive ways. In their work, new uses for familiar interpretive procedures and educational practices are not only imagined but made available to other educators. Berthoff's focus on ambiguity, prompting the close examination of paradigmatic options and syntagmatic resonances in the text, are themselves traceable quite directly to Richards but more generally to New Critical practices, even those marking her own scholarly work on literary texts. In the above passage, for example, as she moves to uncover/discover the complex possibilities of student writing, she first appropriates a powerful contemporary discourse of ambiguity that "hinges" the literary feature of paradox and the perspective of irony to a complex ordering of poetic meaning. She then applies that appropriated discourse to the needs of students trying to make meaning for themselves. Shaughnessy's complicating reading of (for) patterns of meaning, excavating "a design" underlying the text's surface disorder, calls upon the commonplace textbook phrases ("closer look," "careful reading") conventionally used to correct or transcend naive textual understanding by insisting that textual anomalies are in fact both interpretable and explainable when rightly understood.

Berthoff and Shaughnessy effectively use formalist critical discourse to defamiliarize (itself a formalist move) and then reinterpret student writing. They do not question (nor am I suggesting that in their circumstances they ought to have) the premises of these reading procedures, which accounts in my view for the rather conservative understanding we find in both of them

of the possibilities of “nonacademic” discursive practices within the academy. In contrast, it mattered quite a bit, I believe, that in the formative period I am exploring, I did not teach “composition” or “writing” courses but humanities courses, however deeply committed these courses were to student writing. In my courses, different ways of reading brought by my students prevented my adopting Shaughnessy’s and Berthoff’s methods because their *way* of reading itself (and mine) —I finally realized—was being challenged by the students whose writing I was trying to interpret and assist.

From that position, from that dim recognition that I needed to explore the place of alternative discursive practices in my own teaching, I was able to start learning from my students. And that helped me to start figuring out a different place for student writing within my own work and my understanding of what a college education was all about. The paradigm change for me was not from product to process (something I encountered and welcomed later, less as a theoretical apparatus for professional definition than as an illuminating set of practices that made the work I wanted to do better). Rather it was a shift from seeing student writing as marginal to seeing it as central to the purposes of higher education, as where the real action was taking place (or not).

#### IV. Rethinking Pedagogy

[P]eople in the U.S. (and many other countries) are coming to grips with old realities that have been elided from official history.

I want to . . . give [this process] a name that may surprise some readers: *decolonization*. When the debates over Western Culture broke out in the U.S. six years ago, I found myself reminded over and over of my years growing up in English Canada in the 1950s, when pictures of the Queen of England governed every home, courtroom, hockey arena and curling rink, and received our morning pledges of allegiance in the classroom; where culture, history, art, reality itself lived somewhere else. Not where we were, but on the other side of the ocean, which Britain ruled. These, I later realized, were the workings of the colonized imagination. Now the United States is a world imperial power and it is admittedly difficult to think of it as having a colonized imagination. But I am convinced that in the domain of culture and national understanding, it does . . . Even when they know almost nothing about European high culture, as *cultural subjects*, I suggest, Americans remain to a signif-

icant degree colonial subjects for whom reality and value live somewhere else. They are so constituted by the national institutions of knowledge and culture, official and otherwise.

Pratt, "Daring to Dream"

As Pratt admits, it is difficult to get our minds around this idea, but it may be helpful to recognize that my classroom, despite its concerns for diversity, was lamentably all-too-focused on being a culturally sanitizing, metropolitan space, cleansing itself of difference all the more powerfully because it was done without any specific malicious intent. Like literary meanings themselves, specific procedures for constructing culture were universalized as culture itself in this space, and thus mystified. I came to Lincoln ready and able to perform, within this educational framework and by my best lights, the teaching I was hired to do. My students, who understood and critiqued the dual imperial impositions of education that Pratt traces, were more interested in doing some intellectual work.

What emerged in subsequent semesters—slowly and with never an epiphanic moment to be found—was not just a different theory of literary analysis but a different understanding of the work of the classroom, a different pedagogy guiding exchange, and a different appreciation of my own institutional responsibilities. It was in the context of exploring these central issues— theorizing textuality and critical analysis, rethinking teaching and its fundamental purposes, recognizing the politics of the curriculum and its larger social and cultural consequences—that my other experiences at Lincoln took their meaning. I learned from the classroom outwards, coming only in this way to understand faculty life and the social purposes of colleges.

This learning began, perhaps, with recognizing that only academics think of students as "coming" to college; most people, including students, understand that students *go* to college. The distinction is significant because it entails the attribution of agency. If students summon the energy, and in most cases the *courage*, to attend college; if they go there and seek to benefit themselves by doing so; and if their going there is made possible by the removal (but not without their traces) of barriers that until then prevented them from deciding to go; then they are perceived differently and programs responsive to their decisive action are perceived differently. When compared with many university students, for whom moving on to college was as "normal" as their moving on to high school some years before, many of my students at Lincoln had determined to go to college against considerable

odds and occasionally in conflict with the expectations for them held by their former teachers and even their families.

Composition, as I came to know it, began in relation to *and with* students acting decisively in just this way. Working with students, in this sense, opened up the possibility of being influenced by them, of working together to shape a curriculum and pedagogy that would be responsive to their initiatives. The academic culture that I joined at that time and that nurtured my own sense of professional obligation recognized the need for change if we were to take seriously our responsibilities to the students. It was becoming increasingly clear that universities had a lot to learn.

In this context, a particular way of being concerned with student writing as a defining feature of the life of a university emerged—as something central to the work that goes on there, not derivative of other work. The students with whom I worked to understand McKay’s “If We Must Die” clearly had much to teach. But to have worked with them is to have become acutely aware of just how much writing is taken for granted as part of a university’s culture. As I suggested a moment ago, this awareness came from the gap between their acute ways of reading and their difficulty in finding—or rather my difficulty in providing or suggesting—forms to argue for those readings within the academy. My concern was *not* that students’ writing didn’t “measure up” but that so much was being lost because our measures were simple-minded. I found this, needless to say profoundly disorienting, challenging the very foundation of disciplinary work as I had been trained to do it. As Keith Hjortshoj notes, that’s a good thing. Allowing ourselves as teachers to become confused in the face of students’ questions and needs is perhaps the best thing we can do to become their teachers (“Theory, Confusion, Inclusion”). Embracing this kind of disorientation seemed then, and still seems today, at the heart of composition’s work, especially as it makes possible the critical examination of any discipline’s intellectual “canon of methods.”<sup>6</sup>

My own difficulties were particularly befuddled because I was learning both reading and writing in new ways—not just learning to teach them differently but learning new ways to think about them, understand these processes, and do different kinds of intellectual work with them. It was not a comfortable experience. For me and most of my colleagues, the work of composition was born in response to—because of—these very perplexities. New ways of teaching reading and writing arose within a struggle to understand and practice ourselves ways of reading and writing for which we had not been prepared—indeed, for which we had been ill-prepared.

My disorientation with respect to ways of reading taught me, finally

and not easily, to imagine a different place for student writing in the academy and so to ask different questions about it: What institutional circumstances had refused our students their full powers as writers? How was their prior training as writers effectively a form of censorship, a denial of rights? Teaching writing thus became a political matter, not simply a pedagogical one, because students' unfamiliarity and frustration with the academic forms we required and our unfamiliarity with the forms they needed were not personal "problems" but a matter of politics. They were serious intellectual difficulties demanding a response. As a result, the work of composition became inextricably connected for me to the analysis of how language and language instruction commonly serve primarily to mystify, domesticate, and dominate. That is, my own work became necessarily concerned with the interpretation of cultural practices originating the pedagogical and discursive difficulties I encountered. That my students had been refused the development of their writing—that they had been denied the right to a writing consonant with and enabling their ways of reading—made writing itself the central concern of my courses.

"Writing" was then, and remains, a metonym for addressing the larger issues of its denial and of the need to question dominant discursive practices. Before reading (indeed before knowing that there even existed) an Althusser or Bourdieu, those of us teaching at Lincoln and in similar programs could see clearly that the distribution of cultural capital was unequal, in this particular case so conspicuously unequal to the powers of mind that our students demonstrated daily in their reading and conversation that the political causes and consequences needed the fullest possible examination.

As I suggested above when discussing Shaughnessy and Berthoff, this examination took many forms. Given my own circumstances and all that I had come to understand about the work I did as an educator, I concluded that it would be impossible to separate the teaching of writing from the cultural critique of its circumstances and the critical investigation of all areas in which it has been denied to students or mystified for them. For me, the work of composition thus required helping students interrogate the contexts that had shaped their writing and that continued to shape it, in the courses I was teaching and the courses that would follow. In attempting this larger interrogation, I began by questioning my own assumption that student writing was a form of spectacle—not only in my expectation that critical essays would be formally executed but also in what I had characterized in my report (discussed above) as the values of being "interesting," "exciting," "surprising," and so on. Oddly perhaps, Aristotle's treatment of spec-



tacle proved helpful here, particularly the way he clarified its marginality to the substantial purposes and achievement of the discourse he analyzes in the *Poetics*. (Such was my unfamiliarity with composition theory that the *Poetics* was all I had to go on to conceptualize my understanding of the issue at hand.) Searching for a way to theorize what I was glimpsing in my work, it came to my mind that the purposes of writing instruction had become a kind of staging, not the mastery of a discursive structure with its attendant dimensions of inquiry and evidence (that is, not an intellectual action planned or plotted by human agents) but a spectacular performance, assessed on grounds that everyone knew to be inadequate to the intellectual possibilities of the form itself. And in turn this conception secured a marginal place for student writing within the institutional culture—a place students were, on all other occasions, unwilling to accept.

### V. Working and Learning: Being a Faculty Member

I do not think I would have been able even to begin this reexamination of my work had I not joined a faculty receptive to one another's oddities and committed to a spirit of collegiality. Our differences were certainly aired with considerable passion, both in department meetings and monthly meetings of the whole faculty. Still, my experience at Lincoln led me to appreciate that it was possible to have a coherent and responsible curriculum that was nevertheless taught out of profoundly different, often competing intellectual interests and from many disciplinary perspectives. That there was no orthodoxy to command our agreement meant that there was open discussion and disagreement about these matters, and for that reason alone our work was better. We were engaging things that mattered, for purposes we shared, for work that was our own and that felt all the time as a challenge to prevailing definitions of the study of literature, culture, and writing, as if we were, even when "just" teaching, engaged in the most significant intellectual activities of the profession.<sup>7</sup> While there were bad days, there was no down time; it all mattered, like it or not. *What people read, and how they read; what they wrote, for whom, and why*: These were the questions that were directly or indirectly raised and addressed in every class and in all our efforts to develop a curriculum with, and responsible to, the students we taught.

Remapping the classroom to make institutions responsible meant more than rearranging the desks, relocating the teacher from in front of the podium, altering the relationships between lecturing and discussion, though all of these were important. Remapping entailed first and foremost

challenging the classroom as a neutral site of cultural assimilation. Creating this alternative classroom required a deep respect for intellectual autonomy. It required faculty members with full academic freedom and the encouragement to bring their own intellectual interests openly into the classroom; and it required an even more complex respect for the students' autonomy, for their freedom to speak their minds openly.

The autonomy of the faculty to design their own courses, and the place of student writing in those courses, were thus the crucial factors. That is to say, the effectiveness of the curriculum depended on the constant and critical examination of classroom practices with a clear focus on the nature of the communication made possible there. Though it was not true for all, it was true for many of us that student writing became the central issue in this effort, which is to say in part that the effort was always also about something else, serving as a way to compress a number of related concerns.

My interest in student writing derived primarily from its crucial importance to the project of remapping the classroom and of challenging the classroom as a site of assimilation. The classroom I am talking about here is one where students are heard, not just by the class but also by the institution, because the teacher is not a transient but a permanent member of the faculty, which is collegially responsible for shaping institutional practices. This is the structure that makes it possible for those students—the students for whose attendance the university is *not* ready—to alter institutional practices.<sup>8</sup> This is what they do through their writing, once we learn how to read it responsibly. That is, the writing of students, especially those often considered *least*-suited to prevailing modes of instruction, is important because it alters institutions.

The teacher of writing—the work of composition—becomes (as I grew to understand the job) a mediating force in this transformation. The job entails reading and interpreting diverse cultural textualities and imagining alternative institutional structures to accommodate them. This sense of the job, and what it means to commit to it, is what I had in mind when I suggested that “teaching writing” is always also about something larger. I will develop this position more fully in the next chapter; but now let it suffice to say that the working out of this position in my own intellectual life was made possible by students who taught me how much I could learn from embracing it.

As I have suggested earlier, the history of education has yet to be written to the extent that we have no thoroughgoing study of the changes wrought by students (apart from their mere presence as demographic statistics) on the

intellectual purposes and climate of higher education. The history we do have is often merely a chronicle of students' unmet needs, of institutions only slowly (if at all) responsive. It is often the history of misunderstanding and failure, or the footnote history of successful educational practices occurring on (and relegated permanently to) the margins of mainstream institutions.

It is quite possible that the issues that I take up in the following chapters—including the role of students in the creation of academic culture, the intellectual work of teaching reading and writing, the rights of the faculty and its central responsibility for leading institutional change, the understanding of disciplinarity—can make sense as *connected* issues only to the degree that one takes seriously the educational possibilities that marked these early years of the work I have been describing. It may be that what I remember is simply eccentric or dated, but what I hope is that recovering this historical moment can recall important purposes that have been lost, misunderstood, or misremembered. One of the main goals of this book is to recover, or at least simply remember, the promise of the invention(s) of composition.