USING NARRATOLOGY TO REPRESENT EMOTION, AGENCY AND CHANGE IN STUDENT LITERACY NARRATIVES

Ann C. Dean, Joshua Lobkowicz, Lauren Smith, and Caroline O'Connor-Thomas

Thousands of students write literacy narratives each year in college courses.[1] Scholars in writing studies have described this assignment's potential for developing students' confidence and identity as readers, their knowledge about writing, and their critical awareness of the possibilities and limitations offered by literacy (Scott; Soliday; Sullivan; Yagelski). At the same time, the literature also suggests a common problem: we find students structuring their narratives according to cultural common sense, rather than questioning or critiquing it. Students dutifully outline their hard work, good intentions, and social progress, reinscribing the very assumptions the project invited them to question (Alexander, 609; Bawarshi, 128-9). Cultural "master narratives" of literacy seem to restrict critical analysis, and remain remarkably durable (Alexander; Bawarshi; Carpenter and Falbo). Here, we describe readings, assignments, and classroom practices that can help students develop alternative narrative forms and alternative points of view. Using narratology, students can rewrite their pasts as they envision their literate futures.

The practices we advocate include experimenting with narrative form, using literary texts as models, and practicing with analytical concepts derived from literacy theory. After outlining the way we used these practices in an upper-level English course, we will describe how they could be adapted to a first-year course or one with a more specifically rhetorical focus.

Ann Dean (the professor) planned the course with two outcomes in mind: students would write detailed, interesting narratives of their literate lives, and they would analyze those narratives within the context of family, institutional, and economic sponsorship as presented by Deborah Brandt. To reach those goals, she structured the course around a series of readings and writing assignments:

- Students read and discussed published literacy narratives: Frederick Douglass, Benjamin Franklin, Richard Rodriguez, Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John,* Zitkala Sa's "The School Days of an Indian," and Leslie Chang's *Factory Girls*. Class discussion explicitly treated these narratives as models, looking at the ways the writers treated space, time, and point of view.
- Students completed frequent, low-stakes narrative writing exercises, describing moments in their literate lives. (See Scott for detailed examples of similar assignments).
- Students read Mieke Bal's *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. In class, students and teacher together used Bal's terms to analyze both the published literacy narratives and the students' own narratives.
- Students read Deborah Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives* and Donehower, Hogg and Schell's *Rural Literacies*. In class discussion, we used these writers' analytical terms to examine both the published literacy narratives and the students' own narratives.
- Students completed a final project in which they reworked the material they had generated all semester into a longer literacy narrative, accompanied by an analysis of its narrative and theoretical implications.

To adapt these practices for first-year students, teachers might:

- Substitute a shorter summary of narratology. Provide students with a definition list of just a few terms, such as flashback, flash forward, framing, and iteration.
- Substitute a shorter account of literacy theory, such as a selection from the prologue to Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words*.
- Practice using narrative terminology by analyzing a familiar narrative, such as a movie the students watched as children, or a video shown in class, before moving on to analyze a literacy narrative.

To adapt these practices to a course with a more explicitly rhetorical focus, teachers could use Kenneth Burke's dramatistic pentad in place of, or along with, narratology (Burke, 992). Students could consider a particular scene of literacy, and then ask what act occurs, who the agent is, what creates the agency, and what purpose the agent intends to achieve (see Shirley Rose; Sandlin and Clark for Burkean analyses of literacy narratives). Such analysis leads directly into questions of sponsorship, since agency is central for both Burke and Brandt.

In our course, students did meet the anticipated outcomes: they wrote interesting, surprising literacy narratives, and their analyses demonstrated their understanding of larger social forces at work in their literate lives. Dean was surprised, however, that some students achieved a further, unexpected outcome: they illustrated a mode of literacy storytelling outside the familiar "master" narratives. Here, we are calling this alternative mode the "lateral literacy narrative."

Narratives of literacy tend to fall into two groups: success stories and loss stories. Kara Poe Alexander describes "the conventional literacy success story, a narrative that assumes the more literate one is, the more successful he or she will be. This cultural narrative affirms the romanticized power of education . . . and 'equates literacy acquisition with a progressive narrative of development and liberation'"(609). The second type, the loss

story, is described by Renny Christopher as the "unhappy narrative of upward mobility." Writers such as Richard Rodriguez, bell hooks, Elizabeth Stuckey, and Henry Giroux have taught us to look for violence, loss, and shame in narratives of educational aspiration. Christopher describes how, in narratives by Lucha Corpi, Richard Rodriguez, and Jack London,

> a desire for (illusory) beauty, for meaning, for something more (something usually undefined), impels these protagonists (and, indeed, the writers themselves) to undertake upward mobility in search of that which cannot be found within the working class, where they must "trade beauty for survival." These protagonists find only hollow outlines of what they were looking for when they achieve their upward mobility and are left focusing on their loss. (104)

Neither of these models accounts for the narratives developed by students in our course. These students describe neither the same aspirations nor the same shame that, for instance, Richard Rodriguez articulates in *Hunger of Memory*. Neither do they identify with the squeaky-clean prosperity of Benjamin Franklin. These students and their families take an actively critical stance toward education, a stance informed by multiple non-schooled literate traditions. Our point here is not that these three students are broadly representative. All three were English majors in an upper-level course, and all three were intensely engaged, committed students. Instead, their value as case studies is that their work draws attention to an important narrative alternative to familiar stories of success and loss: the lateral literacy narrative. Using these same materials and practices, other students may write lateral narratives, or develop new forms themselves.

Narratology and Brandt's Literacy Theory

Students in this course productively combined Brandt's ideas about sponsorship with Bal's analyses of time and space in

narrative. Sponsors, in Brandt's words, are "any agents . . . who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way"(19). To tell a story about experiencing sponsorship, a writer must deploy time and perspective. Bal points out that events in the world of a story happen in a particular order and over a particular span of time; a story's narrator, however, never reports the events to the reader in precisely this order or duration. These deviations from strict time order (flashbacks, anticipations, ellipses, and overviews) affect a reader's interaction with a text. Control over time, over what is shown to the reader, is an aspect of focalization: "the relation between 'who perceives' and what is perceived." It is this effect, Bal writes, that "'colours' the story with subjectivity"(8). Students Joshua Lobkowicz, Caroline O'Connor-Thomas, and Lauren Smith made use of these narratological tools to conceptualize literacy in ways that both illustrate and extend Brandt's argument that "often . . . opportunities for literacy learning—including the chance to divert resources for projects of self-development or resistance—open up in the clash among sponsors"(193). Brandt makes much of the image of "lateral" change, one she borrows from Pierre Bourdieu: "the major effect of historical evolution is to abolish history by relegating to the past, that is, to the unconscious, the lateral possibilities that it eliminated" (quoted in Brandt, 45). Notice that this is an argument about narrative form. Multiple, or unfamiliar, or reshaped narratives, in this view, can open new perspectives on historical change in the past and give all of us new opportunities for conceptualizing literacy in the future.

In the analyses accompanying their narratives, each student writer was explicit about the ways in which narrative experimentation helped them negotiate the complexity they found in Brandt's work and in their own lives. In the end, O'Connor-Thomas writes, "*the weaving between Bal and Brandt within a story is indecipherable,*" as both sets of ideas form a deep structure for the narrative itself. Similarly, Smith explains that "*I tried to experiment with time in my literacy narrative, . . . so as to focus on the aspects of my*

literacy development that I believe to have had the most profound influence on the development of my identity as a human being." In both cases, work with narrative, particularly time sequence and focalization, enables work with concepts such as sponsorship and identity. In Lobkowicz's view, "*Brandt and Bal may be combined to show that the ways in which we write about literacy expose both the larger cultural forces at work and also the ways in which we narrativize the process of learning those practices to represent less abstract and deeply personal meanings*." Such comments indicate that these students were thinking narrative questions as they wrote: Where in time will my story start? Where will it go next? When am I the narrator and when am I the main character? What should I let the reader see at this point in the story, and what should I keep hidden? Where should I direct the reader's attention? By asking themselves these sorts of questions, student writers can speak with narrative, as well as being spoken by it.

More conventional ideas about literacy are often represented through conventional narrative forms, as many critics have noted (Alexander; Baynham; Fox; Williams). Narratology provides helpful tools for understanding how this representation works. Early narratologists such as Tzvetan Todorov worked within a structuralist framework, searching for underlying "scientific" principles that would explain all narratives. Bal's work has moved narratology to a post-structuralist (though still very systematic) interest in narrative form. Her exhaustive account of the field's specialized terms and minute distinctions can seem pedantic, but it provides powerful tools for close reading.

For an example of how we practiced with narratological terms in class, consider a conventionally structured literacy narrative. Googling "I learned to read" produces many; this one, Antonia Moore's "I was 30 Before I Learned to Read," was originally published in the *Guardian*. The piece treats literacy as liberating, and it follows a conventional narrative form:

> Mum and Dad never noticed I was failing, but I don't blame them. They had five children and a busy household,

> and I hid it well. I muddled through primary school, but within months of starting secondary education I'd been moved into a class for "slow" kids. As far as I was concerned, that was where I belonged, but I still felt ashamed.
>
> I ignored my new classmates and told old friends I'd been moved up to a higher class. Groups of them would walk past the window, arms linked, and I'd duck my head. Keeping my head down became a habit.
>
> At 14, I realised things weren't going to get better. I'd soon leave school unqualified and unemployable. Everyone would know I was stupid. Unable to confide in family or friends, I ran away from home.
>
> Job prospects for homeless teenage girls are limited enough, but not being able to read created challenges in even the most menial work. As a waitress, I'd pretend to be hard of hearing and get customers to point at the menu, then I'd secretly mark it with a pen.

A fairly straightforward, orderly narrative, this passage still does some complicated things with time and perspective. Nested within chronologically ordered events is a change in focalization. Telling us "I still felt ashamed," the narrator explained how the character felt at thirteen—in other words, narrator ("I felt") and character ("ashamed") are presenting the reader with a view of the same time and space. Then, the narrator interjects the observation "keeping my head down became a habit." This line departs from the chronology of the events the narrator is retelling–in two ways. First, it "covers" the rest of her life until age 30, when learning to read changed her habit. The narrative will have to go back and fill in more details of this period later. Second, saying "keeping my head down became a habit" explicitly conveys the perspective of an older, wiser self, who knows what happened in subsequent years and has enough psychological distance to describe it. The protagonist and the narrator are no longer located in the same time and place. This wiser self has been liberated by literacy and

can use a metaphor to give the reader a view back at the earlier, naïve protagonist. That formal, narrative shift in focalization conveys conceptual freight: the personal growth, upward mobility, and independence so frequently associated with literacy.

These shifts in focalization and departures from chronology are entirely conventional, so conventional that they feel natural to storytelling, and Bal's abstruse terminology is required even to identify them (80). They help the narrator address the reader, who can have a sense of unmediated access to the events because the familiar form does not call attention to itself. By attending to these formal elements, we can defamiliarize conventional narrative and productively interpret less conventional narratives, such as those by Kincaid or Rodriguez. In-class analysis of conventional and unconventional narratives gave students both literary models and tools for analysis as they framed their own experiences in narrative.

Space and Anachrony in Lateral Literacy Narratives

In their own narratives, students in this course put growth, challenge, shame, fear, prestige and judgment into unusual narrative relations. Shame, in these narratives, can be associated with reading too much, as well as with learning too slowly. Literacy can be schooled or unschooled. Spaces, sequences, and scenes can shift in unconventional ways. Like most of their classmates, all three of these student authors value literacy, in the mode of Franklin or Douglass. And they also associate literacy with loss, in ways reminiscent of Rodriguez. But each frames these elements in a lateral way. Each writer depicts parents whose extensive literacy does not confer economic or social advantage. A linear, logical progression from learning, to pride, to personal development, to social advantage, to economic security, cannot represent the divergent and ambiguous influences these writers present. Space and time must be arranged in complex ways to exemplify the complex place of literacy in these experiences.

In creating these lateral narratives, the students were, in Bal's words, "playing with sequential ordering," which "is not just a literary convention; it is also a means of drawing attention to certain things, to emphasize, to bring about aesthetic or psychological effects, to show various interpretations of an event"(81). Students describe events not in the order in which they occurred, but through "anachrony," in an order that allows them to emphasize, question, and interpret (Bal, 82). They also make productive use of "iterative presentation," in which "a whole series of events is presented at once" (Bal, 110). Along with these temporal effects, students work with the placement of their characters in space. Bal points out that,

> the space in which the character is situated, or is precisely not situated, is regarded as the frame. . .A character can be situated in a space it experiences as secure [or] unsafe . . . The boundary that delimits the frame can be heavily invested with meaning. Narratives can endorse that meaning, reject or change it. (136-7)

Students use these formal elements to describe the relations between family, school, work, and literate life.

O'Connor-Thomas's narrative places schooled learning in a temporally rearranged context shaped by family. In the following passage, she uses space to reimagine her father's reading in relation to other parts of his life:

> *My father spent a good chunk of my childhood reading through a tremendous series of books on the Civil War. He also always made sure to sneak the old New Yorkers home from the law firm where he worked as a janitor. I have very specific memories of him sitting at the kitchen table at the rear of his apartment, hunched over a crossword puzzle. The dictionary and thesaurus were never far away, and neither were books of Calvin and Hobbes comics.*

O'Connor-Thomas uses space and time to specify, limit, and enclose the image of her father as reader and as sponsor of reading. The "tremendous series" of civil war histories convey at once the passage of time ("a good chunk of my childhood") and the monumental seriousness of her father's reading. These impressions of expansiveness are chiseled away, however, as the passage continues. Her father sneaks and hunches. The socially prestigious terms (History, *New Yorker*, law firm) are undercut by the second sentence's final clause, "he worked as a janitor." In the end, the passage triply encloses him—in his apartment, in his kitchen, among his reading materials. Rather than moving through his reading, he seems to be tangled up within it, and within his daughter's memory.

O'Connor-Thomas creates the reverse of a narrative of progress. Literacy becomes a measure of grief and loss, as her father drinks himself into barely literate dementia. She is not the first writer to associate literacy and loss, of course. It is important to notice, however, that she develops this effect from self-reflective work with time. She describes her project here as "*the manipulation of a sequence of events*," explaining that "*we typically know our stories to have a beginning, middle and end. In my narrative however, it is clear that we must go back to go forward*."

Lobkowicz also deploys frames and anachronies to describe a conflict between family, school, and literate experience:

> *I took seats toward the front of the room where I could be as close to my learning as possible, as though proximity to the blackboard would allow me to get more education. I maintained straight A's; I always had an answer ready for the teacher; and I corrected my fellow students when I knew they were wrong. I was often the best student in the room and I knew it. It made me better than my peers. It made me an outcast.*
>
> *When other kids were playing basketball or football during recess I was often in the shade of a maple tree with a book…I was made fun of a lot in school, elementary school through high school. It puzzled me that my literacy, a course of pride, amazement and*

> *adoration in my childhood, would become the source of scorn in later years. Throughout my schooling, I saw smart students read less, think less, and work less, in order to find companionship in our peers. I took a different path.*

In his analysis of his work, Lobkowicz points out how constructed this section of his narrative is, using ideas from both Bal and Brandt. Bal's anachronies allow him to create a narrator who "appears to be forever situated in the present, commenting on the past, which provides us with a larger story peppered with individual examples"(Bal 82). Specifically, Lobkowicz points out,

> *though we have identified various spheres exercising various pressures on the narrator's literacy, he presents the story from the point of completion, recognizing only the belief he ends up with—that literacy is more valuable than social acceptance—instead of recognizing the conflict he surely faced at the time.*

Both narrative and analysis exemplify the ways a writer can use Brandt and Bal to negotiate some complex terrain. As a writer, Lobkowicz has tools to convey the ambiguous and culturally overdetermined nature of literacy as he experienced it. He uses familiar tropes: the "different path," the quixotic, bookish protagonist, the front row of the classroom. But he juxtaposes them in ways that show how school's sociality discourages literacy as much as its structure enables it.

O'Connor-Thomas also uses anachronies to uncouple literacy from economic and social aspiration. She begins her narrative with the present, in which her father is lost to dementia.

> *"Don b scared. I done this b-bfore. Show me yr teef."*
> *My father is reading from the jacket of a Lady Gaga CD. These are intended to be lyrics from the song "Teeth" and this is exactly what he sounds like as he reads them…He looks at me for approval: Did he get that right? What is Lady Gaga? Is this something I listen to?*
> *"Yeah," I nod and smile "That's right."*

> *I can't stop thinking of my father before. Before he resided in assisted living, smelling like pre-packaged food, hiding pills under his tongue, boxed in by disgusting Pepto Bismol colored walls…Now he stands in my mother's kitchen…trying to grasp at a language that is escaping him more and more every day.*

Analyzing her narrative work in this passage, O'Connor-Thomas explains that

> *this technique has to do with anticipations within a series of events. Of anticipation, Bal makes the claim that "suspense generated by the question 'How is it going to end?' disappears; we already know how it is going to end" (93). This is certainly true in the first couple of paragraphs; in fact, the narrative voice in the story tells us at the end of the opening that we are not at the beginning, but at the end…From this point on the readers should know that the story is less about the outcome and more about the journey from point A to point B.*

Equally relevant to this passage is Bal's analysis of the significance created through anticipations: "They may serve to generate tension or to express a fatalistic vision of life" (93). Such a "fatalistic vision" is ideological, in the context of literacy, where the conventional narrative suggests that literacy makes people and conditions better. This lateral narrative suggests, instead, that literacy cannot solve this family's problems, and serves to highlight them instead.

As the narrative progresses, structured deviations from sequential ordering continue to create what O'Connor-Thomas calls "severe juxtapositions" between literacy and dementia, past and future:

> *There was not a single moment of my childhood where my father had not indulged in a few beers. In fact if he were to have gone without a drink, he would have been in a terrible mood until he hit the bars. More than once my brother and I ended up at the bars*

with him after school, sitting at a table with free sodas while he sat in the high stools, complaining to the other regulars about this and that or just chatting.

*Frequently my father came home after my brother and mother were asleep, though I could never find rest until he came home. I would stay in bed reading the same books over and over again (*Pompeii: Buried Alive!, How Babies Are Made*, and* The Baby-Sitters Club *series were popular at this time). When I heard him come in and turn on the television, I would sneak out to the living room to spend time with him. I often found him already passed out on one end of the couch and I would climb up on the opposite end, dozing off to the blue glow of late night TV.*

O'Connor-Thomas plays with ongoing present in this passage. The strained double negative of the first sentence ("not a single moment when he had not indulged") indicates the way time itself is dominated by her father's drinking. "Frequently," "Many nights," "over and over" "more than once," these events occurred. Bal calls this "iterative presentation: a whole series of identical events is presented at once." This technique can be used, Bal argues, to create a background against which important events will take place. Or, as in this case, it can be used to highlight perception itself, and make the dramatic banal (110).

O'Connor-Thomas's father's illness moves him from convergent, prestigious, emotionally comfortable literacy to divergent, stigmatized, emotionally painful literacy. Another stereotyped aspect of literacy narratives in American culture is that, like the middle class, literacy is always rising. Brandt points out that this is not always true for all individuals and regions. O'Connor-Thomas's narrative puts literacy in an entirely different narrative frame, picking apart any easy association between literacy, personal growth, and social mobility. Books are crucial here: a frightened child, in bed with the *Babysitters Club* for comfort and *Pompeii, Buried Alive* for images of destruction, is certainly making sense of her life through reading. But literacy is part of the mess, rather than an escape or a rescue.

Smith also works with anticipations and an iterative present, describing her family's literate practice as an informed, active "stance":

> *My family of Catholic Republicans see higher education as elitist bullshit, and they spend holidays and family gatherings discussing and critiquing the flaws of the Democratic Party and its efforts to turn America into an overpopulated wasteland of sin. After unwrapping Christmas presents my cousins and I would lean back in our chairs and learn about how the public education system is run by anti-American liberals who work to brainwash America's youth, convincing them that religion is evil and that homosexuality is not, and that Republicans are ignorant and backwards when in reality we were really just the peacemakers. During Thanksgiving dinner my uncle would express his concerns, as we passed around the turkey and vegetables, that because my cousins and I were young we could be easily influenced; it's going to be easy for them to convince us to their side, and we must not buy into their lies and false promises of a democratic utopia. Such concerns emerged during heated political debates, but also bubbled out when you least expected—during a moment of pointless and directionless chatter, driving by a couple walking down the street or a woman holding a baby, or a conversation overheard–lectures and lessons on morality and your duty as a good Christian sparked at any given time.*

Smith presents an ongoing past, an iterative series of scenes. The protagonist is hardly present at all as an individual. Instead, Smith always writes "my cousins and I." The way to create a character is to assign characteristics. This character has none, except, perhaps, the guardedness developed from having such conversations "bubble out when you least expected." The narrator speaks from a focal position outside the family, from which their rhetoric can be represented as overblown and overbearing. We do not see how the protagonist, the young Lauren, felt or perceived these scenes. Yet the passage conveys a sense of how threatening and painful these conversations were by contrasting them with images of

domesticity and comfort—Christmas morning, a woman holding a baby, a couple. These are "anticipations," in Bal's sense, which create a pattern later on when the narrative becomes a coming-out story as well. The family's careful and relentless policing of scenes of intimacy takes on a different shape from that perspective.

This family's literacy differs from those described in Brandt, and also from the parents described by Mike Rose and Richard Rodriguez, who are powerless and ignorant about institutional education. On our course syllabus, the closest literary analogue is the scene in Frederick Douglass's narrative in which Mr. Ault argues that that no one should teach a slave to read because it will unfit him to be a slave. But as Smith points out in her analysis, the family also provided an alternative literacy, entirely opposed to the one they correctly identified as available in secular higher education:

> *In the private sphere of the Church we were given reading material about what is and isn't moral. As Christians we knew that it was a sin to question or challenge the Bible; not challenging the authorial voice that exists in written text is embedded within the framework of the religion itself. This extends to written texts written about the Bible, as well as any text written about God, Jesus, or any other defining characters of Christianity.*

The challenge here is more than that of older economic relations embedded in a changing landscape of work and school. Instead, two current and energetic systems compete for the protagonist's loyalty. There is certainly an economic element working here—the class identification of the family's populism is explicit in their rejection of "elitism." But they convey an articulate awareness of their own literacy practices and their relations to dominant economies and ideologies. They do not need help uttering "the often inchoate yearnings of voices in change," as Brandt argues that her interview subjects do (46). Instead, they make active, informed choices among the modes of literacy available to them in contemporary America.

Crises and Turning Points

In their lateral narratives, these writers use space and characterization to internalize narrative crises, placing the turning points inside the protagonists' minds and bodies. For example, consider how Lobkowicz presents his decision to leave his food service job and enter higher education: "at the lowest emotional point in my life, the recognition that I needed something more prompted me to swallow my pride and apply for college." He takes a moment often associated with action upon the outer world, and internalizes it. Rather than lighting out for the territory, or taking up a sword or mantle or inheritance, he "swallows his pride."

If this is a moment unlike the conventional turning points of realistic novels, it is also unlike the "master narrative" of literacy, in which literate competence logically produces social and economic success. And it departs from the more complex and ambiguous stories told by Brandt. Lobkowicz's parents read with him frequently as a child and supported his academic success:

> *I remember summer evenings where my mother, my father, and I would sit around in the living room and read…Both parents tell of coming home from long days at work to find me in bed asking for a story. I remember my mother sitting next to me in my twin bed on a box-spring on the hardwood floors of our Dedham apartment reading to me from* James and the Giant Peach*,* Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, and several golden books…I also remember my dad coming up there, still in his coarse gray uniform from the auto parts delivery service, sitting on the side of my bed to stumble amusingly over the tongue twisters of* Fox in Sox *and* Green Eggs and Ham.

When this protagonist, much later, must "swallow his pride," it is not to admit that his family's literacy is inadequate to social demands. The interplay of pride and shame here is grounded in a different hierarchy than that which structures, for example, Richard Rodriguez's story. Rodriguez's parents defer to his

teachers, agreeing to stop speaking Spanish to their children. They appear confused and mystified at a sixth-grade awards ceremony: "'You both must be very proud of Richard,' the nun said. They responded quickly. (They were proud). 'We are proud of all our children.' Then this afterthought: 'They sure didn't get their brains from us'" (56).

In contrast, Lobkowicz is clear that he did get his brains, and his literacy, from his parents. The shaming fact is that his family's nonschooled literacy cannot be so universally comprehensive as to make school unnecessary.

> *By the end of high school I had developed something of the scorn for my classmates that they had always shown me and rejected the notion of college as something that belonged to them. I thought that anything college could teach me I could simply learn from a book. As a well-read individual and a decent writer, I decided I had nothing to gain from continuing my education save more social frustration, so I opted to do what my parents had done and simply join the workforce. Like my father, I went into food-service, a job where I thought I would do interesting work and meet good people.*

This passage describes what the main character thought and how he acted, but from a focal distance. It does not say "college belonged to them," the way the situation appeared to the character at the time. Instead, he presents his current view of the choices his protagonist made.

Economic history, here, is not the actor, as it so frequently is in Brandt, although another frame of analysis might question the class basis of the idea that college "belongs" to some people, despite their lack of academic commitment or performance (Brandt 4). In this account, Lobkowicz is clearly the actor, in a moment of narratological crisis—"a short span of time into which events have been compressed"(Bal 215). Presumably, in the time of the story, the protagonist discussed or overheard his classmates' college application processes, talked with family and guidance counselors, wore a cap and gown, graduated, sat by himself and thought,

applied for jobs, and so on. All these experiences and events are presented in this passage in a compressed, monotonously logical series of actions: I thought; I decided; I opted; I went. In Brandt's terms, we could say that this protagonist has no public sponsors for his literacy: once he leaves the warm, supportive atmosphere of his family, his reading and writing isolate him.

Despite its linear chronology and purposeful actor, this narrative of successful literacy does not look much like Franklin's or Antonia Moore's. It is about loneliness:

> *As eight years passed I became increasingly apathetic about my work and increasingly depressed. I thought I was unhappy in my work because it was hot, hard, and didn't give me much opportunity to interact with people. This might be partially true. I think now, however, that much of my dissatisfaction came from having no cause to use my literacy skills…Writing was completely absent except to sign my name when a delivery arrived. At the lowest emotional point in my life, the recognition that I needed something more prompted me to swallow my pride and apply for college.*

Entering college is an interior experience. Unlike many going-to-college narratives that detail imposing gates, ivy-covered walls, or other physical barriers to be crossed, this passage describes the event "entering college" as happening inside the protagonist's mind, and even his body, the space in which he "swallowed my pride." This internalization of the narrative's crisis provides a figurative model for the protagonist's isolation, and for the disjunction between the literacy sponsors inside and outside his childhood home.

The phrase "I needed something more" echoes Renny Christopher's account of "unhappy upward mobility narratives." Like the protagonists in *Martin Eden* and *The Bread Givers*, this character must choose between active literacy and a way of life. The specifics of his loss, however, are quite different: pride and isolation. In Christopher's account of working-class life, the characters seek meaning or beauty in literacy and class mobility.

But in the stories Christopher analyzes, the characters either find this beauty to be illusory, or they must experience it in isolation and misery. The protagonist in an unhappy upward mobility story loses out on community: the successful individual is also alone. Lobkowicz moves laterally away from that trajectory. The ultimate performance of endurance and self-reliance, in this narrative, would be to continue as a working autodidact, reading and writing unaided by institutions outside a close group of family and friends. In this account, it is those of us in the professional managerial class who have knuckled under for the sake of companionship, and it is the working-class autodidact who is alone.

In contrast, Benjamin Franklin tells us that he worked hard because his father used to quote the proverb "a Man diligent in his Calling, he shall stand before Kings." His hard work was so effective that "I have stood before five, and even had the honor of sitting down with one, the King of Denmark, to Dinner" (part two, 64). Franklin represents his successful work through an image of his physical body, elevated to astonishing social heights, and alone. There is no such separateness in the conclusions of these students' narratives.

It is helpful to compare Lobkowicz's account with some of the "little narratives" identified by Kara Poe Alexander in her coding of student literacy narratives. It bears some similarity to the "child prodigy" narrative, in which the protagonist "excels at reading and writing from an early age and is put on display for others," and also the "rebel" narrative, in which the protagonist "does not necessarily dislike writing or reading but attacks and rebels against established beliefs and institutions, particularly in school settings; includes tales of resistance, subversion, and transgression of what is conventional" (615). As Alexander explains, "because little narratives situate literate experiences within specific ecological contexts, they highlight the range of factors that shape our literacy and the stories we tell about our literate histories" (612). In this case, we are forcefully directed to notice that as a "specific ecological context," an American high school includes both

teachers, who often value and reward advanced literacy performance, and other students, who often stigmatize and discipline it. This is a set of conditions elided by the "master narrative" of literate success. Reading this narrative with attention to the focal distance between the protagonist and setting, and to the movement between development and crisis in narrative time, we can see how narrative not only constrains and reproduces cultural commonplaces, but describes and critiques them. When this character must "swallow his pride," he is not admitting that his parents' literacy was lacking, but that the social order surrounding him does not open an avenue for combining literacy like theirs with work like theirs.

Unlike Lobkowicz, Smith does step away, definitively, from her family of origin. But her turning point is also distinct from those in the literacy narrative canon. Smith's grandmother is quite well-informed about the areas of study available in higher education, and the identity work that students do in relation to those areas. In an attempt to enforce heteronormativity, she forbids her granddaughter to take any courses in women's studies, sending her to college already trained in a particular kind of institutional critique. Her stance contrasts significantly with Mike Rose's often-quoted account of his placement experience at Our Lady of Mercy: "We had no sense that Business Math, Typing, and English-Level D were dead ends . . . . How would someone like Tommy Rose, with his two years of Italian schooling, know what to ask? And what sort of pressure could an exhausted waitress apply?" (24). Smith's grandmother suffers from none of the confusion conveyed in this passage. She very knowledgeably rejects specific aspects of university study:

> *I could see the sadness in her eyes whenever I expressed a desire to be a self-sufficient and independent woman since these attributes resembled ideals perpetuated by feminism, which by nature rejected the desire and need for a man. I promised I wouldn't let them brainwash me, but my grandmother made me swear that I would never take a Women's Studies class because feminism is going to*

> *lead to the downfall of this country. Feminists hate men and they hate children; they would rather see them dead than alive, and they breed this same hatred in others. An increase in lesbianism has also been a result of the feminist movement, so I was to at all cost avoid this crowd.*

Narratively doubled, the promise she extracts from Smith points both forward and backward—both Smith and her grandmother know, in present of the narrating voice, what she will learn in that future women's studies class: how to come out of the closet herself:

> *My professor assigned a reading on lesbianism, and or the first time in my life I read about a woman who was living her life—happily—with her partner, daughter and pets. She wasn't angry, miserable, or evil in any way that I could tell. And it felt as though a warm ray of sunshine lit down on me for the very first time…By the end of the semester, I had come out as a lesbian to myself and to several close friends.*

This sequence of events takes one semester in narrative time, and a single page of text space; in her analysis, Smith calls it "playing with time." The effect is to present a compressed series of experiences, happening to a reader. Trained in a particular interpretive tradition, she looks for evidence of misery and evil in the work she has been assigned. Not finding it, she basks; she comes out. As a writer, Smith deploys Bal's "varied narrative duration" to exemplify Brandt's "divergent sponsorship." Her family, the church, and the university all sponsor literacy, but those influences diverge, creating a narrative crisis. Her account here follows neither the conventional master narrative of literacy nor the conventional master narrative of coming out (Bacon). Instead, working with narrative and literacy together produces a specific, lateral account of the relations between literacy sponsorship, identity, and change.

Like Lobkowicz, Smith presents an internalized narrative crisis. She writes "I broke my promise to my grandmother." Enrolling in women's studies, entering her name on a list, is the action here. There is no physical imagery of a door, threshold, frontier or boundary—not even a closet. Instead, the (almost) dead metaphor of the break happens in writing ("I enrolled"), and it breaks an abstraction, a promise.

Endings

Like their crises, the endings of these narratives present internalized and ambivalent conditions. O'Connor-Thomas evokes the limits of the narrator's power to resolve a lateral narrative when she uses dream images:

> *[A] dream I remember having frequently involved my father as a blind tornado, who was unknowingly destroying everything around him. It was up to me to restore his sight, and the only way to do this was to pour a bottle of ink over his head, or to write down everything that was happening very quickly.*

Ink, and writing, suggest the possibility of order and the desire for narrative control of an otherwise dizzying decline. She concludes her narrative with a return to her opening image of dementia:

> *To watch him struggle to read the simplistic lyrics from a Lady Gaga CD is completely ironic and heartbreaking. That said, my parents helped me make a creative space for myself, where I can explore the fictions of my life freely. My family is permanently entangled with my literacy experiences; I could never separate them from that…Even as he stands there looking at me without the language to express himself, I feel that my father knows this and in a way always knew that my writing experiences would tie us together for the rest of our lives.*

The protagonist repairs broken connections through writing, imagining a literate tie to a past father who no longer exists. Hers

is a lateral narrative, in which alternatives are reclaimed from the unconscious of history and represented together.

Similarly, Lobkowicz resolves his narrative through imagining the divergent narrative streams converging: "I look forward to a life that allows me to be both literary and social." Smith restrains her narrative to the single semester of the women's studies class: "by the end of the semester, I had come out as a lesbian to myself and several close friends." Like O'Connor-Thomas's imagined connection to a past father, these endings are internalized, abstract, and lateral, rather than economic, external, and linear.

Neither lateral narratives nor arguments about contemporary literacy can or should wrap up like a Victorian novel, distributing marriages and country estates. Thus we do not argue here that narratives can fix social problems just by being beautiful, formally playful, or interesting. Instead, we see such work with narrative as what Jesse Matz calls a "temporal project," in which "the temporal proficiencies of narrative texts…become those of the mind and of minds thinking and acting together—the forms of imagination necessary to rethink the singularities of time today and to subject its totalities to the diversity of narrative's provisional designs" (281-2). Narratives work with time, with the connections between past, present, and future, with the convergence and divergence of causes and effects. For students, still forming their literate lives, re-forming the past can change their stance toward the future. For teachers, seeing new stories can help us stop projecting old ones onto new students.

As they met the course objectives, then, producing interesting narratives and developing their conceptual competence with terms such as "sponsorship," students also articulated alternatives to the concepts presented in the course readings. Brandt presents a particular double-bind for many of her research subjects. Barbara Hunt, for example, was "learning to write for an economy she aspired to join while enjoying few of the powerful subsidies that the sponsors of that economy contributed to literacy learning" (43). Students like Lobkowicz, O'Connor-Thomas, and Smith, however, have different pasts, different aspirations for the future,

and different subsidies. They do not necessarily "aspire to join" the economy in the uncomplicated or uninformed way Hunt did. Their families, primary and secondary schools, coworkers in service jobs, and in Smith's case the Catholic Church, worked at cross purposes and caught these students in painful conflicts, but all three diverge from the mainstream at an unfamiliar angle. In Brandt's words, the "openings for literacy learning [are] multiple, various, yet also unstable and frustrating"(193). Narrative work and play help students articulate the multiplicity and instability, as well as the considerable emotional charge, inherent in literate life.

Notes

[1]Rhetorics from major publishers, such as the *Norton Field Guide to Writing*, include literacy narratives among the genres of writing first-year students are asked to produce. Literacy narratives by Richard Rodriguez, Mike Rose, and bell hooks are widely anthologized, and many instructors ask students to model personal narratives on theirs.

Works Cited

Alexander, Kara Poe. "Successes, Victims, and Prodigies: 'Master' and 'Little' Cultural Narratives in the Literacy Narrative Genre." *College Composition and Communication* 62.4(2011): 608–33. Print.

Bacon, Jen. "Getting the Story Straight: Coming Out Narratives and the Possibility of a Cultural Rhetoric." *World Englishes* 17.2(1998): 249–61. Print.

Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. 3rd ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009. Print.

Bawarshi, Anis. *Genre and the Invention of the Writer: Reconsidering the Place of Invention in Composition*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2003. Print.

Baynham, Mike. "Narrative as Evidence in Literacy Research." *Linguistics and Education* 11.2 (2000): 99–117. Print.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Practical Reason*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998. Print.

Brandt, Deborah. *Literacy in American Lives*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2001. Print.

Burke, Kenneth. "A Grammar of Motives." *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1990. 989–1018. Print.

Carpenter, William, and Bianca Falbo. "Literacy, Identity, and the 'Successful' Student Writer." *Identity Papers: Literacy and Power in Higher Education*. Ed. Bronwyn T. Williams. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2006. Print.

Chang, Leslie T. *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2009. Print.

Christopher, Renny. "Rags to Riches to Suicide: Unhappy Narratives of Upward Mobility: *Martin Eden, Bread Givers, Delia's Song*, and *Hunger of Memory*." *College Literature* 29.4 (2002): 79–108. Print.

Donehower, Kim, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen E. Schell. *Rural Literacies*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 2007. Print.

Douglass, Frederick, and Harriet Jacobs. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* & *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. New York: Modern Library, 2004. Print.

Franklin, Benjamin. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1986. Print.

Fox, Stephen. "Memories of Play, Dreams of Success: Literacy Autobiographies of First Year College Students." *English in Texas* 28.1 (1997): 17–26. Print.

Giroux, Henry. *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education*. London: Routledge, 1992. Print.

hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Heath, Shirley Brice. *Ways with Words: Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1983. Print.

Kincaid, Jamaica. *Annie John*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997. Print.

Matz, Jesse. "The Art of Time, Theory to Practice." *Narrative* 19.3 (2011): 273–294. Print.

Moore, Antonia. "I Was 30 Before I Learned to Read." *The Guardian* 29 Dec. 2007. Web. 22 June 2011.

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

Rose, Mike. "I Just Wanna Be Average." *Lives on the Boundary*. New York: Penguin, 1989. 11-38. Print.

Rose, Shirley K. "Reading Representative Anecdotes of Literacy Practice; Or, 'See Dick and Jane Read and Write!'" *Rhetoric Review* 8.2 (1990): 244–59. Print.

Ryden, Wendy A. "In the Public I: Rhetoric and Subjectivity in First-Person Writing." Dissertation. City University of New York, 2002. Print.

Sandlin, Jennifer A., and M. Carolyn Clark. "From Opportunity to Responsibility: Political Master Narratives, Social Policy, and Success Stories in Adult Literacy Education." *Teachers College Record* 111.4 (2010): 999–1029. Print.

Scott, J. Blake. "The Literacy Narrative as Production Pedagogy in the Composition Classroom." *Teaching English in the Two Year College* 24.2 (1997): 108–118. Print.

Soliday, Mary. "Translating Self and Difference through Literacy Narratives." *College English* 56 (1994): 511–26. Print.

Street, Brian. *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984. Print.

Stuckey, J. Elspeth. *The Violence of Literacy*. Portsmouth, NJ: Boynton/Cook Publishers Heinemann, 1991. Print.

Sullivan, Patricia A. "Composing Culture: A Place for the Personal." *College English* 66.1 (2003): 41–54. Print.

Williams, Bronwyn T. "Heroes, Rebels, and Victims: Student Identities in Literacy Narratives." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 47.4 (2003): 342–45. Print.

Yagelski, Robert P. *Literacy Matters: Writing and Reading the Social Self*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2000. Print.

Zitkala-Sa. *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings*. New York: Penguin, 2003. Print.