chapter one

Material Conditions of Identity Politics, *or* How Identity Matters in Public and Academic Discourses

> The grand theme of your career may be that the burden of representation is an illusion—a paradigm, par excellence, or ideological *mauvaise foi*—but that will only heighten your chagrin when you realize that it follows you everywhere like your own shadow. It isn't a thing of your making, and it won't succumb to your powers of unmaking—not yet anyway.
>
> —Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man*

THE DAY AFTER THE L.A. RIOTS a friend called me to cancel our lunch date. She couldn't, she explained, be with a white person today. My first reaction was empathetic; in the wake of such a violent occurrence within race relations, my race certainly seemed problematic. Why would an African American woman want to discuss such a volatile racial event with her white friend? Could I possibly understand her perspective if I tried? But, as good a liberal as I was trying to be in this situation, I was also somewhat confused. I wasn't just any white person—I was Donna, her long-standing friend. Why must she only see race and not our more local relationship? In the way only a white person could, I had hoped we were "past all that."

What I've come to realize, of course, is that few of us are "past all that," no matter how much we want to assume that civil rights and liberal, humanist political actions in the past thirty years have helped us exceed a politics based on race. If I didn't know this, recent events over the past decade were constantly there to remind me: the Million Man March, the resurgence of white power groups, the O. J. Simpson trial, the dragging death of James Byrd Jr. in Texas, the white reaction to the contention that African Americans were deliberately kept from voting or undercounted in Florida during the 2000 presidential election, the

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persistence of racial profiling despite its illegality, the death of an unarmed African American man by Cincinnati police, which occurred as I wrote this chapter. . . . Such occurrences, of course, come up not only as an issue of race, but of all identity politics categorized around the inescapable classifications of gender, class, race, and sexuality operating in U.S. society that continually appear in shocking events such as the Matthew Shepard murder, school shootings, the Brandon Teena horror, the popularity of groups like the Promise Keepers or Montana Freemen. I could go on, but any American citizen could create such a list. The specific list of events matters not so much as how clearly such occurrences speak to how we are certainly not "past" the politics of identity that have so characterized the end of the twentieth century—neither structurally, as in these national events, nor locally, as in the cancelled lunch date.

As startling as such images of violence and inequities are in U.S. society, identity politics also manifests itself in less visible ways. The way we perceive our identities as raced, classed, sexed, and gendered results in particular ways of viewing such events where communication seems to break down. For me, this point was made most clearly in the aftermath of the O. J. Simpson trial. As a feminist, it seemed perfectly logical that I should be critical of the verdict since the crux of the case was the death of a wife at the hands of her husband. In short, I understood the case within the precise gendered terms within which the legal and media discourses presented it. It was murder, plain and simple, and thus obviously wrong, another instance of men using physical strength to dominate women. Yet I found myself surprised that many of my feminist friends disagreed. I clearly recall disturbing conversations with two African American friends, in particular, as they tried to explain why they responded differently, seeing the verdict as a victory in the wake of the historical injustices suffered by African American men in the court system. While one of them was convinced O. J. was guilty, she felt gratified that O. J., as a wealthy man, could access the best lawyers to "beat the system" as so many whites do on a daily basis. His wealth, however, was another sticking point for me. As someone with a working-class background, the idea of "buying justice" rankled, indicating yet another instance of the privilege afforded the rich. In this way, categories of identity, both those we inhabited ourselves and how we understood others to play out in the cultural scene, became almost cards in a game of poker. We went back and forth in our conversation: Race trumped gender concerns for my friends, while gender trumped race for me. Class became the explanation for both injustice and justice, depending on the speaker. Identities functioned as immutably and substantially as if they were, indeed, as real as a deck of glossy playing cards. The ace of clubs could be nothing but the ace of clubs, so categorically did we discuss identity. At a certain point, we simply had to agree to disagree on our reading of the verdict; as hard as we tried to understand one another's reaction—and we did in most cases—that understanding did not lead to different conclusions.

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Both these conversations after the L.A. riots and the O. J. Simpson verdict encapsulate how inextricable identity politics are from issues of rhetoric. In particular, they illustrate that how we come to understand and perceive identity indelibly affects our ability to discuss such cultural issues, perhaps the most volatile at the dawn of a new century. In these conversations, identity took on two forms. In the case of the L.A. riots, my friend and I perceived identity as a category of body: Physically, we were either white or Black (cultural, discursive encodings for the physical, a way of viewing body within racial categories that, although constructed, also structured our vision). As a physical quality, difference seemed immutable. We presumed that such physical bodies meant we had irreconcilable viewpoints that should not be brought into the open or addressed because of the inevitable conflict they would create. In the second conversation, we made judgments less on the physical body but in ways intimately connected to the same. We assumed our differing experiences of culture led to interpretative strategies wherein our experience of the world and the influence of history upon that experience would inevitably remain dissimilar. Even recognizing the positions we took as culturally constructed (i.e., connected to historical events, personal experience, etc.), we assumed the identities constructed in these spheres to be authentic. If we inhabited a certain body, then we took on particular identities and viewpoints as a result. This authentic link between body and experience, further, helps explain the more physical difference marked in the first conversation: Seeing body as raced immediately meant different identities, different views, the need to end conversation to preserve our friendship. As my friend commented after the L.A. riots, "I don't think us being together today would be good for our friendship. I'm too angry at white people."

In making judgments based on our races, our classes, and our gender, we were doing much more than mere stereotyping. We assumed similarity (gender) and difference (race, class) to be authentically written on the body through experience. Our interpretations of the world, we presumed, were inevitably linked to how our bodies had been socialized to think in the groupings in which our experience was constructed. In short, we accepted the categorical nature of identity as we had inherited it. Even in our "enlightenment" about the cultural nature of identity, we still presumed its authenticity by concluding that experience would be differentially understood, made meaningful within the communities in which we had experienced it. And we weren't wrong, as the O. J. Simpson conversation attests. Frankly, only a white person had the luxury of seeing race as a nonissue, as if it need not, in our society, "color" my experience in a way it unavoidably does for people of color. By focusing on class and gender, my whiteness spoke. By neglecting class, my friends' financial privilege spoke. As women, none of us could ignore gender. We enacted our bodies quite well.

Memories of conversations and discussions that have taken these forms over the years greatly disturb me: They are nothing if not stoppages of cultural interaction wherein any potential to "see differently" is interrupted by a logic of

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the body connected to cultural authenticity that seemingly cannot be traversed. Such failures of communication are, pure and simple, impediments to rhetoric and its ability to work in favor of social change. If I thought this were only a personal issue, perhaps I would not be so disturbed, but we see such scenes play themselves out over and over again on the public stage in diverse and seemingly irreconcilable reactions to cultural events. Living in northern Colorado, for example, I am haunted by scenes that played out after Matthew Shepard's murder (he died in my town's only hospital). Debates over whether the killing could be considered a hate crime brought out tensions among class issues (did the two men kill Matthew because of anger over their economic plight?) and sexuality (do gays and lesbians "count" as a protected class?). Should class trump sexuality? Could sexuality be factored into legal discourses? Even the funeral became a site of identity politics as mourners had to pass a picket line made up of a religious right group bearing signs reading "Matthew in hell." On my own campus, one fraternity lost its charter for creating a homecoming float depicting a scarecrow tied to a fence post, obviously invoking how Shepard's body was found. The exclusively white, presumably heterosexual, middle-class members of the fraternity couldn't understand why their "joke" had such significant repercussions. The inability to read such events similarly is connected to the body no more clearly than in issues surrounding sexuality. The perception of too many is that the bodies of gays and lesbians exists in such difference that even liberals discuss sexual multiplicity in terms of "tolerance." Sexual difference is marked so strongly in our society, however, that tolerance need not lead to seeing the body as acceptable—as possessing the same rights to marry, adopt children, access health benefits for partners, or even drink in particular bars.

My experiences, no doubt, mirror the experiences of many other American citizens when identity politics makes itself so visible as in these recent events. Such is the scene of identity politics in this country that identity has become a contested site intersected by a seemingly endless number of discourses, by institutional discourses like law and government, experiential discourses of identity and body, economic discourses of business and socioeconomic class, consumerist discourses that allow us to "buy" ethnicity, media discourses that allow us to "travel" among cultures while not being affected, and so on. The sheer diversity of discourses surrounding identity impacts all aspects of our experience in the material realms of culture. Pulling at one thread seems to send a whole ball of yarn toppling toward our heads as we seek to understand how such events continually recur, and how we might prevent the continuing pervasiveness of oppression based in identity. Frustration emerges continually in seemingly unanswerable questions. Will we ever move beyond our current state of identity relations if we continually disregard difference or preserve its authenticity so strongly that no discussion can take place unless we *share* these same experiences? Whose experience should "trump" the other's? How do we talk with one another to enact social change within such a scene?

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It is precisely this cultural scene into which so many composition pedagogies seek to intervene. Yet given its complexity, are we up to the task? Public rhetorics lead to a seemingly inescapable identity politics that forestalls our attempt to discuss difference outside of the body. These discourses further impact our material experience of the world and pervade all our social interactions in everyday life, including how we construct, perceive, and enact our own identities materially and discursively. Such politics—both their embodiment and seeming resolution—are so deeply entrenched in our institutions and the material realms of culture that I increasingly fear our attempt to exceed such a politic in the composition classroom may be doomed to failure. Given that academic discourse functions not only in conjunction with these other cultural discourses but also as a prominent institutional discourse, what roles do we play in perpetuating as well as deconstructing the discourses by which we learn and enact identity? How is academic discourse embedded within the scene of identity politics and to what effect on student identity constitution? These are the questions this chapter seeks to take up by illustrating, as much as is possible, the way in which composition itself may be implicated in the very scene of identity politics it attempts to alter.

PUBLIC SPACES AND CLASSROOM SPACES

The realm of identity politics has become so central to rhetorical education that we have come to accept that acts of communication take place within and between identities (between and among representatives of discourse communities, or in contact zones created only by leaving our "safe houses") and, as such, that our attempts to address "public" audiences need to be radically refigured. While we may seek a public rhetoric that might focus on shared investments in certain forms of action, rather than alliances built upon similar identities (e.g., Wells; Harris, *Teaching*), those actions, of necessity, are similarly located in our interpretations of events, interpretations impossible to separate from identities. Like it or not, identity politics is the playing field of rhetoric at the beginning of a new century. A unitary public is no longer viable; rather the public might better be imagined as that which "require[s] multiple negotiations and positionings for every possible speaker" (Wells 333). One central task of rhetorical education, then, has become that of helping students highlight what those positions might be by providing opportunities where difference is no longer marginalized under a false concept of a unitary consensus about social norms but becomes a possible site of rhetorical action. The presumption is that a better understanding of the cultural nature of one's own positions will form the grounds through which a new public rhetoric might emerge where students better understand how to negotiate across, within, and between differences in attempts to create a more fully democratic public sphere. These two goals, however, frequently do not operate as well together as we might imagine. Instead, working to highlight

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difference frequently only exacerbates borders rather than encourages one to cross them because of how often our pedagogies incite public understandings of identity that actively work against a rhetoric of communicative action or border crossing.

In my past attempts to enact a contact zone pedagogy, for example, my students were just as likely to become more mired in their own positions—in precisely the ways they had come to understand them as a practice of everyday life—as they were to attempt to talk across and between positions. Although contact zone pedagogies are successful in that students come to recognize their experience as a *position* inscribed by culture, my attempts at contact only made those positions more visible and, paradoxically, more firmly entrenched as a result. Discussions often foregrounded the constructed nature of positions—for example, with comments continually prefaced by "as a white person" or "as an African American." Students claimed ownership of those positions so vociferously that African American students would claim whites could never "understand" a reading by Cornel West, or female students would tell male students they had no right to discuss an essay on women's experience. Seeing claims of positionality as a means of discussing difference did not lead to exceeding such positions to traverse boundaries. Frequently, just the opposite was the case. Adding critiques of power to this pedagogical mix helped some students see the role discourse and culture played in this constitution and occasionally exposed the multiplicity of positions available for interpreting culture. Yet, instead of engaging their new understanding of identity to alter social conditions, my students came to see such power relations as not only unavoidable but also necessary for living life in the social real. The cultural currency offered through capitalism, for example, became not a means of explaining oppression but more often a reason to maintain the status quo. If "moving up the social ladder" was the way to ensure material success, it should be pursued; further, it provided a route for others to escape oppression. Class politics were not opportunities for critique; instead, they explained how equality could be achieved.

Such rhetorical stoppages, even in pedagogies designed to transcend them, seem to imply that no matter how much "contact" occurs between bodies, borders will not be crossed. To use Wendy Hesford's terminology, the "autobiographical scripts" that culture makes available for understanding identities locate us in such ostensibly locked positions that borders can seem absolute. My teaching experiences have highlighted well the scripted responses engaged all too often by students. Assuming we should "get past" seeing a difference based in race, or that the only option is to stop engaging, to "agree to disagree," or that wealth will solve all ultimately reflect many of the strategies my students, when discussing issues of difference, seem to bring up consistently. Ranging from the comments that we are "all the same" (and thus difference should not matter) to an acceptance of difference as indissoluble, yet equal (usually expressed almost precisely as an Arby's slogan: "different is good"), to the assumption that class

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mobility will alter identity politics, my students, like me and my friends, reflect the cultural rhetorics available in the public sphere for discussing identity.

Although we may wish to see such student reactions as failures to engage the contact zones of the classroom, we also have to recognize that such reactions have been well learned in the material realms of U.S. culture. Emphasizing student identity, even when exposing its cultural and ideological nature, does not always allow us to predict what students might bring to the classroom. Rather, it is just as likely that students will invoke the understandings of identity they already use to understand themselves as part of the material world; that is, the public rhetorics of identity that continually categorize bodies such that a particular body is presumed to understand its experience of the world in particular ways. In the logic of identity politics, my white body encodes a variety of assumptions about what I've experienced, how I think, and my position of power in culture. Even if I try to exceed those presumptions when I speak, my "body" is read in ways that counter such attempts. In a contact zone, my body speaks as loudly as does my rhetoric.

Although discourse theory suggests that identities are occupied in more multiple ways than these examples indicate, identities are too often acted upon as if they were authentic and unified within the cultural categories by which we explain our experience to ourselves and others. While we may wish to enact these multiple subjectivities in favor of other kinds of discursive action, the way we *perceive* identity frequently prevents such an intervention into culture. These perceptions may be recognized as just that—cultural constructions—but in material interactions, in the social real in which we operate on a daily basis, such perceptions are frequently enacted much differently. Written into our thoughts and feelings, our bodies encode our perceptions of who we are and can be in the world. Rather than only the locus of culture—that which contains the discursive—bodies function, as Peter McLaren explains, as "the central relay point—the *point d'appui*—in the dialectical reinitiation of meaning and desire" (*Predatory* 63). The body, that is, experiences and enacts culture as more than a discursive relation, but rather as a confluence of meaning, desire, and affect literally written into the flesh. We learn our identities in discursive relations that mediate experience; we perceive our bodies in their material relation to the world via such discursively constructed identities. Experience and discursivity work in a dialectical relation. McLaren summarizes this move quite succinctly: "Since all experience is the experience of meaning, we need to recognize the role that language plays in the production of experience. You don't have an experience and then search for a word to describe that experience. Rather, language helps to constitute experience by providing a structure of intelligibility or mediating device through which experiences can be understood" (*Predatory* 128). This mediation is, further, inseparable from bodies as a material element of experience. How we understand our body's relation to identity (the physical and social markings by which identities are encoded in the social real) inevitably influences both our

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experience itself and which languages we see as most available to understanding that experience.

We see these mutually embedded relations clearly in my reactions to the O. J. Simpson verdict. As a white, working-class woman, my experiences of the world as a body are inseparable from how I perceive these positions. While my whiteness allowed me to ignore race, the experience of the past—and the languages of economic oppression applied to those experiences—could not be separated from how I viewed a material event. Although class is arguably less written on the body, it is enfleshed in multiple ways in my experience. Affectively, it manifests itself in the despair, anger, and violence that frequently accompany economic oppression. Such affective reactions result from the investment of desire in consumer culture, in the presumption of class mobility, in the capitalist credo that class can be exceeded, even while material conditions vociferously cry that it cannot. Physically, it appears most vividly in my images of work uniforms, sweating bodies, and the physical disabilities manual labor has written on my family members' bodies. Even as I live an ostensibly middle-class existence in the present, I bear this history with me through choice, because of the value I place on maintaining social relations with family and friends who still live a working-class existence. I invest in a working-class identity, that is, as a way of publicly announcing social allegiances to historical relations of oppression, to the local experience of my past, and to the bodies I most value.

In this way, our understandings of identity are intimately connected not only to our own body—and how it has been encoded by others—but also our relationships and investments in social relations. We may theorize identities as multiple, but our students do not live only in our classrooms. Rather, any attempt to locate agency in difference will be continually affected by our students' interactions in culture as it is *lived* in material interactions with others that may not always be accounted for in our approaches. This is not only an issue of inequitable power relations enacted upon the body in the material world but also one of affect and connection, of the social relations we *need* to maintain our social lives. As Keith Gilyard has pointed out, the challenge we offer to concepts of authenticity may not be enough to impact the significant influence of the material relations in which such authentic identities are learned.

> . . . academic postmodernism, including that which gets valorized in composition classes, often gets stuck in passive relativism, just a classroom full of instability. It's useful at times to complicate notions of identity, but primary identities operate powerfully in the world and have to be productively engaged. I think King had it right, for example, when he dreamed of Black kids and White kids holding hands (219). There are whole realities attached to those Black hands and White hands that have been insufficiently dealt with to date and won't be if we insist on prematurely converting King's dream to one of hybridity kids holding hands with junior border crossers. When we engage in discussion about fluidity, we ought

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> to keep in mind the question of who can afford to be anchored to a focus on the indeterminate. ("Literacy" 270)

Although identity may be socially constructed through discourse as our invocations of postmodern and cultural theories assume, there are, indeed, "whole realities attached to those Black hands and White hands" that ultimately influence how those identities are experienced. We don't live identity as discourse; we live identity within bodies.

This interaction of bodies and identities in the contact zone also helps explain why so many of our pedagogies do not achieve their intended results. Although I might encourage students to see identity as fluid, as constantly changing and able to cross borders, their sense of themselves as bodies, understood within the particular languages our culture makes available for understanding self, continually reasserts the cultural premise that undergirds so much of our society's identity politics: body = experience = thought. Within public rhetorics, identities are not fluid but unified within particular cultural experiences. We are presumed to have similar experiences to other bodies "like us" that are understood within similar community discourses for explaining experience. Through such logic, my students firmly identify with particular cultural positions ("as a white person") that seem to bespeak an entire identity. Even as students come to critique the presumptions they make about identity's link to raced, sexed, and gendered bodies, such interventions do little to disturb their sense that their own bodies signify and contain who they are as thinking, feeling, desiring beings. My body is how I perceive myself. I have lived in this body for years; it is this body with whom others interact, and through this body that I construct the social relations that sustain me in the material world. My body is *not,* assuredly, an abstract site that merely serves to give boundary to the multiple discourses impacting my material interactions with the world. There is a substance to body, my students continually remind me, that is not perceived as fluid or discursive. Rather, we live within social relations with others that are perceived as *bodily* interactions.

In this way, our rhetorics and experiences of identity work tautologically. We enact cultural positions in particular ways because we have both constituted and experienced our own selves in those ways. Those positions then produce, almost unceasingly, new rhetorics of identity always limited by the ways we already perceive them. The complicating factor, however, is that such reliance upon authenticity claims does not *appear* to impact one's concern for social justice. My students are not reactive in their willingness to recognize oppression or their desire to imagine a better world. Their reactions, that is, cannot be simplistically read as ideological interpellation that facilely accepts current conditions. Rather, their understandings of self and difference, forged in public rhetorics, allow for both thinking categorically *and* the assumption that we can exceed those categories. My students may *act* as bodies, but they understand equity as exceeding materiality. Recall that my students also argue for equity

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through concepts of "shared humanity," "acceptance of diversity," or "equalizing power relations through capital." In such arguments, lived experience of the world can be transcended (shared humanity), the power relations such experience invokes negated (acceptance), or inequities addressed easily through current systems (economics). There is a clear conflict here between how my students explain the world in equity arguments and how they experience it categorically, a conflict that emerges from public rhetorics that attempt to both recognize difference and exceed it simultaneously. Public rhetorics, that is, remind us that while we live in bodies, the way to exceed difference is to simultaneously recognize difference and ignore it.

The apparent contradiction of an equalizing rhetoric and a body that cannot exceed difference is one that easily hides its potential hegemony. Rhetorically, we can invest in equity arguments where difference does not "matter"; however, in the social real—in the fabric of everyday life—we are consistently reminded that body does indeed matter. It matters affectively in forming alliances with others; it matters experientially in making "our individuality" corporeal; it matters materially in what rights we are accorded and what threat our bodies are exposed to. What we lack is a rhetoric that can discuss such differences without becoming locked into authenticity claims that prevent dialogue, ignore power relations, and attempt to negate history. We are caught, that is, in a world where rhetoric and the material are seemingly opposed. Rhetorical tropes of "diversity," "humanity," and "class mobility" seem viable means of impacting the material because they allow us to ignore the very grounds of difference we see and feel in oppressive identity relations. There is a clear mismatch between how we understand identity, even when we recognize its cultural construction, and how we live it.

Like any cultural moment, we have inherited this seemingly inescapable paradox from history, most particularly from the highly visible identity politics of the 1960s and 1970s. In the wake of civil rights actions taken up on behalf of African Americans, Latinos, women, gays and lesbians, and myriad other groups, it has become almost impossible not to perceive self—to understand self and its possibilities for being in the world—within the categories we have inherited from such actions. Given the cultural context in which such movements sought to intervene—the assumption of equal opportunity and common humanity organized to privilege only a certain identity (the white, straight, middle-class, male)—such a new understanding of difference was undeniably the appropriate response. Disrupting how we understood identity as irrelevant to action upon the world within such a historical moment could only be accomplished through an attention to collective politics, to the attempt to group difference in order to highlight inequities, while simultaneously moving toward the same telos of universal rights for all. Such an intervention has been successful on many fronts, ending oppressive conditions of institutional segregation by race, creating new laws attempting to erase discrimination, moving many women

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into the workforce, and so on. While resulting in significant advances for many groups—while others still struggle to achieve just these gains (e.g., gay rights' actions in favor of similar protections under the law)—we also have inherited an understanding of identity (our own and others') that may prove disabling to the dream of a fully enfranchised democracy, rather than a legal mandate that has been unable to alter social conditions. Women still earn less than men for the same work; people of color still disproportionately make up more of the poor; the middle class continues to shrink as fewer and fewer people possess more and more of the wealth in our country; and most significantly, people still are harassed, molested, attacked, and killed because of their race, gender, and sexuality.

Ironically, what we have inherited might be understood most pointedly as a rhetoric of authenticity created through our attempts to respect diversity while maintaining allegiances to universal values (reason, justice), economies (capitalism), and the institutions meant to ensure their perpetuation (law, business, government, education). When we begin thinking diversity, we acknowledge that different cultural experiences, and their encoding in the languages by which we understand experience, come to create diverse cultures within American society. This move to a multicultural society, which attempts to preserve diversity within the ideological structures of a particular nation, encourages a respect for difference within sameness. That is, we recognize different cultural ways of knowing and attempt to count them as equal, while still preserving a link to a national consciousness that we might all be said to share. Events such as the O. J. Simpson trial, however, expose how difficult our attempt to walk this line can be when competing interpretations vie for prominence. Consistently, such events highlight a recurring national issue: how cultural difference can be maintained simultaneously with an allegiance to social institutions that mandate a more unified identity for a nation's citizenry. As a country, we are consistently pulled in two seemingly opposed directions, toward sameness and difference simultaneously. Little wonder our students' discussion of identity politics seeks to both respect diversity and assert common humanity simultaneously with little attention given to the power relations that might make such goals impossible.

This pull toward a unitary public simultaneous with attempts to respect diversity results in a seemingly endless tension between our attempts to achieve a social consensus and not marginalize any perspectives in the construction of that consensus. As John Trimbur argued so long ago, however, rarely is it possible to achieve consensus without marginalizing others ("Consensus"). Rather than creating a social scene in which difference is respected and valued, discussions of identity presume an authentic link between body, identity, and experience that has resulted in a continual ranking of identities. Once something is appropriately categorized, it becomes much easier to order those categories such that certain identities, whose perspectives most mirror that of dominant discourses and institutions, are continually placed "on top" under the rubric of a unified consensus of rationality and public good. While identity politics has

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given us a language to discuss such moves, it also provides the premises by which such discussions take place, ensuring a replication of power relations wherein some voices speak more loudly than others and some perspectives have more currency than others. Within the goal of sameness, difference is consistently refigured as a battlefield of the public good versus personal or community interest. Recent conservative responses to identity politics reflect this tension clearly insomuch as such responses link claims of discrimination to personal agendas (e.g., accusations of "playing" the race or gender card), or more to the point, as impediments to the pursuit of commonly held goals. The backlash against affirmative action policies and feminism are apt cases on point.

Within such rhetorics, power hides. The material facticity of being in the world continually undercuts our goals of sameness and difference as coexisting impulses, but our rhetorics remain to assure us that the mismatch between how we live in the world and how we explain it need not be examined. By seemingly resolving the tensions wherein we act categorically but presume identities need not be categorical, such rhetorics ensure our experience of the world need not impact our understandings of equity. The paradox of difference and sameness becomes resolved through the discursive means offered to explain contradictory experiences of the real world. We may feel oppression, but we can explain it. We may enact self as if borders were absolute, but our rhetorics are there to assure us they can be crossed. Thus, I, like my students, can understand why my friend wants to cancel our lunch date, but still feel that we should be able to get beyond those very differences that I enact myself in response to the Simpson trial.

It is in the tension between these two impulses—toward sameness and difference—that we find the confluence of multiple institutional, media, and economic discourses in which our students are asked to forge their identities. While consumerism may benefit from diversity, capitalism works more smoothly within hierarchies and complete investments in the economic system. Although social programs and initiatives (e.g., affirmative action, antidiscrimination laws) may seek equality, the self-same assumption of rational means by which equality can be reached is embedded in a legal system that, by definition, cannot recognize difference unless it is already categorized (i.e., "protected classes"). The integrity of the "one-man-one-vote" society is weighed against accusations of misconduct in Florida. Sameness and difference collide over and over again as impulses toward multiplicity and national good continually vie for prominence in local situations. Much the same occurs in our classrooms as we attempt rhetorics of multiple identities within an institution whose function is to ensure the continuation of the meritocracy, providing a means to equal opportunity while simultaneously rank ordering merit for potential employers. We seek to enact the agency of multiple identities while simultaneously offering new identities through our teaching of accepted literacies that are best able to operate within the institutions of power in our society.

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COMPOSITION AND IDENTITY POLITICS: TRANSFORMATIVE AGENCY OR IDENTITY FORMATION?

This seeming paradox of difference within sameness is one in which composition is deeply implicated. Composition has consistently attempted to take seriously the mandate of equality through a shared language while simultaneously respecting difference and diversity. In its function as the cultural institution dedicated to ensuring meritocracy, higher education in this country is inextricably involved in debates over identities and how they come to gain power. The same can be said of the teaching of writing, dating back almost to the onset of language education in public schooling in the United States. Not surprisingly, insofar as composition studies is located in and responds to the same social exigencies, our pedagogies reflect a historical trajectory of shifting understandings of identity similar to those in the public sphere. Composition's theories of identity and language attempt to negate the more material affects of identity politics and the institutional power in which our pedagogies are located. In sum, our own history reveals a similar attempt to disassociate the discursive from the material, the rhetorical from the real, and, most significantly, the institution from power relations.

Traditionally, American education, more often than not, has been viewed as supporting an egalitarian and liberatory agenda that smoothly intersects with our cultural mythos of democracy and individualism. Hence, some educational historians interpret the move to public education in America as a way to extend social benefits to the lower social classes. Under the rubric of "equal opportunity," education provided the venue for any American to live the American dream. Not surprisingly, this "egalitarian turn" in education, as Andrea Lunsford points out, also affected a change in the nature of rhetorical education. Lunsford ties this change to the development of land grant institutions through the Morrill Act of July 2, 1862:

> The land grant universities welcomed a much broader spectrum of the American public than had heretofore had access to higher education, and these students were by and large untrained in Latin and Greek—the traditional languages of the Academy. As the vernacular slowly became the language of choice in all universities, instruction in composition emerged as a powerful means of immersing students in the skillful use of English, at least partially in the belief that the "right and proper" use of the English language was requisite to participation in the intellectual and economic life of the republic. ("Nature" 6)

Thus rhetorical education prepared students, or at least gave them the language, to become part of the dominant culture, providing them with the means for social acceptance within that culture.

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Although expressed in democratic terms, rhetorical education also functioned as a primary form of acculturation, creating identities through the pursuit of a monolingual body politic with similar investments in supporting dominant cultural institutions and values. The discourse taught in schools could be read as an inherent good if education is viewed as providing the linguistic resources with which to become an active member of a valued society. To achieve this status, the student not only learns academic discourse but also becomes a member of the dominant culture through her facility with its language. In this way, language education became linked to instruction in dominant culture, to the desire for a national consciousness characterized by a similar language, worldview, and ideology, learned simultaneously with a discourse that would inculcate such an identity and ensure its reproduction in the public sphere should the student "merit" entrance into positions of power. In its own historical trace, composition, that is, becomes mired in structural relations of power; its institutional location connects writing instruction inextricably to the production of the acceptable ideological citizen, worker, and consumer. In this way, composition in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries participated in the public consensus about identity: Equality could best be achieved through sameness, albeit a route to sameness offered only to men of a particular class and ethnicity.

While composition's history is undoubtedly one of teaching "sameness," the beginning of what we might call modern composition studies, brought to the forefront during Open Admissions (historically contemporaneous with Civil Rights), also speaks to our concerns with difference. Early on such attempts to enfranchise new groups entering the university resulted in pedagogies aimed at accommodation and acculturation meant to give students the means to compete within the meritocracy through the "sameness" of their language use (see Lu and Horner). Learning academic discourse, that is, served as the precursor to university success, and thus the material and social benefits a university education was meant to confer. The public attention at this time to the "literacy crisis," for which such admissions policies were partially blamed, mandated such an approach. Yet, as Patricia Harkin and John Schilb have pointed out, such a crisis also resulted in greater attention to the cultural backgrounds of students and a critique of the function of school. Through the influence of work in the '70s, such as Mina Shaugnessy's groundbreaking approach to error or resolutions like "Student's Right to Their Own Language," we came to recognize the inextricable relationship between language use and cultural identity. Social involvement became the foremost model for explaining reading and writing ability, encouraging us to define literacy as "a growing metacommunicative ability—an increasing awareness of and control over the social means by which people sustain discourse, knowledge, and reality" (Brandt 32). By acknowledging the connection between discursive and social practice, we also recognized the ways in which this literate practice reflects the culture (i.e., knowledge, worldview, and relationship to re-

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ality) embodied in the social relations and histories of various communities: the social real as it is lived in local contexts.

In response to such realizations and under the influence of a variety of social discourse theories, pedagogies of the 1980s moved to more liberal approaches based in discourse communities supported by significant research into multiple literacies (e.g., Heath, Shirley Brice; Street). With such pedagogies, we hoped to explain how sameness and difference might exist simultaneously. We could teach academic discourse as a precursor to meritocratic entitlement, while simultaneously acknowledging and valuing the diverse communities from which our students hailed (e.g., Bartholomae; Bruffee; Bizzell, "What"; Dean). Connecting literacy practice to community, identity, materiality, and ideology, however, also led to some disturbing questions about the effects of teaching academic discourse itself. If identity was forged through discursive-material interactions in a given community, then how is identity constituted when students begin to operate in many communities? Recognizing the connection between ideology, discourse, and identity, in sum, raised the question of how the varying power relations among discourse communities within the social real might affect the ongoing process of identity formation. Reflecting on the significant status academic discourse holds in culture, Patricia Bizzell perhaps encapsulates this concern best when she considers that academic discourse could rewrite identity in favor of dominant culture, even within a curriculum acknowledging the multiple discourse practices and worldview of other communities ("What").

Such a concern, however, occupied composition scholars for only a relatively short time, as we quickly backed off from the implications such a question provoked. In our concern for difference, we came to occlude our implication in producing sameness that characterizes so much of composition's history. We held out hope, that is, that sameness and difference could be pursued simultaneously, lest we risk questioning how composition's democratic agenda—now refigured as the preservation of multiple identities—might impact the meritocratic value of learning academic discourse, and thus our expertise in and commitment to teaching that discourse. Even Bizzell, in the very essay where she raises this question, backs off from its potential implications. While Bizzell admits that academic discourse, because of its societal status, "makes a strong bid to control all of a student's experience," she still claims that the goal of pedagogy is to make students "bicultural," able to move between an academic and a "home" discourse ("What" 299, 298). Even though she concedes the power of academic discourse and refers to the school "as an agent of cultural hegemony," Bizzell continues to argue that the dominance of a certain discourse community does not have to equal a conversion ("Cognition" 237). With the influence of Joseph Harris's Braddock award-winning essay, "The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing," the conviction that composition could honor both difference and sameness simultaneously became readily accepted. In this essay Harris criticizes those who describe acclimation to academic discourse as a process of being "born again"

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(16) by arguing that such a description falsely polarizes the academic community and other "common" communities. Instead, Harris argues that acclimation to academic discourse is not an initiation but an addition to a student's already complicated language. Under this view, composition came to see the boundaries of communities as constantly shifting, while individuals were imagined to "cross and recross" boundaries continually, "joining other communities one moment, returning to a 'home' community the next" (Porter 216).

Despite evidence that such border crossing is not always possible (e.g., Brodkey, "Literacy Letters;" Balester; Malinowitz), the conclusion to this 1980s debate now infuses most composition theory. Academic discourse came to be seen as providing an "addition" to an already complicated identity that was written within multiple experiences and languages such that the writing subject could, in the '90s, be reenvisioned as a site of multiple and conflicting discourses (see Faigley). Composition came to see the classroom as a space of multiple, interacting discourses where the fluidity of the subject could exceed its given cultural inscriptions to become a critical agent capable of rewriting culture. Relying on the fluid subject and the multiplicity of discourse did not negate the concerns about power evident in the 1980s. Instead, multiple power relations became the precise means by which agency could be achieved and ideological interpellation resisted. Berlin and Vivion summarize this point well: While writing "may result in a simple accommodation to hegemonic codes, . . . it usually involves a negotiated transaction and even resistance. In other words, cultural codes are rarely totally predictable in their effects on lived experience" (x). Because all local contexts are overdetermined by multiple discourses interacting within a given moment, a single writing context produces a variety of subject positions that have the potential to both interpellate the subject ideologically and/or provide spaces wherein that inscription can be resisted. In this view, the contexts available for writing subjects are probably best imagined as "leaky sites of struggle and ongoing negotiation where no outcomes can be guaranteed in advance" (Trimbur, "Postmodern" 130). Enacting the possibilities for agency, as a result, relies on the subject's ability to see culture as "leaky" by mobilizing the multiplicity he brings to any cultural production, including acts of writing.

While community-based pedagogies focused on "preserving" difference as a site equal to academic discourse (a diversity concept of multiculturalism), more recent approaches focus on bringing "people out of their various 'safe houses' and into a 'contact zone'" (Harris, *Teaching* 120) imagined as a site of conflict (Pratt) or negotiation (Harris) where multiplicity could be engaged. Other pedagogies take this premise of the multiple subject beyond contact to a critique of culture wherein students learn to reread the cultural scene in favor of social transformation (e.g., Berlin; Fitts and France) or reread their own identities as constructed in particular historical and ideological relations as a way of engaging the agency of the subject (e.g., Hesford; Brodkey, *Writing*). In these pedagogies, our chief concern about identity is activating its potential for agency, its poten-

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tial to exceed particular discursive inscriptions in favor of action leading to social transformation. Although the route to such agency is hotly debated, our concerns for social empowerment have become aligned with the ability to critique culture and activate difference in favor of rewriting the world. Power relations are central to such concerns, yet the power of academic discourse to constitute identity introduced as a central issue in the 1980s has largely been elided by a focus on the fluidity of subjectivity.

Examining our current focus on social agency within history and the social events to which it is reacting, however, makes it difficult to relegate questions of identity constitution to theoretical presumptions about its additive effect on student identity. Rather, in this admittedly cursory and deliberately interpreted history of composition, we see mirrored the continual attention to sameness and difference that characterizes much of our current public rhetorics about identity politics. Since the inception of modern composition studies, the teaching of writing is figured as a site of *both* sameness and difference: as the site of learning national consciousness, while simultaneously attempting to negotiate the minefield of contemporary identity politics through attention to the variety of cultures that make up this nation. Given these connections between public rhetorics of identity and the goals of composition pedagogy, I have to ask whether our current reliance on the variety of identities and the mixed, contested array of discursive positions available to our students is an appropriate intervention into such a cultural scene. Identities are, as so many have theorized, multiply constructed in varying relations of power, yet can we presume that identities forged within such power relations can be felt and enacted as sites of agency given the significant influence of more material interactions in the social real and the public rhetorics through which we are encouraged to understand identities?

TEACHING WRITING/TEACHING IDENTITY: DISCURSIVE IDENTITIES IN MATERIAL RELATIONS

What guides this question is a concern that we may have neglected power's more material effects in our search for agency within identity and culture. Composition's focus on the fluidity of subjectivity, that is, reveals a deep entrenchment in discourse theory that, while seeking to take the material into account, relegates the materiality of social life to secondary status. The discursive encodes the material, writes the body, and thus, the way to impact the material is to analyze discourse, to see oneself as a discursive construction, and to alter one's rhetoric to change the world. While I am in complete sympathy with these objectives, I worry that we may have also created a causality loop (discourse = the "real") that can lock us into a binary relation between the discursive and the material, limiting our ability to understand our own role in identity construction and our students' experiences as body in the material world. Privileging discourse over the material, in short, exposes not only a

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potential inability to intervene into our student's understandings of identity but also the material role academic discourse plays in helping create the very hierarchies to which our students are subjected.

Theories focused on the discursive construction of subjectivity, for example, are too easily undercut by the ways in which our students experience identity authentically in material relations and the categorical public rhetorics through which they are encouraged to understand that experience. Multiple identities, we must always remember, result as much from unequal power relations in history (and in the present) as from the panoply of signs and discourses that characterize our post-Fordist, consumerist society. Although constructed via discourse, there is also a material history to that discourse that is inseparable from body. As Stuart Hall puts it so succinctly, "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves in, the narratives of the past" (qtd. in Gates xiv). Part of that positioning is physical. Skin corporeally connects us to the past: "Different shades, textures, and feel of skin" serve as "testimony both to the subjective state of individuals and to the histories that have molded them; of fair Aboriginal skin as a document of the planned erasure of black skin; of the muddied skin of the white working class"(Probyn, "Eating" 87). We cannot escape skin, sexual organs, or the way discourses read our bodies through the lens of history. Such identities, as a result, are continually subjected to unequal power relations as part of everyday experience. Presuming we can exceed these positions discursively through multiple subjectivities deflects attention from these inequities, aligning composition theory with public rhetorics that seek to disassociate power from equity. Although certainly not a "common humanity" argument—in fact, its antithetical position is what allows it to seem such a positive social intervention—the presumption of multiplicity functions similarly to focus attention on the *mobility* of the subject rather than its ability to be fixed within structural power relations.

Although identities may be multiple, they are perceived and enacted categorically and authentically with significant material effects. Henry Louis Gates Jr. illustrates the paradox of the constructed nature of identity versus how it is lived and enacted quite clearly:

> "One is not born a woman," Beauvoir famously wrote; and neither are you born a man, or a black, or the conjunction of the two. But what good does *that* do you? You can rebel against the content of an identity you didn't get to choose—and yet badly stitched vestments are not easily cast off. . . . Hence the appeal of that comforting old lie: I'm not a black *x* (poet, president, whatever), I'm an *x* who happens to be black. Alas circumstance won't have it so. Nobody happens to be black: this is a definitional truth. For a world in which blackness is elective or incidental—a world where you can "happen to be" black—is a world without blackness, a world, that is, where the concept has been dismantled or transfigured beyond recog-

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> nition./ So you might inveigh against, say, the ideology of authenticity, but in some measure you participate in it all the same. (xvii, original emphasis)

If one's body is coded as raced within the social real (or gendered, classed, or categorized in myriad other ways), one is inevitably forced by the reactions of others to inhabit such categories authentically. Within a society that codes identities categorically, perceptions of one's own identity cannot escape such encoding. Our rhetorics of identity, in short, *are* us, and thus, inevitably affect our attempt to act upon the world and define self. While multiple options exist, we do not necessarily perceive them within the structures imposed upon our identity within the material world.

Similarly, while power may function in multiple relations, it is just as often felt, enacted, and perceived structurally as part of everyday life. Theoretically, I may want to dispute the more structural effects of power, but the ways identities are treated and enacted does not allow such a vision. Just ask a single mother thrown off welfare, or a woman sexually harassed by her boss, or a young Black man "profiled" by the police whether power relations of identity aren't experienced structurally quite often. Seen as part and parcel of such a cultural scene, the interaction of structural and poststructural concepts of power are no less relevant to how we might imagine the power academic discourse wields through its institutional role in the social real. As Hesford argues, there is a danger in "romantic[izing] the primacy of the local" and seeing "local sites as independent from larger power structures, social relations, and discourses" (xxii–xxiii). One of those dangers may lie in assuming such local relations can obviate the potentially oppressive function academic discourse may play in constituting identity. Our theories, that is, again correspond with public rhetorics, attempting to disconnect our material location—in institutions of school—from the normalizing function schooling is purported to serve. Through our focus on discursive theories, for example, we are assured that occupying positions inscribed through academic discourse need not affect the multiple subject's agency. Instead, we hold out hope for difference within sameness, enacted by the very students who seek to gain the material benefits schooling can accord. Never innocent about power, composition still tries to situate itself in opposition to the very institution that forms its material function in culture, relying upon the instability of power relations to ameliorate our potentially more oppressive role in identity politics. That our pedagogies' attempts to see identity as performative and rhetorical could easily be undercut by the larger power structure in which schooling functions, however, must be taken seriously. Far from a successful intervention into such a scene, composition's focus on the fluidity of subjectivity could easily be co-opted by public rhetorics as yet another assurance that difference can exist simultaneously with sameness. Connected as it is to public rhetorics of equality through class mobility, academic discourse is well positioned to seem the "way out" of inequitable power relations while simultaneously maintaining one's primary alliances.

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Ignoring the potential that our pedagogies might also be creating identities in accordance with the options available in public discourses, frankly, concerns me a great deal. I fear our quick turn away from these questions in the 1980s may not have been only a theoretical turn, but one in which we could, albeit unwillingly, absent ourselves from literacy's reproductive function in favor of seeing ourselves as supporters of difference. In making such a claim, I do not want to negate the significant contribution that such pedagogies have made in offering multiple ways to intervene into identity politics. In our fervor for creating equitable and critical pedagogies, however, I suspect that we may also have unwittingly allowed ourselves an "out" whereby our own role in constructing identities continuous with dominant ideology may have been given short shrift. By attending so closely to questions of agency and social transformation, composition has not looked closely enough at the more oppressive function academic discourse might serve. If we imagine students' experience of identity as a body who desires and experiences in both discursive *and* material interactions, however, we also have to acknowledge that the fluidity of the subject could potentially be undermined by its experience as body and social being. Social being is negotiated structurally even if individual bodies interact locally. Agency may be possible in the complex relations local contexts provide, but how we em-body identity is never *only* local; it is also always already a fact of social being. This connection between material relations and identity formation highlights two potential challenges to presumptions of agency in composition theory: (1) the effect of the institution's role in the social real on how students constitute identity, and (2) the effect of social relations in the material world on how one perceives the potential agency of cultural difference.

EM-BODYING IDENTITY AND QUESTIONS OF AGENCY IN THE SOCIAL REAL

In complicating identity through redefining culture as an ongoing process, discourse as multiple, and the subject as fluid, composition has admittedly attempted to exceed its own social location and productively intervene into identity politics. Further, I am convinced that at times identities function in precisely the ways we have theorized, as researchers like Hesford and Brodkey demonstrate brilliantly. I am convinced, that is, that writers do "struggle with inherited social narratives of self" and students do "negotiate their identities in response to perceived power relations" such that sites of resistance can be created out of even potentially oppressive discourses and students can redefine their identities in acts of self-agency and use such agency to affect material conditions (Hesford xxxiii). If difference always operates alongside sameness, however, I think we also have to ask whether the influence of "sameness" in institutional rhetorics might have an equivalent influence over identity formation and agency.

There is a limit, of course, to how much of this complex relation among the material and discursive elements of culture we might take on as part of

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composition pedagogy. What I argue in the rest of this text, however, is that the central issue with which we concern ourselves is quite appropriately the agency of our students. Yet before we can productively support such agency, we need to examine more closely how identity is constituted within academic discourse. Discursive understandings of agency need to be tempered by the way the structural and postmodern interact in material relations. Given the social status of academic discourse and its links to other institutions of power, we must ask what effect forging identities in academic discourse has on how students come to understand, and choose among, the various identities culture makes available to them. Only through a clearer understanding of how students negotiate the construction of identity—within social relations, as bodies in material interactions, and as desiring beings—as part of their instruction in academic discourse might we, then, take on questions of agency more directly.

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