Chapter One

Entering the Pensieve

Toward the end of the class I asked the students if "the opportunity to get rid of the niggas" was a possible justification for the trade. It is the first time I used that term this semester. It slipped off the tongue pretty easily, especially as (at that point) I was pretty frustrated at them being firmly entrenched in their Whiteness in all its erased glory. Perhaps they were a bit scared to voice opinions, even after repeated comments from me that it's ok to disagree with me, that it would not count against them. Moreso, though, it is Whiteness as absence: don't see racial implications, would vote no 'cause it's "the right thing to do."

—ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD NOTE, 1997

The classroom is one of the most dynamic work settings precisely because we are given such a short amount of time to do so much. To perform with excellence and grace teachers must be totally present in the moment, totally concentrated and focused.

—BELL HOOKS, *Teaching Community*

Should potentially explosive language and perspectives such as those expressed in the ethnographic field note be used in introductory college courses? What happens when teachers become (perhaps) *too* totally present in the moment, in an effort to more fully engage students on multiple levels, as I did in the field note regarding the film *Space Traders,* in which the citizens of the United States vote to trade all African Americans (like me) in exchange for new technologies from extraterrestrial aliens? What happens when we use ethnography (participant observation research) to both create and study contexts where teachers deploy theory to complicate and extend lived understandings of social realities? In short, we theorize and empirically create the classroom as a context in which both students and instructor(s) attempt to comprehend

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and use language, power, and authority productively in democratic and humane forms in the physical classroom—and beyond. We create "Pensieves," classrooms in which the participants implode public and private ideas and experiences of who they were, are, and could be. In such a classroom teacher/researchers construct themselves as objects as well as subjects of study, helping individuals and groups negotiate the ever-expanding complexities of life in hyperdimensional societies. This book investigates these complexities as lived and learned in college classrooms as Pensieves.

If we are to make the classroom more democratic and, by extension, encourage students to be more critical and engaged citizens, we should experiment with new course forms and processes along these lines (Grossberg 1994; A. Kumar 1997; Lee 2000). We should attempt to use the cultural studies dicta of "the necessary detour through theory" and "engaging the concrete in order to change it" to more critically explore everyday life (Morley and Chen 1996; Turner 1996). The concept of "the Pensieve"—introduced in the fourth book in the popular *Harry Potter* children's series—may offer one possibility:

> "At these times," said Dumbledore, indicating the stone basin, "I use the Pensieve. One simply siphons the excess thoughts from one's mind, pours them into the basin, and examines them at one's leisure. It becomes easier to spot patterns and links, you understand, when they are in this form." (Rowling 2000:597)

Rowling describes the Pensieve as a stone basin that stores human ideas and experiences. Harry Potter and others can then enter the basin to critically examine their ideas and experiences. I believe that the notion of the Pensieve can be used as a metaphor for a particular type of class experience,[1] one in which the instructor deconstructs the participants' (instructor and students) understandings in a way that makes invisible components visible. Specifically, instructors establish themselves as models for possible articulation of ideas and experiences in a particular time and place, in such a way that students can explore these ideas and experiences in other times and places. This revolves around what I call "the three EXs": teachers *expose* students to multiple narratives that involve the teachers' own lived experiences, *explode* those narratives into their constitutive parts based on structural locations (race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc.), and *explicate* possible new narratives that explore implications of combinations of the constitutive parts (Jacobs 1998). In other words, teachers center ourselves (share articulations) in order to encourage students to displace us (create disarticulations) and center themselves (generate rearticulations)

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to explore their own understandings, identities, and practices. Teachers share "personal narratives to remind folks that we are all struggling to raise our consciousness and figure out the best action to take" (hooks 2003:107). Telling and listening to stories about social pasts, presents, and futures, "when juxtaposed with existential experiences, makes it possible to expose and interrogate cultural inscription and to reconsider and construct culture anew" (Garoian 1999:5).

When I show *Space Traders* to my classes, for example, there is usually a sharp divide and intense debate (though no fistfights . . . yet) between those who believe that the trade would never be accepted and those who stress that blacks should go ahead and pack their bags. I am, inevitably, called upon to settle the score: which interpretation is "correct"? The first step in creating a Pensieve is to deliberately disrupt easy closure: I argue for a probable outcome in a given (spatial as well as temporal) context, but stress that even then I can't put money in the bank. The goal here, of course, is to develop a stronger sense of the nature of power and discourse in America, that we must thoroughly deconstruct truth claims and the positions of authorities, even of college professors. Usually, further, the "trade won't happen" folks are disproportionately white, and the "done deal" people are of color (especially African Americans). As an African American instructor, I am placed in an intriguing position. Consider a juxtaposition of fragments from Paul Beatty's novel *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996):

> I was the funny, cool black guy. In Santa Monica, like most predominantly white sanctuaries from urban blight, "cool black guy" is a versatile identifier used to distinguish the harmless black male from the Caucasian juvenile while maintaining politically correct semiotics. (p. 27)

> Scoby is sitting on a stool listening to Sarah Vaughan. That's all he listens to now. . . . So I ask what's so special about Sarah. "Sarah's not one of those tragic niggers white folks like so much. Sarah's a nigger's nigger, she be black coffee. Not no mocha peppermint kissy-kissy butter rum do-you-have-any-heroin caffe latte." (p. 194)

I am frequently called upon by whites to be a "funny, cool, black guy" who will assure them that such a thing as voting to decide the fate of an historically oppressed people will never happen, and, perhaps, absolve them of any guilt that may be lingering about past realities. In Shelby Steele's (1990:10–11) terms, I am called upon to put on the mask of "bargainer": "I already believe that you are innocent (good, fair-minded) and have faith that you will prove it." The students of color,

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on the other hand, want me to put on Steele's "challenger" mask: "if you [whites] are innocent, then prove it"; America is still a thoroughly racist place. Wearing the challenger mask also bolsters my position as a "nigger's nigger," who will toe the company (anti-integrationist) line. Rather than choosing between the two perspectives, in a Pensieve students and instructors explore a both/and perspective, analyzing how aspects of both constructions operate within an overarching hegemonic framework. As part of this process, I relate my own complexities within social forces such as race, demonstrating how context affects my thoughts and feelings: in some places I am a "bargainer" (e.g., as an untenured person discussing multiculturalism in faculty meetings), while in others I'm a "challenger" (e.g., as a citizen in anti-police brutality marches). In essence, I deliberately provide a model students can read to see how social representations and cultural products are used to create individual identities. I show my students how I combine elements of my experiences to support particular interpretations in an effort to encourage students to consider how they use their social locations (age, gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, etc.) to make sense of their own practices and understandings. I am, in short, a "funny, cool, black guy" as well as a "nigger's nigger," with the strength of each particular flavor dependent on daily conditions.

Such a fluid construction and display of identity is facilitated by the "postmodern" condition of contemporary American society, where life is structured by "television-structured reality, the commodification of everyday life, the absence of meaning and the omnipresence of endless information, the relentless fascination with catastrophes, and the circulating advertisements for the death of the author, referent, and objective reality set within image upon image of the electronic connections among life, death, and sex" (Gordon 1997:13–14). In such a place it's very easy for students to become numb, to believe that their lives are not their own to control. Michel de Certeau (1997/1974:31), for instance, argues, "spectators are not the dupes of the media theater, but they refuse to say so." This should not be read reductively, that students always passively accept truth and knowledge claims disseminated by authority figures and formations. On the contrary, "in the postmodern, hegemony is won not simply through the transmission of ideas and the control of the population through centralization and homogenization; it operates also through the *abundance of choice* and the resulting fragmentation of the populace" (Sholle and Denski 1993:300, emphasis in original). Students engage in constant active selection of multiple alternatives, but they sometimes need help in making their choices more informed.

Students know the codes of the operation of difference in media and understand themselves through ubiquitous construction of the Other

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(McLaughlin 1996), but they are less likely to admit that these understandings are the result of struggle within an unevenly occupied terrain of struggle in which some groups have more power to construct favorable representations of themselves and unfavorable accounts of others, and that these social constructions have very real material and cultural effects beyond the personal (Fiske 1994a, 1994b; Giroux 1996, 1994; Kellner 2003, 1995a, 1995b). One of the tasks of a Pensieve is to construct alternative representations as a means toward leveling social and cultural conditions; members can learn to organize new ways of thinking into new ways of doing. This project involves constant discussion of how specific connections of elements of societal issues and personal beliefs serve particular interests and powers, and that these connections are not "natural," that they are created through discourse and can be broken through discourse, and replaced with different understandings (Hall 1996; Hebdige 1996; Slack 1996). Participation in Pensieves helps students explicitly say that they are not dupes and explore ways to live as more empowered community members.

Theory into Practice

Consider the following set of quotations:

> A media culture has emerged in which images, sounds, and spectacles help produce the fabric of everyday life, dominating leisure time, shaping political views and social behavior, and providing the materials out of which people forge their very identities. . . . Media stories and images provide the symbols, myths, and resources which help constitute a common culture for the majority of individuals in many parts of the world today. (Kellner, 1995a: 1)

> For it is still the case that no one lives in the world in general. Everybody, even the exiled, the drifting, the diasporic, or the perpetually moving, lives in some confined and limited stretch of it—"the world around here." The sense of interconnectedness imposed on us by the mass media, by rapid travel, and by long-distance communication obscures this more than a little. . . . The banalities and distractions of the way we live now lead us, often enough, to lose sight of how much it matters just where we are and what it is to be there. (Geertz, 1996: 262)

> Rather than empowering students to express their opinions, it seems more important to give them information and skills that allow them to gather information from disparate sources, analyze it, and formulate informed evaluations, since critical thought involves understanding where "opinions" come from in the first place. (Stabile, 1997: 213)

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Kellner's point calls attention to the pervasiveness of electronic media in American life. Increasingly, we generate understandings of who we were, are, and should be through appropriation and manipulation of electronically mass-mediated representations and ideas (see also Fiske 1994a; Miller 1998; Shaviro 2003). Geertz interjects that this process happens "somewhere," however, that it is not the same always and everywhere, but takes on locally distinct flavorings. Stabile outlines a main point we must consider if such local space is the college classroom: in postmodern conditions information about information sometimes becomes more privileged than information itself (Harvey 1990); the job of teachers is to help students learn to juxtapose and make flexible connections of wildly disparate sources of ideas and experiences.

The members of Pensieves don't exist in vacuums, however. That is, their ideas and experiences are affected by their social histories and material conditions of life. In "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," Karl Marx teaches us that people "make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given, and transmitted from the past" (Tucker 1978:595).[2] Similarly, Pensieves are constrained temporally, spatially, and materially. Participants attempt to create the space by juxtaposing many different ideas, conditions, and understandings, in the process debating not only acceptable fragments for inclusion, but questioning the rules of inclusion/exclusion themselves, under unequal discursive conditions. In Pensieves we are constantly sketching, erasing, and resketching visions of social processes and products, searching for optimal manifestations.

During the 1997–1998 academic year I constructed my undergraduate "media and society" classes at a large midwestern public university (Indiana University) as Pensieves. Along with undergraduate assistants, I conducted an ethnographic analysis of both fall and spring courses in an attempt to (1) understand how students use the media and its products to form understandings about themselves and Others, and (2) build on the purpose of a college classroom as a place of learning, to investigate strategies for developing critical thinking and action, helping students actively use mediated understandings in social interaction in the classroom as well as other spaces. Students learned to recognize the contingent and constructed character of their representations and understandings, considering how some understandings get stabilized, transposed, and even naturalized—all at the expense of other perspectives. The project included (a) teacher and undergraduate assistant observational data on classroom student–student and student-teacher interactions, (b) analysis of classroom assignments de-

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signed to encourage critical engagement with media and mediated information, and (c) analysis of meta-discursive data (comments on the course and classroom dynamics, such as in the course's electronic conferencing system).

Additionally (as I will detail extensively in chapter 2), I attempted to explore "autoethnographic" territory by investigating the implications of the insertion of the researcher into the very center of the study, as opposed to his or her more traditional detached perspective. Participation in postmodern media culture involves hyperreflexivity; a study of the classroom as a site of lived media culture demands that the instructor/researcher be as much an empirical object/subject as the students and media texts. Specifically, I am interested in how and to what extent students used me and my articulation of my experiences and understandings as a model for investigating their own feelings and knowledges, both inside and outside the classroom. I use this "teacher as text" strategy in an attempt to make an *intervention* in social worlds, refashioning webs of social relations to try to increase both personal and collective agency of the Pensieve's participants. Overall, six themes emerged over the course of the autoethnographic year and in subsequent years of continually evolving pedagogical practice.

1. *Students know media culture's individual products and processes, but need help in establishing systemic understandings*. Thomas McLaughlin (1996) argues that today's college students do the "theory" of making connections of media and mediated texts and their own experiences, but that this is often nonsystematic, and can (and should) be more rigorous; they are critical of media as pertaining to their individual lives only. When exposed to various texts such as newspaper editorials, World Wide Web sites, and TV commercials, students quickly pick out main themes and internal logics of the texts, but are less aware of how these texts are structured by and structure larger cultural systems of social life. I encourage students to resist, transform, and appropriate mediated understandings, instead of passively absorbing messages of who they should be and how they should act within social categorization (race, gender, class, sexual orientation, etc.). As each semester progresses, students became more adept at making systemic connections between their personal biographies and group structural locations.

2. *Critical media literacy is structured by social locations (age, gender, race, class, sexual orientation, etc.)*. On the surface, this theme is a banality, as its basic operation is espoused in every study of the reception and

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use of media. Henry Giroux (1993:368), for instance, argues that "literacy is a discursive practice in which difference becomes crucial for understanding not simply how to read, write, or develop aural skills, but also how to recognize that the identities of 'others' matter as part of a progressive set of politics and practices aimed at the reconstruction of democratic public life." This discursive practice is not only based on who the students "are" (men/women, white/black, straight/queer, etc), but on how they understand these personal identities in conjunction with the operation of Others, symbolically as well as in lived social interaction. I explore how and why some students operationalize a critical literacy surrounding first-time exposure to ideas and experiences, whereas others juxtapose and extend old ideas and practices in new ways. To be sure, there are many similarities in the two models, but the difference has an important implication: we must theorize and explore multiple strategies for understanding critical literacies, both as singularities and interactive units.

3. *Each class functions as a heuristic.* I not only want to teach students to learn and live media culture critically in my classroom, but to apply lessons learned to other spheres of life. Students learn that (1) all media are manufactured products, (2) all media are different, (3) media is big business, (4) media have values, and (5) audiences are different (Dover and Greene 1997:69; see also other articles in Hazen and Winokur 1997), and that these understandings can help them negotiate the processes of many spheres of life. Analysis of student media journals, course evaluations, and discussions with me (face-to-face and via e-mail) suggest that many students have begun to apply understandings created in my classroom to other situations, most often to their approach to other classes, but also in nonacademic settings as well.

4. *Elements of political economy, textual analysis, and ethnographic reception are all rolled into rigorous empirical study.* Lawrence Grossberg (1996) argues that Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model of communication has spawned a hegemonic tripartite approach to the study of culture (including that of media): review of relevant institutions and practices governing production and distribution of particular texts, semiotic analysis of encoded meanings of those texts, and ethnographic studies of decodings and uses of the texts by individuals in their everyday lives. He claims that usually only one or two of the components are explored, and even if all three are explored such an

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approach ends up "constantly rediscovering what it already knew" (p. 141) at the expense of engaging the newer and more important questions of social life under postmodern conditions. While I do not conduct a full-blown actualization of the tripartite approach, I do avoid the common mechanistic, reductionistic implementation of this method, and deploy the central elements of each to create a detailed analysis of the Pensieve in practice.

5. *The "teacher as text" concept is introduced and empirically investigated.* One may argue that the critical pedagogy project (see Gallop 1996; Giroux and McLaren 1994; Lankshear and McLaren 1993; Lee 2000; McLaren 1995; McLaughlin 1996) advocates that teachers get out of the center of teaching and learning. In such projects, the literacies, practices, and aspirations of students are the point of departure for helping student and teacher both construct a critical pedagogy of the everyday. My "teacher as text" strategy, on the other hand, uses the teacher(s)' worlds as the gateway. In part, this means exploring how the messenger affects an existing message (Moore 1997), but it also means that we examine how the message itself is dependent on the construction of the messenger. For instance, many students tell me that I am their first African American instructor. They are astonished when I use personal experiences with racism to help illustrate racism in the media; some accuse me of harboring "bias" and racism myself. I respond that there is not one racism, but many racisms, and that the choice of one definition over others reflects personal and group positions and interests. I relate how I resist a simple "Blacks can't be racist because we lack institutional power" definition for one that complicates "power," that considers intersections of race, gender, and class. I encourage students, in turn, to consider the implications—good and bad—of accepting one definition of racism while rejecting others. Establishing the teacher as a text, in sum, subverts traditional understandings of authority; authority as the embodiment of valued social characteristics (age, gender, race, ethnicity, etc.) is replaced by authority as the ability to create contexts that resonate on a lived level of consciousness. I explore how the deployment of the teacher as text affects the construction of the college classroom as Pensieve.

6. *"Autoethnography" is used to merge the analytical, the procedural, the imaginative, and the effervescent.* As previously noted, this book is concerned with the creation and documentation of the college classroom as Pensieve. In a way, the practices explored in the following chapters are classically experimental in that they put forth a hypothesis (one

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> can structure a classroom in such a way to encourage students to powerfully use media culture to increase agency) and "tests" it. "Autoethnography" constructs an ironic twist: not only is the hypothesis a test of a possible end, it is an open-ended means under constant construction. This book, then, describes continual play between the formation of symbolic desires and the discovery of material realities; it explores how the negotiation of meaning is both enabled and constrained. Autoethnography merges conceptual, theoretical, political, and methodological issues and procedures into a framework that not only tells us what was, but helps us imagine what can be.

Steven Shaviro argues: "We live in a world of images and sound. The electronic media are to us what 'nature' was to earlier times. That is to say, the electronic media are the inescapable background against which we live our lives and from which we derive our references and meanings" (2003:64). In such a world students must use electronic media and electronically mediated texts to learn and practice critical literacy, "the interpretation of the social present for the purpose of transforming the cultural life of certain groups, for questioning tacit assumptions and unarticulated presuppositions of current cultural and social formations and the subjectivities and capacities for agenthood that they foster" (McLaren and Lankshear 1993:413; see Lankshear and McLaren 1993 for other usages of the term). The identification and analysis of classroom interaction strategies and procedures surrounding students' engagement with media and mediated products increase the ability of the students to negotiate ever-expanding electronic media cultures. American society in general may benefit from increased knowledge of how electronic media cultures are understood and negotiated by student-citizens. This book builds on established research on media, pedagogy, postmodernity, and culture, and will suggest new directions for future investigation.

Chapter Outline

The process of narrating a personal experience that can be understood as part of a shared history or community memory is also empowering, not only for the speakers, but also for listeners. —KAMALA VISWESWARAN, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*

Following Visweswaran, my retelling of specific experiences is meant not only to detail how the students, my assistants, and I were or were

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not affected by classroom events, it encourages you—the readers—to create empowering perspectives. Most of the experiences I explore in this book come from the autoethnographic project at Indiana University (1997–1998) and its replication at the University of Minnesota (2000–2001), but I have been creating Pensieves since the first time I stepped into the classroom as a teacher (1995) and will do so until I exit in, oh, thirty years or so; this book contains illustrations of practice from the past as well as what I hope to do in the future.

In chapter 2, I will go into much greater conceptual and theoretical depth about Pensieves, specifically as applicable to the college classroom in public universities. In chapter 2 I will also discuss my notion of the teacher as text and my understanding of autoethnography. I will also flesh out the discussion of methodology employed for simultaneously teaching and researching social science/cultural studies courses.

Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 provide empirical illustration to the primarily abstract chapter 2. In each of these chapters I offer thick description (Geertz 1973) of "what happened" when I exposed students to a media text, exploded the text into its constitutive parts, and explicated resulting understandings into possible larger frameworks of interpretation. I detail both successes and failures in this effort, and utilize data generated by use of other texts to complete the analysis of the central main text. Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 are more than "data" chapters, however, as each one significantly extends and expands understanding of theoretical and methodological arguments begun in chapter 2. As heuristics, these chapters are designed to be open for continual negotiation and renegotiation, and generate different perspectives when read in different "moments," spatially and temporally bound contexts of interpretation.

Each chapter is a moment that details particular intersections of text (media products) and context (classroom and campus communities). The central media texts themselves, additionally, are chosen to analyze three different forms of "text" employed in the study. Although all texts are fragments of larger historical and social conditions (Eco 1994), chapter 3 explores the use of texts that are not meant to stand alone; the texts of this chapter are pieces extracted from coherent and explicitly bounded products. The chapter centers around my use of a seven-minute slice of the two-hour film *I Like It Like That* to measure student entry into "the matrix of domination," the space where we examine intersections of both social privilege and cultural domination. *I Like It Like That* is about the lives of a Puerto Rican family in New York City; I exposed the seven-minute clip (about webs of race, gender, and class) to students multiple times over a semester and analyzed the change (or

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lack thereof) of their critical responses. I also analyze in-class exploration of print advertisements and music (videos and tracks from CDs).

Chapter 4, on the other hand, is concerned with the reception of entire putatively stand-alone products. The central text of this chapter is the forty-minute film *Space Traders* and the short story from which the film is adapted. In both texts the citizens of the United States vote to trade all African Americans to extraterrestrial aliens in exchange for new technologies. I investigate student reactions to my efforts to make such texts "strange," pointing out unremarked aspects and leading them in investigations of the intertextuality of the texts, that to fully comprehend individual products we depend on knowledge of other texts and experiences, and that we should explicitly explore the implications of particular articulations of these knowledges and perspectives. I explore reception of an episode of the television show *The X-Files* to complement the analysis of *Space Traders*.

Chapter 5 explores the moment in which the context is the text. That is, from time to time I would ask students to explicitly and reflexively ponder how being in a sociology class affected readings of a text that we were collectively experiencing. I focus on "storytelling days," in which I read short stories to the class and lead discussion about the story and the process of the oral storytelling itself, connecting it to overarching systems of privilege and domination. Secondarily, I analyze meta-discursive data concerning classes held outside the normal classroom, in which small groups of students met with me at a campus restaurant for an hour at a time, in lieu of attending a regular class session.

Chapter 6 looks at students' and assistants' understandings of the Pensieve upon completion of a course with me. In the year after taking a "media and society" course, twelve former Indiana University students met with me and one assistant in a weekly focus group on *The X-Files:* they watched each episode on their own and then we met in groups at a local restaurant to discuss the episode and any social issues it raised. The goal, however, was not so much to generate a close textual analysis of each episode; it was to use elements from the show and the previous year's "media and society" course to stimulate reflection on wider social contexts. I discuss how a small weekly salon about a TV show like *The X-Files* provides the participants with the space, time, and raw materials to ask and answer tough questions about themselves and society. The chapter also presents the assistants' analyses of their experiences with the focus group and/or the 1997–1998 autoethnography.

In chapters 3–6 I include two stand-alone sections in which I focus on a single student. In each of these chapters I provide a sketch of one

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student (using data from in-class observations, course assignments, and the student's direct communication with me) who embraced the forwarded media literacy strategies, and a sketch of one student who resisted these dynamics. I do this not only to offer further analysis of both successes and failures of the project, but also to add a personal, individualistic complement to the composites of students I predominantly use in the book.

Finally, chapter 7 concludes the book by examining experimental techniques deployed at the University of Minnesota: (1) a fall 2000 failure concerning strange texts, (2) a spring 2001 use of a sophomore undergraduate teaching assistant, and (3) a spring 2002 twist on storytelling. The book wraps up with an unusual definition of "evocation." In the end, the Pensieve creates a beginning that sends us on a neverending journey.

Seeing Invisibilities, Speaking Lower Frequencies

I am an invisible man. . . . I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. . . . When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.

—RALPH ELLISON, *Invisible Man*

[T]here's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play. . . . Being invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were, what else could I do? What else but to try to tell what was really happening when your eyes were looking through? And it is this which frightens me: Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?

—RALPH ELLISON, *Invisible Man*

Created under the very nose of the overseers, the utopian desires which fuel the contemporary politics of transfiguration must be invoked by other, more deliberately opaque means. This politics exists on a lower frequency where it is played, danced, and acted, as well as sung and sung about, because words, even words stretched by melisma and supplemented or mutated by the screams which still index the conspicuous power of the slave sublime, will never be enough to communicate its unsayable claims to the truth.

—PAUL GILROY, *The Black Atlantic*

Social theorists of many ages have claimed that we frequently manipulate past understandings with visions of desired future scenarios to create present realities; theorists of postmodernity emphasize the electronic mediation (by TV, film, music, the Internet, etc.) of these articulations, and investigate their existence within a vast consumer culture

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(Kellner 2003, 1995a). A postmodern space, hence, is a discursive arena in which we use electronically produced and/or consumed mass market images, sounds, and spectacles to create fleeting, fragmented understandings of ourselves and our values, purposes, and truths. Moreover—as the epigraphs of this section suggest—those living in capitalist postmodern societies like America "choose" to not fully explore the complexities of power in their existence. Such societies are saturated with power as power/knowledge (Foucault 1980:142): "power is co-extensive with the social body . . . relations of power are interwoven with other kinds of relations . . . these relations don't take the sole form of prohibition and punishment, but are of multiple forms . . . dispersed, heteromorphous, localised procedures of power are adapted, re-inforced and transformed by these global strategies . . . power relations do indeed 'serve' . . . because they are capable of being utilized in strategies . . . [and] there are no relations of power without resistances." In an America where even the most countercultural messages are eventually reappropriated by big business (Frank 1997), students must learn how to strategically use power/knowledge in a never-ending project to articulate new ideas and possibilities.

In Pensieves the participants learn to hear and speak on lower frequencies than they usually tune: they learn to say that they are not cultural dupes and reveal hard-to-discern traces of social structures, exploring how individuals and groups shape and are shaped by multiple social events and practices. Participants study capitalism "to expose its mechanisms of inequality, to motivate people to change them, and to reveal sites and methods by which change might be promoted" (Fiske 1994b:198). Both students and teachers construct tools to comprehend chaotic social experiences and knowledges. They create heuristics.

Members of Pensieves use the heuristics to etch all sorts of ideas about social worlds onto a communal screen. A Pensieve is a palimpsest in which uncovering earlier social tracings can be quite important, guiding not only present but future markings. We may not ever know exactly what the palimpsest's etchings are supposed to represent, but must make attempts to delineate common—if temporary—possibilities.[3] Many people attempt to ignore earlier inscriptions, but if we learn to recognize them and incorporate them into future negotiations we can empower our surroundings and ourselves. We must learn to think sociologically: "the increasingly sophisticated understandings of representation and of how the social world is textually or discursively constructed still require an engagement with the social structuring practices that have long been the province of sociological inquiry" (Gordon 1997:11; see also Clough 1992). Such inquiries draw attention

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to both visible and invisible—and spoken and silent—forces and ideas that hegemonically shape our national and local cultures and realities.

In this book I provide many different fragments of material and discursive realities that unfolded in my classes, and juxtapose them (with each other as well as with outside fragments, such as quotes from scholarly papers and books) in ways that explore sociological significances of postmodern conditions of existence. I encourage readers to combine the stories told within with their own stories, not only to evaluate the potency and efficacy of the social processes detailed here, but of analogous issues and ideas, in both similar and different contexts than the college classroom of large public universities. Compare and contrast sketches to grasp and appreciate other ways of knowing and seeing. Use this project to rethink "objectivity":

> To be objective is not just to tolerate another's epistemic culture, but to engage in cross-the-border conversations, selectively borrowing what works for you, perhaps seeking to persuade the other of the utility of your knowledge for their projects (success at this can not be guaranteed), never imposing your epistemic culture by force of gun or pretensions of privilege (i.e., rationality, truth, moral purity, standpoint), and using the encounter to examine ceaselessly the foundations and implications of one's own knowledge-making practices. (Gieryn 1994:325)

If the United States continues to become a multicultural nation that is bombarded with a rich set of mediated representations of who we were, are, and should be, then we need such understandings of objectivity to enable us to lead truly democratic lives. I attempt to create spaces in which the participants grapple with the myriad intricacies (with both negative and positive spins) that arise in this project. I sketch some of them now, in an effort to help us all learn to continually resketch them in powerfully productive ways.

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