Chapter One

Situating Literacy

In the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth stands a lead sculpture, a giant open book with enormous wings sprouting from either side, standing on an a tall pedestal. Anselm Kiefer's *Book with Wings* offers multiple readings: literacy promises to free us—the flight of imagination, for example—but materiality can never be overcome. Kiefer's choice of a medium is not accidental; he could have produced the sculpture in aluminum or wood or even paper, so the choice of lead is significant. In other words, literacy can only give us the illusion of freedom as we remain weighted, inexorably, to our material lives. We want to believe that flight or escape is available through literacy, but when we look up from the page, we are the same people in the same bodies in the same circumstances. Yet literacy has had enormous impact on individuals as published testimonials attest.

American culture, of course, invests heavily in the notion that literacy will free us from poverty, from prejudice, from oppression. But the United States is not the only culture or cultural body to hold to this belief. The United Nations has produced research that maintains a nation must achieve a certain literacy level among its population before it can begin to rise economically. As Sylvia Scribner's "Literacy in Three Metaphors" shows, these assumptions about literacy have helped shape public policy: "In a contemporary framework, expansion of literacy skills is often viewed as a means for poor and politically powerless groups to claim their place in the world" (75). Increased literacy is also assumed to be necessary for a person's ability to think abstractly. Scribner writes, "An individual who is illiterate, a UNESCO (1972) publication states, is bound to concrete thinking and cannot learn new material" (77). Scribner's

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research among the Vai people in Western Africa, however, then goes on to disprove these assumptions as her five-year study of Vai literacy and literate practices reveal the value-laden nature of Western definitions and reveal as well how literacy in practice cannot be neatly contained by either definitions or metaphors. One would hope that, given the datedness of these references, they would no longer have currency; however, many still widely believe that literacy is a guarantee of national as well as individual success.

But, as Robert F. Arnove and Harvey J. Graff point out in "National Literacy Campaigns," literacy does not automatically lead to anything by itself; to make social or economic change possible, it has to be part of a nexus of factors to have significant effect:

> To ask of literacy that it overcome gender discrimination, integrate a society, eliminate inequalities, and contribute to political and social stability is certainly too much. Ultimately, the retention and uses of literacy depend on the context of the environment of opportunities available to people to use their literacy skills, transformations in social structures, and the ideology of leaders. Whether the materials and methods of literacy and postliteracy campaigns are truly designed to equip people to play more active roles in shaping the direction of their society or, to the contrary, are intended to induct people into roles predetermined by others is a telling indicator of ideology and intent. (614)

In other words, literacy's efficacy is contextual, and the expectations we have regarding what literacy can and cannot make possible are largely ideological.

More recently, Deborah Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives* offers case studies of eighty Americans of varying ages and from various socioeconomic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds to disrupt assumptions about literacy's power to change personal and economic circumstances. As Kiefer's sculpture shows, being literate is neither a simple nor a straightforward process. Brandt writes:

> Expanding literacy undeniably has been an instrument for more democratic access to learning, political participation, and upward mobility. At the same time, it has become one of the sharpest tools for stratification and denial of opportunities. Print in the twentieth century was the sea on which ideas and other cultural goods flowed easily among regions, occupations, and social classes. But it also was a mechanism by which the great bureaucracies of modern life tightened around us, along with their systems of testing, sorting, controlling, and coercing. (2)

At the same time literacy makes social and economic mobility possible, it also provides the means to determine standards for what sorts of literate practices will and will not allow access to that mobility. In addition, Brandt reveals those standards to be fluid: "Unending cycles of competition and change keep raising

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the stakes for literacy achievement" (2). In other words, economic and social mobility require increasingly higher levels of literacy, and definitions of what being literate means are not stable.

At this point, I should explain how I am defining literacy within this project. As a teacher of first-year writing on the college level, I am not, of course, talking about the rudimentary decoding of letters. Despite elitist jeremiads of declining skills and abilities, first-year students come to college able to read and write. The kind or level of literacy that concerns me is the ability to read and make critical judgments about a variety of texts and then to communicate those judgments in writing. In other words, I am referring to a fairly high level of literacy—"higher" literacy if you will. I am also borrowing from Brian V. Street's definition that stresses literacy as "the social practices and conceptions of reading and writing" (1). As with Arnove and Graff, he also argues that literacy is context- and ideology-bound; he "contend[s] that what the particular practices and concepts of reading and writing are for a given society depends upon the context; that they are already embedded in an ideology and cannot be isolated or treated as 'neutral' or merely 'technical'" (1).

My concern in writing this book is not with judging what constitutes successful literate practices; my concern is with the why of literate behavior—specifically, why do some of us pursue higher literacy with almost single-minded devotion. In particular, I am interested in viewing higher literacy through the lens of class. My interest arises from my twenty-plus years as a teacher of composition who continues to be puzzled by why some students succeed and others fail. My interest is further complicated and motivated by my own literacy history as a child of working-class parents whose interests in higher literacy were minimal and who found my passion for increased literacy and higher education perplexing at best. I have to wonder where my intense desire to read and study increasingly complex texts comes from because it was not significantly encouraged in my early years. In fact, being utterly absorbed in a book, as opposed to flipping through a magazine or newspaper, was perceived as a cause for concern. Too much reading was ruining my eyes. Too much reading was not "good" for me. My mother refused to teach me to read or even to write my name before I started school in the first grade. She was not being abusive or cruel; she just did not want me to be ahead of my classmates because, to her way of thinking, standing out and being "different" was not a good thing. I was nurtured by teachers along the way, but, quite honestly, I can only remember being praised by teachers twice in twelve years of public school, and I distinctly remember feeling uncomfortable on both occasions at being singled out—at being "different."

So my desire for higher literacy is rooted in the personal. My motivation is not merely to analyze and work through my own anxieties and unresolved psychological baggage—at least I hope it is not—but research questions, much

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like medical specialties, arise from a personal experience or connection. In addition, in composition studies, we continue to experience the allure of the personal. (I address recent scholarly attention to the "personal" in our teaching and writing in chapter 4.) We reject current-traditional methods that divide reading and writing assignments into modes and begin with personal narratives, but we still feel the pull of personal narrative. Robert E. Coles argues that we are "called" by stories, and Joseph Trimmer says, "To narrate is to know" (xv). Trimmer continues, "We need to tell our teaching stories if we are to understand our teaching lives" (xv). Although telling stories does not necessarily lead to "understanding," stories do provide an important site of knowledge both for us and for our students, and the site becomes richer when we bring the stories together.

Of course, stories drawn from our experience are not enough in themselves. Just relating experience does nothing to situate it within a culture; just telling a story does nothing toward making sense of the role it plays within that culture. In "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," Clifford Geertz writes:

> The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong. There are enormous difficulties in such an enterprise, methodological pitfalls to make a Freudian quake, and some moral perplexities as well. Nor is it the only way that symbolic forms can be sociologically handled. Functionalism lives, and so does psychologism. But to regard such forms as "saying something of something," and saying it to somebody, is at least to open up the possibility of an analysis which attends to their substance rather than to reductive formulas professing to account for them. (255)

Geertz's essay attempts to understand the role cockfighting plays in Balinese society. He acknowledges the difficulty an outsider who "strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong" faces. His goal is to interpret the experience of others, to open up their experience to analysis. Such interpretation is subject to "methodological pitfalls," but those acts of interpretation allows us to read a culture's "ensemble of texts" with greater complexity and with the potential for alternative readings that can help the reader move beyond prejudice and stereotype.

Sometimes, however, an insider's knowledge is a necessary first step to open the way to those alternative readings. I am reminded of Frederick Douglass's reinterpretation of slave songs in each of his autobiographies. Whereas white people had "read" slaves' singing ("straining to read over their shoulders" if you will) as signifying joy, Douglass makes clear that these interpretations are serious misreadings of this particular "ensemble of texts." What white people had interpreted as joy was actually slaves' misery within slavery

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and their profound, even unconscious, desire for freedom, argues Douglass. He writes, "I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are unhappy" (*Frederick Douglass* 29). Yet Douglass argues that he himself could only comprehend that unhappiness after his escape to freedom. From within the experience, he was too close to read it; only by looking over his own shoulder, to paraphrase Geertz once more, is he able to apprehend the experience of slave songs.

In *Alice Doesn't*, Teresa de Lauretis defines experience as:

> the process by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed. Through that process one places oneself or is placed in social reality and so perceives and comprehends as subjective (referring to, originating in oneself) those relations—material, economic, and interpersonal—which are in fact social, and, in a larger perspective, historical. (159)

In other words, experience appears to be individually known and felt; that is, this is my experience of love unlike anyone else's. But how much of the "unique" experience of love is marketed and made consumable (weddings, after all, are part of a multimillion dollar industry)? Consider, too, how difficult resisting or even imagining a love "story" outside a Hollywood narrative is. Experience, too, according to de Lauretis, has history; that is, one can examine the experience of love historically: how definitions of love have evolved, how notions of appropriate partners have changed, and so forth. One way to analyze experience is to look at transgressive acts that challenge the limits of what is being experienced. For example, what can be learned of the experience of love when we consider past laws prohibiting interracial marriage or the current debate regarding gay marriage? Our definitions have to shift—or harden—when we take the "exceptional" into account.

Historian Joan W. Scott points in her article "Experience" to the power of the transgressive or the exceptional to begin a process of understanding experience historically. She begins her essay with a discussion of science fiction writer Samuel Delany's autobiographical narrative in which he describes his first visit to a gay bathhouse. The scene operates to introduce the metaphor of "visibility," that is, of making visible that which has previously been invisible or "outing." Delany's experience "dramatically raises the problem of writing the history of difference, the history, that is, of the designation of 'other,' of the attribution of characteristics that distinguish categories of people from some presumed (and usually unstated) norm" (22). Certainly, rendering the "other" visible is an important step that makes efforts to look away or ignore difference more problematic. And it is a step toward de-exoticizing or demystifying the other. For instance, Douglass's rereading of the slaves' songs make

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his readers' interpretation of them on a superficial level more difficult to do ever again. They at least have to consider other possible interpretations, and their assumptions have been "troubled."

Still referring to Delany's narrative as her central example, Scott writes:

> We come to appreciate the consequences of the closeting of homosexuals and we understand repression as an interested act of power or domination; alternative behaviors and institutions also become available to us. What we don't have is a way of placing those alternatives within the framework of (historically contingent) dominant patterns of sexuality and the ideology that supports them. We know they exist, but not how they've been constructed; we know their existence offers a critique of normative practices, but not the extent of the critique. Making visible the experience of a different group exposes the existence of repressive mechanisms, but not their inner workings or logics; we know that difference exists, but we don't understand it as constituted relationally. For that we need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences. It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience. Experience in this definition then becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced. (25–26)

So "otherness" reveals something about the repressive function of the "norm," but it reveals nothing about how the norm functions as repressive. Only by examining both the "norm" and the "other" historically can we begin to understand how both are "constituted relationally." Experience is not authoritative evidence; the experience is what we are trying to explain. Or as Scott states later in the same article, "Experience is at once always already an interpretation *and* is in need of interpretation" (37, author's italics). In trying to understand more of the complex relationships people have with literacy, then, we should not accept the assumption that the experience of literacy is "life changing," but instead attempt to understand the larger historical and cultural narrative that would allow such an assumption to emerge. I am not denying that Anna Quindlen experienced literacy in this way as she describes it in her short book *How Reading Changed My Life*; I am saying that her interpretation of her experience is available to our interpretation. Experience is bigger than the individual. As teachers, we are in the perfect position to begin that interpretation.

Then, too, I am aware of the problematic nature of my use of "we." Who is this "we" I keep including in my arguments? Certainly, I do not believe that all composition teachers are the same, teach the same, theorize the same, and so forth. I am using the second person plural as an enabling fiction as I argue for certain ways of considering and valuing students and their writing. I am

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including those teachers who share with me a belief that the students in our classes come in with important things to say and to teach us but that learning to hear those things is a never-completed process.

I should also say something about what I mean when I refer to "students" as well. I hope I am clear that I am not referring to generic students or assuming that all students are the same from one coast to the other. The students who populate the classes I teach are more likely to be first-generation college students and are more likely to be working part-time and commuting. About 14% of our student body is African American, which is a larger percentage than most state colleges and universities in my state, particularly the flagship schools. The percentage of Chicano and Latino students fluctuates, but it is generally around 4% to 6%. The majority of our student population tends to live within a one- to two-hour drive from home even if they live on campus. Many are, in Alfred Lubrano's term, "straddlers"; that is, they come from working-class homes but strive to be middle class. In his book *Limbo: Blue-Collar Roots, White-Collar Dreams*, he writes that straddlers "were born to blue-collar families and then, like me, moved into the strange new territory of the middle class. They are the first in their families to have graduated from college. As such, they straddle two worlds, many of them not feeling at home in either, living in a kind of American limbo" (2). The students in my classes also tend to be politically and religiously conservative, and they generally exhibit little awareness or interest about national or international events. Even the war with Iraq has generated little discussion except among those with loved ones in the armed services. More than 50% of our students identify their religion as Baptist. These students tend to be resigned about reading and writing rather than passionate, but they tend to be good sports about fulfilling these assignments. I rely heavily on the verb "tend" in my description because, of course, these are the broadest of descriptive strokes.

Ignoring class on my campus would be easy—as it most likely would be on most campuses—because students do not want to talk about it and because the divisions are perhaps less evident for students at the university where I teach as they were for me at the "suitcase college" I attended, a college much like this one. But Lubrano argues, "By ignoring class distinctions, people may be overlooking important parts of themselves and failing to understand who they really are. They are Straddlers in limbo, still attached to their working-class roots while living a new kind of life in the white-collar world" (5). When students leave this school, they will be better prepared for the inequities they will likely encounter if class has been frankly discussed. In addition, they may find themselves unprepared for the tensions that can arise between them and loved ones if and when their education begins to change them. Lubrano uses the metaphor of the hinge on a door to describe the straddler's position between worlds:

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> Being the white-collar child of a blue-collar parent means being the hinge on the door between two ways of life. With one foot in the working class, the other in the middle class, people like me are Straddlers, at home in neither world, living a limbo life. It's the part of the American Dream you may have never heard about: the costs of social mobility. People pay with their anxiety about their place in life. It's a discomfort many never overcome. (8)

I see students trying to live in both worlds and see the toll it takes. My colleagues complain about the "bizarre" excuses our students have for their absences, but the excuses make perfect sense to me, a fellow straddler. My middle-class colleague shakes her head in disgust when a student misses class to take an aunt to a doctor's appointment or to support a sibling in a child custody hearing. But these students are trying simultaneously to be students and to meet their obligations to family members. They come from families who may be pleased that their sons or daughters are working to improve their economic and employment status, but the hard-and-fast rule is that family comes first.

But, of course, the goal is to become middle class; however, how can one know what it means to be middle class if one has had little experience of it apart from what appears on television? As I saw the way my father was treated by the company for which he worked for more than thirty years, I vowed that I would do everything I could to make sure I could never receive the same treatment. Many straddlers are motivated similarly. "But," writes Lubrano, "we don't want to have to totally reject who we are and where we came from to become educated and live in nicer houses. There is, then, unease in the transition, because Straddlers are making a difficult journey. That trip is invisible to the middle class, who don't have to cross class lines to become educated" (82). My middle-class colleague can only interpret her student's absence to help his sister move as a way to get out of coming to class or as a case of insufficient dedication to his education. She cannot see how the student is indeed trying to serve two masters.

Of course, most of the straddlers on my campus do not consider themselves to be working class. In fact, what surprises me most on my campus (although it probably should not) is the extent to which virtually all students, no matter their race or ethnicity, identify as middle class. Of course, I understand that this is the class to which they aspire, the reason they are in college in the first place for most. Based on my own experience, too, I should not be surprised because it did not occur to me to consider myself "working class" or, perhaps more accurately, to consider my background working class until I already had a master's degree, had my first university teaching job, and had heard someone else refer to my background as working class. My family, too, identified as middle class, even though for much of my childhood my father

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was a milkman and my mother worked hourly wage jobs. Although I can now easily list a dozen or so class markers that clearly reveal my family's working-class status, we did not perceive those tastes, traits, and activities to be markers of any kind. And, as Lubrano points out, "Class can hold you back, or limit you. But if you express this, it sounds like whining" (4). No one wants to be perceived as a whiner, especially if you come from a family like mine, where whining was never rewarded with anything positive.

In *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*, Annette Lareau writes, " . . . Americans are much more comfortable recognizing the power of individual initiative [rather] than recognizing the power of social class. Studies show that Americans generally believe that responsibility for their accomplishments rests on their individual efforts" (7). As Lareau states, Americans want to believe their achievements come solely by way of their hard work and perseverance. A colleague of mine told me about a young white male student in her introduction to multicultural literacy class. He expressed displeasure at the focus on difference and at what he perceived as reverse discrimination, more specifically, "white male bashing." In a written assignment, he argued that he had worked for and earned everything he had achieved and that when he finished his college degree, he would begin his job as a vice president in his stepfather's company because he had worked for it. Nothing could convince him that he had any kind of advantage for that job. We can laugh or roll our eyes at what we see as the absurdity of his position, but his beliefs remain firm, and he is not alone in those beliefs. Of course, Americans cannot deny that poverty exists, yet, rather than ask questions of the system that engenders poverty, we have a tendency to blame poverty on those who are poor—particularly poor whites. In the introduction to their book *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz write:

> In a country so steeped in the myth of classlessness, in a culture where we are often at a loss to explain or understand poverty, the white trash stereotype serves as a useful way of blaming the poor for being poor. The term *white trash* helps solidify for the middle and upper classes a sense of cultural and intellectual superiority. (1)

If we assume that with enough hard work no one has to be poor, we can take the next step and assume that those who are poor deserve it.

Despite many Americans' class blindness or prejudice, class does, of course, affect us. Andrew Milner in *Class* writes:

> There are differences in the levels of cultural salience that attach to social class in different national cultures. . . . But the available sociological evidence clearly shows class position to be a primary determinant of cultural behaviour, attitudes, and lifestyle, irrespective of this general level of "awareness" of

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> class. Indeed, empirical sociological research is so invariant in its findings on this subject so as to call into question the further point of continued speculation about the supposed "death of class." (11–12)

Whether we acknowledge it or not or, as in the case of my family, whether we are even aware of it, class marks us. When I entered college, I truly believed that one college was as good as another. I knew some of the people I went to high school with went to elite private colleges, but it simply never occurred to me that they might gain some advantage by going there instead of the mega-university that I chose for reasons of cost and convenience. I had heard of Harvard and Yale, of course, but schools like that seemed to be from a different universe and to be for the upper classes. Only by looking back, reminiscent of Douglass's ability to "read" slave songs after he was no longer in a position to sing them, can I see how I was marked by my social class. In other words, I exhibited no class consciousness.

What interests me now is how these class divisions and distinctions are maintained and resisted. If we see class distinctions as serving the capitalist state, we can turn to Louis Althusser for a Marxist analysis. Whereas Marx demystified the seemingly "natural" movement of capital, Louis Althusser analyzed the seemingly "natural" operations of state and government in support of capital. Building from Marx's work, Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)" details how institutions and ideology enmesh to reproduce and maintain stratifications that make possible the continuation of capitalist society: "As Marx said, every child knows that a social formation which did not reproduce the conditions of production at the same time as it produced would not last a year. The ultimate condition of production is therefore the reproduction of the conditions of production" (127). For the capitalist state to continue, it must make possible an endless circulation of capital; production requires the incessant renewal of the means of production. This is true not only in terms of raw materials, but also in terms of labor power and the social formations that produce and sustain it:

> To put this more scientifically, I shall say that the reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order, i.e. a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class "in words." (132–33)

For Althusser, then, school is where labor learns to follow the rules and where management learns to enforce them, and there is no possibility for "radical" or "liberatory" education. At this stage in the development of capital, the kind of

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labor that Marx and Althusser imagined is in non–U.S. countries, so the need for schools to reproduce "submission to the rules" may be even more crucial for capitalism.

According to Althusser, the school functions as an ideological state apparatus (ISA), one of the many ideological state apparatuses including the church, the law, trade unions, and others, not to be confused with the "(repressive) state apparatus," which functions "massively and predominantly by repression (including physical repression), while functioning secondarily by ideology," for example, the police or the military (145). Althusser is careful to point out that the (repressive) state apparatus makes use of ideology to support the means and threat of repression just as ISAs can ultimately take recourse in repression because no apparatus functions as purely repressive or purely ideological.

From this point of view, school is the most important ISA if for no other reason than that students are placed in the system when they are at their most impressionable and kept for six to eight hours a day, five or more days a week for a number of years:

> But it is by an apprenticeship in a variety of know-how wrapped up in the massive inculcation of the ideology of the ruling class that the *relations of production* in a capitalist social formation, i.e. the relations of exploited to exploiters and exploiters to exploited, are largely reproduced. The mechanisms which produce this vital result for the capitalist regime are naturally covered up and concealed by a universally reigning ideology of the School, universally reigning because it is one of the essential forms of the ruling bourgeois ideology: an ideology which represents the School as a neutral environment purged of ideology . . . , where teachers respectful of the "conscience" and "freedom" of the children who are entrusted to them (in complete confidence) by their "parents" (who are free, too, i.e., the owners of their children) open up for them the path to the freedom, morality and responsibility of adults by their own example, by knowledge, literature and their "liberating" virtues. (156–57, author's italics)

His sarcasm notwithstanding, Althusser argues that the public school's pretensions to neutrality and egalitarianism make it such a formidable agent for ideology. Few would argue that schools in areas with a wealthier tax base are better than those from poor neighborhoods, and the disparity has reached a point where it could no longer be ignored. President Bush's No Child Left Behind initiative seemingly eliminates this disparity, offering parents in poor neighborhoods the opportunity to place their children in better schools, but, of course, the reality is that many of these parents have no means to transport their children to better schools and that the better schools do not welcome these students if they do manage to transfer. And the initiative does nothing to address the reasons for the disparity; instead, the assumption is that testing

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will spawn the means for improvement and success. In other words, No Child Left Behind is the illusion of reform; the status quo is untouched. (For a clear and systematic critique of state-mandated testing, see Gerald Coles's *Reading the Naked Truth: Literacy, Legislation, and Lies*.)

Althusser's argument is reflected in Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis's understanding of the school as the "apprentice" period when individuals learn to take their place in the workforce, as "exploiters" or "exploited," having unknowingly absorbed the ideology of the "ruling class." This absorption, however, is accomplished from within the framing metaphors of "freedom" and "liberation." The school, as Althusser points out, is perceived as ideology-free, and teachers see themselves and are seen by others as models exemplifying the ideals, the "'liberating' virtues," of knowledge and literature without, of course, imposing their own political sensibilities on the children in their classes. Figured within Althusser's constructs, parents expect, and even demand, the school's political "neutrality" under the assumption that their bourgeois ideology is simultaneously unique (this is what our family believes is right and true) and natural (this is the way everyone should live). Furthermore, individuals are "free" to choose their own way of living, but that choice ("informed" choice, if you will) is made possible through the "'liberating' virtues" of knowledge and literature, ineffable virtues that transcend mere know-how.

Many educators have worked to expose the "hidden curriculum" that teaches students not to think but to accept their place in capitalist society. Bowles and Gintis, for example, write:

> [W]e suggest that major aspects of educational organization replicate the relationships of dominance and subordinancy in the economic sphere. The correspondence between the social relation of schooling and work accounts for the ability of the educational system to produce an amenable and fragmented labor force. The experience of schooling, and not merely the content of formal learning, is central to this process. (125)

According to Bowles and Gintis, the primary concern of schooling is not what we learn but that we learn our place within the capitalist mode of production. We learn to be "amenable," to submit to and even cooperate with the system that oppresses us, but we are also "fragmented" in that we do not recognize or seek a commonality of purpose that would question or disturb the "relations of dominance and subordinancy in the economic sphere" by means of collective action.

Althusser offers little hope for resistance to the capitalist "regime." Later in his essay he states that the subject is created by ideology: " . . . *the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects*" (171, author's italics). Society creates the individual as a subject to participate in society and

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to serve it. Resistance, the ability to recognize ideology as repressive and act autonomously to change or subvert it, seemingly has no opportunity to emerge from this process of the constitution of the individual as a subject because that subject acquires systems of values and codes of behavior, ontology, and morality through ideology. Althusser offers no suggestion as to what allows the subject—such as himself—to see the contradictions of bourgeois ideology, much less act on them. Still he salutes the few teachers with enough courage to fight against the "ruling bourgeois ideology": "I ask the pardon of those teachers who, in dreadful conditions, attempt to turn the few weapons they can find in the history and learning to 'teach' against the ideology, the system and practices in which they are trapped. They are a kind of hero" (157). In Althusser's picture, educators face bleak prospects for meaningful resistance. They have "few weapons" and are "trapped" within the ideological system. Seemingly doomed to noble failure, these teachers are "a kind of hero."

This is an interesting, although brief, aside for Althusser. It is the only place in the entire article where he overtly mentions the potential for resistance. This resistance comes not from parents or students who feel some manifestation of (and thereby become conscious of) their own oppression. Instead it comes from teachers who "'teach' against the ideology" and, in so doing, attempt to teach others to see ideology at work. The teacher then plays a leadership role—albeit a limited one—in whatever attempts can be made to organize resistance; the very conditions that make schools the ideal place to inculcate the ideology of the ISA make them also the ideal place to teach others to be aware of it and so resist it, and the teacher is in the perfect position to take advantage of those conditions.

Althusser illustrates the structure of domination as a kind of inverted pyramid in terms that are strictly top-down. Such an illustration makes apparatuses of power visible, but this visibility is produced by means of monolithic terms that do not address the complexity of and possibility for the individual's role within this structure and within these apparatuses. As represented within the terms of Althusser's analysis (and for those such as Bowles and Gintis whose theories have been deeply influenced by his analysis), teacher and curriculum combine to make students internalize their positions within the capitalist mode of production and understand these positions as natural and right. For Althusser the individual subject is created by and through ideology, and this understanding is his greatest limitation because it fails to explain how participating in the structure is possible, how power works in productive as well as repressive ways, and how and why individuals find ways to resist and question their places. Yet others, too, find exploring docility easier than exploring resistance.

For Althusser as for Marx, the family obviously plays a key function in maintaining the class system. Annette Lareau's *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* allows us to see something of how class position is

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passed on from generation to generation. Her book offers case studies of twelve families (four middle class, four working class, and four in poverty); two families of each group were black and two were white. These case studies make visible the ways that child rearing itself is marked by class. "Concerted cultivation" is Lareau's term to describe middle-class assumptions about and practices of raising children:

> The white and black middle-class parents engaged in practices of *concerted cultivation*. In these families, parents actively fostered and assessed their children's talents, opinions, and skills. They scheduled their children for activities. They reasoned with them. They hovered over them and outside the home they did not hesitate to intervene on the children's behalf. They made a deliberate and sustained effort to stimulate children's development and to cultivate their cognitive and social skills. (238, author's italics)

Her term to describe working-class and poor parents' attitudes toward and practice of raising children is the "accomplishment of natural growth":

> The working-class and poor parents viewed children's development as unfolding spontaneously, as long as they were provided with comfort, food, shelter, and other basic support. . . . As with concerted cultivation, this commitment, too, required ongoing effort; sustaining children's natural growth despite formidable life challenges is properly viewed as accomplishment. Parents who relied on natural growth generally organized their children's lives so they spent time in and around home in informal play. . . . Boundaries between adults and children were clearly marked, parents generally used language not as an aim in itself but more as a conduit for social life. (238–39)

As in Shirley Brice Heath's seminal *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms* (discussed in chapter 3), Lareau found that the significant differences between the "cultural logics of child rearing" were not between black families and white families, but between middle-class families and working-class and poor families. Middle-class children, because of their parents' emphasis on language and negotiation and on learning and organized activities among nonfamily members, are better prepared for college and for middle-class employment opportunities. Working-class and poor children, however, tend to have stronger ties with their siblings and extended families and are better able to occupy themselves and take responsibility for their own entertainment. Also like Heath, interestingly, Lareau seems to find herself less drawn to the middle-class parents and children as middle-class life becomes "increasingly rationalized" (246).

Yet Lareau is careful to point out that working-class and poor children do not necessarily grow up to be working class or poor themselves. (In her description of one middle-class, dual career family, Lareau mentions that the

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parents are helping to support their parents and siblings still living in poverty.) Lareau writes, "To be sure, there are also significant amounts of upward and downward mobility. There are those in the population who overcome the predicted odds, particularly certain immigrant groups. The social structure of inequality is not all determining" (256). Early in the book, she states, "Perhaps two-thirds of the members of society ultimately reproduce their parents' level of educational attainment, while about one-third take a different path" (8). I wish to turn my attention to this one-third. Althusser and Lareau, from radically different perspectives, show how the individual is interpellated by and within culture. Yet, as Lareau also states (but does not demonstrate in her case studies), the individual has the potential to resist that interpellation. "The social structure of inequality" is not the result of an overt system of repression.

Antonio Gramsci, for example, specifically addresses the potential for the importance of teachers and education in any kind of organized resistance to repression. In his *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, he describes the "new type of intellectual" whose position is marked by "active participation in practical life, as constructor, organizer, 'permanent persuader'" (11). Gramsci also develops the category of the "organic intellectual" who rises from the working class or from poverty to represent his own class and argues that "it is the organic intellectual who can speak most powerfully and persuasively for and from his class" (10). "School," writes Gramsci, "is the instrument through which intellectuals of various levels are elaborated" (10), and the teacher, by reason of her education and her participation in the production of knowledge, becomes a potentially potent agent of change for her students, as has been true for many who have been moved to mention their teachers in their published literacy narratives. Of course, we also know that teachers, unfortunately, have the potential to have the opposite effect.

But Gramsci and Lareau help us begin to see how power works in much more complex ways than Althusser describes. As with Althusser and Gramsci, Michel Foucault has been useful for contemporary critiques of higher education. Foucault, writing at the same time as Althusser, defines power as beyond the distinctions of class and race and refuses to consider it as top-down movement. For Foucault, no power vacuum, no neutral space, no "free zone" exists where the web of power is not stretched, and everyone, including teachers and students, is situated within that web. Foucault hypothesizes in "Power and Strategies" that "power is co-extensive with the social body; there are no spaces of primal liberty between the meshes of its network" (142). At the same time:

> one should not assume a massive and primal condition of domination, a binary structure with "dominators" on one side and "dominated" on the other, but rather a multiform production of relations of domination which are partially susceptible of integration into overall strategies. (142)

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Power is always everywhere and is much too complex a concept to describe in binary terms of a downward movement from those-who-have-power to those-who-are-powerless, as Althusser does. Power is "multiform" (as opposed to uniform) and produced from "relations of domination" that in turn can be integrated into "strategies" that are productive. As Foucault explains in "Truth and Power":

> If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression. (119)

Power cannot be contained by or limited to binary oppositions; neither is it to be thought of as "evil" or as bad in and of itself. It produces pleasure, knowledge, and things. Structures and strategies of power make learning in systematic ways and passing on that learning in systematic ways possible; structures and strategies of power not only make possible "our" standard of living, but also make any standard of living possible, such as in the ways we live work, and play. Of course, this is not to say that structures and strategies of power do not produce pain, real pain. And this is not to say that everyone is or should be happy wherever and however they are situated in their social, economic, political positions and relations at home, at work, and elsewhere. Obviously, there are people who are suffering and who fight to end that suffering as well as people who see and fight to end the suffering of others. But the subject is not so much trapped in the web of power as a participant in the play of power. Furthermore, resistance is a production of power's network, and paradigms can and do shift.

One of my favorite photographs of my daughter as a baby shows her on the floor, crawling on top of and thoroughly investigating my ancient copy of Ribner and Kittredge's *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. The photograph serves as a visual metaphor for her relationship with literacy throughout her life thus far. She was immersed in literacy long before she had a say or a choice because my husband and I read to her with religious-like fervor almost from the very day we brought her home from the hospital. And she saw us, as students and as teachers, reading constantly. Now she's a young adult who remains an avid reader with a passion for ideas. In terms of the research, her literacy was predictable. But in terms of the same research, my literacy was not. Therefore, one goal of this book is to make sense of my own seemingly anomalous experience. More importantly, however, as a teacher, I want to believe that the desire for higher literacy is teachable, but in order to teach it, I need to have a better understanding of from where that desire comes.

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Perhaps power is what motivates the desire for higher literacy, a desire that has fueled countless individual paradigm shifts. Certainly, power and desire are intimately entwined. But, as with Foucault, I am not thinking of power in an overt political or monetary sense. Nor am I describing a desire to be middle class, to have a "nice" house with "nice" things. For many, the desire for higher literacy has no connection with a desire to "rise" to another class status. Consider Harvey Pekar, for instance, creator of *American Splendor: The Life and Times of Harvey Pekar*, a "comic" book series that is smart and ironic but rarely comic. He lives in what many would see as squalor, surrounded by books and records, and he is an exceedingly well-read autodidact who has no desire to be viewed as middle class. And, for many, the desire for higher literacy functions to obscure class consciousness. So I define this desire, at this point, in the sense of wanting and feeling some measure of control over one's environment and some measure of control over one's place in that environment.

This project seeks to expand what teachers know about their students' as well as their own reading and writing to enable them to see in more complex ways what impedes or motivates their students' acquisition of higher literacy. I want to learn more about what turns so many students off from reading and writing as they work their ways through high school and college. I want to know more of what worked for the students who make it to college ready to tackle the more demanding literacy we require of them. I am particularly interested in the stories students from nonmainstream backgrounds tell because the scholarship in my field and my own experience as a teacher of composition (with more than seven years as a teacher of basic writing in addition to eleven years as a teacher of "regular" first-year writing courses) shows me that these students are the ones who struggle most painfully in the process of acquiring higher literacy.

The following chapters examine definitions and studies of the relationship between literacy and class and then explore literacy narratives to see how others from various class backgrounds characterize their desire for higher literacy. The next chapter focuses on these descriptions of individuals' relationships to literacy not to take them at face value or to view them as individual stories of success or failure, but to read their experiences and their representations of their desire for literacy as part of a larger cultural narrative of literacy education.

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