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“GETTING ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF IT” *Problematizing and Rethinking the Research Paper Genre in the College Composition Course*

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My first teaching assignment at my current college was the infamous freshman research paper class. To my then pleasant surprise, my students expressed a familiarity and ease with “the research paper.” They explained how they wrote such papers for almost all of their classes. Some of their courses even required two research papers per semester along with essays, short-answer tests, departmental midterm/final exams, and homework assignments. When I asked to see samples of these research papers, I understood more clearly how they were able to accomplish so much “formal” writing in one semester for one class. After reading about three papers, a pattern was apparent. It was as if these papers had been written by the same person. There were no real distinctions in any of the twenty or so papers in the ways that positions were assumed, counterarguments constructed, types of evidence gathered, voices incorporated, perspectives presented, formal and rhetorical choices made, structural and organizational techniques used. There were no autobiographical accounts, poems, interviews (published or done by the student), or survey data. There was never an explicit acknowledgment or understanding that students’ sources were at best secondary ones, representing someone else’s opinion, and hence, students never really analyzed why authors thought a certain way. Each source was projected with the fact-laden “objectivity” that encyclopedias seem to convey. Unlike many of my colleagues with whom I have shared this experience, I do not automatically accuse these students of plagiarism. I believe very much that they wrote these carbon-copy papers themselves. This is what and how they had been taught and they had indeed learned their lesson well. What I suspected was that the context in which the “research paper” as a genre had always been presented to them, from high school on up into even freshman composition, was so consistent that now all they had to do was churn out a standard, stagnant form.

That these were the kinds of papers produced in the name of the college research paper is of course no coincidence. It is part and parcel of the problematic politics from which “documented writing” gets reproduced by students who are regarded as mere *tabula rasa*–typed “initiates” at the university. In 1982, in his landmark essay for *College English*, “The ‘Research Paper’ in the Writing Course: A Non-Form of Writing,” Richard Larson warned of the widespread tendency to teach and conceive of the research paper as such a “separately designated activity” (814). He described the way that instructors approach the research paper as if it were a type of generic writing that incorporates the results of research and then differentiates that writing from other rhetorical and discursive plans for writing. Just as with the students I describe here, students heed this message and reproduce in mass number this type of “nonwriting” that Larson castigated two decades ago. To this end, Robert Davis and Mark Shadle, in their CCC article “Building a Mystery”: Alternative Research Writing and the Academic Act of Seeking,” argue that research writing textbooks still reinforce this kind of writing by giving students a “standardized concept of how academic research writing should look and sound” (2000, 418). Given what Davis and Shadle see as the omnipresence of the research paper as a linear, contrived, and templated collection of detached facts,¹ the assignment itself teaches students “little more than the act of producing, as effortlessly as possible, a drab discourse, vacant of originality or commitment” (419).

According to Larson (1982), we undermine our teaching by compromising the very goals of why we might want students to do research: to familiarize themselves with ways of gathering information; to draw upon and acknowledge the data from outside themselves in their writing; to become comfortable with using in their own writing the citation of other sources as a way of identifying, exploring, and evaluating issues; and to incorporate a thoughtful, perceptive examination of their sources and the contribution that those sources have made to their thinking. Since I agree with the ways Larson describes the purposes and goals of students doing research, I must also concur that this type of thinking and writing is undermined by the ways in which we, as instructors, often construct the genre of the research paper in our classrooms. For me, there was very little in the paper samples I collected that represented any of Larson’s goals. There was no evidence of students exploring, analyzing, or connecting to their topics and sources. In fact, none of these students could engage in dialogue or debate with me about the content of their papers,

why they chose their topics, or what they learned. They were merely playing “the school game” and had learned how to do it well. The rules of the game required exactly the kind of “unwillingness or inability to think imaginatively and originally” as Davis and Shadle describe, alongside the acquisition of an apolitical notion of writing and its social purposes (2000, 425). In the end, this is what set the stage for me to question my own notions of topic generation, form, and genre when teaching “the research paper,” notions that I believe situate writing and the politics of academic work quite differently. That semester essentially became, for me, the first draft of my vision of such a classroom, with ongoing revisions going into the next year.

As David Russell shows in *Writing in the Academic Disciplines, 1870–1990: A Curricular History* (1991), the research paper as a genre and how we even think of research has a very specific history in American schools. This history and its current manifestations hardly make the research paper a value-free, apolitical exercise in which students simply learn to write better and more fluently as they move onward into their other classes. The problematic nature of this history was what I encountered when I first taught the “research paper” at my current college; my second semester, what I am calling the revision stage, represents ways my students and I revised those encounters.

THE FIRST DRAFT: ENCOUNTERING AND COUNTERING PRIVILEGED FORMS AND PRIVILEGED STUDENTS

Are we arguing that facts are useless, or that the discourses of expository intent, such as the modernist research paper, be abandoned? No. We are suggesting, however, that facts and expository writing have limits; they only allow certain types of inquiry to take place. What we envision, finally, is a discourse that will not have limits, that will allow for various kinds of inquiry to echo, question, and deepen one another.

—Robert Davis and Mark Shadle

In that first semester of Comp II, my own ability to push students to rethink what they saw as the research paper was limited. The most “successful” students in the class at the college, the two women with the highest cumulative grade point average (and they made sure to remind everyone of it), were unsurprisingly the most resistant. At the onset, Nellie routinely questioned my desire for her and her classmates to choose their own topics. She wanted an assigned topic with every class focused solely

on explicit guidelines for “the” thesis statement, each topic sentence, and APA style. Anything outside of this simply was not a writing class. She struggled to write any analytic response to the articles (she merely summarized the works) we read in the course and could not understand why we were reading so many “inconsequential” Caribbean and African authors anyway. All that was required to her was a summary of the main points of a text. That those points carried varied, socially situated messages or meanings for the reader and writer was irrelevant for her writing. Meanwhile, she prided herself on being able to speak “properly” and “intelligently,” unlike her “ignorant,” “slang”-burdened classmates who, she told me during office hours, should not be permitted to speak so much in class. She also made sure to inform me on many occasions, undoubtedly feeling comfortable with me as a fellow light-skinned woman, that the “light-skinned people” in the Brooklyn neighborhoods of her youth had simply informed her that she was being raised better than “the brown people.” I assume she did not appreciate my comments to her about people like “us” choosing to stand outside of the black community and take on anti-black racism in order to “pass.” She dropped the course right after, never having produced any piece of writing that articulated her opinion on something other than being better than the “brown people.”

Meanwhile, Alice, a light-green-eyed native of Trinidad, also prided herself on her ability to speak “proper” English with a “perfect British accent” (in fact, neither of the two students actually possessed the phonological systems they claimed). Alice consistently (but never with success) tried to impress upon her classmates that her homeland of Trinidad was a most inviting and racially harmonious place and that it was tragic that no one else had been brought up there as she had (usually making references to the family’s maids and expensive private schooling). In the end, the challenges that I posed to her about her research papers largely went unheeded. Her final paper focused on the disciplining of children in Asian countries. The question that framed her paper was: what is it about Asian culture that makes people not want to discuss openly the issue of child abuse? I suggested that she could also be self-reflective in her paper as to why she had chosen this topic—introducing her to the notion of the researcher’s standpoint—and thus, perhaps, even ask herself: what was it about her own current culture that assumed it could and should frame such a question and answer it about someone else? I also raised issues about sources: were they Asian writers? Were they “Americanized”? She insisted that such issues were not pertinent to the writing of a research

paper. As far as she was concerned, she had transitions, a clear and concise thesis statement, strong topic sentences for each paragraph that did not begin with articles; furthermore, she had used APA style flawlessly.

It is no coincidence that *these* students resisted so strongly, as they were simply valorizing an academic form that had rewarded them. They had no need, then, to engage a type of writing that would, as Davis and Shadle propose in their work, question falsely dichotomized boundaries of the academy, “logos-dominated arguing,” and the dominant notions of depersonalized writing as “academic” (2000, 422). Alice seemed unable and unwilling to analyze her own interests in her project. Thus, she could not situate academic work as always socially and politically situated, even though each question she framed and every sentence that she wrote in her paper were loaded with her own assumptions and perspectives. Just as problematic in these cases was the fact that these two students’ privileging coincides quite obviously and directly with race, class, and skin-color positions.

Interestingly, the students in that first semester most clearly willing to take risks seemed to be those who had very negative experiences in their previous writing courses. One such student, Gail, waited until her last semester to repeat this particular course requirement. Her final paper took its inspiration from an assigned text by the highly acclaimed sociolinguist Geneva Smitherman (2000), who described being left back in elementary school and later being placed in a college remedial speech class because she was an Ebonics speaker. The text goes on to historicize linguistic and structural racism as well as important research on black language varieties. Gail had an elementary school-age daughter in the New York public school system who was placed in speech classes because of her Caribbean “accent,” and after reading Smitherman, she seemed to have a new charge and connection to language politics and education (and I imagine her fire was also sparked by the class’s two light-skinned, light-eyed “dream children”—as Toni Morrison [1970] names such a character, Maureen Peal, in *The Bluest Eye*). In her paper, Gail described her daughter’s growing silence, distaste for school, and propensity to “correct” the English of everyone in the house. Gail’s paper turned out, then, to be an examination of her daughter’s classroom, research into black language varieties, a collection of published black scholars’ views on language and literacy for black students, and a sampling of creative writing that incorporated the use of these language varieties. It seemed that Gail was wrapped up in informing her ideas about language and

culture, while she was also deciding what she should do with her child at the school she was attending. At the end of the course, she even wrote me a note and came to see me about my writing an article about language. She said she would take on her child's school and that I, in turn, should write something to enlighten her professors and my colleagues. She criticized these professors for not making her sensitive to her daughter's situation earlier and called these people "black dread on the outside but white on the inside," especially because they thought they were doing something positive by ridiculing every student aloud in class for using black language varieties.

Another student, Kesha, wrote about drug addiction, inspired by an assigned text by college professor and noted writer Megan Foss (1999), who was once a drug addict and prostitute. As a working-class woman, Foss focuses a large part of the purpose of her essay on addressing class politics and writing. As someone who had witnessed firsthand the reality of drug addiction in people's lives, Kesha wanted to talk about the experiences of black women with prison records and drug histories. In her final research paper, she interviewed addicts in a rehabilitation center as well as the staff who worked there. She then did one case study of an individual she knew. Kesha seemed to work with more ease than Gail, who seemed to struggle with how to incorporate her and her daughter's own narratives alongside the texts she was reading. Meanwhile, it seemed that all I needed to do was explain briefly to Kesha what a case study was and it appeared in her paper. Similarly, all I had to do was suggest that she place her interviewee's narratives alongside information that focused on the experiences of blacks in the criminal justice system and reasons for drug abuse. I simply asked her: What was the social and racial context of all of this? She was then off and running, and eventually decided to shape this writing into a piece of literature, an actual brochure, that the rehabilitation center would be able to use. In Kesha's case, I just showed her examples of models that I was sure she had not seen before. Because she was clear about her purposes for this brochure and whom she wanted to help with it, simply showing her a few models was all that I needed to do. She was always clear from her initial reading of Foss that she wanted to center black women's voices, and so she revised the interview models I showed her according to what would be most appropriate for her brochure. For a large number of students, however, rethinking what they thought a research paper could be was an easy enough process, but the actual writing proved to be an excruciatingly confusing task.

For Elva, writing her paper was frustrating, albeit beneficial (or so she said). She struggled throughout the writing of her paper and in the end, there still seemed to be large gaps and holes. She was very caught up in male-female relationships and wanted to show that black culture exhibits a different type of interaction via romance, body/beauty preferences, and so on from what goes on in mainstream white culture. She decided to interview young, single, heterosexual black men and women. She knew what she wanted to do and whom she wanted to interview, but designing questions was very challenging for her. She found this difficult and so consulted her classmates, whom she tested questions on. I thought this was brilliant and told her that this was called a “pilot study,” a tool that she clearly understood. After we looked at her “pilot,” she collected data from at least forty people. The next and most difficult process was “aggregating” the data. Designing questions, disseminating questionnaires, and then categorizing responses took an exacting amount of time for her and she interpreted this as incompetence. It did not seem to comfort her when I insisted that what she was doing was, in fact, quite difficult because it was very sophisticated. Throughout our many e-mail exchanges and meetings, she continued to run into moments where she was frustrated. No matter how much her writing group and I thought her frustrations were natural (very few people sing and dance with utter joy as they write), she saw herself as incompetent. I even explained (and offered her the opportunity to work with a partner) that scholars often undertake such research in partners and teams and that researchers who collect data for their dissertations might take years to aggregate it, but she still seemed to interpret her struggles as defeat (and this is not even to mention the difficulty she encountered in using texts and personal experiences to define what she meant by black culture and romance). In the end, what interested her most were the differences that occurred across generations. Although the actual written paper was still far from finished, I gave her a good grade on the final project based on her very tedious and time-consuming journey into collecting and aggregating data alongside textual resources. She would need more practice and time with writing up data such as hers, but as a first attempt at such writing, I thought she showed a sharp skill, maturity, and sophistication akin to what my own peers in graduate school were doing in their pilot studies. She, however, never seemed convinced of this.

It was largely through working with Elva that I began to question more rigorously the nature of the research paper in terms of what counts as

“evidence.” The type of data that Elva was collecting and her attempt to write it up should not have been a new endeavor for her. She was in fact focusing in the social sciences and was well into her major. None of what she described as her previous research papers, however, seemed to fall outside of the typical library-go-fetch process. Larson (1982) also commented on this phenomenon in terms of the dangers of allowing students to think that research relies primarily upon books. He notes that only one or two fields of study represent disciplines where the corpus of its research protocols rest on book collecting alone. He argues that much research regarded as “humanistic” takes place outside of the library, just like the very field in which Elva was concentrating her coursework. More importantly, facts—which Elva collected quite well—take on meaning only inside of cultural debates and disciplinary, interpretative networks within which they are framed (Booth, Colomb, and Williams 1995; Crowley and Hawhee 1999). Likewise, the very notion of the thesis/support format that had structured Elva’s entire freshman composition experience (with its final culminating expression in the research paper) has always already been questioned also. Davis and Shadle (2000) go on to point out the central thinking of scholars such as Paul Heilker (1996), Lydia Fakundiny (1991), and Bruce Ballenger (1994) in questioning our notions of the research paper and essay writing in the ways that we limit students’ thinking and disengage students’ work from theories central to social epistemology and rhetoric. The one stock essay form seems the easiest to teach and grade, requiring thus only a mechanical reflex on the part of students and a counterreflex from the teacher’s pen. This, however, does not mean that this is the only way to teach writing, that this is a worthwhile assignment for teachers to give or students to complete, that there is only one kind of essay and one way to write it, or that there is only one kind of information and one way to dump it into writing.

Ann Johns’s work is particularly helpful here. In her essay “Destabilizing and Enriching Novice Students’ Genre Theories,” (2002a), she points out that teachers simplify and generalize text production to such an extent that many features of texts and contexts are distorted or simply discarded. What then happens is that we lift those genres and discourses out of the communities of practice that gave rise to them in their particular purpose, place, and time. The dynamism is wiped away and instead a generic, absolute template for only one type of task is embraced. To this end, Johns reminds us that the genres in which we write “are mental abstractions, perpetually subject to change, socially situated, and revised to respond

to varied audiences or purposes” (237). She thus advocates a pedagogy that destabilizes students’ notions of academic texts, enriches them by embracing the contestation and negotiation through which academic discourses and disciplines are constituted, and then expands students’ notions’ of their writing by inviting them to participate in this work. She cites five goals in her work: (1) to evoke student interest, since motivating students to perform is a crucial element; (2) to draw from students’ own life histories, including their pedagogical histories; (3) to provide experiences, especially in the context of students labeled as “remedial” and discriminated against because of their bilingualism and ethnicities, that allow students to experience themselves in powerful roles during their reading and writing in the classroom; (4) to destabilize students’ theories of history and their theories of genre as static and preexisting; and (5) to provide sufficient scaffolding or assisted performance for students to be supported, critiqued, and encouraged as their theories are destabilized. In this way, students not only become writers but also genre theorists, a process that can be well applied wherever they write. This to me seems the purpose and goal for the freshman research paper class.

While it was easy for me to be critical of the dominant, traditional approaches to the research paper that my students had encountered, what I needed to take on was the more difficult project that Johns describes, which would involve a critical examination of writing in my own classroom. What I needed to do, then, what I had failed especially to do with Elva, was provide a type of scaffolding in the classroom where students would not only be engaging alternative forms of research writing but would also be looking at why, how, where, and when they are used. In that first semester, I was making it up as I went along, trying to understand the context of the place I was in and how it structured students’ notions of what the research paper genre was. But what had really happened in my own classroom? How and why did students define and redefine research, its purposes, and its methods? How did students make their decision about the structures and forms of their research writing? What difference did it make in a final research paper if students spent the semester reading and writing (high stakes and low stakes) in a variety of forms, genres, voices, and language varieties? Which forms of writing did students themselves privilege? The exploration of these questions was sparked in that first semester and would continue a year later, when the infamous research paper class would meet my students and me again.

“THEN BRING IT ON”: THE REVISION STAGE—THE SELF AS TEXT

Criticism, contestation and difference is not a genre, not a skill, not a later developmental moment, not a reading position. It is, according to Voloshinov, a constitutive and available element of every sign, utterance and text. It can be, following Bourdieu, a principal strategy in realizing, converting, and contesting economic, cultural, and social capital. That is, unless dominant cultures and pedagogical practices, however intentionally or unintentionally, silence it.

—Allan Luke

In the second year of teaching “the research paper,” I began the semester by asking students to reflect on their prior research experiences. I wanted these reflections to fulfill two purposes: (1) to find out exactly what students had written before; and (2) to discover what students defined as the “research” genre based on their prior experiences. Interestingly, the student with the most extensive and varied experience was a young woman, Bjana, who had gone to one of the established small alternative high schools in New York City. It is no coincidence that she always seemed to have no hesitation to take on what I thought were very sophisticated and challenging writing topics. Her final paper was an examination of the impact of colonialism on a people’s culture and language. Early in the semester, Bjana wrote about Ngugi wa’ Thiong’o’s *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986) and made plans to read other work by him. In the end, her paper used Ngugi’s arguments about colonialism robbing the language and culture of Africa to contextualize American imperialism in Puerto Rico. Unlike Alice, who had been reluctant to do so when examining what she defined as Asian culture, Bjana explained her own researcher’s position as a black person in America. She saw U.S. racism against blacks as constituting their colonization, thus making the United States a country that robs other people abroad of their culture and language at the same time that it does so for blacks here. I was immediately fascinated by the multiple levels of her argument. It made sense to me, though, given her prior experiences in high school, which included a research paper on the Vietnam War using interviews with black veterans, a position paper on education after studying the differences and similarities in the historical debates between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois, neighborhood studies interviewing longtime residents and the history of white flight, and histories

investigating the conflict between blacks and Jews in Brooklyn. Writing and its social purposes had been a central force in her high school experience, and she could articulate connections to writing, empowerment, and black culture and history that few other students could.

Along with collecting information about students' prior research experiences, I decided that I would ask students to think about the research topics in each of their journal responses, where they were asked to explore what, if any, issue was emerging that they would like to think more extensively about. In this way, I was hoping that the notion of choosing their own topic would not be such a daunting task as it had been in the previous semester. In that way, by the middle of the semester, I hoped we could focus instead on what kinds of data could inform the topics and, in turn, how to write about them. I wanted to encourage students to define and invent their own means of informing their topics while simultaneously deciding the genres in which they would construct the meanings of their subject.

The topics that students would be exploring did indeed take shape early in the semester, all somehow sparked by discussions in class around the texts we were reading and the issues students raised. Each of the topics represented personal connections for the students that were explicitly explored in their papers, pushing forth new understandings of the genre of the research paper in comparison to what they came in with. In fact, I was a bit surprised by how personal their writing was, although that was never an explicit requirement of the research paper. Perhaps what I saw as students' willingness to really "lay it all down on the line" resulted from the journal guidelines, where I attempted to center personal introspection. Along with articulating research possibilities, students were asked to respond in writing to a central set of questions for every text read in the course:

- What for you is most important in this text? Why? What is important about this information?
- What quote or parts of the texts (key words, favorite phrases, etc.) do you find most compelling? Why? (Please keep track of page numbers for later citations in papers.)
- What personal experience(s) can you connect to this information? How? Why? Think of this as opportunity to really delve into looking at why you think what you think, why you respond the way you do. What is triggering your response? What do you think is impacting the way you see/think about something? Explain.

- What other readings, music, conversations, proverbs, granmomma’s wisdom, gossip, etc. do you connect to this information? How? Why?

The formal writing assignments throughout the term always asked students to compare any two or three texts in the set we had just finished reading. Students were guided in class through writing to choose their own texts and the topic they would decide for their papers. In each of these cases, “the self” could serve as one of their chosen texts. “Reading the self as a text” was a phrase I used a lot that semester, and it made sense for students because of our extensive discussions that began after reading excerpts from Keith Gilyard’s *Voices of the Self* (1991). This meant that students had to explain a specific, personal story while also analyzing its larger social and political dimensions as the substance of a comparison to a reading from the course. Of course, not all students chose to do this at all times and often compared two readings to one another. Some typical paper topics throughout the term consisted of the following:

- comparisons of living in poverty as a black child in the Caribbean or as a Caribbean American in the United States to excerpts from Dick Gregory’s (1964) autobiography about the same topic (an African American in the United States)
- comparisons of Geneva Smitherman’s (1999) elementary school experiences with language discrimination to their own educational experiences
- comparisons of personal issues and experiences of assimilation, language, and cultural identity to Richard Rodriguez (1983) and/or Amy Tan (1991)
- comparisons between Haki Madhubuti’s (1990) politicization of racism and the experiences of black men to short stories and narratives written by former students (included in the course packet) and by themselves
- comparisons between Patricia Hill Collins’s (1990) politicization of racism and sexism and the experiences of black women to short stories and narratives written by former students (included in the course packet) and by themselves

There was never an instance where a student did not, at least once in the course, use “the self as a text” in a formal writing assignment. Thus, by the end of the term, choosing one’s own topic and texts, while also socially and politically interrogating one’s personal connection to the topic, were nothing new. I was fascinated with the kinds of topics students chose, topics that I could never have created:

- issues of identity and culture for a “hip-hop cultured,” black Panamanian man in Brooklyn
- how and why Brooklyn teenagers choose historically black colleges and universities
- racism as experienced by black women in corporate America
- disciplining methods of Caribbean parents in the United States and the Caribbean
- the case of reparations for slavery
- black motherhood as defined by black women historically and currently
- autism and the experience of black children and parents
- negative perceptions and stereotypes about Haitian vodun
- the role of the black barbershop in black communities
- police brutality and community response
- racism encountered by black students at historically white colleges
- differences in slavery in the Hispanophone, Anglophone, and Francophone Caribbean
- low self-esteem as a barrier to school success for black teenagers
- differences between Catholic high schools and public high school in the Brooklyn Flatbush area
- oral history of the “Lafayette” projects in Brooklyn (the pseudonym here is created by the student)
- AIDS in Africa

Before students produced any of their own writing, however, many wanted to test me in the very beginning. Did I really mean what I was saying? And what would I do when they did just what I was asking for? This was especially clear with Malcolm, who always seemed to be taking my temperature by asking me if I was really going to let him write about the “real” issues of *his* life. He even asked me if I really valued Ebonics like Geneva Smitherman and if I could get “down” like her. I told him that I didn’t think I could get down quite like Dr. G. but that I do try a “lil sumthin, sumthin here and there,” as Smitherman’s work was important to me. At this point, he assured me that he could “throw down” just like her and could “drop lines just as good.” I couldn’t help but laugh and gave what I thought was the most appropriate response to this very curious student: “Then bring it on. I ain’t skeered,” and he laughed. I was, in fact, quite impressed by his line of questioning because it showed that he understood Smitherman’s work, *Talkin That Talk: Language, Culture, and Education in African America* (1999), very well as well as how to assess his own professor’s politics of writing and academic work. He was simply

testing me to see if I walked what I talked. In the text that we had read, Smitherman herself describes the resistance she faced when she decided not to put the g's on her critical text *Talkin and Testifyin*—a story that I felt was very important to students' understanding of what happens when new stuff comes through old, rusted pipelines. I stress to students, as I did with Malcolm, that Smitherman's science and the way she drops it were not always welcomed but she stayed true to the game and did it anyway. I can't make that kind of decision for students, but I can and will support them when they strike out for something that is new on the page in both content and form (since they really do hang together, like beans and cornbread, is what I usually say). I also point out, based on the texts that we have read, that they are simply following the trajectory of a long-standing history and politics of many socially conscious black writers. Mixing their genres and forms does not mean that they have not achieved what has been "standardized" but instead have moved past it and its purposes (again, Smitherman's story is an important lesson here: she herself talks *not* about the difficulty of achieving a standardized form, but of self-consciously hybridizing an academic style, a style very few writers successfully achieve). I'm not sure who was more surprised at the end: Malcolm, by my "allowance" of his writing; or me, by what and how he actually wrote. Malcolm's first paper, "Love, Hell, or Right," was a personal comparison to "Love Letters" by Megan Foss (the same essay that had sparked Kesha's research paper the previous year). Foss was once a prostitute and drug addict who learned to write in prison by writing love letters to her then pimp-boyfriend. Her piece opens with an autobiographical/memoir account of her life and then moves into questioning the academy's choking of what she regards as her working-class life and language. Malcolm's piece was also about his love letters and literacy in prison and he opened with the following:

As I sit here in my eight-by-ten urine scented cell, I pray that the pale correct officer yells my name on the mail call. Although I am not a Muslim, nor a Christian, I plead with Allah and Jesus to send mail from my baby girl, Nichole. . . . behind these iron vines I learned that pain is love. . . . In here my clock moves like a handicapped turtle. My nights are filled with traumatizing noises from the man in cell five getting burned to death, the guy in cell nine trying to strangle himself with wet sheets and the soft fellow from Queens getting his anus ripped open Louima style with no grease. This is where I had to find love. In hell, now you know that is not right.

Mama never said that it would days like this. I have to put a sheet over my transparent bars to defecate or piss. Somewhere out there I know that there is a better life for an intelligent thug like me. A life filled with less tears. A life filled with more smiles. I hate this place like I hate the cops who killed my father. I hate this place like I hate drug dealers who sold cooked up cocaine to my struggling mother. The only thing that keeps me ticking is the love letters that I receive when the pale-faced men call my name. In this hellhole these love letters make me feel all right.

The substance of his essay looks at how his literacy was driven by the love letters that he wrote to his girlfriend and also to his boys (what he called “thug love letters”). Foss had inspired him to think of his literacy being shaped by these letters. Malcolm’s letters kept him connected to the outside world where he could be free. The beauty of the essay is obviously connected to the way that Malcolm situates his literacy, especially in the way he recaptured his experiences alongside a re-creation of the love letters that kept him emotionally and spiritually alive. I was blown away by his writing—the content, the form, the language, the flow—and I told him so. He had an essay that needed to be heard and read by more people:

Malcolm. . . . A beautiful and passionate piece. Although, perhaps presumptuous of me, I want to hear more—probably me needin to mind my own business, you know how I do. Nevertheless, you got a story/autobiography here that needs to be put in print just as is Megan Foss’s. . . .

That first paragraph wrapped me right up in your writing! The metaphors and images on the first page—the clock moving like a turtle, pale-faced men, hell-hole, iron vines, thug love letters, thug love style. I could go on here. The words escape me to describe the power this had for me. Beautiful and terrifying all at the same time! Let’s talk about this piece, about it being your final project for this class. You could use the Foss piece as your model—notice what she does in the beginning and then how she ends her piece. Her political commentary/analysis is just like the science you always droppin in class. . . .

So yeah, you had it right: you can get down like Dr. G and now I see what you mean that some folks just ain’t ready for this. Yet and still, I hope the space of this classroom is a place where you can to write what you gotta write, no matter who ain’t ready yet.

Malcolm did not follow my suggestions regarding the Foss model because he did not need to. His paper had it its own historical, political

context. He called his final paper “Issues of Black Folks”; he wanted to model it after W. E. B. DuBois’s *Souls of Black Folks* as a genre in which to create his own “auto-sociographical text.”² He created various mini-chapters where he would write about personal experiences, observations, and historical information about being a black man in America. His first chapter was this quoted piece that he wrote in response to Foss, “Love, Hell, or Right.” His second chapter, “Miseducation Continued,” examined issues of race, curriculum, and education in urban schools. His final chapter, “Black Men’s Gender,” was an attempt to be in dialogue with writers such as Haki Madhubuti (1991) alongside key black feminist thinkers like Patricia Hill-Collins (1991) in order to critically represent what he saw as issues of gender oppression in the lived experiences of black men. He ended the course by writing and talking to me about his desire to start writing more stories about his life that could someday become a book. It was obvious to me in his first paper that he had tested the waters and started swimming across after he saw what kind of water-moves I was making. He even insists now that he will be visiting my future classes to make sure that his writing is in my next course reader. The purpose of Malcolm’s project, then, was not to copy a predetermined genre, not even W. E. B. DuBois’s. What was equally important and impressive to me was the way that he could engage the way that DuBois’s genre emerged out of a particular social, historical context intimately connected to the politics of post-Reconstruction. That moment was not necessarily Malcolm’s but it held lessons for him to learn as he went forth with his own genre in his own “second post-Reconstruction moment.”³

Like Malcolm and many of the other students whom I have met, personal interrogations are neither a stylistic issue, where they merely pepper the opening of their writing with a good story, nor are they simply a self-therapeutic maneuver. Students took on themselves as texts and really pushed the boundaries of the research genre for themselves and for me. Students like Malcolm were an integral part of that process. In small groups, students read each other’s proposals, drafts, and final papers and were thus a part of each other’s entire process—from the generating of topics to the final writing. They also gave each other feedback in a whole-class format where all students had to informally present their research. Thus, in taking on the kind of writing that Malcolm did, he also set the tone for how writing could and would look that semester.

As Davis and Shadle have argued, when students use and mix multiple genres and mediums as well as disciplines and culture, their work can

move directly up against the false opposition that happens in composition studies and academic culture: “academic and expressive writing; fiction and nonfiction; high, pop, and folk culture, and [research methods across disciplines]” (2000, 418). This, in turn, helps students to reconstruct the purposes and processes of academic work while also helping them to understand that there is a variety of information and discourses, modes and genres. That a student like Malcolm’s empowerment rests with an ability to mimic preexisting genres denies the sophistication of his thinking and social consciousness, the ways in which he can and has already mimicked plenty of forms already, and most important, his uncanny and straight-up approach for analyzing the politics of the teacher who expects and wants nothing more from him than static writing formulas. We would do well here to heed the work of Allan Luke (1996), who questions whether “technical control” offers success in what is now the generic, overused trope of the “culture of power.” Such theories often focus little on helping students read and analyze structures of oppression and domination that are never static or fully transparent. There is an assumption that power can be gleaned through direct transmission provided by teachers solely through text types used in the classroom. Luke calls this an analytical separation of ideology from function instead of a close reading of the site of contestations of difference, a reading that Malcolm was clearly able to form in his understandings of not just what DuBois wrote but *how* he wrote it (and, as with the case of Geneva Smitherman, we would do well to remember, as Cedric Robinson (2000) points out, that DuBois met extreme opposition with his work form the “culture of power” but did it *anyway*).

Luke’s work illuminates the ways in which texts are always formed inside of powerful forces of ideological struggle about what will count as knowledge. Thus, texts become a type of technology whose structures and effect *cannot* be simply learned and mimicked without investigating their ideological origins, current locations, and consequences. Such generic tropes about “cultures of power” and showing it to students are neither historically informed nor socially illuminating, and they reify and essentialize power more than dismantle it. To this end, Luke argues: “Whether viewed in terms of mastery of genres, mastery of reason, mastery of the self, or mastery of skills, power is treated as something which can be identified, transmitted, and possessed. By investing power in particular genres, texts, skills, abilities, competences, the range of educational interventions tend to reify power: that is, to turn it into an object which can be

(semiotically, pedagogically, institutionally, psychologically) deconstructed and pedagogically reassembled and transmitted” (1996, 321).

As Luke argues, these types of notions of power that rest solely in terms of control of text types actually match well with traditionalist, instrumental approaches. What is achieved, then, is a “purely instrumental and technical (and hence economically beneficial) terminology” that depoliticizes notions of culture and curriculum rather than explicates their political workings and ramifications (1996, 325). Luke’s position, where genres are “political sites of contest,” is very different from what I see as the dominant Oz model: all one needs is one pair of dress shoes for the “power culture” ball, click the heels, and then go anywhere at any time. What Malcolm and his classmates thus need is not a demonstration of how to take apart the genres of their disciplines so that they can readily reproduce them but an approach, “a critical social theory of practice,” that centers examinations of how and why a particular writer did what he or she did, when, and why (332). In this way, writing becomes a “social strategy” located in a particular history and network of power relations that students can and often will choose to participate in (333).

“CAN’T GET ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF IT”: CONTINUING THE REVISION STAGE—OLD GENRE PRESCRIPTIONS AND NEW INVENTIONS

It was the students majoring in the social sciences who made me think back on the events and activities in the course that had supported the kinds of writing that students like Malcolm were undertaking in their research papers. Yet, it was also these students who made me think more about how the genre of the research paper takes shape and shapes writing and thinking.

The social science students all seemed very interested in the topics they had chosen for themselves. The topics of their papers in Comp II were the same as the topics they were doing for their social science classes. While I thought there were obvious connections to the writing they were doing in both classes, none of them seemed to think so. The only connections they saw were the APA format requirements. Ideally, I had hoped that students would use the space of our composition course to write an-depth paper for their social science work. I even argued that the carrot to this approach would be the “killing of two birds with one stone,” so to speak. None of the students, however, chose to do this. The students wrote completely different papers. There was nothing explicitly stated in

the requirements of their social science papers that matched what I saw as the traditional research paper format in its collection of a detached list of “facts.” Yet the students wrote exactly these types of essays for their social science classes.

One student, George, chose to write about manic-depressive disorder. His essay for the Comp class opened with a story about his favorite and closest cousin, who became his sole support when he moved to the United States from Jamaica. All of a sudden, she had an explosively violent episode, which he described with extensive detail so the reader could grasp the terror it must have inflicted and the pain George felt watching his cousin’s life: “It has been over ten years since A—— has been diagnosed with this illness, and life has continued to be a thin line between sanity and insanity for my dear cousin and, in some ways, me as well.” This story and that of his family’s responses never made it into his other class’s paper. For our composition class, George included general information about manic depression from his other paper but he also used online sources for his composition research paper derived from large health organizations. His paper also included information about support groups and descriptions of the current research and controversies in the field where he discussed his own opinions and experiences. While it may seem positive that George satisfied the expectations of his other course with the writing that he submitted, that writing represented a “non-form of writing”(Larson 1982) that did not allow him to engage the multiple and competing perspectives in the field. His accumulation of facts for his social science paper was so general and inconsequential as to make the content almost juvenile. What he produced, in fact, did not represent the type of discourses and research methods that are currently happening in his field and his writing in our composition course clearly indicated that he was more than ready to do as much.

I link George’s paper here to the ideal of research in the late nineteenth century, which created what David Russell has called a very “narrow view of the production of written knowledge” for the modern-day university (1991, 72). He links these early writing models to an Enlightenment project whose goal was to present “an unproblematic recording of the facts in correct language” (73). Knowledge consisted in one form that could be readily sought and replicated, not socially negotiated and changing. Though Russell’s work describes the history of the late nineteenth century, George’s paper for the social science course makes me suspect that some contemporary classrooms may be no different in the ways in which

fact and expression are regulated, ways that were interestingly and not coincidentally designed at a time when his presence at the American university would have been “legally” barred under the same Enlightenment project.

Russell also documents the way that this early research ideal influenced the infamous research paper and as such, has played a central role in mass education today. In this new model of the research paper, the professor represented a disciplinary community with the student as the disciple. However, this research paper industry was itself created at this moment when the research ideal was expanded alongside a large, more impersonal university where students were not expected to draft and revise their papers and faculty did not discuss the social processes and methods of writing in their courses. As the research paper became a routine, the focus moved away from an apprentice model to a mode of production. Knowledge in the disciplines was not regarded as politically constructed and actively situated by conflicting social agents. Thus, the research paper as a genre was really akin almost to an exam—students were simply expected to display facts that they had learned and not enter the “rhetorical universe of a discipline” and thus, the emphasis was on form, length, and sources (1991, 91). Given the responses of students like Alice and Nellie, it would seem that very little has changed in more than fifty years of faculty assigning and grading research papers. Russell goes on to further document the work of George Arms in 1943, whose examination of textbooks’ model papers gave examples where no writing had a communicative or rhetorical purpose outside of the classroom or addressed a problem that did not have clear-cut, ready-made, and factual solutions. What is interesting, then, about my social science student George’s paper is that he turned a serious issue, one that was complex and situated for him, along with his acute awareness of his audience and purposes for writing, into exactly the same kind of paper for his social science class that Arms was reading and critiquing decades ago. One can’t help but wonder what Arms would say if he knew this kind of paper that he abhorred all those years ago got George an A today.

Rhonda was another student who was working on a research paper for her social science class who wrote a very similar paper to George’s and also received an A. Her topic was incest. She knew early on that this would be her topic for both courses. I assumed that she would want to use the same paper for both classes and offered her the option. Like George, however, she did not do this. Her social science paper focused mostly on

the prevalence of incest in statistical terms and ended with two concluding paragraphs: one on the psychological trauma incest inflicts on families, another on the kinds of therapy available to survivors. Although she described her paper for the composition class as interesting, the paper for her other class was something she said she could “not seem to get on the right side of.” She came to talk to me particularly about the issue of how she was instructed to create the social science paper. She needed an introduction paragraph with a thesis statement that named her three arguments. In her body she could have one argument that could be extensive while the other two arguments could be confined to one paragraph each. This formula confused her. She understood it, but for some reason she found herself struggling to get it down on paper. In the end, this paper consisted of very different explorations and conclusions from her composition paper, which focused on female survivors who have used writing and social consciousness to combat and heal histories of incest both socially and individually.

After Rhonda submitted her draft, I noticed that she was absent from class for a few days. This was very much unlike her so I assumed she must be really sick. I didn’t, however, place a call or e-mail to her at that point. I also didn’t get a chance to read the pile of drafts from students until a week later. She had, I now believe, prodded me to find out my reactions, just as Malcolm had done, but I didn’t really get it at the time. In her process and reflective writing that I assigned with the submission of the draft, she wrote about getting carried away with “the story” at the beginning of the paper. She felt she spent too much time there and that she needed to analyze the writers more. I reminded her that it was just a draft and that we would have to sit down and look at this together and decide what she might do.

“The story” that she was warning me about was a recounting of moving in with her mother, who had left her with her grandmother until she could find work, at the age of eight. “A real hell started” when her stepfather began to molest her. Rhonda screamed in agony one day and a neighbor heard her cry and came to the house. The stepfather, realizing his trespasses would no longer be allowed, accused Rhonda of trying to stab him soon after. She was then sent back to live with her grandmother. This is where “her story” ends. At this point in her paper, she moved abruptly into four paragraphs in which she discussed four authors’ experiences with incest. It was as if she were playing it safe and using the same strategy that she was instructed to use in her social science class.

I had suspected that Rhonda was an incest survivor all along but had not expected that she would situate herself and her experiences in her writing in this way. On the back of each of the twelve pages of her “story,” I wrote her a note where I commented as to how her writing had impacted me and connected to my own personal “story.” I made sure to communicate clearly that my bottom line was that she need not stop “her story” but go deeper into looking at it and the role her own writing had in that process (she had described herself as a writer and as someone who needed it in her life on the very first day of class). I told her that I liked where she was going with her analysis of the women writers/survivors. If she so chose, I thought she could make this be a central focus as a crucial variable in how female incest survivors have opened a space for this type of sexual oppression to be dealt with socially. But most important, I really wanted her to make sure that this was a paper that she would be able to “get on the right side of” in terms of the way she was shaping her arguments and purposes rather than following some arbitrary formula. I thought she should continue to situate herself and her own healing in these writers’ stories by constantly asking, and thus writing: What am I learning about myself by reading these women—what are the similarities and differences? How does it impact me and my memories to read this—when and where in the text do these responses occur for me? Where does this all take me? Where does this take me as a writer? What does this mean for women writers generally? What does this show about the psychological and social aspects of incest?

The morning that I did finally read Rhonda’s draft, I made a mental note to call her if she did not show up for class. She did come to class that day and I apologized that I had not read her work earlier and that I supported everything she was doing in her writing. The following day we met again to talk about her other incest paper, the one she said she couldn’t write. Mostly she asked me for ways to organize it “better” because she just did not like it at all (and still doesn’t, though she scored high on it). Had Rhonda’s paper in the composition class made the seemingly “objective” nature of her other paper more difficult? What are the consequences when students are not really interrogating the personal and instead just present the “factual” information, even though they are deeply connected to what they are writing about? When I think back on Rhonda’s two papers, I can’t help but think about the two very distinct titles. One essay was called “Incest and Treatment.” The other was “Surviving to Write: A Story of Women Who Determined Their Destiny.” I am struck by how

nested form, content, and the social analyses of the personal really are. In Rhonda's paper for her social science class, she did not find a space in the confines of that genre that would allow her to examine writing and social issues of gender oppression in relation to the topic of incest. Just like George, her conclusions about "treatment" for incest survivors were very narrowly and minimally defined (not even mirroring what actually exists and is discussed in the literature of the discipline), as it had to be contextualized within a narrow range of writing options.

It seems to me that what we often do in the name of the research paper buries more possibilities than it unearths. Exploring a multiplicity of genres, then, encompasses more than just offering numerous modalities. It expands our understandings of the problems and solutions that our fields can offer at the same time that it can sometimes uncover intersections of identity, social structures, and writing. Ironically, Nellie and Alice, two of the most resistant students I have met, have reaffirmed my commitment to situating the politics of writing, genre, and academic work. Their resistance to rethinking the genre of the research paper and their identity as writers was mixed in complicated ways. Perhaps an approach that prompts an interrogation of those identities will encourage them to "unearth more," a process that I now believe may have been more fruitful for them that I initially thought.

Neither of them has fared well at the university due to the very issues surrounding race, class, and identity that were there on the surface when we met. Nellie, as it ends up, dropped out the semester after we met as her oldest son was being pushed into special education and was very angry with her. Ironically, I know about all of this today because she visits me intermittently, not to discuss her being better than "the brown people," but to rediscuss those issues that politically, she just was not ready to face at our first meeting. Meanwhile, Alice stayed in school a little longer but eventually dropped out also. She found herself overwhelmed with having to take care of a large family whose wealth in the Caribbean was not what it once was and hence were forced to migrate to the United States. The rising costs of tuition made attending college more and more difficult for Alice, although she had a fairly well-paying full-time job. This is especially the case since she advances very little at her job, now hating how everyone moves past her on the promotion line, but telling her how much they love her "little British accent." I was floored in both cases when the students began talking to me about all of this and I am still unsure if this means I opened up a space for them that they did not find anywhere else or if I

failed them miserably. Perhaps it is both. However, when I meet students like them today, I know to be more patient, to dig deeper into those places that they are reluctant to visit. Even when it seems that students would rather retreat into that comfortable “non- form of writing” that Larson describes (1982, 811), where they have to say and question very little, they are hardly safe there.

NOTES

1. Davis and Shadle explain in their article that in a 1982 survey, 84 percent of all freshman composition courses taught the “research paper” (2000, 417).
2. I borrow the term “auto-sociographic” from Sylvia Wynter (1981), who uses it to describe the writings of C. L. R. James, particularly regarding his text *Beyond a Boundary*. She argues that the nature of what he had experienced and the purposes of his writing required a new and different genre with which to capture this. For more about this, see Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (2000).
3. I take this term “second post-Reconstruction” from Manning Marable. Scholars such as Marable regard the post-emancipation moment of Reconstruction as a major site in U.S. history where social relations would be reconstructed. Following this moment, however, came a backlash, referred to as the post-Reconstruction, which framed Jim Crow and legalized racial apartheid in the United States. The second moment of social upheaval, created by the civil rights and black power movements, is referred to as the second Reconstruction. I am here calling the current backlash in social equity the second post-Reconstruction. For more about this see Marable’s anthology with Leith Mullings, *Let Nobody Turn Us Around* (1999) and his *Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945–1990* (1991).