

Narrowing the Lens

Teaching as Narrative Negotiation

One brisk morning in March, I was sitting in my quiet home office surrounded by open books, working on a paper for class (I was in graduate school at the time), when an email popped up in the corner of my screen:

OMG

Can you get over here today! [Samuel's] all girls' class has done some *unbelievable writing*. I need to get this published ASAP! We need your help!!!

It was our second year working with Rosa Parks Middle School, and Tallulah and I had facilitated a workshop entitled “Using Genre to Act on Content Area” the day before.

I grabbed the phone, called the school, and managed to get a very excited academic facilitator on the line. She wanted to know if Tallulah or I could come right then. Tallulah and I exchanged some jubilant text messages, and because she happened to be in the area, Tallulah went by. She got there just in time to join the class where the students—mainly African American girls—were reading aloud from their homework papers: diary entries written as if they were Jewish children living during the Holocaust. The teacher, the academic facilitator, and the new principal, Mrs. Morgan, were all in the room, listening to the girls read with tears in their eyes. When Tallulah entered, the girls greeted her and asked one student, Erin, to read her entry again. As she read quietly, the students and adults openly cried. Several other tearful entries were shared before the period ended.

Afterward, Tallulah wrote to Lauren and me, thinking about and celebrating this moment that we had been invited into.

When I was getting ready to leave, one of the girls asked [Samuel] something. And he said, I don't know, ask her. She said, “Did you cry listening to the stories?” I said something like “Well, you know these diary entries are very powerful and full of emotion. The thing, though, that is really affecting me is the way that all of you girls are so interested

and connected to your writing and that you are doing all of this amazing writing and thinking in social studies with [Samuel].” (And being me) I actually was a little choked up telling them that. I looked over at Samuel and he was tearing up himself. What a moment—teacher, kids, WP consultant connecting over a writing assignment.

This chapter focuses on the narratives of two social studies teachers who are negotiating the various narratives presented in Chapter 3 in order to engage their students in the curriculum of the class through writing. These analyses will then serve as context for the student work in Chapters 5 and 6.

A WORD ABOUT GENRE THEORY: WHAT WE WERE ATTEMPTING TO DO

I want to pause here with a word about genre theory and problematize the workshop we led in order to better explain the assignment Samuel gave. Though Tallulah and I had been studying genre theory and thinking about genres as sites of action rather than simply containers for knowledge, our workshop really dealt with genre as “form.” Genre as form is problematic because it lends itself to formulaic writing, where there is a form to be filled out, much like a fill-in-the-blank worksheet. Genre as form smacks of the testing and accountability narrative that we were trying to critique. Genre as sites of action see genre as a place where writers act on something, exploring the rules for behavior in that genre and then acting within those rules while also pushing the boundaries.

Now when I do workshops on genre, I use the analogy of going to a party. One has to figure out the purpose of the party and who will attend in order to know what to wear, what types of conversations are appropriate, and how to behave. Then the person decides how to be recognizable as belonging in this setting while maintaining personal identity and possibly pushing at the boundaries. Entering a genre is much the same, and working with genre in this way requires much more critical thinking than filling in a form.

The title of the workshop alluded to our beginning thinking about genre as sites of action, and on the agenda we had written:

If we think about genres as sites of action, as ways of being and viewing the world, then viewing a topic through different genres and contexts is like holding it up to the light and looking at it from different angles, from different viewpoints.

However, the activity that we asked the teachers to try with one another and later with their students does not really push the term *genre* past the

container notion of form. In fact, we even say “forms/genres” on the hand out—marking the terms as interchangeable.

We asked the teachers to work with the handout in Figure 4.1.

Basically, this activity asks writers to plop what they know about a topic into multiple forms. They aren't acting on anything. And this container idea of genre became obvious in the diary writing assignment that Samuel took away from the activity and that prompted the email message above. He asked the students to write a diary as if they were children of the Holocaust. The students didn't examine the actions available in the party of diary writing or being a child during the Holocaust as I would have had them do when teaching this lesson now. They were simply asked to fill in the diary, as they understood it. Looking back with my fuller understanding of genre as a site of action now, I see the formulaic nature of the assignment, but that's hindsight. In the moment, I was jumping out of my skin over having struck a chord with one of the teachers.

NARRATIVES OF CONVERGENCE AND RESISTANCE

Samuel's narrative, the story of the Holocaust diary entries that opened this chapter, is one of convergence, where teachers, consultants, and administrators all work outside of the testing and accountability narrative of urban school reform, where teaching and learning is about doing what you are “supposed to do.” Samuel was teaching writing because he was supposed to add it into his social studies curriculum, and the administration was excited because both the teacher and the students had done what they were asked. As Writing Project consultants sent to help teachers get more writing into their classrooms, we were also excited because a teacher had done what he was supposed to do and taken something from our workshop to the classroom.

This narrative is about following the rules of the district and producing results; the results here are that all of the students were engaged enough to do their homework. The teachers, administrators, and consultants all offered ways for students to write in social studies class, so according to the testing and accountability narrative, if the students don't produce high-quality writing, they only have themselves to blame. A tension around the edges of all this conformity lies in the form of the writing we were promoting. While we did fall into the form trap, which can be equated to the formulaic writing of the testing and accountability narrative, the forms we offered were outside of that narrative and could be (and later were) considered play writing by the testing and accountability agenda of the administrators, who made an argument-only writing policy. In fact, this chapter and the chapters following are focused on social studies classes because the English/language arts teachers, who were directly responsible

Figure 4.1. Writing to Learn: Using Genre to Act on Course Content

1. Take a moment to think about the topic you are working with in the unit you are teaching right now. Quickly list everything you know about it, or everything you wanted your students to know. (5 min.)
2. Choose one or more of the following forms/genres to show us what you were just writing about.

A free verse poem

A poem in a character’s voice

A monologue

A newspaper article

A want ad

A resume

A collection of recipes

A poem in two voices

A dialogue between two characters

A CD song list

A comic strip

A political cartoon

A Myspace page

A series of Facebook status updates

A videogame

A storyboard for a short film

A text message conversation

A song or collection of songs

If this topic were a car, what kind of car would it be? What would be the accessories?

If this topic were an outfit, what would it look like?

A genre of your choice

(15 min.)

for a reading comprehension test, did not feel that they had time for this play writing while trying to comply with the argument-only writing policy and Achieve3000.

The second narrative in the chapter, focused on Ronald, is one of dual resistance and compliance that further illuminates the tension of a teacher doing what he is “supposed to do” for the consultants. Ronald implemented the daybook (described in detail in Chapter 2) into his 7th-grade social studies class. However, our daybook assignments were outside of the testing and accountability narrative and so he was resisting the dominant narrative of the school as well as the school’s argument-only policy.

In both cases as I look at the dual narratives of compliance and resistance and how they work within and against the accountability and testing agenda. I also explore how identity and class are at play as the teachers negotiate their positionality in the school world. Foucault (1977) argues that the institution of school is one of the great normalizing institutions in society. Giroux (1983), Ryan (1991), and Ayers and Ayers (2011) are just a few of the scholars who build on Foucault's ideas to illustrate the great socializing process of schooling. As I've described in Chapter 3, there are multiple and, in many cases, conflicting narratives of schooling within the figured world of Rosa Parks Middle School, with the dominant one being the testing and accountability narrative of urban school reform. In order for teachers and students to be recognized in the school world, they must negotiate these conflicting narratives that are inscribed on them along with the lived narratives of their histories in order to compose themselves, or their identities, as teachers and students.

THEORIES FOR CONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES

Identity construction has everything to do with the way educators think about teaching, learning, and writing instruction as the work within and against the testing and accountability narrative of urban school reform. The teachers at Rosa Parks Middle School were all working hard to be good teachers. They genuinely wanted to help students learn and overcome their positions of poverty. But being good, taking on that identity, is a complicated thing. Theory for identity construction is important to understanding the ways in which teachers (and students, administrators, and consultants later in the book) negotiate the competing and conflicting narratives of Rosa Parks Middle School presented in the early chapters of this book as they make bids to be good.

Gee (2011) offers an alternative understanding of identity as something we perform through social interactions within institutions and between people rather than as something we have. He defines identity as "being recognized as a certain 'kind of person,' in a given context" (p. 99). People have the agency, or as Holland et al. (1998) describe, a modicum of agency, to construct their identities within the confines of the institutional framework that inscribes structures on them (Bettie, 2003; Holland et al., 1998; Foucault, 1977). Bettie (2003) argues that although there is no essential self, the fixed nature of the identities constructed by the institution make people feel as though the "real self" temporarily constructed by the institution in a given moment is somehow who they really are. For example, when the institution of school constructs a student as at risk, they

come to see themselves as being at risk in all they do. Thus, when people attempt to construct an identity that differs from that inscribed on them by an institution, they feel like they are pretending to be someone they are not, or “passing,” in Bettie’s words. This feeling of not really belonging brought on by the institutional identity is what reproduces class structures because people stay where they feel they belong, understanding that positioning as connected to an essential, unchangeable self.

Foucault’s (1977) concept of the carceral society (the idea of social discipline and surveillance in modern society) explains how normalizing institutions—like schools—produce “Truths” about the normalcy of class positioning. Though teachers are often considered middle class, Samuel and Ronald mirror their working-class students through *code-switching* (switching between standard English and the slang their students use). They are *membershopping* (working to create identities that match with those of the students’ home lives) with these high-needs students. Samuel and Ronald are also expected to do as they are told. Creativity and critical thinking are not expected or welcome in the same way they are for teachers in neighboring affluent schools.

Samuel and Ronald’s identities as teachers are being constructed in part by the normalizing institution of schooling in the United States through the narratives of urban schools and urban school reform in popular culture, and in popular culture’s understanding of school, based on their jobs in a school serving a neighborhood of poor, minority people where violence often occurs. The normalizing narratives of the urban teacher identity within the testing and accountability narrative are highly regimented. Teachers are to uniformly follow the pacing guide provided by the district and keep the children quiet and under control. Teacher-proof programs like Achieve3000 reduce their jobs to policing students while the computer makes the assignments and does the grading. Outsiders who come into the school to fix what’s wrong there also surround them. While the testing and accountability narrative expects teachers to act almost as robots, pop culture narratives are either those of the hero/martyr or the deadbeat teacher. There is no in-between. The hero/martyr teacher is expected to connect with students and live their lives for those students and the school. Otherwise, they are deadbeats who don’t care about the students. The urban teacher must negotiate a balance between regimentation and being someone with whom the children will identify. In their bids to be good teachers, Samuel and Ronald had to negotiate with the urban teacher identity and how it tempers the ability to be a good teacher for educators like them. Gee (2011) labels this sort of identity construction as *institutional identity* or I-identity, where the power of construction is located in the institution. The institution determines what constitutes a good teacher.

But there is hope for change. Bettie (2003) argues that when people do attempt to “pass” in social situations where they feel they do not belong, they open up the possibility for change in the institutional structure. In order to pass, people must negotiate known narratives of how to be in a context with new ones. Holland et al. (1998) talk about this negotiation of narratives in terms of improvisation, where people “perform self” by bringing the lived narratives of their histories (the stories of their lives by which they define who they are in the world) into a new social situation. The students and teachers in the narratives in this book are not new to the school, the community, or to writing, but they are new to the narrative of writing that the Writing Project brought and the accompanying writing assignments. The teachers and students then had to improvise in order to perform good teacher and good student identities in these new social situations. Holland et al. point to improvisation as having transformative potential. Improvisation opens up space, much like Bettie’s concept of “passing,” for change.

Over time, the improvisations of earlier generations can become the expectations of the next, espousing change. Gee (2011) refers to this passing and improvisation, or these newly negotiated identities, as *discourse identity* or D-identity. The negotiation of narratives must be recognizable by others in order for it to be an identity, so the power for identity construction lies in discourse or dialogue with other individuals. These identities are not distinct from institutional identities, and so institutions certainly make use of discourse identities in order to solidify the institution’s social hegemonic position. For this reason, improvisation does not guarantee change or transformation; it simply has the potential for it because we are constantly making and remaking scenes in our daily lives. In the cases of Samuel and Ronald, the institutional identity of urban teacher is inscribed upon them. I will examine how Samuel’s discourse identity complies with the urban teacher identity of doing as he is told in his bid for a good teacher identity. The urban teacher identity matches with the narrative of his lived history about how to be a teacher. Ronald’s discourse identity contains a performance of resistance to the urban teacher identity as he complies with the ideas of the writing consultants, who bring a different narrative of good teacher as a creative, critical thinker. In his discourse identity, Ronald is negotiating these narratives along with his lived history of how to be a writer and a writing teacher.

COMPETING NARRATIVES OF WRITING

The school’s adoption of the computerized literacy program Achieve3000 in the third year of their partnership with the Writing Project is indicative

of the competing narratives of writing instruction in the world of Rosa Parks Middle School. If we consider writing itself as a mediating tool in the activity of knowledge-making and sharing, an analysis of Achieve3000 (itself a mediating tool for writing instruction) can help illuminate the conflicting narratives of writing that students and teachers at Rosa Parks Middle School had to negotiate.

Achieve3000 was a highly efficient literacy producing and monitoring software program approved for school purchase by the state and encouraged in schools bearing low-performing status. At Rosa Parks Middle School, each student spent 45 minutes, or half of each ELA class, in the computer lab working with an article assigned by the computer program. Students silently read and answered multiple-choice questions and filled in the blanks when prompted with information from the article in order to complete an essay. The computer then scored the essays and sent the report to the teacher, administrators, and the district office.

The teacher's role in this activity was to monitor the students while they worked. Teachers were to walk up and down the line of computers, checking to see that the students were on task. They were also to monitor the reports that the program creates for each student. Administrators access the reports to monitor the teachers. They informed the teachers that Achieve3000 time was not to be used to converse with colleagues, grade papers, plan lessons, or even to conference with students about their writing or their ideas.

When we first came to Rosa Parks Middle School, we learned that writing in this world was to follow a rigid form, and that form was to be filled in with the right ideas as decided by the teachers, who were themselves being monitored by the administrators, the district, the state, and the testing industry. With the addition of Achieve3000, the software corporation had great power in deciding what ideas were right and how they fit together. ELA teachers therefore felt that their time for writing instruction was full and did not take up any of the ideas that we offered as writing consultants.

When we left the school at the end of our 3-year study, the dominant narrative of writing in the figured world of the school was that students do not do it when asked, and that the structured testing and accountability narrative of writing is something that they need in order to be prepared for the rigors of tests they will take in high school if they are to go to college. Within this narrative, the state determines that students should write in all subject areas, but it does not define that writing. The software corporation determines what nonfiction information students read and write about and how they write about it.

The narrative of writing in our figured world, as Writing Project consultants brought in to help, was in conflict with the intersecting figured

worlds of the testing industry, software corporation, schooling in the United States, and urban school reform. We viewed writing as a mediating tool, not an outcome in and of itself. In our narrative, writing was about the sharing of ideas, critically and creatively thinking, and bringing forward new ideas. In our view it was a mediating tool that can connect students' daily lives to the information they learn in school, and a mediating tool with which to inquire into legitimizing power structures. Our narrative of writing, then, was in conflict with that of many other narratives of writing constructing the school world. And yet we also slid into a commodified narrative of writing as well, asking teachers to do our "thing" of using daybooks and allowing students to think critically and creatively through writing. When teachers and administrators constructed us as "do-gooders," we, in turn, constructed teachers and administrators as simply not getting "it"—the narrative that the Writing Project was promoting.

There are narratives of writing at work in the world of Rosa Parks Middle School that critique the dominant testing and accountability narrative of writing. They exist in what the teachers are doing in their classrooms behind closed doors, what the students are doing in their writing in and out of school, and even in the ideas of writing that we, as outside consultants, were attempting to put forward. However, students whose thoughts in writing did not fit into the school world's socializing narrative of right were constructed as problematic, as will be seen in the following chapters where students' Holocaust diary writings caused concern due to their "inappropriate" content. The students were aware of what counted as school writing, as is noticeable in their interviews as well as in the differences in the various narratives that appeared in their school essay writing assignments and the other forms they engaged in and out of school. I will examine these writings in much more detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

DIARY WRITING: A NARRATIVE OF CONVERGENCE

Let's return to the vignette that opened this chapter, where students read diary entries in which they imagined living during the Holocaust. I went to the school to collect the students' diaries because the academic facilitator and Samuel wanted me to look at them closely and think about ways to publish them. They also wanted me to know that this was the first time all year that all of the students had actually done their homework or been engaged in schoolwork.

The academic facilitator read Erin's entry out loud, beaming and crying at the power of the student's writing. As I sorted through the other papers and asked about other classes who did the same assignment, she explained

that they had a “problem” because some of the entries weren’t “appropriate for school” and most of them were rife with grammatical errors.

I met with Samuel the following week to talk more about the diary entries and the assignment. In that interview and in subsequent conversations with him about this moment in his classroom, he said that this was his best day in 9 years of teaching. He told me the story of how he got to the diary assignment. He had been teaching a unit on World War II, and in order to explain how the Holocaust could have happened, he made Adolf Hitler, in his words, “look like a good guy” in order to help the students see how Germans and others living at the time could be drawn to someone or something we so clearly see now as wrong. He worried that he had been too convincing and that the students were getting the “wrong” message, so he showed the film *Remembering the Holocaust: Children’s Diaries* to make sure they got the “right” message about the atrocities of Hitler’s regime. He got the idea to have them write the diaries from our workshop on using different genres/forms with course content. The film was narrated with sad tones and music, describing diary passages from children during the Holocaust, with images of the atrocities and from the war.

We sat with the stack of papers. He pulled out the ones he most wanted me to see and shuffled others to the bottom of the pile, saying that these students had mishandled the assignment and their entries weren’t worth my time. He shared the academic facilitator’s concerns about the school appropriateness of some of the work and the errors in the conventions of writing. The “inappropriate” pieces had veered from a retelling of the film narrative to include more of the writers’ ideas and personal histories. I will look at one of these in detail in Chapter 6.

Samuel had never tried this sort of informal writing and was thrilled with the results overall. He wanted to publish the students’ work in some way to keep it with him and to remind him of the success. He wanted my help because he said that he was not comfortable with his ability to “teach writing.” He had given the assignment because he knew that he was now required to teach some writing in his class. The district central office and the state had begun to require writing in all subject areas in order to support the CCSS in English/language arts, but the district and state were not specific about what that writing should look like, other than that it should be connected to the material the students were studying. Samuel did not know what to do next with the diary writing, but he did know he wanted to do something significant with it. I explained that while wonderful, these pieces were first drafts and had great potential for working through multiple drafts because the students were so engaged with the writing and proud of it. He was concerned that he did not have any more time to work closely with the pieces in class because he had to move on with the other

content he needed to teach. The standards that he was required to teach focused on content, not writing; therefore, extended time spent on a writing assignment, no matter how engaging and powerful, did not make sense to him in his compliance with the expectations of the school district and the administrators.

Tallulah and I ultimately decided to make a video recording of the students reading selections from their diaries, since it was the act of the reading of them out loud in class that seemed to be the significant moment. We also asked the girls to reflect on the experience as a part of the video. We then edited the readings and interviews together into a movie. I conducted formal interviews with several of the students, and I examine some of those in Chapters 5 and 6.

In his negotiation of the narratives of the figured world of Rosa Parks Middle School, Samuel's discourse identity is in compliance with the institutional identity of "urban hero teacher." He is committed to both the students and to following the rules of the institution. Samuel is an African American male with a close haircut. He typically wears a Rosa Parks Middle School polo shirt and khakis to work, emulating the uniform the students wear. He is also a football coach, and his appearance works with his coaching identity. Samuel is known for strict discipline in his classroom. The students move around the classroom in an orderly way, getting books from the shelves in an orderly, silent manner, or being sent back to their seats to start over if they do not comply. The same rules apply for lining up to leave. However, he also memberships with the students by code-switching and giving them nicknames. He jokes with them individually as they enter and exit the classroom. One day when I was observing, he was ragging a 6th-grader about his height, saying "Dude, why you so short? When you gonna grow?" Although in some cultures this may seem terribly insulting to the child, it mimics the way these students talk to and kid with one another. It is emblematic of the camaraderie between Samuel and the students.

Samuel keeps an orderly classroom, is orderly in his appearance, works hard to be someone the students respect and identify with, and gives extra time to coaching after a long day of teaching. He works to follow the rules by giving the writing assignment suggested by the consultants in compliance with the school system mandate that he put more writing into his lessons, even though he is very uncomfortable with his own ability to teach writing.

As I mentioned before, the diary assignment complies with the testing and accountability narrative wherein learning is "doing what one is supposed to do." Samuel is teaching writing in social studies because the state and district say he must do it, the administrator is watching to be sure he does it, and we as consultants are watching to make sure he does it in a

way that we wanted. Samuel, the academic facilitator, and the consultants said the students were engaged because they all did their homework—what they were supposed to do. We published the student work in a movie that was shown to the administrators to show that the students are doing good work so we have succeeded in doing what we were supposed to do: getting writing into the school in content areas. In this convergent narrative there is no room for movement or change. Any movement away from giving back exactly what the consultants said to do in terms of assignment making, or away from the narrative of the film in terms of what the students were writing, is viewed as deviant behavior. There is no space here for pushing at the boundaries and creating something new and different. The narrative solidifies Samuel in his position of working-class, urban teacher who does as he is told and does not veer from that. Even the way the academic facilitator and Samuel respond to the students who didn't simply retell the narrative of the film falls into this narrative of convergence. Here, learning is giving back what you have been told.

The Holocaust diary assignment came to be the narrative by which the students, and in some ways Ronald, the second teacher in this chapter, defined the type of writing in which the Writing Project was interested. More than a year after the initial assignment in Samuel's class, when I interviewed the students in Ronald's class about writing in social studies, they began by referring back to these Holocaust diaries. This assignment was the reference point by which the students described not only their writing in social studies class the following year, but all of their school writing in their conversations with me. So in many ways, this moment of writing that we were all so excited about became a closed circuit. Samuel did not go on to do any other writing assignments in his classroom. In fact, he left the classroom at the end of the year to become the dean of students, a position that deals predominantly with discipline. The students had this one moment to harken back to as a moment when they wrote, but as will be discussed in the following chapter, they did not equate it with the “real” writing they did in English class, which was the argument writing they did with Achieve3000. The students who were celebrated as successful in this assignment retold the narrative of the film without question or critique. Those who did question the narrative were seen as unsuccessful. Chapter 6 looks closely at one example of a student who was pushing at the boundaries of the film narrative and was considered unsuccessful. So, although this moment lived in the minds of the teachers and students in the school as an example of student engagement and a time where students felt they were writers, it did nothing to change the culture of writing in the school or the construction of students as writers, because the testing and accountability narrative of what writing should be had more power.

DAYBOOK WRITING: NARRATIVES OF RESISTANCE AND COMPLIANCE

I was at Rosa Parks Middle School one afternoon in early December in the third year of our work there to finish up a formal interview with Ronald about how he saw himself using writing in his social studies class. The Writing Project had given Ronald 170 composition books for his classes to use as daybooks. As I described in Chapter 2, the daybook is a tool for writing and thinking that the Writing Project brought to Rosa Parks Middle School in the first year of our partnership with them. Tallulah and I, along with other colleagues in the Writing Project, use this tool with our students as a place for getting ideas onto the page. The daybook is essentially a container for messy, on-the-spot thinking thrown on the page to be mined later for larger, more public pieces of writing. The daybook functions as a writer's notebook for students (Brannon et al., 2008b). In our Writing Project site it functions as a way to record their thinking about the content of a class, the ways it might connect with their daily lives, and ideally, it allows them to begin to question the legitimizing power structures that are present. However, as I mentioned in Chapter 3, this empty composition book had become commodified. Having students write their thoughts and think about content in forms like acrostic poems or diary entries was the "thing" we had told the teachers to do. Ronald's interest in using the daybook was one of the main reasons I chose to study his classes.

When I checked into the office, I learned that he was in a new teachers' meeting being held by the district. I slipped into the back of the media center to wait for the meeting to end, and he came hurrying back. Breathlessly he said, "You'll never believe what the kids are doing," and then he was off, whispering away about what his students were writing, and ignoring the woman up front who was pointing to a PowerPoint slide and talking to the group of teachers who were also whispering among themselves, texting, or grading papers.

"Let's get out of here! I've got to show you this stuff!" Ronald grabbed my bags and hustled me out of the media center. He continued to talk, hands and bags waving, as we nearly ran down the hall. He started pulling out daybooks as soon as we got to his classroom, and said, "Oh yes! Please!" when I interrupted to ask if I could turn on my recorder. For the next 30 minutes, he read to me from his students' daybooks, repeatedly saying how smart they were and how excited he was about what was happening in his classroom. He couldn't stop reading to me from the notebooks and telling me about the amazing discussions and deep understandings of social studies that were resulting from the writing. He had asked them to write from the prompt "I was standing by a pool of water and I saw . . ." He was excited about the descriptions the students gave and the insights he

was able to glean about their lives from what they choose to write about. He was excited about the way he could use those insights to connect with them over the social studies content they were learning. He had also done a lesson using a CNN newscast to teach about nuclear weapons in Korea, and the students had done a quick write that led to a lively discussion about war and the possibility of the draft.

He talked about how the students were getting so excited in the discussions that they were talking over one another—not usually condoned the school’s orderly culture in which they were meant to speak after raising hands—but he hated to stop them because they were so engaged and enthusiastic. He talked about how he couldn’t wait to work with his 7th-graders to take what they had been doing with quick writes in their daybooks and class discussions and move them into longer essays, particularly document-based questions. I felt like I was looking at the work of a master teacher. His classroom management style and the daybook assignments complied with my narrative of good teacher.

But then, as I was leaving he said, “You know, all of this is totally under the radar. No one even looked at these notebooks for my eval and I got ‘emerging teacher.’ Whatever, I know I have a lot to learn.” Here he was referring to his yearly evaluation required by the district and conducted by a school administrator in which he was not considered an exemplary teacher but rather a novice who didn’t quite know what he was doing. The notebooks and the discussions that I held in such high esteem and that he was so proud of were meaningless to his evaluators, who were looking for evidence of compliance with the testing and accountability narrative of order and control. The improvisation evident in his discourse identity of good teacher was not recognizable by the school even as it was recognizable to me, the writing consultant. Neither of the assignments we were looking at was on the pacing guide and therefore held no value in his evaluation.

Three months later, I slipped into the end of Ronald’s first 2-hour block. The lights were low, and 32 pencils in the hands of 32 students were scribbling as fast as they could go. Some students were squashed together, bumping elbows at a back table because there weren’t enough desks. They didn’t notice one another, or me, when I walked into the room. Ronald called time, and some began to put away their notebooks and get in line, but others were still writing. One child walked over to me and whispered, “Were you here? Did you see how brilliant we were? Did you get that in your notes?” As I sat staring at the child in stunned silence, kicking myself for being late getting out the door that morning, Ronald opened the door to lead the students to their next class and bellowed down the hall, “We’ve got some writers up in here!” The students gathered their things and slowly

followed him out, grinning, talking, and pushing one another until they got to the hall, where strict silence and order was enforced.

Ronald was nearly dancing when he came back in, once again grabbing notebooks and this time reading the acrostic poems the students had written based on a gallery crawl of images from the slave trade that he had posted around the room. He prided himself on representing two sides of every story, and the images depicted slaves piled onto ships as well as slave owners and slave boat captains. The students were to write from all of those points of view. In the entries he read to me, he valued critical thinking over simple retelling. For the most part he was thrilled simply that all the students had written. For Ronald, learning was about thinking rather than retelling the narrative given by the teacher. He was, though, compliant with our view of teaching and learning. He was “passing” as a teacher in a middle-class school where creativity and critical thinking on the part of teachers and students is valued, although he was working in a school where those values were not sought.

Other teachers on Ronald’s team came in to see what all of the excitement was about, and they began to marvel with him about the outstanding thinking and writing the students had done. This out-of-meeting sharing among teachers was rebellious in and of itself, and when someone mentioned telling the administration about it, a hush fell over the room. The other 7th-grade teacher had done a different activity in her class, and the school policy was to follow the same curriculum in all classes. If Ronald “told,” they would both be “in trouble.” They would be reprimanded for not following the same curriculum, and this was particularly dangerous as the principal had strategic staffing power, meaning that she could replace noncompliant teachers. The testing and accountability narrative of the school was that all students should be doing the same thing, following the pacing guide, at all times. Ronald had disregarded the policy, and that mattered more in the world of the school than the kind of thinking and learning that was taking place in Ronald’s classroom.

Ronald’s classroom was much different from Samuel’s. It was often noisy as students shared what they are thinking with partners and groups and talked to one another while moving around the room, but it was a purposeful noise. He embraced the workshop approach we brought from the Writing Project and resisted the order and control of the larger testing and accountability narrative. Ronald is an African American male with dreadlocks that he wears neatly tied back. He also often has a beard in different stages of growth, from full beard to goatee. Most days, he wears dress slacks, a long-sleeved button-down shirt, and a tie. However, like Samuel he embraces the hero teacher identity, membership with the

kids by code-switching and coaching track in his after-school hours. Ronald self-identifies as a writer and is comfortable with the identity of writing teacher within the social studies courses that he teaches.

In many ways, the narrative of Ronald and his daybook activities is a narrative of compliance as well as resistance. In some ways, Ronald was negotiating a discourse identity of resistant teacher. He resisted the institutional identity inscribed on him by the institution's narrative of the urban teacher who follows directions and keeps order and control above all else. He ducks out of meetings, brushes off the fact that the writing his students are doing doesn't count in his evaluation, and resists the idea of teaching exactly the same thing at the same time as his colleagues. He allows his classroom to be a noisy, bustling place where kids write what they think rather than regurgitating the narrative he gives them, and where they talk over one another in their excitement to share those thoughts. And yet, in resisting the administrator's directives, Ronald was compliant with the Writing Project narrative by using the daybook. In his discourse and dialogue with me, he is recognizable as a brilliant teacher who excites his students about learning and gets them to think through writing, but in the world of the school, because of his institutional identity of urban teacher, he is recognized as resistant and a problematic teacher even while being recognized as a hero/martyr teacher because of his relationship with the students and the extra time he gives to coaching.

NEGOTIATING GOOD TEACHER IDENTITIES IN A COMPLEX WORLD

Both Samuel and Ronald were negotiating how to be teachers within the figured world of Rosa Parks Middle School. They both enacted good urban teacher discourse identities, but in different ways. While Ronald improvised more resistance than Samuel by not complying with the administration in terms of keeping a quiet classroom, following the pacing and curriculum guide, and attending all of the new teachers' meeting, he was still in compliance with what the Writing Project consultants wanted him to do. Both men enacted hero teacher by committing extra time to the school through coaching and working hard to have good relationships with the students.

Teaching in an urban school is incredibly complex. Teachers must negotiate the testing and accountability narrative of regimented order and control while working to identify with and engage their students. There are also often outsiders coming in to fix what's wrong. As Writing Project consultants, we brought an outside narrative of teaching and learning to the school that valued creativity and critical thinking on the part of the teachers and the students. This narrative is more often recognizable in middle-class

schools, but not in low-income settings. Teachers have to improvise how to be good teachers within that competing urban school reform narrative of schooling.

Samuel attempts to pass as a writing teacher by using the assignment given to him in a faculty meeting by the Writing Project. He relies on the administration and the consultants to tell him what to do next with this writing, which he considers remarkable though problematic. In this way Samuel reproduces the socialization process of the school. He retains the identity of working-class teacher doing as he is told and is considered a very successful teacher in the school. He was promoted the year after the Holocaust diaries to become dean of students, though it is significant that this appointment carried no curriculum duties, and certainly not writing instruction duties.

Ronald saw himself as a writer and was therefore more comfortable with the writing teacher narrative brought to the school by the Writing Project. In some ways, his enactment of good teacher resists and critiques the urban teacher narrative that says do as you are told because he resists the narrative of order and control and the narrative of learning as retelling information. However, in his compliance with the Writing Project narrative of teaching and learning that critiques the urban narrative, Ronald attempted to pass as a middle-class teacher. Therefore, he is labeled an emergent teacher—a teacher with a lot to learn, or a problematic teacher. Ronald left the school at the end of the following year for a position at a charter school where his ideas and ways of being a teacher were more respected.