

Redefining the Literate Self: The Politics of Critical Affirmation

Min-Zhan Lu

Drake University

*A lecture sponsored by the Center for Interdisciplinary
Studies of Writing and the Minor in Composition,
Literacy, and Rhetorical Studies*

** A version of this paper also appears in the December, 1999 issue of
College Composition and Communication, 51.2: 172-194.*

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Preface

In January 1999, the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing (CISW) and the Minor in Composition, Literacy, and Rhetorical Studies were pleased to sponsor a lecture by Professor Min-Zhan Lu. Her talk, “The Politics of Critical Affirmation,” is reprinted here. Professor Lu's talk began with the premise that it is worthwhile to promote critical pedagogies that encourage students to reflect on themselves and on their own social positioning. Such approaches allow students to know themselves and their relationships to others in increasingly complex and sophisticated ways. Critical pedagogy ultimately works for social justice by enabling students to understand the dynamics of oppression from the inside out, so to speak—by having students start with themselves. However, Lu takes this discussion a step further in reminding advocates of critical pedagogy that we too must look honestly at our own social positioning—at what she calls “the paradox of one's privileges.” Using race and her own experience of both privilege and oppression as a focus, Lu thoughtfully explores ways we must be mindful of interconnections between our own complex personal ethos and the political pedagogies we advocate.

Min-Zhan Lu is the Endowment Professor of the Humanities at Drake University. She is a national expert in composition pedagogy, basic writing, and multiculturalism. Her areas of research interest include the dynamics of cultural “difference” and how it affects the individual writer, how multicultural approaches in the individual classroom can be used to help students identify those sites of difference, and how ethnographic research can become as politically complex as current composition pedagogy.

It is by sponsoring lectures such as Min-Zhan Lu's that the Center continues to fulfill its primary mission to improve the quality of undergraduate writing at the University of Minnesota. The speaker series for the Minor in Composition, Literacy, and Rhetorical Studies, along with colloquia, faculty development workshops, conferences, publication, and other outreach activities are designed to foster active engagement with issues and topics related to writing among all of the members of the University community. In addition, CISW annually funds research projects by University of Minnesota faculty who study any of the following topics:

- curricular reform through writing across the curriculum;
- characteristics of writing across the curriculum;
- connections between writing and learning in all fields;
- characteristics of writing beyond the academy;
- the effect of ethnicity, class, and gender on writing; and
- the status of writing ability during the college years.

We invite you to participate in these conversations, either by contacting us directly or by attending any of our programs. Please visit our Web site for more information about the Center's programs: www.cisw.cla.umn.edu.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Series Editor
Erika R.L. Rivers, Editor
January 2000

The Politics of Critical Affirmation

Literacy is a trope, the meaning of which is up for grabs (Brodkey, "Tropics"; Royster, "Perspectives" 105-07; Scribner, "Three Metaphors"). Defining literacy is thus a site of pedagogical and political struggle. Taking up such struggle, this paper argues that we use reading and writing for the following three goals: 1) To end oppression rather than to empower a particular form of self, group, or culture; 2) To grapple with one's privileges as well as one's experience of exclusion; and 3) To affirm a yearning for agency shared by individuals across social divisions, without losing sight of the different material circumstances shaping this shared yearning and the different material circumstances against which each of us must struggle to enact such a yearning. It is a form of literacy which, following Cornel West, I call "critical affirmation" (West 30, hooks 208).

Critical affirmation is crucial for negotiating the "postmodern" world because, unlike certain versions of postmodern discourse, it emphasizes collectivity and experience. It does not conflate totality, defined as collective political unity, with totalitarianism. It recognizes the importance of experience and history in the struggle for agency. At the same time, it combats essentialist approaches to identity politics, which encourage a politics of sectarianism. It poses a subjectivity which is "fueled by the concern of others" (West 29, hooks 25, Sedgwick 266, Waugh 338).

Let me sketch four common abuses of identity politics to illustrate the urgency for critical affirmation:

Abuse One: Writing the Personal for Capital Investment

Some of us use personal narrative solely as a means of accruing cultural capital. Particular versions of the personal have, in turn, served to legitimize certain individuals to

speak in particular ways within given institutional sites and to exclude other versions of the personal. In reaction, some of us have inadvertently resorted to inverse discrimination: automatically dismissing as self-serving those writings which might appear trendy and thus trite.

Abuse Two: Using the Personal as a Mirror Reflection of a Self or Culture

Few in literacy studies would dispute in theory that the self is an on-going, complex, conflicted, and transformative process. Yet, in teaching and research, "personal experience" is treated as a self-evident thing existing prior to and outside of discursive practices. Personal narratives are thus viewed as a direct reflection of the writing self and her culture.

"Experience" is seldom explored as a process we can only have access to discursively, through the mediation of a complex network of power, desire, and interests. Nor is it usually treated as a possible site for critical intervention on the formation of one's self and the material conditions of one's life (Kirsch and Ritchie, Lu and Horner, Miller, "Nervous"). Thus, recitation and revelation rather than revision remain the dominant modes of writing the personal.

Abuse Three: Slotting the Personal

In the name of acknowledging diversity, individuals are often slotted as Persons of Color, Gay and Lesbian Teachers, and so on. This often involves equating a person's social placement with that person's political stance. That is, how one is marked by a particular system of oppression is conflated with one's often paradoxical attitudes and actions toward that system. For instance, my experience of one system in one context (e.g., racism within a classroom) is isolated from or used to stand in for my experience of that and other systems in all contexts (e.g., racism on the street or sexism, homophobia, and class elitism within the

same classroom). We slot one another as having or not having certain experiences and thus having or not having the authority to speak against oppression. In some instances, this practice has led to a problematic distribution of duties in which speaking against oppression becomes the special responsibility of the oppressed. Played out in reverse, insightful arguments by academics who appear White often receive little response beyond accusations of appropriation and exclusion.

Abuse Four: Disembodying the Personal

I have in mind the tendency to contain the lived experiences of individual agents within some dogmatic theory of cultural politics (Spellmeyer). All experiences which do not fit neatly within simplistic notions of race, sex, class, and gender are then dismissed as private, non-political, and therefore irrelevant. Such overt political analysis has often in effect worked to limit our efforts to make political use of lived experiences (Lu and Horner). For instance, it has kept us from attending to the social construction of our private, visceral reactions when reading and writing (Miller, "Nervous"). In reaction to such abuses, some of us have simply reversed the hierarchies between theory and lived experience, automatically dismissing as dogmatic all personal writings that include overt discussions of the politics of representation.

In positing a literacy of critical affirmation, I join others who have marked writing and the teaching of writing, especially of personal narratives, as a site for revising one's sense of self, one's relations with others, and the conditions of one's life in the interest of ending oppression. Through the years, I have argued in public forums about the need to promote critical affirmation in pedagogical research and practice. Today, I take the argument a step further by exploring the need for scholars and teachers to apply to our own discursive acts the

same pedagogies we pose for our students. I investigate our own ability to practice critical affirmation when trying to combat essentialist abuses of the personal and to overcome the distrust, indignation, and despair they breed among scholars, teachers, and students.

This paper assumes that the authority of a scholar and teacher comes from her ability to practice what she poses for others. In my research and teaching, I have urged others to practice critical affirmation by developing literacy in what Lindsay Pentolfe Aegerter has termed the "paradox of privilege." To help students wrestle with the paradox of their privilege, I have come up with teaching tactics that help students to map the matrix of their identity in terms of the power differential in the different contexts an individual student inhabits, to examine the complex network of power, interests, and desires shaping that individual's literacy practices, to consider the possibility that the very system of oppression one deplores often confers certain privileges upon oneself, and to confront one's witting or unwitting complicity with various systems of oppression when reading and writing. Yet, I have not always paid as rigorous attention to the paradox of my own privileges when recounting my own experiences of exclusion and when reading the works of others in the field. As a case study of what it might mean for teachers to wrestle with our own illiteracy concerning our own privileges, in the remainder of the paper, I recount two instances of my attempt to practice critical affirmation when combating racism.

I have three motivations for choosing race as the focus. First, in the United States today, racism remains the most emotionally convoluted and volatile topic in critical exchanges among people of different (socially labeled and/or self-named) racial identities. Second, within the U.S. academy, matters of racism are still most often treated strictly in isolation from—rather than as different from but interlocked with—matters of economic

inequality, sexism, homophobia, and so on. Third, matters of racism are where I have the most difficulty in confronting the paradox of my privileges. I suspect my need to develop fluency in confronting my paradoxical power relations in matters of racism is common to the profession. I hope the following accounts of my struggle to practice critical affirmation can serve to illustrate the urgency for marking teacher illiteracy and teacher self-education as crucial topics of pedagogical research.

Instance One: Representing Asian Immigrants

If the authority of a scholar and teacher resides in her ability to practice what she preaches, then it is imperative that I examine the extent to which I confront the paradox of my privileges when imaging my Asian Immigrant experience. Here is a story I like to tell: It took place at the Des Moines airport a few years ago. I was dropping my teenaged nephew on a flight back to Seattle. I had brought along a friend visiting from China to give her a sense of the city's physical layout. The security guard refused to let my nephew carry on a gift-wrapped, hand-carved, miniature oak slingshot he had purchased from a store that specializes in toys for corporate executives.

When recounting this incident, I have usually focused on the guard's racism and xenophobia: he had my nephew pegged as an Asian gang youth and my friend as my nephew's non-English speaking immigrant mother. That is, I have treated it as yet another illustration of my lived experience as an Asian Immigrant. I now think I need to also call attention to the fact that the security guard's unfair treatment of my nephew stood out in my memory partly because it jarred my expectations. I had grown accustomed to and taken for granted the friendly smiles I have received from the same security guards before and after that incident, when my bags have harbored scissors and gift-wrapped letter openers. This

does not, however, mean I have not experienced the special treatment on reserve for "foreigners": being talked to in a slow and loud voice or having the answers to my questions addressed to my native-speaking companions rather than me. But, it does mean that because I appear "educated," "professional," and "well-integrated,"—which in Des Moines would make me not Vietnamese, nor Thai, nor Laotian—I have been routinely exempted from all the prejudice on special reserve for "Asian Refugees."

To practice critical affirmation, I need to confront my privileged class and ethnic ranking within the Asian immigrant community. My initial accounts of the airport incident have focused on characteristics which marked my nephew and my friend as visible Others but overlooked the characteristics which marked me as "normal" and thus rendered "invisible" my privileges (see Spack). Class privilege is a consistent oversight in my self-representation, even though in my writings I have posed teaching strategies to help students analyze the social sources and consequences of such oversights and to confront them when reading and writing. Grappling with my class privilege when combating racism is further complicated because race matters in the United States are intricately interwoven with global power struggles. As a result of both Chinese xenophobia and Western orientalism, many Americans as well as Chinese view Asian countries such as Korea or Vietnam as mere crossroads between the United States and the "major" Asian forces: China and Japan. For instance, when Korean immigrants became the target of violence during the Los Angeles upheavals following Rodney King's beating, the media solicited Chinese- and Japanese- but not Korean-American views (Kim, 522, 526).

To speak with authority as an Asian Immigrant, I need to examine my conflicting attitudes toward the so-called "less educated" and "non-Chinese" Asian Immigrants. I also

need to revise these attitudes following the principle of critical affirmation. This type of revision has to begin at the most local and private level. Such revision remains challenging because, as Pierre Bourdieu has argued, we are dealing with dispositions—habitual ways of being in one's body (*Distinction*). For instance, one of the visceral reactions I have inherited from the racism and class elitism of home is an intense aversion to hairdos or dress codes which would, as my family puts it, "make you look like someone from Chinatown" or "like a Korean grocery store owner!" I have been trying to fight against such prejudices when interacting with other Asian Immigrants, those who appear to fit these stereotypes as well as those who act wittingly and unwittingly to perpetuate the prejudice. Yet, the process is extremely taxing. First, such prejudices are literate in the sense that they involve both language and reading/writing habits, which have been internalized through years of home training and schooling. Second, they are seldom publicly verbalized. Thus, such prejudices are rarely subjected to the kind of scrutiny, which our training leads us to give to written texts. In short, these prejudices are prone to producing what we often refer to as "unfortunate oversights" in our literacy practices.

These lapses are compounded by the fact that we live in a culture hungry for overnight cures for deep economic, cultural, and political problems (West 158). Even though, as a teacher and scholar, I have joined others in promoting a "deliberative discourse" when addressing these problems (see Lynch, George, and Cooper 76), in everyday life, I seldom take the time and energy to enact this discourse. For instance, in recent years there have been several gang-related shootings at two Asian food markets within the Des Moines area. After the incidents, whenever I entered these businesses, I feared becoming the victim of both gang and police brutality: that is, I feared being mistaken by the gang members for the Asians

they've come to coerce, and I feared being mistaken by the police for the gang members they have come to prosecute. Out of concern to support the store owners caught in the crossfire, I have tried not to let that fear keep me from shopping there. However, my necessary vigilance toward gang and police brutality often works to impede my concern to combat my distaste for the Chinatown-Korean-Grocery-Store-Owner look. I find myself constantly using such stereotypes to check on the other Asian Americans around me, especially the young males among them. And I catch myself using the stereotypes to "protect" myself and my young Asian-American relatives and friends. That is, I silently censor our appearance to make sure that our educational and professional status remains immediately identifiable, clearly distinguishing us from the Other Asian Immigrants.

In trying to put in writing this lapse in my effort to combat oppression, I hope to make the need to confront such lapses in "extra-professional" activities a central part of my work as a teacher and scholar. As Ball and Lardner have argued, teachers must learn to treat their personal experiences of crossing borders in "extra-professional" sites as "occasions for knowledge-making" of our own dispositions toward differences ("Dispositions Towards Language" 482). We have developed writing and revision assignments to urge students to turn such personal experiences into occasions for knowledge-making. We cannot ask our students to trust us to help them confront the paradox of their privilege if we cannot, or are not aware that we cannot, trust ourselves to always do so with equal rigor. It is absolutely necessary that we engage in such writing and rewriting, utilizing in our own literacy practices the expertise and knowledge we apply to the literacy practices of our students. Writing pedagogy has taught us a variety of forums for this type of critical reflection, including prewriting, private journals, and electronic bulletin boards. What might be the appropriate

forums for teachers and scholars to engage in such writing so that we might help one another revise our literacy practices during not only conference presentations and scholarly publications, but also in our private thoughts and feelings in professional and extra-professional contexts? I end this section with the question of forum because it remains to be explored within the different and ever-changing personal and institutional contexts of individual teachers and scholars.

Instance Two: Critical Exchanges Across Racial Divisions

In this section, I recount my effort to revise my initial mixed reactions to an essay titled "The Nervous System" by Richard Miller, which appeared in a 1996 issue of *College English*. In this essay, Miller uses moments of "personal crisis" to argue for the need to mark visceral reactions as a site for rewriting our professional and personal circumstances. Miller's article challenges essentialist abuses of the personal by introducing the "body" into discussions of language, power, and subjectivity. It insists on the fluidity and specificity of self and culture. And, it reminds us to take more seriously the experiences and insights of people confronting "personal crises" which are not immediately explicable through social categories such as race, gender, class, and sex.

However, I have been reluctant to acknowledge publicly the real contribution Miller's essay brings to the profession because I have had reservations about two of the rhetorical moves Miller makes. One move appears in Miller's reading of Cornel West's essay on "Nihilism in Black America." In West's essay, he argues: "If cultures are, in part, what human beings create (out of antecedent fragments of other cultures) in order to convince themselves not to commit suicide, then black foremothers and forefathers are to be applauded" (24). In the citation of this statement, Miller trims it down to read "cultures are,

in part, what human beings create (out of antecedent fragments of other cultures) in order to convince themselves not to commit suicide" ("Nervous" 283). I was troubled by this citation practice, for it undercuts West's invocation of the remarkable history of black America and its success before the 1970s in maintaining "the lowest suicide rate in the United States" (West 24). Miller's citation highlights a common challenge posed by the ever-present threat of self-annihilation facing all cultures. In doing so, it risks losing sight of what "the history of black America" has to offer us on how to combat self-annihilation in a society where deep economic, cultural, and political problems have been allowed to fester for decades (West 158). The second rhetorical move in Miller's essay that troubled me appears in Miller's tendency to explicitly describe only those who are "black," "poor," or "gay" as having racial, sexual, class identities. I found this problematic since Miller makes no references to his own identifications along any of those lines.

I want to affirm Miller's essay for its effort to link our socially constructed "nervous system" to the politics of the personal and to the revision process. But I also want to call into question these two rhetorical moves. For I fear that such moves might limit the scope and the depth of how we go about revising our professional and personal circumstances when reading and writing. However, to critically affirm Miller's work, I must overcome several traps of essentialism dominating scholarly exchange. Trap One would be to use my knowledge of Miller's skin color and marital status to slot his motives for making such rhetorical moves as White, Heterosexual, and thus, automatically suspect. Trap Two would be to treat these moves as evidence of Miller's intellectual limitations, his failure to reflect on and revise his own culturally shaped reading and writing habits in ways he is calling on others to do. Trap Three would be to keep private my reservations of three related fears.

There is the fear of intense rage, distrust, indignation, and defensiveness charging any critical exchanges over matters of racism between persons of different skin colors. There is also the fear that any critical reading might be perceived by Miller as aiming to undercut his work and be used as such by others in the field. Consequently, it might damage coalition building with writers whose viewpoints I am interested in promoting. And then there is the fear of exposing myself to retaliation from writers like Miller whom I admire because of the sharpness of their viewpoints and style.

The principles of critical affirmation ask me to get beyond these traps by accenting the yearning for agency I share with Miller. Starting from this shared yearning would not decrease but increase vigilance toward oversights in our practices, and in three ways. First, we might approach rhetorical moves like Miller's in terms of not only our desire for agency but also, our commitment to ending oppression. Second, instead of treating each rhetorical move as simply a matter of good or bad intentions, or a matter of strong or weak intellectual capabilities; we might focus attention on the specific social, historical circumstances shaping that yearning and constraining individual attempts to enact it. Third, instead of resorting to attack and defense, we might conduct honest discussions on the problems facing us and on how to help one another live up to our announced goals.

One of the problems Miller faces is the politics of citation—that is, the ways in which the paradox of privilege mediates how we interpret and invoke the words of others. Instead of treating Miller's citation of West as an "oversight" unique to Miller, I might examine our shared need to confront that paradox when reading and writing across racial divides. As my grandmother liked to say in Chinese, "Those standing on the side enjoy a clearer vision of the situation than those caught in action." This is her way of reminding the bystander to not

abuse her privileged position, but to use whatever understanding she might gain from that standpoint to advance whatever interests and goals connect her with the person in action. I think this Chinese saying applies to my position as a reader in relation to Miller's effort as a writer. To critically affirm a writer's work while standing on the side would involve actively working along side that person (Jarratt, *JAC*). Thus, I need to review not only Miller's but also my own citation practice, and I need to explore alternatives as a person caught in action rather than as a mere bystander.

For instance, one of the problems I face when reading the works of writers like Cornel West is the tendency to slot both West and myself as "persons of color interested in social justice." I have difficulty always keeping in mind that, although racism is at the heart of slavery, xenophobia, and orientalism, these institutions have not targeted "blacks" and "Asian immigrants" in the same way in U.S. history (see Ogbu). In my previous readings of West's article, I had not paid sufficient attention to West's discussions of the distinctive genius of black forefathers and foremothers. Looking back, I think that Miller's citation practice bothered me mostly because it had turned what I took to be a statement concerning the history and realities of a racially oppressed culture into a general statement about all cultures (West 20). I was worried that such a move might keep us from looking, as West puts it, into "what race matters have meant to the American past and of how much race matters in the American present" (xvi). However, in spotting this oversight in Miller's citation practice, I had not turned the critical gaze on my own action. I had not gone on to examine the extent to which I might have substituted the word "minority culture" for the word "black" when reading West's statement.

An alternative use of West's statement would therefore involve not only re-inserting his reference to the black foremothers and forefathers but also, taking seriously his view on their distinctive work in combating nihilism. West applauds black religious and civic institutions—black families, neighborhoods, schools, churches, mosques—for sustaining "familial and communal networks of support," constituting ways of life which embodied values of "service and sacrifice, love and care, discipline and excellence." In my previous reading of West's article, I glossed over these statements because the language of "sacrifice," "service," and "familial and communal networks" brought out my worst cynicism. Part of that cynicism comes from the difference between the networks West traces in the black American tradition and my own experience of such networks. When growing up in China, I had been exposed to "communal networks" such as neighborhood committees which used an ethic of love, service, sacrifice, and discipline to incalculable sentimental celebration of uniformity. Over here, I often feel entrapped in a "familial" network promoting class elitism and Chinese xenophobia.

To confront the predispositions resulting from such experiences, I have re-read West's statements concerning the distinctive genius of black foremothers and forefathers. He applauds them for building "traditions for black surviving and thriving under unusually adverse New World conditions" of exile and enslavement. And he urges us to approach those traditions through a "subversive memory," one which looks for "the *best* of one's past without romantic nostalgia" (29-30, emphasis mine). The "best" of those traditions, he argues, promote self-worth and self-affirmation to preserve hope and meaning and, thus, keep alive the possibility of struggle against oppression. Such a network of support is indispensable, given the "collective clinical depression in significant pockets of black America" in

postmodern times (27). In short, an alternative use of West's statements would attend both to the full history of black America's battle against nihilism and to the reader's own history, examining, in the interests of ending oppression, the points of both convergence and divergence.

A second problem Miller faces is the poverty of language available for capturing the conflictual, fluid, and protean nature of individual self with accuracy, precision, and elegance. For instance, when I state "I am a female Chinese immigrant" and when I say "I am a heterosexual," I know I don't mean the same thing by using the same copula verb. With the first statement, I mean to indicate my social placement, my self-identification, and my ideological stance: my interest in fighting discrimination against all Asian Immigrants. The unity among these three levels of being is easily captured by the single verb "am." When I say "I am heterosexual," I intend to acknowledge my social placement and my self-identification. But the statement leaves ambiguous my ideological stance on issues of sexuality. It does not immediately make clear my concern to fight my own witting or unwitting complicity with homophobia. As illustrated by my presentation of this example, I have difficulty depicting this conflict in social placement, self-identification, and ideological stance without sounding "clumsy" or "jargonistic." Miller faces the same problem of finding innovative ways of presenting such a split when deciding on whether and how to identify himself as white and heterosexual.

Furthermore, in identifying some of the writers, teachers, and students as "black" or "gay," Miller also indicates a concern to acknowledge their social placements and to respect their self-identification. To never forget to do so is crucial. In fact, as a result of the automatic "outing" of my sexual and racial identifications by my wedding band and skin

color, I have not always taken seriously the political work intended by and the "labor of the body and the emotions" involved in the self-naming of gay and lesbian students and teachers (see Elliott 694). To combat such an oversight, I've always tried to acknowledge the self-naming of gay and lesbian students and teachers. At the same time, given the privilege of normality—"invisibility"—already granted to heterosexuals in today's United States, I worry that such a move could work to further mark these students and teachers as Others.

Accordingly, I have tried to *accompany* it with efforts to "out"—render visible and wrestle with—my own heterosexual privileges.

I use the word "outing" self-consciously to call attention to the potential use and abuse of this type of discursive practice. In "The Nervous System," Miller tells of a seminar where two self-identified "gay teachers" started a discussion on the benefits and dangers of "coming out" in the classroom (278-79). Then, a "number of instructors took the opportunity to deploy the structure of the coming out narrative to tell their own stories" (279). Finally, another instructor "highjacked the narrative structure and 'came out' to the class as a . . . [sic] Christian" (280). Miller uses this chain of stories to remind us that "the solicitation of one kind of personal narrative simultaneously prohibits the production of other kinds of narratives. To have the right kind of personal experience is what matters, for this is what allows one to accrue cultural capital within a given institutional context" (280). Given such a historical reality, we need to be very cautious about how, why, where, and when we tell stories of the paradox of one's privilege.

The emphasis always has to be on using these stories as an accompaniment to our efforts to take more seriously others' stories of exclusion. Theoretically speaking, I imagine such a discussion following the chain of "coming out" stories Miller describes: All present

share the responsibility to "out" ourselves along lines of spirituality and sexuality. Those of us who view ourselves as non-religious and not-gay would take the responsibility to deliberate on how to present our sexuality and spirituality in the classroom, especially how to make visible the privilege of "invisibility" conferred on us within and outside the academy. All present would have to consider the paradox of one's privilege along other lines of division, including those caused by racism and economic injustice, even if and especially because these issues seem to appear peripheral, even irrelevant to our lived experience and to that discussion. Furthermore, we would remind one another that the goal of "coming out" with one's experiences of exclusion, inclusion, complicity, and resistance is to become jointly responsible for a critical investigation of and intervention in the historical realities represented by the chain of stories. In short, the why of story telling—humble freedom fighting—must dictate our assessment of the how and the what of story telling, of who has the "right story" and "the right to tell stories."

I highlight the motive to "accompany" because I agree with Miller that our training in the academic nervous system has better prepared us to vie for individual voice and authority at the expense of our collective interest in ending oppression, than to rigorously sustain the tension between the two. Yet, the tension between individual agency and collective goals is at the heart of critical affirmation. Without that tension, reflection on one another's paradox of privilege would turn into mere gripe sessions for and by the *power full*, where recitations of our privileged locations are used to displace rather than accompany responsible researching of the experiences and insights of the *power less*. Worse yet, narratives of one's Whiteness, Maleness, Middle Classness, or Heterosexuality could be used to justify rather than confront one's ideological stances and to protect academic turf and privileges from (the

perceived and feared) invasions of the Other (because their voice has not been granted the power of invisibility). Attention to one another's paradox of privilege could also be used by the *power full* to irresponsibly dismiss accounts of oppression and exclusion by the *power less* under the pretense that the Other has not sufficiently scrutinized her own complicity with various systems. In short, reflections and revisions of one's privileged social placements must be used to bring to the foreground rather than push back and out of hearing the histories, experiences, and voices of the oppressed social groups.

I end my talk with this idealized classroom scene to problematize my own use of the personal. I have maintained that the actual act of writing is an important means for reflecting and revising the paradox of one's privileges. It helps to put on paper for personal and public scrutiny one's private thoughts, feelings, and bodily reactions when reading. It can initiate exchanges in which colleagues become coinvestigators on not only the problems needing to be addressed but also, how to go about addressing them. In posing the outing of one's privilege as a form of accompaniment to one's own and others' stories of oppression and exclusion, I have emphasized my impression that teacher illiteracy on our own paradox of privileges constrains our effort to develop pedagogies which construct literacy in the interest of ending oppression. We need self-education on how we critically affirm one another's use of the personal for the political. At the same time, the question very much at the back of my mind when writing this paper is the specific, privileged conditions sustaining this writing project. It was first initiated by an invitation to speak at a national conference. I came back and reworked it for another conference and with the promise of placing it in a leading journal. So this paper needs to be scrutinized on not only the extent to which I am composing the kind of accompaniment I imagined at the level of theory, but also the usefulness of such a

theoretical frame for teachers and scholars across different institutional locations at different points of their professional and personal lives. To what extent are my convictions, suspicions, and self-knowledge indicative of the profession in general? What might be the limitations of using the self, and particularly this self, as a point of departure for a "deliberative discourse" on how to practice critical affirmation when conducting pedagogical research?

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