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Author(s): Amy E. Robillard

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# It's Time for Class: Toward a More Complex Pedagogy of Narrative

**Amy E. Robillard**

*[I]n my family the past provided the only possible understanding of the present.*

—Linda Brodkey, "Writing on the Bias" 528

*[W]hen left to my own devices I continue to measure the value of the present in terms of itself rather than the future. The future only interests me when the present becomes intolerable.*

—Brodkey 542

*[A]utobiography [is] a sensitive instrument of critique, certainly the only critical apparatus sensitive enough to register the subtle rumblings of class in higher education.*

—Carolyn Leste Law, "The Making of Working-Class Academics" 7

**M**y mother is never late for anything. In fact, she's infuriatingly early for doctor's appointments, movies, personal dates. When my siblings and I were kids, we heard over and over again, "Hurry up. You don't wanna be late." My brother Guy and I are our mother's children—never late for anything, usually five or ten minutes early. My habit of being early has paid off for me, I have to admit. I've gotten the job more than once because I was the first one there. Employers see me as dependable and conscientious, and my friends know they can count on me to be there when I say I will. My sister Sue, though, chose to respond to our mother's chronic promptness by rebelling—she's late for everything. When I lived with her for a year in Anchorage, I found myself adopting her way of thinking for a while. Doctor's appointment across town in twenty minutes? Sure, I've still got time to eat

**Amy E. Robillard** is currently completing her doctoral degree in Syracuse University's Composition and Cultural Rhetoric program. Her recent work includes a collaborative article in *Dialogue* entitled "Coming into the Field: Intersections of the Personal and the Professional in Graduate Student and Faculty Narratives," and a chapter in the forthcoming *Introduction to Authorship*, edited by Tracy Hamler Carrick and Rebecca Moore Howard. Her research focuses on the social uses and functions of autobiography in the context of contemporary authorship theories.

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my breakfast. I can't remember whether Sue was late for her own wedding, and if I asked her now she'd surely say she was on time, but if my mother's got it right, Sue will be late for her own funeral.

Beginning this essay with a personal reflection is not unusual; we see these sorts of beginnings all the time in scholarly articles in *College English* and *CCC*, and we're usually drawn into the piece. We want to keep reading. And as much as you want to keep reading, I want to keep writing about the way my family understands notions of time. But I've got a point to make. When we see a piece in *College English* or *CCC* that begins with a personal story, we assume there's a *reason* for it. When Julie Lindquist chooses to begin her 1999 *CCC* essay with "Before I was an English teacher, I was a bartender" (225); when Linda Brodkey opens "Writing on the Bias" with the story of her first writing project—taking the neighborhood census; and when Lynn Z. Bloom opens her seminal essay, "Freshman Composition as a Middle-Class Enterprise," with "I used to go to parties in hopes of meeting new people, but now we live in a small town and everyone knows I'm an English teacher" (33), we trust that Lindquist, Brodkey, and Bloom have very good reasons for opening their essays with personal stories. But we don't always grant this same trust to our students when they tell us their personal stories in writing we assign.

Lindquist, Brodkey, and Bloom are all writing about relationships between social class and literacy. Bloom's argument that first-year composition is a middle-class enterprise, particularly composition's middle-class emphasis on the future, helps us understand why the discourse surrounding autobiography and the personal narrative in the field is driven by defense. "It is a middle-class virtue to work and scrimp and save in the present for long-term gains in the future—such as the fruits of an education or an insurance policy," writes Bloom (45). Thus we're here to provide a service to our students, to the rest of the university community; the work students do in our courses will help them as they move through the rest of their courses. Therefore, the story goes, our students should be looking to their bright futures as middle managers and CPAs, not looking to their pasts. Insofar as the personal narrative and autobiography are stories of a person's past, they are not appropriate discourse for first-year composition.

In this essay, I'm interested in time. I want to establish that there are different ways of conceiving of time and that these different ways of conceiving of time are class-based. That they are class-based affects composition because composition as a middle-class enterprise assumes that all students understand and value the middle-class "delayed gratification" Bloom writes about. Shirley Brice Heath has recently established that, for what we might call "nontraditional" students, writing is not tied to schooling in the way the discipline of composition tends to imagine it is. Students from the working class "dip into and out of college, pulling from it what they [see] as current needs" (233). College composition as the gatekeeper course, as the course in

service to the rest of the academy, Heath argues, bears little or no relevance to many working-class students' needs. Academic discourse may serve traditional students well as they work their way through the academy, but in today's new capitalism—with ever-increasing emphasis placed on flexibility, teamwork, and risk-taking—all of our students will likely find themselves adrift. Richard Sennett, coauthor of the 1972 *Hidden Injuries of Class*, observes in his more recent *The Corrosion of Character* that it's this feeling of aimlessness that leads to a corrosion of character: "The conditions of time in the new capitalism have created a conflict between character and experience, the experience of disjointed time threatening the ability of people to form their characters into sustained narratives" (31). For our students from the working class who dip into and out of college over a number of years, and may never finish, this fragmentation of time is magnified.

Sennett, along with many in our own field (Fishman; Mahala and Swilky), argues that narrative provides shape, order, coherence to events beyond our control. Narrative is more than a simple chronological rendering of events. Narratives, says Sennett, give "shape to the forward movement of time, suggesting reasons why things happen, showing their consequences" (30). As long as we continue to devalue the possibilities of narrative in the composition classroom, we will continue to marginalize the possibilities for working-class students to develop an understanding of why things happen, their consequences, their material results in the present. E. P. Thompson says that class is defined "by men [and women] as they live their own history" (11). Narrative provides one way of interpreting and ordering a history. Devaluing narrative, then, can deny certain students the opportunity to develop a class consciousness, thereby all but ensuring their uncritical identification with the middle class.

Further, because the working-class student struggles with the relationship between his or her past and his or her present, it becomes critical that we recognize the ways students rely on their past experiences to understand new knowledge. We cannot simply expect students to adopt our ways of thinking uncritically. We cannot take for granted our own ways of thinking. We are a middle-class enterprise to the extent that we emphasize the value of delayed gratification. We ask our students to look to their futures rather than to their pasts. We ask our students to accept meaning that has already been created. But don't we also want to encourage our students to create their own meanings from their own histories, thereby allowing them to entertain some sense of control over their educations and their lives? If so, we cannot so easily dismiss narrative in composition. Patricia R. Webb argues that the reason narratives hold so little value in the academy is that "those in authority have already determined how students should learn and how they will continue to learn" (34). Perhaps those in authority have already determined, too, with whom students from all social classes will identify. The personal narrative, argues Martha Marinara, gives us "the unique opportunity to help students negotiate the borders between

work and school, past and present, self and other" (8). To argue, as Marinara does, that the personal narrative helps students negotiate the border between work and school is to focus attention on *students who work*. Many of our students work many hours when they're not attending classes. Many of our students probably feel a strong disconnect between the self that works and the self that attends classes. If narrative provides some degree of control over language and experience, as Sennett argues, and if narrative cannot be separated from the more privileged genres of analysis and argument, as I will argue shortly, then we cannot afford to dismiss narrative from our writing curricula. Nor *should* we in the name of academic discourse.

In what follows, I tell portions of my own story, illustrating in part the history of one working-class student struggling to make sense of middle-class affiliations with academic discourse and middle-class understandings of time. Additionally, I will propose that, as writing teachers, we make more explicit in our classrooms the ways that narrative and the more privileged genres of analysis and argument interanimate one another.

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At Syracuse University, where I work, students from the working class are, for the most part, invisible. They take classes early so they can get to work on time or they take classes at night when they've finished work for the day. I'm told by one of the professors in the writing program that any mention of tuition and/or financial aid is *verboten* among students. Students from the working class who are here on scholarship or financial aid don't want to talk about it.

At Syracuse University, the personal narrative is, for the most part, losing visibility in the official discourse of the writing program. As the program works to respond in fair measure to the competing demands of the rest of the university and of the discipline, the personal narrative is replaced by a focus on analysis and argument. This is not to say that there aren't a good number of teachers in the program still teaching some form of the personal narrative. It *is* to say that the value of instruction in personal writing goes unmentioned, unrecognized, unstated by the program. For now.

While this move makes sense in light of the so-called social turn in composition—a move toward writing for a real audience and an emphasis on not just the production of texts but the circulation of texts—I cannot help but wonder why the social turn translates into the death of personal narrative and the misrecognition of issues of social class. Consider this: at the same moment that a writing program as renowned as Syracuse's is moving away from the personal narrative, scholars in composition are embracing it. The September 2001 issue of *College English* featured a special focus on personal writing in which we heard from well-known composition

and rhetoric scholars like Min-Zhan Lu, Richard E. Miller, Anne Ruggles Gere, Victor Villanueva, Ellen Cushman, and Jane E. Hindman on the significance of the personal/autobiographical to their work. I wrote, simply, “Wow” in the margins next to the comment by Villanueva’s colleague upon meeting him in the library, “I didn’t think your kind of writing required the library” (Symposium 50). *Your kind of writing*. Whose kind of writing is it? I get the sense from the issue of *CE* that it is our kind of writing. Us: the teachers and scholars. Them: the students. Do as I say, not as I do.

\* \* \*

In his recent *CCC* article, “Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss: Class Consciousness in Composition,” Joseph Harris draws on the work of E. P. Thompson to come to a definition of class consciousness. Thompson writes that class is not *determined* by our pasts or our economic situations; class instead is “a relationship, and not a thing” (qtd. in Harris 46). Harris correctly interprets Thompson’s definition to mean that the relationship of class “rests on a sense of shared *interests* and not simply on a set of common experiences” (46). But Harris later downplays the significance of shared experiences in understanding class consciousness; he suggests that, rather than focusing on narratives of our working-class pasts, we should concern ourselves with “how workers define their *present* interests and commitments” (46). Narratives of our pasts, he argues, treat social class “as a personal quality, an aspect of character” rather than “a sense of shared *interests*” (46). Going back to Thompson, however, we find that the relationship that class entails is a *historical* relationship, one that “must always be embodied in real people and in a real context” (9). Indeed, class is *not* a thing and so cannot be defined statically; class, says Thompson, “is defined by men [and women] as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition” (11). Focusing solely on a person’s *present* interests and commitments, as Harris does, slights the personal history that propels such interests and commitments in the first place. Interestingly enough, in this same article we learn that Harris comes “from a union family” (45), that Harris is “the son of a truck driver” (48), and that he is therefore “troubled by [his] position as manager in a system that treats so many of its teachers unfairly” (45).

What I notice is Harris’s move to dismiss his past along with his insistence on a discussion of class consciousness that focuses on the present; yet obviously, even for Harris, these affiliations with the past *do* matter. Sure, Harris admits to some sense of the ambiguity of his own class positioning (44), but he continually refers to his own present positioning as a composition “boss,” a “tenure-stream” faculty member working to improve working conditions for all composition teachers (61). I argue

that the personal, manifested in narrative and autobiographical accounts, is essential to developing a “new sort of class consciousness” in composition (45).

Carolyn Kay Steedman, an academic from the working class who recounts her own history in *Landscape for a Good Woman*, argues that it is only through the stories we tell ourselves about our past that we can begin to understand that past. “Once a story is told,” she writes, “it ceases to be a story: it becomes a piece of history, an interpretive device” (143). And these interpretations help people “explain how they got to the place they currently inhabit” (6), a claim that supports Thompson’s articulation of class as defined only in living history, and that explains why Harris could not help but include the fact that he is the son of a truck driver, a product of a union family. How else could we, his audience, understand his dedication to issues of labor politics in composition? To suggest that we shift the focus to “the social and material interests [that] undergird our work as teachers of composition” (46) while implicitly disparaging the forms in which we make sense of and interpret class consciousness—narrative and autobiographical histories—is contradictory at best. “[S]uch stories,” says Harris, “have the peculiar effect of always locating class in the past, as a way of talking about where someone has come from rather than where they are now” (46). As Steedman makes clear and as I argue further below, telling stories of the past does not limit one to simply telling *what happened*. Telling stories of the past involves selection and interpretation. The choice to tell a story of the past is a rhetorical one.

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John McMillan argues that “one of the reasons we haven’t until recently talked about class much in the academy is because it is difficult, if not impossible, to be abstract about it” (134). Any discussion of class necessitates storytelling. Story, he argues, is “central to all epistemological activity” (133). We come to understand ourselves by crafting stories about ourselves. Stories are constructs as much as social class is a construct. Social class consciousness is something that is developed through storytelling. Take away narrative and you take away any meaningful discussion of class.

Similarly, Irvin Peckham notes that as writing teachers “we have been trained to marginalize the kinds of narrative and descriptive writing tasks that resonate with the working-class experience and to valorize the abstract, analytical writing tasks at which the professional/managerial-class students excel” (273). I agree with Harris that we need to pay more attention to social class in composition, but I think we need to pay attention to it in the classroom with the students we teach—with *all* of the students we teach—and not just in the boardroom where the bosses manage the

work of the droids. By valorizing narrative along with analytical writing—narrative *as* analysis—and by making explicit the ways that narrative and analysis interanimate each other, perhaps we can create a forum where all students feel comfortable speaking and writing. To focus on the place we are now, as Harris advocates, is to ask students to ignore the material realities that brought them to the university in the first place. Such a focus on the present, too, privileges the abstract and analytical ways of knowing of the already-privileged middle-class students; it “denies its subjects a particular story, a personal history, except when that story illustrates a general thesis; and it denies the child, and the child who continues to live in the adult it becomes, both an unconscious life, and a particular and developing consciousness of the meanings presented by the social world” (Steedman 10–11). It is to ask students to deny their tacit understanding of class, to identify with the middle-class values of higher education.

\* \* \*

When my sister Sue was in high school, she had a part-time job at McDonald’s. She took the job to make money to pay for the beat-up yellow Pinto she would lock herself out of more than once. Before she could buy the Pinto, though, my mother would drop her off at work at least twenty-five minutes early. This is Sue, the one who’s going to be late for her own funeral. To this day, she still bitches about Mom dropping her off so early. It’s what she remembers about the job, having to sit outside until McDonald’s opened and the manager would let her in. “What’d ya do? Sleep here?” he would ask her. I can imagine the scowl she’d reply with.

Is this a story? Which part of it? James Moffett writes that “[t]he essence of story is once-upon-a-time. Once. Unique and unrepeatable events—not ‘recurring’ events, as in science” (121). It’s a story, but one that has been generalized. It goes beyond the “what happened once” to “what used to happen” and “what happens now when Sue thinks about her job at McDonald’s.” In his complex theory of discourse, which includes definitions of abstraction and selection and their consequences for writing curricula, Moffett explains the progression from narrative to theory by centering in on the verb tenses most commonly used in each. He writes, “we may imagine a progression of writing that is personal in the sense that it is about the speaker but that is aimed at a general audience and therefore employs the sub-structures of the language more universally [. . .] from personal journals to detached autobiography” (42). All of the subclasses in Moffett’s class of personal writing are based on narrative; their differences are in the temporal orientation of the writer to the event. At the lowest level of verbal abstraction is the present-tense *what is happening* “because it conforms most closely to the temporal and spatial order in which phenomena occur” (34). From the present tense up the abstraction scale, the writer



moves to *what has happened* to *what happened* to *what was happening* to *what happens* to *what may happen* (35), and in doing so, the events “become less and less space-time bound, and [are] processed from narratives to generalizations to theories” (35). The stories by our students we dread reading, the seemingly never-ending narratives that don't seem to *do* anything are the ones that rely only on *what happened*. We tire easily of reading “then, then, then, and then.” But how many of our students write simple *what happened* narratives? Don't many of them write stories like the ones I'm writing here? Don't many of our students' narratives combine the *what happened* with the *what happens* and the *what may happen*?

*What happens* to the concrete when we narrate it? *What may happen*?

Joan Didion recalls of her feelings of inadequacy as an undergraduate at Berkeley that she “tried, with a kind of hopeless late-adolescent energy, to buy some temporary visa into the world of ideas, to forge for myself a mind that could deal with the abstract. In short I tried to think. I failed. My attention veered inexorably back to the specific, to the tangible, to what was generally considered [. . .] the peripheral” (5). Thinking, for Didion, was equated with the ability to abstract. The concrete, well, that was too simple, it was what others considered peripheral. I think this is the reasoning that writing teachers fall prey to when they decide that narrative is too easy for students, that narrative doesn't challenge students to think. This is the reasoning we fall prey to when we assign the personal narrative as the first assignment in a writing course, a sort of warm-up exercise for more abstract, analytical, academic writing. As Bruce Horner argues, such courses' distinction between the personal and the academic denies “the possibilities both that ‘personal’ writing is socially inscribed and that individual students may well have ‘personal’ interests articulated in more ‘academic’ writing” (511; see also Fishman; Hilligoss; Mahala and Swilky). This kind of reasoning opposes the personal as concrete with the academic as abstract. Yet, as Moffett explains, the abstract and the concrete are not necessarily oppositional. Abstraction requires categorization into classes and subclasses, and the “yardstick” by which concepts of two different classes or subclasses are measured is “the extension in time and space of the referent” (19). I quote Moffett's example here: “[O]ne could observe an instance of ‘bartering’ or of ‘dog’ by standing at one point in space-time, but one could not so observe an instance of ‘international trade,’ which is itself a complex of actions occurring at different times and places” (19). Moffett's point is that “‘concreteness,’ the traditional antonym for ‘abstractness,’ is a matter of just this extension of the referent in time and space” (19–20). Story's concrete nature, then, is no less complex than a traditional research paper's abstract nature. The difference is that stories are once upon a time, the stuff from which research papers and reports abstract. But without the stories, without the concrete, from what might one abstract? From what would theories be developed?

More to the point, why do we insist on distinguishing between narrative and the more privileged genres of analysis and argument, the research paper, even? Why, in this view, does one lead to the others in a kind of progression of difficulty and complexity? Every experience I've had with narrative—both writing and reading—leads me to believe that we cannot distinguish between narrative and analysis, between narrative and argument. Recently we saw Candace Spigelman make a case for the personal as evidence in argument; she argues, and I agree, that “even supporters of experiential writing generally fall short of establishing its argument-based role” (64). Few supporters of personal writing argue any more for its expressive qualities, its potential for self-discovery. We support it because we know, intuitively, experientially, logically, theoretically, that narrative and argument interanimate each other. There exists a dialectical relationship between narrative and the genres we privilege in our writing classrooms. Didion calls this phenomenon the “shimmer around the edges” (6):

When I talk about pictures in my mind I am talking, quite specifically, about images that shimmer around the edges. There used to be an illustration in every elementary psychology book showing a cat drawn by a patient in varying stages of schizophrenia. This cat had a shimmer around it. You could see the molecular structure breaking down at the very edges of the cat: the cat became the background and the background the cat, everything interacting, exchanging ions. People on hallucinogens describe the same perception of objects. I'm not a schizophrenic, nor do I take hallucinogens, but certain images do shimmer for me. Look hard enough, and you can't miss the shimmer. It's there. You can't think too much about these pictures that shimmer. You just lie low and let them develop. You stay quiet. You don't talk to many people and you keep your nervous system from shorting out and you try to locate the cat in the shimmer, the grammar in the picture. (6-7)

I like Didion's language here. What if we said that we could see the narrative structure breaking down at the very edges of the story: the story becomes the analysis and the analysis the story, “everything interacting, exchanging ions.” Edges. Borders. Breaking down. Narrative interacting with argument and analysis. Narrative and the more privileged genres interanimating one another. A dialectic.

The distance—the time, the space, the hierarchical distinctions we maintain—between narrative and analysis becomes—*is*—blurred and *that's the point*. Imagine this type of blur between a person's past and a person's present. A refusal to draw hard distinctions between who I was and who I am. Narrative analysis as a conscious enactment of interpretation.

\* \* \*

I am immersed (present tense) in the middle-class value system of higher education. But I come from a lower-class background. I hesitate to call mine a working-class

background because my father died when I was four and my mother didn't work until I was in high school. We lived on Social Security and welfare. Steedman makes the point that the problem with most working-class childhoods is "that they simply are not bad enough to be worthy of attention" (9). In some ways, this task I'm undertaking—reflecting on my class positioning and arguing for the value of narrative—is a luxury because my childhood, though in *some* ways bad enough to be worthy of attention, was not, from the looks of things, all that bad. I stress "from the looks of things" because I've told myself so many competing stories about my childhood that I have to consciously sift through the good and the bad depending on who I'm talking to and what point I'm trying to make.

Stories are constructs, and the stories we tell ourselves about our social class standing betray the way we want to be seen and understood. So, I could tell the story focusing on the fact that my mom was home when I came home from school every day, that I went to school with a full belly every day, that I never went without clothes or shoes. We lived in a one-family house on a dead-end street with a city park right across the street. When the ice cream truck came ding-donging down our street in the summer, I could usually get my mom to give me a quarter for a Popsicle or an Italian ice.

Or, I could tell the story a different way, with details that come to me only intermittently now, the details that come more painfully and in some ways more easily. I could tell you that my mom was home every day when I came home from school, but she was asleep in front of the television. The oatmeal she filled my belly with was bought on credit at the corner store (and here I could go into all of the difficulties surrounding the word "credit" in our family) and on Wednesday and Sunday nights the one-family house was filled with the sounds of my screams as my sister beat me while my mother went out to "the dance" in Connecticut. (I say "my sister" here, but I refer not to Sue, my chronically late sister who will be late for her own funeral, but to my other sister, whom I'd rather not name.) I could tell you about the time my sister gave me a bloody nose while my mom was out at one of those dances and I refused to clean myself up. I sat, resolute, on the couch in the living room, blood running down my chin and neck, wanting my mother to see what she was letting happen to me.

These details of mine call to mind the story of Stephen Garger, a working-class academic who misreads his colleagues' responses to his presentation in a faculty meeting. After one colleague had in effect asked him the same question three times, Garger writes, "When he made the same point for the third time, I felt attacked and got defensive and angry. The only response I could conjure up was 'Fuck you' followed by a leap across the table to throttle him. I decided to withhold my response" (42). Garger comes to realize that academics are never looking for the right answer *per se*; they are looking for a good discussion. And I think, "Explain that to a student

whose parents' arguments were always in the name of who's right and who's wrong." Explain that to a student whose survival in social circles depends on his or her ability to take sides, to take a stand. Working-class and minority students may be coming to us from neighborhoods where, in Peter Rondione's words, "being ambivalent, being in the middle, will get you trapped in a crossfire of lead and blown into little pieces" (884).

\* \* \*

Stories of the past are not often told in my family. My mother doesn't like to talk about it, "it" being anything from my father's death to their marriage to her own childhood to the fights my siblings and I got into when we were younger to my father's smoking and his series of heart attacks. I don't really know how she developed the understanding of time that she passed on to us. I don't know what my grandparents did for a living. My mother never really worked until I was a teenager, and then she worked in a laundromat and later in a series of factories. I know that my mother's conception of time served her well in those jobs, particularly the factories where she had to punch in and out each morning and afternoon. At the factory, there was no free lunch. She had to punch in and out for lunch, too. She was paid by the hour: six dollars and fifty cents. But long before the jobs in the factory, my mother was preoccupied with being on time—no, with being early. Why? I can't ask her; she won't talk about it. But maybe it's about refusing to be labeled irresponsible, unreliable, unprofessional by the boss. Maybe still it's about seeking approval from those in control so that the stories we tell about ourselves are good ones. Maybe controlling time is more important than we sometimes let on.

The point of telling stories, Steedman writes, "doesn't lie there, back in the past, back in the lost time at which they happened; the only point lies in interpretation" (5). The point of telling stories lies in how one moves from *what happened* to *what happens*. This is why stories are not easy to tell. This is why my mother won't tell us the stories about her childhood, about my father, about her parents. She knows that then we'll be able to draw conclusions. We'll be able to interpret, to analyze.

A narrative never works alone.

So in one sense, it's true that to develop a new kind of class consciousness in composition, we cannot pay attention only to the stories of our pasts—individual and collective. We have to pay attention to the present-time *effects* of the stories we tell about our pasts. The point lies in interpretation. We understand our present by interpreting our past, analyzing its details and selecting the plot line.

\* \* \*

Time is money. No news there. Except, for so many of us in academia, time is not money in the way it is for our working-class students.

On two separate occasions, I worked at a writing training company that delivers business writing workshops to corporations. During my first term there, from the summer of 1995 through the early fall of 1996, I was a salaried employee. I was persuaded by co-workers to take long lunches (a challenge to my preoccupation with being on time), and eventually I became comfortable with not watching the clock. I usually left at five, but when I didn't, it didn't really bother me the way it did a year and a half later when I returned to the company as an hourly employee. The change in status changed the way I conceived of my work. If I thought I was being asked to do too much, I pointed to my hourly wage and said, "For this? You want me to do x, y, and z, for *this*?" The hourly rate was actually more than I had been making as a salaried employee, but the feelings were very different. I felt as if my co-workers and employers didn't trust me. I watched the clock like a hawk and never left one minute past five o'clock. I asked for raises more often than I had as a salaried employee. I felt less valued, easily replaceable. The focus was always on today, how to just get through the day. Sure, I planned ahead for projects I was working on, but my personal focus never got much past Friday.

I remember, too, the feeling that, as an hourly employee, I could find the ground slipping from under my feet at any moment. I had no job security. I could be let go at any time. I was not essential.

*What happens* when a worker carries with her a feeling that, at any moment, her life could veer out of control? The social structure of the working class is such that there is no sense of stability. There is a general, vague feeling of having no control, of uncertainty. One's life need not actually be out of control; the threat only needs to loom large. Is it any wonder that we from the working class seek order and control in the stories we tell about ourselves? Contrast this with the concept of job tenure in academia. Job security. No real threats to one's ability to put food on the table. Is it any wonder, then, that we academics privilege what Julie Lindquist calls *what-if* discourse? Is it any wonder that we encourage students to keep the inquiry open, to resist closure? We have that luxury.

When I had earned my master's degree at the University of Massachusetts Boston and had one semester to kill before I went off to Syracuse University, I taught two sections of first-year English. I was paid \$2,200 per course. I promptly figured out the hourly rate and then tried my hardest to forget it. If I took into account only the time spent in the classroom, I was making good money, I told myself. I tried not to think about the time I was spending reading student papers. But I love what I'm doing, I told myself. It doesn't matter what I get paid.

I imagine that there are countless adjunct composition teachers who tell themselves the same thing. The amount adjuncts are paid per course conceals the pit-

tance they earn weekly and monthly. So, clearly, it's not really accurate to say that, for academics, time is not money in the same way it is for our working-class students. For most adjuncts, it probably is the same. But it is the culture of the academy to disguise that similarity. Nobody teaches for the money, so they say.

I am, I think, shifting some of the focus here to what Harris calls "the social and material interests [that] undergird our work as teachers of composition" (46). And I'm doing so by abstracting from the stories of my past. I know no other way.

\* \* \*

Last summer I accompanied my mother to many doctor visits as they prepared her for serious surgery on her right leg. The blood flow in her lower leg had all but ceased, and the plan was to literally move a vein over from her thigh to just above her lower leg. If she didn't have the surgery, her doctors told her, the leg would eventually develop gangrene and have to be amputated. As we sat in waiting room after waiting room, my mother's disgust at her doctors' unfailing lateness seemed to increase by the minute. And with it, so too did my own disgust, but with her. How many times did I have to tell her that doctors will *never* be on time for appointments? She gets angry with individual doctor after individual doctor, and takes it out on the receptionist; she refuses to see the pattern, refuses to acknowledge that the world is not run on her time clock. In those moments, I become angry, so angry I can hardly contain myself and have to walk away from her. Then, a moment later, walking the halls of the hospital, I am overcome with guilt for leaving my mother sitting in the waiting room by herself. I tell myself that I'm supposed to be here for her in ways that the rest of my siblings can't or won't be. (Of my four siblings, I'm the one farthest removed in space excepting my sister in Anchorage, Alaska, but I'm also the one with the most flexible schedule because I'm in academia and I can afford to take a day here and there to drive four hours each way to be with my mother. My brother Guy lives two streets away but could not get the days off from his job as an auto mechanic.) Later I'll probably play this hero card for all it's worth in family arguments. But now, in this moment, I want to strangle her.

Coming back to school in August is difficult because the concerns here are so different. But having this space to write about my personal experiences in an academic setting has helped me see that I don't yet completely embrace my class origins. And maybe I never will. It's never as easy as either/or. But I also know that I cannot in good faith deny those experiences. The desire to strangle my mother in that moment was as real as the moment I sit here writing about it.

And in this moment, sitting here writing about it, I know that I'm not just telling a story. I'm interpreting. I'm analyzing. I'm doing the work of the academy. In disguise.

\* \* \*

Though Steedman might agree with Harris that there has been a proliferation of working-class autobiography that allows the *expression* of class consciousness in the forms of narrative and autobiography, she insightfully departs from Harris's claim when she points out that "there has been little space [. . .] to discuss the *development* of class-consciousness (as opposed to its expression), nor for understanding of it as a *learned* position, learned in childhood, and often through the exigencies of difficult and lonely lives" (13). Perhaps the reason we spend so little time thinking about the development of class consciousness is that we're trying so hard to escape the working class that we rarely look back. Or we assume that our students are trying so hard to escape their working-class origins that they have no need to look to their pasts. Only once we've risen above our working-class origins do we grant ourselves the luxury of looking back. And by that point, it's a modern-day rags-to-riches story; we *know* how the story will end.

Yet it's this master narrative of escaping our working-class roots once we enter the academy that helps us understand how social class is different from race and gender. Lynn Bloom's 1993 call for MLA papers on "intersections of race, class, and gender in composition studies," which resulted in "only one proposal on class—in comparison with a dozen on race and ninety-four on gender" (36), points to our field's hesitance to grapple with the complexities of social class and writing instruction. James Zebroski, too, argues that "composition and rhetoric is about at the same place regarding social class as English studies was toward feminism in the early 1970s. Just making class heard and proving it is always there, even when silent, powerfully affecting our every task, will have to be our first priority for the next several years" (88).

Social class, in comparison with race and gender, is the most invisible, the most easily ignored. As Carolyn Leste Law and C. L. Barney Dews observe of their work editing *This Fine Place So Far from Home*, a collection of narratives from working-class academics, social class, more than gender or race, must be claimed. It is not visible in ways that race and gender usually are. "While we can't be guilty of displaying our gender or race (usually we cannot help it or we are in for criticism if we *don't*), we *can be* and *are* guilty of exposing our working-class origins because we must decide to do so, to make ourselves seen" (10). Social class is not fixed; one can hypothetically move from the working class to the middle class, if we're thinking of class mainly in terms of economics. One can buy the clothes that make one less likely to be marked as working class. One cannot so easily move from one race to another, from one gender to the other.

This helps to explain why we work so hard to affirm our students' race and gender identities in the writing classroom. They're pretty much stuck with them.

But when it comes to affirming our students' social class, we're a bit more hesitant. Mary Soliday makes this point quite well when she observes that "we don't affirm a student's inability to buy a computer or textbooks in the same way that we affirm that student's street slang as a creative, oppositional use of language" (734). Perhaps we think, "Our students have come this far, inching their way toward the middle class of the university; why not use this opportunity to help them move a little bit closer? Why not instill in them the values of the middle class, values like delayed gratification and punctuality?"

But my mother is making me challenge Bloom's characterization of punctuality and delayed gratification as specifically middle-class values. As I said, I'm never late for anything and if I am, I feel tremendous guilt about it. How is punctuality connected to leisure? Is it too simple to suggest that those who have extra time can afford to waste it and that those whose lives are run by the time clock cannot? Probably. But I also know from my own experience and from stories my working-class friends and colleagues tell me that this emphasis on punctuality is not exclusive to the middle class.

I find myself wondering about the serpentine nature of the development of class consciousness. Is class consciousness something that can only be *reclaimed*? Do we have to lose it before we can find it? If so, what does that do to my argument that we need to reclaim the place of narrative in composition courses? Did we have to lose it in order to reclaim it? Is this where we are right now at Syracuse University? Do we have to lose the personal narrative now so that we can reclaim it again in five or ten years?

\* \* \*

When my mother and I go shopping, she loves to look at watches. She owns probably ten, ranging in style from your everyday bang-up to your fancy gold dress-up watch. I hate to leave the house without mine. Cliché, yes, but I *do* feel naked without it.

When I was in Spain for two months a few years ago, my only timekeeper in my small hostel room was my plastic Swatch. When it broke, I called home frantically, urging my mother to send me a replacement ASAP. I'm not really sure why I didn't just buy one in Spain—no money, probably. Until my replacement arrived, I borrowed one from a secretary at the American School. It was thick gray plastic, far too large for my wrist. And ugly. But it allowed me to watch the time.

My mother usually cannot afford the watches she buys on credit in the department stores when we go shopping. But if you were to ask her, she'd say she cannot afford *not* to have a reliable watch.



Time is money. Buy a good watch so you'll always be to work on time. Along with delayed gratification, Bloom shows us that punctuality is a middle-class value embedded in the practices of the typical first-year composition course. With its emphasis on revision and the expectation that students will turn in successive drafts of works in progress on time, first-year composition encourages students always to think ahead, to plan for the future. Failure to do so brings with it "penalties for non-performance, for lateness, and for other evidence of haste or sloppiness (read error and sin) [as] the university's efficient means of indoctrinating new students into the ways of the academic world" (45). I think, though, that most working-class students can relate to Bloom's next statement, that "[e]ven the muse must report for duty on time" (45), for they've probably experienced the effects of reporting for duty late.

\* \* \*

I have two bumper stickers on my car. One says, "There's only now."

Seize the day.

If not now, when?

Looking at it reminds me each day that I have a life now, today. The program I'm in is so future-oriented that I sometimes forget to live for today. I'm always wondering how this will help me tomorrow, how it will look on my c.v. At what point do I let myself have a personal life? After coursework? After exams? After the dissertation? After I've landed my first job? After I've earned tenure? By that point I'm middle-aged.

My other bumper sticker is neon orange and says, quite simply, "GO READ."

Go read. There's only now.

I showed my mom the "GO READ" bumper sticker when I was home this weekend. She likes it, she said. And she always says she'll get around to reading the books I get for her. Just like she always says she'll get around to cleaning the empty bedrooms upstairs. Just like she always says she'll get around to visiting me in New York.

Just like she always says.

What happened.

What happens.

What may happen.

\* \* \*

I'm impatient. I am always looking at the clock, waiting for whatever I'm doing to be over. I'm always rushing time along. I think this comes from watching the clock as

an hourly employee. Wanting my time back to myself. The lines were clear. From nine to five, my time was theirs. From five on, my time was my own. I could do with it whatever I wanted. Now, as a doctoral student in a demanding program, the lines are not so clearly drawn. I have to consciously *make* time for myself or run the risk of allowing school to take over my life. My working-class upbringing and my obsessive relationship with time often translate to an intense need for closure. I want things to be neat. I want to cross things off my list when I'm done with them. It's ironic, I know, that I've chosen the discipline of composition for myself—a field whose focus is writing, for we all know that a piece of writing is never really finished. A field whose boundaries are more accurately represented by dotted lines than by solid ones. Permeable. And in my academic life so far, I've found that there's a different understanding of accomplishment—they're few and usually far between, but when the awards and recognition come, they're substantial. When I was working as an hourly employee, getting through the day was an accomplishment, and there were five accomplishments each week.

This desire for closure, I argue, is a characteristic of a working-class life filled with uncertainty and instability. I know that my own need for closure could easily lead me to write trite narratives: and *then* and *then* and *then* and *then* a happy ending. Pat Belanoff describes the effects of school writing, which teaches that life becomes language via neat little packages:

I learned to turn away from complicating issues—particularly issues which reared their unwantedness, unbidden, when I had almost finished a project. I didn't want my texts messed up by things I couldn't include seamlessly. I had to keep beating the dissonance down, me, a working class woman close to a world which, materially based, can never be so neat. (62)

Along with this need for closure is a preoccupation with getting things right. I rarely miss a deadline, and if I do, I feel tremendously guilty about it. I know my grammar and spelling rules very well despite or because of (I'm never sure which) my working-class origins because I took the lessons at school very seriously. John Alberti claims that working-class students have “an obsession with correctness” (3) and I think he's right. But, as a writing teacher, I've learned to distrust the neat and tidy endings, the conclusions that look to a bright and happy future despite the contradictions and complications woven through the body of the piece. As a writing teacher, I've learned to distrust the very way of writing that is most comfortable for working-class students. We find comfort in closure, but the middle-class academy wants us to keep the inquiry open, to keep on asking *what if*.

I want to comment here on some of what I've just said. *As a writing teacher*, I've learned to distrust closure, valuing instead writing that keeps inquiry open, the exploratory discourse of the middle-class academy. But *as a student, as a person from the*

*working class*, I trust closure and tidy endings. I want the bottom line, the neat distinction between my time and my teachers' time. Though I will probably always identify myself with the working class, I have to admit, too, that there are times when I know I'll use my status as an academic to claim membership in the middle class. Zebroski refers to this as the "seductions of passing," and as the "temptation to pass," each of his word choices betraying the desire I sometimes feel to belong not to my class of origin but to the one I've entered. I know that I am vulnerable to "pretending that the values and culture of the academy and the middle and upper classes are naturally [my] own, of pretending [I] have no others, or at least no others that are important enough to be voiced" (88). And, perhaps ironically, the people with whom I'll most likely claim that middle-class membership is my working-class family—probably because I know they think I've gone and entered a different world, the world of pretentious, stodgy book-lovers. I identify my class membership at times based on a set of shared interests, and as the interests of the important people in my life are significantly different, so will my identification with classes change as my surroundings change. It's just never clear which membership I'll claim with whom.

As a writing teacher, I want to put out a call for a more complex pedagogy of narrative. I believe that we can take advantage of *all* students' relative comfort with narrative in ways that make explicit the dependence of analysis and argument on narrative, and vice versa. But to do that, I think we need to first pay attention to the complex ways class intersects with conceptions of time and narrative. We need to pay more attention to *how* our students write their stories, *why* they write them, and how they conceive of time in those stories. Special issues on personal writing such as this one go a long way toward a reexamination of the significance of personal narratives to more privileged genres like analysis and argument. Can we, will we continue this work in our classrooms with our students from all social classes?<sup>1</sup>

#### NOTE

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