15 THE ANXIETY AND NOSTALGIA OF LITERACY
A Narrative about Race, Language, and a Teaching Life

MORRIS YOUNG

February 1, 1973

Speech evaluated—Missing central incisors.
No apparent speech defect; however omits initial /s/ in blends (st, sw).
Difficulty could be due to missing teeth.
Good stimulability—Recheck. Waiting list.

J. Takano, Speech therapist

I look up from my chair at the stranger who has come to take me to an unfamiliar classroom. My legs dangle over the chair seat, feet not reaching the floor as I prepare to hop off. The building this classroom is in is different from my school—more sterile and hospital-like with the long corridors and chairs placed outside doors along the hall. In the yard there are no swings or jungle gyms to play on, a strange absence if this was indeed another school. As we enter the classroom, I notice the walls are not covered with kiddy cartoon figures or alphabet letters or big funny pictures like my kindergarten classroom. And it’s dark. Not pitch black but more gray and gloomy as if a storm were approaching this room alone.

The walls are hospital green—not quite the blue-green of the ocean but not grass green either; more the pale mint of tooth paste. The furniture is familiar with kid-size tables and chairs. Easels stand on either side of the table—one with a paper pad and markers propped up on it, the other holds a felt-covered board with felt letters, numbers, and shapes that stick to it.

Mom and Dad wait on the other side of the closed door as I sit across from a young woman. She looks like a teacher but is friendlier than the teachers I knew back at my kindergarten. She asks me questions, has me pronounce words and letter-sounds, and read a little. I do as I am told, unsure why I am being drilled this way, especially when everything is so easy. I know my alphabet—A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, and the rest. I read a little—“See Spot run” or some other simple sentence. And I answer all of her questions—“How old are you?” “I am six. My birthday was last month. I go to Kapalama School.” Why was I pulled away from Saturday morning cartoons (though I remember vaguely being bribed with the promise of a chocolate covered wafer bar)? Why was I in another classroom far away from my regular school that was just next door to my home?
January 1, 1974
J. Takano, Speech therapist

I walk up to the main office building, leaving behind the rest of my classmates in Room 34. This has become a weekly routine as I miss story hour every Tuesday to meet with Mrs. S. But Mrs. S is nice and I don’t mind talking with her. It’s those worksheets that annoy me. Why do I need to fill the sheet with L’s and S’s? Why do I have to practice the “ST” and “SW” sounds when I can do them already? But I go to speech therapy and I bring home the worksheets to show Mom. “Look Mom. Listen Mom. S S S S S. ST ST ST ST ST. L L L L L.” I continue to practice even when my missing tooth makes the air whistle through the gaps. Then I stop going to speech therapy. I don’t remember why. It just seemed to stop. I stayed in Room 34 and sat for story hour with my classmates on Tuesdays now. And sometimes I would stop by the main office building on my way home and say “hi” to Mrs. S.

I look back at this time and wonder how much this early experience with language has shaped my life? Is it just coincidence that the study of language has become part of my professional life? Why did I become engaged with language rather than alienated like so many other students who may have had similarly “negative” experiences? Or was it a negative experience? Despite the “scariness” of being evaluated and the potential for resentment as I was sent off by myself on those afternoons, I was comfortable with language and perhaps even amused at the treatment I was receiving. Why was there so much interest in me? What about those other kids who seemed to have the same “problems” but did not receive the same attention I did?

April 18, 1974
Speech re-eval. No further therapy recommended.
J. Takano

Here is the first clue that my life would be shaped by language:

Born today, you are an intellectual by nature. Your head rules your heart almost exclusively and you make all decisions without emotional involvement. Such an approach to life is good when it comes to furthering your career, but it could prove a drawback in your personal relationships. No one likes to feel that he is friends with a machine. You have a great gift for the written word and often do better in your relationships with others if you can communicate by letter rather than face-to-face.

“Your Birthday—By Stella” (21 January 1967).

As I read this horoscope thirty-two years later, clipped and saved by my mother, I am amused by the “accuracy” regarding my interpersonal skills, and
am amazed by the final line’s attention to “a great gift for the written word.” I had never seen this horoscope until I began rummaging through the File, the personal record my mother kept on each one of her children. The File is selective and includes many of the expected things: report cards, notices of achievement, important school and personal records. But then there is also a hodgepodge of items that illustrate a life filled with literacy. Among my favorites are the programs from the pre-kindergarten story-hour at the neighborhood library and my first library card.

Now with the kind of predestination indicated by the horoscope, it is no wonder that I have become a writing teacher (though I still find it difficult to call myself a writer) who researches literacy practices, and finds himself writing about writing in these pages. And as I reflect back on my life it is not surprising that some of my most vivid memories from my childhood are about language. Before I started kindergarten I attended story hour at the neighborhood public library where I would receive the aforementioned handmade program that listed the stories for the day and an animal shaped nametag. My opening memory about that Saturday morning speech evaluation is often replayed in my head as I look out at my classes everyday and speak publicly with them. On a family vacation when I was twelve, I found myself in New Orleans at an open market looking at some used comic books (my passion at the time) when the burly man who ran the stand looked at me accusingly and said in a gruff voice, “Don’t you understand English?” as he pointed aggressively to a “no reading” sign. I only stared back at him, speechless, knowing that somehow my Asian features and dark skin had marked me as illiterate in his eyes. I am not sure why these memories stay with me. Perhaps because these were encounters with language I have internalized them and have become aware of the everyday uses of language and their contexts. Or I recall these experiences now because at the time they occurred I didn’t understand their implications. Wasn’t story hour just fun? What was a speech pathologist? Did I look as if I didn’t know English? Did I look foreign? Or, as my horoscope suggests, perhaps language was simply part of my destiny.

In these memories, I see Sylvia Scribner’s three metaphors for literacy—Adaptation, Power, and State of Grace—often the common tropes that drive our narratives about literacy. I see Adaptation in my experience with the speech pathologist where I needed (or was expected) to modify and develop my language skills to participate fully in school. Literacy as Power is clear when my English language skills were conflated with my race by that man who ran the comic book stand and acted to disempower me by questioning my literacy. And perhaps I am experiencing literacy as a State of Grace now since I am able to make language my career and experience the promise of literacy—a good
education and a good job. There are variations in these stories about literacy, but usually recognizable characters, themes, and actions emerge to create a familiar cultural script. This script naturalizes experiences and creates master narratives of transformation and success that seem like easily achievable and desirable goals. These stories can evoke nostalgia, recuperating meaning for those who want to remember their literacy experiences in uncomplicated ways and who seek confirmation of their place in society. However, these stories can also create anxiety because they can further marginalize those who have already been marked as Other by privileging one story over another. In the stories I tell here I explore the anxiety and nostalgia of literacy in my own life, not to prove myself or to share myself. Rather, I consider my own struggles with literacy and identity in order to acknowledge the struggles of others who have often found themselves unsure, confused, and immersed in the contradictions of their lives and literacy.

In his book, *The Call of Stories*, Robert Coles explains that “one keeps learning by teaching fiction or poetry because every reader’s response to a writer’s call can have its own startling, suggestive power” (xix). As a teacher, I value the emphasis that Coles places on pedagogy and how a teacher’s own learning can inform his or her practice. As a reader and student of literature I also believe that Coles is right when he suggests that the “call of stories” plays a very important role in a reader’s life. When stories are read there is an attempt, whether conscious or unconscious, to make a connection between stories and personal lives. Those narratives about education, about literacy and language, hold even more sway because memories about these types of experiences (whether negative or positive) resonate with a bit of “truth,” offering readers at least a glimmer of familiarity if not outright identification with these stories.

However, there is also a danger in the way stories can be used. The attraction to stories is due partly to attempts by readers to see aspects of their lives in them; to read the narrative of another’s life is to sometimes read (or attempt to read) the narrative of one’s own life. But it is this very desire of the reader that can be exploited; stories can be employed in ideological projects that act to advance particular views rather than to engage the readers in their own self-examination. Harold Rosen suggests that readers keep these “basics of narrative” in mind:

1. that it matters which stories we work with and that remembering and comprehending are especially related to the power of a story to engage with the world of feeling and thought in the listener;
2. that receiving a story is an exploration by the receiver(s), not a set of responses to someone else’s questions in right/wrong format;
3. that we should ask why we should remember a story and not simply what we remember;
that the most constructive way of examining the hold a story has is for it to be presented in a propitious context and to be retold in an equally propitious one. (229)

Rosen’s “basics” provide not only a way to approach stories, but also a way to approach the use of story in our culture. In these guidelines he recognizes the interestedness in the telling and use of story. Rosen proposes a set of critical methods that readers of story must utilize in order to understand how a story is working beyond the narrative structures of plot, character, and setting, and in our own larger structures of culture and society. These guidelines seem like common sense since they build upon a reader’s own interest in reading story. And yet the need to articulate this critical approach to reading suggests that for some reason readers are more often uncritical in their reading and that the potential of stories in their lives becomes a danger if it acts to fill a void through diversion rather than to help them create their own meaningful narratives.

Stories can provide a sense of belonging, can appeal to a desire to belong, or even to confirm a belief that individuals do not quite fit in. While the power of story is that it can bridge differences and appeal to many, this is also its danger. As Rosen notes:

The very universality of narrative contains its own surreptitious menace. Stories are used to manipulate, advertizse, control, above all to soothe, to massage us into forgetfulness and passivity. They are, in the original sense of the word, diversions. (236)

The universality of narrative acts to create a community, and I would also suggest, to create an audience. But while community can provide a sense of purpose through the production of common practices and goals, it can also result in a sense of reality with a very limited view: whatever or whomever falls outside the parameters of the community simply is not part of the story. Raymond Williams’s definition of community is similar to Rosen’s description of story as soothing, “massag[ing] us into forgetfulness and passivity”:

Community can be the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships. What is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all other terms of social organization (state, nation, society, etc.) it seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term. (66)

The persuasiveness of story and community can act in the erasure of subjects who do not fit easily into either. In the attempt to create a universal and unifying narrative, stories can erase those minor narratives that tug and pull at the margins and bring into question the universality of a story. Minor narratives are either dismissed as unimportant or too radical, or are “rewritten” to
appeal to the larger culture, making sure that the unfamiliar becomes familiar even if it means relying upon stereotype or other overdetermined representations. As Jerome Bruner argues, “The function of the story is to find an intentional state that mitigates or at least makes comprehensible a deviation from a canonical cultural pattern” (49-50). Thus in our culture, stories about education and literacy are often read as stories about becoming American, about the transformation from cultural Other into legitimate American subjects. And as Janet Carey Eldred points out, despite the controversy over cultural literacy in curricular matters and readings of conflicts between literacies, “the myths of self-reliance and of the self-made man who transcends his environment, who succeeds despite his origins, still bolster critical readings” (“Narratives” 696, emphasis added). No matter what ideological or political project is at hand, the trope of literacy as transformation or conversion—or to return to Sylvia Scribner, literacy as a State of Grace—occupies an important place in the American consciousness because it brings us back to those nationalist fantasies of self-reliance and success through hard work that have been part of our country’s imagined narrative history and character. This is the National Symbolic suggested by Lauren Berlant, where the production of fantasy and the use of traditional icons, metaphors, rituals, and narratives “provide an alphabet for a collective consciousness or subjectivity” (20).

A familiar literacy ritual found in the American classroom in one form or another is the worksheet. Whether these worksheets are the mimeographed dittos of a past era, mass-produced workbooks that accompany basal readers, or new interactive computer programs, they often operate under the illusion of scientific validity. As Patrick Shannon argues, this type of work “maintains the myths among poor and minority students that they are solely responsible for their difficulty in learning to be literate and among middle and upper class students that they are literate simply because they can pass basal tests and other standardized tests” (631). This literacy ritual thus performs a socializing function as students are either made responsible for their own (lack of) social position or are rewarded because of their social position. Students learn what it means to be a good citizen by performing the appropriate labor and completing their own individual (though culturally scripted) narrative of progress.

As we know, the project of schooling for citizenship begins early. Here is another artifact from the File (Figure 1) that is an example of my own schooled literacy being reinforced by institutional practices. The two-page worksheet is dated Oct. 30. There is no year but I suspect it is something I worked on in kindergarten or first grade. Some of the clues: my written answers are in block print and not cursive; and a classmate I knew only in kindergarten and first grade is named.
1. Today I feel like reading.
2. When I have to read, I want to play.
3. I get angry when someone takes something.
4. To be grown up you half to be a man.
5. My idea of a good time is playing chase.
6. I wish my parents knew I want to have a football.
7. School is fun and good.
8. I can’t understand why I can’t play with chalk.
9. I feel bad when I am mad.
10. I wish teachers gave me good work.
11. I wish mother gave me a new book.
12. Going to college means lots of work.
13. To me, books are good to read.
14. People think I am a good boy.
15. I like to read about fire truck.
16. On weekends, I like Miles to come and play.
17. I don’t know how to take pictures.
18. To me, homework is good.
19. I wish people wouldn’t hit me.
20. I hope I’ll never be a police man.
21. When I finish high school I am going to college.
22. I’m afraid of dogs.
23. Comic books are funny to read.
24. When I take my report card home, I see if I have a good grade.
25. I am at my best when I study.
26. My brothers and sisters are good.
27. I’d rather read than write.
28. When I read math I think.
29. The future looks good.
30. I feel proud when I am good.
31. I wish my father makes a playhouse.
32. I like to read when it is day.
33. I would like to be a fire man.
34. For me, studying is good.
35. I often worry about my fish.
36. I wish I could have a boat.
37. Reading science is fun.
38. I look forward to going to Miles house.
39. I wish someone would help me catch butterflies.
40. I’d read more if I had a new book.
41. Special help in reading means tutors.
42. Every single word is not a compound word.
43. My eyes see good.
44. The last book I read was in school.
45. My mother helps in my homework.
46. Reading in junior high school is hardwork.
47. My father thinks reading is good.
48. I read better than Scott.
49. My father helps me with my reading.
50. I would like to read better than my brother.
On the worksheet there are fifty prompts that are to be completed by the students. There are the standard, “Today I feel . . .” and “I get angry when . . .” But as part of the ideological project of schooling there are also prompts like “School is . . .,” “I wish teachers . . .,” “Going to college . . .,” “To me, books . . .,” and “I’d rather read than . . .” There are a number of these prompts that act to reinforce schooling in a positive way. And the completion of these prompts are often glowing portrayals (for a 5-6 year old) of school. Now I admit I was probably well-prepared for school. I had much older siblings who did well in school, my Mom had worked as a teacher’s aide before I was born, and there were tons of books and magazines around the house. So when I read over these worksheets I am not surprised at my answers—I was socialized to be a “good boy” (see #14) and to reproduce the positive attributes of school, literacy, and family. The worksheet acts to write the standard literacy narrative, prompting students to rehearse the “school is good” mantra and perhaps transforming students to believe this.

Patrick Courts argues that the basalization of literacy teaching and learning has diminished literacy by its attention to decontextualized language learning and creation of an artificial performance by the students. As Courts points out, worksheets become an instance of literacy that exists for itself:

Either you must fill in the blank (or does the blank fill you in?—they have lots of blanks) or you must identify the correct or incorrect answer by circling it, or drawing an X through it. In addition to all of this, students will find that learning to spell involves copying the definition; and learning to write involves writing a sentence or two using the word they copied five times and looked up in a dictionary. . . . In surprisingly few cases does one find kids reading in order to have fun or to learn something because they are too busy reading in order to read. And to the extent that they write at all, they are writing-to-write; they are practicing correct punctuation and usage and business letters—getting ready for the day shift, so to speak (Courts 47-48)

While Courts’s description of the classroom critiques our culture’s capitalist impulses to prepare workers for an existing labor market, I find that his own belief in education is perhaps overly romantic. Certainly it would be nice to have “fun” or to learn something simply because of curiosity or joy or pleasure. However, the idea that education and learning are unquestioned positive and enlightening experiences has its own ideological underpinnings. As my own experience has shown, I can take such enlightenment ideals for granted because of my middle-class upbringing and my parents’ belief in the cultural value of education.

I find my own worksheet actually very clever because of what I see as its ideological project of promoting good schooling. And I hope that students at an early age can have these positive, perhaps less heavy-handed, literacy experiences. But
when I read over these questions and prompts I also wonder about the students who could not comprehend prompts #12 or #21 because going to college seemed like a very remote possibility. Or about those students who could not expect to get a new book as I did in prompts #11 and #40. Or who did not have parents who were available to help with homework (see #45 and #49).

How do students feel when faced with a worksheet like this that asks them to draw upon literacy and educational tropes that while seemingly familiar in our expectations of American Culture—that is, white middle-class culture—may not be familiar in their daily lives? Hawai‘i writer Lois-Anne Yamanaka captures this anxiety about not being a part of white middle-class culture in her novel about growing up in the islands, *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers*:

I don’t tell anyone, not even Jerry, how ashamed I am of pidgin English. Ashamed of my mother and father, the food we eat, chicken luau with can spinach and tripe stew. The place we live, down the house lots in the Hicks Homes that all look alike except for the angle of the house from the street. The car we drive, my father’s brown Land Rover without the back window. The clothes we wear, sometimes we have to wear the same pants in the same week and the same shoes until it breaks. Don’t have no choice. (9)

In this expression of anxiety, the character Lovey Nariyoshi, a working class/poor Japanese American girl, recognizes how language and class are often conflated in our culture. To counter this anxiety Lovey creates a nostalgic scene of what she understands American culture to be:

Sometimes I secretly wish to be haole [white]. That my name could be Betty Smith or Annie Anderson or Debbie Cole, wife of Dennis Cole who lives at 2222 Maple Street with a white station wagon with wood panel on the side, a dog named Spot, a cat named Kitty, and I wear white gloves. Dennis wears a hat to work. There’s a coatrack as soon as you open the front door and we all wear our shoes inside the house. (10)

For me, this scene captures the tension between the anxiety of being a marginalized subject and the nostalgia for an unfamiliar life that has informed an understanding of what it means to be American, to be average or normal, to be literate.

*The moist air sits on my skin as I walk slowly through the New Orleans streets.*

*Gray colors the sky and the ground as tiny puddles mirror back the dark clouds.*

“Mom,” I whine,”Can’t we go back to the hotel? It’s sooooo hot.”

*Mom looks down, “We should look around—we’re only in New Orleans for a couple of days.”*

*A bead of sweat moves down her forehead as she tries to be positive. I drop my head and follow her, Dad, and my sister Genny, as we wind through the open air*
French Market. God why is it so hot? The humidity is worse than Hawai‘i. The streets are dirty, and there's a fishy smell from the docks a few blocks away.

“This French Market is sooo boring,” I complain to Genny. “It’s only fruits and vegetables—we can see this stuff anywhere.”

Genny pats my head. She looks tired too but she trudges on through the crowds trying to look interested. This family vacation has lasted too long I think to myself. We started two weeks ago in Seattle and made our way across Canada, down the East Coast, and now New Orleans. Why can’t we just go home, to my comic books and friends? This is grown-up stuff. I’m twelve and I’m stuck on the mainland without anything to do and no one to hang out with. My own family is holding me hostage.

“Hey, look over here,” Genny calls to me.

I drag myself over to a table she’s standing next to. I’m expecting to see some New Orleans thing—voodoo dolls, pralines, or some such junk. I look down at the table and there are stacks and stacks of comic books. Not just newer comics, but lots of old ones too. Maybe I can find some X-Men or Legion of Superheroes, those really old ones that cost $2.00 at the collector's store. I’m excited as I start to rifle through the stacks. No I have that one. What’s with all of these old Superman’s? Isn’t there anything good here?

“Hey boy!”

I don’t look up.

“Hey boy! What’cha doing there?”

I slowly raise my head and look over to where the voice is coming from.

“Hey! Can’t cha read English? Don’t cha know English?”

A finger wags in my face as I follow where it points to: “No Reading Comic Books” warns the sign.

I look back at the man behind the finger. He’s staring at me with contempt. His plaid shirt is pulled over a big belly and he leans toward me as he squints. I pull back, not sure how to respond. “Of course I know English,” I think to myself, “Why do you think I’m looking at the comic books?” But I remain silent, unable to speak, unable to prove that I know English. I turn my back and walk away, feeling a little frightened and a little indignant. Who is he to ask if I know English?

I meet up with Mom, Dad, and Genny who are a few stalls down looking at some souvenirs.

“Didn’t you buy something?” Dad asks.

“No, there wasn’t anything good,” I reply meekly. I turn back to look at the old grouch at the comic book table. What was wrong with me? Why did he think I didn’t know English? Did I look—foreign? I continue to shuffle after Mom, Dad, and my sister wondering if we all looked foreign, wondering if others on the mainland didn’t think we were American.
Up to now I have only provided glimpses of my life through my literacy experiences. Let me set some of the conditions of my own narrative-in-progress, creating a clearer but also more complicated portrait through history, story, and theory. I was born and raised in Hawai‘i, on the edge of downtown Honolulu in the working-class neighborhood of Kalihi. Perhaps another sign of predestination was my home on School Street just next door to the elementary school I attended. This school had been an English Standard School much before my time but it was a distinction that was often remembered by teachers as well as my family. The English Standard Schools were part of a two-tier public education system that existed from 1924-1948 that separated students based on the quality of their speech, leading to de facto racial and class segregation. This system emerged during the height of the Americanization campaigns of the teens and twenties and was aimed at separating the children of immigrant laborers from Asia and the Native Hawaiian population from the children of Hawaii’s growing white middle class who could not afford the elite private academies. Even today, the legacy of the English Standard School has an impact as debates about the use of Standard English, complaints about pidgin-speaking students, and concerns about the poor quality of public schools continue in Hawai‘i.

I rehearse this short history because the creation of racialized subject positions is a primary condition in the production/emergence of my literacy narrative and in the cultural discourse about literacy and education. I do recognize that writers who have been marginalized in other ways (i.e., gendered, classed, queered, Othered, etc.) also produce narratives in response to the ways they have been constructed by and/or excluded from dominant culture. However, I focus on racialized writers in particular, partly because this is my own position but also because these writers find themselves so ideologically infused by dominant culture and carrying so much cultural baggage that they are more susceptible to being read as non-citizens, often as “foreigners” in their own land. Though the expected impulse is to prove proficiency (even expertise) in Standard English (note my Ph.D. in English and my specialization in literacy practices), there is also an impulse to resist Standard English, or at least to resist the imposition of Standard English by dominant culture. My own racialization becomes a way for me to reconfigure the literacy narrative as a strategy for resisting appropriation by a dominant American culture. Instead of undergoing a metaphorical naturalization to American citizenship by proving my literacy in Standard English beyond a doubt, I choose to denaturalize Standard English in order to unpack the ideology that accompanies our belief in the promise of literacy. In the story written by dominant American culture racialized subjects are included only marginally, reduced to cultural Other, or presented as “good Americans” who
have successfully assimilated—think of the ways Frederick Douglass and Richard Rodriguez have been represented in mainstream culture. George Lipsitz’s concept of “counter-memory” invert this story, and cultural Others begin to use local moments in order to critique larger master narratives of history and culture (213). The inversion of Standard English, not the dismissal of it, begins the process of analyzing literacy tropes and how they operate in literacy narratives.

My New Orleans story is not uncommon. In his introduction to A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America, Ronald Takaki recounts his own experience with being “foreign”:

I had flown from San Francisco to Norfolk and was riding in a taxi to my hotel to attend a conference on multiculturalism. Hundreds of educators from across the country were meeting to discuss the need for greater cultural diversity in the curriculum. My driver and I chatted about the weather and the tourists. The sky was cloudy, and Virginia Beach was twenty minutes away. The rearview mirror reflected a white man in his forties. “How long have you been in this country?” he asked. “All my life,” I replied, wincing. “I was born in the United States.” With a strong southern drawl, he remarked: “I was wondering because your English is excellent!” Then, as I had explained many times before, I explained: “My grandfather came here from Japan in the 1880s. My family has been here, in America, for over a hundred years.” He glanced at me in the mirror. Somehow I did not look “American” to him; my eyes and complexion looked foreign.” (1)

Why is there an expectation of foreignness? If we were to continue the story, the cab driver, now defensive, might insist that he does detect an accent since traces of Takaki’s Hawai‘i accent may slip through. However this would open up another set of expectations and constructions as the trope of Hawai‘i relocates Takaki. Every day in our culture we see examples of how language, literacy, identity, and race are often connected, constructed, and talked about in often problematic ways. The Asian markings of Takaki’s body defines him as foreign despite any other signifier that would mark him as American. His use of Standard English, his credentials as an academic at an elite university (The University of California, Berkeley), his expertise in American history, seemingly will not supersede his racialized body.

Here is another example. When United States Senator Alphonse D’Amato mocked Judge Lance Ito on a radio talk show by using an exaggerated Asian accent reminiscent of Japanese villains in old World War II movies, he displayed an attitude that often constructs Asian Americans as less than literate and as less than full citizens in America. The New York Times reported:

In a rapid-fire conversation with the radio talk show host Don Imus on Tuesday, Mr. D’Amato sharply criticized and belittled Judge Lance Ito over his handling of the
Simpson case and used an exaggerated Asian accent, like that of villainous Japanese characters in old World War II movies, in talking about the Judge . . . “Forever and ever, because Judge Ito will never let it end,” Mr. D’Amato said in his version of a Japanese accent. “Judge Ito loves the limelight. He is making a disgrace of the judicial system. Little Judge Ito. For God’s sake, get them in there for 12 hours; get this thing over. I mean this is a disgrace. Judge Ito will be well known. And then he’s going to have hung jury. Judge Ito will keep us from getting television for the next year.” (6 April 1995)

While we might give the cab driver in Ronald Takaki’s story the benefit of the doubt since his interaction with Takaki was probably limited and overdetermined to start, it is harder to dismiss Senator D’Amato’s willingness to construct Judge Ito as a Japanese caricature with a pronounced “foreign” accent. Ito had been seen and heard on television often. His position as a judge seemingly provided an authority and legitimacy that located him securely as an American citizen. And yet D’Amato felt he had license to portray someone with an Asian body as a foreigner with a recognizable marker of foreignness, an accent, as well as the use of “Yellow English.”

I look at these different scenes because they illustrate the complicated representations of literacy and race that exist in our culture. The ability to participate in public discourse, to be perceived as fully literate (and without an accent) often becomes a marker of citizenship and legitimacy. Our culture’s discourse of literacy (the ways in which we talk about and deploy literacy), its inherent construction of race, and the implications for the teaching of writing are problematic not just because literacy is often constructed in uncomplicated terms, as an unquestioned public good; rather, the discourse about literacy is also problematic because it is often coded as a way to talk about race, citizenship, and culture in America by raising the specter of crisis.

According to John Trimbur, the idea of a national literacy crisis entered into the nation’s popular consciousness with the Newsweek story “Why Johnny Can’t Write” (December 8, 1975). The tone of the story by Merrill Sheils certainly invokes crisis. Education at all levels is questioned, the threat to the labor pool is emphasized, and the cultural life of the nation is at risk:

If your children are attending college, the chances are that when they graduate they will be unable to write ordinary, expository English with any real degree of structure and lucidity. If they are in high school and planning to attend college, the chances are less than even that they will be able to write English at the minimal college level when they get there. If they are not planning to attend college, their skills in writing English may not even qualify them for secretarial or clerical work. And if they are attending elementary school, they are almost certainly not being given the kind of required reading material, much less writing instruction, that might make it possible for them
eventually to write comprehensible English. Willy-nilly, the U. S. educational system is spawning a generation of semiliterates. (58)

This opening paragraph to the story does not only describe a perceived crisis, it participates in the making of a crisis by playing on the anxieties of parents who not only had to worry about the economic and political difficulties of the 1970s, but now had to consider the “poor” education their children were receiving. If their children were not being taught the very basics of reading and writing, what could parents expect for their children’s future when the outlook at the time was already bleak?

The conflation of very different issues into a single literacy crisis is also problematic. Sheils draws together issues about writing instruction, language politics, literary culture, and discourse communities without ever discussing fully the complexities of any of these single issues much less the construction of them as all about “good writing,” or in this case, “poor writing.” As Trimbur points out, the construction of a crisis is meant to provide an explanation for events and conditions that have shaken the confidence of a culture, “resolv[ing] in imaginary ways actual tensions, anxieties, and contradictions” (281).

Just as Benedict Anderson suggests the “imagined community” as a way of organizing relations among diverse subjects, this imagining of crises is also a way to organize relations and to draw together a community. Citizenship and its attendant practices (such as literacy) becomes a way to both create and resolve these imagined crises, to enforce dominant practices as well allow the more subtle powers of hegemony to operate. In the case of both citizenship and literacy, subjects are made to desire these conditions and yet are also made to suffer the exclusionary consequences when citizenship or literacy is unavailable to them. Henry Giroux describes this process and appropriately emphasizes its pedagogical aspects: “The concept of citizenship must also be understood partly in pedagogical terms as a political process of meaning-making, as a process of moral regulation and cultural production, in which particular subjectivities are constructed around what it means to be a member of a nation state” (7). Renato Rosaldo suggests a term, the “polyglot citizen,” which is extended by Mary Louise Pratt to describe the “changing realities in the U. S., notably the arrival of large, new immigrant populations,” but to also account for the realities of a polyglot history of the United States (“Daring” 6). The polyglot citizen, in Pratt’s construction, is “a point of intersection of multiple threads that weave in and out to make the dense fabric of society” (“Daring” 8).

The use of an autoethnographic moment, to build upon Mary Louise Pratt’s definition of autoethnography, allows these Othered subjects to theorize their subjectivities through their literacy practices as well as the literacy practices and expectations of the metropolis. That is, these subjects can interrogate literacy by
investigating how they are situated and how they participate in constructing representations of literacy. This autoethnographic moment within the literacy narrative is a way for the tension between nostalgia and anxiety to be reconfigured as a productive and no longer debilitating act. Talking about literacy is a complicated and often quite frustrating experience because the term “literacy” is just as ambiguous as it is powerful. When it is invoked, it is used to describe a standard in our larger society (perhaps most often manifested in our educational institutions), a standard that is never clearly defined and often relies heavily on “Western” assumptions and contexts and the modernity of nations. Literacy becomes a marker of membership, and those who can demonstrate this membership gain both access to and privilege in the dominant structures of power. Those without membership often face economic and political disadvantage, limiting their participation in the community in various ways. The implications of literacy, then, are greater than just acquiring reading and writing abilities that meet the community’s “standards”: literacy often becomes the marker of citizenship and this assignment of legitimacy is often “required” to enjoy the full benefits of citizenship or even of basic human rights. The incentive for individuals to be identified as literate is great; for individuals to question literacy is a great risk.

First Day, First Semester, First Year, First Job

I enter the classroom nervously, surveying the room and trying to maintain some semblance of authority. I am beginning my first full-time teaching position and my first class is first-year college composition. Twenty-three fresh faces stare back and I worry about learning all of their names. As I scan down the roll sheet I notice there are two Kristins, a Kristine, a Kirsten, and two Jeffs. Everyone looks alike to me except for one young African American woman. I take attendance, trying to burn faces and names into my brain. I ask students to introduce themselves: where are they from, what are their interests, why are they here? I try to assure the class that I’m experienced, have my Ph.D. from a prestigious university, and can identify with them since I’ve lived in the Midwest for six years. Then I go into my routine about being from Hawai‘i, that faraway place that evokes dreams of Paradise—I exploit my “exoticness” to gain some cultural capital in this class. After reading through the syllabus and asking for questions, I dismiss class. Only fifteen more weeks in the term. Only forty-three more class meetings. I hope they like me. No, I hope they respect me. Please, I hope they learn something.

Third Week, Second Semester, First Year, First Job

I enter the classroom to the strained humming of the Hawaii Five-0 theme song—dada da da daaaaaaa da... John, a student from my first semester course welcomes me with this tune everyday. Its become my theme song, a way to prepare me mentally, and to signal the start of class. It’s the second term and I’m teaching a Composition and Literature course, the second part of a year sequence writing requirement. I survived the first semester—I enjoyed the first semester.
This week the class is preparing for its first essay assignment. Last semester students generated essays around various topics and responded to a wide range of texts: essays, magazines, television, music, lived experience. This term they focus on reading and responding to written texts. As a form of practice and demonstration I bring in a sample essay for them to work on. I want them to read and respond in productive ways and I provide something that is similar to the writing assignment I just gave them. The only directions: they should give this essay the same attention they would to a classmate’s essay—treat this like a workshop paper. Afterwards, I plan to go over the essay with the class, partly to model a way of responding but also to illustrate how I evaluate writing.

This time the practice essay is something I had written as a sophomore in college. I must admit that when I looked over the essay with the instructor’s comments and the final grade of “B,” I was a little embarrassed to use it in class. Terms weren’t defined, the thesis was a little shaky, and I didn’t provide page number citations for the quotes I used from The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. But as I reread the essay, I saw some originality in an underdeveloped idea that actually seemed to have something interesting to say. I saw some rhetorical flourishes, a nicely turned phrase, and even some sophisticated sentence structure. There was something to the essay. I did get a “B” (revised up from a “C+” I think) but the instructor was tough and intelligent, and extremely generous as a teacher and person—the kind of teacher I hoped to be. I felt pretty good about that “B” and what I felt was a wake-up call from the empty “pretty” writing I had been doing. There were problems with the essay but also some good points as well. A good essay for the class to critique—a piece that needed work but also a piece that had something there.

“The introduction is boring.”

“There’s no thesis—maybe if the first couple of paragraphs were combined.”

“The author seems to have some good ideas but it also seems like he’s just trying to sound smart.”

“This is at best a C paper.”

I stared back at the class, grinning because I was embarrassed about the essay, but perhaps also because I saw myself in these students. The confidence, the assured evaluation of the essay’s quality, the real belief that they knew what “good” writing looked like. That was all me as a college freshman and sophomore. Until I did get a “C” on that essay and everything in my world seemed to fall apart. The skill I had the most confidence in, the ability that I felt was most natural had let me down. What now? Could I even get a “B” for the course? I was literate, even intelligent. Why (in my mind) was I failing?

Rereading my sophomore writing and hearing other students respond to it forced me into their place once more. I was not always the “professional” writing teacher. I did not always have the “authority” that I suppose I do now. I was a student trying to write essays I thought were smart and interesting. And perhaps they were smart and interesting—to me—but they were also in need of revision and lots of work. When I respond to writing now I cannot help but think of that teacher who dared to give me a “C.” He was generous, understanding, and tough, and taught me to approach writing in a different way. I begin to take risks.
A new year and a new class. This time I am another writer in a roomful of writers, cramming the night or morning before class in order to bring a draft to our writing groups. Teacher and student, the lines are blurred as everyone writes, shares, revises, and learns. Another risk.

As a writing teacher, I often ask students to think about the experiences that have brought them to this point in their lives—college—and how these experiences have shaped who they are, how they think, why they believe, and what they write. I also ask them to think about their literacy: what is literacy? What does it mean to them? How do they know they are literate? I do not ask them to write about their personal lives though some choose to do so. And I do not ask them to reveal intimate or private moments though some do because a particular experience is necessary in their making of meaning. What has become apparent to me the more I teach is that our lives are so intertwined in our learning that whatever we do in the classroom both as teachers and students has some reference, no matter how small, to an individual's lived experience.

In my case, I cannot help but address my lived experience in my teaching everyday. As an Asian American who was born and raised in Hawai‘i, the difference in/of my life is in front of me as I look at my classes and usually see students who do not look like me. I understand this. Hawai‘i is a state where 63.1% of its population is Asian/Pacific American and whites are the minority at 33.4%. Contrast this to Ohio, where I presently live and teach: 87% of the population is white; 1.1% is Asian American. At the university where I teach, 93% of the student population is white and 7% non-white. I cite these statistics not to lament about the lack of diversity, especially since no place in the US can match Hawai‘i for its varied population. However, I do raise these figures because of what it has meant for my classroom. In 10 courses I have taught so far, I have had 18 students of color out of 242, slightly better than the 7% minority population at the university. But when you break down these courses, I have had classes with minority enrollments of 1, 4, 0, 1, 0, 2, 0, 0, 1, 4, 0, 1, 1, 0, and 1. What does it mean for these students to be in a situation where they are often the lone student of color? What does it mean to me when I am the only person of color in the classroom? And what does it mean to both my students and myself when I am perhaps the only teacher of color many of these students may ever have?

It means I am tired. Tired not because of the teaching but because of the extracurricular work I feel I must do. While I have never been directly challenged in my classroom about my “agenda” (read Race) or my qualifications (read Affirmative Action hire), I still work very hard to not let others assume anything about me. When people ask what I do, I tell them I teach writing and
literature, not English, because they may assume that means English as a second language (or is this my own fear?). On the first day of class when we all introduce ourselves, I often say I have lived in the Midwest for a number of years before revealing I was born and raised in Hawai‘i. I make it clear I earned my doctorate in English from an elite university. And I assure the students that I have taught many writing classes. Just as I see in front of me a sea of mostly white faces, I am sure they are looking back at me and my dark features, their Asian American (if not only Asian) teacher.

But when I look out at those mostly white faces, I also see “diversity” (a problematic though perhaps necessary term) and work hard not to categorize these students who have been labeled members of J. Crew U (or now, Abercrombie & Fitch U). When these students write, they bring their lives into their work, analyzing, arguing, or narrating about their culture and their place in it. My work as teacher is to work with these students as they make and shape meaning in their lives. I can only hope my presence as a person of color is part of this meaning making and shaping even if just a tiny bit.

In my memories about language, I have tried to uncover the pervasiveness of the ideology that has formed my anxieties and fueled my nostalgia for my literacy, whether achievements or shortcomings. I want to offer one last scene that perhaps illustrates the ideological force of Standard English and Asian American anxiety to a point of absurd indulgence. One evening I was in the video store with a friend looking over the rental possibilities when one box cover caught my eye. It was a Hong Kong action movie that starred two actresses whom I recognized from another action film I had recently seen. That was partly why I took a closer look, but under the movie credits at the bottom of the box was what really caught my attention. It read: “With Yellow English Subtitles.” I was amazed. I called my friend over and declared to her that this video was racist. I could not believe how blatant the video producers were in advertising that Yellow English was a feature, if not highlight, of the movie. Of course I refused to rent the tape; my friend did rent it. The next day after watching the video, she promptly called me and explained that “Yellow English Subtitles” meant the subtitles were yellow so they would show up on the screen better. “Oh” was my only utterance.

I describe this scene because it illustrates the power of ideology and the discourse of literacy. The problem, however, was that it was my own ideological project which was driving this reading of literacy and race on the video box cover. Because of my own immersion into the discourses of literacy and race I had become hyper-sensitive to those possible eruptions of racialized representations of literacy. It seemed if it wasn’t Alphonse D’Amato and Lance Ito in the middle of an uproar over racial stereotypes and accents, then it was a much
publicized debate about Ebonics and the Oakland School Board’s policy on literacy. If it wasn’t someone approaching me and inexplicably beginning to speak in Japanese then it was another complaint about the use of Pidgin in Hawai’i and the lack of standards in the schools. As Thomas O. Beebee says, “The ideology of genre is all around us” (3). I take this to mean that generic conventions are always already set up waiting to be activated. Ideology drives genre when there are investments in reading cultural texts and culture in specific ways.

However, this raises an important question for me. While I can see my own expressions of anxiety about literacy and race in my willingness to read beyond generic conventions in order to fulfill my own needs, what is it that allows other genres to exist which are blatantly racialized if not racist? What allows the National Review (24 March 1997) to portray President Clinton, Vice-President Gore, and Hillary Rodham Clinton as racialized Asian subjects with the stereotypical features of buck teeth and Fu Manchu facial hair? Why does golf sensation Tiger Woods become the center of so much attention because his racial identification is a contradiction for so many people: he is coded as African American; he is “actually” more Asian American (one-quarter Thai, one-quarter Chinese, one-quarter Caucasian, one-eighth African American, and one-eighth Native American) (Leland and Beals 59, 60).

These questions about racial identity and the discourses our culture uses to talk about race create much anxiety not only for dominant culture but for all subjects who often only have their identities to hold on to. While we must work to make the ideologies which drive (the seemingly neutral/natural) discourses about literacy and education visible, to see how literacy and citizenship are intertwined with race and class, we can also assert agency, to act upon these discourses as James Berlin describes:

Of equal importance, the subject in turn acts upon these discourses. The individual is the location of a variety of significations, but is also an agent of change, not simply an unwitting product of external discursive and material forces. The subject negotiates and resists codes rather than simply accommodating them. (78-79)

While there are ideological projects that allow for racist formations both as part of hegemonic cultural practice or as a more radical expression, marginalized subjects can and must respond. As I have begun to argue in this essay, the writing of narratives becomes an important strategy for marginalized subjects in their negotiation of and resistance to the discourses of dominant culture. The use of story (and not simply to resist or invert dominant culture) creates the possibility of expressing a fuller experience.

In Neil A Lewis’s New York Times article (5 May 1997) about critical race theory, he focuses on storytelling as a primary feature that allows individual
experiences or parables to provide different contexts for the interpretation and understanding of minority lives. Professor Kimberle Crenshaw, a proponent of critical race theory who was interviewed for the article, says that storytelling aims at “challenging versions of reality put forward by the dominant white culture” (Lewis A11). However, critics of critical race theory find the use of storytelling to be weak scholarship because it reduces complex issues to personal experience:

But for Professor Sherry, “storytelling doesn’t bear the slightest pressure once you start to examine it.” Such storytelling, she said, starts with conclusions, “and when you start with conclusions, it’s all too easy to make arguments that won’t withstand any scrutiny.”

Her co-author and colleague at the University of Minnesota, Daniel A. Farber, who, like Professor Sherry, is white, said another problem with storytelling, especially personal narratives like the one by Professor Banks, is that when someone challenges a story, “you’re not just criticizing someone’s scholarship, but you’re attacking their life, something that goes to the heart of their identity.” Dr. Farber added, “That can make a dialogue very difficult.” (Lewis A11)

While I certainly agree with Dr. Farber that dialogue can be very difficult, dialogue has often been difficult for marginalized subjects forced to enter a public discourse that has constructed them and yet rarely allowed them to participate in meaningful ways. That is, while marginalized subjects are often portrayed in the American Story, their own stories are either naturalized, reduced, or even erased in order to maintain the ideological and genre requirements of America.

The point that opponents of critical race theory miss is that storytelling creates a fuller picture of the American experience. I share some of my own stories here not to authorize this project or to use my personal life as a shield from attack. Rather, I use my stories to provide a context for this discussion about literacy and for the ways I do research and teach.

A former student once offered a definition of literacy that I have always found compelling: “[Literacy] meant the ability to stay healthy, thus survive and succeed, by being honest and open about the way I feel” (Nye and Young 69). In the scenes of literacy I have provided here this definition is at work. While writers/characters often contend with definitions and representations of literacy and race constructed by dominant culture, they also come up with alternative definitions of literacy which allow them to survive and succeed. In my work when I have read the literacy narratives of others I have gained an increased awareness of the complexities in representing and constructing culture and identity, the complexities of reading lives, and the complexities of life.
When I examine the literacy artifacts from my own life, reread my stories, and begin to write my own literacy narrative, I see both the virtue and the danger in my performance as an elementary student some twenty-odd years ago, as a college sophomore a dozen years back, and as a teacher today. How can I not be nostalgic, as I’m sure my mother was whenever she placed something in the File, as I look back at what I achieved at five or six years old and consider the cumulative effect of these collected literacy moments. No wonder I am a professor of English and teach writing or courses on the teaching of writing. But I also feel an anxiety because of the contradictory experiences in my life that have told me that despite my literacy I am open to being questioned and challenged or to being held up as a model of assimilation. Perhaps it is my destiny as my horoscope told me to live a life with words. In writing my own literacy narrative here, I have begun to understand the many layers of experiences and the many layers of culture which make up my life. It is this understanding and these experiences which become the foundation for my life as a teacher and a scholar as I continue to read the literacy narratives in my classroom and in our culture and to write my own life’s story.

NOTE

This essay was written and workshopped in my Advanced Composition course in the Fall 1998. I thank the following students for their feedback and honesty: Jennifer Dobbins, Nick Hiltunen, Mike Leesman, Jon Masica, Carrie Ostermeyer, Melissa Quigley, Jami Riley, Megan Saulnier, Shelly Siemering, and Drew Stricker.