
Reviewed by Brenda Glascott, CSU San Bernardino

In the literacy theory class I teach, the central touch point for the undergraduate students (many of whom are first generation, “non-traditional,” ethnic minorities themselves) has proved to be the James Gee-Lisa Delpit debate about the conflicts between home and academic discourses. While my students argue persuasively for siding with Delpit in this debate, testifying to their own abilities to code-switch, for instance, the essays in the quirky collection Identity Papers: Literacy and Power in Higher Education are unified by a Gee-ian assumption that acculturation into academic discourse (which is, overall, characterized as a homogenous, stable category) demands a complete and painful alienation from home discourses. The work of the collection as a whole, then, is to critique academic discourse and the academic cultures they construct from diverse perspectives.

Bronwyn T. Williams has gathered thirteen essays which together act like a prism, bending in different and often-unexpected paths the discussions about the asymmetrical power relations embedded in academic discourse. The book is organized into three parts. Part 1 offers four essays tackling what Williams calls “Institutions and Struggles for Identities.” Part 2, also containing four essays, appears under the heading “Identity in the Composition Classroom.” Part 3, “Identity Outside the Institutional Walls,” offers three essays and Min-Zhan Lu’s conclusion-essay that traces concerns about materiality and the body through the collection. As the organizational headings suggest, the collection is highly focused on the “institutionality” of composition and the teaching of an academic discourse which, according to Williams, forces students and teacher to adopt “literacy identities” that “can often run counter to our other identities outside the classroom, leaving us feeling isolated and powerless” (1). The project of the collection is both to identify the definitions of academic literacy—and the pedagogies perpetuating these definitions—that create this isolation and powerlessness. As antidote to this poisonous academic literacy identity, Williams offers the essays to “illustrate how writing helps [the authors] and their students compose alternative identities that may allow the connection of professional identities with internal desires and sense of self” (2). He directly appeals to graduate student readers, urging them to use the collection as a key for unlocking the unspoken about professional identities so that they can knowingly accommodate or resist them.

The three essays I most enjoyed in the collection include James T. Zebroski’s “Social Class as Discourse: The Construction of Subjectivities
in English,” Patricia Harkin’s “Excellence is the Name of the (Ideological) Game,” and Tara Pauliny’s “When ‘Ms. Mentor’ Misses the Mark: Literacy and Lesbian Identity in the Academy.” These three essays, all in part 1, share careful attention to the meaning of particular terms and move from personal story to theory to suggestions for action as they unpack the ways in which the academic’s identity is classed, professionalized, and marked sexually. Zebroski uses an incident of miscommunication between himself and his blue collar father to think through the multiple discourses we use to talk about social class. He identifies six “often contradictory” discourses about social class which, he argues, determine the “line of argument,” “key words,” “values,” and “subject positions and identities” available in any discussion about class (21). Zebroski ends the essay by outlining six ways of using his theory of social class discourse in composition pedagogy. His most significant intervention here follows his critique of one version of professional writing pedagogy when he calls for the “dual need to teach the conventions of ruling discourse and critique those conventions through new forms,” forms he envisions as emerging from students’ experiences (27).

Harkin’s essay is a manifesto of sorts against the complicity of compositionists in the corporatizing of the university—a complicity she identifies with our often-desperate accommodations to what she calls “grant culture” which creates a situation in which compositionists “aspire to be a ‘funded researcher’ rather than . . . a person who seeks to theorize writing so that she can teach it” (40). Harkin offers ten concrete suggestions for how to strategically counter what she argues is the “dangerous” discourse of “excellence” which undergirds grant culture. In “When ‘Ms. Mentor’ Misses the Mark,” Tara Pauliny explores how the academic identities forged through “professional literacy acquisition” are marked sexually. Pauliny offers evidence that this sexuality continues to be compulsively heterosexual with some truly astounding excerpts from Emily Toth’s Ms. Mentor advice column. Toth’s discomfort with queer sexualities is painfully obvious in Pauliny’s reading, and Pauliny explores how following “Ms. Mentor’s” advice to draw a strict line between the public and the personal encouraged her to “pass” as straight in her own classrooms. Pauliny persuasively argues that this strict line “leaves no room for a queer academic to perform as such” (70).

The identities available to academics are also explored in Janet Alsup’s “Speaking from the Borderlands: Exploring Narratives of Teacher Identity” and in Lynn Worsham’s “Composing (Identity) in a Posttraumatic Age.” Alsup explodes assumptions about the professional identities secondary school teachers construct, arguing that pre-service teachers “must develop a sense of professional identity that incorporates his or her personal subjectivities with the professional/cultural expectations of what it means to be a ‘teacher’” (111). She argues that this process is accompanied by a “borderland discourse” which encompasses both the personal and the professional.
Worsham urges compositionists to recognize themselves “not first of all as scholars and teachers of writing, but as subjects in and of trauma” (172). Arguing that our historical moment is uniquely “catastrophic,” marked by “unprecedented historical trauma” (170), Worsham warns composition teachers from naively assuming that personal narrative is healing.

Academic identities aren’t the only identities under review in this collection. Several essays tackle the identities assigned to students in writing classrooms. In “She Toiled for a Living: Writing Lives and Identities of Older Female Students,” Mary Hallet argues that the academy often “flatten[s]” the identity of older, female students because their bodies are often marked in relation to reproduction. Hallet discusses an evening course on autobiographic writing she teaches in which she creates opportunities for non-traditional students to resist this flattening and own their own “contingent, layered, and fluid identities” (80). In “Literacy, Identity, and the ‘Successful’ Student Writer,” William Carpenter and Bianca Falbo describe how students’ representations of themselves as writers change after they work as writing tutors. After serving as “Writing Associates” at Lafayette College, the students Carpenter and Falbo work with represent themselves as “more conscious about writing as a recursive process” (100). Carpenter and Falbo suggest that students base their initial identities as writers on external responses to their writing; students construct more complicated identities as writers only when they shift their focus from external responses to internal responses. In “Who are They and What Do They Have to Do with What I Want to Be? The Writing of Multicultural Identity and College Success Stories for First-Year Writers,” James R. Ottery begins by arguing that students are often unable to “relate” to multicultural texts because first-year students are shaped by the cursory reading habits formed through engagement with popular culture. Ottery impresses on his students that a university education, and the acculturation into academic discourse that this education requires, will inevitably change students and partially alienate them from their origins. Ottery believes that this sacrifice is a necessary first step toward reforming university discourse.

Several essays in the collection report on work undertaken in various sites of our field. In “The Feminist WPA Project: Fear and Possibility in the Feminist ‘Home,’” Shannon Carter explores the difficulties she encountered—often from the writing tutors who worked for her—when she attempted to implement a “Feminist WPA Project” which sought to validate the home discourses students brought with them to school. In “Migratory and Regional Identity,” Robert Brooke discusses issues about identity and place raised by the Nebraska Writing Project Rural Institutes. In “Some Trouble with Discourses: What Conflicts between Subjects and Ethnographers Tell Us about What Students Don’t/Won’t/Can’t Say,” Sally Chandler discusses objections her subjects raised to the way she originally represented them.
in an ethnographic study she conducted. Using this experience and ethnographic theory, Chandler suggests that writing students can be understood as occupying positions analogous to ethnographic subjects.

Missing from this collection is any exploration of the multiple kinds of professional discourses one can locate in the academy or a sense that “academic discourse” is ever-evolving, intangible, and always-already subject to hybridization. I expected to find work informed, for instance, by Gloria Anzaldúa and I was quite surprised by this absence. Nonetheless, I would recommend this collection to anyone interested in the narratives we construct about who we become as we make our way in the academy and who our students become in our classrooms.

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In the present era of assessment and increasingly large-scale writing studies, anyone who wonders what teacher-researchers can contribute should read “What about Rose?”: Using Teacher Research to Reverse School Failure. Part professional memoir, part research narrative, and part how-to guide, Smokey Wilson’s contribution to the Teachers College Press Practitioner Inquiry series (ed. Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan L. Lytle) makes a compelling case for teacher research as “an agency for change.” Twenty years ago, when teacher-researchers were “just beginning to find [their] voices,” Dixie Goswami and Peter Stillman made a similar argument (v), and they invited readers of Reclaiming the Classroom: Teacher Research as an Agency for Change “to consider the potential of classroom inquiry to improve the quality of education” (vi). Recognizing the “unmistakably political and polemical quality” of such claims, James Berlin heralded teacher research as a powerful movement with “the potential to become a revolutionary force in schooling” (3, 10). “What about Rose?” captures the revolution at work, although Wilson reminds us that education is not a battleground, and school change is not a victory to be won through agnostic engagement. Instead, practicing an irenic rhetoric, Wilson shows how education practitioners can address systemic problems from the ground up, one student-teacher interaction at a time.