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Writing on the Margins

The Spiritual and Autobiographical Discourse of Two *Mexicanas* in Chicago

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Literacy researchers increasingly are aware of the variety and richness of literacy practices carried out by all kinds of people in the different settings of their lives. This awareness stands in stark contrast to the "conventional wisdom" that assumes, in the midst of another national "literacy crisis," that millions of people can't read or write. While we ourselves would argue for more support of adult literacy programs for those who are not literate, as well as for those who want to expand their current literacy abilities, we regret the public rhetoric that, sometimes in an effort to increase such support, decries rampant illiteracy, which is then assumed of entire groups of people who would be clients in such programs. Our long-term ethnographic research in the Mexican community of Chicago, in contrast, has impressed on us the creativity, resourcefulness, and substantial capacities that ordinary people demonstrate in their everyday uses of written language. In spite of the fact that this is no doubt true of any community, denigrating stereotypes of minority communities lead us to "prove competence," that is, to prove what should already be assumed as a given.

Thus our research has as its overall goal the documentation and description of the communicative competence (Hymes, 1974) of one social network of families in this community. Since it is a bilingual and biliterate community, this description involves a sociolinguistic repertoire in both Spanish and English. Such a repertoire, however, entails more than grammatical competence in Spanish and/or English; it includes as well knowing

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how to use one or both of these languages appropriately in various contexts. As many people who have studied a foreign language only in school could attest, knowing the rules of grammar does not ensure communicating effectively with native speakers of that language. One also needs to know, for example, how to be polite, how to offer sympathy, how to ask for help. These pragmatic aspects of language use are cultural, and so our research involves the cultural as well as the linguistic, the oral as well as the written.

Such language abilities are central to education. As noted by Cazden (1988), language is not only the object of instruction in formal schooling, it is also the medium of instruction. This means that, whenever classrooms include individuals (students and/or teachers) from different cultural backgrounds, the potential for miscommunication increases. This is even the case when the students are fluent in the same language as the instructor and the textbooks, for miscommunication can arise from differences in styles of using language, either oral or written. Bilingual individuals, in fact, often transfer styles of speaking from their native to their second languages (Gumperz 1982a, 1982b; Scollon & Scollon, 1981, 1995), and even native speakers of a language vary greatly in styles of language use that they prefer and/or are accustomed to (e.g., Kochman, 1981; Morgan, 1994; Smitherman, 1977, 2000).

We are particularly concerned with the potential for such cross-cultural misunderstandings in college composition classroom for two reasons. First, the successful completion of required composition courses is essential for graduation, and it recently has been shown to be the single most important factor in retaining undergraduates at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) until graduation (Bulanda, 1994). Second, the centrality of language in the educational process is especially foregrounded in composition courses; instructors realize that they have comparatively little time to prepare their students to write academic prose successfully enough to survive not only the sequence of composition courses but also other courses in the university. That is, learning to write in a particular register of language, what various researchers have termed "essayist literacy" in English, is the most important goal of composition courses. As one young woman from a family in the social network who attended UIC said to one of us during her first semester, "Oh, Marcia, my *life* is writing now!"

What kind of writing does this young woman have to produce to successfully complete her university classes? What expectations do her instructors hold as they read her essays? What implicit models are these instructors using as they evaluate these essays? What, in other words, is "essayist literacy"? Although there certainly are discipline-specific characteristics of this language register, there are also general characteristics pertaining to most academic writing that can be described. Various scholars have provided

descriptions of aspects of essayist literacy, and these descriptions converge in important ways (Farr, 1993). Some, including Olson (1977), Ong (1982), Goody and Watt (1968), and Scollon and Scollon (1981), have referred to the "autonomous" or decontextualized quality of this kind of language (though generally written, essayist literacy can be expressed orally, too). These descriptions include as well assumptions of readers and writers as rational, idealized minds that either generate or comprehend the autonomous, decontextualized language under discussion. Scollon and Scollon (1981) and Walters (1990) add another characteristic: the foregrounding and importance of a particular kind of logical order within the text; that is, sentences must have an order that often is explicitly signaled—for example, with the use of "transition" words and phrases such as *moreover* or *however*. Elbow (1991) adds that essayist literacy relies on the specifying of reasons and evidence, rather than only feelings and opinions.

Recently some scholars have critiqued the restrictions of academic literacy. For example, Anzaldúa (1987) has decried the "language shame" of Chicano/as, in reference to both their dialectal Spanish and their often "mixed" English. Others have stressed the importance of writing in other genres, such as autobiography (e.g., hooks, 1989). In response to these and other works, some loosening of the strictures of essayist literacy, especially in English Department composition courses, has occurred in the past decade or so. In some university composition courses, other genres are emphasized, particularly narrative genres. Outside of English Departments, however, most instructors continue to expect traditional essayist conventions and genres, usually argumentative ones (Lunsford & Ruszkiewicz, 1998), albeit with discipline-specific features (Feldman, 1996). And it has been argued that *not* to teach the conventions and genres that meet these expectations is ultimately disenfranchising for students who come to the university without full control of essayist literacy (Delpit, 1995; Farr, 1993; Graff, 1999; Guerra, 1997). Our own position is that students should be prepared to handle the demands of essayist literacy in order to succeed in college and beyond, but that such teaching should be accompanied by an attitude of full respect for the oral and literate genres—as well as the dialects and languages common in their homes and communities—that students bring with them to the classroom.

Those students who don't learn, or aren't taught, to control essayist literacy conventions and genres must struggle to survive academically, regardless of their native intelligence or their linguistic skills in other genres, registers, and/or languages. And here is the crucial point: Teaching this "new" register is much more effective when the instructor understands the "variant" styles that occur in the initial (and sometimes later) compositions of students from homes and communities in which this academic register

is not common. Yet extremely little is known about these "variant" styles of language from the variety of communities from which many contemporary university students come. Ethnographic and sociolinguistic research on these ways of using language can play a crucial role in the improvement of composition instruction. Minimally, it is important for instructors to understand that essayist literacy itself—what we teach when we teach "writing"—is not "naturally" logical or superior as a way of using language but, in contrast, has its own cultural and historical context. Maximally, however, it is better for instructors to understand and respect the communicative competence of their students' communities, aspects of which undoubtedly emerge in their writing, as they do in their speaking.

Our primary goal in this chapter, then, is to examine two genres of the "variant" writing of two women who reside in and are part of a social network that we have been working with for more than 10 years in Pilsen and Little Village, the largest and most densely populated Mexican-origin neighborhood in Chicago. Before we discuss the ways in which these two *mexicanas* establish rhetorical personas grounded in their lived experiences, we will first briefly describe the process we went through to establish a presence in the community and to identify the focal members of a social network we could enter to gather ethnographic data.

Identifying and Establishing a Relationship with Research Participants

While most people are aware of the fact that Mexican-origin people live in large numbers throughout the southwestern United States, few realize that Chicago has the second-largest *mexicano* population in the United States and the fourth-largest combined *mexicano*/Mexican American population behind Los Angeles, San Antonio, and Houston (Garza, 1994). The history of *mexicanos* in Chicago has its origins in the recruitment and "contracting" of 206 *mexicano* railroad track laborers in 1916 in the midst of a period of prosperity and industrial expansion in this country (Año Nuevo Kerr, 1976). Since then, three major waves of immigration from Mexico and migration from the southwestern United States, especially Texas, have resulted in a population of more than 350,000 Mexican-origin people in the city of Chicago (Garza, 1994). Almost one-third of this population currently resides in Pilsen and Little Village, the two contiguous and most concentrated Mexican-origin neighborhoods in the city. Mexican music pours out of record and tape stores, street vendors sell *elotes* (roasted ears of corn) and other fresh and frozen Mexican foods, signs for most business establishments are in Spanish, a number of *tortillerias* turn out thousands of *tortillas* daily, and

grocery stores sell an abundance of Mexican food, both fresh and canned. In short, the cultural and linguistic ambience of these neighborhoods is so "Mexican" that a stroll along 18th or 26th Streets, two primary commercial avenues, can convince the stroller that he or she is in Mexico.

When we began our ethnographic work in August 1988, we optimistically planned to identify and work with three different social networks that would represent the major groups in the Pilsen/Little Village community: *mexicanos* (immigrants raised in Mexico), Mexican Americans raised in Chicago (who generally prefer the terms *Mexican* or *Mexican American* to *Chicano*), and Mexican Americans raised in Texas (who often refer to themselves as *tejanos*). Eventually, we decided to limit our work to a *mexicano* social network and identified a married couple who agreed to participate in our research project.

Jaime and Rocío Durán arrived in Chicago as undocumented immigrants in 1970 from two *ranchos* (small rural communities of small landowners) located about 120 miles from each other in the states of Guanajuato and Michoacán, respectively, in western Mexico. They, like many other Mexican migrants to Chicago, identify as *rancheros* (tough, independent "ranch" people), a subgroup of the larger Mexican society (Farr, in preparation). Once they met and married in Chicago, Jaime and Rocío joined the two extended families each had living in the Chicago metropolitan area and formed a large and complex social network. In the course of our work, we visited and worked with the 10 families that Jaime and Rocío's family interacted with the most. Of the adults in these families, only two had obtained more than a sixth-grade education; most had fewer than 3 years of schooling or no formal education whatsoever. Almost all adults in the social network, both male and female, worked full time as dishwashers or cooks in restaurants, as laborers in meat-processing or -distribution plants, or as railroad workers or window washers. While many of their younger children had been born in Chicago, most of their older children had been born in Mexico. Among the children, very few had graduated from high school, and only six—including four from one family—have thus far gone on to college. Several of the younger children who are currently in high school, however, have indicated an interest in pursuing a college degree.

Most of the data that we collected during the first 2 years of our work with members of Jaime and Rocío's social network involved reading and oral language use. We have reported on many of these findings in earlier publications (Farr, 1993, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c, 1998, 2000; Farr & Guerra, 1995; Guerra, 1996, 1998). Aside from the homework that the children in the household did every night, the lists and notes the adults and children wrote in the course of the day, and the letters they wrote to members of their families in Mexico (but which they did not share with us at the time),

we witnessed few instances in the course of our first 2 years of research of individuals engaging in writing extended pieces of discourse. The lack of extended writing, however, was not a reflection of their inability to engage in it but the result of the limited occasions that their daily lives present them with to take pen or pencil to paper for the purpose of writing more than a few words on a list or a note.

Over the past 8 years, as our individual research projects have taken us in different directions, each of us has developed an increasing interest in the kinds of writing members of the social network do or are capable of doing. While one of us (Farr, 2000) has developed an interest in the kinds of literacy practices that take place in the religious domain, the other (Guerra, 1996, 1998) has developed an interest in two very different genres of writing: personal letters written between members of the social network residing in Chicago and one of their *ranchos* in Mexico, and personal narratives written by a group of young women that reflect various aspects of their lives in Mexico and the United States. For the purposes of this chapter, we examine a number of spiritual letters that Doña Josefina wrote to God and several pieces of autobiographical writing by María Guadalupe, one of Doña Josefina's nieces.[1]

The Spiritual Writing of Doña Josefina

Doña Josefina, in her late 50s, is the oldest sibling in a family of nine who began to migrate to Chicago in 1964, the last year of the U.S. Bracero Program in which manual laborers were recruited from Mexico to work in the United States. Of the nine siblings, four of the five brothers now live in San Jacinto, their *rancho* of origin, three of them after having worked in Chicago for varying numbers of years, and one brother lives in Chicago, as do all four of the sisters. Doña Josefina was born and raised in San Jacinto, where she attended school only through the second grade; after that she was needed to help with family chores, even though other residents of the *rancho* have commented on how "good" she was in school. That she is quite intelligent is apparent in her speaking, since she uses analogies and "critical thinking" to discuss various topics, including the treatment of Mexicans in the United States (Farr, 2000). Moreover, her school-oriented identity is revealed in the fact that her oral language more closely approximates "Standard Mexican Spanish" than does the language of some (but not all) of her sisters and brothers. Like Standard American English, Standard Mexican Spanish is taught in schools and is considered more "correct" than the rural dialect that many from or in the *rancho* speak.

The family network is strong and tightly woven, maintained by continual visits of members on each side of the border to the other side. The

family (here *la familia*, meaning the extended, not nuclear, family) attends a Catholic church on 18th Street in Chicago, in the heart of Pilsen, in recent decades the traditional "port of entry" neighborhood for Mexican immigrants. While many in the family have moved to "better neighborhoods" (in their own words) by buying houses farther south and west of Pilsen, several, including Doña Josefina, have remained in Pilsen, and most still attend the same church on 18th Street, especially for special events such as baptisms, *quinceañeras* (religious and social celebrations when girls turn 15), and other special occasions.

This church tends to be less "activist" in orientation (in social and political terms) than some other churches in the neighborhood, and the priests are more tolerant of charismatic activities by church members, who use the church building for meetings. The charismatic renovation is an evangelistic, "Protestant-like" pentecostal movement within Catholicism that stresses self-expression and direct communication with God through the scriptures and prayer, rather than solely through the church hierarchy. Some Catholic priests oppose this movement within their churches for various reasons. Those who are Freirean-inspired "liberation" theologians criticize the movement for distracting church members from working together to more radically affect social and political change in their communities. Others object because it is so uncharacteristic of traditional Catholicism and the priestly authority that goes with it. The emphasis on direct communication with God differs radically from traditional (pre-Vatican II) Catholic practices in which literate priests interpreted scripture for the laity, who, in most isolated Mexican *ranchos* until the 1950s, were relatively unschooled. Catholic charismatics, however, like members of similar Protestant movements, emphasize personal interpretation of the Bible and believe in direct appeals to God, through prayer, to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Contemporary Catholic churches, of course, also vest the church hierarchy with authority, and Doña Josefina notes how this hierarchy provides one with someone to turn to for help, although some priests are not as accepting of charismatics as are others. She has had, then, to strike a delicate balance between respecting the church hierarchy as authoritative and claiming that authority for herself, through her reading, writing, and reflection. In addition to the reading of scripture and a variety of other published religious books, she writes prayers in advance of her weekly prayer circle that often take the form of letters addressed to God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit.

Charismatic activities, then, are experienced as empowering for the participants. Since religion is a domain in which females have the most authority in these families, these activities can be viewed as liberatory from a gendered perspective (Juárez Cerdi, 1997). In charismatic prayer circles, being filled with the Holy Spirit gives one power: One prays to be filled

with the Holy Spirit, which brings peace to one's soul and empowers one to heal others through the laying on of hands. This power is experienced and perceived as so forceful as to be frightening, and even dangerous, but it is also perceived as being effective.

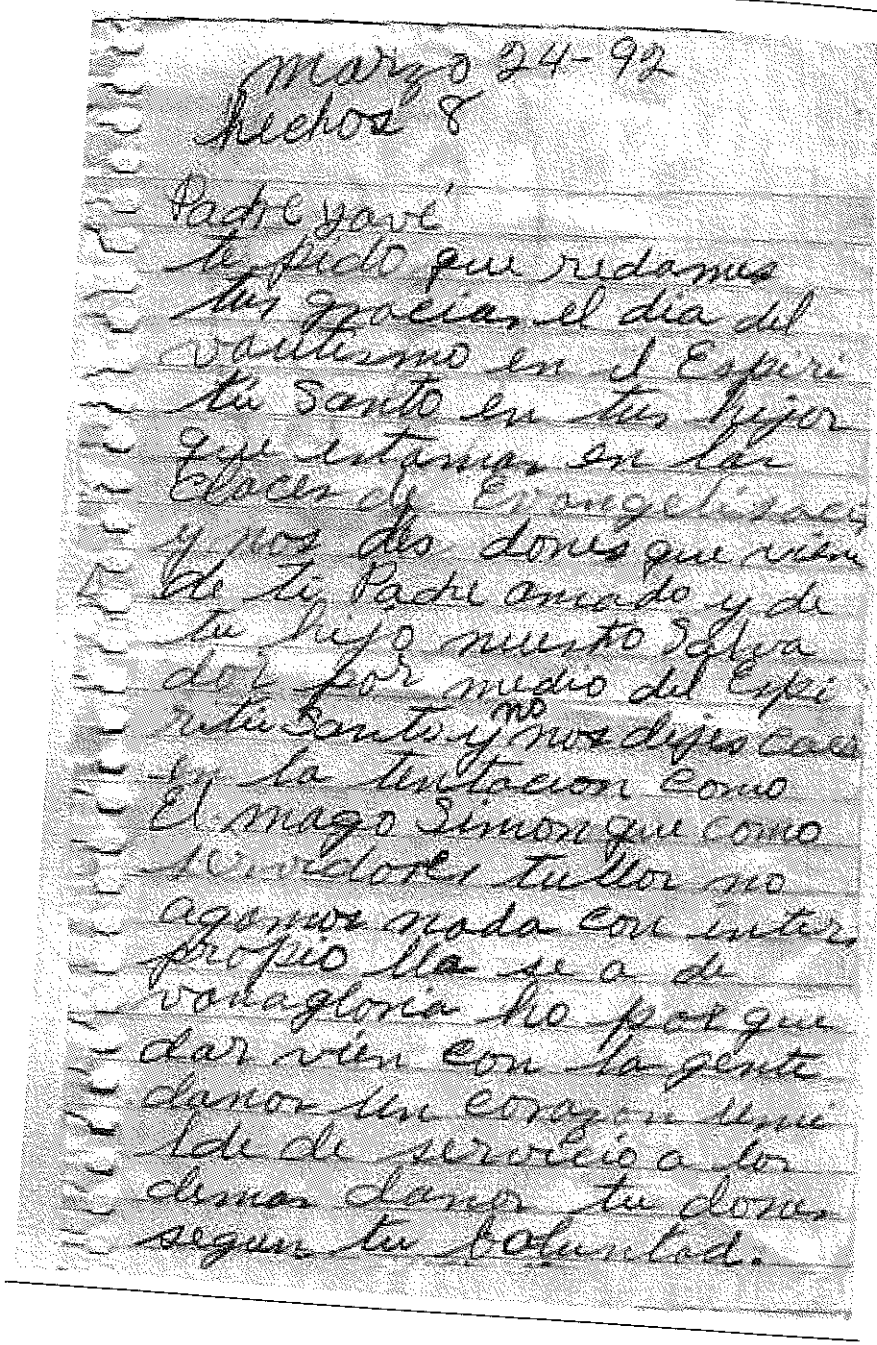
Because the renovation allots a central role to self-expression through language, charismatics are more frequently involved in literacy activities than traditional church members. For example, in western Mexico, charismatic women form groups that teach nonliterates how to read and write (Juárez Cerdi, 1997). The women in this social network who are active in the renovation (and not all are, as some view it—including some priests—"crazy") attend prayer circle on Tuesday nights and Bible study on Thursday nights, as well as other events and meetings, including an occasional book fair where they can purchase books and videos. Once Doña Josefina commented that she was reading a book she had bought at such a fair that told the story of a young girl and her family who were hiding in an attic "during the revolution of Hitler," presumably a Spanish-language edition of *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

For the Tuesday night prayer circle (*Circulo de Oración*), Doña Josefina writes short prayers that are read and responded to with a short comment by the leader of the prayer circle. At the bottom of each page on which she has written a prayer, the leader writes a response, such as *Cristo te ama* (Christ loves you), *Viva Jesús* (Long live Jesus), *Maria, eres de Dios* (Maria [her first name], you are of God), and even *Aleluya* (Halleluja), with its Protestant, pentecostal connotations. It is interesting to note the parallel between these written comments and those that teachers write on student essays in school. Even though these comments do not seem to evaluate the prayers, as school essays are evaluated, the process of reading and then writing a response on the paper is evocative of formal education, since teachers and prayer circle leaders enact a similar role with regard to the writing. Moreover, Doña Josefina refers to this practice as "evaluating" the prayers, using the verb *calificar*, which is used in Mexico to refer to the grading of schoolwork.

What form do the prayers take? The following is an example that is relatively typical of the set of prayers that were shared with me. (For a view of the original handwritten prayer, see Figure 4.1.) Here is a literal transcription and a slightly edited English translation[2]:

Padre Yavé	Father Yahweh
te pido que redames [derrames]	I ask that you pour
tus gracias el dia del	your grace the day of the
vautismo en el Espirit	baptism in the Holy

FIGURE 4.1: A Prayer by Doña Josefina



ú Santo en tus hijos
que estamos en las
claces de Evangelisación
y nos des dones que viene

ti Padre amado y de

tu hijo nuestro Salva
dor por medio del Espi
ritu Santo y no nos dejes
caer
en la tentacion como
El mago Simon que como
servidores tullos [tuyos] no
[L]agamos nada con inter[e]s
propio Lla [ya] se a [sea] de
vanagloria ho [o] por que
dar [quedar] vien con la gente
danos un corazon umi
lde de servicio a los
demas danos tu dones
segun tu boluntad.
Maria J. Rodriguez

Spirit over your children
who are in the
classes of evangelization
and may you give us gifts that
come
from you beloved Father and
from
your son our Savior
by means of the Holy
Spirit and may you not
let us fall
into temptation as
the magician Simon did that as
your servants
we do nothing with self-
interest whether it be
vanity or to look
good in other people's eyes
give us a humble heart
of service to
others give us your gifts
according to your will.
Maria J. Rodriguez

Some of the letters are addressed to God, others are addressed to Jesus, and one is addressed to the Holy Spirit. Many of them begin with thanks: *Gracias Espiritu Santo* . . . (Thank you, Holy Spirit . . .), *Sr. Jesus te doy gracias* . . . (Señor Jesus, I give you thanks . . .), *papá gracias por* . . . (Papa, thank you for . . .). Thanks are given for the love that God or Jesus has sent to her; for the strength to endure sickness and familial problems; for the teachings of Jesus, God's only son; and even for permitting her to read the Gospel. Other letters ask for things: for God to send the Holy Spirit to her; that there be much love among her children, among her brothers and sisters, and among the parishioners of the church; and for the Holy Spirit to come so that they don't fall into temptations.

All the prayers end with Doña Josefina's full signature, although many also include, just before the signature, an appositional phrase such as *tu hermana* (your sister), *tu hija* (your daughter), or *tu servidora* (your servant), depending on the addressee. She is "your sister" or "your servant" in letters to Jesus and "your daughter" in letters to God or the Holy Spirit. All these identities, and the fact that she uses *tu* rather than *usted*, index a

personal, intimate relationship with God. Although the use of *tu* rather than the usually more respectful and socially distant *usted* is conventionally used when addressing God (although He is also referred to as El Señor) in this community, self-references as "your sister" or "your daughter" are not. These self-identities may reflect the charismatic emphasis on personal and direct communication with God. Yet they may hint at something else as well. Inasmuch as having *dones* (gifts sent by God) is empowering, since it allows one to help and guide others spiritually, being such an active servant of God places one closer to Him as well, reducing not only distance but also power differentials, however slightly. *Dones* make one special and augments one's powers here on earth, however humbly one enacts these powers. Women with *dones* are seriously respected by many in these families, and even those who are skeptical leave open the possibility that such spiritual powers might be "true" (*de verdad*) and could even be dangerous.

Thus these letters to God function to affirm and augment Doña Josefina's sense of power within her family and community. They, and her other charismatic practices, reassure her that she is not alone, but connected to others and to God and receiving their support. This enables her to deal better with personal and familial problems, such as her own diabetes, her husband's drinking, and the gang pressures on her son. She has explained that she sometimes composes a prayer (orally) while doing household chores, such as cooking, and that she uses her spiritual reading, either of the Bible or of other books, to cope during moments of particular stress. Moreover, I have observed Doña Josefina follow the priest during a *quinceañera* mass, shaking the hands of and blessing each of the attendants. She clearly felt no ambivalence about assuming a priest's role, which illustrates her sense of spiritual, and worldly, power. Given her other comments about the rights of women, this can be interpreted as an illustration of her "grassroots" feminism.

How do her letters, as a community literacy practice, relate to school writing? As has been noted, prayer circle members enact roles similar to those of students and teacher in school: The leader reads, evaluates, and responds to the prayers that the others write and turn in to him or her each week. Perhaps because these meetings are seen as sources of knowledge, as places of learning and growth, the participants create a school-like structure for them. The letters themselves, however, are quite different from most school writing. First, they employ many phrases characteristic of religious, rather than academic, discourse: *Mi muy adorado Jesús* (my much adored Jesus), *tus servidores* (your servants), *las tentaciónes de la carne* (the temptations of the flesh), and so forth. Such phrases index the religious context of this writing and are reminiscent of the kinds of phrases in student writing that index the academic context in which they are written.

A second, and more important, way in which these letters are different from most school writing lies in their striking tone of confidence and authority. There is a clear personal voice in the letters that many teachers of writing despair of ever finding in student papers. Some of the "voice" in these letters is institutional, of course, especially in those portions that use many more or less "stock" religious phrases. But much of the writing is original: Specific requests are made for specific occasions or reasons and sometimes include personal references to her own sickness and family problems. One letter even uses an agricultural (and biblical) metaphor, referring to herself as a *rama tuya* (your branch) and asking Jesus to "clean" her as one cleans and cuts a tree so that the tree will bear better fruit:

Marzo-10-92	March-10-92
Juan 15	John 15
mi muy adorado Jesus	my much adored Jesus
te escrivo esta carta	I write you this letter
para darte gracias	to thank you
por tu mansage [mensaje] de	for your message of
amor nos mandas	love you send us
y nos ordenas amarnos	and you order us to love
los unos a los otros	each other
como tu nos [h]as ama	as you have loved
do danos al espiritu	us give us the Holy
Santo para asi poder	Spirit and in this way be able
amar a mis hijos a	to love my children
mi esposo a mi fami	my husband my whole
lia entera tan ven [también]	family as well
te pido que como ra-	I ask you that as your branch
ma tuya mi lipes [me limpies]	clean me
y cortes todo lo que	and cut all that
no da vein [bien] fruto	does not bear fruit well
para que asi limpias	so that in this way you clean
de fruto y fruto	fruit and good
vueno es todo aura [ahora]	fruit that's all for now
[h]asta maña [mañana]	until tomorrow
tu hermana	your sister
Maria J. Rodriguez	Maria J. Rodriguez

Related to the strong personal voice in these letters is their fluency. The language seems to flow easily, even though the small 5″ × 8″ spiral-bound paper on which they are written allows little space per line, and

phrases, even words (with or without a hyphen), sometimes are left dangling at the end of one line to be finished on the next. Yet despite these and other surface errors, the language is rich, persuasive, and confident.

The surface errors in the letters (primarily misspellings) are a reflection of Doña Josefina's limited formal schooling. The letter *v* is frequently written for *b*, since these are pronounced similarly in Spanish. Likewise, *y* and *ll* are sometimes substituted for each other, since they, too, are pronounced similarly. Thus many, though not all, misspellings result from how words are pronounced orally. Occasionally syllables in words are reversed (e.g., *redames* for *derrames*), but this, too, can be attributed to how these words are pronounced orally, since these reversals are characteristic of some rural dialect speakers in Mexico. Such surface errors, however, can be improved upon through instruction, and had Doña Josefina been able to continue her formal education, she would doubtless have made fewer of these errors in her letters. What is more difficult to teach, however, is voice, and this she clearly has already found, as it is abundantly evident in her writing here. The confident voice that speaks with such authority in these letters developed in a particular context, one in which she was encouraged and supported in her self-expression. Unfortunately, much writing instruction in school does not do this, and even well-meaning teachers, energetically trying to teach "structure" and "correctness," unwittingly undermine students' developing voices (Ybarra, 1997).

A final contrast between these letters and academic writing has to do with the critical analytic stance taught in school. This stance is plainly absent in much religious discourse, including these letters to God. Because of the context, then, and the function of these letters, such critical reasoning would be inappropriate here. It is important to note, however, that Doña Josefina uses this kind of reasoning in oral language, in other contexts. In one conversation with me, she pointed out that the historical situation of the Hebrews in Egypt was quite similar to the contemporary situation of Mexicans in the United States:

> Porque él, él [Moises] era hebreo, y los egipcios no querían la raza hebrea porque los hebreos estaban multiplicándose rápidamente. Tenían miedo que les quitaran el, el poder. Es lo mismo que en Estados Unidos está pasando. . . . Si uno analiza las cosas es lo mismo. Estados Unidos tiene miedo que los hispanos gánemos [*sic*] este país, destrúyamos [*sic*] su, su, su raza. Porque la raza de, de, del mero mero es an—anglosajón, es poca. Pero este país está—está mezclado con muchas razas. Y la que más ha crecido es la raza morena y la raza hispana. Entonces, ellos tienen miedo que nosotros al—a lo largo de la historia, quite—los destrónemos, los, los quítemos [*sic*] del poder, me entiendes? Eso mismo tenía—ese mismo—esa misma historia pasó en Egipto.[3]
>
> (Because he, he was Hebrew and the Egyptians didn't like the Hebrew race because the Hebrews were growing rapidly. They were afraid that they would take the the power. It's the same thing that is going on in the United States. . . . If one analyzes things, it is the same. The United States is scared that the Hispanics will win this country, we will destroy their, their, their race. Because the race of, of, of the real is an—Anglo-Saxon, is few. But this country is—is mixed with many races. And those that have grown the most are the black race and the Hispanic race. So, they are afraid that we, in, in the long run of history, and, we dethrone them, we take power from them, do you understand me? That was the same thing—that very thing—the same story happened in Egypt.)

Thus Doña Josefina makes an analogy between two different historical contexts, critically analyzing the politics within them. It should be clear, then, that if this kind of reasoning is not displayed in particular pieces of writing, either in classrooms or elsewhere, we cannot assume that the writer does not know how to reason in this way. The reason, instead, may lie in the context. This argues for exploring the contexts in which we teach writing, looking for reasons that the literacy abilities displayed in community practices are so lacking in school writing.

The Autobiographical Writing of María Guadalupe

Malú (María Guadalupe's preferred nickname) is the oldest of four children born in the United States to Olga Ramírez, one of Doña Josefina's younger sisters. Although Malú and her parents lived in a northside neighborhood in Chicago for several years after her parents first arrived from Mexico in the early 1970s, the family moved into the Pilsen community more than 10 years ago and currently lives down the street from Doña Josefina's home. Like many of her cousins, Malú attended parochial and public schools in Chicago and in San Jacinto, her family's *rancho* in Mexico. The difficulties created by this experience are highlighted by her self-representation in the title of one of her personal narratives as someone "Caught Between Two Cultures," between the very different social and linguistic worlds of Mexico and the United States. As the oldest sibling in her family, Malú bears the burden of setting an example for her two younger brothers and sister. Moreover, as one of the first members of the social network to graduate from high school and go to college, Malú is also responsible for serving as an

example for the other young members of the social network who aspire to receive an advanced formal education and to enjoy the economic opportunities that such an accomplishment is likely to bring.[4]

When I first met her, Malú had just returned from Mexico, where she had spent the equivalent of her middle school years. Never one to attract attention to herself, Malú often sat or stood on the periphery of the activities and conversations taking place in the homes where I would see her. Even when I would visit her family in the course of my regular cycle of visits to the homes of various families in the social network, Malú would sit quietly or go into her bedroom while I was engaged in conversation with her parents or was helping her siblings with their homework. The breakthrough in our relationship came when I visited her home one evening while she was working on a writing assignment for one of her classes during her first year at UIC. Because she was having trouble getting started, her mother encouraged her to tell me about the assignment and to get some help from me. After we talked about it and brainstormed together for a few minutes, Malú developed a better sense of the options at her disposal and proceeded to generate some text on her own. Later that evening, I reviewed what she had written and, as a friend of the family rather than her teacher, offered advice about some of the things she could do to expand and improve her piece of writing.

While I had learned about the personal letters that adult members of the group often wrote to one another (see Guerra, 1998), I had not yet successfully solicited examples from any of them. I had often seen them reading letters they had received from members of the group living in Mexico and had even delivered or brought back stacks of letters during several trips that I had taken between Chicago and their *ranchos*, but early on the personal nature of their letters discouraged me from asking them for copies. In an effort to collect and develop a cache of personal letters, I attempted to establish correspondence with several of the teenagers in the social network. When that effort failed, I decided to shift gears and elicit autobiographical narratives from several of them. Because they were younger, better educated, and, I thought, less self-conscious about their writing, I was certain that a group of about ten young people with whom I had developed a firm and positive relationship would jump at the opportunity. As it turned out, only three young women in their late teens agreed to do some writing for me, and more than a year passed between the time I first asked them to write and the time they started giving me samples of their work. Malú was one of these three young women.

Over the course of a 21-month period between August 1994 and April 1996, Malú gave me a series of six narratives. Unlike her aunt, Doña Josefina, who wrote her letters in a context not directly related to school, Malú

wrote a total of six autobiographical narratives that were influenced to varying degrees by school-oriented expectations. The first three narratives were based on my request that she write about aspects of her life that she found interesting and that she thought would appeal to a general audience. These three samples were first-draft attempts written in Spanish, English, and a combination of the two languages. The last three pieces were written in response to assignments given to her in three different composition classes at the university: one in Spanish and two in English. Unlike the pieces that she had written for me, these three were revised several times. While the final draft of the first narrative she wrote for one of her college teachers was handwritten, the last two were typed. And although the essays she wrote for her teachers dealt with much the same subject matter as the three she wrote for me, they were different in terms of the extent to which she constructed a narrative or expository text; her overall style, especially in terms of technical correctness and language choice; and the manner in which she elected to frame or organize her ideas.

One of the most salient features of the three personal narratives that Malú wrote for me is the increasing length and complexity of the texts, especially in terms of the number of different topics she elects to address in each and their movement from a narrative to an expository perspective. While her first piece of writing is only 533 and her second 832 words in length, her third explodes to 1,278 words. Along with this willingness to extend the range of words is a related interest in complicating her writing by addressing more than one topic as she seemingly becomes more comfortable with the task and finds more interesting issues to address in the course of her self-reflections. Malú also complicates matters further by using English exclusively in the first piece and Spanish in the second (except for an English word that she borrows at one point), then shifting back and forth from Spanish to English to Spanish in her third narrative. In the first two pieces, Malú appears to shift from one language to another on the basis of how closely the topic she is addressing is related to school (English) or home life (Spanish). The third piece of writing, however, totally disrupts this convention when Malú's decision to shift is more stylistic than topical.

Malú's first personal narrative, which she wrote in English, is a chronological representation of a transformation that she undergoes during her first day in kindergarten. It begins with her getting ready for class, is followed by a description of a series of experiences there, and ends with her acknowledgment that she became "well adjusted to going to school." The kinds of vivid details that Malú uses throughout the piece ("my mother bought [me] a new school bag, with pencils, crayons and paper" and "my aunt [helped] me put on a brown and black checked dress with a white blouse") help contextualize the experience for her readers. They are imme-

diately made aware of the self-conscious circumstances in which Malú is beginning her schooling. Because her mother, like her father, has to work to support the family, Malú is taken to school by an aunt in the company of her cousins. Her description of the clothes she wore that day and the location of the school itself clearly indicate that she will be attending a parochial school. Moreover, Malú's use of such phrases as "I can still recall" and "I remember" let the reader know that she is actively and explicitly recalling a past event. While there are a few minor problems with punctuation, grammar, and spelling, they are never enough to disrupt the reader's ability to interpret Malú's representation of the moment.

In one very important way, Malú's second narrative mirrors the first. In place of the rite of passage that she experienced in the course of adjusting to school, the second piece begins with a focus on the process that her parents went through in their search for the first home they would ever own in the United States and ends, unexpectedly, with how Malú's new babysitter, *la señora* Eloisa, overcame her illiteracy. Despite the shift in topics, Malú remains faithful to the narrative of transformation that informs her first piece. The second narrative again begins with an unstable set of circumstances; this time, however, it is her parents who are full of *dudas* (doubts) because *en ese tiempo no tenian papeles y pensaban que eso les fuera a affectar* (at that time they didn't have papers and they thought that was going to affect [their ability to purchase a home]).[5] Reminiscent of the language that Esperanza uses in Sandra Cisneros's (1984) *The House on Mango Street*, Malú recalls *aver llegado a una casa pequeña* (having arrived at a small house). While Cisneros's Esperanza laments the home that her parents end up buying in Chicago, Malú reports a different take on the same experience:

> Entramos a la sala y de ayi nos enseñaron las recamaras, la cocina, y el bano. La casa es sensilla pero lo que ami me emoc[i]ono fue cuando nos enseñaron la yarda. Era una yarda tambien de espacio reducido pero a mi se me hacia como algo muy grande, tenia una silla meseda [mecedora] en el lado izquierdo, un gardin en frente y a tras y en el lado derecho enfrente del garage habia una casita. La casita era supuestamente de perro, pero era grande, tenia su puerta, shelfs y una ventana. Y me quede encantada con la casa [de] perro más [que] con la casita.
>
> (We entered the living room and from there they showed us the bedrooms, the kitchen, and the bathroom. The house is simple but what moved me was when they showed us the yard. It was also a fairly small yard but to me it seemed like something very big, it had a rocking chair on the left side, a garden in front and back and on the right hand side in front of the garage there was a little house. The little house was apparently a dog house, but it was big, had its own door, shelves and a window. And I remained more enchanted with the dog house [than] with the little house.)

Malú's second narrative proceeds to describe how they then moved their few belongings into their new house once her parents purchased it. Unexpectedly, Malú then shifts the focus of her story away from the house to *la señora* Eloisa, the new baby-sitter responsible for taking her to her new school. Malú ends the piece with a digression that emerges as a consequence of something her baby-sitter elected to do "on her own":

> De la Señora Eloisa no me puedo quejar por que siempre fue muy buena conmigo. La Señora Eloisa es una persona que admiro, quiero y respeto mucho porque cuando yo la conoci ella ya era grande de edad y no sabia leer ni escribir. Ahora a veces cuando vamos a la casa [de ella] y la veo la [h]e visto leyendo la Biblia, ella solita fue a clase de ana[l]fabetizmo y la enseñaron a leer y escribir.
>
> (I can't complain about Mrs. Eloisa because she was always very good to me. Mrs. Eloisa is a person that I admire, love and respect a lot because when I met her she was already an older person and didn't know how to read or write. Now when we sometimes go to her house and I see her I have seen her reading the Bible, she on her own went to literacy classes and they taught her to read and write.)

Unlike the first narrative, this second one conflates two story lines and consequently ends in a different place from where it began. Interestingly, the first story line ends with her acknowledging that because she was "*una persona que le gusta la soledad*" (a person who enjoys solitude), "*yo creo que por eso no resenti mucho nuestra mudanza*" (I think that's why I didn't resent our move very much). Because there is no conflict for her here, there is no moral lesson to be learned or taught and no transformation to be experienced. The shift at this point to how *la señora* Eloisa became her baby-sitter and, over the years, managed to overcome her illiteracy, grants Malú the opportunity to conclude her narrative with a tale of transformation, a commonplace that begins to emerge in her writing as an important way to bring a narrative to closure.

Malú's final piece of autobiographical writing is not only longer and more complicated, both in its use of two languages and of two different story lines; it also includes a series of transformative experiences that she undergoes as a consequence of the support that she gets from her parents and her peers. Unlike the first two pieces of writing, each of which began with a phrase that signals the beginning of a chronological narrative—"I can still recall" and "*Durante este tiempo*" (During this time)—the first sentence of Malú's third piece signals a blending of narrative and expository writing and thinking. Its first sentence sets the stage in very stark and dramatic terms:

> Las razones por las que decidi ir al collegio son muchas pero las principales son para mejor[ar] la vida economica de mis padres y mia, para encontrar un trabajo que me sea grato desempeñar y para dejar la ignorancia.
>
> (The reasons I decided to go to college are many but the principal ones are to improve the economic life of my parents and myself, to find a job that will be a pleasure to perform and to leave ignorance behind.)

While the sentence is clearly imitative of the kinds of thesis statements that students are often taught to compose, especially for five-paragraph essays that will include an introduction, three supporting points, and a conclusion, what follows it partially disrupts the constraints implied by this convention as Malú not only moves back and forth between and among the three points but, as she did in the second piece, shifts to a new topic about a third of the way through the autobiographical piece. The shift in topic is casually announced by a sentence that explains why she has managed to go to college and survive: "*Yo siempre [h]e dicho que lo que yo logre sera para ellos [mis padres] porque siempre me [h]an brindado su apoyo y confianza*" (I've always said that what I have attained is for them [my parents] because they have always offered me their support and trust). Thereafter, Malú discusses in great detail the ways in which her father, her mother, and a group of young women with whom she attended high school and now attends college have made and continue to make it possible for her to continue her education. The back-and-forth shift in languages also demonstrates her ability to engage in one of the stylistic variations that Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) promulgates in *Borderlands/La Frontera* but that is still rarely encouraged in English-dominant, university writing classrooms. Again, her text—which she concludes with the following sentence—highlights the potential for transformative change:

> "Realmente uno nunca sabe lo que puede pasar, a lo mejor ni siquiera me graduo del collegio pero siquier[a] tuve la satisfaccion de aver tratado y no quedarme con duda"
>
> (In reality, one never knows what might happen, maybe I won't even get to graduate from college but at least I had the satisfaction of trying and not wondering what might have been.)

The autobiographical pieces that she wrote for her university classes, especially the last two, highlight some of the differences between the kind of writing Malú is likely to do at home and in a classroom setting. Some of the most obvious differences emerge from the mere fact that what she wrote at home for me went only through a single draft, whereas what she wrote for her classes was revised several times with input from her friends, classmates, and teachers. As a consequence, her personal essays for class contain fewer surface errors and are typed, self-consciously divided into a series of paragraphs (the three pieces she wrote for me consisted of continuous text with no indentations), and given formal titles. Both of them also begin and end with clearly delineated introductions and conclusions and present a series of related supporting ideas in the middle sections. Finally, instead of demonstrating an actual or potential transformation, the essays end with Malú caught in a stalemate, paralyzed by the conflicting options that she faces. For example, the essay for her Spanish class, titled "*¿Español o Inglés?*", concludes with the following two sentences:

> "Mi problema es no dominar correctamente los dos lenguajes al nivel que debo. Ni modo, me tendré que conformar con hablar el español y el inglés a medias"
>
> (My problem is not being able to deal correctly with the two languages at the level that I am supposed to. No matter, I will have to be satisfied with speaking Spanish and English as best I can.)

On the other hand, the essay for her English class, titled "Caught Between Two Cultures," ends with the following two sentences: "I just happen to be always caught in the middle. Between a Mexican family's expectations and wanting to enjoy some American freedom."

The two major differences between the writing that she did for me and the writing that she did for her college teachers reflect her tendency to highlight a sense of transformation and to engage in digressive thinking in the former, something which seems toned down or nearly absent in the

latter. While the number of narratives are inadequate to suggest that the variant forms of writing that she feels comfortable exploring in her out-of-school writing are typical of her writing, much less the writing of *mexicanas* in her social network, the contrasting tendencies that she exhibits in the two kinds of writing suggest that divergent thinking and its representation in writing is not necessarily a lack of organizational control on her part but a reflection of her desire to allow the narratives that she wrote the opportunity to disrupt the sometimes formulaic organizational structure that we as writing teachers often demand of our students in classroom writing. As such, it should alert us to the importance of context and the variations in style that inform the writing of individuals like Malú who live and write both at home and in school. We need to be careful not to assume that digressive or divergent thinking and writing are somehow a reflection of a writer's inability to think rationally or to marshal a set of ideas into some predetermined order. It may well be another way of constructing a narrative text that eventually morphs into an expository one. At the very least, it should encourage us to think twice about the extent to which we need to revise our expectations about the kinds of writing experiences students bring into the classroom and the kinds of writing that we expect them to undertake in that context.

How Home and Community Writing Can Inform School Writing

As writing teachers in a university setting, each with more than 20 years of experience, we have struggled with the difficult task of helping students from diverse backgrounds learn how to write within the "essayist literacy" tradition. Caught between having students value and make use of the personally and culturally based language registers and styles they bring into the classroom and introducing them to the demands of a more autonomous, academic register and style that requires them to reposition themselves in unfamiliar ways, we have had to reconsider our expectations and the pedagogical strategies we use in the writing classroom. Clearly, there are no easy answers. Still, instead of trapping ourselves in the assumption that we have to *either* respect our students' multivoiced approaches to writing *or* demand that our students simply surrender to the expectations of academic discourse, we realize that we must do both. Teachers are more likely to succeed in teaching academic writing if they make an effort to understand and value the variant styles of language manifested in the kinds of writing that people do in the communities from which more and more university students are coming.

No doubt two of the main reasons why researchers have generally ignored the rich possibilities inherent in examining writing done in minority communities are (1) that we have focused our research on their oral language use or have restricted our research to the kind of writing they do in school-based settings, and (2) that instances of extended writing are less visible and take much longer to encounter, especially when the search is being undertaken by scholars who, because of their social and educational status, are more likely to intimidate individuals who often tell us they can't write. In our case, for example, we limited our focus during the early years of our research to reading and oral language use because they were the more visible acts in which members of the social network engaged. Moreover, when we did ask them for letters at the outset of our research and they hesitated, we became concerned that they would hold back in other ways and so we ceased to continue exploring those particular facets of their language use. Fortunately, we decided to continue our research long enough so that members of the social network began to think of us less as language researchers engaged in academic-oriented critical analysis and more as family friends interested in learning about certain linguistic and discursive aspects of their lives. In short, patience and trust eventually opened up new research possibilities for us.

The writing we examine in this chapter is but one small peek into the vast and still largely unexplored area of writing in home and community settings. What it reveals, though, suggests that members of these communities regularly use various genres of extended written discourse. Given occasion and purpose, the two women whose writing we have reviewed generated texts that communicate their personal views and experiences, and their spiritual hopes and identities. Despite the fact that some of their writing contains the kinds of grammatical and orthographic features that signal a lack of familiarity with standard conventions, the rhetorical stance implicit in their writing is often very powerful and self-assured. There is also a clear familiarity on their part with the cadence of rich and meaningful language that is aesthetically pleasing.

More specifically, however, what kinds of insights does the out-of-school writing of women like Doña Josefina and Malú provide college composition teachers who are increasingly encountering students from similar communities in their classrooms? Demographic projections, after all, suggest that by the year 2050, one of every four residents of the United States is likely to be of Latino origin (Suárez-Orozco, 1998). Obviously, our analysis of the writing of two women cannot provide the basis for establishing a set of pedagogical strategies that will respond to the needs of college-bound members of this community. Without question, scholars need to continue and expand their work on the literacy practices of Latinos and Latinas if

we are ever going to develop understandings that will adequately inform the work that writing teachers need to do. Still, we believe that it is possible to speculate about some issues that directly address the development of curriculum and pedagogy in writing classrooms.

To begin with, we can no longer ignore the communicative competencies that students bring into the classroom. Despite the fact that over the years an array of scholars have urged us as writing teachers to take into consideration the discursive and rhetorical practices students bring with them, too many of us are still hamstrung by our assumed responsibility to focus narrowly on issues of grammar, mechanics, spelling, and organization. This is not to suggest that underrepresented students do not need help in developing their skills in these areas. As a matter of fact, in the course of our research, many of the members of the social network with whom we discussed writing acknowledged that these were areas that seriously concerned them. While some of us may be prone to argue that they held this belief because those among them who had received formal schooling had been told over and over again that they didn't know how to write because they had not yet developed these skills, our interviews with them suggest that they are well aware of the crucial role that the etiquette of writing plays in influencing what others think of them as writers and human beings. At the same time, we cannot ignore their ability to manipulate language in sophisticated ways and, especially, their awareness of how rhetoric plays itself out in the genres in which they choose to write. It goes without saying that we need to give them an opportunity to demonstrate what they already know so that we can help them build new skills on that foundation. This is an idea as old as the teaching of writing itself; unfortunately, many of us continue to ignore it now as much as teachers have done in the past.

Once we have a better sense of what our students bring to our classrooms, we need to be prepared to use a more comprehensive array of pedagogical strategies that will address the varied writing needs of such students. Unfortunately, far too often, we as writing teachers claim allegiance to a particular pedagogical theory and develop blind spots about the potential inherent in alternative theories. This is not to say that the answer is to develop an eclectic approach to the teaching of writing so pragmatic in its goal that student needs alone inform practice or to dismiss theory as an annoying burden imposed by scholars who have nothing better to do with their time. We prefer an approach that acknowledges the contingent nature of the teaching of writing itself. The option we advocate is one that plays itself out in the tension between an eclectic and mono-ideological stance. Because it doesn't recommend that two contradictory positions must be held simultaneously, it does not propose a synthesis. If anything, it recommends a symbiosis of sorts, a process wherein one commits to a particular

pedagogical stance but periodically pulls back and questions it. Such questioning, however, does not always result in a fundamental change, as it does with those who consistently choose to be self-critical. Instead, it acknowledges the importance of accepting the fact that one can be ideological without becoming an ideologue. To put it in slightly different terms, we must be prepared to support what Leki (1997) calls "a pedagogy that views writing instruction as the effort to make all students, not just non-English speaking students, aware of the options and choices appropriate in a variety of text types and writing contexts" (p. 244).

An examination of the kinds of writing that Doña Josefina and Malú do in out-of-school contexts raises another critical issue for us: As writing teachers, we must continue to develop a more flexible notion of what we conceive of as academic writing. While we have focused on the importance of variant styles of writing, our analysis implicitly touches on questions about how the concepts of discourse community and genre emerge as critical concerns in our discussion about the relationship between writing done at home or the community and in school. For several years now, such scholars as Bizzell (1982), Bruffee (1984), Bartholomae (1985), Harris (1989), and Spellmeyer (1993) have debated the existence of discourse communities and the extent to which the concept has given us any useful insights in understanding the experiences of underrepresented students as they make their way from their home communities to academic communities that demand a different set of discursive practices. For the most part, the argument has focused on whether students indeed experience a discontinuity between the two discourse communities. At this point, Lu's (1992) argument that students do not experience an initiation into a discourse community but must instead learn the art of "repositioning" themselves rhetorically has seemingly won the day. Although we would agree on the importance of such repositioning, we still argue that many students are also faced with the task of learning new discourse practices, from the level of language to the level of rhetoric. That they are often not "initiated" into such practices is an important shortcoming of contemporary composition courses.

Finally, in light of the fact that Doña Josefina and Malú are not only writing in contexts very different from those students face in school, but in genres that are in some ways different from those students are likely to encounter in writing classrooms, we need to consider whether or not it is possible to disrupt the genres of school writing and destabilize them in ways that will allow for more varied approaches to writing in the classroom. Miller (1996), for example, attempts to disrupt the assumed hard boundaries between genres, especially between what we as writing teachers often think of as personal writing represented in narrative form and academic writing represented in academic form, by arguing that we must "take down

the cordon separating the public and the private and . . . recognize that all intellectual projects are always, inevitably, also autobiographies" (p. 285). Moreover, Miller contends, we must "expand our notion of the rhetorical project to include the ongoing work of learning how to make oneself heard in a variety of contexts" (p. 282). Bawarshi (2000) complicates this position further by helping us better understand how the kind of writing that Doña Josefina and Malú do out of school can inform the kind of writing that we expect from our students in school. In Bawarshi's view, we need to take into consideration "the role that genre plays in the constitution not only of texts, but of their contexts, including the identities of those who write them and those who are represented within them" (p. 335). While all this suggests that individuals such as Doña Josefina and Malú who eventually show up in our classrooms must learn to write in the contexts of the genres that are preferred in college classrooms, it also means that we as teachers are sorely lacking in our knowledge about the texts, contexts, identities, and acts of representation that they may be engaging in when they write in genres that are preferred outside of school. Clearly, there is much for both of us—students and teachers—to learn about writing and, especially, about one another. The writing done by individuals such as Doña Josefina and Malú in out-of-school contexts is certainly a good place for us to initiate this process for the benefit of all involved—teachers, students, and the communities from which they come.

Notes

1. In the two sections that follow, we shift to the first-person singular because the material we discuss was gathered as part of two separate research projects. Farr collected and analyzes Doña Josefina's letters to God, while Guerra collected and analyzes María Guadalupe's autobiographical writing.

2. In transcribing these letters, Farr has left misspellings and other surface errors as originally written; in cases in which the meaning may not be clear, she has included the intended standard Spanish word in brackets. Words split between lines in the original (because Doña Josefina ran out of space on the 5″ × 8″ inch spiral notebook pages on which she wrote the prayers) are transcribed in the same way; the English translation tries to parallel this. In translating the letters, Farr has edited only the spelling.

3. Words followed by [*sic*] are pronounced with an intonation characteristic of some rural dialect speakers in Mexico. In the Standard Spanish pronunciation of these words, the second to last syllable, rather than the third to last, is stressed. Here I have transcribed Doña Josefina's words as she spoke them.

4. Malú graduated with a bachelor's degree from UIC in December 1999. Meanwhile, her younger sister, Linda, entered the freshman class at UIC in August 1999.

5. In transcribing these autobiographical narratives, Guerra has left misspellings and other surface errors as originally written. He has included a missing word or letter or the standard word in brackets only in cases in which the meaning may not be clear to a Spanish reader. In translating the narratives, Guerra has edited only the spelling of words.

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JULIA MENARD-WARWICK RESPONDS

In this thought-provoking chapter, I see the authors struggling to achieve twin purposes: to "prove the [literacy] competence" of the Chicago *mexicano* community and to suggest ways to enhance the teaching of college writing to minority students. Having taught ESL writing for a number of years, I fully support their mission to improve composition classes by "tak[ing] into consideration the discursive and rhetorical practices that students bring with them." However, Guerra and Farr do not provide much practical guidance on how teachers can bring this consideration into their classroom routine. Moreover, the writing practices analyzed in this paper do not, to me, "suggest that members of th[is] communit[y] regularly use various genres of extended written discourse," as the authors contend. Nevertheless, I think that college writing teachers can find much to learn from the textual evidence presented here.

Certainly, Doña Josefina's "letters to God" do illustrate "the creativity, resourcefulness, and substantial capacities that ordinary people [bring to] their everyday uses of written language." As Farr states, charismatic prayer circles allow women with minimal formal education to "claim authority . . . through reading, writing and reflection." The confidence that Doña Josefina has in her relationship with God gives her writing "fluency and a strong personal voice," while her intensive reading of the Bible offers tools to critically analyze contemporary society. Although college composition instructors are unlikely to be presented with documents that bear much resemblance to the prayers that Farr describes, her account of Doña Josefina offers a potent reminder that seemingly unlikely people can read critically and write with authority. Moreover, Doña Josefina's "rich, persuasive" texts suggest that the best writing is done in situations where people feel comfortable expressing their deepest values and commitments. Although religion is one domain of life that may cause discomfort for some instructors, Doña Josefina's spiritual writing illustrates the value of openness toward student life experiences, whatever they may be.

Guerra's presentation of Malú's work is more problematic. It's easy to see why he is interested in her essays, because (unlike Doña Josefina) she is typical of many minority students who struggle in college composition classes: in her own words, "caught between two cultures." Furthermore,

as Guerra states, she carries "the burden of setting an example." Although he is referring to the example she sets for younger relatives, he also makes her writing serve as an example for extended, out-of-school, written discourse capable of showing the literacy "competence" of her entire community. He wants composition instructors to see Malú's texts as representative of "the discursive and rhetorical practices that students bring with them." However, Guerra's description of the process he went through to obtain Malú's writing makes it clear that she would not have produced the pieces without his strong encouragement: Writing autobiographical essays is not a traditional literacy practice of the Chicago *mexicano* community.

Moreover, Malú seems to have been enrolled in college composition classes during the time she wrote the pieces for Guerra, and her work displays the influence of "essayist" organizational features such as the thesis statement in her third text. As Guerra himself says, the autobiographical pieces she did for him look like "first drafts" when compared to finished essays that she wrote for college classes. I would argue that the "digressive thinking" she displays in the work for Guerra has nothing to do with the fact that she comes from a *mexicano* community but rather is typical of first-draft writing regardless of culture. On the other hand, the most striking commonality Guerra notes about her early autobiographical pieces is that they all end on a note of "transformation." Pointing out that her essays written for college classes express a contrasting sense of "stalemate," he implies that it may have been the freedom to make mistakes and switch languages that allowed her to describe such transformative experiences. Perhaps Malú's example should encourage instructors to read first drafts carefully in order to help student writers find ways to incorporate compelling "digressions" that are at risk of getting lost once the organization is tightened.

In the end, all the intriguing and instructive ethnographic evidence presented by the authors cannot quite carry the burden of "proving" an entire community's "competence." Perhaps it doesn't need to. While students such as Malú may well experience a greater discontinuity than do "mainstream" students between the rhetorical practices of their families and those typical of academic discourse, it is also important to remember that "essayist literacy" is, for *all* learners, a set of conventions primarily learned in schools rather than homes. In mainstream as well as minority communities, few people write "extended discourse" except to meet academic and professional requirements. Even the personal letter is a dying artform. Therefore, while it remains important for college composition instructors to "understand and respect the communicative competence of their students' communities," it should be recognized that the production of extended written discourse in out-of-school settings is not and should not be a prerequisite for college success.

CRIS GUTIERREZ RESPONDS

Poems! Songs! Letters! Raps! Journals! Stories! Young people write in the privacy of their notebooks, on sheets of paper tucked inside books, sometimes in the margins or on the back of class handouts, stating their mind in the huddled minutes or hours away from school demands. These creations often reveal stimulating thoughts and obvious, if not stunning, talent. As a high school teacher of social studies and English, I am always amazed at what kind of writing adolescents do as they pour their feelings into their questions and ideas on a page when not writing for an analytical assignment. Born of imagination and experience and distilled in funny, excited, confident, vulnerable, or adamant voice, their language is honest and clear. Their words, phrases, and sentences stand as intelligent compositions, demanding to be heard and understood. As youth express themselves freely, their literacy resounds.

Unfortunately, it is also, too often, belied by the analytical prose required by academic standards. Throughout the 16 years I have taught in public or private high schools, I have found this contradiction to be true for most young writers, but it is particularly the case for my inner-city students—Latino, African American, and Cambodian American. Ironically, those who come from poor and minority backgrounds, many of whom are recent immigrants, can show literate capacities when and where we least look for them, when and where some of us may least expect to find them, but in exactly the time and place anyone who espouses support for lifelong learning would hope to see literate behaviors thrive—in the everyday goings-on of home, neighborhood, job, and community. How do we open our eyes and ears to recognize the power and potential of literacy in the lives of our students beyond the classroom? How do we incorporate that talent into their scholarship? How do we help youth admit this talent into their academic reasoning and writing?

Having been fascinated with this challenge for a long time, I am delighted to find it to be the concentration of Juan Guerra and Marcia Farr in this chapter. Setting out to present "documentation and description of

communicative competence," these two researchers find strong features of literacy and critical thought in the "communicative competence" expressed in nonacademic writings of two *mexicanas*, Doña Josefina and Malú, at home in the United States and connected to families in Mexico. Guerra and Farr's discussion of these literate capacities is significant for two reasons. First, these investigators establish healthy evidence of assets for scholastic undertakings, especially the kind of writing known to researchers as "essayist literacy," essential for college retention and graduation. (I suspect the same is more and more true in high school.) Second, the capabilities evince bilingual and biliterate strengths while still conveying important cultural assumptions, attitudes, or beliefs particular to Doña Josefina's and Malú's native and familial backgrounds, which can pose healthy challenges to teaching and learning, K–12 or college, because, as Guerra and Farr admirably point out, "whenever classrooms include individuals (students and/or teachers) from different cultural backgrounds, the potential for miscommunication increases."

I am impressed with how clearly and consistently Guerra and Farr keep in mind what I see as honoring the person, indeed the voice, who matters in writing and other literate practices. Such honoring begins with respecting and remembering that context, meaning, and purpose—personal, cultural, and communal—impel communication, hence literacy. Understanding how to embrace natural, even necessary, contexts, meanings, and purposes important to individuals and groups of students underlies successful schooling in "essayist literacy" and classroom discourse. This essential dimension of quality teaching and learning empowers both students and teachers. At the heart of Guerra and Farr's research and chapter lies a high regard for authenticity in how one learns and knows and what one learns and knows.

Typically, K–12 teachers have been pressured much more than college faculty to change and improve practices affecting writing instruction and a myriad of other curricular dimensions. For K–12 there is the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, which addresses the kinds of pedagogy that draws on the learners' reservoir of understandings and capacities, especially in heterogeneous groups of students. We need to leverage that work and other ways to document quality teaching and learning as forms of scholarship for college and K–12 teachers to advance and to collaborate on in their professional practice. We have far to go to strengthen essay writing by incorporating and valuing other forms of students' writings, yes, even as accountability measures. Most important, we need to help foster the inner voice of the writer. That depends on a writer's believing that he or she has something important to say and good reason to say it. Grades and gradu-

ation will not be enough to bring out the best in a student; the quality of our relationships as teachers with students and theirs with each other will be the difference that makes the difference.

Building community is imperative not only for quality writing but for quality teaching and learning in K–12 or college. Guerra and Farr show how such community-building also enriches research. Their chapter reveals many insights and much hope. For as it asks us to honor the person in writing, Guerra and Farr's chapter enlightens us about the human talent and intelligence active in life, the truest test of quality education.

Part III

LITERACY IN AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS