Writing American subjects: Race, composition, and the daily themes assignment for English 12 at Harvard, 1886--1887

Amy A. Zenger

University of New Hampshire, Durham

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.unh.edu/dissertation

Recommended Citation

https://scholars.unh.edu/dissertation/241

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Doctoral Dissertations by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact nicole.hentz@unh.edu.
WRITING AMERICAN SUBJECTS:
RACE, COMPOSITION, AND THE DAILY THEMES ASSIGNMENT
FOR ENGLISH 12 AT HARVARD, 1886-87.

BY

AMY A. ZENGER
B. A. Art, Portland State University, 1994
M. A. English, Portland State University, 1997

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
English

September, 2004
This dissertation has been examined and approved.

Thomas R. Newkirk, Professor of English
Dissertation Director

John Richard Ernest, Associate Professor of English

Paul Kei Matsuda, Assistant Professor of English

Paula M. Salvio, Associate Professor of Education

Sarah Way Sherman, Associate Professor of English

August 2, 2004
Date
A discussion in my high school biology class explored this question about identity: given that all of the cells of the human body are replaced over a period of seven years, could you still claim to be the same person after the seven years are over? I thought of this discussion recently, as I looked back on my time in the graduate program in composition at UNH. So many deep changes have occurred—especially the loss of Bob Connors and the departure of Cinthia Gannett and Pat Sullivan—that the program from which I am graduating is very different from the one that I entered.

In spite of all the changes, though, there has been a very clear "through line" in all of the work I have done as a compositionist: Thomas Newkirk. I first encountered Tom from afar when I studied with Sherrie Gradin, one of his first doctoral students; read his books (Nuts and Bolts, and More Than Stories); and attended a conference presentation, which I still recall distinctly, years after the details of that conference and many subsequent ones have blurred into oblivion. The pleasure and admiration I felt then for Tom's thinking, his skill as a writer and researcher, and his great sense of humor have only gotten stronger as I have known him as a teacher, administrator, and, finally, as the chair of my dissertation committee. His coaching through the research process has been a great gift to me. He knows the rare art of pushing firmly when the ideas are not clear, but also allowing room at the same time—room that truly let me find my own way. His unwavering support made it possible for me to have the deep intellectual satisfaction of pursuing this research project, an experience I treasure. I can repeat that cliche of acknowledgement pages with heartfelt sincerity: Tom made the finest parts of this work possible, but its faults are certainly my own.

I would also particularly like to thank Paula Salvio, whose intellectual boldness and generous friendship have meant so much to me here. Paula introduced me to innovative ways of imagining authority, textuality, and literacy. Her work in performative theory, and her theorizing of the nature of the classroom space were eye opening, and deepened my sense of what it means for me to be a teacher, personally and professionally. Discussions and readings from her classes are a resource that I return to again and again, finding new realizations each time; they have been a great underlying resource for this study.

It is a pleasure for me to also thank the other members of my dissertation committee: John Ernest, Sarah Way Sherman, and Paul Kei Matsuda. John has been instrumental in developing the initial idea and the form of this project. He graciously welcomed me when I showed up on his doorstep, looking for guidance. Our conversations, and the readings to which he has introduced me, form the basis of my learning about race. Over the years I've seen many, many other students who have similarly gravitated to his kindness, his insight,
and his intellectual and moral acuity. His contributions both to me and to the university are remarkable. Sarah kindly agreed to sit on the committee to fill an opening left by the departure of an earlier member. My acquaintance with her since then has only made me regret that I did not meet her much sooner. The breadth of her knowledge of nineteenth-century American culture, the careful attention she brought to each chapter I wrote, and the sensitivity of her observations and critiques has made her the most wonderful reader I could have hoped for. Finally, Paul Matsuda’s work in the history of composition and in L2 writing, and his thorough approach to scholarship has challenged me to think through my ideas and to write more carefully.

I would also like to acknowledge the members of what I have come to think of as my “unofficial committee”: Cinthia Gannett, John Brereton, and Kate Tirabassi. Drawn together by friendship, a love of writing, and a number of different projects, the work that we have done together to create a writing archive at UNH, in writing center and WAC workshops, and in collaborating on articles has proceeded like one long, ever-changing, inspiring and sustaining conversation. They have all contributed to the dissertation through their commentary and discussion, and to my well being through the time we spend together. What could be better than this?

Mary Hallet, Bronwyn Williams, and Dot Kasik, who were seasoned graduate students when I first arrived, have been my most valued mentors, heroes, and friends, roles that they continue to play for me as we become colleagues and add on other kinds of connections. I also thank many other graduate friends and readers: Joyce Rain Anderson, Christopher Dean, Avy Trager, Christina Ortmeier-Hooper, Michelle Cox, Freda Hauser, Heidi Kaufman, Elisabeth Ellington, Danny Wouters (and Manda), and Elizabeth Andersen (and Tulip). I thank Donna Melillo for her spiritual support. Finally, I thank some of the writers I have worked with and from whom I have learned so much: Melinda Salazar, Anneliese Mueller, Kathleen Sims, Crystal Lariviere, Jeff Skowronek, Liz Caffrey, and Peter Guguei.

The daily themes and other archival materials quoted in this dissertation are used with permission of the Harvard University Archives. I thank the staff of the Harvard University Archives and Widener Imaging Services for their excellent help during this research.

I am grateful to the UNH Graduate School for supporting my work with a Dissertation Year Fellowship, which gave me the precious commodity of free time, and made it possible for the writing to finally happen. I also thank the UNH Graduate School for awarding me Graduate Assistantships in the Writing Across the Curriculum Program during two eventful and instructive years, 2001-2003. I would also like to proclaim my appreciation for the personable and absolutely dependable staff of the Dimond Library, who have come to know me very well in the past year.

Last, but far from least, I thank the members of my family, who have loved me through all of my accomplishments and failures, and I thank Stephen Link, my wise, tolerant, loving, funny, and open-to-adventure companion in life. This work, and all of the work I do, always belongs in some sense to them, as well.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ......................................................................................... iv
ABSTRACT .............................................................................................................. ix

CHAPTER PAGE

I. LEARNING HOW TO READ: THEORIZING WHITENESS IN THE HISTORY OF COMPOSITION ................................................................................................................................. 1

Introduction: Where is “Race” in the History of Composition? .......................... 1
Critical White Theory and Composition History .................................................. 5
Race is a historical formation .............................................................................. 8
Race is a system .................................................................................................. 12
Race is linked to epistemology ......................................................................... 14
Design of this Study ......................................................................................... 21
Initial Research Questions .............................................................................. 23
Questioning Representations of the Rise of the University ............................. 24
Questioning Representations of the Purposes of Composition ....................... 27
Overview of the Chapters ............................................................................... 28
Conclusion ....................................................................................................... 30

II. COMPOSITION AND CONSCIOUSNESS: REPRESENTING THE DAILY THEME ASSIGNMENT .................................................................................................................... 32
ABSTRACT

WRITING AMERICAN SUBJECTS:
RACE, COMPOSITION, AND THE DAILY THEMES ASSIGNMENT
FOR ENGLISH 12 AT HARVARD, 1886-87

by

Amy A. Zenger

University of New Hampshire, September, 2004

This study works to develop a way of reading the functions of race in classroom contexts—specifically in the predominantly white contexts in which composition was formed as a university subject. The model of race chosen for this study is based on critical race theories that conceive of race as being socially constructed, but also a force that organizes identity and experience in powerful ways, even when (or perhaps especially when) its presence is apparently silent—or is, in the terminology of Charles Mills, "normalized."

Primary data for the study is drawn from materials related to the daily theme assignment designed by Barrett Wendell for his English 12 course at Harvard in 1886-87. Sources include the daily themes written by 22 of the 144 students who took the course, Wendell’s class notes, and administrative documents from the Harvard Archives. The study situates these course materials in relation to broader cultural contexts.
The study argues that the movement to establish English as a subject in schools and universities was motivated by a desire to privilege values thought to be associated with the Anglo Saxon people and their descendants. Philological theories of the mother tongue defined language as a “race acquisition,” and perceived English to be the repository of particular cultural values, as well as a highly developed set of tools for cognition. Secondly, the study argues that the educational goal of “cultivation” became racialized in the American context, where Americans identified themselves as people who were “fighting the wilderness.” A new ideal of “the cultivated man” was constructed in relation to a racialized concept of wildness. Finally, the study argues that racialized concepts of liberty that understood the love of freedom as a national characteristic of the English, or considered conditions of freedom to apply only to some portions of society influenced the design of the elective curriculum, and fostered a new, more independent model of authority in the classroom.
CHAPTER 1

LEARNING HOW TO READ:

THEORIZING WHITENESS IN THE HISTORY OF COMPOSITION

The seemingly naked body of pure facts is veiled in value.

David Theo Goldberg. Racist Culture.

In ethnography, the office of theory is to provide a vocabulary in which what symbolic action has to say about itself—that is about the role of culture in human life—can be expressed.

Clifford Geertz. The Interpretation of Cultures.

Introduction: Where is “Race” in “The Origin of Composition”? 

Research projects originate in an experience of disruption that intrudes into the researcher’s attention enough to provoke a series of questions. In my case, the disruption was textual, and it occurred as I was reading works from two different bodies of scholarship at the same time. One set of books and essays theorized historical constructions of race in American culture, including such works as David Roediger’s Wages of Whiteness, Toni Morrison’s Playing in the Dark, Theodore Allen’s The Invention of the White Race, and Reginald Horsman’s Race and Manifest Destiny. The second list of writings included key studies in the history of composition—most of them to be found on the reading lists of every graduate student in composition: such works as James Berlin’s Writing in Nineteenth Century American Colleges; Sharon Crowley’s Composition
in the University, and Robert Connors’s Composition-Rhetoric. In light of the fundamental and pervasive way that race structured America and ideas of “Americanness,” according to the critical race theories and histories, I was surprised to notice that race was not listed among forces that shaped composition programs, practices, and texts in accounts of composition in the nineteenth century. In composition histories, race was curiously simply absent.

That race was absent from these discussions seemed distinctly odd, considering the number of major events that pushed race into the foreground of national consciousness during the last three decades of the nineteenth century, when composition was being formed. The ongoing push to incorporate western territories into the US meant ongoing, racially motivated wars against native occupants of those lands. Fears, often expressed in the language of race, that immigrant populations would have a deleterious effect on US society led to the passage of immigration quotas (based on nation of origin) early in the twentieth century. (A relatively open policy of immigration had allowed steady increases of the foreign-born population in the US: in 1850, the foreign-born made up 10%; by 1879, that percentage had risen to 14%; and by 1890, it achieved an all-time high of 15% (U.S. Census ).) Fights over slavery, abolition, and Reconstruction were a fundamental element of the politics of the entire century. And the growth of an industrialized economy, class formation, and new labor movements, as Roediger has argued, were deeply involved with racial identities.

Composition is a cultural phenomenon that was established quickly and was accepted widely; it seemed unlikely that it would fail to reflect these racial
questions on some level. I found that a growing body of work in composition—historical and contemporary—does look at the dynamics of race in writing instruction within populations who have been racialized and marginalized in American society. Shirley Wilson Logan, Lisa Delpit, bell hooks, Catherine Prendergast, and Keith Gilyard have written about the rhetorics, writing, history, and educational experiences of African Americans, for example. Scott Lyon, Malea Powell, and Joyce Anderson, study Native American rhetorics, education in the Indian boarding schools, and the place of Native American scholars in the academy today. Victor Villanueva has written on “the” history and theory of rhetoric from the perspective of a Latino American. Research by these scholars and others is vital for voicing the presence, culture, and educational experiences of people who have been excluded.

A critique on the basis of race has barely begun to be extended to narratives of composition among the non-marginalized populations, however. Historical accounts of the emergence of college English departments and composition courses tacitly assume teachers, administrators, and students, to be white. The white subject assumed in most historical studies has not yet been given the explicit examination that other identities, such as class and gender, have received. In an essay on “the bourgeois subject,” for example, in which she argues that taste performs real social work “to maintain and harden class distinctions,” Sharon Crowley mentions race among the “marks and limits of bourgeois subjectivity,” which, she argues, the composition course is designed to ‘police’: “read ‘white, straight, male, comfortable, Christian’ subjectivity” (Politics
42-3). Race remains only one dimension of a general subjectivity in her discussion, and is not accorded special attention, but most studies do not even go so far as to identify race. One of the problems with this assumption is that not all students and teachers were white. Historically black colleges had been founded at this time, and as Werner Sollors has also pointed out some students at Harvard were black (Blacks at Harvard). A second, more difficult problem is that when whiteness is simply accepted as a given, the process of constructing racial identity goes unrecognized and unstudied.

One reason race has not emerged as a pressing question to be studied may be that it does not show up as an explicit reference in the primary source materials: speeches, president's reports, government studies, textbooks, and published books and articles that accompanied the establishment of English as a subject with a the university. As a relatively new field, composition history has focused a great deal of attention (and ongoing work today) on an immediate need to identify figures, programs and texts, to build archival collections, and to make connections to other related fields—no mean feat in an area in which most texts and artifacts are syllabi, student papers, textbooks, readers, and workbooks that are not regarded as important in intellectual terms, and most often are not saved either by those who produced them or by those who have used them. The legitimation of composition history as a scholarly subject occurred as recently as 1981, according to Robert Connors, who cites this as a watershed year in "Writing the History of Our Discipline" because it was the first year in which three substantive historical studies essays appeared in composition journals (208).
As primary and secondary sources have increased, interpretations of broad cultural issues like race have become more possible. Connors sorts histories into those that describe internal genealogies of practices and theories (such as Nan Johnson's *Nineteenth Century Rhetoric* and Kitzhaber's *Rhetoric in American Colleges, 1850-1900*, for example), and those that work to place composition in a broad social context. He argues that historiography should move in the direction of exploring socio-cultural understanding, and in the years since 1991, when his article was published, many studies have done this. A number of theoretical and historical works have looked at composition history through the lens of gender: Susan Miller's *Textual Carnivals*, which draws on Bakhtinian theory and gender theory to argue that composition serves a "feminized" role in relation to literary study; Miriam Brody's *Manly Writing*; Roberts Connors' *Composition-Rhetoric*, which puts forward the idea that written rhetorics evolved in response to the new presence of women in higher education; and works by Jo Anne Campbell, Anne Ruggles Gere, and many others who look for the story of writing inside and outside of the academy. Several earlier, influential histories looked at history through a lens of class formation: the works of Wallace Douglas, Richard Ohmann, and James Berlin.

**Critical White Theory and Composition History**

A series of lectures delivered by Toni Morrison at Harvard in 1994 and collected as *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, emerged as a key intellectual model for me as I pondered a way to include...
discussions of race in all of the narratives of composition history, not only those that concerned marginalized groups. In these lectures, Morrison asserts that the presence of Africans and African Americans has been a very powerful force in the literary imagination of white Americans, though this has not been acknowledged. Morrison supports her assertion with readings of works by Poe, Hemingway, Cather, and others. Morrison at the same time maintains that the criticism of American literature has similarly been shaped in silent response to the presence of Africans in America. In this sense, the critical description of "American Literature"—the construction of an American canon as much as the critical approaches to reading—has been formed very deeply by forces that have governed all relations between races in America.

In Playing in the Dark, Morrison describes a moment of revelation in which her understanding of American literature and criticism suddenly shifted:

It is as if I had been looking at a fishbowl—the glide and flick of the golden scales, the green tip, the bold of white careening back from the gills; the castles at the bottom, surrounded by pebbles and tiny, intricate fronds of green; the barely disturbed water, the flecks of waste and food, the tranquil bubbles traveling to the surface—as suddenly I saw the bowl, the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world. In other words, I began to rely on my knowledge of how books get written, how language arrives; my sense of how and why writers abandon or take on certain aspects of their project.

Morrison's anecdote reveals how she learned to focus not only on the object in her research, but to think also about the subject—her own and others' perceptions, as the lookers. Her moment of realization actually changes the object of her observation, because the fish no longer appears as a discrete thing, but exists in relation to something else—the object becomes a dynamic.
Morrison's critical work helped me to understand race as a system of relationships that could be articulated in an infinite number of material expressions. Morrison cites her lived experience as a writer as the source of her critical understanding in these lectures (rather than her critical training). Her discussion of the process by which she arrived at her insights also encouraged me not to dismiss my own intuited insights about composition history, even though I could not see my views reflected in published histories.

Morrison's lectures led me to imagine that histories of composition do not take race sufficiently into account as a force that has shaped writing instruction. Race has been elided—whether consciously or unconsciously—because race has been transparent to the consciousness of the overwhelmingly white educators and historians who constructed both the field and our knowledge of the field. By leaving race out, though, historical narratives re-inscribe a racialized vision of culture and perpetuate common misperceptions: that expressions of racism arise merely as aberrations, moments gone wrong in an otherwise just and equal society; that racism no longer exists, having been already been uprooted and remedied by civil rights legislation and affirmative action; or that racism exists only in the sentiments and beliefs of individuals. Leaving race out of composition histories hinders our ability to consider if and how writing instruction was shaped by—and in turn was a shaper of—racialized identities and institutions.

In addition to Morrison’s work, the work of critical race theorists across a number of disciplines has provided both a rationale and a methodology for
reviewing what we already know about the history of composition. The body of theory referred to as critical race theory encompasses many disciplines and many theorists. In the following section, I abstract and briefly summarize only three of the key concepts that were instrumental to me in developing the idea of this research project: 1. Race is a historical formation; 2. Race is a system; 3. Race affects epistemology.

**Race is a Historical Formation**

Arguing that race is a historical phenomenon is crucial for critical race theorists, because historicity counters assumptions that hierarchies based on race are part of a timeless “human nature.” Historicity also points to a possibility that social and political realities could eventually no longer be structured by race.

The theory of race mapped out by David Theo Goldberg in *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning*, for example, depends on the link he formulates between race and modernity, a link he renders in depth in the first chapters of the book. For Goldberg, “Race is one of the central conceptual inventions of modernity” (3). “Racist culture has been one of the central ways modern social subjects make sense of and express themselves about the world they inhabit and invent; it has been key in their responding to that world they conjointly make. In this sense, culture…informs and locates social subjectivities,” he writes. In modernity, Goldberg argues,

we have come, if often only silently, to conceive of social subjects foremost in racial terms. The primary definition of social subjectivity has not always been racialized, and where it has, the dominant mode of racialization and its attendant forms of racist articulation emerge only with the institution of modernity, and they transform in relation to
the principal formative developments in modernity's self-understanding and expression. (1)

The modern social subject came to be conceived as an individual, an atomistic unit: In modernity, social subjects came to be conceived strictly as individuals, governed only by reason. Social identities, such as nationality, gender, class, and race, provided the means of cohering the individuals of an otherwise atomistic society into groups( ). Identities provided cohesion into larger communities formed on the basis of nationality, gender, race, class, and so on. But among modern identities, Goldberg considers race to be the most fundamental identity of all.

Goldberg traces the emergence of race as a concept in European social consciousness, a development that occurred in the fifteenth century, he asserts, and paralleled European voyages of exploration and conquest (21). Every social community defines itself in terms of insiders and outsiders, and social exclusions did exist before the modern era, but these were not based on race; there was "no racial conception of the social subject," he argues (21). In ancient Greek society, for example, difference and exclusion were conceived in political or cultural terms, not according to biology or origins. In Greek culture, "barbarian" was primarily a linguistic idea, but also reflected an ability (or inability) to reason well, which depended on language. Medieval subjects were thought of in terms of theological categories. Moral space was interiorized in late medieval thought, and "savage man" came to represent the "wild man" within that needed to be tamed (Goldberg; White). “The shift from medieval premodernity to modernity is in part
the shift from a religiously defined to a racially defined discourse of human identity and personhood.

Whether attributed to nature or to the environment, differences of race were perceived to be natural, and therefore to mark individuals fundamentally. The criteria chosen as race characteristics varied from one observer to the next, and the numbers of races also varied, but in all studies, according to Goldberg, the classification of races implied a hierarchy of races. He explains: "the derivation of hierarchy from classification rested upon the long-standing assumption that the universe is perfectly intelligible to reason and the principle of gradation ['from a less to a greater degree of fullness and excellence'] inherent in this" (Goldberg 50).

Goldberg asserts the historical emergence of race in order to undercut liberalism's tendency to perceive racism as due to the personal prejudices of individuals, and to consider it as "a pre-modern prejudice, one that enlightened modern meliorism takes itself to be overcoming through the light of reason" (7). "The concept of race has served, and silently continues to serve," Goldberg writes, "as a boundary constraint upon the applicability of moral principle...The rational, hence autonomous and equal subjects of the Enlightenment project turn out, perhaps unsurprisingly, to be exclusively white, male, European, and bourgeois" (Goldberg 28).

In The Racial Contract, the philosopher Charles W. Mills likewise emphasizes the historicity of race. His intention is to confront the abstractness of Social Contract theory with the historical concreteness of what he terms "the
Racial Contract.” Social contract theory, upon which Western democratic political and social structures are based, centers upon an (imagined) narrative moment in which humans shift out of living in the state of nature and enter into a state of society. In the state of nature, humans fought for survival, one by one, but entering into society tied them together to act in the interests of all. Society was formed when individuals become “signatories” to a social contract that bound them to behave in certain ways in return for accepting the benefits that society could offer.

Using the vocabulary of Social Contract theory—the “lingua franca of modern political organization”—Charles Mills proposes a Racial Contract, which, instead of the idealized prescription that most social contract theory offers, provides a broad theoretical description of the political and social systems we actually inhabit.

Although no single act literally corresponds to the drawing up and signing of a [racial] contract, there is a series of acts—papal bulls and other theological pronouncements; European discussions about colonialism, “discovery,” and international law; pacts, treaties, and legal decisions; academic and popular debates about the humanity of nonwhites; the establishment of formalized legal structures of differential treatment; and the routinization of informal illegal or quasi-legal practices effectively sanctioned by the complicity of silence and government failure to intervene and punish perpetrators—which can be seen, not just metaphorically, but close to literally, as its conceptual, juridical, and normative equivalent. (Mills 20-1)

Mills insists on the political nature of the Racial Contract, and stresses that white global domination did not simply appear, unbidden, as the result of a natural process, nor was it the result of an imagined agreement reached in a distant past, now lost in the mists of time. Mills points out that the “signing” of the Social
Contract was never an event in historical time, but as an imagined event has had great power to generate social and political institutions. The Racial Contract, on the other hand, was a real historical event, he claims. Its development can be traced historically as it was built up, decision by decision, through an array of legal, cultural, and political choices.

The emphasis Goldberg, Mills, and other theorists place upon the historicity of race supports the idea of analyzing the origins of composition in terms of race, because they demonstrate that racialized culture developed through very material, specific decisions. This suggests that an analysis does not need to depend upon trying to determine individual attitudes and prejudices of individual administrators, teachers or students, but can proceed by studying a whole range of cultural artifacts, including the design of curricula, representations of language, and representations of composition. If race is so closely allied with the formation of a modern subject, as Goldberg and others claim, it is inevitably pertinent to education.

Race is a System

Critical race theories also argue that race must be understood as a broad social system. Theorizing race as a social and political system is crucial for shifting discussions of race away from judging individual attitudes and prejudices. Understanding race as a system makes clear that *all* social subjects are defined by race, those who are "normalized" as white, as much as those who are designated or named as "raced..." Critical race theorists dispute what they see as
common misperceptions: that expressions of racism arise merely as aberrations—moments gone wrong in a basically just and equal society; that racism no longer exists, having been uprooted and remedied by civil rights legislation and affirmative action; or that racism resides only in the conscious sentiments and beliefs of individuals, not in culturally determined, unconscious behavior, or in collective institutions.

In *Racist Culture*, Goldberg's approach has been to describe race as a system of discourse. Employing Foucault's concept of discourse allows Goldberg to account for the ever-changing "masks" of race. What "race" signifies varies so widely in living contexts, at particular moments and in particular locations, that no single, general definition or theory will fit every analysis. He theorizes that racist expressions transform continually, but are "bound conceptually and sustained by an underlying culture" (8), similar to the way fleeting and changeable articulations of a language are governed by an underlying grammar that delimits the intelligible from the unintelligible, the rational from the irrational, the sayable from the unsayable. Goldberg's project in *Racist Culture* is "to account for the emergence, transformation, and extension, in a word, the (continuing re-) invention of racist culture, and for the varying kinds of discursive expression that it prompts and supports" (8).

The conception of race as a system is crucial for understanding whiteness in terms of race, and for extending racial analysis to all aspects of a racialized society, not confining it to the explicitly racialized aspects and populations. This point is essential for supporting a revision of mainstream composition histories,
which to all appearances have been predominantly white. If viewed in dynamic relationship to events and people—the racialized others with whom they coexist—the meaning of programs, texts, curricula can suddenly change.

**Race is Linked to Epistemology**

Critical race theories have long been concerned with the effects of racist discrimination on the consciousness of the oppressed. W. E. B. Du Bois described the “double consciousness” of black persons living in white society; Franz Fanon wrote, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, of the terrible consequences of racism and oppression for the psyches of the colonized. Theorists have also worked to understand how consciousness is formed in subjects occupying positions of domination—the colonizers. In *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Chela Sandoval names Roland Barthes as an early theorizer of white consciousness. As a French subject during the period of French occupation of Algeria, Barthes attempted to describe the cognitive dynamic that allowed “innocent, well-intentioned” whites to colonize and oppress, even as they failed to recognize the violence inherent in their political relations. As Sandoval explains, Barthes wanted to understand how domination could become neutralized, could come to seem simply “normal” to those who effected it. In *Mythologies*, published in 1957, Barthes developed a theory he called *semiotics*, a system of reading cultural images as ideological signs.

In her analysis of *Mythologies*, Sandoval describes what she calls Barthes’ “inventory of the psychosocial forms around which consciousness is constituted
as 'white'" (118.8). She argues that using the semiotic methodology he had
developed, Barthes identified a series of "poses" for supremacist consciousness.
Sandoval presents these poses together as a "rhetoric" of supremacist
consciousness; the adoption of these poses results in subjects that experience
themselves as "good citizens" and as "normal" (118.8). The figures of
consciousness named by Barthes are "'the inoculation,' 'the privation of history,'
'identification,' 'tautology,' 'neither-norism,' 'the quantification of quality,' and 'the
statement of fact'" (118.8).

"The inoculation" works to shield consciousness from being overwhelmed
by difference by introducing minute amounts of difference that can be
incorporated, "domesticated," and in the end prevent consciousness from being
challenged on a deeper level. (Sandoval uses affirmative action as an example
of this figure.) "Inoculation" functions to immunize consciousness against
difference and remain essentially intact (119). A second figure of white
consciousness, "the privation of history," removes the "soiling trace of origin"
from images and objects that are consumed. Being ignorant of where an object
comes from, or the conditions under which it was produced, frees the "good
citizen-subject" to simply enjoy it without feeling responsibility or concern.
Barthes writes that the privation of history "seduces" white consciousness
through a pleasure in possession based on ignorance.

"Identification," Barthes' third figure, moves white consciousness to see
others as being like itself—to ignore difference or to assimilate it, thus protecting
itself from confrontation with true difference. Sandoval writes: "Identification
extends to a dependable emergency figure known as 'exoticism,' where the exoticized other can be perceived as pure (sex) 'object,' 'spectacle,' or 'clown.' Difference is then safely relegated to the limits of humanity" (121). "Tautology," the next figure in Barthes' list, functions to reinforce a status quo by using authority to authorize itself. Asserting something is so because it is so blocks questions about how authority is built. This figure "freezes meaning into place" writes Sandoval, and produces, in Barthes' words, a "dead, motionless" reality (121). Sandoval sees in Barthes' cataloging of the effects of colonization on the colonizers themselves a theory that foreshadows the work on white consciousness that would be taken up more than 40 years later by thinkers in the feminist movement, and, eventually, in many other disciplines.

In _The Racial Contract_, Charles Mills also argues that whites live, for the most part, in "an invented, delusional world," and that they rely on "an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance" (italicized in original) (18). The "structured blindesses and opacities" of white consciousness, Mills argues, make it possible even for well-meaning white people to be oblivious of the extent to which the world they inhabit is politically skewed to favor white Europeans and their descendants. This "inverted epistemology" of white people is an important aspect of critical theories of race, because it disengages individual intentions from social realities and effects.

Though epistemology is not explicitly addressed in standard contractarianism, it occupies an important place in classic social contract theories, Mills argues, since they assume agreement among signatories about
what counts as an objective account of reality, a "consensus about cognitive norms" (17). In a racial polity, functioning under a Racial Contract, on the other hand, the agreement about what is "objective" does not agree with reality, according to Mills. Instead, signatories to this contract (which, he argues, underwrites the Social Contract) have "an agreement to misinterpret the world" and to live instead, for the most part, "in an invented delusional world," using "an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance" (italicized in original) (18). "The ironic outcome," he argues, is "that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made" (18). The "structured blindesses and opacities" prescribed by the Racial Contract, Mills theorizes, enables political and social worlds to be created which benefit Europeans and their descendants. When functioning under this "inverted epistemology," people will create institutions

in their cultural image, political states differentially favoring their interests, an economy structured around the racial exploitation of others, and a moral psychology (not just in whites but sometimes in non whites also) skewed consciously or unconsciously toward privileging them, taking the status quo of differential racial entitlement as normatively legitimate, and not to be investigated further. ( )

For both Mills and Goldberg, countering racist culture means countering racialized epistemology. Mills argues that for people of color who have been categorized as "sub-persons" under the Racial Contract, countering racist political structures becomes a difficult process of "claiming the moral status of personhood" (118). "Linked with this personal struggle," he writes

will be an epistemic dimension, cognitive resistance to the racially mystificatory aspects of white theory, the painstaking reconstruction of past and present necessary to fill in the crucial gaps and erase the
slanders of the globally dominant European worldview. One has to learn to trust one's own cognitive powers; ... one has to think against the grain. (119)

Theorizing—naming unseen dynamics of race—is an important step towards countering injustice. By recognizing white supremacy "as a political system, the "racial Contract" voluntarizes race in the same way that the social contract voluntarizes the creation of society and the state. It distinguishes between whiteness as phenotype/genealogy and Whiteness as a political commitment to white supremacy" (127).

An empirical study of the consciousness of white women, conducted by Ruth Frankenberg and described in White Women Race Matters, corroborates the theories proposed by Barthes, Mills and others. Frankenberg analyzed in-depth interviews she conducted with 30 white women about their own identities. The women were of different ages, classes, sexual orientations and geographical origins, but all commonly expressed that "being white felt like being cultureless." In the interviews, the women commonly referred to white culture as "regular," "boring," or amorphous, while naming and valorizing difference—the cultures that can are nameable and "interesting." Even when the recognition of difference was expressed as admiration, Frankenberg points out, "this mode of thinking about ‘difference’ expresses clearly the double-edged sword of a color- and power-evasive repertoire, apparently valorizing difference but doing so in a way that leaves racial and cultural hierarchies intact" (62).

Frankenberg found that for her interview subjects "whiteness and Americanness both stood as normative and exclusive categories in relation to
which other cultures were identified and marginalized (64). Whites were “the nondefined definers of other people” (63). Frankenberg concludes that it is important to work against perceiving any culture as reified, whether that be by seeing it as “unchanged” through the ages (as nonwestern cultures are often described), or by seeing it as “no culture” (as white culture is often described). She argues based on her study that it is important for white women to work against seeing white culture as “cultureless” or amorphous by learning about history and learning about white consciousness.

Basing my own study on the concept of whiteness complicates access to the “central data” of the present, because as these theorists have pointed out, whiteness is difficult to grasp and to name for a researcher who is white, as I am. But at the same time, the researchers’ personal experiences and observations have always a fundamental source for the study of composition. Robert Connors observe in “Dreams and Play: Historical Method and Methodology”: “Among the most important data for the historical researcher in composition studies are perceptions of the present…. I am calling perceptions of the present central data because they stimulate questioning, excitement, and curiosity, without which history of any sort is a dead compiling of facts without affect” (222). Susan Miller similarly notes that the historical methods of composition’s histories have been “connected in contemporary composition studies to ... a proselytizing intellectual agenda for the field as a whole” (“Composition as Cultural” 19). In reading across composition histories, I observe that they have indeed often been motivated by a desire to understand how current practices came to be, and
tended to focus on a few key themes: the development of the obsession with correctness and grammatical features of writing; the relationship between composition and the history of western rhetoric; the place of composition in the English department and in the university; the relation of writing instruction to different constructions of self.

To study composition history through the lens of whiteness is thus to base it theoretically on a personal and disciplinary blind spot. (My own whiteness affects my own ability to work inductively, because it affects my ability to see.) My earlier life experiences may have predisposed me to some extent to become interested in a project like this, since they fostered a complicated relationship with American national identity. While we were growing up, my brother, my sisters, and I lived as Americans overseas, but were plunged periodically back into American culture in a sort of tempering process that stripped away our ability to take cultural allegiances for granted, or to see American culture as simply “normal.” Our oscillations back and forth across borders were also movements across racial boundaries, as I can now see. These formative experiences may have challenged my understanding of race and nationality, and made me gravitate to this project, but they were still too inchoate to serve as a tool for theoretical understanding of whiteness.

The epistemological “blindness” constructed by race makes this study dependent on theory to a greater degree than usual. Theoretical frames act as heuristics, very literally as lenses to show me what I would otherwise be unlikely to see. To view historical accounts of composition through the lens of critical
race theory is to depart slightly from earlier work, because the study is constructed not on my own (polemical) experience in the present, but on a sense that there is something that we have not recognized in the present, but may be able to learn from studying the past.

In *Making Race Visible*, Sondra Nieto cautions that studies such as mine have "the potential to privilege Whiteness." "Whiteness can once again become the central focus," she writes, "even among those concerned with racism and inequality....As a field we need to guard against focusing simply on soul searching about and recriminations for racism" (204). I have remembered her caution many times as I asked myself how necessary it is to return once again to sites and voices in the Harvard program that have been so powerful for so long in our society. Wouldn't it be more useful to work towards inclusion of marginalized voices, I wondered? But, as Nieto also notes, problems of racial injustice in education "are approached as if they just ‘happened,’ as is they came to us full blown, for no apparent reason" (203). This study, then, is offered as a contribution to understanding what “happened,” as one effort to render the day-to-day functioning of race in a context that has not been studied for race before.

**Design of This Study**

As Matthew Frye Jacobson has observed, the study of race in American culture must look at the conceptions of racial difference as well as at the ways they “masquerade as nature” (*Whiteness* 10). The central purpose of this study is to look for ways of reading how race operated and has “masqueraded as nature”
in the predominantly white context in which composition was formed. A study of race focusing on the origins of composition, then, would look at how teachers, school administrators, students, and writers were conceiving of racial difference in their own lives, conceptions which may be very unlike our own. It would study how racial identity may have been interpellated by educational contexts. It would also consider how race is represented, not only in the past but also in present-day narratives.

The approach of many educational histories has been to review massive amounts of data, discern overall the movements in thought that it reveals, and devise taxonomies that help make sense of its enormous complexity. This method has produced invaluable studies such as Bruce Kimball's *Orators and Philosophers*, Lawrence Veysey's *Emergence of the American University*, Albert Kitzhaber's *Rhetoric in American Colleges, 1850-1900*, James Berlin's *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth Century American Colleges*, and Robert Connors's *Composition-Rhetoric*. These works have been indispensable for my own research.

But as Goldberg, Jacobson and many other theorists stress, the cultural expression of race alters from context to context, from one time to another, from one place to another. Because of the non-specificity of racial expression, neither the broad "history of ideas" approaches nor highly specific biographical approaches (such as Charles Paine's study of Channing and Hill) would be effective ways of getting at both the details of lived experience and broad conceptual realities at the same time.
To be as specific as possible, but to also allow for as much depth and complexity as necessary, I chose to limit my study simply to the Harvard program in the last decades of the nineteenth century. After an initial period of research, in which I identified general areas for further questioning, based the study on just one writing assignment: the daily theme assignment for the English 12 course taught by Barrett Wendell in 1886-87. By limiting the study in this way, I hoped to be able to portray the daily theme assignment not as a discrete entity with specific properties but as an open cultural site, a space shaped and inhabited by larger cultural meanings, and defined in relation to other cultural sites and ideas. Limiting the core data to one assignment permits this study to draw connections between very broad ideological constructs and very specific material conditions and identities.

**Initial Research Questions**

In the first phase of my research, I reread existing primary and secondary sources to identify arguments and narratives that invited further interpretation in terms of critical race theory. I questioned the representations of the rise of the university in America, because composition was an integral aspect of that larger project. Without its connection to the university, composition would be a very different institution. The rise of the university was tied explicitly to American national ideals, and these in turn were implicated with race. I also questioned the purposes historians have put forward to explain the very fast and very extensive adoption of composition in America. Finally, I thought that cultural descriptions
of language—the ways language is represented, and claims that are made for the effects of language—could also bear reconsideration. Exploring these general questions led to the more specific arguments that I present in Chapters II, IV, and V.

Questioning representations of the rise of the university in America.

Composition has always been understood to be integrally connected to the university, and as a first year required course has also been an integral feature of most universities. As John Brereton writes "Composition arose with the modern university and took on the characteristics that it did because of the university" (Origins 5). The emergence of the university in America is a cultural event with many, many layers of complexity. The nature of the relationship between composition and the university in its formative years necessarily has several dimensions.

In one sense, the connection between the rise of composition courses and the formation of the university is structural, and emerges in relation to the introduction of a fully elective curriculum. Adding new subjects increased the number of courses being offered, and increased the depth of teaching possible for each subject. The introduction of electives and increasing specialization that it made possible also strengthened the role of departments. As the only, or one of the only required courses in the elective curriculum, composition has been affected a great deal by the way its place has been envisioned structurally. Composition may have originally been represented as an "essential" knowledge
for educated persons, and made a requirement for that reason, but it came quickly to be seen not as "central" or "essential" but as "basic" or "prerequisite" in relation to other parts of the university curriculum. The tension between these two interpretations has not ever been resolved, and composition historians have naturally been very interested to understand the developments by which rhetoric came to be localized in the English department, and the teaching of writing confined to (and the responsibility of) a few specific courses.

In another sense, the connections between composition and the university are cultural and intellectual, because introducing scientific methods changed the cultural representations and roles assumed by the sciences and the humanities in relation to each other. The new role assumed by the humanities in relation to the sciences also shaped the role of composition in relation to literature. The question of what occurred in the shift from teaching rhetoric as part of the four-year curriculum to teaching composition has generated a great deal of composition history.

As I read commentaries that considered how composition had been influenced by its enmeshment with the formation of the university, some features of the historical narratives seemed to offer potential as sites for further exploration in relation to race. Education historian Bruce Kimball, for example, notices in Orators and Philosophers: The Idea of a Liberal Arts Education that the concept of the "liberal arts" was widely written about and debated in magazines and public addresses in the second half of the nineteenth century, but Kimball is at a loss for how to explain this phenomenon. In his analysis, Kimball
describes the fascination for links between "liberty" and "liberal arts" and a tendency to begin describing the purpose of the liberal arts as being "to free the mind." These metaphorical descriptions could, it seemed to me, be reflecting political realities of fights over abolition, and the public information or misinformation about the effects of slavery on the mind, (though Kimball does not suggest such an interpretation).

I also wanted to know more about the way in which the idea of universities came to be accepted in American cultural life. In composition histories, accounts often repeated simply that the university was "adopted" from Germany, or that a German-style research university was the model for American institutions. Laurence Veysey likens the process of "adoption" to "immigration," and sees the process by which the university as an institution became American as similar to the pain and struggle experienced by individuals undergoing assimilation to American culture. Charles W. Eliot refused the idea that America adopted an educational system from anywhere, and insisted that it was "original" and "a slow growth out of American soil." These debates also were suggestive to me, albeit in a general way, of debates over immigration, assimilation, and nativity, (and implicit in these, concepts of national identity), which are often implicitly also debates about race. The special place of Germany in these narratives, which is presented as a fact and nothing more, seemed interesting as well. Why did Americans choose to go there, specifically, and what kinds of learning were they bringing back in terms of ideas about race?
Questioning representations of the purposes of composition. Composition historians often argue that composition arose for practical reasons—because the culture had developed an industrial, managerial stratum that required people who were able to write, because the country had grown so much in physical size and in population that writing was much more necessary for communication—and so on.

In "Composition as a Cultural Artifact: Rethinking History as Theory," Susan Miller also questions the explanations typically offered as purposes for the invention and growth of composition. She suggests that adhering to these practical explanations for the original function imagined for composition has precluded us from writing histories that really get at the purposes composition truly serves, and as a consequence, our histories have not been of use to us in attempting to change the present. "Entrenched images of what composition courses are for" have not been changed by intellectual history that suggest alternatives, Miller writes.

She considers the two bodies of historical work pertinent to composition history:

The first, which might be called neoclassical because it relies on ancient rhetorical traditions, follows the methods of traditional "big" histories by describing a rhetorical canon, a list of prominent names from Aristotle to Linda Flower and John Hayes and beyond. The second, more naturalistic and new-historicist, details curricula, textbooks, organized practices, and trendsetting models for teaching composition since its late-nineteenth-century beginnings as a distinct university-level curriculum. 19

Both of these bodies of work "target" theories of instruction that focus on correctness and propriety, on mechanics, on "methods to persuade students to
enthusiastically write texts that are finally, stringently, corrected" (20). But in spite of the work of "our historians cum propagandists cum theorists," the flavor of composition has not been noticeably affected (20). Miller suggests that historians cast a wider net in their search for defining the cultural work that composition actually performs—the unrecognized cultural role that certain practices with so much staying power may be performing.

In The Resistant Writer, Charles Paine questions the efficacy of these explanations, suggesting that they do not mesh with the patrician values of the actual people who designed and taught the first composition courses. Paine's book argues that composition served to "inoculate" students against the corrosive effects of popular culture and journalism in an age when print culture was growing explosively. The work of Miller and Paine to disturb our concepts of what composition courses actually do suggested that this could be a site for an analysis of the operation of race in the writing classroom.

Overview of the Chapters

Chapter II, "Composition and Consciousness: A Description of the Daily Theme Assignment," presents information about the daily theme assignment and themes in the Harvard collections that have been used to consider the student participation and voice. This chapter also expounds upon the theory of composing that can be inferred from Wendell's writing and teaching. I argue that Wendell's conceptualization of the composing process is much more carefully thought through, and more cognizant of current developments in psychology than
it has been credited with in earlier histories, beginning with Kitzhaber's *Rhetoric in American Colleges, 1850-1900*, and continuing with the work of James Berlin, Wallace Douglas, and others.

In Chapter III, "Race, Composition, and "Our English": Performing the Mother-Tongue in the Daily Themes for English 12," I argue that the shift to English as the medium of instruction and the establishment of English as a subject in schools and universities was motivated by a desire to privilege values educators associated with the Anglo Saxons and their descendants. Philological theories postulated a concept of the mother tongue, which defined language as not *inherently* dependent upon race (not a "race characteristic"), but as very tightly linked socially and culturally to race (a "race acquisition"). Linguistic theories also understood language as the repository of particular set of cultural values, and as a particular set of tools for cognition. Archival materials suggest that university reformers envisioned composition as only one dimension of a broader goal: the teaching of the English language. (Other dimensions included studying the literature of English and studying the history and structure of English.) Teaching English was understood as a way to protect the language from changing too rapidly or mingling with other tongues in the racially mixed and fluid population of the U.S. at the end of the nineteenth century.

In Chapter IV, "Composition, Cultivation, and Wilderness: A Racial Geography of the Daily Theme Assignment," I study Charles W. Eliot's ideal of "the cultivated man," which stood as his goal for the process of university education at Harvard. I argue that the new ideal of the cultivated man, which
guided the new university education, relies on a racialized spatial metaphor that contrasts "savage" wilderness with "civilized" cultivated areas. The implications of the metaphor serve to characterize the physical space of the university itself as a white, "cultivated" space. The ideal of the cultivated man also works to define the general parameters of the appropriate subjects and acceptable ways to present the self in the daily themes. In this sense, a racialized metaphor of cultivation also works to define the university as a white intellectual space.

Finally, in Chapter V, "'Liberty in Education': Freedom, Whiteness, and the Daily Theme Assignment." I argue that some institutional structures and practices in the new university were governed by concepts of liberty that were exclusionary on the basis of race. Wendell espoused an idea that the ideal of liberty originated in England and was a national characteristic of the English and their descendants in America. Charles Eliot adhered to the utilitarian ideals of J. S. Mill, and thought of liberty as an environment that encouraged the growth of freethinking individuals by restricting government as much as possible. These ideas were important in the construction of the elective curriculum, in fostering a certain frankness in relationships between teachers and students; and in expecting students to conceive of their own theme topics.

Conclusion

The project to open up cultural interpretations of the daily theme assignment has made this research highly interdisciplinary. To try and understand all of the factors at play in the assignment, my questions led me into
reading critical race theories, of course, but also into reading histories of philology, postmodern geographies, histories of psychology, labor histories, and moral philosophy—and more besides. I was drawn to these various disciplines, and was nourished by them, to the extent that they illuminated particular questions that I brought. The multidisciplinary aspect of this study has also been the source of frustration, however. I cannot claim expertise in these many fields, and learned to proceed with the understanding that my arguments must be "contestable," a word that Clifford Geertz uses to describe the practice of ethnographic writing. As in an ethnography, my goal has been not to exhaust the interpretive possibilities, but rather to open up new theoretical pathways, and to suggest directions for further research on race and composition. My final intention in this study has always been to demonstrate that racial identity formation can and should be represented as part of composition history by presenting my own historical interpretations as examples.
CHAPTER II

COMPOSITION AND CONSCIOUSNESS:

REPRESENTING THE DAILY THEMES

Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!


I was trying to get this present immediacy
without dragging in anything else.

Gertrude Stein. "How Writing is Written."

Introduction

Because it has been so amply documented, the daily theme assignment for Barrett Wendell's English 12 course in 1886-87 provides an unusual opportunity to study one writing assignment from a cultural perspective, looking at it on a number of levels, from the most mundane details of daily practice to the broadest issues of theory and ideology. Student writing (which so often is not considered worth preserving) survives for 22 of the students who took the course that year—about one-sixth of the class—in folders containing a year's production of their daily themes. These folders appear to have been kept by Barrett Wendell for assessment purposes, and this explains the completeness of the set for this particular course. Although the Archives does hold an interesting range of student work in the form of lecture notes, themes and other projects for many other years and many different courses, these have been donated by individual
alumni, and they tend to be much more sporadic and incomplete. It is the existence of so many student texts and student voices that sets this course apart as a subject for research, and permits a more complete cultural and social analysis.

The Archives also holds lecture notes kept by Barrett Wendell for English 12, which informally record his day-by-day presentation of the course. The notes supplement the more formal presentations in *English Composition*, Wendell's successful composition textbook, which was published in 1890, and was based in large part on teaching experiments he conducted in English 12. The personal notes and textbook both provide detailed information about how the course was organized and how he approached the teaching of rhetoric.

Finally, a great mass of primary and secondary materials documents the institutional context of the English 12 course itself. In the year the course was offered, Harvard was 15 years into curriculum changes that stirred a great deal of interest inside and outside of the Cambridge community, and were documented in Charles W. Eliot's very interesting annual reports to the Board of Overseers of the College. Curriculum materials, journal articles, speeches, student newspapers, memoirs, and biographies also provide insights into the effects of intense local and national change in education.

Historians have not always been in agreement about the nature of the daily themes, or about the philosophy of composition that prompted Barrett Wendell to design them. In the next three chapters, I analyze the themes in depth from different cultural perspectives, but before being able to do that, it has
been important for me to gain a clearer picture of the assignment itself. Chapter Two is therefore devoted to describing the daily theme assignment as it was taught in English 12 not only in its logistical details, but in the ways its purposes and underlying theories have been represented.

**A Description of English 12 and the Daily Theme Assignment**

English 12, a Junior-level course, was offered as an elective. It was primarily a writing course, though readings included literature, and Wendell expected students to strive for “literary feeling” in their themes. In-class work included lectures by Wendell on rhetorical theory, oral in-class critiques of student writing, and exercises in peer responding to the fortnightly themes. The course was popular: in this particular year, 144 students were registered (Annual Report). Wendell was the primary instructor, but he had assistants to help in reading and responding to themes. He scheduled regular office hours, and scheduled individual conferences with all students, meetings in which he returned themes with personalized recommendations for issues the student should focus on in composing.

The written work for English 12 consisted of two different theme assignments. First, students were to write “fortnightly themes” of several pages to be turned in every two weeks. During the first semester, the topics of the fortnightlies varied, and could include writing about social life at Harvard, writing responses to poems, and writing evaluations of the course itself. During the second semester, students chose a broad topic for themselves and decided how
to devote their fortnightly themes to one aspect their large subject; the purpose of connecting the themes was to allow students to experience the challenges and opportunities they could expect encounter in extended composition projects such as the writing of a book, for example.

Secondly, students were to compose daily themes on six days of the week for every week that the course was in session. The assignment is characterized by a rigid set of rules concerning logistical aspects of the writing, which provide a framework for the writing, which is, by contrast, extremely open in terms of subject, style, and genre. In his course notes, Wendell recorded these four rules for daily theme writing:

**Daily themes**

a. Must cover one page of theme paper. Each man's dailies must be uniform in size, uniformly folded, [and] uniformly endorsed with name and date.
b. Dates are taken to be actual evidence of time of writing. Only one theme counts for each day.
c. Dailies must be delivered at 18 Grays at or before 10 o'clock in the morning following their dates. No overdue theme will be considered, nor any written on Sundays or holidays.
d. Let the subjects be as specific [and] contemporary as possible. Make the themes a journal of what distinguishes day from day. Avoid moralizing; [and] look for 1. Good English; + 2. Good sense.

(“Lecture Notes” no page no)

Wendell presented the assignment in his lecture on the first day of class, and instructed students to use the first daily theme that they wrote to articulate the assignment in their own words. One example of a student's version of the daily theme assignment appears, for example, in the folder of Charles de V. Musans:

The object of these daily compositions is in brief to cause the student to acquire the habit of expressing himself in writing and of more
closely observing daily events. To aid the instructor, it is desirable that they should all be written on uniform paper and deposited before a certain hour. For convenience the "theme blocks" have been selected as the paper and 10 o'clock in the forenoon of the day following the theme is written as the time. After they are finished the themes are to be folded lengthwise and endorsed with the authors name and the date of composition. No theme which has been omitted can be "made up" and it is very desirable in order to gain the benefits designed by the course, that these themes should be written regularly each day. Finally they are to be deposited in Grays 18. (October 1, 1886)

The chorus of themes, written on October 2 or 3, 1886, each with a slightly different emphasis, creates something like a cubist portrait of the "dailies" assignment.

Written responses on the themes were highly structured. Because there were so many papers to read, responses had to be efficient. The system of responding had four distinct parts.

- A simple vertical mark indicated whether the theme was acceptable for credit ("\(\checkmark\)"), exceptional ("\(+\)"; a rare mark) or unacceptable ("\(-\)"; also rare).
- The subject of the theme was noted in a succinct word or two (i.e. "cheating" "toboggan" "old letters" "Shakespeare epitaph").
- A holistic qualitative response indicated a brief overall impression it made upon the reader (i.e. "easy" "some vividness" "dull" or "sympathetic").
- Finally, themes could be graded.

Only the first response was essential and always present on every theme: the simple mark to indicate credit. The other three varieties of responses show up inconsistently and in various combinations. Very occasionally, a comment from the reader might complain of misspellings or handwriting that was very difficult to
read; apart from these, the responses to the dailies in this course did not concern themselves with minutiae of style or grammar.

Representing the Daily Theme Assignment in Composition Histories

Until the late 1980's, composition historians represented the daily theme assignment, more often than not, as a symptom of things gone terribly wrong in writing instruction. With few exceptions, accounts of daily theme writing were subsumed into a broader historical narrative that positioned the Harvard program as the source of attitudes and practices that present day compositionists regard as problematic. "Most historians of composition—whatever their differences—have agreed on two points," writes Thomas Newkirk. "The first is that Harvard exerted a strong, even dominating, influence on the direction of composition teaching in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. And second, that this influence was negative and regressive" ("Politics" 116). Historians have accordingly viewed the "dailies" assignment, which was designed in the 1880's by Harvard rhetoric professor Barrett Wendell and embraced enthusiastically by other Harvard writing instructors, as a quintessential expression of the Harvard program.

Albert Kitzhaber first set the tone in Rhetoric in American Colleges, 1850-1900, a study he completed in 1953 but did not publish until 1991. The work circulated in manuscript form for years, and it won the admiration of emerging historians in the 1970's and early 1980's—a group that included Robert Connors, Susan Miller, Sharon Crowley and others. Kitzhaber had been motivated to
undertake historical research, according to John Gage, "because he was dissatisfied with the routine way in which most composition was taught...and he grew curious about where the entrenched methods came from" ( ). Kitzhaber expresses concern that his fellow writing teachers “fail to recognize that they are part of” the 2,300-year old tradition of rhetoric (*Rhetoric* 222). The alienation of writing teachers from their rhetorical roots had been effected, he thought, by a series of changes that occurred during the second half of the nineteenth century:

The years from 1850 to 1900 cannot in any sense be called a great period in the history of rhetoric; yet it was important. It was the time that saw the rise of modern courses in English, both literature and composition. It was the time in which nearly every development that was to appear in rhetorical theory and instruction up to the middle 1930’s was formulated. Most composition today...is still being done in the shadow of rhetorical theory that came into prominence between 1885 and 1900. (226)

Kitzhaber finds very little that he considers original in the work of the major theorist/practitioners that he studies, who include John Genung, Fred Newton Scott, and Barrett Wendell. He accuses all except Scott of failing to incorporate developments in psychological theory into their work.

The principal developments in composition between 1850 and 1900, Kitzhaber claims, sacrificed theory in the interests of practicality and efficiency. Working to adapt to the changing curriculum and to larger and more diverse student bodies, the textbook authors and curriculum designers oversimplified writing into formulaic prescriptions and fostered a pervasive obsession with mechanical correctness at the expense of rhetorical effectiveness: “Rhetorical instruction became routinized,” Kitzhaber says ( ). He isolates the simplified
principles of composition in Wendell's textbook and the ascendancy of the four modes for special rebuke:

These two items of theory encouraged writing by formula, writing as an academic exercise to illustrate certain abstract principles or fulfill certain specifications imposed neither by the needs of the student nor by the requirements of the subject or situation. It was writing in a social vacuum, with no motivation behind it except the necessity of handing in a theme. (Kitzhaber 223)

In *Rhetoric in American Colleges, 1850-1900*, Barrett Wendell's influence is cited repeatedly as essential for shaping an approach to composition that ended "any tendency there might have been to recognize the communicative functions of language, and the office of rhetoric in ministering to social needs" (223).

Given Kitzhaber's predominantly negative assessment of the composition program at Harvard, it is not surprising to find the daily themes described in similarly harsh terms in *Rhetoric in American Colleges, 1850-1900*. In his discussion of the different approaches proposed for adapting rhetorical instruction to university structures, Kitzhaber writes:

Another solution was to make rhetoric 'practical' to insist that rhetorical principles were valuable only as far as they led to actual skill in writing. In its ultimate form, this attitude led to the 'daily theme' constant practice and little or no theory. (222)

Kitzhaber's contentions about the Harvard program—including the idea that Wendell was obsessed with efficiency and practicality at the expense of rhetorical depth—were taken up and developed by the next generation of historians, including Wallace Douglas in "Barrett Wendell" and "Writing for the Meritocracy"; James Berlin in *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth Century American Colleges*; and Sharon Crowley in "The Invention of Freshman English."
In the last two decades or so, historical scholarship has pushed for imagining a more nuanced view of the part Harvard's writing program has played in composition history. In 1987, for example, in an essay in *College English*, David Jolliffe noted that histories so far had failed to take one very important source into account—student texts:

The growth of English, especially composition at Harvard has long been a focus of inquiry, but previous scholars (e.g. Kitzhaber, Reid, Berlin, Connors) have chosen to examine the Harvard program as it is represented in secondary sources—histories of the university, professors' memoirs, textbooks and so on. No one has yet examined the primary sources, the students' papers. As Mina Shaughnessy pointed out, textbooks are not the content of composition courses, the students’ own texts are. (166)

Jolliffe's essay, "The Moral Subject in Composition: A Conceptual Framework and the Case of Harvard, 1865-1900," observe actual student essays to find out why students chose to write about matters of "moral obligation," but it not undertake to question the broader assumptions regularly made about the composition program at Harvard. Jolliffe concludes that "social and cultural contexts" led students at Harvard to think that their essays should have a moral dimension (citing the influence of Matthew Arnold in particular), and suggests that this moralizing practice became "entrenched" at Harvard, and still influenced composition at the time he was writing (164).

In the early 1990's, a pair of articles by Thomas Newkirk pushed much harder for a critique of the standard narrative of composition history. In "Barrett Wendell's Theory of Discourse" and "The Politics of Intimacy: The Defeat of Barrett Wendell at Harvard" Newkirk counters the acid view of Barrett Wendell...
that predominates in the work of Kitzhaber and Douglas, for example, by suggesting that it would be more accurate to view Wendell, not purely as a reactionary but also as a failed reformer: "Whatever his political view, he responded to the institutional challenges that Harvard presented in the 1880's and created a bold experiment in writing instruction, his English 12 course" (129).

Newkirk argues that, contrary to prevailing views, Wendell actually prefigured many theoretical and practical innovations that are generally considered to have been devised much more recently: individual conferences with student writers, peer editing practices, and reflective writing on the course and on the writing process. Newkirk studies the daily themes for the way in which they reflect the lively engagement with the course material and with the community of the writing class that Wendell sought to inspire in his students.

In 1999, Charles Paine also called for a reassessment of initial, emotionally weighted historical judgments. In The Resistant Writer, Paine writes: "in the heat of defining itself through its past (i.e. against its past), composition history often surveyed the nineteenth century too hastily and broadly, rejecting most everything, finding very little in the past that had relevance for the moment." He deems many of the generalizations made by James Berlin, John Schilb, and others about the ideological agendas of composition in the nineteenth century to be "inaccurate and misleading."

Rather than taking a very broad, generalizing look, as many of the earliest historians did, Paine's approach is to return to particular moments for a closer look, and to study of two of the important figures in writing instruction at Harvard.
in greater depth: Edward Everett Channing and Adams Sherman Hill. Paine seeks to deepen our understanding of the cultural context of writing instruction by reading the early writings and the biographies of these two men. Ultimately, Paine shares the generally negative assessment of the composition program at Harvard, and sees in it the roots of what he calls a theory of composition as "inoculation" against the corrosive effects of popular culture, an attitude that Paine says still persists in writing instruction.

Barrett Wendell's Theory of Composing

A careful study of Wendell's writing reveals that he did theorize the writing process, and did indeed take contemporary psychological thinking into account in his work, contrary to assertions made by Kitzhaber, Douglas, and others. His insistence that students "take subjects from life" for their daily themes was based on his operative theory of the composing process, which he understood to have two phases: the focusing of consciousness, and the expression of personal impressions. He argued that the study of composition necessarily involved not only the teaching of style and arrangement—the range of ideas commonly associated with his work; it must also take into account the movement of the consciousness to select and organize experience.

In "The Study of Expression" and in other writings, Wendell describes composition primarily as a fundamental psychological activity. In this fundamental sense, composition (as the Latin meaning of its etymological roots imply) is simply "putting something with something" in order to create something
new. In this sense, he argues, the scope of composition is virtually limitless, because it is the means by which all knowledge is created. The brief description Wendell presents of this phase of composition, while hardly scientific, indicates that his attempt to incorporate scientific concepts of consciousness, rather than to depend upon associationist models of the thinking process or upon the faculty psychology that underlay earlier rhetorical theories, such as those of Bain, Blair, and Campbell.

In "the Study of Expression," Wendell pictures a basic "man, the agent and patient of all educational processes whatsoever" situated in a context, and having to make sense of it to survive. In the following passage, he uses distinctively scientific terminology—words like "environment" "adapt" and "mutation" suggest Darwinism, at least:

In the universe, in this world, in history, in time, in space, he is surrounded by a surgently moving environment to which we may give the name of force. Force is about him everywhere, incessantly and infinitely altering the conditions which seem least mutable. ... In this universe of stirring force man finds himself conscious. His task is as best he may to adapt himself to his environment of incessant change, and of change which in our time is swiftly and surely accelerating its historic rate of mutation.

Wendell imagines that human consciousness functions like a "lens....A flexible, animate focus of force." Consciousness is able to accumulate, diffuse or concentrate some of this force. "One phase of his focal task" Wendell says, "is to compose them, to fuse them. The other phase of it, and not the less worthy, is...the expression of that fusion in such a manner as shall convey the full and living vitality of it to others than himself." In Wendell's description, the acts of consciousness on this fundamental level appear to create knowledge itself, for
"among the rays or streams of force which he can momentarily accumulate, in part, are those which we name science and history and literature." Wendell does not cite a philosophical or psychological theory in his address, but the model of consciousness he describes (however vague it may be) suggests newer ideas that were developing as psychology was being claimed as a natural science.

In *The Principles of Human Psychology*, William James distinguishes his work primarily as an *empirical* study of mind, differentiating it from the multitude of earlier metaphysical works on the subject. One of the most important and original implications of adhering to empiricism was James's observation of "the stream of thought." James notes that earlier thinkers had begun by assuming that thought begins with simple sensations, even though we are, in fact, incapable of actually observing simple sensations in ourselves. What we do observe, when we think about our own consciousnesses, is rather a mass of sensations in constant movement.

James stresses five points about the character of thought in his chapter on "The Stream of Thought." His first point is that "every thought tends to be part of a personal consciousness" (225). Then, within each personal consciousness, though is "always changing"; is "sensibly continuous"; and "always appears to deal with objects independent of itself" (225). Finally, while it is thinking, personal consciousness is continually *choosing* from among the welter of available objects what it would like to be interested in (225). The model of thinking that James outlines in these five extraordinary observations appears to
be much closer to the ideas that Wendell drew on for his ideas of the process of composing.

Wendell's version of how consciousness works—immersed among incessantly swirling lines of force, and functioning to somehow bend, or refract the forces into something meaningful—closely resembles the more famous description Henry James provides in "The Art of Fiction" (an essay Wendell may have known, since it was published two years before he taught the English 12 course that is the subject of this research):

Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every airborne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative—much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius—it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations. (594)

When Wendell asked students to observe daily life, he intended that the assignment would offer them an opportunity to "capture airborne particles" in the tissue of their own minds, and to make something out of their own experience of the world, to produce something unmediated by books.

Conceiving of the assignment as an exercise in personal consciousness also led Wendell to also diminish the nature of the experiences that students wrote about. He carefully stipulated that their observations should be about "commonplace" events, and discouraged them from straying from day-to-day happenings. In "The Art of Fiction," Henry James lauds novelists who are gifted enough in their own imaginative consciousness "to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern,"
an ability that Wendell also seemed to want to encourage in his students. Wendell could have said to them, as James says in his essay about novel writing: “If I should ... say to a novice, “Write from experience and experience only,” I should feel that this was rather a tantalizing monition if I were not careful immediately to add, “Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!” (595).

The words Wendell did say, and repeated over and over to students who floundered for ideas of what to write about, were “What made today different from yesterday?” Like Claude Monet’s series of paintings depicting nothing but a haystack in a field, seen at different times of day, in different seasons of the year, the daily theme assignment played down the subject of the theme in order to foreground the writers’ commonplace acts of perception.

Wendell’s vision of consciousness as a focusing force, his underlying metaphor of “the lens of consciousness,” and the equivalence he sees between composition and consciousness itself all governed how the daily theme assignment was framed. The range of the qualitative responses Wendell wrote on the themes indicates that he sought a sense of commonality between the nature of the experience the student describes and the textual nature of the theme itself, as if the experience of consciousness could be embedded into the very words and syntax of the writing. He perceived the finished composition was not only as a text that had been crafted of words and sentences, but, just as importantly, as the record of an event in the individual writer’s consciousness.
The words Wendell uses to characterize the writing can, accordingly, also be understood very often as words to characterize an experience and state of mind. Words with both positive and negative connotations show up in the responses, and are used to characterize the text and the consciousness: words such as "confused," "sympathetic," "simple," "diffuse," "rambling," or "dull" can be understood to represent both. (The idea of "sympathy" expresses the most heightened perception, in which the viewer is able to enter into the scene being witnessed, and, hopefully, to create a text that allows the reader to similarly enter into the experience described.)

Some examples from the daily themes may clarify the quality that Wendell appeared to be seeking in the daily themes: a consonance between the nature of an experience and the style of a text. Wendell’s view of the relationship between text and topic led occasionally to startling responses. In the following theme, for example, T. O. Shepard writes about visiting the site of a train wreck that had occurred on March 14, 1887, in Forest Hills, a suburb of Boston. A railroad bridge had crumpled, sending six train cars smashing down an embankment and leaving three cars on the track above, telescoped into each other and greatly damaged. Many passengers dies or were injured:

The Accident.

Another horrible accident is now to be added to the already long list of fatalities which have happened on our railroads in the past few years. It seems all the more horrible to us because it has taken place so near home. And you cannot imagine how shocking it appears to one who has been an eyewitness of the event. Yesterday,
after reading the thrilling accounts in the papers, and finding that the scene of the accident was so near at hand, I decided to go and see in what condition the wrecked train was in. On my arrival, I found a large crowd of people who had come out, for the same purpose as I had come. The people could not get within several hundred feet of the wreck, because a rope had been placed around the debris to keep the crowd at a distance. I was more fortunate than my friends insomuch as I had my camera with me, and on the plea that I wanted to take views of the place the police permitted me to roam about at will within the enclosure. The nearer I approached the ruined pile, the more heartrending was the sight, and overcome with grief and sorrow for the wounded and afflicted I was compelled to retrace my steps.

(March 15, 1887)

Wendell summarized the subject of this theme as “accident,” and the impression it made as “diffuse?” As a stylistic term, “diffuse” is used to indicate that the text is verbose or prolix—that it is not tightly focused, but is loose and disorderly in the way it presents information. But Wendell clearly chooses to use “diffuse” here because it also characterizes the scene of the accident the writer was witnessing—since “diffuse” in a more general sense means “to scatter, to pour out, to break up and distribute, to spread out thinly and wastefully.” Wendell indicates by the question mark after his comment that he intends his comment as a kind of pun—he is winking at Shepard, figuratively speaking.

Shepard’s account is interesting because it fails to provide the narrative we would expect in a theme whose subject is a train accident. The wreck itself is as graphic and distinct as imaginable, yet Shepard actually reports very little of that event. Unlike newspaper accounts, which were typically crammed with vivid images, eyewitness accounts, and shocking details, reported under a long list of screaming headlines, Shepard’s theme turns away from the wreckage and the
event itself, and it becomes, essentially, a theme about his own reaction to the sight of the accident.

The theme is also interesting because of the camera that Shepard carried, and the unrestricted access to the accident scene that his camera provided. The ability to make "instantaneous photographs" was still a new development at the time. Few themes mention the action of taking photographs, but photographs of artworks are sometimes listed in descriptions that students write of the decoration of their dormitory rooms. The concept of photography is important nevertheless for understanding daily themes,...

"No book, no guidance, nothing to go by. I had to see it myself"

Wendell's talks to his class, and speeches that he made on other occasions show that in his own mind the intellectual activity of composing was consonant with the larger movement in education to champion "the inductive philosophy" in teaching and research. The new university sought to base learning and teaching on experiment, a method that depends on experience in its most essential definition. Charles W. Eliot often argued that students needed to be taught to rely upon their own senses, rather than being taught to depend on books and approved authorities. The methods of Louis Agassiz came to exemplify the new stance to be taken towards learning, a stance Eliot recounts here in a popular anecdote:

When young Bigelow arrived for the first time at the laboratory, Professor Agassiz gave him a trilobite, a notebook, and a piece of drawing paper, and said, "Examine this object all day, describe in this notebook what you see, and make a drawing of the trilobite as you see it." Young Bigelow
worked over the trilobite all the morning, and thought he had described and drawn everything he could possibly see in it; but during the afternoon he discovered a few points which he had not recorded. The next morning Professor Agassiz looked at Bigelow's drawing and remarked, "You have not seen half of it. Go right on." That process lasted three days. Young Bigelow found it interesting though difficult. He went home to spend Sunday, and his father asked him what he had done at the laboratory. Young Bigelow having described the process, his father said, "What! No lecture, no sketch from Mr. Agassiz, not instructions as to what you were to see?" "None," the son said; "No book, no guidance, nothing to go by. I had to see it myself. I had to describe it all myself." "Well," said the father, "that is exactly the way a puppy has to learn." The comparison was a just one; but Dr. Bigelow omitted to say that what a puppy learns he learns admirably well, and that is a matter of life and death to him to put it into practice. (55-56)

Eliot repeated this story often over the years to explain the underlying rationale for far reaching changes in the university curriculum. He lauds law Professor C. C. Langdell for developing methods of teaching law from actual case histories, for example, and praises drawing, singing, and sports as forms of physical training that will help students think more acutely (18-33). He recommends applying the principle of concreteness to the study of literature and language as well (Concrete 52-3).

Here, late in his life, Eliot reiterates recommendations that he had been urging throughout his long career as an educator.

It proceeds from the observation of the concrete and the practical; it seeks the fact, it thinks little of the abstract or the speculative; it does not rely on any kind of revelation. It studies the fact, the concrete object, vegetable or mineral, solid, liquid, gaseous, or ethereal; the thing or being that can be seen, heard, or touched; the movement or process that can be weighed or measured...And having observed the facts by eye or ear or touch, or any other sense-process, it compares fact with fact, group of facts with group, and from that comparison and the resulting classification, it draws some very limited inference, the next step in advance, not a far-reaching speculation away out among the stars or the atoms, not a full-fledged theory, but the very next step beyond the facts observed. And then it
makes a careful record of all these observations, the groupings, the leadings, and he inferences" (Tendency 7-8) [my emphasis]

In this sense, the inductive philosophy was represented by Eliot and its other advocates as the "modern" approach to education.

In a speech Wendell prepared to read to students on the last day of class in May, 1888, it is already apparent to him that the field of composition is not regarded by some in the university community as an intellectually essential subjects, or as a subject elevated enough to be taught in the university. While Wendell conceives of composing—putting something with something, and then finding the best way to express it in language—is an essential aspect of every discipline, others do not share this view. The detractors, who wish to push what they regard as the menial burden of teaching writing onto secondary and elementary educators, identify composition only with the study of expression, the aspects Wendell calls "simple enough to be grasped by a child," and "that lesser but not contemptible benefit that our critics think the whole thing—the mere habitual mastery of technique [and] method." They ignore the most fundamental phase of composing—the act of making connections, or of doing what William James might have called "bringing something before the footlights of consciousness."

No doubt Wendell is reacting against the report on English Composition presented at the end of the previous year by Charles Francis Adams and others, and published in the Annual Report to the Board of Overseers. The report strikingly equates "writing" with a very narrow definition of grammatical and
mechanical correctness, and fails completely to account for the idea of composition as a "focusing of the lens of consciousness" that Wendell has tried to promote in his assignments.

And so the first cracks have become evident in a fissure between composition and other university subjects that has plagued the discipline ever since. In his talk to students Wendell begins:

Were [English Composition] no more than what it is commonly thought—the art of using one's own language decently; were the first result of the study nothing but an increased power of putting words together prettily, I should agree with who condemns it as unfit for a university course. Even now I go a good way with those who condemn as elementary much that we do.

Then, countering this representation of composition, Wendell goes on to say:

I believe yearly more [and] more that the work we are at has a place in education not fully appreciated. These words, etc. are only our tools; these qualities only our catch-words, to text the effects we produce, to keep in mind when we criticize our work—what we are trying to effect, + where we are likely to fail. The task of using these tools, when we have once mastered them ...is a task that to me never grows old [and] never fruitless.

I cannot too often repeat that to me this art of writing presents itself more + more as a fine art; + the study of it, in all its branches, a study that, pursued in the spirit, results in a singularly broad culture.

This breadth of culture comes from the fact that unlike most matters we deal with in college... the work of the writer is essentially creative. He sees, or feels, or thinks something for himself. With what mastery of his tools, the tests we apply will show, he translates this thought into words. He has made something that was not before.

Wendell makes clear later in his talk that he understands "faithful, regular" practice of composing the daily themes to be an essential part of the training in composition, regardless of the artistic merit of the resulting texts. "This art-work of ours teaches us in a way I have hardly suggested to you before, to see what
real life is," Wendell tells the students, suggesting that such work is a healthy antidote to the rest of school training, which has been almost entirely "in books."

Seen on their own terms, the daily themes were an exercise in crafting impressions of real life and in honing consciousness in a direct way that was not for the most part available to students in other areas of study.
CHAPTER III

RACE, COMPOSITION, AND "OUR ENGLISH":
PERFORMING THE MOTHER-TONGUE
IN THE DAILY THEMES FOR ENGLISH 12

Not one in a hundred, or a thousand, of those who speak realizes that he 'uses language;' but there is no one who does not know well enough that he can talk. That is to say, language, to the general apprehension of its users, is simply a means of receiving from others and giving to them: what it is to the individual soul, what it is to the race, few have reach of vision to see.

William Dwight Whitney. Life and Growth of Language.

Introduction

One of the remarkable features of the daily themes written for Barrett Wendell's English 12 course at Harvard is simply that they are written in English. This fact may not seem exceptional to compositionists today, who emphasize the processes of composing, and render more or less invisible (until confronted by non-native English speakers in the classroom) the language in which their assignments are written. It is not unusual to speak of composition as being "housed" in the English department, for example, as if writing pedagogy is in, but not of the discipline of English. This term, "housing," suggests transient, impersonal accommodations like barracks or dormitories, and implies that the English department provides a roof over the head of composition, but is not truly
its home. This perceived disjunction has been reinforced by disciplinary histories that have tended to focus either on the story of literary studies or on the story of writing instruction, (especially its marginalized status in relation to literary studies), but not on both together.

But materials from the Harvard program belie this image of the relationship between composition and English. Charles William Eliot, Adams Sherman Hill, Barrett Wendell, and others who built the writing program at Harvard emphatically envisioned both the teaching of composition and the study of literature as two aspects of one larger project to champion English not only as a modern language (as differentiated from the dead classical languages) but also as “the mother-tongue.” For these men, a single focus on teaching English united the various functions of the department under one goal, a goal that emerges clearly in the criticism Adams Sherman Hill leveled at existing college English departments in 1888: “None provides the requisite facilities for a student who desires to master his mother-tongue in its history as a language, in its completeness as a literature, and in its full scope as a means of expression with the pen and the lips” (Our 75). Unlike these, Hill’s own department at Harvard, did encompass the full scope outlined in his critique. A “Description of Courses in English” at Harvard for 1886-87 listed its “three objects” as: “I. A scientific knowledge of the origin and development of the English language and literature; II. A general acquaintance with English Literature during some of its most flourishing periods; III. Some proficiency in English Composition” (HUA). Of these three goals, the study of composition was considered to be the most
essential for the "man who wishes to know...about the language he is going to use all his life" (Hill *Our* 76). Writing by students at Harvard, as well as annual reports, articles, books, lectures, and writing assignments by administrators and members of the faculty reflect the assumption that composition was at home in—was even the heart of—the English department.

The shift to using English as the medium of instruction was a key aspect of the curriculum reforms that built a distinctively American research university, reforms spearheaded by Harvard under the presidency of Charles W. Eliot. In "The New Education: Its Organization," a two-part article that had appeared in the February and March, 1869, issues of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Eliot had included the introduction of English among his recommendations for revitalizing American colleges, and also advocated teaching new subjects, adopting investigative methods of research, and offering a fully elective curriculum. In one respect, the shift to English was motivated by a rejection of Greek and Latin (and all of the pedagogical baggage that came with them) as the privileged languages and texts of the liberal arts education. A tradition of such long standing was not dislodged easily, though, and Eliot was compelled to articulate the reasons for his decision over and over throughout his life. He delivered a final, definitive critique of required Latin in *Latin and the A.B. Degree*, a pamphlet prepared for the General Education Board in 1917, almost a half century after he had written the 1869 *Atlantic Monthly* essays. The ideal of the cultivated person had changed, he argued, and, in addition to classical learning, the body of human knowledge included many new subjects, such as zoology, geology, botany, engineering,
architecture and landscape architecture, political science and economics. More importantly, Greek and Latin should no longer be the center of a college education because teaching the "dead" languages and texts, and employing the rote methods traditionally used to teach them, got in the way of the true object of education: encouraging students to rely on their own senses to carry out inductive investigation—observing carefully, recording their observations, and making limited inferences based on those observations.

It would be inaccurate, however, to represent the adoption of English as a neutral move, as if English merely emerged by default to fill the vacuum left by the classical languages. Beyond making English the medium of instruction, Eliot argued for institutionalizing English as an object of knowledge in its own right. In "What is a Liberal Education?" he writes, "The first subject which...is entitled to recognition as of equal academic value or rank with any subject now most honored, is the English language and literature" (Educational Reform 97). Others at Harvard, such as Barrett Wendell, Adams Sherman Hill, Josiah Royce, and George Lyman Kittredge, also worked hard to promote English studies by speaking to teachers, delivering lectures to the public, publishing textbooks, and serving on committees outside of the university. They all very consciously wielded the prestige and cultural weight of their institution to support efforts at reform, not only by instituting the written entrance exams in English, but also by publicizing their views in journals such as Atlantic Monthly, Scribner's, Andover Review, and Century Magazine. The President's Report for 1886-87—the year these themes were written—foregrounds a four-page review of the efforts of Hill
and others to press for the teaching of English in schools, and to standardize both what to teach and how to teach it.

But Eliot was only the most famous and influential spokesperson for a wide movement to introduce English into American education that also found supporters among public officials, school administrators, teachers, and college presidents from every part of the country. In *Tradition and Reform in the Teaching of English*, Arthur N. Applebee measures the phenomenal success of the movement by the fact that it was able—in the space of mere decades—to shift public debate away from wondering *whether* to teach English to discussing *how* it should be taught (36). Notwithstanding Eliot’s chronic fretting about the slowness of educational reform, English became established as a regular subject in American schools through a series of relatively quick developments. A comprehensive plan for a liberal arts education designed in the late 1850’s by Thomas Hill, Eliot’s predecessor in the presidency of Harvard, had not even mentioned English among the subjects to be studied in elementary school, secondary school, or college (Hill *True Order*), but by 1883, when the Modern Language Association was organized, “representatives of twenty leading colleges could tally... thirty-nine teachers of English among their several institutions,” as Applebee observes, and by 1900 (a mere 17 years later), “major universities in all sections of the country were offering graduate degrees in English literature,” and English had become an “almost universal offering” at the undergraduate level (28).
The desire to standardize proliferating college entrance requirements and to systematize high school education led to conferences of teachers and administrators, beginning with a regional meeting of New England colleges in 1879 (Applebee 30). In 1892, the National Educational Association commissioned a group of ten important educators from across the country, the famous Committee of Ten, to report on the status of nine different subjects in the schools (including English) and to make recommendations for national standards. In the final Report of the Committee, published in 1893, English was the only subject out of the nine that was deemed essential for all students in all four years of high school (Applebee 33). The goals articulated for English study in this report still reflect the single overarching purpose that characterized Harvard's English program. Rhetorical and philological studies are seen as separate, but "mutually dependent" approaches of that "should never be dissociated" for a full understanding of English: "(1) to enable the pupil to understand the expressed thoughts of others and to give expression to thoughts of his own; and (2) to cultivate a taste for reading, to give the pupil some acquaintance with good literature, and to furnish him with the means of extending that acquaintance" (United States Bureau of Education 86).

The rapid "birth" of English as an academic discipline was made possible, Applebee claims, by two developments: first, the cultural understanding of literature articulated most prominently by Matthew Arnold, and second, the emergence of philology, with its scientific approaches to studying language. Arnold's essays portrayed the study of literature as a means to forge a national
cohesion in an industrial era riven by class warfare. Theories and practices of nineteenth century philology provided the rigorous methodology that English needed to render the genteel “appreciation” of literature rather old-fashioned and to define itself as a moral science on a par with other newly prestigious scientific disciplines (25-28). But Applebee does not spell out the ways Eliot’s reforms constructed a racialized vision of American identity as the basis for an educational system that would be truly, originally American. While English was, indeed, the spoken language of most Harvard students and faculty members, the decision to teach it, and even to require composition courses for all students in an otherwise fully elective curriculum, was motivated not by mere practicality but by theories that linked language to the formation of race and nation. Because philological descriptions of language were intimately entwined with processes of defining and constructing race, philological theories identifying language with a “folk” provided an important rationale for studying English seriously in the first place. Arguments that drew on the concept of the mother tongue upheld the use of English because it created a bond among its speakers, a basis for community—an internal function. Other statements, closely related to those arguments, tout the virtues of English as linguistically superior, and characterize the language in relation to the external, to its Others.

**Literature and Culture**

Literary historians have discussed at length the ways in which Matthew Arnold’s ideas in “Culture and Anarchy” provided a fundamentally nationalist
motivation for the study of literature in schools (cf. Applebee 22-4). Arnold had famously argued "to know ourselves and the world' we have, as the means to this end, 'to know the best which has been thought and said in the world'"("Literature" 82). The class formations produced by industrialization created new forms of social tension, and it was Arnold's conviction that the best works of literature could bring "spiritual grace" to their readers and provide a vision of unity to a secularized nation that could no longer count on the church to provide a means of social cohesion and control (Culture).

Important public intellectuals in America such as Horace Elisha Scudder, a writer and publisher of children's books and editor of the Atlantic Monthly, did seem to echo Arnold's vision of literature as a builder of national, rather than solely individual, sensibility (Applebee 38; Brier 248). Arnold's ideas were instrumental in convincing publishers and educators of the moral value inherent in reading complete works of literature, rather than simply knowing that they existed. The authors of the report on English produced for the Committee of Ten reflect Arnold's kind of humanism when they assert that "the mechanical use of 'manuals of literature' should be avoided, and the committing to memory of names and dates should not be mistaken for culture" (Unites States Bureau of Education 91). Literature compendia produced in earlier parts of the century had consisted of long, inclusive lists of books and authors, but did not reproduce the works themselves. Arnold's writings also spread the idea of "touchstones"—works whose essential value had not eroded with the passage of time, whose greatness was proven by surviving generation after generation of readers.
But if Arnold's humanism provided a rationale for studying literature in an age besotted with the possibilities of science, his arguments do not explain passionate endorsements for institutionalizing the study of English. Arnold himself did not confine his idea of "great literature" either to works in English or to works of the imagination. In "Literature and Science" he emphatically distinguishes his broad idea of literature from the "ornamental" scope of belles lettres; "all knowledge that reaches us through books is literature," he asserts (90). He advocates studying Greek and Roman law, philosophy, poetry in the original languages, and reading Euclid and Newton as well as poetry and history. Arnold recommended reading "the best that had been thought and said" in all genres and all works that had survived the test of time.

Arnold's broad definition of literature does not fit precisely with the aims for American education expressed by Eliot and Adams Sherman Hill, who promote not the study of literature in general, but the study of English. In "What is a Liberal Education?" an essay he wrote for The Century in 1884, for example, Eliot describes why he considers English language and literature to be at the top of the list of subjects with high academic value:

It cannot be doubted that English literature is beyond all comparison the amplest, most various, and most splendid literature which the world has seen; and it is enough to say of the English language that it is the language of that literature. Greek literature compares with English as Homer compares with Shakspere, that is, as infantile with adult civilization. It may further be said of the English tongue that it is the native tongue of nations which are preeminent in the world by force of character, enterprise, and wealth, and whose political and social institutions have a higher moral interest and greater promise than any which mankind has hitherto invented. To the original creations of English genius are to be added translations into English of all the masterpieces of other literatures, sacred and profane. It is a

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
very rare scholar who has not learned much more about the Jews, the Greeks, or the Romans through English than through Hebrew, Greek, or Latin. (Educational 98)

In the essay, Eliot lingers on English for many more paragraphs before moving on to consider other subjects. In the passage quoted above, he clearly is not tapping into Arnold’s rationale for the study of “the best that has been thought and said” from a wide range of languages and civilizations.

It may be that in this passage Eliot is echoing the nationalistic fervor that characterized introductions to literary compendia published earlier in the century. Sharon Crowley has considered these introductions in terms of the process by which literature studies and composition studies became separated. In “Literature and Composition: Separate but Certainly not Equal,” she describes a series of shifts in the meaning of literature as it changed radically over the course of the nineteenth century, from “repository of nationalist culture and moral sentiment” to “ideal repository of human experience” to “means of developing individual taste” (Composition 81). Drawing on Raymond Williams, Crowley writes that “The ideological transformation of literature involved two steps: the suppression of the role of composition in the production of literature; and the redefinition of the completed literary text as an embodiment of ‘the full, central, immediate human experience.’” (80)

Theorists such as Gupti Viswanathan and Alastair Pennycook, who study the role colonialism played in shaping the teaching of English, provide further insight into the attitudes evidenced in Eliot’s essays. In Masks of Conquest, Viswanathan has pointed out that English literature was established in the
curriculum in British colonies by the 1820's, long before it was institutionalized in England itself. Furthermore, English literature was an important subject in the entrance examinations for the Indian Civil Service before it became a subject for examination in the home country (2-3). "No serious account of its [i.e. the discipline of English] growth and development," Viswanathan writes, "can afford to ignore the imperial mission of educating and civilizing colonial subjects in the literature and thought of England, a mission that in the long run served to strengthen Western cultural hegemony in enormously complex ways" (2).

Theorizing the curriculum as a "constructed reality" responding to very specific contexts, Viswanathan refuses to see the Indian and the English systems as determining each other, despite the close parallels between British policy in India and Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*. She does, however, postulate a "fluidity of movement" between the two.

Alastair Pennycook's study, *English and the Discourses of Colonialism*, explores how present day English language teaching is still closely entwined with practices and discourses of colonialism, long after the demise of the British Empire as a political entity. Pennycook argues that it is important for language teachers to question many taken-for-granted practices to understand their formation in colonial contexts. His work discusses such issues as representations of English, which is regularly contrasted with images of other languages; constructions of the Self and of the Other in language teaching; and particular tropes that characterize colonialist discourses that cling to discussions of English teaching. Certainly, Pennycook's discussion illuminates the passage.
in which Eliot represents an English Self in relation to less-developed, historical Others (portraying the English Self as adult and the Others as children), and extols the "political and social institutions " of the English speaking nations as having a "higher moral interest and greater promise" than any in the world—all tropes common to colonialist discourse. Elsewhere in his writings, Eliot describes his plan for education as a response to the needs of the American people whom he describes as "fighting the wilderness, physical and moral"—a description, Pennycook would recognize, that also perpetuates distinctly colonialist tropes: the "emptiness" of the lands being settled and the bringing of civilization to the new territory (Eliot "New Education"; Pennycook 10-21).

Viswanathan's and Pennycook's work indicates that further study might reveal ways in which America drew on colonialist constructions for its own curricula. Research could look at the use of written entrance examinations, for example, which have been linked to colonial practices by Bernard Spolsky in Measured Words, a study of the development of objective language testing ( ). It would also be worthwhile to find out if the famous comment made by Macaulay—that "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia"—inspired in some way Eliot's equally famous (and also controversial) collaboration with Collier's to publish the Harvard Classics. In public addresses, Eliot had urged Americans to continue their educations by reading 15 minutes a day, asserting that a five-foot shelf could hold all of the works essential to a liberal education (Hawkins 292-6; James
Charles W. Eliot). After his retirement in 1909, Eliot selected and edited the
series with the assistance of William A. Neilson, an English professor at Harvard.

English and Philology

When Adams Sherman Hill declares that "from the beginning to the end of
the pre-collegiate course, the one thing that should never be lost sight of is the
mother tongue" ("Answer" 51); or when Charles Francis Adams, Edwin Lawrence
Godkin, and Josiah Quincy write in an assessment report, "What is English
Composition? It is the art of writing the mother tongue," (Report 95); or when, in
1869, in his inaugural address as university president, Charles W. Eliot, quoting
Locke, says, "If any one among us have a facility or purity more than ordinary in
his mother-tongue, it is owing to chance, or his genius, or anything rather than to
his education" (Educational Reform 2), these men are engaging with the concept
of the mother tongue, a key idea in the discourses of comparative philology.

Taken in its broadest sense, philology refers to the "branch of knowledge which
deals with human speech, and with all that speech discloses as to the nature and
history of man," a definition that incorporates a wide scattering of literary and
linguistic investigations dating back to classical times (Whitney "Philology" 414).
But used more often in its restricted sense, philology refers to the historical, or
comparative, linguistics that developed when scientific methods were applied to
the description of languages, and languages began to be studied not in isolation
but in comparison to one another "in order to bring to light their relationships,
their structures, their histories" (414). Like geologists, who observed features of
the earth’s surface, and, applying their knowledge of geological processes, 
pieced together narratives of what had happened to the earth’s crust in the past, 
philologists minutely described the “surface features” of living languages and 
interpreted what they observed as having been formed by the workings of 
linguistic laws operating over extensive periods of time.

Philologists were highly conscious of the fact that, unlike the physical 
human body, which revealed only general, often misleading, information about its 
genealogy, languages preserved traces of past events encoded into every aspect 
of their structures—in words, syntax, semantics—that allowed philologists to 
discern a people’s past means of subsistence, their migrations, their past 
encounters with other groups, the passing into obsolescence of parts of their 
culture, information which might otherwise be lost to memory. As Christopher 
Hutton explains, part of the process of describing and comparing languages “was 
the postulation and creation of new horizons of identity and identification across 
vast expanses of time and space”(305). He describes philology as 

the dream-factory of the colonial scholar-official, one in which the 
linguistic diversity of the world could be mapped out, labeled and 
compared. In this way, the migrations and wanderings of the peoples 
could be brought into a single explanatory framework, and the crisis of 
resemblance and difference resolved or at least controlled by appeal 
to science and objectivity. (305)

While philologists generally refused to theorize that language could be attached 
to race in any technical, biological sense (they stated, in other words, that 
language could not be genetically transmitted from one generation to the next), in 
practice, their concept of the mother tongue made it very difficult to imagine 
language separately from race.
Eliot’s commitment to philology can be inferred from the first hire he attempted after his accession to the presidency of Harvard in 1869: William Dwight Whitney, the most important and influential philologist in America, and one of the few American scholars to be highly respected in Europe as well. Whitney was a consummate Sanskrit scholar, trained in Germany, who, in addition to writing and translating extensively for a scholarly audience, worked very hard to keep the public informed of advances in linguistic science. Whitney’s work is especially significant because he conceived of linguists not only as engaging in scientific description, but as also contributing to the formation of language policies in public life and in education. Michael Silverstein explains that Whitney had “a real belief in the intimate relationship between the cultural institutions of a people and their ‘progress’...To understand the dynamics of language as it functions in a community meant that one could ascertain how to proceed in implementing an engineered reform as well as how to infer past history” (xiv). Whitney campaigned for spelling reform, for example, moved by his historical scholarship to work for changes in contemporary practices.

The idea of a “mother tongue” shows up in Whitney’s work when he discusses the question that, according to him, “determines well-nigh the whole of linguistic philosophy”: the issue of language acquisition, or, how “each speaking individual becomes[s] possessed of his speech” (Life 7). For him, the correct answer to this question is that language is “taught us by those among whom our lot is cast in childhood” (7), a common-sense observation that denies, he says, “two other conceivable answers”: “That language is a race characteristic, and as
such, inherited from one's ancestry, along with color, physical constitution, traits of character, and the like; and that it is independently produced by each individual, in the natural course of his bodily and mental growth" (8). To rebut the idea that language is a" race characteristic," Whitney cites the American community "where there are...descendants of African, of Irish, of German, of southern European, of Asiatic, as well as of English ancestors, all using the same dialect, ...none showing a trace of any other 'mother tongue' or 'native speech,'" and he provides further examples of missionary children acquiring local speech as "naturally' as do the children of the natives" no matter where their parents may have originated (8). As for the idea that speakers produce their own speech independently as a natural process of development, he quickly dismisses it on similar evidence, because it implies that each person would have to inherit from their ancestors the ability to "develop unconsciously the same speech as theirs," and, as he has already argued, language is not passed on by blood (9).

But despite Whitney's assertion that there can be no scientific basis for claiming that language is inherited, or that it is linked to race in a physical sense, he still, nevertheless, understands language to be a "race acquisition" and in that sense to be "a pretty reliable indicator of race"(qtd. in Hutton). It was the idea of a mother tongue that made it possible for Whitney to describe language as an "indicator" of race though not pertaining to it; the idea indicates that even though language cannot be passed along genetically, learning it in infancy as part of the intimate bond with one's mother is almost—but not quite—the same thing.
The mother tongue idea arose from philologists' recognition that language exists in a liminal area between nature and culture. On one hand, language is not natural: "The essential difference," Whitney writes, "which separates man's means of communication in kind as well as degree from that of the other animals, is that while that latter is instinctive, the former is, in all its parts, arbitrary and conventional" (*Life* 282). Unlike other baby animals, who are born with the innate ability to chirp, bark, or growl like others of their species, human infants must be taught to express themselves in language. On the other hand, language is not, strictly speaking, artificial, either, since an individual person or group of people does not consciously create it. Humans are born *into* a language: If they do not have innate knowledge of a particular language, they do have an inborn ability to *learn* language, a task that they undertake when they are very young, before they can be fully conscious of what they are doing. The mother tongue is thus the language learned "in the immediacy of the family unit as the primary act of socialization" (Hutton 296).

To Whitney, language was a cultural institution that arose initially out of a desire to communicate, but became as it developed an important facilitator for thought as well. "The kind and degree of thinking which we do nowadays would be impossible without language-signs," Whitney wrote in an entry on philology for the *Encyclopedia Britannica* ("Philology" 415). He asserts that the language learned in infancy forms its speaker culturally in the most fundamental sense, and determines what that person will be capable of thinking, saying, or doing:

Every single language has...its own peculiar framework of established distinctions, its shapes and forms of thought, into which, for the human...
being who learns that language as his "mother-tongue," is cast the content and product of his mind, his store of impressions, however acquired, his experience and knowledge of the world....It amounts simply to this: that the mind which was capable of doing otherwise has been led to view things in this particular way, to group them in a certain manner, to contemplate them consciously in these and those relations. (Life 21-2)

Conceived as the mother tongue, language becomes more than a useful tool for communication: it becomes "a repository of fundamental values" (Hutton 296). "The spread of the mother-tongue is thus the triumph of a particular sensibility," Hutton writes. "The individual is socialized not only into a family or a clan, but into an immense community which linguistics has discovered"(298). The mother tongue functions as a bond linking its speakers in a distinct community across geographical boundaries; it also unites its speakers across time, connecting living speech with history.

In his study of the idea of the mother tongue, Christopher Hutton points out that philology came to be understood as a key to human history, conceived as "a history of social units with their own individual sets of emotional associations, world views and beliefs" (296). Hutton also claims that the vast historical and geographical communities defined by language combined with an awareness of the arbitrary, changeable nature of language to create a "crisis of identification and assimilation" in nineteenth century and much of twentieth century linguistics. The transmission of language was imagined to be stable in communities that were perceived to be relatively "less advanced" and therefore living in relative isolation, rarely mingling with other groups, and keeping the boundaries of race impermeable. The boundaries of language were perceived
to be more threatened in communities that were "more advanced" and thus continuously expanding, encountering other languages and other peoples in the course of conquest, commerce or the spreading of religion. "It is not the wild or obscure races which are, or have ever been, mixing blood and mixing or shifting speech upon a grand scale; it is the cultivated ones," Whitney writes in *The Life and Growth of Language*. "If one barbarous tribe overcomes another...there is not usually a change of speech; but nations like the Romans and the Arabs, who come with the force of an organized polity and a literature, extend their speech widely over strange communities" (274-5).

The "horror of assimilation" that Hutton sees expressed in nineteenth century writing about language reflects a fear that as a language expands, and as it is transmitted to an ever wider number of speakers in an ever wider geographical expanse, it will "assimilate" changes and influences to such an extent that it will lose its value "as a key to history and the reconstruction of earlier human unities...This not only excludes linguistics from playing a role in the reconstruction of human history, but also implies that history is fundamentally mute and impenetrable, an endless and disordered mixing of peoples, landscapes and languages" (Hutton 299).

The "horror of assimilation" Hutton describes would explain the profound sense of vulnerability that pervades discussions of language teaching, like the five essays collected into Adam Sherman Hill's *Our English*, for example. Hill chooses a paragraph from Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* as an epigraph for the
book, a paragraph that clearly expresses the perception that forces of internal
and especially external change assail English from all sides:

In prose I doubt whether it be even possible to preserve our style
wholly unalloyed by the vicious phraseology which meets us
everywhere, from the sermon to the newspaper, from the harangue of
the legislator to the speech from the convivial chair, announcing a
toast or a sentiment. Our chains rattle even while we are complaining
of them...Much, however, may be effected by education.

In a country that was in the midst of absorbing millions of non-English-speaking
immigrants, and was in the midst of expanding its territories into “empty” lands
peopled by speakers of dozens of Native American and European languages, the
fervor for institutionalizing English study was produced as an antidote to the
forces that threatened to erode the language. The nature of the mother tongue
as only partly natural, yet not fully artificial called for a strict attitude if the ties to
race and culture were to be preserved. “It requires an act of will to maintain the
link between race, ethnicity, heritage, tradition on the one hand, and language,”
Hutton explains. “That act of will had to be collective”(304). To adopt a laissez
faire stance in the relation to language would be to let racial and national
identifications to grow out of control.

The movement to establish English in schools and colleges was charged
with the powerful mix of identification and anxiety that characterized philological
thinking about the mother tongue. On one hand, English inspired such strong
champions because it was a means for envisioning a specific American identity.
It created a connection to Anglo Saxon predecessors, a people and a culture
perceived to be rough, but tough and uncompromising in their attachment to
independence. It possessed an extensive literature that was thought to embody
the essence of Anglo Saxon character as it evolved, matured and extended out into the world. Finally, it was considered to be the most practical and flexible tool for thinking. In all of these ways, English—as medium of instruction, as means of expression, as literature—was ideally integrated into the project to remake Harvard education for "the American boy who needs..." etc. On the other hand, the reverence for the mother tongue came with a proprietary sense of needing to maintain its "purity" in the face of the corrosive effects of other native tongues as new speakers were incorporated. Far from assuming that its native speakers would be fully authoritative, and fully in command of it use, or that a mother tongue, by definition, need not be taught (much less in college), educators, without a hint of irony, kept pushing for more and more vigilance around language. Hill's telling use of the possessive pronoun in the title of his book, Our English, suggests both the way language had become laden with a sense of group identification, as well as the way he felt responsible for protecting the vulnerabilities of English, for making sure correctness remained an important issue.

Language and the Daily Themes

If the institutionalization of English in schools, and the specific goals for the study of English were debated widely by those who were shaping the curriculum, they are referred to only rarely and obliquely in the themes themselves. They form nevertheless, the condition in which English courses could come into being, including Barrett Wendell's English 12. Studying
Wendell’s course lecture notes and reading the themes produced for the daily theme assignment provides some insight into how these broader underlying discourses played out in practice in the classroom. The extent to which students endorsed the study of English in their own minds can be inferred from the numbers who signed up for this elective course. In academic year 1886-87, when the entire undergraduate enrollment was 1,080 students (240 of them Juniors) 144 chose to take Wendell’s class. The students in English 12 were mostly Juniors, but also included graduate students, Seniors, Sophomores and “Specials.” (Eliot President’s Report 51). It seems unlikely that a student would have chosen to take the course if he were not committed to “improving his ability to use the mother tongue,” considering the amount of work and the quality of involvement that Wendell expected. The assignment of dailies and 16 fortnightlies set up a marathon of writing tasks that lasted the entire year, and the requirement that students choose their own topics pushed them to engage earnestly in the writing.

The following theme suggests the degree to which the writer had internalized the importance of writing well in English, and felt entitled to assess the use of language in others, as he had been assessed himself:

I have just received a letter from a sub freshman who wishes to obtain my room for next year as I think of taking a single room when my brother leaves college. The epistle was a specimen of about the poorest English that I have ever read—that is coming from a fellow who is about to enter college. I wonder if he will pass his entrance examination in English. I rather doubt it. I wonder if he will take English courses while in college. I doubt this too but hope for his sake that he will and that he will learn to write a letter, during his four years at the university, that would not disgrace a primary school boy as the one I received certainly does. (Sampson April 27, 1887)
In this theme, H. W. Sampson criticizes the letter-writer not for being a poor writer, but for having the "poorest English that I have ever read." In doubting that the student will take English courses to improve his abilities, Sampson, by implication, congratulates himself on his own decision to take Wendell's class. This theme also foregrounds our awareness of the context in which it was written, since we may wonder if Sampson, acutely aware of his audience, expects his indignation about the sub freshman's English to meet with his professor's approval.

Several of the themes by Robert Treat Paine engage deeply with the project of learning English. In the following example, Paine wonders if producing "specimens of excellent English" gets in the way of writing the "truth":

Climatic Paragraphs

Macaulay is certainly one of England's most brilliant writers yet he failed to accomplish his end unless he had the unworthy motive of seeking his own praise. He intended presumably in his history of Great Britain to give the precise facts. It is acknowledged however that he failed to present a fair case. Why? He was writing a book! He was a litterateur. Therefore his works must be specimens of excellent English. He failed to reconcile this requirement with historical truth. Yet he had wonderful power. If he failed, must not we all? If so, there must be something radically wrong with our ideal. For often we cannot expect that there should be in a century more than one or two men surpassing Macaulay. Then the vast number of good writers cannot write good paragraphs; for truth must precede brilliancy. But their usage determines the proper way of writing English. Does it not follow that it is wrong to seek to give every paragraph a sharply defined climax. Either our ideas cannot endure such a strain or the necessary forms of our language are wanting. (October 13, 1886)

Here Paine reads against the grain of prevailing ideas about the place of literature in composition classrooms. As embodiments of the purest expression of both the spirit of a people and the essence of a language, literary works were...
thought to exist not as a separate kind of writing, but as the most essential or intense versions of the language that all its speakers use. Literary works were considered to be at an extreme, but still on the same continuum with the speech or writing of any member of the English speaking community. When Paine suggests that "there must be something wrong with our ideal," he is doubting the reverence for English as language itself, both as it is expressed in Macaulay's attempt (misguided in Paine's view) to be a "litterateur" and in the use of Macaulay as an inspiring model for other writers of English, an attempt Paine considers to be futile for the vast majority of writers.

In a second theme, Paine again questions advice about style received, in this case, from Emerson:

**The Superlative**

The use of the positive should be cultivated; almost without exception such a statement is greatly stronger than one containing several superlatives. Emerson says that its use shows a lack of perception of quality and that the user to make good his deficiency tries to overestimate the quantity. I should not want to give too readily my assent to this dictum, for from my experience it is chiefly Society people and those who desire to keep up an interesting flow of conversation that use exaggerations and gross overstatements. The country man has a decided bent for understating and minimizing the case and says of something that he feels will be injurious: "Well, that won't do very much good." How delightful and impressive is such a remark in contrast with the talk of Society. (January 31, 1887)

This theme again show's Paine's tendency to refuse absolute rules for the use of language, even when the rule shows up with the imprimatur of a revered intellectual like Emerson. Instead Paine considers the issue of use in question and refers it to "my own experience." He moves towards understanding language use contextually, and differentiates speakers according to class. Paine
describes the usage of “the countryman” not as ignorant of the “proper” forms, but as a valid—even more admirable—expression of a different identity, resulting in a different rhetorical effect.

T. T. Seelye also considers the intersections of language and identity in a number of his themes. In Seelye’s writing, we can see him testing his identity as a writer and speaker of English, trying on a Self that is often delineated through the representation of linguistic Others. In one theme, Seelye, equating the character of a people with the character of its literature, scoffs at the idea that Shakespeare’s work could be translated into any language, particularly French:

The new French version of Hamlet is said to be a very great success. We can hardly imagine a translation of any of Shakespeare’s plays into any language being a success; and especially that wonderful tragedy, of Hamlet translated into the French language. How would such a passage as, “O that this too too solid flesh would melt,” sound in French. I read in a newspaper that “Hail, horrors, hail!” was rendered “Comment vous portez vous Messieurs les horreurs?” The effect may be very pleasing to the French mind, but to an Anglo Saxon it seems decidedly ridiculous. Imagine Hamlet, a bowing and smiling Frenchman; or fancy the grave­digger a Frenchman! How utterly absurd it seems to us. (October 11)

Seelye emphatically identifies himself as “an Anglo Saxon” and sees himself as part of an “us” (in pronouncing “how utterly absurd it seems to us”), a member of a community defined by a language whose essential spirit is epitomized to an untranslatable degree in the work of Shakespeare. As an Anglo-Saxon, Seelye feels entitled to and responsible for defending Shakespeare from the humiliation of a “ridiculous” performance. While the “bowing and smiling” character of the French—both language and people—are spelled out in the theme, the character of the Anglo-Saxon is only implicitly represented by Hamlet—the play and the prince.
The lightweight image of French that fuels Seelye's indignation emerges again in a different theme, by a different writer, Hesseltine, signaling how broadly circulated such general characterizations of language were, and how they functioned as a code for national character:

**French and German**

There are hardly two languages more widely separated than the French and the German. One is smooth and polished and by its easy grace especially adapted for conversation. When one hears a conversation carried on in French he may even be moved to call the language flippant. The German is, on the other hand, a language of strong expression, each work having a definite and well marked sound. It abounds in gutturals and sounds to some ears even harsh. But compare the language to the French, and to an unprejudiced ear it may sound more melodious and musical than the soft and delicate language of the Frenchman. The fact that the German is more especially adapted to music is one fact that shows its power and innate melody. The German opera far surpasses the French not only in melody but in construction, for the language is capable of much grander and nobler treatment. It may well be the language of the War Gods as Wagner has shown; it is the language for noble and lofty sentiment and deep and stirring passion. (November 13, 1886)

Hesseltine, like Seelye, valorizes the Germanic language over the Romance tongue. His praise of German can be taken as at least an indication of the ways he might have also praised Anglo Saxon, since it, of course was also Germanic: it is "noble," "lofty," "stirring passion," and powerful, unlike French, which is merely "graceful" and suitable conversation.

Ironically, considering his readiness to dismiss the language for its superficiality, Seelye reveals in a later theme that he actually doesn't know enough French to follow a public reading that he attends. (Public readings of literature in various languages were offered regularly on campus.)

This afternoon I went to the French Reading, and soon found I was getting more than I had bargained for. I had no text with which to
follow the play, and after the first two minutes gave up trying to understand the French, and turned my attention during the remainder of the hour and a half to watching the audience. There were three women and one man there who evidently understood French and they acted as thermometers for the rest of us in letting us know when we ought to laugh. It was amusing to see how the people watched these few and regulated their facial expression by them. A smile might be said to creep over the audience. There was one man there who knew a little French and he generally smiled last as it took some little time to translate the jokes into English. He would then look around to see if the rest were smiling. As every body had gotten through by that time he saw nothing but sober faces, and would suddenly calm down and look as if he had been laughing at a funeral. (April 25)

That the French reading was offered, and that it appears to have been well attended leads us to imagine that a knowledge of French was taken seriously and accorded respect on some level. Seelye's debonair account of coming to realize that his French was not up to the occasion, and his perceptive reading of the audience, whose abilities were, by his guess, not much better than his, lead us to imagine, however, that on another level, his sense of identity is not heavily invested in knowing French. Far from the shudders of dismay he records in response to the idea of French translation of Hamlet, he registers only amused detachment when he realizes that listening to a French play in the original is getting in over his head.

Seelye takes Shakespeare as a starting point for another theme that treats the poet more lightly. This theme belongs to a distinct genre within the daily themes that might be called "the goodie paper." An older woman who cleaned the rooms of undergraduates, the goodie emerges as a stock character: garrulous, slipshod in her housekeeping abilities, sometimes tending to drink,
and not terribly bright, but good and well meaning at heart. Wendell dismisses this theme as “trivial” in his scribbled comment:

“Good frind for Jesus sake forbeare
To dig the dust encloased heare.
Bless be ye man that spare thes stones,
And curst be he that moves my bones.”

This facsimile of the inscription on Shakespeare’s tomb I have framed and hanging up over the looking glass in my room. By the way over the mirror is a very appropriate place for it. As I look at it now (I mean the epitaph not the mirror) I imagine that if the immortal William should walk into my room at this moment and see his own epitaph hanging up there, he would say “Please be ye man that wipes some of the dust off.” The goodie with her dust cloth rarely aspires as high as this. As a result considerable dust has been allowed to accumulate, and it now seems very probable that some day in the near future the epitaph, frame, glass, and all will be entirely hidden from sight. (January 12, 1887)

In light of the earlier theme in which he defends Shakespeare from the desecrations of translation into foreign (presumably “inferior”) languages, and explains his connection to Shakespeare’s work by the fact that he is an Anglo Saxon, it is interesting to notice, in the first place, that Seelye has put the poet’s epitaph over his mirror. However joking in tone the theme may be, the placement of the epitaph over the looking glass graphically suggests the identification with Shakespeare Seelye had already expressed in his earlier theme. The goodie’s neglectfulness in letting the dust accumulate makes Seelye increasingly unable to see who he is; eventually he will not be able to see either himself or the Shakespeare or even the mirror at all. Maintaining the identification with Shakespeare doesn’t just happen—it’s something that needs to be kept up, but the goodie “rarely aspires as high as this.”
In a single image, Seelye suggests a complex interdependence between his imagined identity as it is defined by English (that is, how he sees himself in the mirror adorned with Shakespeare's epitaph) and the performances of those who share his language but not the "aspirations" (the gooie, who is like himself in speaking English, but is Other as a woman and a person of an inferior class). Here Seelye lightheartedly reflects Hill's heavy sense of the communal effort needed to be undertaken by all speakers to prevent English from simply decaying unchecked, subject to its own internal, organic processes. No matter how much Seelye works at perfecting his English, this theme suggests, the overall effect will be for naught when it meets with the neglect of the "goodies" of this world. But Seelye's tone also suggests that while he recognizes the complex set of identifications he is being asked to assume, his acceptance of them is not without irony.

In several themes, Seelye's anxieties about language focus on poor whites who do not exert themselves to learn English better, even when confronted with superior ability in Others. In the following theme, the Others emerge as two African American children whose good English Seelye holds up as an example to shame white children who do not speak with as much "politeness:"

This afternoon as I was walking down Brattle St I met to little Negro girls. They were about five or six years old; both had remarkably bright happy faces, the usual bow legs covered by the regulation dirty white stockings, big feet clad in still bigger shoes, and had on dilapidated looking clothes in general. As I was passing I say [sic] one of them look up at the clock on the city building and heard her say, "It is just five minutes past four." —"I beg your pardon," replied the other, "but you are mistaken, it is a quarter past four." This was all that I
heard of their conversation, but I was surprised at the earnestness and politeness with which they addressed each other, for I was expecting to hear some such answer as, T'aint You'r off, or you lie. And which I probably should have heard had they been white children. (January 5, 1887)

Seelye deftly depersonalizes the two little girls by drawing them as caricatures, lumping them with all Black children in his description: their legs are “the usual bow legs,” clad in “regulation dirty white stockings.” His brief observation of them confounds his low expectations, but he applies the import of what he has seen not to these children, but to an assessment of white children. That Seelye is struck by this fleeting moment enough to write about it suggests the “anxiety of assimilation” Christopher Hutton describes as a feature of mother tongue ideology. If he were to spell out his anxiety more explicitly, perhaps Seelye would fear that the white children, failing in “earnestness and politeness,” threaten racial boundaries defined by language. He appears to find it discomfiting to recognize that his speech gives him something in common with the little girls he has seen on the street, but makes him different from other white people.

Seelye’s criticism of poor whites is even more trenchant in another theme that instead of reflecting on his own experience draws, apparently, on a published report of literacy rates in the United States:

Excepting Tennessee and North Carolina, Kentucky is said to be the most ignorant state in the union. That is she has the largest proportion of her white population, above twenty one years of age who are not able to write their names. In New York and Massachusetts where there are so many ignorant foreigners, there are only about sixty men out of every thousand who cannot write their names. Even in Kansas and Nebraska there are but thirty out of every thousand. While in Kentucky there are 173. It is said that in Kentucky there are
many members of the legislature who can neither read nor write, and that they even pride themselves on the fact, and boast that they are elected notwithstanding their ignorance. (date)

Just as in the previous example, in which he deplores the poor use of English in white children, here Seelye shames the white population of Kentucky for having such low literacy rates, contrasting them to the masses of "ignorant foreigners" in other states who have been able to learn to write their names. Today we may speculate that the presence of immigrants may actually have spurred the acquisition of literacy in populations who wanted to differentiate themselves from "ignorant foreigners"—a population of eager learners that could have included both native born Americans and new immigrants—but Seelye does not. He intimates that the ignorance of Kentuckians can be blamed on their own lack of initiative; feeling no embarrassment for their illiteracy, and confronted with no Others who surpass them, they probably feel no compulsion either to take pride in learning to read and write themselves, or to refuse political support to candidates who are illiterate.

Finally, Seelye devotes several themes to considering the freewheeling style of newspaper English and the journalistic use of slang. A suspicion of newspapers is expressed by many theme writers, and appears to be a commonplace in polite society. In a city that supported seven daily newspapers in English (and many more papers in other languages serving smaller ethnic communities), readers were continually awash in a sea of written language composed by writers that, it was felt, could not be entirely trusted with the guardianship of English and deserved to be continually questioned. Newspapers

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
represented on one hand the vital, dynamic world of the present, and they were celebrated by both Charles W. Eliot and Adams Sherman Hill as necessary reading for people who were more interested in getting involved in contemporary affairs of business, politics, and science than in mastering the esoteric, dusty facts of the past. But because of the sheer speed with which they were composed, the sheer number of words they generated, and their wide, unselective circulation, newspapers also presented dangers for the maintenance of “pure” English. In “English in Newspapers and Novels,” Hill comments that even if newspapers are not all bad,

faults of newspaper English rapidly spread through space,—a phrase that was hatched in Texas or Oregon living to chirp among the “All Sorts” of an “esteemed contemporary” in Maine, and, if very bad, dying within quotation points in a metropolitan journal, which cans it—so to speak—for exportation as an Americanism. (Our English 115)

Hill’s fears show him thinking of American national identity in terms of language and reveal the concerns with the margins of language that were a logical extension of his understanding of the mother tongue concept. Oregon and Texas literally represented the still new, still unruly geographical margins of the nation, and he perceives their incorporation as a threat to the integrity of English, describing phrases “hatched” there spreading like viruses to the established center. Hill worries that this unreliable marginal element could become part of what is perceived from outside as being “American.” In this essay, Hill lists the “varieties of bad English” with numerous examples he has culled from popular publications, and cautions that in reading these publications “our own English will be injured unless we guard against it with the utmost care” (134). He suggests
that "for the sake of our English," readers should work hard to also take in literature of a "better class" that they truly enjoy, literature that would "serve as an antidote to the noxious effects produced by the novels and newspapers of the day," and offers Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Cowper, Hawthorne, Tennyson and Whittier as good choices (135).

Writers in English 12 shared Hill's suspicion of newspapers. T. O. Shepard began one of his themes, for example, by remarking "It seems a pity that there are such things as newspapers in existence" (November 11, 1886). T. T. Seelye criticizes newspaper headlines on general moral grounds in the following theme, and conveys, as Hill does, the uneasy sense that newspaper writing is unrestrained, or not (in the parlance of nineteenth century education) "self governing":

It seems a pity that the newspapers always prefix such headings to accounts of railway and other accidents. For instance the Herald this morning headed the account of the accident which happened on the Providence railroad on Tuesday with almost a column of such stuff as "Pit of Death, Thirty Three Souls went into Eternity" &c. The reporters seem to have a morbid desire to make the accident as terrible as possible and bring out all the horrible details with refreshing accuracy. They tell us in the most flowery language of the "wild mad shriek of the wounded and dying passengers." In fact these reporters remind me of a gourmand sitting down to a good dinner who desires to eat as much as possible and lingers with increasing fondness over every dish that comes on to the table. (March 15)

In this example, Seelye echoes the reservations voiced by Hill, who complains that "in ... novels and newspapers, precision in language and nice distinctions in thought are rare," and denigrates journalists as "uneducated or imperfectly educated persons [who] are at liberty to handle their pens as they will, without guidance or criticism" (Our English 119-20). Seelye's criticism in his theme gives
some indication of the kinds of choices he might make in his own writing, and why.

Seelye does not endorse a blanket condemnation of newspapers, though, in spite of his reservations. In a different theme, Seelye responds to a criticism of the use of slang in newspapers, expressed in a letter to a "polite" journal, The Nation. Seelye is not entirely persuaded by the letter writer's criticism (not surprising, perhaps, in view of the relish with which Harvard students coined their own slang words):

A few weeks ago I saw in the Nation a letter which spoke of the secret sympathy with crime expressed in newspapers when they speak of "boodle" Aldermen & c. The writer of the letter said that this humorous way of talking about crime indicated a kind of "good natured sympathy with the actor." I have been interested since then in noticing how many papers use such slang phrases, and to my surprise I found a great many. They were not these second class newspapers which print anything just to make the paper sell. Some of them were along the best newspapers published in the country, papers which would resent and justly I think any imputation of sympathy with evil doing. Although I know nothing of the psychological aspect of the question but I cannot but think that it expresses contempt rather than sympathy. (January 27, 1887)

Seelye's noncommittal attitude, refusing to condemn all use of slang, is borne out in a theme by Robert Treat Paine in which he defends his writing from criticism, probably from another student"

"The words are slangy" was written on the back of my theme which I returned with corrections to 14 Grays. The criticism was just. On a careful reading I perceived that such an air seemed to pervade its every part. But I object to the underlining of the word "lurking," [?] for I added to clarify my use of it "to use a word of the current college slang." It might be called a technical word, yet its meaning is perfectly clear and unequivocal to all. I know of no other word that can express that technical meaning. To be sure it is not in the dictionary, but that is only a negative argument that it is not in good use; but as I have said, many so-called good writers, I think, use words of a similar nature
to "lurking" with a qualification like mine. I do not see why my expression should be criticized. (November 1, 1886)

In a final example, Seelye again comments on the use of slang in a newspaper article, this time from the financial pages. In noting how often newspapers use idiomatic language, he simply remarks that it is "surprising":

"The market is entirely in the hands of the bulls, those short who have not already shown the white flag must capitulate if the screws are put on tomorrow." I saw this sentence in the paper this morning in an article headed by the appalling words "Slaughtering the Shorts." If that article with all its idiomatic phrases were translated literally into a foreign language I wonder what sense a foreigner would make of it. He might suppose that we had gone back to the old custom of tortures, thumb-screws, & c.; or he might think as I did a few years ago before I had the meaning of those words explained to me that some bulls had gotten into a crockery store and were making it lively for the owners. It is surprising to see how much of such idiomatic language one sees every day in the newspapers; and I sometimes wonder whether any other language has so many peculiar phrases as the English language. (March 2, 1887)

It is striking that even in the short space of this paragraph, Seelye frames his comments not merely as thoughts about "correct usage," but as observations about English as a language among other languages. He imagines "a foreigner" trying to understand an idiomatic usage, translated literally, and he wonders if other languages have as many idiomatic phrases. He even describes himself as being like a non-native speaker in having to have the meaning of an idiom explained to him.

Conclusion

Accepting it's use as a commonplace, historians of composition have tended to move quickly past the moment when English was first adopted as the medium of instruction. The way historians have represented that change can be
illustrated by considering Barrett Wendell's account of the difficulty he had finding a title for his textbook, an account that concisely encapsulates the broad reforms that occurred in the teaching of writing at Harvard between 1870 and 1891, when his book was published. Wendell confesses that finding the title had been a long, unsatisfactory process: he had begun by considering Rhetoric, but rejected it because of its associations with persuasion and ornamental language, then embarked on a succession of other possibilities—Style, The Philosophy of Style, Art of Composition, and Literary Composition—before settling, finally, but not altogether happily, for a title that is at least accurate, he sighs, in naming the subject of his lectures: English Composition.

The shift from "rhetoric" to "composition" that Wendell's account chronicles has received a great deal of attention from composition scholars. Wallace Douglas finds "something depressing" in Wendell's anecdote, and sees in Wendell's work "more...of constriction than of growth in thought" (21); for Douglas, the trajectory traced by Wendell's titles is emblematic of a movement away from classical rhetoric and the civic importance that rhetoric implies. Other historians of composition such as James Berlin, Sharon Crowley, and Susan Miller, motivated primarily by a desire to explain and to counter the marginalization of composition within the university curriculum, similarly perceive the establishment of composition as a narrowing of the intellectual place of writing instruction, an eviction of rhetoric from the central position it had previously occupied in the liberal arts curriculum. Even Robert Connors, though he argues that practices of writing instruction developed in nineteenth century
America were continuous, not discontinuous, with rhetorical tradition, keeps the scholarly conversation focused on the relationship between composition and classical rhetoric, and pointedly titles his book *Composition-Rhetoric*.

The second, equally important, shift that Wendell's story discloses—the emergence of English as the medium of composition—has received very little scholarly comment, however. Studies of the early composition program at Harvard—Sharon Crowley's "The Invention of Freshman English" and Wallace Douglas's "Barrett Wendell," for example—criticize the pedagogical practices of the Harvard English teachers, seeing in the concern for correctness they display in reports on the written entrance examination in English and in comments on the daily themes evidence of an obsession with class, a subjection of language to the demands of gentlemanly propriety. Recently, in an essay criticizing the English Only movement, Bruce Horner and John Trimbur locate the source of that movement in the adoption of English and the establishment of required composition courses at Harvard which, they argue, tacitly endorsed the formation of a monolingual culture.

But in campaigning for schools to teach English, in making English composition the only required course at Harvard, in examining entering students in English literature, in insisting on stringent grammatical correctness, proponents of English at Harvard (though not indifferent to questions of gentlemanliness) were compelled by a perception that English should be foregrounded in education because it functioned as a vivid link for forging a modern nation and for connecting living speakers to distant Anglo Saxon progenitors. Confronted by
the organic internal processes that changed language naturally, and by the external forces that threatened to mix English with other languages, these educators took action to protect English from dissolving, assimilating, blurring its boundaries beyond recognition, from losing its ability to act as a marker for race.

The consciousness of language that students reveal in the daily themes from English 12 reflects popular representations of English as the language of "adult civilization" and philologists' conceptions of language as an important indicator of membership in a racial group. The themes suggest that students in Wendell's course saw themselves learning not only to practice fluency and correctness in writing; the extensive writing, reading, and critiquing they engaged in also functioned as a workshop for negotiating their identities as speakers of the mother tongue. It wasn't enough to simply be a user of English. Consciously assuming an identification with English meant becoming that rare person who, according to Whitney, "realizes that he 'uses language.'" It meant, as Whitney writes, having the "reach of vision" to see what language is "to the individual soul, what it is to the race" (Life and Growth of Language 286).
CHAPTER IV

COMPOSITION, CULTIVATION, AND WILDERNESS:
A RACIAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE DAILY THEME ASSIGNMENT

Let us as teachers accept no single element or kind of culture as the one essential; let us remember that the best fruits of real culture are an open mind, broad sympathies, and respect for all the diverse achievements of the human intellect at whatever stage of development they may actually be—the stage of fresh discovery, or bold exploration, or complete conquest.

C. W. Eliot. The Cultivated Man

Composition, Cultivation, and Wilderness

In "Stability and Experiment in the American Undergraduate Curriculum," historian Laurence Veysey refers to the body of arguments in essays, books, speeches, and reports that accompanied the establishment of universities in America as "the rhetoric of American academic purpose"(5). The power of this rhetoric can be deduced from the fact that universities were founded and acquired a "surprisingly definite" form in America between 1870 and 1910—in just a few decades, as Veysey notes, registering amazement at the speed of a cultural development he calls "the only genuine 'academic revolution' yet to be experienced in the United States"(1). During this short period, which was marked by educational variety, experiment and debate, American views of higher education changed from being "strongly anti-intellectual" to being given a
"prominent place in the American imagination" (3). One explanation for the power of these arguments to establish university education may lie in the ways in which they tapped into already established debates and assumptions about the identity of the nation itself. Arguments about the form education should take turned not only on what would be most useful for individuals, but also on what the nation needed.

In the United States, a nation that defined itself originally and continued to define itself in terms of pioneering and expansion—of "discovering," exploring, and conquering land—the idea of cultivation emerged as a concept that could harness feelings that already ran deep in the minds of American citizens and deploy them in the interests of establishing an American university system. Based on colere, a Latin root whose literal meaning is "to till the soil," cultivation had come to indicate "improvement" in a more metaphorical sense, as in "the developing, fostering, or improving (of the mind, faculties, etc.) by education and training; the condition of being cultivated; culture; refinement" (OED). Cultivation had in this metaphorical sense always been associated with liberal arts education (Kimball). Charles W. Eliot, one of the most respected and influential voices in the national debate about American academic purpose often calls upon the idea of "cultivation" in his many speeches and essays, but he imbues the concept with new, distinctly American connotations. Eliot reanimates the etymological history of cultivation to link the idea of higher education, with its goal of cultivating the individual, to the more literal process of cultivation that kept pushing American boundaries westward.
In "The New Education: Its Organization," a two part essay that appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1869, shortly before he was elected to the presidency of Harvard, Eliot uses a system of metaphors to argue that establishing universities is crucial for "fighting the wilderness." He addresses the essay to the father who "is anxious to have his boys better equipped for the American man's life than he himself was," and represents the form of education he is advocating as a response to needs generated by territorial expansion:

The difficulty [of how to educate his sons] weighs more heavily upon the thoughtful American than upon the European. He is absolutely free to choose a way of life for himself and for his children...But freedom is responsibility. Secondly, being thus free, and being also in the face of a vast and new territory, he is more fully awake than the European can be to the gravity and urgency of the problem. Thirdly, he has fewer means than any other, except the English parent, of solving the problem to his son's advantage. (203)

The kind of learning traditional liberal arts colleges were able to offer—training in preparation for preaching or other scholarly occupations—could not help in the rush to take advantage of the great opportunities presented by the wealth of natural resources in America, Eliot writes; higher education should also be able to produce architects; bridge, canal, railway, and road builders; experts in metallurgy and chemistry; manufacturers and skilled managers. In this essay, he surveys the educational experiments undertaken at American scientific and polytechnic schools, which were teaching pure and applied science, modern languages, and mathematics, and he suggests that these curricula should become the basis for a new education that matches the real needs of the nation.

When Eliot refers to the university in "The New Education," he pointedly brings in agricultural images, identifying the university as a "cultivated" site, and...
suggesting that the university can also be understood as being itself the fruit of a long process of nurtured growth. In one passage, for example, he writes, "the American university has not yet grown out of the soil," and "a university, in any worthy sense of the word, must grow from seed." (216). Eliot cautions against simply importing an educational institution from Europe, ("It cannot be transplanted from England or Germany in full leaf and bearing.") and against expecting the university to flower immediately:

When the American university appears, it will not be a copy of foreign institutions, or a hot-bed plant, but the slow and natural outgrowth of American social and political habits, and an expression of the average aims and ambitions of the better educated classes. The American college is an institution without parallel; the American university will be equally original. (216)

In this essay, the space of the university is represented as mirroring the space of a nation committed to a belief in manifest destiny: the university is represented as providing the practical knowledge necessary for claiming new lands for cultivation, and the university itself is also seen as an institutional "fruit" of cultivation.

The distinction between wilderness and cultivation that structures Eliot's discussion in "The New Education," also suggests a racial dimension to his argument, because, as Charles Mills argues in The Racial Contract, to categorize a space as wilderness is not a racially neutral move. As Mills and David Theo Goldberg claim, the way space has been used and imagined in modernity has been intimately connected to relations of power, including race. Goldberg writes:

The category of space is discursively produced and ordered. Just as spatial distinctions like 'West' and 'East' are racialized in their conception and application, so racial categories have been variously
spatialized more or less since their inception into continental divides, national localities, and geographic regions. Racisms become institutionally normalized in and through spatial configuration, just as social space is made to seem natural, a given, by being conceived and defined in racial terms. *(Racist Culture 185)*

The spatial distinction between wilderness and cultivated can function to racialize the wilderness as a space inhabited by “savages.” At the same time, marking an area as wilderness, according to Mills, is a way to construct the *unmarked* space—the spaces against which others are defined as “exotic” or racially distinctive—as “normal”:

> the norming of space is partially done in terms of the *racing* of space, the depiction of space as dominated by individuals...of a certain race. At the same time, the norming of the individual is partially achieved by *spacing* it, that is, representing it as imprinted with the characteristic of a certain kind of space. (42)

In “The New Education,” Eliot characterizes Americans in terms of their relation to untamed spaces: “The American people are fighting the wilderness, physical and moral, on the one hand,” he writes, “and struggling to work out the awful problem of self-government” (203). His definition makes the fight against the wilderness central to the identity of “American,” and implies that “Americans” are not those who inhabit the wilderness—only those who fight it.

This definition was not original to Eliot, of course, but was already widely accepted. Roy Harvey Pearce has studied how national space and race were linked, and in *Savagism and Civilization* he argued that the development of an idea of “savagism” provided a rationale for European settlers to appropriate Indian-occupied territories. Pearce writes that in the eighteenth century, Americans were confronted with the living problem of how to reconcile “two ideas
of order”—the “savage” and the “civilized.” The solution they contrived was to imagine “an idea of progress, American progress”: “Cultures are good, it was held, as they allow for full realization of man’s essential and absolute moral nature; and man realizes this nature as he progresses historically from a lesser to a greater good, from the simple to the complex, from savagism to civilization” (48). This idea of progress functioned along several dimensions, Pearce explains:

Westward American progress would, in fact, be understood to be reproducing this historical progression; and the savage would be understood as one who had not and somehow could not progress into the civilized, who would inevitably be destroyed by the civilized, the lesser good giving way to the greater....The Indian was the remnant of a savage past away from which civilized men had struggled to grow. To study him was to study the past. To civilize him was to triumph over the past. To kill him was to kill the past. History would thus be the key to the moral worth of cultures; the history of American civilization would thus be conceived of as three-dimensional, progressing from past to present, from east to west, from lower to higher. (48-9)

Pearce’s History of Ideas approach has been superceded by newer historical methodologies, but his work is still highly respected as an early articulation of how an idea of “savagism” came to play out in the real lives and affairs of the American nation (Krupat ix). Pearce’s work is also an early study of how what is culturally perceived to be “normal” can be discursively constructed by naming that which is “other,” a concept important for the work of critical race theorists studying the construction of whiteness as an unmarked racial category. When Eliot identifies “Americans” with those who are “fighting the wilderness,” then, he brings his arguments about the shape of higher education into alignment with
longstanding racial ideologies that had been underwriting expansion into Native American territories for a long time.

The representation of the American people that appears in "The New Education," published early in Eliot's career, persisted throughout his work. The confrontation with wilderness, and the distinction between physical and moral aspects show up, for example, thirty years later in a set of inscriptions he composed for the Water Gate at the Columbian Exposition of 1893, in Chicago. The differentiation of space into "wild" and "cultivated" still inheres in the language of the inscriptions, and is performed in the way the inscriptions are displayed spatially: on one side of the gate—the side facing the water—all of the inscriptions are concerned with the physical victories of the war on wilderness; on the opposite side—facing the Court of Honor—the inscriptions are concerned with the moral achievements of the war on wilderness. Honoring those who physically "fought the wilderness" Eliot wrote:

A few dared toiled and suffered myriads enjoyed the fruits.
To the bold men their names remembered or forgotten who first explored through perils manifold the shores lakes rivers mountains valleys and plains of this new world.
Of the many races tongues creeds and aims but all heroes of discovery.
The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them.
To the brave settlers who leveled forests cleared fields made paths by land and water and planted commonwealth.
To the brave women who in solitude amid strange dangers and heavy toil reared families and made homes. (James)

On the opposite side of the gate, honoring moral dimensions he associated with "fighting the wilderness" were these inscriptions:

Civil liberty the means of building up personal and national character.
To the pioneers of civil and religious liberty.  
But bolder they who first cast off their moorings from the habitable past and ventured chartless on the sea of storm-engendering liberty.

I freedom dwell with knowledge: I abide with men by culture trained and fortified. (James)

By the time he wrote these inscriptions, Eliot’s national stature as a thinker and educator was tremendous. His participation brought gravitas and legitimacy to the Fair, but his inscriptions also suggest both real and metaphorical ways in which American expansion figured into his theorizing of university education:
The university provided training for fighting the wilderness, and fighting the wilderness built “personal and national character.”

The University as a Cultivated Space

While metaphorical, Eliot’s description of the university as a “cultivated” space provides real insight into the character of the material space of Harvard University—the context in which the daily theme writers were living. As Elspeth Probyn has theorized, material spaces function as a context “to allow and delimit our individual and collective performance of selves” (291). Another “text” that seems to support Eliot’s characterization of the university as a cultivated, (racially unmarked) space emerges in an account of a torchlight parade staged by undergraduate students to honor the 250th anniversary of the founding of Harvard College. The parade was just one of many formal events that all together performed a public expression of the Harvard as a place with complex personal, local, and national meanings. The ceremonies took place over three days in November of 1886, and included athletic contests, literary exercises, church
services, and a procession of alumni, administrators and important guests (including U.S. President Grover Cleveland) to Sanders Theater, where they heard an address by Lowell and a poem delivered by Oliver Wendell Holmes. President Eliot also conferred several honorary degrees.

The ebullient account of the parade in the Harvard Crimson is lighthearted and a little ironic in its description of the general pomp of the occasion. In the parade, the four undergraduate classes, dressed in their distinctive class uniforms, were interspersed with marchers representing the Harvard Crimson, the Lampoon, band and drum corps, costumed marchers representing student organizations of the past, drays shooting fireworks, a giant cardboard replica of the Mott Haven cup, covered in silver foil, and a group of men dressed to impersonate the early benefactors of Harvard. The parade was “lustily cheered” along the route, which was “aglow with lights and lanterns” the report informs its readers.

Harvard’s Puritan roots figured strongly, as one would expect. More surprising are the representations of African and Native American figures in the parade. Following the class of ’97, for example, rolled a cart bearing “the oldest printing press in the colony,” on loan from the Boston Globe. Two students accompanied the press, one dressed as “a primitive Hollander with a long clay pipe” and the other dressed as “a regulation Indian.” Two others kept the press in operation, “and from time to time distributed to the crowd facsimile copies of the title page of Eliot’s Indian Bible, with two little verses on the back, said to have been composed for the occasion by Rev. E. E. Hale” ((2). An Indian student who
had been part of the first class at Harvard was represented among the group of men dressed in "characteristic costume" as "benefactors of the college." Their names (many of which are familiar as names of buildings on the Harvard campus) are listed as "Sam Adams, Count Rumford, Boylston, Gore, Hollis, Stoughton, Holworthy, Flint, Josiah Quincy, and the Indian freshman with the unpronounceable name" (3). This "unpronounceable" student appears again, at the head of the column of the class of '90—the freshmen, who carried "a cartoon of the 'lone Indian freshman' of 1636."

The report of the parade also describes the seven-foot high transparency entered by the Harvard Crimson, showing an image of the chapel and some relics of earlier college days, "borne through the entire parade unharmed, on the stalwart shoulders of two sable Africans"(3). Finally, the procession of students from the Law School carried a number of transparencies that punned cleverly on legal phrases. These included:

[a cartoon of] a gory scalp, labeled 'The First Fee,' a Puritan demolishing an Indian, thereby illustrating the 'Ancient Action of Conversion;' a convict suit labeled 'Livery of Seizer,' and a bargain between a poco and an aborigine, representing the 'Ancient Action for a Suit.' A fourth showed a gentleman being killed vigorously in 'Joint Action;' and on the reverse an aged darkey was made to illustrate 'Black Male.' (5)

The torchlight parade graphically illustrates the way in which the identities of the institution and the space of the university were constructed by representing them as unmarked parts of duality that depended on designating some people—the "regulation Indian" and the "sable Africans"—and some spaces as Other. The "Indian with the unpronounceable name" and the "sable Africans" could make an
appearance, but did not have full-fledged membership in the social or political space.

In "The Spatial Imperative of Subjectivity," her study of how space "interpellates" individual subjects, Probyn writes: “Subjectivity is not a given, but rather a process and a production....In other words, the space and place we inhabit produce us. It follows too that how we inhabit those spaces is an interactive affair" (294). Probyn turns to the theory of subject formation proposed by Louis Althusser in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus" because it offers a way to imagine how individual subjects are connected to ideology through a complex traffic of everyday practices. The benefit of Probyn's theory is that it suggests a way of understanding the spaces of Harvard, including the English 12 composition classroom, not as a "void," or a backdrop against which social interactions occurred, but as an important agent in the dynamic production of subjectivities, including race.

According to Probyn's theory, subjects within the university space that responded positively to its "call," that identified with the subject being interpellated by the space, would experience themselves and the space subjectively as "normal," or okay. Subjects who differed from the ideological norm would experience themselves as "not belonging" to some degree. The effect of this dynamic in terms of subjectivity would be to render "the normal" transparent or invisible to those who "were normal." Critical race theorists similarly argue that the unmarked racial category—whiteness—demands of its subjects a similar inability to recognize their place in a racialized society. Charles
Mills describes white consciousness as an "inverted epistemology," and "a schedule of structured blindesses and opacities." "Part of what it means to be constructed as ‘white,’” he writes, "…is a cognitive model that precludes self-transparency and genuine understanding of social realities" (Social Contract 18-19).

Two memoirs of student life at Harvard, placed side by side, appear to illustrate the effect of subjective experiences working to either establish a person as a "normal" subject or to undermine a sense of belonging. In *Harvard Yard in the Golden Age*, Rollo Walter Brown pays tribute to the men who had been at Harvard in his student days. It is the place, Harvard Yard itself, however, that figures as the real emotional center of the work. For Brown, the Yard is the opening into which human greatness could emerge, the stage upon which great teachers could perform, and the object of his nostalgic affections. He remembers the Yard with iconic clarity as "a human enterprise worth seeing":

Especially early in the morning in late autumn when the wind was swirling the leaves everywhere beneath the elms, and sending undulations of pink or claret through the ivy still able to cling to the sunny protected side of Appleton Chapel, did the Yard suggest the kind of haven that the founders must have had in mind. (13)

Brown remembers the Yard as "a haven," an impression reinforced by the walls that physically enclosed the space and reflected its separateness in a more symbolic sense. To students, "the Yard came to be a symbol of something that stood higher than they did….The honest looking brick walls of Massachusetts and Harvard and Hollis and Stoughton and Holworthy led one to wonder just
where there was another academic enclosure that provided the same solid peace" (18).

W. E. B. DuBois, by contrast, remembers his own experience as a student as being "at but not of Harvard." David Levering Lewis uses this phrase as the leitmotif for the Harvard years in his biography, *W.E.B. DuBois: Biography of a Race*. Lewis remarks upon the "discordant" details and "divergent scripts" of the different accounts DuBois wrote of his life at Harvard. Lewis coins names for the different "incarnations" DuBois presents in different memoirs. In one incarnation, which Lewis calls "The Grateful Outsider," DuBois is simply content to be given access to the lectures and libraries that Harvard offers, seemingly indifferent to the sense that his race prevented him from being of the place in a deeper way. In another voice, which Lewis refers to as "The Imperial Self," DuBois remembers Harvard as "an endured experience charged with frivolity, snobbishness, and conservatism" (Lewis 80).

Charles W. Eliot was adamant in his determination to provide access to a much wider range of students who demonstrated intellectual promise. He diversified the student body, ensuring that black students and students who could not afford tuition, such as DuBois, for example, would be given admission. DuBois's "divergent scripts" and Probyn's theory suggest, however, that "access" operated on more than one level. The way spaces were represented discursively also worked to "accept" or "reject" those who were in them.
The ideas of subjectivity put forward by Probyn and Mills suggest that the initial writing of the daily themes, as much as our reading and interpretation of them in the present, must necessarily be shaped by the “blindnesses and opacities” of the reading and writing contexts.

The writers of the daily themes did reflect occasionally on the nature of the social space of the university, especially in situations where “edges met”—where the meeting of differences disclosed an otherwise taken for granted nature of place. Writers were highly conscious, for example, of the Puritan history that still clung to the school and was memorialized in the statue of John Harvard in the Yard, in the important figures associated with the college in the past, and in other less obvious ways. Writers expressed a sense of discontinuity, and describe themselves as modern by comparison with, the Puritan past. The two following themes by C. D. Peale suggest ways that he both engaged with Puritanism and viewed it as a relic of the past:

Some very curious instances of Puritan peculiarities are to be found in the Library. Today, while rummaging among some books in one of the alcoves, I found an old book written in Latin on Mythology. This book had been presented to Harvard in 1764 and had been owned by a Puritan minister. On looking through it I found that the original owner had carefully put fig leaves over all the nude statues. The old fellow was not willing to say with Joshua Whitcomb “I can stand it, if the women can.” It is a good illustration of the narrowness which the Puritans so often displayed. He could not appreciate the beauties of art until he had removed whatever he thought impure. (C. D. Peale)

There goes the old bell on Harvard. What a queer old-fashioned bell it is! There is not a particle of music in its tones. In every way it seems to be a true old Puritan bell, doing its work in a stiff, business-like way, taking care to exclude any pleasure-causing sounds from its tones. Yet the old bell seems to take an interest in our doings. In the morning at 720, how almost maliciously it wakes us. Every note seems to say “I’ve got the bind on you.” The Tone of the chapel bell
has changed this year. Formerly it was derisive, now you can
distinguish a tone of sadness. Throughout the rest of the day it takes
on a hum-drump tone and dies away at three o'clock with weary sound.
(C. D. Peale)

The labor strikes that spread up and down the East coast in the winter of 1886-
87 prompted many more themes, and reflect the months of tension and public
disruption caused by the strikes. In fact, 1886 saw more labor strikes across the
nation than any other year before or since in American history. Workers were
fighting over many different issues, but the 8-hour work day was the most
prominent concern that drew them to join the unions. Earlier in the year, in the
spring, the Haymarket affair in Chicago had ended in the deaths of workers and
policemen, and the arrest and trial of eight labor activists.

In Boston and Cambridge, striking public transportation workers halted
horse car traffic and crowded Harvard Square with demonstrators. Students
write about walking across the Charles River bridges to get to Boston, and riding
on alternative modes of transportation that were set up as negotiations wore on
for weeks without productive resolution. Most, but not all, of the theme writers
viewed the capitalists with sympathy, and regarded the strikers as problematic
and as interlopers in the space of the Square. The fact that most of the striking
workers were European immigrants—mostly Irish—contributed to a tendency to
understand incidents in the strike in racial terms, as effects of Celtic
“characteristics,” as they are in this theme by C. H. Burdett:

In his forensic lecture last week Prof. Royce in speaking of the
characteristics of the different races said that while the Anglo Saxons
are the most practical yet in all their attempt to be practical they are
confirming an ideal. On the other hand, the Celtic race overlooking
the practical strive for the ideal and so far do they carry this that even when their ideal has vanished they still continue the struggle. The Cambridge RR strike he said was an illustration of this perversity. The cause of the strike, if there ever was one, has been removed, yet the "strikers" are still out. But what are they fighting for? Confusing their attention to the ideal, they have failed to see that the practical has assumed an entirely different phase and that they are now in the predicament of a man beating the air. It is surely an unfortunate position to be in, not without a tinge of ludicrousness—a small band of men pretending to be on strike and yet they know not for what they are striking. (C.H. Burdett)

A second theme that comments on the strikes reveals how close the striking workers were to the university, and how tense the atmosphere in the square had become. This theme, by C. de V. Musans, describes an incident in which the racial contest was played out on a very small scale in the "language" of personal space:

There are many stories concerning the Cambridge strikers going about, some of which are amusing but only one so far has roused my indignation. This is because one of our "Caucasian xxx," as the Crimson designates our white servants, when he does discriminate between the strikers and the rest of the public, makes his discrimination in the strikers' favor.

Wednesday afternoon a friend and I in going to walk went through the square. Strikers were lined up on both sides of the sidewalk leaving a narrow passage in the center. As we were passing through I met a friend with whom I exchanged greeting. Hardly had we stopped when a big policeman, important in his uniform and brass buttons, rushing up, informed us we couldn't stop there—we must move on at once. As we were almost through our conversation I paid not attention to him which I found was the worst punishment we could have inflicted. He blustered and when I mildly suggested that were we three were occupying one foot the loafers were occupying four, he threatened to arrest us. He must have thought better of it, as he didn't try to execute his threat. (C. deV. Musaus)

Two more themes—concerned not with the strikes, but with urban encounters of other kinds—are worth bringing in here, because they show individual variation in
how the writers represent difference. In the first theme, T. T. Seelye suddenly finds himself by accident walking in a poor neighborhood. His description is clearly seen through the eyes of a slightly shocked outsider, but the theme refrains from moralizing. The theme keeps it fairly clear that this is about the writer's own experience, not pretending to be an objective account of the reality of this neighborhood:

Last night as I jumped off the car at Bowdoin Square I started for the Boston and Lowell depot by what I supposed was a short cut through some back streets. As is usually the case with intended short cuts I lost my way and for some time wandered about through narrow streets and dirty alleys looking for some one to set me on the right track again. The street lamps had just been lighted. There was a great crowd of workmen with their tin dinner pails returning from work. I saw troops of ragged dirty children of all ages playing hide and seek around corners of tall tenement houses or dodging about among the passers by and sometimes almost under the wheels of a wagon as it came rattling down the street. Drunken men tottered past me, and I saw women with dirty shawls over their heads standing in the doorways. I wandered about for fifteen minutes before I found the depot, and was just in time to catch my train. (T. T. Seelye)

The second theme, by D. K. Snow, shows less restraint in its observations. In his approach to writing about a baseball game played by very young black children, Snow does not qualify his observations, and assumes an authoritative interpretation. In his description, unlike in Seelye's, the "comical" and "amusing" qualities reside in the children themselves, not in his perceptions of them:

Yesterday afternoon as I was crossing the Common I saw quite a crowd of men gathered about some small boys who were playing ball. The boys were colored children and scarcely one of them over eight years old. Just at this age darkies are most amusing. One nine was in the field and the other at the bat. Eight of the side in stood about the home plate with eager faces all cracking the ninth man who stood in a very professional position with the bat. The bases were filled, and the batsman struck three times with no success in hitting the ball, the third strike was missed and the lads on bases began to run; one of the
side at the bat picked up the ball and threw it in a direction safe from any fielding hands and brought in three runs. It was a comical sight. (D. K. Snow)

**A New Ideal of Cultivation in Education**

The purpose of the liberal arts education had always been to nurture, slowly and assiduously, the production of “a cultivated man.” In his push for higher education reform (or rather university “construction,” a term he preferred), Eliot argued that the ideal of “a cultivated man” had changed, however, making old methods and subjects of higher education no longer effective. Eliot did not fight against the old curriculum as much as he undermined it, refusing, for example, to reject the teaching of classical texts, Greek, or Latin, and proposing instead “only to put new subjects beside the old in a fair competition” (*Educational Reform* 119). “In education,” he remarked, “as elsewhere, it is the fittest that survives” (120).

Eliot was more aggressive in his attack on ideas of “cultivation” that were associated with the four-year liberal arts colleges that existed in America before the Civil War. Before the nineteenth century, attaining the ideal of “cultivation” had indicated a fairly circumscribed and commonly agreed-upon set of accomplishments: it implied that a person would be acquainted with Greek and Latin, would have some knowledge of a body of classical and religious texts, could write or speak particular kinds of compositions, for example. Citing Emerson as a fellow thinker in this matter, Eliot denigrates this older ideal of cultivation, claiming that it formed only “a weak, critical, fastidious creature, vain of a little exclusive information or of an uncommon knack in Latin verse or
mathematical logic" (*Cultivated* 4). Instead he proposes the ideal of a cultivated man who is physically vital, has a passion for pure knowledge, and is also immersed in the everyday affairs of the world. Eliot insists on moving away from thinking of cultivation as the mastery of particular texts or skills and defining it much more as a question of morality, taking the idea of cultivation away from “acquisition of knowledge” and reinvesting it in “character.” In *The Cultivated Man*, and in other essays such as “What is a Liberal Education?” and “Liberty in Education,” Eliot argues that the ideal of cultivation, always shifting in any case, had changed greatly over the course of the nineteenth century to accommodate a huge expansion in knowledge.

Eliot argues that two principal differences were introduced to culture during the nineteenth century, and these led to changes in the way individual cultivation was conceptualized: First, the inductive philosophy, the methods of scientific inquiry, became indispensable to the production of every kind of knowledge, and second, the “acquisition of some form of manual skill and the practice of some form of manual labor” also came to be seen as essential to true culture (*Cultivated Man* 5-9). As a result of the emerging importance of the inductive philosophy, the new ideal of cultivation valued a method of inquiry above particular information. Eliot endorses the adoption of inductive methods of inquiry, which had developed in the sciences, by all of the disciplines, including the humanities, and quotes John Addington Symonds, who wrote, “an interpenetration with humanism with science, and science with humanism, is the condition of the highest culture” (5-6). Of the effect that a concern for the body
had on the new ideal of cultivation, Eliot notes that "if ... athletic sports [are included] among the desirable forms of manual skill and labor, ... during the last thirty years this element of excellence of body in the ideal of education has had a rapid, even an exaggerated, development" (7-8). Eliot considered that all forms of physical activity, including the manual skills of drawing and writing, worked to develop the mind (Concrete).

The most important outcome of these two fundamental modifications in culture was a new emphasis on character, which, according to Eliot, became a more significant element in the modern ideal of cultivation than it had been earlier. A higher value placed on the formation of character meant being concerned with the present as much as with the past. In The Cultivated Man Eliot writes:

Now, character is formed, as Goethe said, in the "stream of the world"—not in stillness or isolation, but in the quick-flowing tides of the busy world, the world of nature and the world of mankind....The panorama of today's events is not an accurate or complete picture, for history will supply posterity with much evidence which is hidden from the eyes of contemporaries; but it is nevertheless an invaluable and a new means of developing good judgment and good feeling, and the passion for social service; or, in other words, of securing cultivation.

The modern means of becoming acquainted with "the stream of the world"—both through travel and through news and other reports (made newly possible by "steam and electricity")—are hugely improved, Eliot argues, and offer much better ways of developing character than studying history or ancient cultures: "For the world of to-day supplies in its immense variety a picture of all stages of human progress, from the stone age, through savagery, barbarism, and medievalism, to what we now call civilization" (11). It is by engaging with this
vast and confusing variety of new images and experiences that character is developed, not by remaining aloof or protected: "The stream is, what is has been, a mixture of foulness and purity, of meanness and majesty; but it has nourished individual virtue and race civilization" (12).

When Eliot invokes the image of "fighting the wilderness" in the opening paragraph of "The New Education," fighting is a key term for the significance of this image in his theorizing of education. In fact, fighting figures as an important element of what may be called the iconography of Eliot's biographies. In Charles W. Eliot, for example, a two-volume biography that won a Pulitzer prize in 1932, Henry James begins by noting that because Eliot was born with a large birthmark on one side of his face, he was forced at an early age to become accustomed to being treated as an outsider in public, and to fighting. When he was young, Eliot fought boys from other neighborhoods on the Boston Common. For James, these fights, while painful, were significant in forming the tough, fearless character that would serve Eliot well later in life, as he tirelessly promoted educational change (2).

A "willingness...to engage in combat" also emerges as a key to Eliot's character in "The Olympian," Rollo Walter Brown's profile that appears in Harvard Yard in the Golden Age, a memoir of some of the men who were at Harvard while he student. Brown characterizes Eliot as a man who was always "much alone among men," in part because he had so often found himself fighting against odds (24). Brown recalls an anecdote about Eliot's meeting with a new faculty member:
“Can you fight?” he asked a young professor who had gone to him with a disconcerting problem.

“Why yes,” the man replied. “That is, I think I can.”

“Can you fight when you are in the minority?”

“I have done so occasionally.”

“Can you fight when everyone is against you—when not one man is ready to lend you support?

“I am ready to try it if necessary.”

“Then you need have no fear. But if you have convictions, it will sometimes be necessary to do no less.” (25)

Late in his life, Eliot, who lived to be 96, came to be regarded with his impressive oratorical voice, formal manner, and intellectual pedigree as “the last of the Puritans” or “the last of the New England Brahmins.” By the time he edited the enormously successful “five foot bookshelf,” a selection of texts that promised a liberal education to anyone who would devote even 15 minutes of reading to them a day, Americans attached their dreams of higher learning to him perhaps as much for his intimacy with a classical past as for his visionary ideas of the future. Eliot came to seem as if he were from a different world than men like Theodore Roosevelt [or Owen Wister]. Henry James is amused by an anecdote about Roosevelt staying as Eliot’s overnight guest in Cambridge, realizing at breakfast that he had forgotten to strap on his pistol, and rushing back upstairs to get it. But Eliot, himself a product of the classical liberal arts education, constructed a bridge between higher learning and the character formed by “fighting the wilderness.”

Eliot was only one of a number who argued for similar changes, and his arguments did not go unopposed. Notwithstanding these reservations, the shifts in the ideal of cultivation that he articulated and advocated for so successfully did hold true in a broad sense. Studying these ideas suggests that an idea of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
individual development and "race development" underlay his beliefs about education for all students. Studies of Eliot's life and work, such as Henry James's biography, *Charles W. Eliot*, and Hugh Hawkins' *Between Harvard and America*, have approached the issue race largely by assessing his personal opinions and prejudices, an approach that pieces an inconsistent patchwork of remarks Eliot made about racial Others at widely interspersed intervals. Far more liberal in his personal attitudes than the mainstream of Americans, Eliot insisted on providing access to higher education regardless of race, wealth, or gender, and he refused to limit immigration quotas. He rejected genetic explanations of racial difference.

Given his liberal attitudes, comments such as those Eliot made in 1909 after a trip to the American South appear as anomalies: "He prescribed 'four or five more generations more' for American culture to do its elevating work on Negroes, whom he described as only recently removed from 'savagery'" notes Hugh Hawkins (191). Since for the slave "labor is a curse and frugality an absurdity," Eliot considered that the condition of slavery had deprived the black people he saw from developing the aspects of character necessary to evolve a civilization, "built on willingness to work hard six days in the week, and to be frugal all the time," (qtd. in Hawkins 191). Without precluding the possibility that some individuals could be "cultivated" like the 30 black students who were in Harvard in 1880, or even that a whole group of people could be so, these remarks make it clear that for people who were considered to be in a sense of the wilderness, "fighting the wilderness" would be much more difficult. These remarks highlight that "cultivation" was a constructed state in this scheme for
everybody, an effect of environment, for whites included, but as Hawkins remarks, because of the slowness of the process, it "might almost have been genetic."

**The New Ideal of Cultivation in the Daily Themes**

In the daily themes themselves, the new ideal of cultivation elucidated by Eliot emerges in silent contrast to the ideals underlying compositions of a previous time. No single theme is startling in its newness, but taken as a whole, the themes do create a pointillist image, bit by bit, of a new character ideal. Because the daily theme assignment asked writers to observe the ordinary, it focused their attention on the present—on what Eliot called (after Goethe) "the stream of the world" as it was occurring, not as history, after events were over. Because writers wrote about their own lives, the themes also reflected the kinds of activities that a person who was cultivated in the modern sense would engage in: sports, theatre going and performance, travel, and even a certain amount of "grinding." Finally, because the assignment was designed to strengthen writers' powers of observation, the practice of theme writing was aligned with the newly-important practices of scientific inquiry.

The values privileged by the new ideal of cultivation are not uniformly present. The informality and frequency of the assignment allowed writers to easily test different subjects and approaches, and to try on authorial personae. Within the work of a single writer, themes could range widely in subject and in genre, and could exhibit ways of knowing and writing that had been favored by
earlier forms of "cultivation," as if the student were negotiating a transition between an older style of training and the new. Two themes by D. K. Snow, for example, composed just two days apart very early in the school year, seem to exemplify the two versions of cultivation Eliot writes about in *The Cultivated Man.* One theme, written on October 5, 1886, is about shoes, and is described in the theme grader's comment as "encyclopedic" both in subject and in style. The impersonal presentation of factual information and the assumption of a global perspective in this theme are much more reminiscent of an earlier ideal:

Shoes have been made as long ago as fifteen hundred years before Christ. About the simplest kind of foot apparel was in sandal form fastened to the foot with thongs, the upper part was open and the straps passed between the toes and round the ankle. Leather was the commonest article which was employed though sometimes palm leaves were sewed together. The Greeks and Romans i.e. the men went barefooted while the women wore some covering for their feet; the Japanese wear a rocker shaped shoe with various materials for the sole; they are perfectly straight, no allowance being made for the natural foot it seems as though they thought the big toe grew in the middle, with two small toes on either side. For one whose foot is not trained from infancy, a custom which the Japanese practice, these shoes are the most uncomfortable thing to put on imaginable. The Japanese, as the Turks, take off their shoes before entering a house having a respect for door mats as has been said. (October 5, 1886)

There is little sense that Snow is writing from his own observation, and even though shoes might be considered a "commonplace" subject—as the assignment requests—the treatment here elevates them to something more like a sociological phenomenon.

A second theme by Snow, which takes up the subject of cows, was written on October 7, two days after he had written about shoes. Snow is still concerned with being informative, but shifts to a different perspective: unlike before, he is
clearly writing an account of his own experience, and he presents information within the framework of how the facts were learned (not as disembodied bits of knowledge, as in his earlier theme):

The fair, now being held in Mechanics Building, exhibits some of the finest bred cattle + horses in the country. I must say my failing is toward the Holstein breed, perhaps because my uncle is interested in this breed, and my taste has been educated to these animals from seeing + hearing so much of them. It was a pretty sight to walk out into the cow barn and see a row of black and white heads looking out over their troughs at you; each head turned towards you as if expecting a wisp of hay. A good part of this herd was imported from Holland; when one importation came in I went down to the steamer and saw some fine cattle; one magnificent bull died on the pier about two days after landing. Strange as it may seem, these cows could not make out what our boss! Boss! Means to American cows, and we found out later from the Dutch herder who came over with the Holsteins that they called them by a queer sound, something like tweet! tweet!; and also by whistling to them. (October 7, 1886)

The grader of this second theme commends Snow for his style, described as “good” and “easy.”

The theme is anchored by a specific event (a visit to the cow barn at the fair), though not entirely absorbed with that event. The theme also suggests a writer who is less pedantic, less “vain of a little exclusive information” than the writer of the theme about shoes, a writer who knows something of the everyday world around him, and who can learn from a commonplace situation such as looking at cows. In fact, it is likely that writing about looking at cows would have been questionable as subject matter in pre-university days, when the curriculum focused more on classical texts, on translations, and on moral abstractions.

Snow's folder of daily themes contains 131 themes in all. Besides the theme about shoes, four others do not fit the new ideal of cultivation. Three take
the form of translations from unnamed texts, a practice that had been common in
schools at one time but was reviled in the Harvard composition program as a
great blight on style. The following theme, for example, received credit, but was
spotted (not surprisingly) by the grader as "probably a translation":

"Ah! It is you, Mathusalem?" cried out master Jean, "come in! come in!" He held out to him a glass of wine which the old man took bowing to the people about him. Then he drank it complacently, his little eyes shut. When he had emptied the glass master Jean asked him to sing something but old Mathusalem replied that he had not sung for years. Ah! How moved we were when he began to play an air, very sweet, and so old that no one knew it; the people looked at each other and suddenly my father said: "It is the 'Air of the Peasants." And all at the table cried out "Yes! Yes! It is the Air of the Peasants., Jean Pierre you will sing it."

I didn't not know that my father sang well, I had never heard him; he said; "I have forgotten all of it, I do not know the first word." After some urging, he said, well, if you really with it I will try to recall it. And then he sang the "Air of the Peasants" following the hurdy-gurdy, in a voice so sweet and sad that one could see his ancestors ploughing the land with his wife strapped to the plough and the soldiers pillaging their harvest. (November 23, 1886)

A fourth theme is apparently a whimsical invention—a story about a character
named Frisco, who is captured by brigands while he is on a trip around the world
on his bicycle. These five themes, however, are noticeable for their differences
from the other themes in Snow's folder, the majority of which observe the
commonplace world around him, as the assignment requests.

Snow's work is representative of this body of themes as a whole in the
way it occasionally discloses, palimpsest-style, glimpses of other ideals of
cultivation. One other genre stands out as countering the expectations of the
daily theme assignment and being linked very clearly to earlier compositions:
every now and then a theme presents an abstract of a sermons or commentary
on a biblical text. Here is one example of this genre from the folder of Robert Treat Paine:

Brief abstract of Dr. Brooks' Sermon.
Text: "And the Lord gave Cyrus the treasures of darkness." Cyrus conquered the Babylonians and the Jews whom he found in captivity these he sent back with gifts to Jerusalem. The text refers to the wealth of the Babylonians, which the Lord gave Cyrus that he might help the Jews. Thus we see how the Lord made the material wealth serve thro an intermediary the interests of his chosen people, of the priests of the religion. In like manner we should cause our will which stands in the relative position of Cyrus, to devote to the support of the Soul the riches of this world. Riches in themselves and as an end in view have no value whatsoever but as a means, as a strengthener of the soul they are of the greatest benefit. (January 10, 1887)

The grader of this theme responded merely with a question mark, the graphic sign for "huh?" or perhaps, "What has gotten into you?" Paine, a friend and ardent admirer of Phillips Brooks, writes again about sermons by the famous preacher, but frames the composition in terms of his experience of reading or listening, writing an account of how the audience reacted to a sermon, for example, or analyzing how Brooks uses illustrations to support the lesson. These approaches were received more positively by the theme readers.

Encyclopedic pronouncements, translations, whimsical stories, and abstracts of sermons that show up in the daily themes written in 1886-87 appear as remnants of genres common in earlier days at Harvard and still prevailed in schools and other colleges. A sense of how innovative the introduction of daily theme writing must have been—with the assignment's insistence on the immediate, the ordinary, the unexpected—may be gleaned from comparing the daily theme assignment to a list of theme topics assigned by Edward Tyrrel.
Channing, Boyleston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard from 1819-1851. As he was retiring, Channing wrote a note detailing the system of theme assigning and assessing he had used over the years, and bequeathed it, along with a minute record of topics he had devised, including the dates they had been assigned, to Francis James Child, who succeeded him as Boyleston Professor from 1851-1876.

Theme writing in Channing’s time was entirely in the form of fortnightly (or sometimes less frequent) themes. Channing describes a system in which a “Theme Bearer” was hired by each student to act as go-between, picking up corrected themes and topics for new themes from Channing and delivering them individually to the writer. In early years, assignments often included translations from Latin authors (a practice he later discontinued). Theme topics invented by Channing occasionally elicit commentary on current events. On May 12, 1849, for example, he suggested writing on “Our Duty to Immigrants,” and in April of 1844, he suggests “The recent indications of a purpose to increase the Territory of the U. States.” He sometimes also asks writers to imagine through the eyes of others: a beautiful country scene through the eyes of “natives” and through the eyes of “travelers” (Dec. 5, 1850); or the Boston Museum through the eyes of Shakespeare (in his own voice) (Nov. 23, 1850). It is also not unusual for him to ask writers to reflect on writing itself: “Difficulty of Writing a Good Dialogue—Name Some Successful Attempts in Novels”; or “Of Conveying Instruction by Dream Example” for instance.
Channing's list represents an earlier approach to writing that inductive methods were consciously modeling themselves against, the previous subjects of study and methods of teaching that prevailed in colleges designed to prepare students only for the intellectual demands of being ministers or lawyers.

Channing's suggested theme topics would fall overwhelmingly into categories Eliot and Wendell would have described as "abstract," "speculative," "moralizing," or "relying upon revelation." Even more important, the fact that Channing provided topics to the student writers, rather than expecting them to invent topics themselves, would have been seen by later educators as an impingement on the students' abilities to observe and to express. Channing often provides a line or two of text as a "point of departure" for the theme writers to reflect upon, quotations culled from a wide range of Greek, Latin, and modern European literature, as well as the Bible. Even though these points of departure are drawn from secular literature as well as sacred, the genre the themes gravitate towards is clearly the sermon. Sermons, being instructive, do not preclude examples from daily life, but their "center of gravity" so to speak clearly rests in more communal, more overarching concerns. Themes written in response to Channing's topics could have explored the experience of daily life for the purpose of reflecting, and to draw moral instruction—a very different thing from noticing daily life for the purpose of honing one's powers of observation.

Wendell's daily theme assignment for English 12 was very specific about the size of theme paper to be used, the length the compositions should be, and the frequency with which they should be written, but mode of discourse and the
subject were left for the writer to decide. As a result, the themes assume a great variety of forms, and can be taxonomized in a number of different ways. The next section presents a number of themes that demonstrate qualities associated with the new ideal of cultivation: the sense of immersion in the stream of the world; the interest in cultivating the body; and the concern with inductive reasoning. The themes are presented with relatively little explication.

Immersion in the stream of the world.

Themes engage in the stream of the world by commenting on public events and experiences, noticing things that had happened on the streets, wharves, parks, and horse cars of Cambridge and Boston, or in more distant places. Some of the experiences involved public events of interest to the whole community, like this election night scene described by G. W. Richards:

Boston is always a good city to visit on election night, if you want to laugh and enjoy the comical side of human nature. Last night proved no exception to the rule. A friend came around after me about 7 P.M. and I went in town with him. As soon as we arrived at Scollay Square, we perceived the excitement of the crowd. Large stereopticons threw announcements returns of votes on screens and these returns were either loudly applauded or warmly hissed. When we came to Newspaper Row, we saw an animated crowd, which blocked up the streets and would rarely let a horsecar pass through. Here could be seen men in every rank of life elbowing their way along so as to get a favorable position to see the returns of the voting. Now and then, when the stereopticon operator was in want of returns, he would throw upon the screen the faces of some well known men, and the crowd would show their estimation of them in the usual ways. (G. W. Richards November 2, 1886)

The following theme provides a glimpse into another event that concerned a broad community—the transportation strikes that created civic unrest along the
East coast during the winter of 1886-87. It shows the jittery mood of a crowds in the streets:

This evening as I entered Harvard Square from Brattle Street a snow plow drawn by four horses was led up from the same direction. A crowd of little boys followed it crying out, "Scab!" The sidewalks were covered with the idle strikers and lead by curiosity or by a less excusable impulse as the boys disappeared around the corner they hurried after them. The store-keepers hastened to their shop doors and there seemed to be disappointment in their voice as they exclaimed "Oh, it's only the snow plow." It was easy to perceive that the spirit of restlessness or nervousness prevalent among the strikers might readily be aroused to rash deeds. It wasn't unlikely that a snow ball thrown by an idle youngster would have caused a row. (R. T. Paine, February 9, 1887)

Students also commented on public catastrophes that they had read about in the news, such as a fire in Eastport, a shipwreck, or earthquake. In this theme, the writer comments on a railroad accident from his own experience, since it had occurred nearby:

I drove over yesterday afternoon to the scene of the dreadful railroad accident near Forrest Hills. By the time we reached there the dead and wounded had all been gotten out and removed and nothing remained by the great heap of debris. It was an appalling sight to see those great cars twisted and crushed as if they had been egg shells. But the thing that impressed me even more than this was the crowd of people assembled there. It seemed as if the whole city of Boston had turned out and there must have been 5,000 people around the wreck either seeking friends or drawn by idle curiosity. (T. Clyde March 14, 1887)

Most themes do not record events of such drama, however. It is much more common to find theme writers simply taking pleasure in noting minor incidents, from the poignant to the inane, that they had observed in the streets or on public transportation. The following three themes by T. T. Seelye, represent only a few examples of the many that would fit into this category. It is significant that these
themes simply record Seelye’s observations, making very little movement towards moralizing or generalization, even when the subject seems to invite this:

Today I saw a funeral passing up Brattle Street on its way to Mt. Auburn. It was not one of those funerals headed by a brass band in which almost every man is decorated with a piece of green ribbon and gold lace: Nor was it one of those eminently respectable funerals in which you see an elegant hearse drawn by prancing horses and followed by a long line of handsome carriages. There was in this funeral but one carriage and that one was drawn by two bony mallet-headed horses which looked as if they were ready to die and be buried. The little coffin wrapped up in a great yellow horse-blanket was strapped on behind. A small, timid, tearful woman sat in one corner of the carriage and on the seat opposite a man with his head leaning on his hands. (T. T. Seelye February 3, 1887)

Having nothing to do this afternoon I went into Boston to see the crowds of people and gaze in at the shop windows. This may be a very childish amusement, but nevertheless I enjoy it. We all have out petty whims. I know a very learned and much respected man who lives not many miles from Cambridge, who, when near a rail road always runs to see a train of cars pass. Somehow I like to watch the people passing through the streets, jostling one another, some good naturedly other ill humoredly. Some in a hurry and others walking leisurely. Old men and boys, schoolgirls and married women, all are there, each going his own way. What a vast variety of faces one sees passing him. Beautiful plain, and repulsive ones. One moment it is a face one which is written all the sorrows and burdens of this world, and perhaps the next is that of a happy joyous schoolboy of the dirty impudent face of a newsboy. I can watch for hours this ever changing, never stopping throng, and can pass a very pleasant afternoon in this harmless amusement. (T. T. Seelye October 14, 1886)

This evening I went to a spiritualistic séance in Lyceum Hall. The audience consisted mostly of muckers of all kinds, sizes, and ages, with a few students here and there to keep up the respectability of the performance. Shortly after the advertised time a fat man who afterward turned out to be the medium came upon the stage and informed us that the “see-ance” was about to begin, that the audience were going to see the most wonderful, startling &c. exhibition of spirit power ever witnessed in this part of the country, and also that nay noise on the part of the small boys would be quickly stopped by the
policeman at the door. This last remark made a profound impression on the youthful portion of the audience, for they kept very quiet during the whole performance. The medium then showed us the rope test, the wire netting test, and several other tests. Between each of these "Acts" the audience was requested to sing a few verses from "Sweet By and By" or some other "beautiful" song, but acted like a bashful child and refused to sing. (T. T. Seelye, March 14, 1887)

The "stream of the world" was not only about public events and experiences, however. Themes also commented on more private realities, recording life inside the student dormitories or in classrooms. The following theme, by C. V. de Musans, is surprising in the intimacy of tone, possibly an effect of being allowed (as the reader of his theme) into Musan's room, even though, as he tells us, he has turned several others away:

I have been my room all day with a toothache and have been trying quite unsuccessfullly to drown my thoughts in an interesting romance. Several people have knocked on my door but as I did not answer them they went away. This evening when the lighted gas showed I was in a stern "Busy" kept me free from intruders.

The only eventful thing of the day was when "Billy" brought me a letter whose envelope was heavily bordered with black. I had never received such a one before and I was for a time excited. When I opened it I found only some words from some friends who have been abroad for several years and have apparently imported some customs.

I have been trying to finish copying my forensic, but such labor does not seem to agree with me. I guess I shall have to try the xxx on the unavoidable hinderance xxx or else put a notice on the outside of my forensic that it was copied under difficulties.

Damn the tooth! Oh!! (C. DeV. Musans December 6, 1886)

Themes that deal with the private domain of the student dormitory report on other ways that students spent their time, such as in the (non-Puritanical) poker game that tempts H. W. Sampson away in this example:

I have been sitting idly before my glowing fire for the last fifteen or twenty minutes wondering how I shall pass the evening—for it is
young yet and as I write the clock is striking only eight. There is an exciting game of poker going on in the next room and I am just trying to make up my mind whether to join it or not. Ah! Through the open door I hear the old familiar "called" and the answer "three aces" and then something that sounds very much like a half suppressed damn but let us hope it is not quite so bad as that. I hear the chips rattling upon the table now. The fascination is strong for me and I must close this and try my luck—I am only human after all. (H. W. Sampson March 2, 1887)

Finally, writers expressed their immersion in a present, earthly world through the kinds of texts that they read and wrote about critically in the themes. If novels, newspapers or plays would have seemed inappropriate for them to discuss at an earlier time, this was no longer the case by 1886. (Writers did still comment on their reading of Biblical and academic texts, but not as frequently.) Attending the theater was very popular. Current plays and famous singers and actors were such common subjects to write about that the graders would often indicate the subject of these themes with just an initial—"E" for Erminie. The following theme by C. D. Peale suggests quick but sophisticated (if "involuntary") analysis style in two novels. Peale's stress on the pleasure that he enjoys in reading (and rereading) fiction also suggests that this is a kind of literary reading that is for personal enjoyment, not particularly for edification or education:

Day before yesterday I read "The House of the Seven Gables" the third time. Yesterday I read "She." Reading these two novels so near together I involuntarily compared the style and treatment of each. In Hawthorne every word was exactly as it impressed the exact meaning. The whole was strong and beautiful, the limits of the probable were never entirely passed, although the most oppressing sense of the supernatural was always felt. In "She" almost every sentence is imperfect in some way, many very loose, more forced, the plot is so entirely improbable that it is often ridiculous yet the wonderful imaginative power of the author holds the attention. You can not help wishing that some master hand such as Hawthorne's had written the
story. For then it would have been doubly enjoyable. The faults of a
style which so much mar the pleasure of the reading would have been
removed. (C. D. Peale January 24, 1887)

A second theme that deals with reading, a comment that H. W. Sampson wrote
about his process of composing a longer fortnightly theme based on a "point of
departure" taken from The Golden Treasury, an anthology of poetry, also is
concerned with pleasure—except that he is writing about the lack of pleasure he
has experienced from the assigned reading. While this theme would certainly be
unacceptable as literary analysis, it does receive credit as a daily theme, since it
is sufficient for the purpose of the themes—to practice fluency and observation:

I have been hunting for a point of departure, for my next theme, in
the first thirty pages of the book which has been assigned.
Most of the poems seem to me to be love-sick little ditties upon
which it would indeed be difficult to write a sensible theme.
Of course there are some which I can appreciate but I have not yet
found one to suit my taste, entirely.
There is one poem, particularly, which troubles me extremely. It is
on Spring and by—forget his name. It seems utmost incredible that a
sane man should write such a thing. This is a poem that, to my way of
thinking, a child of ten years old should be ashamed to write. (H. W.
Sampson December 2, 1886)

A final example from the themes in which students engage with affairs of the
world through their reading, the following letter was composed by R. T. Paine
and printed in the "Letters to the Editor" section of a Boston newspaper. Paine
clipped the letter out of the newspaper, pasted it onto a sheet of theme paper,
and turned it in as a daily theme. In an earlier theme, he had discussed deciding
to write the letter. This letter to the editor theme is unusual because of the way
Paine chooses an actual, public rhetorical situation and imports it, so to speak,
into the theme assignment, a perfectly acceptable thing to do. (He was rewarded

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
for his work with a rare "+"") The daily theme assignment was not conceived as rhetorical, in the classic sense of the term, but it didn’t preclude such uses, either, as Paine demonstrates:

CONGRESS AGAINST THE PEOPLE.

To the Editor of the Herald: It may interest many of your readers at this time, when the dependent soldiers’ bill is in the hands of the President awaiting his action, to know how as similar pension bill, small in appearance, but gigantic in the vast outlay it has caused, was considered and passed by Congress. I refer to the arrearances of pensions bill of 1879. This bill repealed the limitation, which prevented applicants who had not filed their claims within five years from the date of their discharge from service from obtaining arrears of pensions. By the provisions of the bill arrears were granted to all who should apply before June 30, 1880.

This bill was introduced in the House of Representatives April 2, 1878, by a Mr. Cummings of Iowa and was referred to the committee on invalid pensions. As this committee did not report it, a member from New York moved June 19 that the rules be suspended, the committee be discharged from further consideration of the subject, and that the bill be passed. No debate was in order on a motion to suspend the rules and not one word was spoken concerning its merits, but it passed 164-61.

The next day Congress adjourned. The bill was reported to the Senate, and somewhat discussed Jan. 16, 1879. Mr. Saulsbury uttered the laudable sentiment that the Senate ought not to vote blindly on the matter, and accordingly asked if there were any estimates as to the expenditure involved. Mr. Ingalls answered that not more than $20,000,000 would be needed to pay the arrears of pensions to those whose claims had been filed prior to January 1, 1879. With the misunderstanding that $20,000,000 in all would be the total expense caused by the bill, the Senate passed it, and it became a law Jan. 25, 1879.

Mr. Bentley, the efficient commissioner of pensions, stated in his report, Jan. 20, 1881, that the total expense would be $510,000,000. As an indirect result of the bill, the number of claims filed at the pension office rose from an average per year of $24,000,000 for the six years before 1879 to an average per year for the six succeeding years of $70,000,000.

Now let us turn to the pension bill just passed. Its treatment bears a striking resemblance to that of the bill just considered. It was debated in the House of Representatives just 30 minutes, and passed under a suspension of the rules. Its proposer claimed that it was only an act of substantial justice to all soldiers of all United States wars who were
now dependent for support on charity, or who lived in workhouses or national or state soldiers' homes, and, furthermore, he stated that, estimating the number of soldiers thus supported at 33,000, the expense each year would not amount to more than $5,000,000 or $6,000,000.

Let us hope that this act will not result as did the arrearages of pensions bill. But I see no reason why it should not. The New York Evening Post has discussed the question pretty thoroughly, and it thinks that it will cause an extra expenditure for pensions of $70,000,000 a year. Certainly the estimate given in the House of Representatives is most inaccurate, and the total number of men estimated to be pensionable under the act is not one-tenth the actual number of men who will apply and obtain pensions under its provisions.

There is, however, one chance left that the country will be spared this burden. Let the President veto it. He has often hitherto exhibited a disregard and defiance of politicians and their demands, and the country can safely place its reliance upon him that in this case, too, he will do his duty. He has nothing to fear. The people will applaud his action, and the vast majority of the soldiers of the G.A.R. will also approve of it. The danger is that he may consider the voice of Congress as that of the people, but during this last week the people have spoken plainly and with unanimity against the bill.

R.T. P. Jr.
Cambridge, Feb. 10, 1887. (R. T. Paine February 17, 1887)

**Cultivating the body.**

Another way that theme writers reflected a new ideal of cultivation was in the interest they demonstrated in all aspects of "cultivating the body," an interest that shows up in the numbers of themes that deal with sports and exercise. Writers mention playing or watching football, baseball, sparring, shooting, swimming, track, rowing, tennis, sailing, yacht racing, tug-of-war, weight lifting, hiking, or simply working out. Snow writes about having a weight lifting machine installed in his dormitory room, and about a "hare and hounds" race through "muckerdom" (the surrounding Cambridge neighborhoods)—a game in

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
which a “hare” ran ahead, leaving a trail of signals for the pack of “hounds” in pursuit.

Counting themes according to topic, we find, for example, that 32 out of a total of 131 themes in Snow’s folder (or 24%) deal with sports in one sense or another. This percentage is higher than the average, but most folders do contain many themes that deal with the new interest in physical exercise and competition. (Counting the contents of other folders at random, we find that in Clyde’s folder, 41 out of a total of 162 themes (about 25% of the themes) deal with sports; in Peale’s folder, the number is 15%, and in Paine’s folder, the number is only 6%.)

Harvard, like other institutions at this time, built a modern gymnasium to promote physical strength and health, important but relatively recent qualities in the ideal of cultivation that colleges wanted to foster. Eliot believed that physical activity and movement of any kind developed the mind in a very material sense, even considered writing and drawing to be ways of developing “the ganglia” in this concrete sense (Concrete and the Practical ). According to the President’s Report for 1878-79, the Hemenway Gymnasium opened for use after the Christmas recess that year, and Dr. Sargent, an Associate Professor of Physical Training, was appointed to be the director. “It was the purpose of the Corporation in making this appointment to put the department...into the hands of a man of medical education, who was also practically familiar with every kind of bodily exercise and athletic sport,” writes Eliot (42). Dr. Sargent supervised the installation of gym apparatus, some of which he had designed himself.
The enthusiasm for sports and physical training seems in one respect to be a reaction against bookishness and the “all work and no play” mentality that made Jack a dull boy in the nursery rhyme. Physical training appears to have been more acceptable socially than studiousness, which was not acceptable, as G. W. Richards notes:

Why do all students want to belittle the amount of time that they spend on their studies? It seems to me to be the height of folly. If a man is studious and fulfills the intentions and wishes of his instructors he should be proud of it, and expect praise. But somehow or other, every fellow, that I know, who “grinds” much, pretends that he is scarcely ever opens a book. A fellow came into my room this afternoon, and after lighting a pipe, he began that same old refrain. “I wish I could find time to study but I am constantly on the go. I know for a fact that he is a studious, hard working fellow and stands well in his class. And in order to stand well, he has to study hard, because he is not naturally a good scholar. (G. W. Richards November 30, 1886)

In *Sports and Liberty*, Roger Smith argues that sports teams and contests developed in nineteenth century colleges as an undercurriculum—an unscripted means that students devised to escape the oppressive authoritarian structure of colleges. It was only later that schools accepted and supported teams with money and training. The themes do bear out Smith’s ideas about the students’ uses of sports to form allegiances and have contests in a culture of their own outside the official purview of the school. This theme illustrates the spirit of an undercurriculum very well:

Today, two rival clubs contested, on Holmes’ Field, in a baseball match.

The A’s took the field first and three runs were made by the B’s; in their half of the inning the A’s made two runs, and neck and neck, for a few innings, they played. Soon the A’s began to hit the ball, and the final serve was 19 to 8 in favor of the A’s. When the B’s came on the field they were headed by five German street band players and were escorted in
great pomp. At the end of the game cheers were given to each others
nines and the B’s took up their march for home.

Each side had a mascot, in the shape of a bull-terrier, and the
defeated B’s carried their dog, lying in their arms, legs in the air. The
band played a dirge, and they marched on with uncovered heads. The
victorious nine and its supporters formed in two lines, through which the
vanquished passed, and as they filed through, raised their hats in honor of
their rivals. (D. K. Snow May 17, 1887)

Inductive Reasoning

Finally, the writing prompted by the daily theme assignment was
consistent with the new ideal of cultivation in that it required students to observe
everyday aspects of experience, supporting practices essential to “the inductive
philosophy.” When Barrett Wendell assigned the daily themes to his students in
English 12, he elicited the immediacy of experience he was hoping to see in their
work from the beginning by describing the assignment orally in class, then asking
students to treat the assignment itself as the subject of their first theme. They
were to recapitulate the instructions in their own words, and hand the work in on
the following day. The first item in each folder of themes in the Harvard Archives
is almost always an individualized variant of Wendell’s assignment. The value
Wendell placed on the everydayness of the themes can be inferred from his
responses to students who strayed outside the boundaries of acceptable subject
matter. In the following theme, for example, N. Hesseltine responds to
comments (possibly made by Wendell in an individual conference) indicating to
Hesseltine that the subjects of his themes were too removed both in time and in
place to be suitable:

It is often difficult to know what to write for a daily theme. The
subjects must be to some extent limited so that they may fit the size.
Subjects appertaining to real life are doubtless the ones to be sought, but it may be hard to understand exactly what those subjects are. One would think that humorous [sic] incidents that came under the author's experience an exhibition of traits of character. One would think these subjects from real life. But in the report on my daily theme it seems that such is not the case. I am told to "take subjects from life." I am also informed that I choose too many European subjects. Now of those subjects that concerned Europe there were only one or two that did not treat of some humorous occurrence that came under my observation. I was complimenting myself as others had already complimented me on the same thing that my trip this summer in Europe had given me a good stock of stories and anecdotes, fit subjects for daily themes; but it seems that such are not the most preferable, though I should think they would be if done well and told interestingly. (November 19, 1886)

The confusion—and perhaps indignation—that Hesseltine expresses is understandable, since, as he points out, his previous subjects were taken from daily life and from his own experience. Wendell's corrective provides a clearer sense of the parameters of the assignment as it was conceived in his own mind, and suggests that he was after a more immediate temporal relationship (yesterday or today, not last summer); a more local experience (America, not Europe); and even a rawer narrative quality (a simple report of observed experience, rather than a finished, albeit more amusing, anecdote). Wendell's class notes and the student themes themselves intimate that the nature of the appropriate subject came up fairly regularly in class discussion; students whose themes took a turn towards "moralizing," the "abstract," or even "encyclopedic" were coaxed and prodded, as Hesseltine was, back into observing "what made today different from yesterday" (Wendell Notes). While most of the themes "observe" on some level, a few stand out as making a more evident attempt to record sights, smells, or sounds, as C. D. Peale does in this example:
This evening, as I sat by my window with the curtains drawn between me and the light from the fire, I was for the first time struck with the beauty of the scene outside. Although the moon was hidden by clouds, it managed to add enough light to allow one to see the outlines of buildings quite distant. The silhouette of the hills was marred distinctly by the rows of street lamps and lighted windows. Below these the Charles, looking for once clean and picturesque, makes a broad, sweeping curve. Nearer yet the gilded roofs of Cambridge muckerdom, for they did appear gilded in this light, added an Eastern look to the picture. (C. D. Peale)

Conclusion

During the period when these daily themes were written, educators and other intellectuals believed that truth could be sought through inductive methods of scientific inquiry; they believed scientifically produced knowledge could be good and true and beautiful all at the same time, writes Julie A. Reuben in The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality. A daily theme written by Robert Treat Paine exemplifies the sense of possibility that scientific and technical developments were thought to offer to intellectuals and educators in the late nineteenth century:

In reading Emerson's poems tonight [Paine writes] I read one very beautiful thought. The author and his friends were traveling through the Adirondacks which at that time was an unknown wilderness. A fellow traveler as he passed them in his canoe told them that the Atlantic Cable had been laid and messages sent across the ocean. Loud exulting shouts arose and the echoes answered from the neighboring hills: 'A burst of joy as if we told the fact to ears intelligent; as if grey rock and cedar grove and cliff and lake should know this feat of wit this triumph of mankind.' (date)
In Emerson’s poem, the huge new capabilities for communicating that the transatlantic cable opened up are echoed in the “communication” between the men’s shouts and the “ears” of the wilderness. The wilderness and the men are not in opposition, but exult together, as they do in one of Charles W. Eliot’s inscriptions on the Water Gate at the Columbian Exposition, in which he wrote of men and women settlers: “The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them.”

Paine’s theme and Eliot’s inscription suggest that constructing an identity that was “cultivated” meant being dependent upon the wilderness, not only as a moral and physical challenge to be tamed, but as a mirror that reflected identity back in a positive sense. They suggest a strange and unexpected intimacy that the “cultivated” expected from wilderness: to “hear,” to recognize, and to “be glad” of cultivation. But as Malea Powell points out in “Blood and Scholarship: One Mixed-Blood’s Story,” such an identity was only possible through “the un­seeing of Indian peoples, nations, and civilizations” (3). Powell writes that in the Academy today, the “un-seeing” of Indians that was part of colonization still gives “Euro-Americans a critical distance from materiality and responsibility” from the genocide that accompanied the first wave of settlement in American territories (3).

Powell also remarks that the present-day Academy and its scholarly practices are linked to the “frontier story” that underwrote colonization in the first place, creating for Native American scholars an unbearable tension between
engaging in scholarly discourses and honoring the memory of the "Indian bodies"
who were "mutilated, raped and murdered" as the wilderness was tamed:

The "rules" of scholarly discourse—the legitimizing discourse of the
discipline of rhetoric and composition—require us to write ourselves
into this frontier story. Scholars are to set forth on the fringes of
"the known" in order to stake out and define a piece of "unoccupied"
scholarly territory that, through our skill at explicating and
analyzing, will become our own scholarly homestead, our area of
concentration. We are trained to identify our object of study in
terms of its boundaries, its differences from other objects of study,
and then to do everything within out power to bring that object into
the realm of other "known" objects. In effect, we "civilize" unruly
topics....This scholarly homestead-plot is our price admission into
the Academy. (3-4)

My own study in this chapter supports Powell's point, and suggests how
Americans grafted a "frontier story" on to traditional definitions of education as
cultivation. In this way, metaphors of cultivation tied to white identity came to
saturate the way academic practices were imagined.
"LIBERTY IN EDUCATION":
FREEDOM, WHITENESS, AND THE DAILY THEME ASSIGNMENT

At present the proper work of education is the study
of means by which self-direction may be rendered safe.
G. H. Palmer. "Possible Limitations of the Elective System."

Liberty, as a principle, has no application to any state of things
anterior to the time when mankind have become capable
of being improved by free and equal discussion.
J. S. Mill. On Liberty

Introduction

In 1886, the year the daily themes were assigned, the meanings of
"liberty" were no more fixed than they are today. This was made apparent in
October of that year, when the Statue of Liberty was formally dedicated, and
members of the New York State Woman Suffrage Association were denied
participation in the ceremonies. "To emphasize their disgust at this treatment,"
reports an article in The New York Times, 200 members of the Association
hired a boat for themselves, and without asking anybody's leave took up
one of the most favorable positions for viewing the ceremonies on
the island....Immediately after the veil had been drawn from before
Liberty's face Mrs. Blake called an indignation meeting on the lower
deck. After denouncing the ceremonies just witnessed as a farce, she
offered resolutions declaring "that in erecting a statue of Liberty
embodied as a woman in a land where no woman has political liberty

137

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
men have shown a delightful inconsistency which excites the wonder and admiration of the opposite sex.” (“They Enter”)

This protest at the inauguration of the Statue of Liberty reveals the powerful emotions evoked in this country both by the ideal of “liberty” and by the imperfect ways that ideals of liberty have been actualized politically. Although liberty was passionately endorsed by virtually everyone in America, beliefs about what liberty actually meant in material terms, and ideas about who should enjoy the privilege of liberty (or who was considered to be capable of benefiting from liberty) have continually differed.

As a general topic, the idealization and realization of liberty in America is a huge subject, of course. But liberty is important to consider in relation to the daily themes, nevertheless, because it figured so strongly and explicitly in American theories of higher education in the nineteenth century, as Bruce Kimball has asserted in Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education. In this study, Kimball works inductively, following “the words ‘liberal education’ and ‘liberal arts’ through history,” and constructing “a simple typology” to help educators make sense of the proliferation of meanings that have attached to liberal education in western cultures (3). He detects a significant shift in the meanings of “liberal” education during the second half of the nineteenth century. As one example, he cites a study comparing statements on the “liberal arts” or “liberal education” made between 1842 to 1876 with a similar group of statements made between 1909 and 1920; the later group tends to define the purpose of liberal education to be to “liberalize” the mind (158). It was only after the Civil
War that "connotations of 'liberating' and 'freeing' gained widespread currency," Kimball observes (158).

To state it in very simple terms, before the Civil War, the liberal arts had been defined in terms their association with persons of leisure and means: free men—or *liberales*. American liberal arts colleges perceived it as their mission to teach students mental discipline, and designed their curricula accordingly. They taught the rudiments of many subjects, but it was not the content of knowledge—or the "furniture of the mind"—as much as the process of disciplining of the mind that they valorized. This approach led educators to value difficulty, in and of itself, since they thought learning difficult subjects (like the classical languages) would be most effective in training students' minds to learn. This approach did not call for great variety in the curriculum, since the same subjects were useful for the mental disciplining of all students. Consequently, America colleges generally prescribed the subjects all students were to study, the order in which they studied them, and often even the words they could use to describe their learning. (A prescribed curriculum was also the most economical for small colleges to offer.)

The idea of disciplining was perceived to be incongruent with ideals of individual liberty held by reformers in the movement to establish American universities (the movement that also spawned the first composition courses). They expressed frustration with the authoritative hold college faculty kept over students, the prescriptive nature of study, and the fact that all students were put through the same curriculum, regardless of their individual talents or aspirations.
James Morgan Hart, for example, voiced his objections in *German Universities*, a book that combines a personal narrative of his graduate work in Germany with a formally researched essay comparing German and American institutions of higher education. (Like many reform minded Americans, Hart had spent several years studying in Germany before he became Professor of Rhetoric and English Philology at Cornell University and an early chair of the Modern Language Association.) Hart writes:

The American collegian is...simply a school-boy of larger growth ....From the day of his matriculation to the day of his graduation, he is under surveillance more or less intrusive, he pursues a prescribed routine of study, his attendance is noted down, his performances are graded, his conduct is taken into the account, his parents or guardians receive monthly or term reports. In other words, during the entire period of four years the collegian is made to feel that he is looked upon as one incapable of judging and acting for himself. (*German Universities* quoted in Crowley 46)

The prescribed routines and constant "surveillance" that were part and parcel of life in American colleges were one of the features that Hart and other reformers found most disturbing, and that they worked hardest to change by proposing new administrative structures and university curricula.

Although the broad scope of Kimball's study leads him to focus on generalizations, he still makes it clear that the emergence of "liberty" in discourses of higher education was especially pertinent to the culture of education at Harvard in the late 1800's, and to the work of Harvard's president, Charles W. Eliot ( ). Fortunately, Eliot's deeply held commitment to public liberty as expressed in the works of Utilitarians such as John Stuart Mill can be confirmed by examining "almost any piece of work that [Eliot] undertook,"
according to Henry James, author of a biography of Eliot (and nephew of Henry James, the novelist) (Charles W. Eliot 327). Barrett Wendell, who designed the English XII course and the daily theme assignment, also devoted a lecture to "Liberty" in a series of lectures on America that he delivered at the Sorbonne in 1905, and published as Liberty, Union, and Democracy in 1908. Ideas about American liberty articulated by Eliot and Wendell in their published works provide, then, a theoretical context that is specific enough and substantive enough to support a reading of liberty in relation to the daily themes.

In the first part of this chapter, "Liberty and the Daily Theme Assignment," I detail how concepts of liberty embraced by Wendell and Eliot shaped the English XII course and the daily theme assignment. The ideals of liberty the two men describe are different, but both ideals contributed to an underlying rationale for the course and for the design of the daily theme assignment. Broadly speaking, concepts of liberty come into play because composition was subsumed into a larger project to foster students as free individuals. The introduction of an elective curriculum was in part envisioned as contributing to this larger project because it reduced prescription and rote learning throughout the curriculum, and it increased the number of choices students were expected to make. Electives changed the way students and teachers related to course material and to each other, and the daily themes reflect these changes. A number of themes are addressed to Wendell personally, for example, and provide insights into the nature of his relationship with students; other themes reflect on the students' connection to course material in other courses as well as in English XII. The
daily theme assignment itself also asked students to make choices by requiring them to write about their own experience and to invent their own topics, aspects of the assignment that students frequently comment on in their compositions.

In the second part of the chapter, "Critiques of Liberty," I present criticisms of theories of liberty as a way to "making race visible" in the daily theme assignment. These critiques contribute to an understanding of whiteness as it constructed—and was constructed by—the daily theme assignment. The first argument, put forward by philosopher Charles Mills in *The Racial Contract*, contends that liberty, as it has been construed in social contract theories, has implicitly pertained not to all people, but only to white people. The ideas expressed by John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty* and carried by Eliot into the designs of higher education clearly fall into the group of theories that Charles Mills is critiquing.

A second class of arguments suggests that discussions of liberty were contingent on a larger process through which White identities were defined by racializing Others. In a very broad sense, I follow Edward Said's argument in *Orientalism*, for example, in which he describes how a cultural identity for the West was constructed through a complex process of constructing an idea of "the Orient" through a number of different disciplines. My argument in this section is also modeled upon the critique of American literature and literary criticism presented by Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. These theorists make us conscious of the extent to which texts advocating for liberty and for liberty in education reference people in America for
whom freedom was not a given—African slaves, and their African American descendants, or refer to purportedly a-historical “Oriental” cultures of the Middle and Far East.

Liberty and the Daily Theme Assignment


Wendell and Eliot represent liberty very differently in their work. While Wendell portrays Liberty—or the love of liberty—as an attribute intrinsic to national and individual character, Eliot understands liberty in terms of political and institutional structures. Wendell declares American character to be quintessentially idealistic, but notes the “imprecision” of the three ideals he has selected as most representative of American society: Liberty, Union, and Democracy. His discussion looks at the varying ways liberty has been defined in America. In Eliot’s work, on the other hand, liberty is relational—a set of social and political conditions that allows individuals to develop with the least restriction possible. Eliot seems to view liberty as an environment in which individual growth can be fostered. He uses educational institutions to create such an environment. The definitions of the two men are compatible, however, and coexist in the fabric of ideas supporting the daily theme assignment.

Barrett Wendell: Liberty as an English Characteristic. Wendell’s discussion, presented as a lecture before a French audience, is careful to distinguish French ideals of individual freedom from more reserved American versions. The first
effigy of Liberty on American coinage was from a French image, and "by way of indicating that liberty is free and unconfined, [the artist] had the happy inspiration of designing her head with uncombed locks of hair streaming to the breeze," a feature more suited to the French ideal. A later, neater, image with combed hair "really suits us better" Wendell observes (Liberty 108-9).

He begins a meditation on American character, which he considered to have been first formed in seventeenth century England, in the period just before the English revolution. The political credos and the intense idealism of the English before the revolution were brought to America with the English Puritans who settled in New England and Virginia—these credos and this idealism became the seeds of American character, he says ( ). "These founders of our country, coming to their maturity in the 25 years of English history which preceded the approaching years of revolution, could not help being pre-Revolutionary Englishmen," Wendell writes (35). American character, Wendell declares, has a core essence that is passed intact from one generation to the next: "our revolutionary forefathers, the orators are all agreed, were Americans in precisely the same sense of that word which still makes us feel it instinctively inspiring" (10-13).

During the period of 1620 to 1775, the institutions established by the American colonists existed, "unhampered" by tradition and history, Wendell says—unlike the case of European countries (79-80). In America, the ideals of freedom grew strong in their isolation, while in England and other European countries, cultures changed and moved away from the original ideas. Attributing
American character so definitely to a source in pre-Revolutionary England allows Wendell to describe the American Revolution as "essentially conservative," because, he says, it was not a "destructive" fight to overthrow an ancient regime (like French Revolution), but was simply a fight "with all the power of a newly conscious national existence, to maintain against reactionary innovation that historical continuity, those immemorial traditions of our own" (85-6). In other words, in the centuries since America had first been settled by English Puritans, the English in England had changed to such a degree that the English colonists in America needed to sever their ties with them, to protect the values of freedom, democracy and unity. According to Wendell, the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution are not the origin of a new people, but their "emergence into consciousness," and the "assertion" that they already exist (81-3).

The "statement of the principle which underlies our American ideal of Liberty," and the core of the Declaration lies in the assertion that government derives its just powers from the consent of the governed. (129-30) The adoration of the Declaration of Independence obscures its generalities and difficulty of determining specificity of life, liberty and pursuit of happiness, however. Conceptions of liberty were not precise: differences arose over the "unit of liberty." Sometimes the unit was a "vague and inspiring assertion of personal liberty" (131). Divergent and equally strong arguments located the unit of liberty in the individual state government or in the national government.
Charles W. Eliot: Liberty as an Environment Free of Restriction. Henry James, Eliot's biographer, dates Eliot's entrance into the national educational arena to 1873, the year he presented a paper to the National Education Association arguing against a proposal to create a national university. In the paper, Eliot argues against the establishment of a university that would be dependent on the government for funds. It was his opinion that this would be to give too much responsibility to government, and to undermine the liberty of individuals. He argues that, unlike the nations of Europe, whose dependence on the government is "an accursed inheritance from the days of the divine right of kings," Americans "maintain...that Government is to do nothing not expressly assigned it to do, that it is to perform no function which any private agency can perform as well, and that it is not to do a public good...unless that good be otherwise unattainable" (quoted in James Charles W. Eliot 325-6).

Consequently, Eliot recommends that higher education be funded only by private endowment.

Eliot quotes John Stuart Mill in this paper, notes James, who says, "The paper shows that he carried the laissez faire philosophy of the Benthamite school to its extreme implications in his own realm of higher education" (327). Ideas expressed in Mill's On Liberty inform every aspect of Eliot's thinking about education, according to James ( ). In On Liberty, Mill takes up the question of how much control governing institutions should be allowed to wield over individual members. Mill frames his argument within an overarching goal of furthering the development of mankind, and takes as the epigraph of his essay a...
statement from Wilhelm von Humboldt's "Sphere and Duties of Government":

"The grand, leading principle, towards which every argument unfolded in these pages directly converges, is the absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity." Mill considers "it is only the cultivation of individuality which produces, or can produce, well-developed human beings" (77).

Mill asserts that it is in the best interests of the development of humanity to allow individuals as much freedom as possible—as long as a person's actions do not cause harm to others. In Mill's own words:

The object of this essay is to assert one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control, whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties or the moral coercion of public opinion. That principle is that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number is self-protection. (13)

Social and political bodies have authority to control individual members, given to them by the consent of the governed, according to Social Contract theory. But, this authority should be as limited as possible, Mill argues: "the individual is not accountable to society for his actions in so far as these concern the interests of no person but himself" (114).

Mill presents his argument in two main sections. The first, "Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion," deals with the freedom of ideas. In this part, he asserts that "human beings should be free to form opinions and to express their opinions without reserve" ( ). He predicts that if this liberty is not conceded, there would be "baneful consequences to the intellectual, and through that to the
moral nature of man" ( ). The stifling of opinions, he argues, is evil, whether the opinion be true or false. All opinions should be tested by open discussion: “However unwillingly a person who has a strong opinion may admit the possibility that his opinion may be false, he ought to be moved by the consideration that, however true it may be, if it is not fully, frequently, and fearlessly discussed, it will be held as a dead dogma, not a living truth” (43).

In the second section, "Of Individuality, as One of the Elements of Well-Being," Mill argues that individual originality—not custom—is the basis for human progress. Mill concedes that tradition and customs have a place in society, but they should not be followed blindly. Individuals should determine whether customs work to their benefit or not, or whether customs are applicable to their own specific circumstances, and to follow or reject them accordingly. “It is the privilege and proper condition of a human being, arrived at the maturity of his faculties, to use and interpret experience in his own way. It is for him to find out what part of recorded experience is properly applicable to his own circumstances and character,” Mill asserts (71). The process of questioning received traditions is crucial to the formation of individual character, Mill thinks:

to conform to custom merely as custom does not educate or develop in him any of the qualities which are the distinctive endowment of a human being. The human faculties of perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference are exercised only in making a choice. He who does anything because it is the custom makes no choice. He gains no practice either in discerning or in desiring what is best. (71)

It is by choosing that an individual develops into “a person whose desires and impulses are his own—are the expression of his own nature” (71). Failing to
choose, or simply following customs that are not congenial to a person's own
nature, "[render] his feelings and character inert and torpid instead of active and
ergetic" (71).

Mill's essay is concerned almost entirely with identifying the circumstances
under which social and governmental control would be allowed to restrict the
liberty of individuals. At the end of the essay, however, he adds a list of
"Objections to Government Interference" that are concerned not with restraining
individuals but with "helping them" (133). He suggests occasions when
government restraint would work to strengthen individuals. First, the government
should refrain when "the thing to be done" would likely be done better by
individuals, particularly those who have a personal interest in the outcome (133).
Secondly, the government sometimes also ought to refrain even in situations
where they are more capable than individuals to do a job well, and allow
individuals to do it instead "as a means to their own mental education—a mode
of strengthening their active faculties, exercising their judgment, and giving them
a familiar knowledge of the subjects with which they are thus left to deal" (133-4).

Finally, the "interference" of government should be restricted simply for the
sake of preventing it from accumulating too much power: "Every function
superadded to those already exercised by the government causes its influence
over hopes and fears to be more widely diffused, and converts, more and more,
the active and ambitious part of the public into hangers-on of the government, or
of some party which aims at becoming the government" (135). He cites
revolutions among the dangers of allowing populations to become too dependent
on the government. If the people are used to expect the State to do everything for them, they will also be likely to blame the government for everything that goes wrong, rise up, and replace them with a new government (136-7). In states where “people [are] accustomed to transact their own business,” however, there will be many people are capable of carrying on public affairs intelligently. Mill says,

this is what every free people ought to be. A people capable of this is certain to be free; it will never let itself be enslaved by any man or body of men because these are able to seize and pull the reins of the central administration. No bureaucracy can hope to make such a people as this do or undergo anything that they do not like (137).

These final “Objections” in On Liberty were especially pertinent to Eliot’s theorizing of power and authority in the context of education. The minimalist approach to social and governmental control that Mill advocates went counter to the old-style college experience in which almost every aspect of the curriculum was dictated by the administration to faculty, every aspect of learning was dictated to students by faculty, and in which both faculty and administration spent a great deal of time and energy in maintaining discipline in the classroom and in the dormitories. In Mill’s guidelines can be seen the underlying philosophy that came to structure interactions between Eliot’s administration and the faculty, between departments and faculty, and between faculty and students.

Concepts of Liberty and the Elective Curriculum

Eliot’s convictions about liberty contributed immeasurably to the fact that universities in America let the earlier ideal of mental discipline fade into the
background (though it has never gone away entirely), while they privileged interpretations of the liberal arts as *liberating*. In the paper he presented to the National Education Association in 1873, Eliot said American education should "breed freemen":

Let us cling fast to the genuine American method...in the matter of public instruction. The essential features of that system are local taxes for universal elementary education, voted by the citizens themselves; local elective boards to spend the money raised by taxation and control of the schools; and, for the higher grades of instruction, permanent endowments administered by incorporated bodies of trustees. This is the American voluntary system, in sharp contrast with the military, despotic organization of public instruction which prevails in Prussia and most other states of continental Europe. Both systems have peculiar advantages, the crowning advantage of the American method being that it breeds freemen. (qtd in James. Charles Eliot 326)

Eliot labored to actualize the ideals of liberty articulated by John Stuart Mill, institutions that would foster the development of individuals by protecting the freedom of thought and expression; keeping the authority of central administration to a minimum; and expecting students to take much more responsibility for governing themselves. Encouraging individual development while curtailing administrative and faculty control was a central theme running through Eliot's educational designs, determining the form of the elective system at Harvard, the development of graduate education, the use of entrance examinations, and many other reforms (James 352)

Infusing individual choice into the program became an important priority at Harvard during Eliot's presidency. In 1869, when he became president, some parts of the curriculum were voluntary, but under his leadership the introduction of electives intensified until almost every course was offered as an elective. The
success Eliot had in making this very substantial change in the curriculum can be attributed at least in part to the fact that he and other supporters explicitly linked electives to discourses of liberty. In “Liberty in Education,” an essay defending the introduction of an elective system, Eliot names two different kinds of reasons for abandoning the prescribed curriculum. First, there are what he calls “mechanical” reasons. Although prescribing courses is highly efficient in terms of labor (because it allows a small band of faculty to teach a large number of students, and because it keeps coursework at a fairly unspecialized level), he notes, the prescribed curriculum is objectionable because it prevents new subjects from being introduced, forcing the exclusion of whole branches of knowledge, such as the new sciences, the modern languages, economics, and art and art history, to name only a few ( ).

Secondly, there are, according to Eliot, moral reasons for objecting to the prescribed curriculum. Earlier models of college education had sought to establish “a supervising authority” in loco parentis over the students, he observes (“Liberty” 147). Eliot counters this stance, arguing, “it is not the business of a university to train men for those functions in which implicit obedience is of the first importance. On the contrary, it should train men for those occupations in which self-government, independence, and originating power are preeminently needed” (“Liberty” 148). He asserts that universities should be structured to train men for “self-reliance through liberty” (148). Maintaining disciplinary authority over students is not entirely possible, he says, for one thing, and it is not...
desirable, for another, because it weakens students’ own ability to "govern themselves" (146).

The phasing-in of the elective system precipitated several other changes in the logistics of offering courses. For one thing, electives forced the development of new courses. As Albert Kitzhaber observes, "The appearance of the elective system accounted at least in part for the great increase in the number of literature courses: if students were to choose for themselves a considerable part of their courses, they must be supplied with adequate range of choice" (41). The expansion of course offerings and the incorporation of entirely new subject areas had, in fact, been one of the primary goals of making courses elective.

Another one of the primary goals of the elective system had been to allow for greater specialization. The increase in course offerings made more specialized courses possible and also permitted students to focus on specific areas in greater depth, so that they would have the background they needed to enter advanced study in specialized courses. This entailed hiring faculty who had the specialized knowledge and research skills to be able to teach advanced courses. Individual faculty members also were accorded a great deal of freedom within the boundaries of their own course. In a description of English at Harvard that he wrote for The Dial, Wendell wrote that "once a man has been hired," [find quote. What he does in his own class is up to him—each person has an individual approach]. To make the greater numbers of courses feasible for the university in financial terms, the enrollment of students needed to be increased.
The introduction of electives also prompted changes in the ways that faculty related to students. As another way of supporting student choice, departments also began to articulate the nature of study in their field, and to publish accurate descriptions of the content and requirements of each course that they offered. Students needed to have enough understanding to make choices about what courses to take and what major areas of study to pursue. George Herbert Palmer explains that professors under the new system would be called upon to take a more “pastoral” role with students—must be willing to counsel them in making choices about areas of specialization and the proper courses to take.

With enthusiasm for any work, a man can do wonders with interest in it he can do much, but when he does a thing because he feels it is his duty, the chances are that he will make a botch of it. I have been advised to choose courses in college which would be sure to arouse my interest, but it is no easy matter to do this. You may think you like a certain subject but a particular course in that subject may be conducted with such a lack of interest and such a tendency to discourage that, though you conscientiously think you are doing good work, you are really doing nothing. I have discovered that I have this year just such a course. It is a subject I should like to know much about and for that reason I chose the course, but from all reports I seem to be making a failure. (April 19, 1887) C. H. Baldwin

The elective curriculum functioned as the most important means of making choice integral to university education, but personal choice was made important in other ways as well. Attending classes was made voluntary, for example. In 1886, attendance at chapel services also became voluntary for the first time, a change that students reflect upon in their daily themes.
Choosing Theme Topics. The concept and practice of liberty were also important in the writing class, and must be taken into account in a cultural analysis of the daily theme assignment. The course in which the themes were assigned, English 12, was an elective, and expected students to participate because they volunteered to do so, not because they were forced to do so. Students were also pushed to practice choice because theme topics were not assigned, as a rule, either for daily themes or for fortnightly themes; students were expected to arrive at their own writing topics.

Before the changes that reshaped Harvard College into a university, when the curriculum had been almost completely prescribed, it had been the rhetoric professor's job to invent theme topics. A list of assigned theme topics recorded by Edward Tyrell Channing, who taught rhetoric at Harvard from 18 to 18 , shows that he put a considerable amount of time and effort into coming up with ideas, and to making sure that topics did not repeat themselves from one year to the next.

The daily theme assignment required writers to produce six themes a week, every week of the month, for eight months. Students describe the marathon writing project of composing the themes as a test of endurance, a rite of passage, and a bonding experience, not least because—with very few exceptions—the topics of the daily themes were left for the student to decide. Choosing topics every day was a very significant task in terms of the daily theme
writers' experience of the assignment. Near the end of the academic year, T. O. Shepard reflected on the work he had done for Wendell's class:

With no greater feeling of relief have I ever finished a piece of work than when I wrote my last fortnightly theme in English XII. It makes me tired to think of the amount of work I have done in this course during the year, and of the number of themes, daily and fortnightly, I have handed in from the beginning to the end of the year. When one first begins to work on this course, it is not so bad, but as the year advances, and the dailies have to be kept up as constantly, then the work becomes tedious, and begins to tell on a man. I am very thankful there are only two more dailies. (May 1887)

The daily themes were not designed to be like the exploratory writing exercises familiar to us today, which are intended to help writers find their way into more formal topics—free writing, fast writing, brainstorming, or some kinds of journaling. The dailies were meant to be focused themes, with a clearly defined subject, written for a public audience.

At some point in the oeuvre of each student whose work I have studied in the archives, the never-ending hunt for topics became in itself a subject to write about. The "looking for a topic" genre took several forms. One common approach was to simply narrate the process of casting about for a suitable topic until the sheet of theme paper was full enough to submit, as in this example by T. O. Shepard:

What to Write On?
I sit down to put in writing the few ideas that pass through my brain in order to cover the requisite amount of paper needed for a daily theme. So far so good, but the next question is what to write about? I might write again about Ruddygore, describing the play, the songs, and the finale, but as the poor man who is obliged to read this effusion, has probably read hundreds of themes on the same subject, I will refrain. I might write about the new liquor law now in vogue in Cambridge, but to tell the truth I know nothing about it. I might take Spring as my
subject, but again pity for the instructor prevents me. The poor accommodation for getting into town, the class news and their prospects in the coming race, the swimming tank, the University Club, an a thousand other subjects would afford good material for a daily, but as I have reached the end of my paper I will pause. (May 6, 1887)

Themes in the “looking for a topic” genre sometimes presented a more direct discussion of the difficulties the writer encountered. These might be as simple as ‘s glum midwinter observation that “subjects for the daily theme are as scarce as hen’s teeth” ( ) or as lightly ironic (but honest) as C. D. Peale’s comments:

There is one bad thing about the daily theme work in English 12. It encourages loafing. (No doubt the Instructor who reads the dailies agrees with me in this.) But I en that the more you loaf, the better will be the dailies you write. A man when he is grinding has neither time nor opportunity for picking interesting bits of information or noticing amusing incidents about him. His mind must be on his work. While the loafer has nothing to do but notice little things happening about him. Forensics are now the all-absorbing subjects of our thoughts “So pardon us” our dailies. (April 25, 1887)

Placing students in the position of having to decide for themselves what to write about made choice an important dimension of the theme assignments in English 12—dailies and fortnightlies—in a way that it had not been before.

Shifting Authority Relationships. The privileging of independent character and the privileging of choice also altered the nature relationships between students and professors in the classroom. In “The Politics of Intimacy: The Defeat of Barrett Wendell at Harvard,” Thomas Newkirk has detailed the lively engagement Wendell encouraged his students to take towards the course and towards the subject of writing. Newkirk points out that many of Wendell’s
teaching innovations in English 12 were designed to invite students to participate in the course, and prefigured developments “that we have come to see as more recent—writing conferences, the use of student writing as the primary texts of the course, peer critiquing, analytic evaluation tools” (119).

The daily themes were one of the “regular channels” available to students for commenting on the course, often critically (Newkirk “Politics” 123). In many themes, writers answer criticism they had received from Wendell, when he read their work out loud before the class, or from other students in their written peer reviews. The following series of themes provides a glimpse into one side of a “conversation” between Wendell and Robert Treat Paine:

Private.
A friend who attended today the lecture which I cut, told me that my theme was read in the class. He added that Mr. Wendell called the use therein of the word sonnet an example of “stupendous ignorance,” saying that he did not believe there were 3! men in the class who did not know the correct meaning. Indignant at these statements I inquired of the first ten men in the course I met, and not one had known at the time in question. Of 14 men at my table, 9 take the course. I believe honestly that these 9 men fairly represent all sections of the class, and yet, not one had known. Only 1 man at the table knew and he happened to have heard the definition a month before. I wonder under these circumstances, whether the statement as to the number 3 does not argue an insufficiently intimate acquaintance with the needs and status of the class. And I deeply feel that the accusation of ‘stupendous ignorance’ that was publicly made against me was unjustifiable and uncalled for. It may have been provoked by my rather rude remarks at the bottom of the criticism of my theme. These remarks I confess were not gentlemanly. And yet I believe that my indignation at the ‘Schoolboy’ phrase was justified.

It may be that I should have swallowed my wrath or that I should have attributed the displeasing phrase to the fact that Mr. Wendell had been reading previously many other ‘bad themes.’ (Robert T. Paine Jr. January 19, 1887)
Wendell’s written response on Paine’s theme simply notes that it concerns “sonnets” and he characterizes it as “direct and courteous.” Paine feels no compunction about beginning his complaint by noting that he was not present at the lecture because he had cut class, because attendance was voluntary.

On the following day, Paine takes up the issue again, and continues to argue that Wendell had no grounds for assuming that every student should know the proper definition of a sonnet. Paine supports his defense with informal statistics he has acquired by questioning other students in the Junior class:

I wish to offer a few remarks in justification of my remark on the criticism of my theme V. I am impulsive, and I believe in being frank; I am inclined to support pretty firmly my opinions when once formed. I held then the same opinion of the number of men with the correct idea of the definition of the word ‘Sonnet’ as a canvas has since given me good grounds for holding now. If only 1 in 14, men in the Junior class know the definition, what ground is there for believing that every Schoolboy knows it? Therefore I feel that my remark was undoubtedly true. I have been told that my mark would be most seriously affected by it. This suggestion is unmanly and is unfair to any instructor. It is so cowardly that even if true it should rather tempt one to make the remark. It is frank and I believe frankness towards one’s instructor is beneficial to one’s character, but may well be that that meaning should have been expressed in a happier phrase. (R. T. Paine January 20, 1887)

To this second tirade, Wendell imperturbably responds: “on frankness—delightfully frank.”

Finally, on the following day, Paine submitted one more theme on the subject of his response to the criticism of the theme, but in this instance the anger of his original comment has dispersed into a more general (and slightly confusing) observation of the fact that spoken tone and inflection cannot be deduced from written text:
I should not have said anything in so-called justification of my remark on the criticism of my theme V if I had not been considerably aroused. I do not think the remark could be justified, but many things might be said in palliation of it. I doubt however whether such a remark should ever be subjected to the chance interpretation of it when in black and white for the reader can not tell the tone and inflection of the original speaker, and for a correct interpretation the knowledge of these two qualities is essential. N.B. This thought was suggested by my remark but otherwise had nothing to do with it. (R. T. Paine. January 21, 1887)

Paine's last theme is somewhat contrite, but not apologetic. The personal tone, emotional frankness, the willingness to engage with an issue (whether knowledge of the sonnet should be assumed or not) that are evident in his themes are to be seen in many of the themes of other students as well.

The endorsement of ideals of liberty that emphasized individual choice and personal expression provided an institutional context that supported Wendell's main goal in teaching, which Newkirk describes as attempting "to overcome the emotional flatness, the gridlock in teacher-student relationships."

As Newkirk also points out, however, the elective system "almost crushed" Wendell, who was nearly "defeated by his own popularity" (124). As the research mission of the university strengthened and grew, tensions also developed between funding for the project of engaging in specialized research and funding for the providing the individualized attention to students that Wendell promoted.
Critiques of Liberty

Limiting Those Designated as "Persons"

Because race theorists have already leveled critiques at theories of liberty, the ideals of liberty endorsed by Eliot and Wendell and the educational practices designed to foster these ideals provide a means for interpreting the daily theme assignment in terms of race. The first argument I would like to consider appears in *The Racial Contract*, by Charles Mills. In this work, Mills argues that race is a universal—but unacknowledged—political system that "underwrites" all of the other political systems of modern states.

Mills, a philosopher, asserts that political philosophy has consistently "elided...the experience of racial minorities" (2). He adopts the vocabulary of Social Contract philosophies themselves to critique their failure to address the existence of racism and white supremacy. Conventional Social Contract theories "obfuscate...the ugly realities of group power and domination," Mills says, by explaining racist incidents or inequalities as anomalies—violations of an otherwise functional system (3). "From the inception...race is in no way an 'afterthought' a 'deviation' from ostensibly raceless Western ideals, but rather a central shaping constituent of those ideals" (15). Social Contract theories are based on the concept that individuals possess their individual rights and liberties in exchange for their "agreement" (it is a figurative agreement, not a real one) to abide by the social and political rules that exist for the safeguarding of the community as a whole.
Mills proposes that modern political systems, organized according to the principles of freedom and accountability articulated by social contract philosophers, argue for liberty and equality, but are tacitly underwritten by an even more fundamental political system he calls "the Racial Contract": "Racism (or...global white supremacy) is itself a political system, a particular power structure of formal or informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties" (3). The Racial Contract is "the unnamed political system that has made the world what it is today" (1). While the Social Contract is an ideal construct—a concept for organizing and understanding society, the Racial Contract, Mills says, functions much more efficiently to describe and explain the way the world really works.

The purpose of the Racial Contract is to establish a racial order—an agreement by which certain groups get designated as "white" and benefit from full membership in society, with all of the rights and responsibilities that entails. Others who are not deemed to be white, are allotted the position of "subpersons" who cannot then be signatories to the social contract, Mills says: "the color coded morality of the racial Contract restricts the possession of...natural freedom and equality to white men" (16).

Corroboration for Charles Mills's contention—that the ideals of liberty they are advocating are not to be considered as applicable to everybody—may be found explicitly stated in John Stuart Mill's On Liberty. Mill reveals an underlying assumption that humanity is in the process of developing from a rudimentary
state towards a condition of greater and greater potential. The stages of this progression exist in a hierarchy, with the most supposedly primitive, barbaric or savage at the low end of the scale, and the most supposedly civilized at the top. The progression is chronological (beginning with the "primitive" in early times and evolving into the "civilized" present), but at any single point in time, humans at every stage of this progression coexist in the world simultaneously.

In the Introductory passages of On Liberty, for example, John Stuart Mill interjects a cautionary note, restricting the persons to whom his theory of liberty would be suitable:

It is perhaps hardly necessary to say that this doctrine is meant to apply only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties. We are not speaking of children or of young persons below the age which the law may fix as that of manhood or womanhood. Those who are still in a state to require being taken care of by others must be protected against their own actions as well as against external injury. For the same reason we may leave out of consideration those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered in its nonage. (13-14)

It is perhaps hardly necessary to say that the "backward states of society" in this passage refer to people who are not white.

In the work of Eliot and Wendell, the line separating those who may be considered "advanced" from those who may be designated as "backward" can be understood according to the concept of assimilation. In Liberty, Union, and Democracy Wendell denies that American character is attached to race in any biological sense: It is not the mortal body of our race, it is the deathless spirit for which we passionately desire a noble endurance," he writes (11). But the metaphors he uses to discuss national
character suggest it is attached to England and descendants of the English
in America. He describes the period of 1620 to 1775 as a time of
"gestation" for the national consciousness, and he likens the American
Revolution to a "birth" (81). He creates a family tree of sorts by tracing
national character back through Lincoln, Daniel Webster, Benjamin
Franklin, George Washington, Cotton Mather—a distinctively genealogical
approach. He writes:

> At heart, after all, our pristine ideal of liberty was English. The force
which made it vital sprang from our hereditary unwillingness to permit
any foreign interference with the legal rights—the liberties, in the old
English sense of the term—which we had unwittingly developed for
ourselves. (114-15)

Wendell represents Liberty as a capacity that, in a sense, "belonged" to
the English and their descendants. Although others are not precluded from
feeling a love of liberty, it is viewed as an English trait that others are welcome to
adopt. Wendell subscribes to the idea that immigrants to America, to become
American, needed to adopt ways of thinking and being that were essentially,
inherently English in origin. Even though America accepts huge numbers of
immigrants, Wendell denies that the country is "confused and composite" (7).
New immigrants, he says, "embody ... the animating force which has been vitally
ancestral to this America of our own":

> Year by year, as new classes come to me and new class lists are laid
before my eyes, I am confronted with faces, and still more with names,
absolutely foreign in all their implications, to the traditions by which we
of New England have been nurtured, and which in turn we have
jealously cherished these three hundred years. ... When more and
more names and faces gathering about us in our own New England
remind us that the regions where our fathers dwelt shall in time to
come be the homes of children whose fathers were other than ours,
there must hover into our consciousness some despairing sense that we of the elder tradition are a race peacefully conquered....As he comes to know them,,,,,his growing certitude that despite the variety of their origin, these boys ....are not Frenchmen or Italians, Irishmen or Germans or Jews. They are rather Yankees like their native Yankee teacher. (10-11)

Eliot, however, was generally much more liberal than his peers, and more than most Americans, according to Hugh Hawkins. He considered liberty to be a great educator outside of academia as much as inside it, and thought that by inhabiting a free society, most individuals could "use freedom" to learn the responsibilities and privileges of liberty. He was in favor of open immigration, believing that new immigrants could contribute to American society, regardless of their origins; he also fought to admits students from previously excluded groups into Harvard. He was fully committed to the belief that some individuals of any race or creed were capable of outstanding accomplishment.

Passages in Eliot's work also disclose his sense—like J. S. Mill's—that humanity is developing through a series of progressively improving stages in a linear direction, with "primitive" people in the earliest/lowest position, and Europeans in the most recent/most exalted position. In some instances, Eliot expresses the opinion that some people are unable to assimilate altogether. This passage is taken from an essay entitled "Five American Contributions to Civilization"; the contribution under discussion here is the "abandonment of war as the means of settling disputes between nations, the substitution of discussion and arbitration, and the avoidance of
armaments." It is Eliot's contention that Americans have not resorted to wars of the kind that would "contract the limits of individual liberty":

There has been a great deal of fighting on the American continent during the past three centuries; but it has not been of the sort which most imperils liberty. The first European colonists who occupied portions of the coast of North America encountered in the Indians men of the Stone Age, who ultimately had to be resisted and quelled by force. The Indian races were at a stage of development thousands of years behind that of the Europeans. They could not be assimilated; for the most part, they could not be taught or even reasoned with; with a few exceptions they had to be driven away by prolonged fighting, or subdued by force so that they would live peaceably with the whites. (Contributions 4-5)

This passage clearly shows the scheme of development underlying Eliot's assumptions about the capacity of people to participate in a free society. He separates the native North American from the European colonists in terms of their "stages of development." The boundary of assimilation coincides with a racial boundary.

In a discussion of Eliot's attitudes towards diversity in education, Hugh Hawkins writes that Eliot "shared the belief of many who considered themselves men of good will: that there could be race distinction in law without race discrimination" (Between Harvard 191). Hawkins notes that Eliot "grasped the cultural sources of so-called 'racial' differences" (191). Eliot considered that the condition of slavery functioned as the negative to the environment of liberty—instead of fostering general human progress through forcing individual choice and self reliance, slavery stultified the impulse to individual development. After a tour of the South, Eliot asserted that the slave experience had produced cultural attitudes in the black population that kept them from progress. Since "labor is a
curse and frugality an absurdity" under slavery, blacks in the south had not yet learned "that civilization is built on willingness to work hard six days in the week, and to be frugal all the time" (quoted in Hawkins 191).

As Hugh Hawkins points out, Eliot's idea that progress is learned from adapting to a condition of freedom seemed to amount, ironically, to an indictment in some of his pronouncements. Though Eliot believed that there was no genetic basis for racial difference, Hawkins notes, "the slowness with which he expected American culture to work its transformation was so great that the 'inferiority' might almost as well have been genetic" (191).

Observations such as the comments Eliot makes about the future he imagined for the African American community suggest how these ideas may have shaped the vision he had for American education more generally. In Playing in the Dark, Toni Morrison "wonders"

whether the major and championed characteristics of our national literature—individualism, masculinity, social engagement versus historical isolation; acute and ambiguous moral problematics; the thematics of innocence coupled with an obsession with figurations of death and hell—are not in fact responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence. (5)

Following her example, it is hard not to also wonder if the redefining of the liberal arts as studies that "liberate the mind" (Kimball), the radical "freeing" of the curriculum through the elective system, and the general concern in educational theory with reassigning authority to the individual student were not driven to some extent by a consciousness of the "four hundred year old presence" of Africans and African Americans in this country.
Support for this idea emerges in an essay defending the elective system at Harvard against its critics. The essay, written by the Harvard philosophy professor George Herbert Palmer, appeared in the *Andover Review* in January, 1887, and was responding to an essay critical of electives that had appeared in that journal in 1885. Palmer argues that electives are invaluable because they foster the free will of students. "As a moral will comes to be recognized as the best sort of steam power the modes of generating that power acquire new claims to attention" (4) Educators must exercise authority, but they have a choice in what kind of authority they will wield:

Authority is necessary, ever-present authority. If your man’s choice is to become a thing of worth, it must be encompassed within limitations. But as the need of these limitations springs from the imperfections of choice, so should their aim be to perfect choice, not to repress it. To impose limitations which do not ultimately enlarge the youth they bind is to make the means of education “oblige against its main end.” (2)

What is remarkable in Palmer’s argument is the way that he frames the issue of authority in education in relation to slavery:

A father may exercise an authority over his child no less directive than that of the master over the slave; but the father is trying to accomplish something which the master disregards; the father hopes to make the will of another strong, the master to make it weak; the father commands what the child himself would wish, had he sufficient experience.

Palmer searches for a way to differentiate actions which appear to be the very same by making the relationship the defining feature between the authority figure and the person who is being made to obey.

Palmer’s argument seems to run counter to his own purposes, because he is defending the relatively relaxed authority structure under the elective system.
against detractors who claim that "submission to authority" is, in and of itself, a healthy thing for students. Palmer appears to be condemning the "old" authority familiar to students of more traditional colleges by likening its effects to the effects of slavery, while still allowing that authoritative control could be beneficial, if possessed by a person in proper relation to the one who is being controlled.

The child's obedience accordingly enlightens, steadies, invigorates his independent will. Invigoration is the purpose of the command. The authority is akin—secretly akin—to the child's own desires. No alien power intervenes, as when a slave obeys. Here a foreign power intervenes, as when a slave obeys. Here a foreign will thwarts the slave's proper motions. Over against his own legitimate desires, the desires of a totally different being appears and claims precedence. Obedience like this brings no ennoblement. The oftener a child obeys, the less of a child is he; the oftener a slave, the more completely he is a slave. Roughly to say, then, that submission to authority is healthy for a college boy argues a mental confusion. There are two kinds of authority,—the authority of moral guidance, and the authority of repressive control; parental authority, respecting and vivifying the individual life and thus continually tending to supersede itself, and masterly authority, whose command, out of relation to the obeyer's wish, tends ever to bring the obedient into bondage. Which shall college authority be?

Palmer's argument is confusing because it does not evaluate actions in and of themselves, but qualifies them according relationships that exist between the actors. It is striking, though, to see how deeply the shadow of slavery is moving in the images and moral questions that he is arguing, and even in very mundane aspects of the structures and practices of education.

Conclusion

Liberty has been (and still is) a powerful "God term" in American culture. It has influenced the structures and practices of university education. Critiques of
the way liberty has been theorized has implications for educational practices.

This chapter began with a story about the inauguration of the Statue of Liberty. In "Linguistic Utopias," Mary Louise Pratt summons that image of the excluded women suffragists circling the island in New York Harbor at the inauguration in 1886 to visually represent a problematic ideal of imagined community. Like the guests on the island disregarding the groups who have been disinvited to the party, views of language and education too often are anchored in "a normative vision of a unified and homogeneous social world" that precludes understanding of real difference.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

This study has worked to develop a way of reading that would allow us to discern the operation of race in any classroom context, particularly in the predominantly white contexts in which composition was formed as a university subject. The model of race chosen for this study is based on critical race theories that conceive of race as being socially constructed, but also as being socially potent. The model asserts that race organizes identity and experience in powerful ways, even when (or perhaps especially when) its presence is apparently silent—or is, in the terminology of Charles Mills, "normalized."

This study has relied on three theoretical principles abstracted from a body of critical race theories to support a reading of composition history in terms of race. These three principles—that race is a historical reality; race is a system; and race is linked to epistemology—have provided the theoretical framework for undertaking a cultural analysis. Although the model of race outlined by these general principles has provided a general rationale for studying the daily themes, it could not predict the appearance of what David Theo Goldberg calls the "mask" of race in any given situation; it could not show how race would look empirically in the written and visual texts, the institutional structures, the spaces, and the customs of the cultural moment that have been the subject by this study.
This study used the critical race model to develop an empirical description of the ways race was being manifested in one, very specific historical moment. The limitation of the scope of the study to one writing assignment undertaken by one class during one year at Harvard in 1886-87 focused the study on depth rather than breadth, and foregrounded the multi-layered nature of the composition class, when it is seen, as Susan Miller suggests we should see it, as a cultural artifact.

In this respect, this research study is designed to function much like a case study: the research tests the applicability of critical race theories for interpreting composition history. But unlike most case studies, this study has depended to an unusual extent on theory for disclosing forces that might otherwise go unnoticed. Rather than drawing upon theory to explain an observed phenomenon, this study has used a critical race model to make historical phenomena visible in the first place, and then to argue that race should be seen as an important, though unrecognized, dimension of the history of composition.

Representing Race

A model of race based on critical race theories has proven to be a productive lens for reading composition history. The theory has yielded three very different ways of interpreting the functions of race in relation to a single assignment. The model could, I have no doubt, have been used to develop further descriptions of race in this one context; the three interpretations
that I have pursued for this study are those that I consider to be most pertinent to writing instruction.

As we approach readings of race in composition classrooms, we should imagine race as diffuse and multilayered, as borne along by the numerous (perhaps even innumerable) discourses that structure the cultural meanings of any moment. Based on my experience with this research project, we should not expect to find race as a unified, singular force that motivates all attitudes and behaviors, shapes identities, and structures decisions of educational policy or curriculum design in any situation. This study began by asking, "Where is 'race' in 'the origins of composition'?" Now, at the conclusion of the research, the answer to this question appears to be that race shows up in a number of different places, and functions to define many different practices and theories. In this study, three different discourses—philological theories of language, the metaphor of cultivation, and the concepts of liberty—exist as separate strands, so to speak, but all of them also simultaneously structure the same cultural moment that is embodied in the English 12 classroom.

A narrative of progress has appeared as an important component of each of the interpretive strands that I have studied. The narrative of progress is an invented myth of developmental stages that functions to define observed differences in much more emphatically hierarchical terms. In each case—in the shift to English as the medium of instruction; in the underlying metaphor of
cultivation that shaped the methods of education; and in the representations of liberty in circulation at the time—categories of difference become subsumed into a narrative of progress. This narrative functions to alter marks of difference, so that they become located along a continuum that moves from "undeveloped" (or uncultivated, or savage) to "developed" (or civilized or cultivated). The narrative of progress focuses in each case on an ideal goal of developing "humanity" in a broad sense.

Progress narratives function insidiously in each of these cases to obscure racist exclusions. The theories of human progress underlying each strand of meanings in these interpretations ostensibly place all humans on the same developmental path ("Anyone can become President"). As it does so, however, the theory describes people no longer simply as different, but also as belonging to an inferior place or a superior place on the (chronological) developmental scale. Discussions of the potential for human progress, such as John Stuart Mill's On Liberty, focus on the ideals and possibilities of the future, but leave for the most part unmentioned those people who will be designated as "earlier" or "more primitive," according to the narrative, despite the fact that they are actually living, of course, at the same time as the so-called "evolved" individuals.

One limitation of the critical race model for this study is that it may be too productive: the material it potentially can generate could become logistically very difficult to manage. The challenge for using this model appears to be finding a balance between seeing a broad, pervasive proliferation...
of racial significations, and describing detailed, but strictly localized realities. The narrow restrictions of time and place imposed on this study to counter its inherent complexity were effective in keeping the project to a manageable size. But the limitations also forced the study to sacrifice breadth. It would be theoretically unsound to extrapolate from this narrow study to describe even other parts of the Harvard composition program, much less other sites at other universities. To undertake broader, and potentially more useful cultural studies, however, would demand much greater, more prohibitive investments of time, knowledge, money, and intellectual stamina.

Representing the History of Composition

This study suggests that the racial identity and racial consciousness of historians significantly determine not only what historians may be able to see in the past but also how they will interpret what they see. The effects of race on epistemology described by critical race theorists and theorists of whiteness have not been taken into account sufficiently in terms of the historiography of composition or in terms of critiques of our disciplinary histories. Compositionists and composition historians can become more educated about race and how to read for race both our in own lives and in historical materials.

Linguistic theories of the mother tongue suggest racialized motives for shifting to English as the medium of instruction and for the concerted efforts to establish English as a subject in schools and universities.
Composition courses in the new university were imagined not just as courses in the processes of composing, but as courses in one aspect of knowing English as a mother tongue and learning how to preserve the language by using it properly. Identifying race as a factor influencing why and how English and composition programs were formed suggests new explanations for teaching practices. An obsession with correctness, for example, might be attributed to the concern for preserving the ability of the language to connect present day speakers of English to Anglo Saxon ancestors and their values.

In America, the ideal of “a cultivated man” was governed by a metaphor of cultivation that racialized distinctions between cultivation and wilderness. The metaphor of cultivation serves as a frame to broadly characterize the genres of writing produced at one time. In the composition classroom, the metaphor of cultivation and the image of the “cultivated man” is useful for describing the expectations and the accepted parameters of the daily theme assignment, which designated some theme topics or approaches or uses of language as outside the bounds of proper cultivation.

Concepts of liberty that linked freedom and race governed the design of the elective curriculum and some of the practices of the composition classroom. The findings in this chapter suggest connections to the work of Lisa Delpit, Valerie Walkerdine, and Mary Louise Pratt, all of whom explore the cultural connections between ideals of liberty and individual identity, and how
these play out in literacy instruction. The study of liberty provides insight into ways that explicit adherence to the idea of equality may be structuring a context of hidden inequality. New work in literacy research by these scholars, as well as Pippa Stein, David Barton, and others, seeks to imagine ways of incorporating and negotiating difference into the classroom.

Directions for Further Research

Composition researchers and historians need to develop specific ways to become more aware of their own epistemological visions and blindesses about race, perhaps by reflecting on personal experiences and personal consciousness of race.

Compositionists studying race could also benefit from developing research study models that balance material specificity with chronological or spatial breadth. One way to do this could be to study individual issues one at a time, extending the study across a greater historical period. A single study, for example, might examine whether the representations of language that associated English with race still persist in the English Only movement, even after the philological concepts that fostered these representations have been superceded by other theories.
In September 2003, as I was beginning to write this study, I visited the Museum of Glass in Tacoma, Washington, a site that encompasses a series of outdoor terraces to be used for artists’ installations. A work Mildred Howard had created for one of these terraces impressed me because of the way it played with the dynamics of race and perception that I have been trying to address. Her installation, “Blackbird in a Red Sky (a.k.a. Fall of the Blood House),” incorporated one of the museum’s long, shallow reflecting pools. Howard had commissioned 550 apple-shaped floats to be made out of red glass, which she set on the surface of the water. At the edge of the pool, she had built a shed-like structure out of heavy, blood red panes of glass. Door-like openings in the “house” allowed viewers to enter and stand inside. When I stood inside of the shed, everything seen through the red glass walls of the house looked red: the sky, the water of the bay, and the buildings. But the red of the glass apples floating in the pool miraculously disappeared, so that they looked as if they had been blown of clear glass.

I admired the beauty and elegance of Howard’s work, and the power of the perceptual shift that it created. In an interview, Howard, an African American artist based in Berkeley, California, commented that she was the “blackbird in the red sky” of the title, and she also identified herself as “a blood.” The work used elements that are visually very simple, but also layered with complex cultural associations: the rudimentary house that invoked shelter, and the contrast between inside and outside; the saturated, blood red color that suggested blood,
race, and violence, but also apples and passion; and the language of the title that evoked identity and social change.

In her installation, Howard engineered a perceptual shift in the viewers, but because each of the elements was so layered with significance, the exact meanings of the work were never fixed. She set up tensions that drew attention to race, but by making the red of the apples “disappear” she also undermined the idea that race has any basis in reality. The experience of the work provoked trains of thought in the viewers without being didactic.

A reflection on Howard’s work seems like an appropriate way to end this study, in part because she exemplifies the exciting work of artists, novelists, filmmakers, and poets whose engagement with the social realities of race have provoked and interested me as much—or more than—more conventionally presented theories. But her work also found a way to make every viewer literally get “inside” the issues she was raising, and, by puzzling over the work, participating in it, each in his or her own way. And this, it seems to me, is what research on race in composition should also try to find ways of effecting. Race is not an issue that only affects some people some of the time; it is a complex reality that affects all of us, all of the time, a reality that we can all work to demystify and dismantle.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


——. Charles Eliot, Landscape Architect, a Lover of Nature and of his Kind, Who Trained Himself for a New. 1902


Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.


_____. *The Tendency to the Concrete and the Practical in Modern Education*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913.


Palmer, George Herbert. "Possible Limitations of the Elective System." Andover Review January 1887


____. *English Composition.* [1895] New York: Scribner's, 1918.


____. Curriculum. "Lecture Notes for English 12, 1887-1888" HUC 8887224.12 Harvard University Archives


