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Writing for numbers: The Cultural Production of Good Writers in the Time of High Stakes Writing Assessments

Barbara W. Tindall

University of New Hampshire, Durham

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Writing for numbers: The Cultural Production of Good Writers in the Time of High Stakes Writing Assessments

Abstract

Few studies have looked at the consequences of standardized writing tests to students' understanding of what it means to be a competent writer. Using research techniques drawn from performance studies and art therapy, this qualitative study of middle class, honors students invited them to explore their understanding of what it means to be a high scoring writer on the SAT.

The theoretical framework of the study is situated at the intersection of three fields: cultural production theory, New Literacy Studies and object relations theory. The study has two related strands. In the first, I perform a socio-historical analysis of the setting, Yankee City, and its schools from the Great Depression when James Conant first identified the SAT as a vehicle to a classless society to the current era when neo-liberal policies assert that standardized testing will ensure that all students receive the education necessary to succeed in life. I argue that standardized testing has done more to normalize the belief that society distributes its rewards fairly than to provide opportunities for social mobility. In the second strand, I explore the tensions my seven participants experienced between agency and structure, creativity and compliance, as they imagined the writers of high scoring SAT essays. Drawing from the object relations theory of D. W. Winnicott, I consider the consequences of taking up the discourses of standardized testing to my participants' capacity for creative and critical engagement with their social worlds.

Participants' demonstrated substantial variation in the discourses of schooling and gender they took up as they imagined an SAT prompt writer and two high scoring essay writers. The girls imagined the testing environment as authoritative and hostile and described high scoring SAT writers as abstract, objective and compliant. The boys imagined a testing environment peopled by fellow human subjects and high scoring SAT writers who imagined contexts for writing that subverted positions of power in the testing context. Findings suggest that a regime of high stakes, standardized writing tests will work to perpetuate the compliance of society's most vulnerable writers.

Keywords

Education, Tests and Measurements, Education, History of, Education, Language and Literature

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WRITING FOR NUMBERS:
The Cultural Production of Good Writers in the Time of High Stakes Writing Assessments

BY

BARBARA W. TINDALL
BA, Dickinson College, 1974
EdM, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 1976
MST, University of New Hampshire, 1984

DISSERTATION

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

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Education

December, 2012
This dissertation has been examined and approved.

Paula M. Salvio, Ph.D., Dissertation Director
Professor of Education

Thomas R. Newkirk, Ph.D.
Professor of English

William L. Wansart, Ed.D
Associate Professor of Education

Bronwyn T. Williams, Ph.D.
Professor of English
University of Louisville

Lisa C. Miller, M.A
Associate Professor of English

October 10, 2012
Date
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Given that this dissertation is a study of potential spaces, those environments that allow writers the time and space away from authoritative voices to creatively engage, resist and/or transform the ideas of others, my first thanks goes to those who nurtured me in my own potential space, the third floor of Hamilton-Smith Hall, a warren of offices that houses about twenty graduate students and instructors of first year writing at UNH. From listening to a fellow instructor ruminate on how to respond to a student essay to collaborating with colleagues on a CCCC's proposal, I was nurtured by the very best. Donna Qualley, Virginia Stuart, Becky Rule, Elizabeth Chesiri-Strater, Sue Wheeler, Alice Fogel, Mark Edson, Bruce Ballenger, Dot Kasik, Anne Malone, Mary Hallet, Bronwyn Williams, Stephanie Paterson, Jennie Marshall, Kerry Riley, and Meredith Hall, to name a few, have left indelible marks on this dissertation and my understanding of what it means to write and to teach others to write.

The collective nurturing and growth that occurred on the third floor of Ham-Smith is also attributable to those who inhabited the more spacious offices on the floors below us. These more experienced and credentialed teachers understood that if you provide teachers a substantial degree of agency over their curriculum, routine opportunities to collaborate, and strong systems of personal support, they will develop far richer attachments to their work and to their students than teachers who are obligated to follow a curriculum designed by others. I am so thankful to Don Murray, Gary Lindberg, Tom Newkirk, Pat Sullivan, Tom Carnicelli, and Lester Fischer for mentoring a composition
community that invited all of us into the conversation and for their extraordinary capacity for humility. Humility as modeled in the UNH composition community does not mean that one does not fight doggedly for what he or she believes in; the aforementioned individuals certainly have done just that over the course of their careers. Humility means recognizing that one’s ideas are contingent upon the very possibility of conversation with others and that the conversation only persists when one provides others opportunities to be equally attached to theirs. The human values I learned on the third floor of Hamilton-Smith, nurturance, humility, and a fascination for how others make sense of their world, lay at the heart of this study—values that are clearly being denigrated in our public schools by a psychometrically driven national curriculum.

Many thanks to Jennie Marshall and Joleen Hanson for our long afternoons at Barnes and Noble. How I missed those days when both friends finished long before me! Thanks to Shauna Wight and Nathaniel Welch for taking their place in the last year of my writing. Shauna always provided quick and thoughtful feedback on chapters. My son Nathaniel was in college when I conducted this research and returned home with a degree in continental philosophy as I was writing the final chapter. Despite the rest of the family’s dismay when dinner table conversations turned to Michel Foucault, Nathaniel walked with me throughout these final chapters, always eager to discuss schooling, discourse and power.

Although a dissertation is written in private and confined spaces, I was extraordinarily lucky to share the “psycho-social spaces” of my writing in conversation with the six members of my committee. Thanks to Tom Newkirk for his scholarship on literacy and gender and on writing as a performance of the self. Thanks to Bill Wansart
for his incredible course, “Learning and the Learner,” which interrogated the theoretical and psychological lenses through which we understand the student learner. Bill’s trope, “You gotta be the student” is threaded throughout this dissertation.

It is horribly sad that I will never have the opportunity to thank Grant Cioffi who unwittingly sent me on an intensive study of projective testing. As I described to Grant my “invent the writer” methodology, he said, “So you will end up with both hard data and projective data.” I must have nodded, yes, and hurried home to Google “projective data.” The trail of projective research beginning with Rorschach in the early 20th century to performance studies in 21st century is a fascinating one and more fully exposes the underlying ideologies of psychometric testing and its theory of mind. My thanks to Lisa Miller who agreed to take Grant’s place on my committee. Once a former resident of the third floor of Ham-Smith, Lisa not only is a formidable professor of journalism but works to carry on the legacy of Don Murray whose writing and teaching inspired many of the values that that drove this study.

Bronwyn Williams, another former denizen of the third floor, is now a full professor and a foremost authority on writing and identity. I am endlessly thankful to Bronwyn for his extraordinary patience, kindness, and humility. No ordinary person would have read the “early” drafts that Bronwyn so willingly read while encouraging me to keep on writing. Bronwyn’s loyalty provided me the backbone to get this thing done. And finally, thanks to my chair, Paula Salvio. Without Paula, I would never have found the words to articulate the concepts that drive this study. Paula’s classrooms and our many conversations provided the potential spaces that allowed me to explore the role of the unconscious and the imagination in the performance of selves in writing.
The heroes and heroines of this dissertation are the seven young writers who agreed to give up Sunday afternoons during a terribly busy time in their lives. Throughout these chapters, I thank them many times over not only for agreeing to put their imaginations out there for strangers to explore, but also for being the wonderful and fascinating young people they are. Many thanks to Mrs. S, the creative writing teacher who led them to this study.

Most especially, I thank the four men in my life: Chris, Jamie, Nathaniel and Nick. Thank you for learning—better than anyone else I know—not to ask one more time, so when are you going to finish?
ABSTRACT

WRITING FOR NUMBERS:

THE CULTURAL PRODUCTION OF GOOD WRITERS IN THE TIME OF HIGH STAKES WRITING ASSESSMENTS

by

Barbara W. Tindall

University of New Hampshire, December, 2012

Few studies have looked at the consequences of standardized writing tests to students’ understanding of what it means to be a competent writer. Using research techniques drawn from performance studies and art therapy, this qualitative study of middle class, high school, honors students invited them to explore their understanding of what it means to be a high scoring writer on the SAT.

The theoretical framework of the study is situated at the intersection of three fields: cultural production theory, New Literacy Studies and object relations theory. The study has two related strands. In the first, I perform a socio-historical analysis of the setting, Yankee City, and its schools from the Great Depression when James Conant first identified the SAT as a vehicle to a classless society to the current era when neoliberal policies assert that standardized testing will ensure that all students receive the education necessary to succeed in life. I argue that standardized testing has done more to normalize
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Participants’ demonstrated substantial variation in the discourses of schooling and gender they took up as they imagined SAT prompt writers and high scoring essay writers. The girls imagined the testing environment as authoritative and hostile and described high scoring SAT writers as abstract, objective and rule oriented. The boys imagined a testing environment peopled by fellow human subjects and high scoring SAT writers who improvised contexts for writing that subverted positions of power in the testing context. Findings suggest that a regime of high stakes, standardized writing tests will work to perpetuate the compliance of society’s most vulnerable writers.
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INTRODUCTION

DEFINING THE GOOD WRITER

If we look at the history of writing instruction in America, we find that writing teachers have been as much or more interested in who they want their students to be as in what they want their students to write.

--Lester Faigley, "Judging Writing, Judging Ourselves"

What we are about, in a phrase, is formation of the self: And writing assessment, because it wields so much power, plays a crucial role in what self, or selves, will be permitted in our classrooms; in our tests; ultimately in our culture.

--Kathleen Yancey Blake, "Looking Back as We Look Forward: Historicizing Writing Assessment"

I saw the confusion on the faces of my colleagues in the English and Education Departments when I suggested working titles for this project. "The good writer?" they asked, I assume, startled by my naivety. Given current post-structuralist and anti-foundational approaches to literacy research and given the disciplines’ commitments to understanding that literacies are always situated and that literate subjects are always multiple, what phenomenon could I could possibly be suggesting with my epithet, "the good writer?"

And yet, we do use the term freely in our everyday talk, often behaving as if the good writer is a durable identity construct whose attributes we tacitly agree upon. For example, my officemate sighs about her first year student, "I’m just so disappointed in his
lack of commitment. He’s such a *good writer, you know?*” And I shake my head, yes, I do know, or so I believe. Or perhaps I recommend a book to my friend Susan, “It’s stunning,” I say. “She is such a *good writer.*” Susan may, on my advice, read the book and she just may love it, or, then again, she may not. Janet Emig, the patron saint of case study writing research, provides a further example of the assumption that “the good writer” is a durable identity construct. Emig turned to high school English department heads to nominate “good” writers (quotations hers) for her study of twelfth graders’ composing processes, and they obliged her (29). In addition to these teacher nominations of good writers, Emig used school records and SAT scores to “suggest” the “intelligence” of her subjects (29). Predictably, Emig’s critics and even she herself complained that she had not unpacked these chairpersons’ use of “good” writer or any of her chosen proxies for intelligence (Voss, Nelms, Schreiner), but the more modernist perspectives of the nineteen-sixties did not compel Emig to interpret teacher judgments, school grades or SAT scores as culturally embedded constructs. After all, don’t we still assume that writing teachers and English department heads are our experts on student writing? Don’t we assume that they can tell us who their good writers are?

Or do we? As far back as the middle of the nineteenth century, educational researchers, policy makers and school administrators have been concerned with the subjective judgments of English teachers and have sought objective, evidence based assessments such as the timed, impromptu writing test to measure student ability and teacher effectiveness (Reese). Although for over a century, teachers and compositionists have questioned the validity of the large-scale use of objective, standardized writing tests (White, Huot, Broad, Elliot, Reese), state boards of education have continued to add them
to their repertoire of instruments to monitor and measure student learning and teacher accountability (Hillock, Reese).

In this study, I explore one aspect of test validity which Faigley and Yancey claim in the epigraphs I cite above: the teaching and assessment of writing is not limited to the transfer and measurement of cognitive skills from teacher to student but involves invitations to students, made wittingly and unwittingly, to assume the subject position of a good writer born from an elaborate web woven from the threads of individual teacher’s values and assignments, from federal, state and local curricular frameworks, and from the rubrics of state and national standardized tests, to name a few. And if I assume that some students receive and accept our invitations to become members of this literate elite, what Deborah Brandt has called the “the writing class” (131), then I must also accept the reverse. Some other students fail to receive our invitations, others may outright reject them and still others may alter our criteria, for reasons that often lie outside our field of vision. Both Faigley and Yancey assert that the teaching and the assessment of writing is about the production of student selves. In the past compositionists like Faigley, Yancey, and Coles and Vopat have addressed this question largely through a combination of scholarship, textual analysis and teacher interview. Few studies, however, have turned to students to answer the question, who is the writer you want to convey when you write for a high stakes test like the SAT? And is this the person you want to be?

**Rejected: The Good Writers Row**

It was my first introduction to “the writing class” (Brandt) that led me to wonder about the ontological implications of assuming, or in my case, not assuming the position
of "good writer." The place was Mrs. Roskowsky's fourth grade classroom. The time was the early 1960s. John Kennedy had recently been elected president; Fidel Castro would soon announce that he was a Marxist-Leninist, and, that February, the New York Times would publish its first review of a young singer songwriter who had recently changed his name from Robert Allen Zimmerman to Bob Dylan. A few years later, my suburban community would be sued for a covenant on our property deeds which the New York Times reported, "barred anyone who did not have a northern European, Christian background" (Sullivan). Coincidentally, Mrs. Roskowsky legally changed her name that year too. Mrs. Ross, she explained, would be far easier for her nine year old students to pronounce.

After several months of practicing the loops and swirls of cursive, Mrs. Ross announced to the class that she was rearranging our desks. When she explained that the purpose of our new seating plan was to honor the good writers by seating them in their own "Good Writers Row," I was eager to hear her call my name. At the age of nine, my feisty, competitive spirit had yet to mellow, and any confirmation that I was "better" than a classmate was just about as important to me as roping a line drive past Danny Freeman in gym class. But Mrs. Ross didn't call my name that day. Instead, I watched the smart girls, Jane and Ellen, Anne and Linda and Diane slide their desks across the floor to take their new positions, side by side, along the window-ledge side of the classroom, whereupon Mrs. Ross bestowed upon each girl her very own red, bulbous, Zaner-Bloser pen. We mere mortal writers, stranded across the fluorescent-lit side of the room, would remain restricted to our erasable No. 2s.
What I want to emphasize is that in truth I was really quite ambivalent about earning a seat in the "Good Writers Row." On the one hand, I did want to be singled out by Mrs. Ross. I had no interest in being one of the common, unrecognized folks in class. In fact, I was probably feeling spiteful and downright mean spirited about the ascendancy of Jane and Ellen and the rest of their exclusive club, despite the fact they were my friends. On the other hand, I did understand that what we were talking about here was perfect penmanship, which didn’t rank particularly high on my nine-year-old’s scale of desirable talents. And more, I wasn’t all that sure I wanted to be stuck sitting side by side with Jane and Ellen and the other "good writers" in our class. True, they were the smart girls, I would grant them that, but with their brains came other complicating factors. The smart girls were particularly good girls; they wanted to follow the rules, not only mimicking the perfect curves on the Zaner-Bloser chart, but the rules Mrs. Ross enforced in our classroom. They weren’t interested in playing kickball with the boys at recess; they were disdainful of the pranks we pulled to break the monotony of the long school day; and I found it utterly uncool when Jane and Ellen began carrying purses to school in the fourth grade, not to mention swooning for John, Paul, George and Ringo, long before the rest of us could understand why.

I am surely aware that I am revealing far more about myself than I am about the girls who sat in the Good Writers Row, but that is precisely my purpose. With some help from Mrs. Ross and her curricular choices, I was developing an understanding of what it meant to be a good writer in her classroom, an understanding that spread far beyond the ability to mimic the curves on the Zaner-Bloser chart and included, but was not limited to, my understanding of being female, my relationships with Mrs. Ross and the other girls
and boys in the classroom, and the very spot where my desk and my body were situated on the classroom floor. I don't mean to over dramatize my response the Mrs. Ross’s Good Writers’ Row. The memory is as indelible as day Mr. Seale snatched Sharon Roper’s and my science tests off our desks and gave us both F’s for talking. My point is simply that school was not just about learning skills; skills always came loaded, often with social consequences, some which left me feeling ambivalent and others which were outright threats to my sense of who I was. I now understand that my desire to earn a place in the Good Writers’ Row was simply not a rational, cognitive choice: the ambivalence I felt about being one of these writers, one of the smart girls, emanated from unarticulated and often conflicting yearnings and fears.

I begin with this narrative to present a case that learning to write in school is not simply a matter of skill acquisition and the student’s accumulation of a growing writer’s tool kit, nor is learning to write simply a matter of rhetorical growth and the student’s ability to construct increasingly more complex and transferable genre sets, nor is learning to write simply a matter of participation in cultural activity and the student’s apprenticeship to adult literacy practices. Learning to write is all these things and, I submit, it is much, much more. As I hope my case emphasizes, learning to write understood most broadly involves ontological changes, both conscious and unconscious, in how a child understands his or her being and place in the world.

At the age of nine, I knew that working towards a seat in the Good Writers’ Row would require significant change: I would have to put up with the tedium of keeping every loop even and every “i” dotted. But worse, I would have to give up my place on the shady side of the classroom floor where, for me, the action happened. To be sure, my
awareness of this moment when a group of five girls ascended to the academic elite in my fourth grade classroom was far more unconscious than my elaboration of it here suggests, but in some way, at the age of nine, I knew that earning an invitation to what Deborah Brandt (podcast) has termed the “writing class”—that group of individuals who are recognized as possessing both literacy skills and status—would require me to reconsider who the person was that I wanted to be.

Today, the criteria for defining what is good writing and who is the good writer are often determined far beyond the walls of any classroom and emanate downward through the channels of federal policy such as the recently disseminated Common Core State Standards, state frameworks and standardized writing assessments. Together, these practices form what Chris Anson calls a closed system, “one in which the activities admit little variation, are habituated over long periods of time, and are learned through repeated practice” (115). Closed systems tend to reduce definitions of good writing into authoritative and abstract rubrics shutting down occasions for teachers and students to deliberate and question why particular genre features are more effective in some situations than in others. Those who design closed systems of writing instruction are not particularly interested in what those with the least power within the system, the students, have to say about their place in it. Giving voice to students about their participation in one particular “closed system,” the new SAT writing test has been the purpose of this study. In this dissertation, I momentarily turn my gaze away from the archive of essays written for this standardized test and invite high school students to teach me about their individual experiences of participating in the discourses that surround the SAT writing test.
The purpose of this dissertation was to provide a forum for highly competent high school juniors and seniors to explore what it means to write well and to be a "good writer" on the SAT writing test, arguably the most important writing test students will encounter during their school years. The young writers who participated in this study were among the very best scholars in their high school graduating class and today are all working towards full membership in Brandt's writing class, that elite club, who "have a handle on the power of society" as "decision makers, gatekeepers, advocates, government leaders." Nevertheless, Brandt notes, while the writing class may have access to power, their very proficiency with literacy makes them particularly vulnerable to exploitation by those who may hire them to do their writing. Competence as a writer in our current educational program, Brandt suggests, does not always go hand in hand with the writer's ability to take a critical stance and consider the far reaching consequences of their use of language. Much like Lisa Delpit first argued in her important work Other People's Children, Brandt emphasizes the importance of education to sensitize students to their "language choices," to the "audiences or constituents they might write for" and to their need "to be open to the language diversity of their society." Brandt insists that teaching students to become literate means not only teaching them to manipulate language but also teaching them to attend to the ways their use of literacy situates them amongst others in a diverse society.

In this study, I invited seven highly successful high school juniors and seniors to explore high scoring SAT essays and to imagine the lives of the students who wrote them. Over the course of several months, during which they too took the SATs, my
participants played with these imaginary lives and addressed the questions, who are you when you write for the SAT and is this the kind of person you would like to be?

The Organization of the Dissertation

The chapters of this dissertation travel through several decades and locations but a simple theme connects them. All chapters consider the influence of hierarchical schemas—whether they be the normal curve of psychometric testing, the ladder of the class system in the United States, or the six point rating scale on a standardized writing test—on human subjectivity and ideologies of the self in a multicultural society. Across these chapters, I travel through several layers of psycho-social history. Broadly, I consider the heyday of intelligence testing and the birth of the SAT in the early twentieth century when psychometrics promised scientific instruments that would foster a more just society. Locally, I explore the evolution of schooling and diversity in Yankee City over these same decades. Yankee City is the small New England city where my seven participants grew up and attended school and where I settled with my husband to raise our children. Finally, and most intimately, I explore my work with these seven young people around the conference table on Sunday afternoons during their junior and senior years of high school. In each of these contexts and throughout my research methodology, my driving question was to gather insight into the influence of measurement on a person’s sense of what it means to be somebody.

In Chapter 1, “The Cultural Production of Good Writers in the Time of Standardized Testing,” I introduce the broader question that drove this study: how do standardized tests of writing influence young people’s understanding of what it means to
be a good writer, student and citizen. I situate this problem in the scholarship of three different disciplines. The first, cultural studies, provides a broad and critical view of educational research that considers the roles of agency and power in the cultural production of young writers. I derive the unit of analyses for this dissertation, “the good writer,” from cultural studies’ research in the cultural production of the educated person. I then turn to the scholarship of North American genre theorists to argue that the genre positions that particular contexts like the SAT make available to writers leave their traces behind, whether writers take up, resist or transform these positions. Finally, I turn to the object relations theory of D. W. Winnicott to argue for a research methodology that allows the teacher/researcher to understand the important relationship between the students’ experience of the testing context, their own psycho-social histories as writers, and their writing performances on a standardized test.

In Chapter 2, “A Brief Social History of the SAT,” I shift my focus back to the origins of the SAT to explore the cultural ideologies that led Harvard president James Conant to argue that a statistically valid and reliable testing instrument, the SAT, was essential to orchestrating the classless society. In this chapter, I consider the ideology of American exceptionalism and how the belief in America as a classless society has informed more recent scholars to argue that the SAT does more to reproduce social class than to aid social mobility. This chapter ends with a look at the current ideology the College Board uses to justify its importance to parents and students and the persistent belief that the SAT is beneficial to all because it reliably and validly locates test takers position on a normal curve.
In Chapter 3, “Yankee City: The Setting and its People,” I take a socio-historical view of the setting for this study to explore the prevailing ideologies of social class and schooling in my research site during the same years Conant was arguing for the SAT and his particular vision of a classless society. This socio-historical view provides a broad lens to gather insight into the relationship between the prevailing ideologies of social class, schooling and the self during the Depression Era, a time when Yankee City was contending with limited economic resources and tremendous ethnic diversity among its population. I conclude this chapter by turning to the contemporary, gentrified Yankee City during the time of my participants’ families and my tenure there in the last quarter of the 20th century. I reflect upon the conflicting values of city residents like me who chose to move into an economically diverse city only to transform it into our own version of an ideal community, ultimately displacing the people who once called Yankee City their home. I argue that the normalization of western values such as the rational, objective self has worked to suppress difference, justify social stratification and limit social mobility.

In Chapter 4, “Performative Playing: A Research Methodology,” I argue for a research method that contrasts with the premises of scientific objectivity of psychometric testing and turns to the psycho-social experience of the performing student to gather insight into student learning. Performative playing questions our current reliance on the scores from standardized testing to make important decisions about teaching and children’s futures in the absence of relationship with the children whose lives we measure. The central research activity for this study invited participants to collectively imagine the writers of an SAT writing prompt and two high scoring SAT essays. As a research and teaching method, I argue that this sort of activity provides opportunities for
relationship between children and teachers that allow both parties to collectively explore the psycho-social themes that affect learning and teaching in the deliberative spaces of the classroom. Whereas psychometric testing seeks definitive measurements, performative playing provides psycho-social spaces where both the child and the adult, the assessed and the assessor, are open to learning and change.

In Chapter 5, “Excursions in Potential Space: Imagining the Psycho-Social Space of the SAT Writing Test,” I discuss the insights I have drawn from the performative playing of my seven participants, all of whom grew up in Yankee City and attended its public schools. While I had anticipated that my participants, all high achieving high school students, would turn to test rubrics, scores and grades to explore and to justify their identities as strong writers, I found far greater differences across the genders of my seven participants than I had anticipated. More precisely, these high achieving girls understood that writing for a standardized test required them to take up an objective position and address an evaluative and abstract reader. The boys, however, understood themselves as possessing greater personal agency that invited them to write from a personal position and to address a reader they understood to be a fellow human subject. I explore these differences through the lens of Winnicott’s object relations theory to draw insights into my participants’ relationship to writing for a standardized test and to derive a new understanding of what it means to write “authentically.”

Chapter six, “Teaching and Learning to Write in the Time of Common Core Standards and High Stakes Assessments,” explores the implications of my findings by returning to the Yankee City schools as they prepare to enter “The Race for the Top.” This chapter unpacks the current methodology by which educational reform is
“delivered” to Yankee City and considers the implications of my findings to teaching young writers to become more agentive, critical and inclusive in a time of instrumental rationality, standardization and neoliberal policies.
CHAPTER I

THE CULTURAL PRODUCTION OF GOOD WRITERS IN THE
TIME OF STANDARDIZED TESTING

The Problem: What Standards and Testing Hide From Our Vision

In this chapter, I introduce the critical components of this dissertation, including the research problem and the theoretical assumptions that underlie my investigation. Drawing upon scholarship from cultural studies on the “cultural production of the educated person” (Levinson, Foley and Holland), I define the unit of analysis for this study, “the good writer,” a theoretical lens which attributes limited agency to student writers as they engage in various performances of the “good writer” on a standardized test and as they try on and reflect upon the subject positions implicated in those performances. I begin this chapter by locating the construct, “the good writer,” within literacy studies. I then introduce theories from The New Literacy Studies and North American genre theory on the relationship between the selves writers construct in their writing (the discoursal self) and the more durable, narrative senses of selves they construct throughout their lives (the autobiographical self). Finally, I use the work of object relations theorist, D W Winnicott, to locate this construct, the good writer, in a psycho-social third space he calls “potential space.” Winnicott’s potential space allows us to consider cultural types like “the good writer” as existing in a third space where boundaries between the conscious and the unconscious, between self and other, and
between the psychological and the cultural merge and cannot be clearly delineated.

Winnicott’s work comes out of his mid-twentieth century work with children who had been separated from their families by the evacuation of London. Among his greatest concerns was the impact of a coercive environment upon the unfolding of the child’s emotional life and the child’s capacity to creatively engage with his or her environment (Phillips 33). I turn to Winnicott’s work, in particular, to shed light upon my participants’ beliefs and feelings about what it means to perform as good writers on a standardized test and to comply with the requirements of the test as they understand them.

The argument that learning requires both epistemological and ontological change as I have expressed in my childhood experience in the fourth grade classroom is not always recognized across cultural, psychological, and socio-cultural perspectives of learning and has been particularly invisible to those researchers and policy makers who view learning through the lens of statistical measurement (Packer and Goicoechea, Hollway). Cultural, developmental psychologists Packer and Goicoechea suggest that constructivist and socio-cultural researchers often overlook ontological changes because of “their relatively unarticulated character” and because of “the lingering anxiety, traceable to the logical positivists, that discussion of ontology is merely ‘metaphysical,’ untestable, and therefore unscientific or even meaningless” (227-228). Pamela Moss, scholar of validity in educational testing, supports their claim and argues that assessment experts must turn to other lenses such as hermeneutic, critical, feminist, and poststructuralist in order to uncover the “tacit, beneath consciousness,” “understandings” (119) that are the consequences of writing programs and assessments. Moss underscores
the importance of this work citing Luke's claim that the unspoken understandings of teachers and researchers "become part of the taken for granted definitions and categories by which members of communities define themselves and others" (119). These tacit identity constructs, in turn, impact community members "access to material resources and locates them within social relations of power" (119). If these constructs are left unexplored, Moss warns, the drive for standardization of literacy may simply reproduce unjust social structures.

Today's fervor for the measurement of student learning further magnifies our need to understand these "beneath consciousness understandings." Despite decades of work by literacy scholars like Brandt and Delpit who honor difference within and across communities and who seek to uncover the function of power within those differences, the combined forces of marketization and centralization of public education increasing demand objective measurements and "scientifically based research" to determine educational policy, allocate funds, and make decisions that impact the lives of children, teachers and schools (Race to the Top, Apple 615). The current emphasis on "research based practices," "common core standards," and accountability controls via standardized assessment has turned the nation's focus away from the more philosophical questions of what children should learn and how they should be taught (Mathison and Ross, Salvio and Boldt). Instead, school officials and curriculum specialists increasingly rely upon the analysis of assessment instruments to design curriculum by isolating the skills necessary for students to become better test takers. Today many teachers and researchers complain that teaching and learning has been reduced to repetitive practice of isolated skills in assessment-like situations (Hillock, Finn-Welch, personal communication). The
requirement of NCLB for regular state assessments, the increasing use by states of high stakes tests for awarding the high school diploma, and, more recently, the Obama administration’s Race to the Top Fund which requires states to connect teacher evaluation to student test scores and the National Governors’ Council Common Core State Standards Initiative all point to the urgent need for educators and the public to understand the consequences of standardized assessments to the lives of children. Literacy scholars and qualitative researchers like Hillocks, Ketter and Pool, Scherff and Piazza, and Anson have shown the consequences of writing assessments on the instruction of writing. Few studies, however, have actually turned to the test takers, the students themselves, to consider the consequences of testing.

While it is arguable that a public policy that gives all children instruction in the literacy skills necessary for full employment and civic participation is grounded in ideologies of social justice, the opposing argument is equally warranted. As Deborah Brandt’s work suggests, standards often work to serve the interests of those who make the determination: what exactly is standard? No one has argued the complexity of the problems raised by the standardization of literacy instruction more clearly than Lisa Delpit when she reminded literacy educators that the writing process pedagogies they assumed honored the language of the child, in fact, denied marginalized children access to the very literacy skills they needed to participate in the discourses of power.

Delpit’s argument, however, is deeply contextualized. Not only is it incumbent upon those in positions of power to provide access for all children to the discourses of power, Delpit argues, it is equally incumbent upon them to recognize the “arbitrariness of designating one variety over another as ‘standard’” (68). Much like Brandt, Delpit
contends that it is the responsibility of those who hold power to teach all children “what it feels like to move between cultures and language varieties, and thus perhaps learn how to become better citizens of the global world” (69). What constitutes standard written English, after all, is not identifiable by “scientifically based” research methods but by virtue of the power held by the very groups who use it. Subsequently, while some argue that standardizing literacy skills emancipates students, others claim that standardizing constrains students by reproducing the power differentials among social groups and by serving the needs of a neo-capitalist economy to indoctrinate a docile labor force in the ideological values necessary for self-regulation and efficient productivity (Hursh, Apple).

In concert with these scholars, I concur that standardized written English and the genres of writing that we associate with standardized testing are not value neutral. However, we know little about how students experience the ideological values they assume, resist or transform when they engage in the practices that surround standardized testing. Furthermore, we know little about the consequences of student success and failure on these tests to young people’s sense of who they are as productive, literate agents and their relationship to a world of other readers and writers. It is my concern for students’ understanding of who they are and their relationship to a world of others that leads me to the work of Packer and Goicoechea and their concern with the ontological consequences of learning. Through the lens of ontology, the researcher and the teacher are not primarily concerned with what a student knows but with understanding a student’s sense of who they are as students, writers and citizen. This study explores students’ insights into the ontological implications of taking up the position of a “good writer” on a standardized writing test: what does it mean to them “to be” this good
writer; what cultural ideologies do they take on, contest or transform as they engage in the discourses that surround the "good writer" of a standardized writing assessment?

Knowing, doing and being cannot ultimately be separated one from the other. Nevertheless, given the current educational climate that values only those skills that are amenable to measurement, few educators have the time and luxury to consider the questions of being which drive this study.

As the mother to three college age sons and as a long time teacher of high school English and college composition, I have witnessed the many and varied writing opportunities that compel, repel and trouble these young people whether it is the constant clacking of keys on their cell phones and laptops, the private writing they jot into their journals then slip under their beds, or the writing their schools have them practice before compulsory state examinations. I have seen their many and varied responses to the emphasis schooling often places on writing as a standardized performance in the form of the five paragraph, thesis driven essay, a practice that is repeated throughout the grades in their English and history classes and in their preparation for mandatory state testing. As the warnings of Moss, Yancey and Faigley suggest, we know very little about the consequences of rewarding students for taking up the subject positions they perceive as necessary to perform well on these tests. In this study, I asked seven highly competent high school students to imagine the lives of the writers of high scoring SAT essays, to consider how they feel about these imaginary people, and to wonder if this is the writer and the person they want to be.
The Purpose: Who is the "Good Writer" of a Standardized Writing Test?

The purpose of this multiple case, qualitative study was to engage highly competent, middle class, high school juniors and seniors in an exploration of the values, beliefs and feelings evoked when they imagine the lives of the discoursal selves (Ivanic) performed by the writers of high scoring SAT essays. To provide participants with alternative standpoints from which to reflect upon these imaginary lives of "good writers," participants also collectively imagined the life of an SAT prompt writer, constructed their own writing histories, and explored the discoursal selves conveyed in their own self-selected writing and in their own SAT essays. These imaginary lives of SAT prompt writers and high scoring SAT writers provided the occasion for in-depth discussions with participants about their values, beliefs and feelings that might otherwise lie below conscious awareness when they performed for a standardized writing test.

In sum, the purpose of this study has been to explore the influence of standardized testing on highly competent high school writers' understanding of who are as writers, students, and citizens. The following research questions drove this study:

1. How do participants describe the context of writing for a standardized writing assessment?
2. How do participants imagine the lives of the writers of high scoring SAT essays?
3. What do participants' descriptions reveal about their feelings and beliefs about the writer they describe?
4. What, if any, psycho-social patterns of feeling, belief and compliance underlie these descriptions.
Findings from this study will provide teachers insight into the impact of standardized writing assessments on students’ understanding of what it means to be a writer, a student and a citizen. Moreover, the methodological techniques used to engage my participants and the revelations about writing selves evoked by these techniques suggest activities teachers can employ to help students to reflect upon, confront and contest the persistent requirement that they perform as good writers on standardized tests.

**The Research Approach**

With the approval of the University of New Hampshire’s Institutional Review Board, I hired seven high school juniors and seniors from my local community to meet with me three to four times over a period of about four months to engage in the following research activities:

1. the oral construction of a literacy history with self-selected peers and the researcher as audience;
2. the collective imaginary construction of the writers of an SAT essay prompt and two high scoring SAT essays; and
3. two semi-structured one-on-one interviews to address the research questions in regard to participants’ imaginary SAT writers, writing histories, self-selected most representative writing, and experiences taking the SAT writing test.

Over the course of the research, all seven participants took the SAT for the first or second time and were preparing for their future lives outside of the community by visiting and applying to colleges.
The research activities listed above generated five different data gathering methods. 1) The first activity, the construction and presentation of oral writing histories to friends and me provided me with an introduction to my participants. My intuition was with one or two friends in their audience, participants would be less likely to engage in managing an impression of themselves they believed would singularly appeal to me. 2) The collective imagining of the SAT prompt writer and two SAT essay writers invited participants to generate imaginative material that evoked discussion among participants about their more tacit or unspoken beliefs, values and feelings about the testing context and about their images of high scoring SAT writers. 3) Group processing during the collective imagining of the visual images provided a third method for generating information about how participants privileged various ways of achieving goals and understanding the purpose of the prescribed task. 4) Themes that arose during these collaborative activities formed the basis for a fourth method of data generation. In one-on-one interviews, I asked participants to elaborate on themes and/or to explore the developing ambivalences and conflicts in these themes. The first of these one-on-one interviews occurred shortly before the participant took the SAT and the second shortly after. 5) Textual analysis of writing produced by the participants, including three self-selected samples of their most representative writing and their SAT essays provided the fifth data gathering method. Across all five data sets, significant differences arose regarding participants’ engagement in the discourses of schooling and gender.

I analyzed participants’ imaginary prompt and essay writers using a framework based upon Winnicott’s concepts of playing and complying in psycho-social space. I began analysis by separating data around three orientations.
1) The group’s orientation to the prompt/essay writer. Where did the group locate their prompt in cultural space and what does this location reveal about participants’ psycho-social relationship to the prompt writer and his/her authority and why?

2) The group’s orientation to the text: What elements of a text did participants attend to as they imagined its writer? How do these textual elements reflect what the group values or deems important about the particular text and why?

3) The group’s orientation to group processing: How did the group collectively engage in the process of imaging the writer? What did the group’s conversation patterns reveal about the group’s understanding of the nature of the activity, their relationship to one another, and their beliefs and feelings about the SAT writing test?

Commensurate with a Winnicottian analysis, I interpreted the themes that arose through the separation of data across these three orientations for the ranges of participant’s compliance/noncompliance to external standards. Substantial relationships between co-occurring themes arose across all data sets including the participants’ imagined writers, their writing histories, and their SAT essays.

I confirmed, disconfirmed or elaborated on the validity of these themes through member checking. This included sending transcripts of interviews to participants for their approval and inviting further discussion on themes, inconsistencies and paradoxical sentiments in later one on one interviews. A professional colleague provided a reliability check to the coding of my primary data: participants’ imaginary SAT prompt and essay writers. Finally, I turned to scholarship from available research to provide corroborating support.
I triangulated data by using the five data gathering methods described above: writing histories, projective imaginings, group processing, semi-structured interviews, and textual. Because I generated information from a small number of participants residing within the same community, my findings are context dependent and, therefore, not intended to be generalizable. Nevertheless, the conclusions I draw from this study should provide opportunities for what Patton calls extrapolations or "modest speculations on the likely applicability of findings to other situations under similar, but not identical, conditions" (459). While generalizability must rely on statistical probability, Patton explains that extrapolations "are logical, thoughtful, and problem-oriented" (459). As Patton suggests, my participants’ imaginative work, their writing histories, and our collaborative investigations of what it means to be a good writer on a standardized writing test provide cases for the interested reader to imagine what it might be like to be a young person learning to write in the twenty-first century.

**Three Assumptions: The Theoretical Framework for this Study.**

The unit of analysis for this study, like all analytical categories, is an invention. Not all readers ponder over who the writer is of the texts they read, though, on occasion, many do. And certainly some genres require the writer to veil any sense of an authorial presence so that, for instance, readers are not distracted by a writer's presence while they struggle to recognize the difference between "bolt A" and "bolt B" in an instruction manual. The seeming absence of a writer from the text is, however, a particular kind of presence such as the one constructed in the traditional lab report where the use of the passive construction is intended to suggest researcher objectivity, if not outright absence.
from the research context. On the other hand, there are occasions when writers intentionally promote a strong authorial presence in their texts. For my participants, the college essay was a prime example as they struggled to craft a self who conformed to their impression of a particular college’s favorite candidate. Despite this range of authorial presences in a text, behind any piece of writing lies a writer who ontologically conforms, fails to conform, or perhaps chooses not to conform to the genre constraints for which he or she is writing. Subsequently, I argue, yes, in some fashion we imagine an author for all the texts we read and write. For the purpose of this study, I maintain that when I asked my participants to overtly imagine the writers of SAT essays in order to shed a brighter light on the vague contours of the imagined SAT writers who resided in the margins of their consciousness, they were merely extending the boundaries of what readers typically do.

When I asked participants to imagine the “good writer” from their reading of an exemplar SAT essay, I claim that they were engaging in creating a particular sort of identity construct, or what Gee calls a “kind of person.” Gee notes that, “Being recognized as a certain ‘kind of person,’ in a given context, is what I mean here by ‘identity’” (“Identity” 99). For the purpose of this study, I am defining the “good writer” of the SAT as a particular sort of identity construct, a cultural model or stereotype, which individuals overtly or tacitly construe from the patterns they draw from their everyday interactions with cultural experience. Underlying any recognizable identity construct, Gee continues, is an interpretative system which may include people’s cultural understandings about nature (e.g. good writing is a consequence of one’s genetic inheritance), the norms and traditions of cultural institutions (e.g. a state’s frameworks
establish what is good writing), discourses between others at the local level (e.g. a teacher’s rubric determines what is good writing) and the values and interests that define an infinity group (e.g. what gets the most hits on youtube determines what is good writing) (25). The present study sets out to explore not my participants’ descriptions of good writing on the SAT, although our discussions often began there, but my participants’ understandings of the kinds of people who are conveyed as the writers of high scoring SAT essays, and the beliefs, values and feelings my participants associated with these people. As Gee’s definition of identity would suggest, my aim is to understand the interpretive systems that underlie my participants’ descriptions of these writers and to understand the historical, cultural and psycho-social sources of their descriptions.

Because my focus is primarily on understanding the production of a particular identity construct (the good writer) drawn from a particular literate activity (a standardized writing assessment), the theoretical framework which underscores my research draws from several bodies of scholarship including 1) ethnographic studies on the cultural production of educated persons, 2) literacy studies, particularly those which investigate the relationship between genre, discourse and identity construction, and 3) conceptions of psycho-social health and the unconscious drawn from the object relations theory of D. W. Winnicott.

Assumption One: The Cultural Production of the “Good Writer”

I derive the unit of analysis for this study, the “good writer,” from Levinson, Foley, and Holland’s research on “the cultural production of the educated person.” Cultural production theory was developed as a corrective to liberal assumptions about schooling as a meritocratic springboard such as those espoused by contemporary political
educational agendas like NCLB and Race to the Top on the one hand and to radical critiques of schooling as social reproduction such as that of Bowles and Gintis, Anyon, and Giroux on the other. Cultural production theory, perhaps first performed by Paul Willis in his classic study of British working class lads, shifts analysis away from a mechanistic vision of schooling as transmission and understands human subjects as the producers of their own beliefs and practices in response to the cultures and discourses in which they are embedded. Willis contends that his research subjects are social agents who “are not passive bearers of ideology, but active appropriators who reproduce existing structures only through struggle, contestation and a partial penetration of those structures” (Levinson 175). Cultural production theory is significant to my study because it attributes agency, however constrained, to the human subject as the arbiter of meaning in his or her own life. As Willis suggests, what should be most interesting to us as literacy teachers is the young writer as he or she “struggles, contests and partially penetrates” the official genres of testing, as they make sense of who they believe they should be when they pick up their pencils to put words on their SAT test sheet. Cultural production theory allows us to shift the lens away from official knowledge that emanates from the College Board, from state frameworks, and from the school English department as the producers of student subjectivity, so that we can honor the work of young people as they struggle, contest and partially penetrate the genres of schooling and of testing. By shifting the focus of analysis away from official and normative standards of what the child should know and onto the activity of the least powerful stakeholder in the research context, the focus of cultural production theory creates what I would argue is an ethical space between researcher and participant. This research begins with the premise that the
participant is always a subject in his or her own right and never fully knowable through the lens of any theory.

This lens of cultural production theory provides an important contrast to the "evidence based" lens required by standards based education reform. When learners are viewed through the lens of only those performances that that can be measured normatively, our conception of student subjectivity is little more than a number along a predetermined linear scale on which a student’s performance attains its meaning only by virtue of its relation, better or worse, to their peers. In the northeastern state where this study takes place, the state department of education urges teachers and school administrators to obtain training in the use of the state's “data warehouse” so that educators will use test scores archived there to develop more effective curriculum for their students. While I do not argue against the use of standardized testing to obtain useful information about student learning, I argue there is an equal imperative to observe and engage children through qualitative and intersubjective lenses that enable the teacher to recognize the child as a being in his or her own right, separate from the demands of the state.

While focused on students as the active producers of their own identity, cultural production theory simultaneously seeks to understand relationships between the subject, power and particular identity constructs made available through cultural discourses that are both authoritative and popular (see Bakhtin Discourse of the Novel 342). Traditionally, studies in the cultural production of the educated person have almost exclusively been concerned with the imposition of western style schooling on communities in developing nations and on marginalized western communities where the
researcher can explore the conflicts and contradictions that arise when powerful national agendas meet the powerless voices of students who are the object of educational reform (Levinson 1). The participants in this study, white, highly successful students and children of middle class, professional parents, may seem an obscene parallel to the children of developing western nations. Nevertheless, I would argue that the increasing unification of voices from global economic markets, from not-for-profit educational organizations like the College Board, and from state and federal government agencies for common core standards makes the Levinson, Foley and Holland lens of cultural production a particularly useful one. Given that standardized testing works to validate and to naturalize what my participants may already do well, it is important to understand the cultural values and beliefs these students feel are confirmed or, perhaps, contested by their success. As exemplary students and as future members of "the writing class," my participants expect life trajectories that will move them into careers of significant power and privilege. The lens of cultural production theory focuses this research on participants' processes of selecting particular constructions of the "good writer" for the testing situation over other potential constructions. It encourages us to ask what rationales students use to justify one construction over another and why. Inviting my participants to articulate the values, beliefs and feelings that underlie their constructions of the "good writer" of the SAT and the power of the SAT to shape those construction advances a better understanding of how standardized testing may serve to confirm or contest contemporary theories of what it means to be an educated person and citizen in a democratic society.
To summarize, the unit of analysis of this study, the identity construct I call “the good writer,” is based on three assumptions which I draw from Levinson, Foley and Holland’s work on the cultural production of the educated person.

1. Students are not assimilators of cultural knowledge, but they are agentive and creative producers of their identities and their understanding of the “good writer” in dialogue with popular and authoritative constraints.

2. The “good writer” is not a durable and stable construct. Rather it is a cultural construct that is always in negotiation, despite those who attempt to stabilize the construct. Subgroups across race, gender, class, generation, profession, affinity or activity groupings develop various constructions of the “good writer” which may be coincidental with, contrary to, tangential to the interests of those holding power” (Levinson 22).

3. Negotiation of various constructs of good writing and the “good writer” are not relegated to schools but are embedded in local practices of the family, the workplace, and the local and virtual communities where they may be challenge and transformed.

I base this research in cultural production theory because it shifts the focus of attention away from writing as a mediational means and onto the young subjects themselves who write and use writing as a mediational means in the work of cultivating a self.

Assumption Two: The Relationship Between Discoursal and Autobiographical Selves

The second assumption situates my theoretical framework in literacy studies. The New Literacy Studies and North American genre theory share many of the same
assumptions with cultural production theory about the post-structural self and the ideological nature of discourse and knowledge. The New Literacy Studies recognizes that literacy, like cultural identity models, is not singular, neutral or “autonomous” (Street). Rather, literacies are multiple and take on meaning through the reader/writer’s engagement in particular cultural and social practices (Street 77). The New Literacy Studies, like cultural production theory, emphasizes those moments when literacies, with their relative degrees of sociocultural power and attendant ideologies, meet, whether in a Senegalese marketplace, in a fourth grade classroom, or as I have attempted to evoke in this study, in the unarticulated anxieties and desires within a person’s mind. Once again, these assumptions about the ideological basis of literacy reflect the purpose of my research: who do participants imagine “the good writer” of a high scoring SAT essay to be? How does this writer imagine his relationship to authority and to other reader/writers? And is this the writer participants want to be?

I turn to North American genre studies for scholarship on the relationship between the subject positions writers perform when they engage in a particular genre and their more enduring understandings about the self. The complexity of this connection has been elaborated upon most notably in North American genre theory and particularly the work of Miller, Freedman and Medway, Bazerman, Bawashi, and Devitt. For this dissertation, I turn to Roz Ivanic’s (1998) work for a definition of what I have less formally been calling my participants’ image of a writer. Ivanic’s work is largely concerned with how and why her adult, university student co-researchers “came to portray themselves as writers” in their coursework (26). In her study, Ivanic identifies four different identity constructs she associates with writers: the autobiographical self, the discoursal self, self
as author and possibilities for self-hood. My own work draws on two of Ivanic's identity constructs: the discoursal self and the autobiographical self.

Ivanic calls the portrayal of a self in one’s writing the “discoursal self.” She writes, “A writer’s ‘discoursal self,’ is the impression—often multiple, sometimes, contradictory—which they consciously or unconsciously convey of themselves” (25). Ivanic calls the construct ‘discoursal’ because the writer constructs this self through the discourse characteristics of a text, which relate to values, beliefs and power relations in the social context in which they were written...It is fleeting, insofar that it is tied to a particular text, yet it may leave a relatively permanent impression of the writer on whoever reads the writing. (25)

In Ivanic’s terminology, my request to participants to imagine the SAT writer were requests for descriptions of the “discoursal self” they construed from the particular discourse features they attended to in the text, in conjunction with their own projections onto the text about what it means to be a particular sort of writer. Furthermore, Ivanic claims that the discoursal self has the potential to leave its trace on the autobiographical self, a self, which she defines as “a writer’s sense of their roots, of where they are coming from” (24). The autobiographical self is the identity writers “bring with them to writing” which itself is “socially constructed and constantly changing as a consequence of their developing life history...” (24). While the autobiographic self of the writer includes both one’s literacy history and one’s representation of that history, Ivanic notes that a writer’s knowledge of their autobiographical self “may lie below the level of consciousness” (25).

As my participants imaginatively elaborated on an SAT writer’s discoursal self, their imaginations moved from discoursal self to autobiographical self of the writer. In concert with Ivanic, I do not assert a unitary, knowable, modernist self. I told my
participants that I did not expect their descriptions of SAT writers to be logical or consistent. I reiterated, "Just have fun with these. Be playful; tell me what you think."

The claim made by genre theorists that is most significant to my study is their assertion of a relationship between discoursal and autobiographical selves. Genre theorists make this connection between discoursal and autobiographic selves through the concept of genre understood as social action (Miller 1984). While traditional and common sense notions of genre understand a genre as the recurrence of textual features in a category of texts, contemporary genre theorists shift their focus away the formal analysis of textual features to the analysis of the social contexts in which writing is performed. Subsequently, it is not the features of the writing that are the focus of study, but an understanding of the dynamic social forces that underlie the formation and evolution of a genre. Through the lens of genre theory, language users in general, and writers in particular become cultural performers who participate in the genres appropriate to a given social practice whether that be writing a thank you note to a grandparent or taking a standardized writing test. As participants in a social practice, Charles Bazerman asserts, writers "take on the mood, attitude, and actional possibilities of that place—they go to that place to do the things you do there, think the kinds of thoughts you think there, be the kind of person you can become there" ("Genre and Identity" 13). It is through recurring participation in any particular genre practice that the discoursal self leaves its trace on the autobiographical self. Accordingly, genre may be understood as a mediational means whereby a person's construction of an autobiographical self, our beliefs and values, are shaped or constructed, validated or contested, through the
internalization of genre in inner speech and through engagement with genre in the social world.

Despite Bazerman’s suggestion above that there is a deterministic relationship between the discoursal self a writer conveys in a particular writing situation and the autobiographical self, ethnographic studies reveal a more complex relationship. As the work of Anne Dyson shows so powerfully, even young children do not simply assimilate genres as preformed boilerplates for use in designated social situations. Instead, these young writers “remix” genres from internalized prior experiences, “exploiting” social conventions to produce hybrids that perform what Dyson calls the young writer’s “social work.” Through the concepts of remixing and hybridity, Dyson looks at children as the producers of genre which allows them to mediate their social worlds:

...they are reconfiguring, rearranging, and rearticulating concrete symbolic stuff from one situated communicative situation to another. The hoped-for outcome of all this sampling and remixing is the ability to use the written system in symbolically flexible and sociopolitically astute ways in the present world. (180)

What becomes important in the written genres that circulate around high stakes testing is the “flexibility” students demonstrate as they reconfigure, rearrange and rearticulate to produce a high scoring essay. Not only must student writers contend with what they know about the test prompt and the essay genre, but they must they must also contend with an understanding of their own productive agency in the testing situation. Dyson’s work suggests that we consider the influence of these high stakes writing moments on student’s “ability to use the written system in symbolically flexible and socio-politically astute ways” in an authoritative genre system that simply responds to them with a singular number. Or as Bazerman asks, who are the people our students “can become
there”? Dyson and Bazerman’s work suggest the importance of exploring the ways in which students feel they possess the agency to exploit the testing situation and conversely the ways in which the testing situation exploits them. As the work of genre theorists suggests, an exploration of the “good writer” of the standardized writing test involves not only an understanding the traces of the ideology of discoursal self on autobiographical self, but the felt understanding of an even more elusive self: one’s own capacity to be a productive agent. This is where the work of Winnicott and the child’s relationship with a coercive external environment becomes important.

Assumption Three: The Unconscious and the Location of Cultural Experience

The repressed unconscious must be kept hidden, but the rest of the unconscious is something that each individual wants to get to know and play, like dreams, serves the function of self-revelation.

--D W Winnicott (The Family, the Child, and the Outside World)

Threaded throughout this theoretic framework have been undefined notions of the unconscious as a resource for cultural and psychological knowledge that is dynamic, fluid and contradictory although few attempt to define it. I have noted how frequently ethnographic researchers point to the importance of psycho-social understandings that lie below the level of consciousness. Packer and Goecoechea note that the ontological consequences of learning are of a “relatively unarticulated character” and assert that, nevertheless, ontological change must be the subject of educational inquiry. Moss argues similarly: the consequences of writing instruction and assessment are “tacit, beneath conscious” understandings and must be explored as an essential aspect of test validity. Ivanic notes that the constructs of discoursal and autobiographical selves often “lie below
the level of consciousness," and her project has been to uncover the connection between
them.

Nevertheless, while these sociocultural studies in literacy theorize a role for the
unconscious as a resource, they have done little to define the unconscious or to employ
methodological techniques that claim to access this resource. For example, Ivanic’s
research depends on interviewing methods and so she relies on her participants’
articulated memories and course documents to draw connections between participants’
discoursal and autobiographical selves. Anne Dyson uses the methods of participant
observation in classrooms and schoolyards where she observes children “remix” the
genres they bring from home and popular culture with the genres of the classroom.

Interviewing and participant observation are both limited in their capacity to evoke the
pre-articulated material that I intended my imagining the writers activity to elicit from my
participants. Wendy Hollway (“The Psycho-Social”) addresses the issue of the limitations
of many qualitative methods in accessing material that is consistent with contemporary
understandings of the postmodern subject. Hollway argues that qualitative research that
relies on semi-structured interviews posits the research subject as “a rational, separate,
coherent, reality articulating subject” (13). Despite the social sciences’ “turn to
language” and their postmodern conceptions of the multiple self, Hollway claims that
qualitative researchers still take the “naïve approach” that “people mean what they say,”
and treat their participants as “a subject of which one can ask questions and get straight
answers” (13). Reliance on interviewing and participant observation limits the
researchers’ and the participants’ access to participants’ unconscious conflicts and pre-
articulated anxieties and desires.
While I place my study within tradition of sociocultural studies of genre and the important work done by researchers like Ivanic and Dyson, my primary method of generating information was to invite participants to use their imaginations, not so much to inform me about what they know, but to generate evidence of my participants’ previously-unarticulated conflicts, anxieties and desires about writing essays for a standardized test. Such work requires defining the unconscious and activities that provide evidence of it.

For this reason I turn to the work of object relations theorist D. W. Winnicott. As Winnicott states in the epigraph above, the unconscious need not be limited to the interior biologically driven unconscious, what Freud called a “chaos, a cauldron of seething excitement” and associated with the id. Rather, Winnicott asserts, the ontogenesis of the unconscious lies in the undifferentiated space between the parent and newborn child, what he calls “potential space.” Through “playing” in this liminal, me-not me space, the child introjects an objective external reality world while she simultaneously projects unconscious material into the world. Paradoxically, it is through playing that the child—and the adult—recognizes both the exteriority of an outer, objective world and an interior, subjective self. In contrast to the western Cartesian dualisms, conscious and unconscious, mind and body, self and other, Winnicott refuses to draw sharp boundaries between interiority and exteriority, instead positing a third space in which the self forever engages in the work of determining what belongs to oneself and what belongs to the other. Through the individual’s play in this third space, the unconscious is revealed.

It is important to point out that in his writing and his work, Winnicott’s first commitment was to the complexity of his human subjects rather than to the delineation of
analytic terms or theoretical systems (Phillips). He avoided using psychoanalytic jargon in his writing because he feared that fixing terms would fossilize his understanding of his patients' experiences. Unlike current educational policy which has educators teaching to externally defined standards, Winnicott tried to work inductively, learning primarily from his patients, and so his theoretical work continued to evolve to the very end of his life. By using his patients' self-descriptions to articulate theory, Winnicott felt his writing could maintain the fluidity necessary to describe the complexity and the potential for the paradox he felt was necessary to understand human subjectivity (Phillips 136).

Winnicott's theories about child development are built upon metaphor and paradox. His concepts like playing and potential space have played a significant role in encouraging contemporary social theorists to understand the self and the unconscious as social and relational constructs.1

In defining a notion of the unconscious for this study, I draw particularly on Winnicott's second notion in the epigraph above: "the unconscious is an important source for understanding the self and this understanding is a consequence of playing." In one of his more concrete descriptions of playing, Winnicott (1971) writes "the child gathers objects or phenomenon from external reality and uses these in the service of some sample

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1 Salvio and Boldt (2009), for example, have found important parallels in Winnicott's emphasis on the importance of playing to learning in the writing of his brother-in-law, language and literacy scholar, James Britton. Britton like Winnicott insisted on the child's need for play in a third space between self and external authority in order to assimilate cultural experience and become productive cultural agents. Salvio and Boldt cite Britton to demonstrate the similarity in conceptions of playing as activities that meld unconscious world with external reality:

The more the images that clothe inner instinctual needs enter into the play activity, directly or indirectly, and the more they engage and relate to images from the world of shared experience, the more effectively, it seems to me, is the activity achieving its assimilative function. (43)

Winnicott's understanding of the space between self and other as undifferentiated and merged predicted poststructuralist arguments against self-other and subject-object dualisms.
derived from inner or personal reality” (51). While the individual externalizes unconscious desires and anxieties through playing, what is most essential to an understanding of playing is the indeterminacy of what belongs to the subject and what belongs to external reality, of what is inner and what is outer. This point is essential to my research: as I invited my participants to create imaginary writers of SAT essays, I maintained and continue to maintain the disposition that these performances were artifacts of playing. These imagined lives were neither drawn singularly from my participants’ unconscious material nor from personal or shared cultural experience, but always both. And as was the case with Winnicott, the imagined writers my participants created were not so much projected inner material for me to interpret as they were resources for all of us, my participants and me—and my reader too—to engage with as we considered the previously unarticulated beliefs, values and feelings churning within these imagined characters’ internal lives.

The Researcher

But both sides do need to be able to listen, and I contend that it is those with the most power, those in the majority, who must take the greater responsibility for initiating the process.

To do so takes a very special kind of listening, listening that requires not only open eyes and ears, but open hearts and minds. We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs.

--Lisa Delpit, Other People’s Children, 1995, 46.

“Always, as an anthropologist you go elsewhere...” Ruth Behar (1996) writes in her classic essay, “The Vulnerable Observer.” Behar’s purpose in this essay is to “scrutinize” the anthropologist’s subjectivity as she journeys through the “long tunnel” to “elsewhere.” In this study, I chose to walk out the front door of my home in a small New
England coastal city and into the lives of seven local high school students most of whom live only blocks away from my front door. Although I did not know my participants prior to the study, I admit to knowing and admiring them and others like them through parent talk during the intermissions of high school plays or on the side lines of a cross country meet. Our largely middle class community sees names like theirs frequently in our local newspaper when they give the valedictorian speech at graduation or win a National Merit Scholarship. They are the president of their high school class; they play the leading roles in local stage productions, and they set the school record for goals scored on the soccer team. I admit to admiring them for their successes and, furthermore, I admit to wishing their successes upon my students and my children. In other words, I am deeply implicated in the values our community passes on regarding what it means to be a successful student and the many ways that may be implicated in being a “good writer” and a “good person.”

Despite Behar’s description of the ethnographic journey to “elsewhere,” my trip was a decidedly short one and points directly back at myself, at my beliefs and values, cultural or otherwise. But I hope that through this project I have addressed Behar’s requirement for being a “vulnerable observer.” She writes, “Vulnerability doesn’t mean that anything personal goes. The exposure of the self who is also spectator has to take us somewhere we couldn’t otherwise get to. It has to be essential to the argument, not a decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake” (15). Researcher vulnerability has many meanings which include not simply self-exposure but, I would argue, the capacity for the researcher to change—what Winnicott would call “play”—in her encounter with her participants. To this end, I have worked to attend to and to “play” with the voices of
three "others' in this study, voices who should not be heard in isolation but who take on a fuller meaning when they are understood as positions in a larger cultural conversation.

The first other/s in this study are the seven young people who willing explored the writing of SAT essays with me. I have come to appreciate them not for the GPAs and SAT scores and accomplishments they share, but for their individual differences, desires and hopes for their futures. Throughout my work with them, I have learned to appreciate that despite my admiration for their successes, they most certainly are not me, nor are our values and beliefs one and the same. I believe this has been especially problematic in my work with the young women. Throughout this research it has been difficult at times not to impose my own life's history and desires onto their understandings of who they are as students and as writers.

Significantly, however, I cannot bracket my own beliefs and values, conscious or otherwise. As with my work in the classroom, it was I who defined the activities my participants engaged in and it was I who listened for and opened up the gaps, the paradoxes and ambivalences, in my participants' stories where, perhaps, they had perceived no gaps, no paradoxes, no ambivalences before. The second other in my study lies within myself, unarticulated, and is admittedly an important object of study for this research. Born into a white, middle class family who moved from one suburban, white, and overtly racist community to another across the Middle Atlantic States, I evolved from the fourth grade girl who would rather be scoring runs in kickball to a college student who would rather be working for a GPA, albeit often questioning what sanity lay in my motives to achieve. The paradox of these first two voices, between my participants as other and myself as other, lies in my recognition that while I was not them, their
achievements symbolized my own desires whether for myself, my children or my
students. Understanding the beliefs, values and feelings that underlie my own desires for
academic achievement has clearly driven this study. For this reason, I needed to pay
attention to my participants' responses particularly when they surprised me or went
against the grain of what I myself believed. I hope I have learned to respect seemingly
incongruous gaps in my own and my participants' narratives so that they might instruct
me about my own unspoken assumptions.

Finally, I recognize the necessity of listening to the two aforementioned others
through acknowledging the primacy of a third other whose presence must cast a shadow
throughout this study. The work of Lisa Delpit, among others, speaks for this “other” in
her call for middle class, white teachers, like myself, to understand the arbitrariness of the
linguistic codes we prescribe and the function of these codes in sustaining power
relations among communities of people. This other has also been made apparent to me in
the work of educational anthropologists Ray McDermott and Herve Varenne (1995) who
emphasize the capacity of culture, and the culture of schooling in particular, to arbitrarily
disable and dis-empower students through what they call collective “hammering.”
McDermott and Varenne are especially critical of psychometric testing which assumes
that what is interesting or knowable about a person or a group can be reduced to a set of
non-arbitrary skills which can be tested for, and when testing is made sufficiently
difficult, a population will fall upon a bell curve which sorts the gifted from the normal
from the deviant. McDermott and Varenne's work is a warning to educators, like me,
who locate ability “out there” in the child rather than in the linguistic constructs and
cultural tools through which we build a social world. Once the constructs of academic
ability are defined and statistically validated, we are not so open to question what may otherwise be normative and arbitrary constructs. This may be particularly the case in the measurement of writing, about which scholars have debated for over a century as they have struggled to design assessments that are fair, valid and reliable (see Elliot). The work of scholars like Delpit, McDermott and Varenne, which asserts that social discourses sort people in ways that produce and/or reproduce hierarchical, social strata, leads back to the questions which drive this dissertation. Who do highly competent students imagine the writer of a high scoring standardized essay test to be? How does this good writer relate to authority and to his fellow readers and writers? What cultural structures of feeling, belief and compliance underlie their descriptions? And are these the people they—and we—want to be?

**Conclusion**

...culture is not one primordial or coherent thing, fixed in time and space—as many older discussions and much popular theorizing imply—but rather a dynamic, continually emerging set of struggles among people trying to identify themselves in relation to other.

--Margaret Eisenhart 214

Ethnographer Harry Wolcott warns that it is not possible to “describe human social behavior without some notion of culture lurking in the background, at least implicitly” (90). Wolcott suggests that how the researcher construes the culture concept will have much to do with what the researcher sees. Throughout this theoretical framework, I have made the case that the unit of analysis for this study, the “good writer,” is an invention, a lens built upon the scholarship of cultural production theorists, genre theorists and object relations theorists for the purpose of looking at the ontological
implications to being a “good writer” in a time of high stakes, standardized writing assessments. Not only is this unit of analysis an invention, so too is my rendering of the cultural world in which my participants reside. Through the assumptions I have listed above, I have describe a cultural world in which people, everywhere and always, construct and construe, produce and revise, images of one another (and of themselves) as they work to make sense of a social world and their places in them. The merger of cultural production theory, genre theory and object relations theory as I have described it above presents a view of culture that emphasizes the individual’s capacity for creativity and agency but simultaneously recognizes that the individual is never radically free and must contend and struggle with enduring and often hidden structures of power. The view of culture I have described above embraces the variations that arise within any cultural grouping but simultaneously recognizes that the particular patterns and meanings that people produce and manipulate are consequential for them (Eisenhart 235). And finally, the view of culture I present emphasizes a psycho-social self which challenges Cartesian dualisms such as the self and the other, consciousness and unconsciousness, and the rational and the rational and, in particular, highlights the importance of the unconscious as an important source of information for educational research (Hollway, “The Psycho-Social Subject”). Through the use of “playful” methods to generate data, this study interrogates the psycho-social space, what Winnicott calls the “potential space,” formed by the interaction of students, SAT essays, and researcher.

Clearly, the research methods I have used were intended to provide an alternative to the methods used by the College Board in the writing section of the new SAT Reasoning Test. Because our analytic lenses construe the cultural world differently, we
are exploring quite different phenomenon. Rather than an exploration of what constitutes good writing on a high stakes standardized exam, my research attempts to uncover what it feels like for a student to be the good writer of a standardized writing. As Wolcott would assert, despite the College Board’s assurance that the SAT is rigorously grounded in mathematical conceptions of reliability, validity and fairness, notions of culture lurk in every crevice of testing practices, from the choice of a specific test item to various notions of a just society that drive the many ways we use test scores to sort out our children in preparation for their future lives. In the following chapter, I turn to the social history of the SAT to locate these ideological assumptions, often conflicting, that have motivated SAT test design and usage from the SAT’s inception in the 1920s.
CHAPTER II

A BRIEF SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE SAT

Introduction: The SAT and Equality of Opportunity

Because the history of the SAT is both complex and contested, because the ideologies and motives of the many individuals and organizations who influenced the SAT’s evolution from its first administration in 1926 were never singular and stable, I focus this brief history on the relationship between the SAT and the prevailing ideologies of class and diversity in the United States. More than any other country, the United States has historically tried to make a college education available to any citizen who has successfully completed a high school education (Lemann 3, Atkinson). Opportunity to attain a post-secondary education underscores America’s commitment to providing equality of opportunity to all its citizens. It is important to point out the difference between equality of opportunity and equality of condition because the tension between these two values underscores many of the ideological conflicts that underlie the use of the SAT.

The principle of equality of condition underlies the values that promote the sharing of society’s rewards based on need rather than merit; this is the ethical principle that underlies socialist economies. A state committed to equality of condition is concerned not only with providing an equal education to all citizens but is also concerned with the discrepant life conditions that affect a child’s future access to educational opportunity such as malnutrition and medical care. The principle of equality of opportunity underlies capitalist economies; the ethic that underlies this principle values
individualism and a subject who is free to compete for society’s rewards unfettered by the interference of government regulation and control. Equality of opportunity promises that to the extent possible (e.g. without undue government interference) the competition to gain admission to a post-secondary education is a fair one. The SAT has been an essential tool in maintaining the principle of equality of opportunity. Arguably a statistically reliable, valid and fair predictor of a student’s first year college grades, the SAT has provided Americans an instrument that determines how post-secondary educations will be allocated in the United States for almost nine decades. Conversely, those who argue from a critical, discursive perspective assert that the SAT has played an instrumental role in perpetuating a belief that access to college is equally available to anyone who has the talent, works hard, and acts right, regardless of the station of their birth (see Lemann 1999, Nairn 1980, Crouse and Trusheim 1988). This scholarship takes the position that the SAT, rather than provide for equality of opportunity merely reproduces class structure.

The first SAT, administered on June 23, 1926 to 8,040 high school students in the Northeast, was considered a test of native intelligence, a revision of the large scale army intelligence tests used during World War I for the quick and efficient identification of future officers. Carl Campbell Brigham, a Princeton psychology professor, used his work on the army intelligence tests to design the SAT, a multiple choice test that he believed could reliably predict a high school student’s future grades in college. Brigham’s first motivation, however, was not a commitment to equality of opportunity. Rather, in his influential book *A Study of American Intelligence* (1923), Brigham used his vast data sets from army IQ testing to claim that intelligence, understood as a biologically based and
genetically inherited trait, mirrored the social order as it existed in the 1920s. Brigham asserted that his army IQ data proved that intelligence was a “racially” based trait and that, of the white “races,” the Nordic whites were the most intelligent, followed by the Alpine and the Mediterranean. At the bottom of Brigham’s scale sat the “Negro.” Brigham’s work was used to support important social policy decisions during the early 1920s such as the Immigration Act of 1924 which sought to eliminate immigration of southern and eastern Europeans and also the enforced sterilization of the “feebleminded” (Porter and Ross 642). From its earliest social uses, intelligence testing considered by policy makers as an objective, scientific instrument has had profound social consequences.

By the early 1930s, Brigham reconsidered his work and noted that the assumption that intelligence tests measure “native intelligence…without regard to training and schooling” was “one of the most glorious fallacies in the history of science (qtd. in Lemann 34). Nevertheless, the promise of a test like the SAT that could separate native intelligence from the influences of wealth and privilege caught hold of the imaginations of educators quickly and for three decades provoked little public critique. By the 1950s, a half million high school students took the test each year. That number jumped to almost 1.6 million in 2010. Despite the SAT’s continued popularity across eight decades, by the 1970s, the test became a favorite subject of cultural critique by scholars and journalists who questioned the test’s validity and fairness, claiming that the SAT fossilized social class rather than provided opportunity for social mobility. The tensions that lie at the heart of American educational ideology between equality of opportunity and equality of condition, between understanding student performance as a function of individual agency
or understanding student performance as a more complex social phenomenon deeply embedded in cultural/structural forces, also lie at the heart of my study and much of the scholarship on the SAT.

**Assessing the Validity of Social Research:**

**Predictive versus Consequential Validity**

The first of the major cultural critiques of the SAT was initiated in 1974, when Ralph Nader encouraged high school senior, Allan Nairn, to pursue an investigation into ETS, the not-for-profit testing organization that administers the SAT. Six years later, Nairn published his study, *The Reign of the ETS: the Corporation that Makes up Minds* (1980). Nairn’s central thesis was that despite the long-standing understanding that the purpose of the SAT was to predict future college grades, the data demonstrated that, in fact, high school grades were a superior predictor and that the SAT provided little additional information when added to a student’s GPA. Nairn further argued that because the correlation between SAT scores and parental income was particularly high (53), the data suggested that the use of the SAT by American colleges and universities was sustaining social class in the “guise of merit.” This conclusion, that the SAT has

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2 Nairn computes a 5% improvement on predicting first year college GPA. However, a variety of statistics can be computed for improvement, depending on the statistical procedure used, whether each SAT score is totaled or averaged, whether range effects are restricted and the institutional and individual characteristics that are taken into account (Baird 10). Research scientists at ETS agree that high school grades are a better predictor of success at college and argue that the SAT scores “are affected by many conditions—some statistical, some social, and some education” (Baird 10). Educational psychologists and psychometricians, Crouse and Trusheim (1988) supported Nairn’s claim. Like Nairn, the authors made the critical claim that the SAT penalizes black and lower class students. Furthermore, the authors warned against the trustworthiness of ETS which, they argued, behaves more like a corporate lobby than a research organization. They write, “The shifting justifications for the SAT also illustrate ETS’s development into an organization that acted to protect and expand its own size and power” (16).

3 More recently, Orlich and Gifford (2006) of Washington State University found a correlation of .98 between parental income and 2005 SAT scores and a correlation of .99 between parental income and the ACT.
done more to solidify class than to enable social mobility based on merit, has been central to most critiques of the SAT. David Owen, in *None of the Above: the Truth Behind the SATs* (1985, revised 1999) similarly argued that statistical evidence proved that there was no ethical justification for ETS to continue administering the test. His emphasis was to expose the profit oriented motivations of ETS and to question the conflict between these profit motivations and ETS’s service to educational institutions and to students.

Sociologists James Crouse and Dale Trusheim, in *The Case Against the SAT* (1988) analyzed new sets of survey data from colleges and universities and similarly concluded that the SAT provides no additional help to colleges in selecting students nor help to students in selecting colleges. The two writers emphasized the “adverse impact” the test had on low income and black applicants. In 1999, journalist Nicholas Lemann published, *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy*. Lemann focused on the social history of the SAT and the way promoters of the test have engaged in various interpretations of democracy and merit to redefine notions of equality in the United States. Among his conclusions, Lemann notes that the “rhetoric that accompanied the birth of ETS was one of mass opportunity and classlessness, yet the main purpose of the organization was to select the few, not to improve the lives of the many” (344). Lemann argues that the SAT has justified the position of an upper-middle class who feel they have earned their place in society while failing to recognize that their competition had been limited to the already chosen.\(^4\)

Lemmann’s conclusion that testing functions to normalize

\(^4\) Berkeley sociologist Jerome Karabel’s *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* (2005) looks at how SAT scores have been variously interwoven into the admissions process along with other traits of “individual merit” like character, athleticism, and physical appearance. Karabel emphasizes the various definitions of “merit” these three elite schools have employed with “discretion and opacity” to determine what groups will gain admissions. He concludes that, “there is
upper-middle class values and entitlements is central to my own study. As my history of Yankee City will demonstrate, the gentrification of the city’s neighborhoods has normalized new sets of liberal tastes and values that often lead to its citizens holding contradictory ideologies, such as simultaneously valuing mixed class neighborhoods and believing that one’s own cultural values are ideal for the sake of the community.

For their part, research statisticians at the College Board have answered these charges. The aim of their work largely turns around their definition of the purpose of the SAT: a score that predicts student performance in college. Subsequently, their assessment of the test’s value to students and to schools relies on the construct of predictive validity; that is substantiating the claim that the SAT is a good predictor of college performance. The College Board’s most recent study of predictive validity of the SAT (Kobrin, Patterson, Shaw, Mattern, Barbuti) continued to find high school grades the most powerful, single predictor of college performance with a predicative validity of .54. The three SAT subtests, critical reading, mathematics and writing, combined have a predicative validity of .53. When SAT was combined with high school grades predictive validity increased to .62. These r values indicate that about 36 % of the variation in first year college grades can be accounted for by knowledge of a students’ SAT scores and high school GPA; the other 64% of the variation must be accounted for by other factors and by chance. Given the increase of the validity coefficient by .08 (about 6 ½ % of the variation ) of the combined measures over high school grades alone, the College Board concludes, “the best combination of predictors of FYGPA is to encourage institutions to use both measures when making admissions decisions” (6). Given how little additional

no neutral definition of ‘merit’; however, it is defined, it will benefit some groups while disadvantaging others” (3).
information the SAT provides colleges and students about first-year college grades, many like Nairn, Crouse and Trusheim have questioned why we continue to invest so much time and money into this institution.

Not all education statisticians believe that predicative validity is a sufficient assessment of a test’s validity. While a statistic like predictive ability may be important to understand relationships between various performances in large populations, these statisticians insist that researchers must consider the “taken-for-granted theories and practices” (Moss 122) that underlie their categories. In other words, no matter how highly correlated two categories like race and test performance may be, categories like race and performance are ultimately discursively based and culturally constructed. Most important of these validity researchers are Messick and Shepard who insist that validity assessment include a construct they call consequential validity. They argue that because assessments like the SAT are socially based practices, validity evaluations must investigate the intended and unintended consequences of the test for all of its stakeholders. Messick, for example, suggests that a validity evaluation include several investigations which parallel the sort of work my participants and I engaged in as they imagined the lives of SAT writers. Messick’s recommendations included the following validity investigations:

- directly probe the ways in which individuals cope with the items of task, in an effort to illuminate the processes underlying item response and task performance, ...
• investigate uniformities and difference in these test processes and structures over time or across groups and settings—that is the generalizability of test interpretation and use,… [and]  
• see if the test scores display appropriate variations as a function of instructional and other interventions,… (qtd. in Moss 114).

Critiques of the SAT by Nairn, Crouse and Trusheim, and Lemann are important examples of the evaluation of the SAT’s consequential validity. These researchers have interrogated the assumption that an SAT score represents the intelligence, ability or achievement of the individual child apart from the social environment in which he or she was raised, and they have interrogated the consequences of the SAT to culturally defined groups like race, ethnicity and gender when the SAT is used to monitor social and economic mobility in America. The use of the SAT, a norm referenced test, to justify the sorting of winners and losers has long been based in a firm belief that predictive ability equates with fairness. Nevertheless, underlying the SAT is a complex narrative driven by contested notions of race, ethnicity, gender and competing ideologies about the aims and purposes of public education in a democracy.

The research projects I have listed above such as Nairn’s, Crouse and Trusheim’s, and Lemann’s are analyses of the ideological tensions that surround conversations pertaining to education and class in America. These writers’ shared assumption that intelligence should not be reduced to one-dimensional metrics parallels the essential tension in the assessment of writing. Brian Street’s (1984) famous critique of “autonomous” models of writing emphasizes that writing is always a culturally embedded practice that may reproduce, contest or partially penetrate structural differences across
groups of people. These tensions between an abstract and autonomous model of writing and the contextual and culturally embedded model of writing have been central to my study, not only in the tensions apparent in the differences in methodologies used by the College Board and my study, but also within the singular minds of participants as they struggled to articulate the commitments of good writers to competing versions of good writing, an autonomous model they learned in school and hybrids drawn from their wider literacy experiences.

Critical studies of the SAT play two important roles in my research. First, they provide a backdrop to the positions my participants take up as privileged, high achieving, white, middle class juniors and seniors in high school. An historical genealogy of the SAT sheds light on the various ideological positions my participants took up as they evaluated the high scoring SAT essays and creatively imagined their writers. Second, and more subtly, these critical social histories provide a backdrop for a parallel history of the relationship between class, diversity and schooling in Yankee City, the small Northeastern city in which my participants were raised and attended public schools. Over the past eight decades since the first administration of the SAT, Yankee City has changed from a highly stratified manufacturing city and home to a large immigrant population to a predominately white, middle class, professional community. In the remainder of this chapter, I look at the history of the SAT and the cultural beliefs about class, diversity and individualism that influenced its use. In the following chapter, I use a similar lens to explore the history of Yankee City over that same period of time. There I will explore the influence of predominate notions of class, diversity, and education in a democracy on the history of Yankee City and the organization of its schooling and curriculum.
In this chapter, I take up the first set of question: how have prevailing conceptions of class and diversity in the United States influenced the development of the SAT and the consequences of its use. I argue that the rhetoric that underlies the SAT has emphasized the importance of the individual over the collective and equality of opportunity over equality of condition. This ideology, while always contested, is a classically American one and is mirrored by the prevailing economic, sociological and anthropological paradigms of class and social stratification in America. In the following chapter, “Class, Diversity and Schooling in Yankee City,” I turn to the home community of my participants and me to consider a critical history of these ideologies beginning with the Depression Era when the SAT was first administered until today when the state administrates and the federal government monitors high stakes tests to all students across age groups and curriculum.

**The SAT as Instrument for a Classless Society**

Until fairly recently it was taken for granted that the American republic could be described as classless. For a century and a half Americans have been saying with pride, “This is a free country. There are no classes in the United States.” Note these words carefully, for the denial of classes in America is the denial of hereditary classes, not the denial of temporary groupings based on economic differences.

--James B Conant (1940)

Despite the growing disparity between rich and poor during the economic boom of the 1920s, the concept of class remained anathema to most social scientists, policy makers, and educators in the United States. When William Fielding Ogburn, president of the American Statistical Association and Director of Herbert Hoover’s Committee on
Recent Social Trends, was asked if the terms “middle class” and “upper class” were “offensive,” Ogburn replied that these terms are “are much more applicable to Europeans than they are to Americans, and these terms are not generally used” (Gilkeson 331). The SAT was first administered in 1926, an era when many Americans clung to the ideology of American “exceptionalism”; the United States, so this thinking goes, is superior to other nations in large part because it escaped the class based traditions of Europe. Tocqueville pointed this out eighty years earlier when he noted that Americans do not “derive their belief from the opinions of the class to which they belong; for, so to speak, there are no longer any classes, or those which still exist are composed of such mobile elements that their body can never exercise real control over its members” (3). Given this vision of the United States as classless society, there had been few major studies of class in the United States before 1929.5 The concept of class suggested a fixed caste system, which to most social scientist was simply not a valid representation of the social structure in the United States (Gilkeson 332). In America, individuals were deemed free to pull themselves up by their own proverbial bootstraps.

Nevertheless, economic inequality persisted in the United States; in fact, during the 1920s the gap between the rich and the working classes expanded due to the success of manufacturing and the consequent increase in corporate profits and dividends. To explain the growing economic gap and the persistence of economic inequality in the United States, prominent social scientists in the country turned to a school of sociology/anthropology called structural functionalism. In reaction to neo-Marxist ideologies of class struggle more fashionable on the European continent, the prevailing

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5 Thorstein Veblen’s critique of capitalism and the leisure class (The Theory of the Leisure Class, 1899) was largely discredited by mainline anthropologists and sociologists who working within an empirical paradigm claimed that his theory was based upon a utopian ideology (Simich and Tilman).
orientations in Great Britain and the United States aimed to be scientific: descriptive and empirically based. Structural functionalism held that societies are structural wholes, like organisms, whose integrated parts, like organs, promote the harmonious functioning of the whole (Erickson 124). Limited by their commitment to objective observation, what the structural functionalist observed was considered, in theory, “normal.” By structural functionalism’s very definition of society as an organic whole, no activity, conflict or disparity was considered to occur outside the structure. Subsequently, the structural functionalist argued that the normal, even if the normal was contentious, was necessary to the smooth functioning of society’s internal parts. The work of eminent American sociologists like Talcott Parsons, Lloyd Warner, Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore (at times all members of Conant’s faculty at Harvard) assured policy makers and the public that, in fact, because of the complex division of labor in an industrial society, its smoothing functioning indeed depended upon the unequal distribution of wealth. Only with a hierarchical system of rewards could society be assured that the most qualified individuals would rise to the most important and consequential positions. As late of 1945, Parson’s students, Davis and Moore, wrote in their well-regarded Some Principles of Stratification that “a certain amount of institutionalized inequality” is required to assure that “the most important decisions are conscientiously filled by the most qualified people” (qtd. in Gilkeson 339). The paradigm and metaphors structural functionalists used to explain economic disparity had the effect of integrating Americans and avoiding class conflict (Gilkeson 331). From the perspective of these powerful men, it made sense to avoid the class based analyses of their continental counterparts. As long as the public
perceived themselves living in a "classless" society, the gap between rich and poor was palatable.  

In 1933, newly appointed Harvard University president James B. Conant saw the effects of accumulated wealth somewhat differently. A brilliant young chemist, he loathed the reign of inherited wealth over intellect he observed on the Harvard campus. The student body at Harvard was dominated by the sons of New England wealth. Admission to an Ivy League college for these children of privilege, who prepped at schools like Groton, Exeter and Andover, was simply a question of whether their choice would be Harvard, Yale or Princeton. Conant saw these young men as a lazy, anti-intellectual lot and dangerous to the ethos he believed necessary for a research university and for future leaders of the country. Conant, the child of middle class, albeit old Yankee, parents, was determined to change the face of the student body at Harvard, if not the ruling elite of the country. He sought gradual, measured change; his biographers have called him a cautious, conservative man who would not forfeit his own position as the university's president to push his ideological agenda too far (Hershberg 530). It is in this climate that Conant pointed a spotlight on the SAT, the scientific measure of—as it was then considered—native intelligence.

The important function of Scholastic Aptitude Test came to light when Conant planned to fund a number of new Harvard full tuition scholarships determined solely by a young man’s academic potential (Lemann 28). Conant’s hope was that these scholarship students would become the new model of the Harvard student: bright,  

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6 Anthropologist Sherry Ortner (2006) argues that because American hegemonic cultural discourses are so deeply steeped in the beliefs in social mobility and individualism, we fail to look at structural accounts for non-mobility and instead “shift the domain of discourse to arenas that are taken to be “locked into” individuals—gender, race and ethnic origin” (26).
serious students who were dedicated first to their academic disciplines and not to their own social standing. Unlike Harvard’s previous partial scholarships, which required their working class recipients to engage in stigmatizing campus labor, the new scholarships would be paid on a sliding scale based upon family income. A full scholarship for a boy from a family of little means meant that he could fully participate on the Harvard campus on an equal basis with children of the wealthy. Conant’s problem was how to identify these boys when there was no standardization across the nation’s locally run public high schools. For Conant, the research chemist turned college president, Brigham’s Scholastic Aptitude Test promised an objective, scientific instrument that could rank and sort students into (or out of) post-secondary education, first at Harvard and later across all of American (Lemann 33, Karabel).7

While Conant despised the reign of New England wealth on his campus and was concerned about the stigmatizing of scholarship students, his values were clearly not equalitarian. Conant’s commitment was to equality of opportunity; not quality of

7 The first Scholastic Aptitude Test was administered on June 23, 1926 to 8,040 high school students as part of a research study on the use of intelligence testing to predict first year college grades. Standardized and efficient, the SAT could, in theory, sort and rank high school students from every corner of the nation, based not on the quality of their schooling but on the student’s biologically based intelligence (Lemann 33, Karabel). The new SAT would replace American education’s first attempt at a standard college admissions test, the “College Board.” In theory, the original College Boards were more akin to today’s SAT II tests and even the revised 2005 SAT tests which claim to measure what is taught in school rather than general intelligence. Initiated in 1901 by a coalition of elite colleges and prep schools, their aim was to standardize curriculum to ensure their students entrance in member colleges like Bryn Mawr, Swarthmore, and Columbia (College Entrance Examination Board 3). Because the exam covered content on subtests from English literature to ancient Greek, it was of little use in measuring the aptitude of children from the country’s thousands of locally controlled public high schools. Much as educational researchers and teachers complain today about the narrowing of curriculum due to standardized tests, teachers in the 1930s when the College Boards were still being administered recoiled at having a standardized curriculum forced upon their classrooms. An editorial in a English Journal written in 1931 pleads with its readers to “abolish” subject tests for college entrance because they have “narrowed” the high school curriculum by encouraging teachers to “study its questions year after year and train their pupils to meet similar questions” (“Editorial: College Entrance Exams 771). These same teachers praised the new SAT which claimed to test general intelligence and had little impact on what happened in their classrooms. The new SAT, designed by Brigham provided the necessary alternative to the content based “College Board.”
condition which he equated with the rising communist fervor in Europe. In a 1940 article in *The Atlantic* titled, "Education for a Classless Society," Conant wrote, "Note these words carefully, for the denial of classes in America is the denial of hereditary classes, not the denial of temporary groupings based on economic differences." Much like the structural functionalists on his campus who believed that a stratified society ensured that the most capable individuals would move into the positions of most consequence, Conant believed that a society stratified by merit would ensure that the most capable individuals would rise to positions of leadership. But more naively, Conant believed that when leaders were selected on the basis of merit rather than wealth, they would surely be motivated to serve for the common good and not for personal gain (Lemann 50).

The crux of matter is that Conant continued to envision a social structure based on a single vertical dimension: his system supplanted rule of the dollar with rule of academic intelligence. The difference to Conant between the two matrixes was the difference between two opposing world views. By his argument, inherited wealth fixed social structure and created barriers for equality of opportunity. He believed his new metric, intelligence, on the other hand, was an equal opportunity trait that would foster social mobility. In "Education for a Classless Society," Conant explains:

Let me pause a moment to examine the phrase 'social mobility,' for this is the heart of my argument. A high degree of social mobility is the essence of the American ideal of a classless society. If large numbers of young people can develop their own capacities irrespective of the economic status of their parents, then social mobility is high. If, on the other hand, the future of a young man or woman is determined almost entirely by inherited privilege or the lack of it, social mobility is nonexistent.

Conant’s dream of a classless society stratified on the basis of the individual’s (that is white male’s) ability was predicated on accepting that native intelligence is an abstract
trait unaffected by local influences of culture and equally distributed across a diverse population. As noted, Conant was vehemently opposed to the principle of equality of condition, which he associated with totalitarianism and Russian communism. He feared the powerful sway of “the religion of the Marx-Engels-Lenin creed,” (qtd. in Hershberg 461) should it hit the American shores. For Conant, the SAT had an important function in the ideology of equality of opportunity in a classless society. The SAT provided the tool necessary to promote equality of opportunity by opening up admissions to the country’s best universities to any who applied. Moreover, the SAT diverted public opinion from a different set of equalitarian principles winning favor in Europe: equality of condition. Cultural historian Lewis Menand goes so far as saying, “Conant believed that admissions policy was a weapon in the war against communism” (92).

The Recognition of Class in the United States

[The American radical] believes in equality of opportunity, not equality of rewards; but on the other hand, he will be lusty in wielding the axe against the root of inherited privilege. To prevent the growth of a caste system, which he abhors he will be resolute in his demand to confiscate (by constitutional methods) all property once a generation.

--James B Conant (1943)

After a decade of depression and now engaged in a Second World War, the image of an exceptional and classless America became more difficult to envision, particularly for Conant. In 1943, Conant took the daring position of suggesting in an article in *The Atlantic* that the time had come for a new breed of American radical who would “be resolute in his demand to confiscate...all property once a generation.” For the first time, Conant argued that the classless society would require the redistribution of wealth in the
United States. Conant was not alone in this shifting view of class in the United States. The austerity of the depression years led to several important large scale studies of class in the United States beginning with Robert and Helen Lynd’s study of economic classes in “Middletown”\(^8\) (1929, 1937). In 1930, anthropologist Lloyd Warner (1941) brought a team of thirty researchers to study the social structure in Yankee City, the small New England city and the setting for my study some eighty years later.\(^9\) Unlike the Lynds who assumed that class was an objective, economic category, Warner was the first sociologist to define class as a complex, hierarchical matrix of relations between individuals performed through their everyday social practices, affiliations, and tastes. By the beginning of the World War II, class and social stratification had become important topics of empirical social research, and, by this time, many social scientists concurred: a class system did exist in the United States much as it did in Europe (Gilkeson 331).

These changing perceptions of class had a profound effect on Harvard president Conant. Fearing the rise of class conflict in the United States and concerned about the movement of Soviet communism across Eastern Europe, Conant again addressed the issue of a classless America in another Atlantic article, “Wanted: American Radicals.” This time Conant confessed that equality of opportunity could not be sustained without government intervention in America’s class structure. Equality of opportunity, Conant admitted, cannot be disjoined from equality of condition. The SAT combined with his university scholarships, he had come to believe, was simply not powerful enough to overcome the barriers to mobility presented by the class structure.

\(^8\) Muncie, Indiana

\(^9\) Throughout the dissertation, I use Yankee City as the pseudonym for the setting of my study.
Conant's very public advocating for the redistribution of wealth obviously did not sit well with the Harvard Corporation, the university's governing board, among them some of the country's wealthiest industrialists. When members of the Corporation threatened to take away his presidency, Conant discontinued this line of public argument. Shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and while serving on the Manhattan Project, Conant turned his attention to curriculum reform: yet another intervention to stabilize conflict across social strata. Conant believed that the tracking of students into specialized vocational tracks in both high school and college worked to reproduce class differences and instigate conflict. Conant convened a committee of twelve Harvard professors to design a new core, common curriculum that would provide students with a common "vocabulary of ideas" (Menand 105). Their solution, written up in the influential book General Education in a Free Society (1945), was quite similar to the Great Books curriculum initiated at the University of Chicago. Cultural historian Louis Menand writes that the principle behind this new curriculum was to provide, "...a vocabulary of ideas shared by all members of an otherwise diverse and mobile society: social tradition which stratifies and divides is replaced by intellectual tradition which provides what the report refers to as a 'binding experience'" (105). If government could not redistribute wealth among families, Conant's thinking went, than the schools could play the part of family and bring culture to their students. Conant's idea of a core curriculum in the form of "great books" and high school civics classes would introduce students to that common culture. Conant's concern for curriculum, although bringing little new to the table, continues to have a profound effect on many high school's curriculum as it does in Yankee City High School today. Like the SAT, the common curriculum was not an
attempt to reduce economic and social inequality in the United States. Conant always believed that a society stratified on the basis of merit would encourage the brightest to rise to the top and bring about the very best form of representative democracy. The core curriculum would socialize students to value the Western intellectual tradition while the SAT would provide a valid and reliable instrument to measure that intellect and to justify the ranking and sorting of students. Combined, they formed the central components of a system that forged the belief that social and economic prestige came to those who most deserved them.

Regardless of Conant’s concern for economic diversity in his student population at Harvard, his focus was restricted to two linear metrics: economic and intellectual. Despite the complex racial, ethnic and gender differences students brought to schools with them, the diversity that concerned Conant was economic, and the culture that he was committed to was masculine, rational, and scientific. Through reducing his assessment of students (largely white, Protestant and male) to simple measurements like the SAT, Louis Menand accuses Conant of driving creativity out of the university. Menand writes:

> The scientistic standards he imposed on the selection of students and faculty at Harvard (and, through that example on much of the rest of the country’s institutions of higher education) reflect a certain imperviousness about the variety of forms that contributions to knowledge and to the cultural life can take. (105)

Similarly, Conant biographer, James G. Hershberg calls Conant’s vision of the classless society “mildly liberal and comfortably progressive in concept and rhetoric and yet at times overly abstract and euphemistic in both description and prescription” (404). Hershberg notes that while Conant said that racism in the US was “leading our national
idealism and our social practice into a head on collision” (403), he showed little interest in the education of black students and was not in favor of women’s rights.

Conant’s initial hope had been that a test of native intelligence like the SAT would be a silver bullet to a more “exceptional,” classless United States. Within a decade, he understood that this single metric, the SAT, was not the powerful instrument of equality of opportunity that he had hoped. As the country entered into the post World War II years, however, a new social structure was evolving across the United States that no one could have foreseen. The GI Bill, which Conant opposed because he believed the country already doled out too many college degrees, provided education and training to 7.8 million World War II veterans. With the new population of educated young, a booming economy, and VA home loans, social mobility exploded and a huge middle class was born. Fleeing city life, the new middle class sought homes in a new suburbia where homes—and whole communities—were designed largely around the price of housing. This mass exodus out of cities effectively separated the classes: middle class professional from middle class working white from urban poor who no longer shared schools systems or political districts. With the exodus of the white middle class, the inner cities became largely black and densely populated (Rossides 670). It would be wrong to romanticize urban life of the early 20th century where rich and poor shared the same city sidewalks as my portraits of Yankee City and its schools will demonstrate in the next chapter. Nevertheless, with the economic boom of the 1950s, the issue of poverty became an increasingly abstract and distant concern to the middle class family who by “right” of education and income had earned their passage out of the city and into a new suburban territory.
Although Conant understood that standardized testing could not be the silver bullet to his classless society, the SAT still carries the aura of the test which sorts the intellectually gifted from the average from the slow; the SAT is still considered a necessary instrument in the doling out post-secondary educations. Despite social critiques tying testing to the reproduction of social class, the number of individuals who take the SAT continues to increase each year both in numbers and in geographic locality. Not only has the SAT grown in influence, but so has a deep seated belief that every child’s learning can and should be measured and monitored through standardized testing. Today, common standards and testing have become the backbone of an educational ideology that insists that linear measurements are the most equitable way to educate the young and produce a just society.

2005: The SAT Revised: Standards, Teaching and Testing

If at first the SAT was believed to be a valid measurement that enabled post-secondary schools to contend with America’s commitment to the local control of public schools, today the roles have reversed. The recent federal and state commitments to standardized testing and common core standards require local communities to comply with demands decided from above or forfeit federal and state funding or even risk school closure. The College Board and the SAT became a part of this movement in 2001 when Richard Atkinson, President of the University of California, announced that his state would no longer require the SAT of its applicants. Atkinson, a cognitive scientist and statistician, rightfully complained that the SAT assessed “undefined notions of ‘aptitude’ or ‘intelligence’” and that heretofore the California university system would require only
standardized tests that "assess mastery of specific subject areas." California provided the College Board with its largest market for the SAT: the College Board listened.

In 2005, the College Board explained that a revised SAT would more adequately test the skills that all high school students learn in school and need for success in college (Mattern, Camara, and Kobrin). Verbal analogies were dropped, replaced by more reading comprehension and algebra questions, and a new subtest, writing, was added. The new 60 minute writing test includes a 25 minute impromptu essay question and multiple choice questions such as finding faults in usage and sentence structure. Test designers from ETS argued that not only would the test better serve its original purpose of predicting first year college grades, but, moreover, the test "would reinforce the importance of writing skills throughout a student's education and...would support academic achievement for all students, bolstering their chances for success" (Mattern, Camara, Kobrin 5). Placing writing on the SAT, the College Board claims, is essential to insuring that teachers will teach writing in the classroom. It is the interpretation of this relationship, between the testing of writing and the instruction of writing, that generates the greatest tension in the scholarship and research of writing assessment. On the one hand, based upon a survey of high school English teachers and school administrators, the College Board (Noeth and Kobrin 2007) claims that the new SAT writing section clearly supported, "major changes in writing priorities, attitudes, and expectations; how writing is taught; learning related to writing, writing resources, and the importance placed upon writing in the curriculum in their schools and districts" (8). As a broad based survey of school writing instruction, however, the College Board research did more to quantify the time teachers spent on writing activities than they did to understand the nature of the
change in writing instruction as a consequence of the test and its impact on student learning. One telling finding from the survey was teachers' increased "use of the type of essay and scoring rubrics found in the SAT" in their "curricula, teaching method, and writing assignments" (5). Writing instruction that serves to coach students for success on standardized writing tests was a key criticism of an NCTE task force on the "Impact of the SAT and ACT Writing Tests." The task force warned that "the kind of writing skill required to do well on short, timed essay tests has little instructional value" (3). The SAT's short 25 minute essay, they predicted, would foster "formulaic" and "superficial" writing rather than the "in depth" and "complex writing expected by most college instructors" (3).

The College Board provides evidence to substantiate this criticism in their most recent alignment of common core standards and the SAT (Vasavada et al.). In a summary of their findings, the College Board researchers claim that "The SAT demonstrates strong alignment to the Common Core Writing Standards and there is very strong agreement between skills required on the SAT essay and the Common Core State Standards" (5). Nevertheless, in looking at the actual alignment between writing standards and the SAT writing test, the College Board researchers frequently note that the SAT aligns with writing "over shorter time frames" only and that many important writing activities like planning, sustained research, and revision are "beyond the scope of the SAT" (Vasavada et al. Appendix D: 8). The bottom line is that the instruction of writing in the United States has become increasingly driven by what will appear on a timed, standardized test of writing (see Hillocks).
The conflict between the various stakeholders in this situation seems clear. State and federal officials and policy makers are concerned that all children have the opportunity to learn the skills necessary to “to succeed in college and the workforce in the 21st century” (Common Core 2), a goal determined by scientifically based research assessments that rely on data that are measurable, reliable, and allow repeated measurement. Other stakeholders, such as teacher educators, teachers and parents, are also concerned about the quality of the relationship between the individual child, his or her teacher and a curriculum that is geared towards high stakes standardized testing. Whether the SAT is aligned to standards or not, the bottom line is the SAT is an arena for competition among students. The SAT is a norm-referenced test whose very purpose is to spread student scores over a normal curve in order to indicate where a student lies in relationship to all others. The consequences of this culture of testing on children’s identity formation and their material social worlds cannot be easily reduced to measurement or uncovered in large-scale surveys.

The Relationship Between Standardized Writing Assessments and Identity Formation

Compositionists like Lester Faigley, Kathleen Yancey, and Brian Huot have long argued that writing assessments, rather than simply a measure of what students know, are “shapers of students” (Yancey 498). Yancey’s scholarship in particular has focused on the power of writing assessments to shape student identity. She writes, “What we are about, in a phrase is formation of the self: and writing assessment, because it wields so much power, plays a crucial role in what self, or selves, will be permitted—in our
classroom; in our tests; ultimately, in our culture" (498). Nevertheless, few qualitative studies to date have explored the relationship between writing assessment and the formation of self.

Scherff and Piazza (2005) conducted one of the few studies that have looked at the impact of state mandated writing assessments on student perceptions of their writing instruction. Situating their research in a thirty-year historical-political study of teaching writing in Florida, “its instruction, curriculum, standards and assessment,” Scherff and Piazza conclude that despite three decades of writing process instruction in Florida’s classrooms, “in the present political climate of No Child Left Behind, an emphasis on direct instruction and accountability seems to pervade our school” (292). The students surveyed indicated that that their teachers “ignore particular forms of writing (poetry, personal, etc.) in favor of those that are tested (expository, persuasive, etc.)” (292).

Carpenter and Falbo (2006) drew implications about the consequences of testing to student identity from the literacy narratives written by the “talented, privileged and academically successful” students chosen to be writing associates in the writing center at a highly selective liberal arts college. The researchers found that new associates “very literally” identify with their grades and assessments, labeling themselves with comments and evaluations they have collected over their past school years: “’B student,’ ‘creative writer,’ ‘inventive thinker and so on’” (106). Using the metaphor of a market economy, Carpenter and Falbo describe how “‘more successful’ student writers use their status to motivate themselves to understand new writing expectations.” They note that “such rewards—grades, test scores, stickers, prizes—often become the end of the writing process [and] play some role in how students identify themselves in regards to education.
and their peers" (106). Carpenter and Falbo "wonder if such rewards hinder the literacy
development of students identified as successful writers" (107).

While the participants in the Carpenter and Falbo study closely resemble the high
achieving high school students who participated in my study, Mya Poe's investigation
into "the relationship between cultural stereotypes about racial identity and genres of
writing testing" most closely resembles my research in its exploration of the identity roles
students take up in writing assessments. Situating her work in North American genre
theory, Poe claims that "identity positions are highly scripted with the test-taker offered a
limited range of possible identity positions that might actually result in a high mark on
the test" ("Uptake" 242). These identity positions become even more complex, Poe
asserts, when we consider that students and tests are situated in larger cultural discourses
that surround testing, writing instruction and schooling:

[When students] produce their written exams, they are taking up an entire
educational and cultural history of memories associated with educational
testing (Freedman 2002). This process is not merely about a test-taker's
background knowledge of testing but the relationship between cultural
contexts and the immediate test situation. Because test situations are "blind,"
i.e., the test-taker does not know the exact identity of the grader, students
may select from multiple memory representations of readers to form their
response...As a result, it is not uncommon to see students "searching" in
writing exams for identity positions that will be rewarded with higher scores.
("Uptake" 242)

In order to explore the identity positions students chose to write from on essay exams,
Poe asked her participants to "explain...how they constructed their image of exam
readers" (245). Poe found that when student's "take up" the exam prompt, they are "not
only drawing upon their knowledge of textual qualities of academic writing but they are
also drawing upon their memory of writing situations" (246) which varied across her
participant, particularly when she considered the racial stereotypes her participants
contended with as they searched for successful identity positions. Most important of Poe’s findings as they relate to my study is the relationship she found between students’ racial identity and “the different roles with very different kinds of agency “available to them. Although when I began my research, I perceived my participants as a rather homogenous group of high achieving, white, middle class high school students, the variation in their descriptions of imagined SAT writers emphasized the importance of recognizing standardized testing as a cultural space where discourses of power and compliance are “taken up” quite differently. When a standardized writing assessment is viewed as a cultural practice in which examinees draw on memory to select from a limited range of identity positions, the notion of the SAT writing test as an ideologically-free space becomes questionable.

Welcome to the SAT: A College Board Portrait of the Good Student.

I began this social history of the SAT with a description of Conant’s vision of the “classless” society and the necessity of a scientific instrument that could sort people into the social roles most appropriate to their intellectual ability. Conant believed that if a society truly provided equality of opportunity, then people would willingly accept the unequal distribution of society’s rewards. In America, people get what they deserve. As I close this chapter, I want to consider the voice of the College Board today as it addresses high school students about the importance of the SAT. I contend that in the contemporary voice of the SAT, Conant’s ideology lingers, promising students that they are engaging in a powerful, time test tested, scientific instrument that promises everyone a fair share of society’s rewards.
The College Board provides students, parents and educators a substantial website which includes videos and preparation materials for the SAT ("About the Tests--What is the SAT"). A one minute video, called "What is the SAT?" introduces the exam. The speaker is a young man who appears to be a student studying for the exam, sitting at a library table with a stack of SAT prep books beside him. He looks quite studious sporting "geek" style, black rimmed glasses, a red sweater vest over a collared shirt, sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He is the epitome of the clean cut young man: his hair is cropped short; his skin is black. Sitting in this imaginary academic setting, he comprises what I contend is a portrait the College Board’s "good student." He drops his pen on the notepaper before him, pausing his studying only momentarily, as he looks up to address us.

When I click on the video, he unfolds his hands and looks me in the eye. "What exactly is the SAT?" he asks. "Put simply the SAT is the nation’s most widely used college entrance exam. It represents more than a century of work by colleges and educators to create a single entrance exam that is fair to all test takers." He addresses me in the second person "you" as do most SAT prep books and I become his "you" as I assume a high school student would too. While emphasizing the gravity of the test to my future, the young man works to put my anxieties to rest by making three claims about the SAT. First, he guarantees that the SAT tests what "you already know" and that I will only be tested on what educators "insure" "students are learning in the classroom."

Second, he emphasizes the test’s fairness. "Every question," he says, "is tested to make sure all students from all backgrounds have an equal chance to succeed." And finally, he closes by suggesting that I will benefit from taking the SAT. "It is more than a test," he
tells me. "It may also open opportunities for you to connect to scholarships, placement in
college courses, and learn more about your academic strengths."

Having read the College Board's validity studies written over the past eight
decades, I understand the tensions that underlie constructs like "fair," what "you already
know" and "every question is tested to make sure all...have an equal chance to succeed."
But in the young man's voice, I hear the conviction of James Bryant Conant exhorting me
to believe that the SAT benefits us all.

It is what the young man does not say that I find most troubling. Most high school
students know one fact about the SAT. Whether this knowledge is overt or tacit, they
understand that the SAT is a norm-referenced test that positions them in relation to a
million and a half other high school students who take the test alongside them. For every
student who sits on one side of the normal curve, there will be another sitting on the
opposite. What the young man does not say is that the SAT is designed—not to test
"what you already know" (if that were the case, why test?)—but to disperse students
across linear measures of intellectual ability. I interpret the young man's message to be
that we need to take the SAT seriously because it is an essential tool in maintaining our
belief in the American Dream: through our hard work in classroom and through our
preparation for the SAT, we share a common culture in which all feel assured that those
who get the larger share of the pie are those who deserve it. Today, the good student to
the College Board may be red, black, yellow, or white, male or female, native English
speaker or bilingual, but she has taken advantage of the natural talent bestowed up her
and through hard work she has soared beyond her peers. She will get her fair share of the
pie.
CHAPTER III

YANKEE CITY: THE SETTING AND ITS PEOPLE
In the bright glow and warm presence of the American Dream all men are born free and equal. Everyone in the American Dream has the right, and often the duty, to try to succeed and to do his best to reach the top.

-- Warner, Meeker and Eells 1949

**Introduction**

In describing the setting for this study, I pay particular attention to three moments in Yankee City’s history, the small coastal New England city in which my participants and I reside. The first of these moments is the 1930s, the era during which James Conant took over the presidency of Harvard University and sought to change the face not only of the student body at Harvard, but also the relationship between schooling and class in American society. The second of these moments is the 1980s, the time when my participants’ parents and I, baby boomers who came of age during the war in Vietnam, Woodstock and Watergate, moved to the Yankee City to begin our lives as parents, professionals and citizens of our local community. The third of these moments is Yankee City at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the years during which my participants passed through their teenage years, attended the local public high school and left the community for their post-secondary educations. As I traverse the history of my setting from the early 1930s to the present, I pay particular attention to two themes:

1) Diversity among community residents regarding race, ethnicity, class and gender, and residents’ prevailing feelings and beliefs about this diversity; and

2) Disparities and compatibilities between the prevailing discourses about the purposes of schooling and class in American society at large and in Yankee City in particular.
As I lay out these three moments in Yankee City's history, I also pay attention to the influence of the ideologies that shaped Conant's dream for a classless America. This ideology includes the following premises:

1) The individual is an independent agent whose utility to society can be reliably, validly and fairly measured through the science of psychometric testing;

2) Equality of education means not that all students receive the same or equal education, but that all have an equal opportunity to receive an education determined by their natural talent and determination and not by their station of birth;

3) Leaders of society, selected on the basis of merit, will serve for the common good of the people; and

4) Wealth and status are a fair and just compensation for one's position in a classless society.

The portraits of Yankee City that follow demonstrate the shifting relationships between class, race, ethnicity and gender in the lives of its people between 1930 and the present. Yankee City evolved from a failing industrial city where differences of race, ethnicity, class and gender were overtly marked in the everyday practices and social relationships of its people to an "upscale" community of largely white, middle class residents where differences of class, race, and gender typically go unspoken, if not unnoticed (see Ortner 2002, Pollack 2001). The changes in Yankee City over the past eighty years since Conant first instituted a policy to use standardized testing to determine student merit sheds light on the consequences of a culture that believes, as Conant hoped,
that its hierarchies are natural and just. At the same time, these portraits of Yankee City provide insight into the socio-cultural history of the community that sponsored the childhoods of my participants. Finally, this history provides a context for exploring the question, in what ways did my participants’ imaginary good writers of the SAT reproduce, resist or challenge the beliefs and attitudes of the community and the culture of schooling in which they grew up.

Yankee City: Colonial Port to the Great Depression

The first thing that strikes one in the United States is the innumerable crowd of those striving to escape from their original social condition. Every American is eaten up with the longing to rise.

--Tocqueville (qtd. in Lemann 50)

Yankee City is a small, coastal New England city with a population of about 17,000. For most of its history, Yankee City approximated a three by one mile grid of streets that overlooks the banks of a major New England river before it meets the Atlantic coastline. Shortly after the Second World War, suburban neighborhoods pushed the city’s boundaries into areas that earlier served as common pasture, farm land or city forest. Today, a drive along the city’s main thoroughfare, Hill Street, reveals Yankee City’s history as one of the wealthiest cities in America prior to the Embargo Act of 1812, a moment demarcating the city’s 160 year slide into economic decline. Today, Georgian and Federalist mansions built by ship captains and mercantilists sit atop Hill Street where they lord over smaller and denser streets lined with homes dating back to the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Some of these grand old houses have been maintained as single-family homes; a few show the wear and tear of decades of neglect; and many others have been
divided into multi-unit apartment houses or condo complexes. Outsiders know Yankee City primarily as a day trip destination, for its restored downtown, its boutique shops, its riverfront board walk, and its summer waterfront festivals. Except for the Richdale store, several banks, and a handful of coffee, pizza, and sandwich shops, the retail businesses in today’s downtown cater more to the desires of the day trip shopper than they do to the everyday needs of Yankee City residents.

I call my setting Yankee City as did anthropologist Lloyd Warner who was the first social researcher to use ethnographic methods to study an urban community. Warner came to Yankee City upon his return from Australia where he had studied the social structure of an aboriginal tribe under the tutelage of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, considered by many the father of structural functionalism (Upadhyay and Pander 234). Returning to the United States, Warner sought a city that was small enough and stable enough to try out his new ethnographic tools for describing social structure in the industrialized world. Like Conant and many other intellectuals who worried about social stability during the Great Depression, Warner wanted to explore “social persistence” in Yankee City. What was it about the city’s social structure, Warner asked, that kept the city stable and its prevailing Yankee values intact (Gilkeson). Beginning in 1930, Warner and a team of thirty researchers spent almost a decade in Yankee City, interviewing residents in their homes, at their workplaces, in their schools and churches, and on the city streets. Robert Yin (2004), scholar of case study methodologies, calls Warner’s Yankee City project the “the longest case study in social science annals, consuming five(!) separately published volumes over an 18 year period” (34). (The exclamation point is Yin’s.)
Warner’s writings have been particularly fascinating to me because they provide portraits of Yankee City schools and their relationship to city residents during the same historical moment that Harvard’s president Conant became concerned about the character of his student body and argued for a scientifically based method to select students for a Harvard education. An overview of the evolution of Yankee City from a highly stratified, ethnically diverse industrial city in 1930 to what some call an “upscale” residential community and tourist destination in 2011 sheds light on the material and psychological consequences of social policies like Conant’s call for a standardized measure to identify society’s leaders and to allocate its rewards.

In explaining his decision to choose Yankee City for his study, Warner writes, “The first impression one gains of the town is that it has a living tradition inherited from generations of Yankee forbearers. Yankee City is ‘old Yankee’ and proud of it” (Warner and Lunt 77). Despite Warner’s overall impression that city’s residents were “proud” of their “old Yankee” heritage, Warner found that only half of the city’s residents came from ‘old Yankee’ blood when he arrived in 1930. The other half of Yankee City’s population consisted of more recent immigrants. By Warner’s count, “There were 3,943 Irish, 1,466 French Canadians, 397 Jews, 284 Italians, 677 Poles, 412 Greeks, 246 Armenians and 141 Russians. The ‘Negroes,’ with 80 individuals, constituted the smallest group in the city’s population” (78). Like the rest of the country during the Great Depression, work was scarce in Warner’s Yankee City. Only a half of the “employable” workers had full time jobs, 30% had part time jobs and 17% were unemployed (78). Semiskilled workers, working in the city’s shoe and silverware factories, made up half of the work force. About 8% of employed city residents held jobs
in the professional and managerial classes. Overall, Warner felt that "economically and
socially" Yankee City was much like any other American industrial town (79).

Although Warner's ethnographic observations of Yankee City eventually
provoked him to reconceptualize numerous theoretical constructs concerning class and
ethnicity, he held fast to the structural functional position he learned in Australia with
Radcliffe-Brown throughout much of his work. Like fellow intellectuals at Harvard,
Conant and Talcott Parsons, Warner accepted the necessity for the disparity of wealth in
Yankee City as an unfortunate, but necessary, fact of social life. Like other structural
functionalists, Warner assumed the disparity in wealth he found in Yankee City provided
the motivation necessary for individuals to assume the wide variety of roles necessary for
the smooth functioning of society. Nevertheless, Warner's Yankee City studies led him to
reconsider his understanding of concepts like class and ethnicity. Warner was the first to
use the term "ethnicity" rather than "race" to classify Yankee City residents who did not
descend from old Yankee blood. The distinction was important to Warner's larger
understanding of the function of social structure. The construct of ethnicity permitted
Warner to analyze the range of cultural traits in Yankee City and demarcate their distance
from or proximity to the city's dominant Yankee traits. The difference between ethnicity
and race, Warner claimed, was the potential for change. Just as Conant longed for a
measure of native intelligence, Warner saw that ethnicity could be understood as lying
on a metaphorical yardstick where one's ethnicity could not only be measured in terms of
its distance from Yankee ideals, but, importantly, through the persistent work of the
ethnic population, ethnic differences could ultimately be eradicated. Racial traits, on the other hand, Warner contended, were biologically based and therefore unchangeable.¹⁰

Warner theorized that the cultural traits of the city's upper class Yankees provided target behaviors and attitudes against which both Yankees and "ethnics" determined their own and one another's social standing in the city. In order to measure this movement toward approximating old Yankee cultural traits, Warner was the first social scientist to divide the social strata into six classes, from upper upper to lower lower. Given their black skins, Warner claimed, the city's African-American population was not permitted to participate in this process of learning to pass as Old Yankee. Herein lies the similarity between Conant's and Warner's views. For both men, the important metaphor for social life was the singular ladder. Both understood the proper functioning of society as a head to head competition in a sum zero game. For Conant, a young man's success relied on his ability to overreach his peers in intellectual prowess and ambition. For Warner, success relied upon a person's ability to flawlessly perform the social roles of the higher social strata. The complex division of labor in an industrial, capitalist society required that there be winners and losers. As long as the contest was deemed fair by most of the competitors, then society and its values remained stable. As long the contest was deemed fair, people would accept that the winners attained their positions—and the greatest share of the pie—through their own individual talents and efforts.

Warner's ethnographic study of the class system in Yankee City, however, allowed him to see the rich complexity of social structure in a way the social sciences had never before. Prior to his work, mainstream social scientists considered class to be an

¹⁰ Prior to Warner the term racial was used more broadly to refer to individuals with cultural, non-native differences.
economic variable. This simple understanding of class, for example, could not explain why Warner and his team found four doctors, with similar professions and incomes, placed in four different social strata by their fellow Yankee City residents. Using ethnographic observation, Warner found that residents’ everyday practices, attitudes and associations were profoundly woven into the city’s social structure. From this microanalysis of people’s lives in Yankee City, Warner was the first social scientist to explore cultural barriers to social mobility in the United States. Noting the limited social mobility in Yankee City, Warner concluded that “rising in the class hierarchy is a slow process” which imposes “fundamental and all-pervading changes” on the individual (233). Despite how seamlessly we may assume recent immigrants in the first half of the last century assimilated American culture, Warner reminds us of the difficulty of this process. In the following passage, Warner intimates the sort of analysis that sociolinguists and literacy scholars like James Gee (1989) and Shirley Brice-Heath (1983) will argue a half century later about the difficulty of acquiring a secondary culture and its discourses:

The changes cover every phase of his life: he must manipulate every possible device with consummate skill. To rise in the class hierarchy, economic advance alone is insufficient; basic acceptance by the people in the class above is the minimum. The social personality of the individual changes even in such details as his reading habits. The neighborhood he lives in, the church he attends, his family relationships, and his friends—all gradually shift as he gropes his way up the class ladder. (223)

Despite the extraordinary difficulty to rise above one’s position Warner observes in Yankee City, he argues that the combination of America’s class system and a biologically driven desire for upward mobility are “functions for a large proportion of ethnics to destroy the ethnic subsystems and to increase assimilation” (*The Social System* 284). The
small population of Yankee City "Negroes," despite sharing a common culture with native Yankees such as speaking English and the Protestant faith, was excluded from climbing the social hierarchy, Warner contended, by white racist attitudes. The status that the Yankee City community attributed to people of color formed the backbone of a caste system which Warner thought was unlikely to change in Yankee City or across the rest of America.

What made Warner's interpretation of social class particularly valuable for his time was his novel interpretation of social class as a function of a complex set of reciprocally defined behaviors and attitudes rather than simply a function of individual wealth. Warner's scholarship on ethnicity and social class predicted more contemporary constructs of social class such as Bourdieu's notions of cultural capital and habitus. Warner's "social personality" is a precursor to Bourdieu's notion of habitus as an "open set of dispositions" or tastes that are modified and transformed through an individual's everyday experiences (2004). Like Bourdieu, Warner argued for a complex relationship between a "social personality" cultivated early in life and economic power. Unlike Bourdieu, however, Warner's mid-20th century functionalist analysis of social structure assumed that all "light skinned" people share a conscious desire to join the ranks of the middle and upper classes and to assimilate the cultural tastes and behaviors that define those who dominate them. Further unlike Bourdieu, Warner's mid-20th century interpretation failed to understand the function of those unconscious cultural dispositions.

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11 A 1984 review of Bourdieu's Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste opens, with a reference to Warner's work. It begins, Distinction: takes up issues of stratification and lifestyle, a subject that has much waned in popularity over the last decade. It should be remembered that there was a time when social scientists like Stuart Chapin and Lloyd Warner would investigate the way a person's living room was furnished, how he spent his holidays and leisure time and to which voluntary associations he belonged.... (European Sociological Review, (1987) 3, 264).
and tastes by which people become acclimated to accept that the normative is the natural. Except for the city’s African American population and those Warner defined as the truly deviant in Yankee City—such as the “clam diggers who are often regarded as different and apart and the dregs of society” (Warner and Lunt 224)—the residents of Warner’s Yankee City all shared the desire to shed their ethnic traits and to climb the rungs of a singular ladder of social class. Warner’s attempt to explain social structure as a coherent, closed system assumed that almost everyone, that is every white male, in Yankee City shared the American Dream, a dream available to “everyone” as they shed their class and/or their ethnic roots and took on the assiduous work of assimilating a new cultural and social disposition.

Although Warner’s composite portraits of Yankee City residents demonstrate his personal antipathy for the ethnic biases routinely performed by upper class city residents toward lower class city residents, Warner mid-20th century analysis of social class did not consider alternative views, which might have identified productive resistances or hybrid adaptations of cultural performances within the city’s social classes and ethnic groupings. The singular solution to social stability in American society from Warner’s perspective was a citizenry who believed in the legitimacy of the socio-economic ladder—and the consequent shedding of ethnic differences. Warner’s view of social class in America

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12 Once Warner understood the complexity of this achievement in Yankee City, he argued society must offer individuals multiple opportunities to access mobility. The most important point of access for Warner became, like Conant, the public schools. As Warner (Who Shall Be Educated) was wrapping up his Yankee City series, he elaborated on the essential role the public school played in sustaining “social persistence.” Having witnessed how difficult and infrequent real mobility was in Yankee City, Warner claimed that a role of the school was to foster people’s belief in the fairness of the system. He claimed, “the possibility of rising in the social scale in order to secure a larger share of the privileges of the society makes people willing to ‘stick together’ and ‘play the game’ as long as they believe it gives them a fair deal” (Warner, Havighurst & Loeb 157). Warner like Conant had witnessed the severe limitations of social structure to provide equality of opportunity to all. Both men shifted their analysis from their structural
resounds with an ideology quite similar to the College Board’s young man who introduces students and parents today to the SAT. The smooth functioning of social class in America requires that we share a belief in the fairness of the system. Whether we fall at the top or the bottom of the ladder is a reflection of our individual determination and ability.

Portraits of Class in Yankee City

Warner’s studies of Yankee City are particularly useful to my exploration of the subjectivity of high achieving students because his volumes provide striking portraits of the disparities between the city’s social classes and upper class residents who were determined to maintain those disparities. I selected the following vignette from Warner’s work because it foreshadows the sorts of issues writing teachers face when our students take up writing positions they believe will allow them to pass as a “smart” or “sophisticated” writer in an academic or testing context. In this vignette, Warner describes an elaborate tea held at the Hill Street mansion of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Adams Breckenridge, members of Yankee City’s upper upper class. Sitting by her fireplace, Mrs. Breckenridge chats with an invisible ethnographer she has invited to her tea. As the party closes, Breckenridge analyzes each departing guest and what his or her behaviors reveal
about their status in Yankee City society. Her greatest contempt falls upon Mrs. Starr, newly arrived in the city and wife of a shoe executive. Mrs. Breckenridge calls the Starrs “new shoe people,” and continues, “No one ever heard of him until he made his fortune manufacturing shoes” (Warner and Lunt 129). Nevertheless, Breckenridge insists that her disdain for Mrs. Starr has nothing to do with her recent arrival in town or her husband’s recently acquired wealth. Mrs. Starr’s fatal error has been to try too hard to be accepted in the upper class social life of Yankee City. And on this particular afternoon, Mrs. Starr has feigned a genuine interest in Yankee City’s history to win the favor of the Breckenridge men. Mrs. Breckenridge continues:

You could tell that all of what Mrs. Starr said she had learned from books she had read. Somehow it annoys me. I just can’t help it. You could almost see her memorizing it all so she could use it on people like John and my brothers. I wouldn’t mind so much if I thought she really cared about such things, but I know that she doesn’t. She thinks it will help her socially to talk to them about things in which they have a genuine interest. (130)

From the eyes of Breckenridge, Starr’s performance has been fatally flawed: she has tried too hard to pass as old Yankee which has quickly been detected by the eagle-eyed Breckenridge. Breckenridge continues her monologue by describing the rather sneaky tactics she employs to exclude Starr from the city’s most prestigious women’s clubs, suggesting that her intent is to prevent Starr access to Yankee City’s upper upper class.

As Erving Goffmann (1959) a student of Warner at the University of Chicago, will point out a decade later, there is an important difference between the impressions a social actor like Starr consciously intends to give and the impressions, perhaps unconsciously, she gives off to Breckenridge (13-14). For Warner, however, Breckenridge’s monologue provides further evidence of the overwhelming barriers to social mobility in Yankee City.
Warner's assessment of Starr's failure to pass as an "upper upper," is reminiscent of David Bartholomae's insight into the relationship between the basic writer and the classroom professor where Bartholomae, like Goffman, relies upon dramaturgical metaphors to explain the complexity of passing as a member of a higher status community. Bartholomae notes, "To speak with authority student writers have not only to speak in another's voice but through another's 'code,' they not only have to do this, they have to do it before they know what they are doing..." (483). For Bartholomae, the basic writer's success depends not only on the writer knowing everything the classroom teacher knows, but, as importantly, her ability to manipulate the power relations between them by imagining that she writes to him from a position of privilege. Starr has done the reading for Breckenridge, she knows her Yankee City history, but her performance to Breckenridge comes across as inauthentic, she is merely a poser. Rather than appearing to share the same tastes as the Breckenridges, Starr is perceived as fawning and trying too hard. This same vignette will play out again and again in my findings, as some of my participants accused high scoring SAT writers of "trying too hard," or like Starr, are accused of "memorizing this stuff from a text book. You can tell they don't really care about it." And like Starr, several of my participants experienced tremendous difficulty playing the dramaturgical role of a writer who possesses more authority than they construe the testing context will permit them.

While the Breckenridge vignette exposes a performance that controls membership in Yankee City's upper classes, other vignettes expose the performances of school administrators in regulating the social mobility of students from the city's lower classes. A portrait of the Riverbrook neighborhood, located a few city blocks down the hill from
the Breckenridge estate, depicts a visit to the homes of two "lower lower" class families by a representative of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (SPCC) and the city's truant officer. In the scene that follows, the SPCC representative and the truant office report to Oldfield, the principal at Smith School, to discuss their home visits. As the scene opens, the truant officer finds Principal Oldfield in the schoolyard and informs him that the SPCC "gal" is waiting in his office.

"The S.P.C.C. gal is in your office. We've just been down to Sam Jones's and the Frank Tyler's. I thought she was going to puke when she went into their kitchens. It did smell pretty terrible."

Oldfield came into his office. He greeted her saying: "Well, how do you like our Riverbrookers? I hear you've been calling on Mrs. Sam Jones and Mrs. Frank Tyler."

"Why do people have to be so filthy?"

"Because that's the way they like it. Keep them all clean for six months and it would kill them. They cause me more trouble than all the rest of the kids put together. They're dumb and not interested. They don't want to learn anything. But what can you expect when their parents don't want them to either? (182)

Oldfield and the truant officer discuss the delinquency rates at Smith School and the "sex crimes" committed by one of its students. The truant officer explains to Oldfield that he found a girl behind the old tire factory with four boys. Principal Oldfield replies:

"But most of those kids weren't Riverbrookers. Some of them were your own breed of cat."

"Yeah, I know. Some of those shanty Irish are just the same as Riverbrookers. Those new foreigners, some of those Poles and Greeks--give me time and I'll get them all over to the reform school where they'll learn something useful."

"Well, in my small way," said Oldfield, "I keep a lot of them out of trouble. I always advise them to take the commercial and stay out of Latin and scientific courses in high school. That means they learn a little something useful. I see no use in people like that taking courses that would prepare them for college. Too many people are going to college anyway." (182)

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13 These Anglo names suggest these families are clam-diggers, among the few native Yankees who remain in Warner's lower lower class which is otherwise largely made up of more recent immigrants.
Warner uses this schoolhouse portrait to reveal the function of ethnic and class biases in regulating access to social mobility. These portraits reinforce Warner's understanding of the perseverance required for upward mobility in Yankee City. As noted previously, Warner's Yankee City analysis was prescient in his understanding that mobility required every detail in the "social personality" to change—from the magazines he reads to his neighborhood, church and friends—"as he gropes his way up the class ladder" (223). Despite Warner’s structural functionalist ideology that theorized that economic diversity was essential for social stability, Warner described a Yankee City that provided many more obstacles than supports to social mobility for Riverbrook residents.

Oldfield's claim that he keeps his "foreign" students "out of trouble" by steering them away from academic programs and toward the trades provides one of many instances Warner notes of the conflict between the local schooling practices in Yankee City and the prevailing scholarship on schooling for a democratic society in the first half of the 20th century (see Cremin 1961, Rury 2002). Yankee City like many other urban centers in the 1930s was committed to the principles of the comprehensive high school. In theory, the comprehensive high school was devoted, as Conant would advocate, to "ideals of equality of opportunity and equality of status" (The American High School Today 8). Unlike the European system of schooling, which segregated students by ability into separate schools early in their academic careers, the comprehensive high school provided multiple programs of study to prepare a diverse student body for different occupations. In theory, this heterogeneous mixing of students within the walls of one school building would provide a microcosm of the larger society, encouraging students to interact in a shared cultural experience. While students were separated in the
majority of their course work by academic program, they would come together in a shared civics class and in extracurricular programs and public spaces. Most essential to Conant was the functioning of the comprehensive high school as a space that would foster the deliberative processes essential to the democratic functioning of an institution (Rury 308).

During Warner’s tenure in the city, the Yankee City High School moved from a cramped downtown building to a sprawling new campus on Hill Street, a mile away from the retail district of downtown. Using federal money from the Works Progress Administration, the new building incorporated spaces for extracurricular activities including a theater with tiered seating and balcony, a gymnasium, a library and a football stadium with a seating capacity of more than 5,000—room for about a third of the city’s population. In theory, these new social spaces in the comprehensive high school would provide the space and opportunity for students from the city’s various social classes to congregate whether on the stage or on the athletic field (see Terzian 2004 on the failure of these common spaces to build school spirit). Both Conant and Warner endorsed the comprehensive high school as essential to providing all children with an equal opportunity for education (Brint and Karabel). Although the four programs of study available at Yankee City High School prepared students for very different vocations, in theory, the comprehensive high school provided all students the opportunity to self-select their course of study at a very late stage in their educational careers. In practice, however, vignettes like Oldfield’s tirade on “helping” Riverbrookers and the “those new foreigners” stay out of trouble indicate the conflicting values that operated on the ground level of the city’s schools. As Warner’s face-to-face vignettes demonstrate, access to a
higher status educational program placed tremendous emphasis on the student’s individual ability and determination to assimilate upper class Yankee culture.

Warner’s (1941) descriptions of Yankee City High School during the Depression Era indicate that its four programs of study were clearly segregated by ethnicity, race and gender14 and city residents who intended to keep it that way. All children of the city’s upper upper class and many of the upper lower and upper middle classes left the city to attend private day and boarding schools leaving Yankee City High School with an “ethnic” population of about two thirds (363). Not surprisingly, across the four programs of study—scientific, Latin, commercial and general—Warner found tremendous segregation by social class, ethnicity and gender (361). The scientific course exclusively served boys who came predominately from lower upper class families and who intended to pursue science or technology in college. The Latin course served predominantly girls from upper middle class families who also intended to go to college. The commercial course provided vocational training in secretarial and office skills and enrolled predominately girls from the lower classes. Finally, the general course, the “catchall” program, served students who had no particular career objectives and did not consider post-secondary schooling in their futures. The majority of these students were boys from the lower classes (Warner and Lunt 362). Although Warner does not indicate the percentage of students in each program, he does indicate the social class of the high school population:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Class</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>upper upper class</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lower upper</td>
<td>.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>upper middle</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

14 As is probably indicative of the prejudices of his time, Warner gives exact distributions for his ethnic categories but only general estimates for gender categories.
These statistics suggest that students in college prep programs comprised a very small percentage of the Yankee City High School community as would be typical of an era that sent less than 10% of its young people to college.

Warner’s study further reveals the way private funds were infused into the schools and families to determine which children would attend post-secondary schooling. Most notably, Warner points to the Wright Fund which continues to be the most highly endowed scholarship in present day Yankee City. Bequeathed to the schools in the mid-19th century by a local industrialist, the fund provides four years of college tuition to Protestant boys who pursue studies in engineering and science. Warner notes that boys from Yankee City’s upper classes, an almost exclusively Protestant population, used this fund to further their scientific studies at MIT, Harvard and Yale. Boys from the lower classes who went on to post-secondary schooling, a largely Roman Catholic and ethnic population, pursued their degrees at schools like the Northeastern University of the Young Men’s Christian Association, a school whose mission was to serve Boston’s immigrant population. The program at Northeastern integrated work and schooling so that the children of recent immigrants could finance their studies (Warner and Lunt 362)—a practice that continues today with a decidedly different ideology on the relationship between work and schooling. Today, Northeastern University accepts about one in three applicants, “gives special consideration to students who are pursuing a highly challenging college preparatory program, including honors, Advanced Placement and
college level courses” at a cost that exceeds $50,000 a year. Its co-op program is no longer advertised as a way to finance one’s studies. Rather, the school’s website proclaims, “The world’s most innovative co-op program—now more than 110 years old—prepares students for the global challenges of the next century.” In fact, the University’s makes no mention of its historic ties to Boston’s immigrant population in the brief history posted on its website, leaving the impression that ties to immigrants and the working class will tarnish a modern university’s public appeal.

During the depression years of the 1930s, both Warner and Conant were convinced that the rewards of a system that provided equality of opportunity would perpetuate faith in American exceptionalism and prevent further provocation of socialist and communist sentiments across the working classes. Any American, they believed, who put his individual talents to work could, possibly, rise above the station of his birth. The institution of the comprehensive high school—that in theory provided all boys and girls the opportunity to compete in a track of their own choosing—helped perpetuate the belief that, generally speaking, a person got what he or she deserved in life. It was important that the climb to the top of the social ladder was an arduous one. Only the most talented and hardworking deserved to reach the top rung where they would become the nation’s most competent leaders. Despite Warner’s empirical findings that revealed how difficult mobility was for those not born into Yankee culture, he continued to believe that what constituted happiness for Americans was their belief in a stable social system that provided them with the possibility of a minimal degree of self-betterment (Whyte 38)\(^\text{15}\)

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\(^{15}\) In his bestselling book, *The Organization Man* (1956), Whyte noted, “Of the many conclusions that came out of the [Yankee City] study, by all odds the most important finding was the function of social structure in fixing the individual in a satisfying relation to the society” (39).
And for both Warner and Conant, intelligence tests like the SAT and public schools like Yankee City's comprehensive high school played an essential role in promising that upward mobility was possible for anyone (Blint and Karabel).

In the epigraph introducing this chapter, Warner articulates his version of the American Dream: all men are born free and equal; all men have a right, even a duty, to succeed (Social Class in America 67). This was the attitude Warner brought to his Yankee City studies. By mid-century, however, Warner's research into urban life across several cities in America had repeatedly shown him that equality of opportunity was anything but equal. American society, he noted, does a good job of overestimating the opportunities for equality through the study of civics in the classroom and through the repetition of rags to riches stories in the media. By mid-century, Warner claimed that sociology had failed to confront the inequalities that are inherent to the American system: social status works for both "good and evil in all of our lives" although clearly the good and the evil are not equally distributed across the population (Social Class 68).

Nevertheless, Warner still adhered to the structural functionalist paradigm and to his fundamental belief in the importance of equality of opportunity, as he redefined the purpose of his work. If social structure is a closed system, Warner surmised, than his new project was to provide popular instruction in the functioning of social class. In his introduction to Social Class in America, Warner summarizes his project for his reader:

All of us are trained to know and to cherish the ideals of democracy and to believe in the American Dream which teaches most Americans that equal opportunity is here for all and that the chances for success for anyone lie within himself. None of us is taught to know and understand the American status system which is an important part of our American Dream and often makes the success story a brilliant reality. We all are trained in school to understand democratic ideals and principles and to believe in their fullest expression in American life, but we only learn by hard experience, often
damaging to us, that some of the things we learned in early life exist only in our political ideals and are rarely found in the real world. We never learn these things in school, and no teacher teaches us the hard facts of our social-class system. (vi)

Despite the impression that Warner's *Social Class* will expose the injustices of class structure in America, Warner neither questions the premises of structural functionalism or his belief American exceptionalism. Ironically, the purpose of *Social Class* is to give readers a "scientific tool with a detailed set of directions for understanding and measuring social class in making such knowledge useful..." (vii). With this new scientific tool in hand, Warner argues, Americans can "evaluate their social positions and thereby better adapt themselves to social reality and fit their dreams and aspirations to what is possible" (qtd. in Bell and Newby 283). Warner now understood that rags to riches stories were more myth than reality, but he hoped his tool, which allowed the everyday person to measure his own social class, would provide individuals with the knowledge and incentive to move, however slightly, up the social ladder.

In his last publications, Warner no longer praised America's belief in equality of opportunity. Instead, he claimed that the smooth functioning of society required a citizenry who were willing to give up their claim for a fair share of the American Dream and be satisfied with attaining more modest goals. In the end, Warner believed his work as an anthropologist was to provide an instrument for measurement that would allow Americans to recognize where they stood and to help them understand the intimate knowledge required to climb the social scale, however short that climb might be, and to accept the limitations of the hand life had dealt them. By the end of World War II, both Conant and Warner firmly believed in their scientific instruments. Nevertheless, they had
also discovered that the instruments alone could not surmount the multiple barriers to equality of opportunity in the United States.

**Yankee City: Desolation to Restoration**

**Definition of Beautiful People** – Elitist and or Artsy and or $$ individuals...who decided to claim Yankee City as their Kingdom, and turn it into a vision of white collar workers being able to showcase their homes and gardens... They would forsake all others who had lived there for years with family businesses, driving them out of the neighborhood if the business did not meet the new rezoning requirements for the condo units going in across the street. They would vote in their own, and take a once financially diversified city and turn it into a landscapers and boat owners paradise.

(blogsdirectoryhub.com)

By the 1960s, as much of the United States enjoyed tremendous post-war economic growth, Yankee City’s downtown, like many urban centers, was an eyesore. Most of the wealthy sold their homes on Hill Street and left the city for good. Middle class families escaped the city’s decaying colonial neighborhoods and fled to suburban developments on the city’s outer fringes. The massive three and four story brick and frame factories that once employed hundreds of the city’s working class population had long ago been boarded up as the manufacturers of shoes, combs, and heels shut down forever or moved to the South to find cheaper labor. The litter-strewn grounds surrounding the centerpiece of the city’s downtown, the granite 1835 Customs House, merely suggested the city’s past as a busy international trade port and home to some of the world’s fastest clipper ships. By 1960, its marble floors lay cracked from their service as storage for unused submarine parts.
At the same time, however, a new population began moving into the city’s old neighborhoods. No longer were they immigrants from across the ocean, but a younger generation of artists, actors, and musicians who discovered the city’s cheap rents and found congenial places to congregate at the local soda fountain and bars. The bar scene provided venues for musicians who struggled to find success in larger cities like Boston and Cambridge. A group of actors found a ramshackle frame building on the city’s waterfront and refashioned it into a small, live theater. Visual artists discovered one another, purchased a building and a cooperatively opened a gallery. Following this growth in the arts came the infusion of capital, federal, state and private. In the late 1960s, a group of local citizens stood before the bulldozers as they rolled through the downtown on their way to raze the city’s Federalist era brick buildings to replace them with a strip mall and parking lot. Behind the efforts of this group of private citizens, Yankee City became one of the first in the country to receive federal urban renewal grants along with Boston’s Quincy Market and Baltimore’s Inner Harbor (McGinley 114). In my interviews with my participants, I learned that this was the Yankee City that allured their parents in the 1980s: urban, historic, economically diverse, seaside and committed to the arts.

**My Participants’ Community: A Gentrifying City**

Five of my participants grew up Yankee City’s 18th and 19th century neighborhoods near Riverbrook where the truant officer and the gal from the SPCC visited Oldfield’s Smith School. Four of my participants attended Oldfield’s school for their elementary years: its classrooms with their oak floors and cracked black boards
changed over the decades. For the sake of simplicity, I call their neighborhoods Riverbrook because for decades these historic neighborhoods on the south side of the city were considered the wrong side of tracks: home to the working class Yankee City families, many who traced their histories in these neighborhoods back a century or two. Growing up on the streets of Riverbrook can be different than in the sprawling suburbs that skirt the city. My participants’ homes, in addition to being centuries old, tend to be smaller: often a single bathroom, three bedrooms, and they certainly lack the garage with attached basketball backboard, the basement rec room for hanging out with friends and the backyard large enough for a game of whiffle ball. Although the Riverbrook neighborhoods have lost much their economic diversity over the past two decades, you still can find a six bedroom restored Federalist mansion adjacent to a vinyl-sided apartment house with masking tape bandaging its broken window panes. Six of my participants have remained in the same home for the duration of their residency in Yankee City. The seventh has lived in several Riverbrook homes. In short, there has been substantial stability in my participants’ family’s commitment to place.

In contrast to the Riverbrook neighborhoods that cluster around the downtown business district, Yankee city’s suburban neighborhoods skirt the edge of the city on acreage that was once common pasture, farm land or city forest. The houses of these neighborhoods, laid out by a series of developers over the past fifty years, suggest the architectural design of the moment and the financial status of targeted homebuyers. There is little side by side diversity in these suburbs as there is in Riverbrook neighborhoods. The shingled split-levels along Godfrey Road were the first to be built in the 1950s and tend to be modest compared to the five thousand square foot neo-colonials that rose in the
last ten years along Hawthorne Terrace. Despite these differences across the suburban streets, their large lawns, their front doors set back fifty feet from the street and their family’s dependency on the car to participate in civic life sets them apart from the old city neighborhoods where front doors open right onto city sidewalks and where apartment houses butt up against single family homes. Today, while the Riverbrook neighborhoods evoke some hint of urban life in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the suburbs provide an escape from the city and the promises of twentieth century middle class suburban family life.16

At the time my participants’ parents and I purchased our Riverbrook homes, its reputation had barely begun to change from Warner’s days in the city. Nevertheless, I assume that like me, they too were charmed by the diversity of our urban community, the colonial histories in our homes and neighborhood, the short walk to the locally owned pharmacy, the newspaper stand, and the neighborhood elementary school. We understood that we were buying homes in the “bad” part of town, but I would argue, we thought we liked it that way. We had protested Vietnam, cast our first votes in 1972 for George McGovern and believed that in some fashion, whether it was through fighting for better recycling laws or taking on the local nuclear power plant, we were questioning our parents’ suburban values. The Riverbrook neighborhood promised something radically

16 Six of my participants’ parents, like my husband and me, moved to Yankee City in the 1980s, recently college educated and married, looking for a community to settle into adult life and to raise a family. And like us, their parents came from middle class suburban backgrounds from the New England states and from New York, Virginia and California. From the stories my participants told me, the majority of their grandparents were college educated too, their grandmothers staying at home to raise children while their grandfathers worked professional jobs such as lawyers, small business owners, college professors and school superintendents. A few of their grandmothers and grandfathers were writers of fiction, nonfiction and poetry, some making their living as writers and others writing for their own pleasure. Some of my participants’ parents were second generation US citizens, their grandparents having arrived from countries in southern and eastern Europe during the early part of the last century. The cultural heritages my participants noted were Hungarian, Polish, Italian, German, English and Irish.
different from what I had perceived as the oppressive conformity of the suburban New Jersey development I grew up in, and I suspect my participants’ families felt similarly. Although, I cannot speak for my participants or their parents, the scholarship on gentrification and the cultural ideologies that motivate gentrification provide some insight into the values and beliefs that underlie one of the most telling consumptive decisions a person makes in their lifetime: buying a house.

As Bourdieu argues, our consumptive choices and especially our choices around housing and neighborhood were mechanisms we used to identify with particular tastes and dispositions. Surely, we thought by purchasing our first homes in a largely working class urban neighborhood, we were rejecting the mid-century suburban conformity of our parents. Nevertheless, despite our seeming commitments to diversity and social justice, contemporary theoretical portraits of early gentrifiers point to the superficiality of those values. Critical geographer Neil Smith turns to Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis to explain gentrifiers’ fascination for urban spaces. Smith claims that early gentrifiers saw themselves as “urban homesteaders,” with an “adventurous spirit and rugged individualism” (The New Urban Frontier 13). With the American frontier tamed, early gentrifiers turned to the dangerous and uncivilized city where “no (white) man ha[d] ever gone before” (13). In our case, it could be said, where few children of white collar, suburban families had ever gone before. Smith argues that gentrifiers were no less arrogant than the frontier pioneers who preceded them and set out to “tame” the Native American. What began as a romanticized mission of a more radicalized subset of baby boomers to diversify urban communities had precisely the opposite consequence. Gentrification of urban neighborhoods created higher rents and home values that in turn
forced lower income families to find more affordable housing elsewhere. Smith argues, gentrification “cleansed and reinfused [urban areas] with middle-class sensibility” (13). Rather than choosing to live in working class neighborhoods to join the “natives,” we were colonizing neighborhoods to build our own self-styled American Dream.

Certainly, the lower income neighborhoods of Riverbrook were quite “civilized” compared to many of the urban areas central to the study of gentrification such as Harlem, Chicago and Cape Town. Nevertheless, as we newcomers to Riverbrook focused on replacing our rotting clapboards or as we sought out drama classes for our children, we became far more aware of our own vision for a perfect urban community and our own rising house values than we were of the disappearance of many of our working class neighbors. In time, the families who once lived next door moved to communities where housing costs had not been affected by the extraordinary growth of Yankee City’s real estate market. As one set of neighbors disappeared and another appeared, I was never particularly alert to the fact that it was specifically me who was displacing them. We children of middle class professional parents had simply bought into a neighborhood we loved and worked to turn the city and its schools into the places we wanted them to be. How naïve we were when in the span of a decade or two, we watched the houses surrounding us continue to be bought, restored and sold to even younger folks, likely better educated and wealthier than we, who had a vision of a perfect city that was somewhat different from our own.

I had little trouble finding comments on the internet from former Riverbrook residents about the “beautiful people” who have turned Yankee City into their own “Kingdom.” Three decades ago, we baby boomers had difficulty understanding the
contempt many "old timers" has for those of us who moved into the city's old neighborhood. We perceived our intentions as only good. In retrospect I understand that I, as much as Warner and Conant, bought into an ideology of individual freedom and equality of opportunity. I suppose we baby boomers assumed that by virtue of our SAT scores, our college degrees, and our ability to borrow money, we had earned the right turn "our" city into the city of our dreams: a vision of a family and arts oriented "kingdom" we imagined everyone shared. Over time, even James Conant became aware that individually earned merit does not prevent personal greed as he had once surmised; in fact, it may indeed work to justify it. Having recognized this blindness in myself, I wondered, how might credentialing young, high ability writers through a standardized test of writing test, influence their understanding of what it means to be a writer and what a writer's obligations and responsibilities are to those to whom and for whom they write. These are the sorts of conclusions suggested by researchers like Falbo and Carpenter who wonder if the extrinsic rewards students receive for their writing such as test scores and grades "play some role in how students identify themselves in regards to education and their peers" (107).

As the work of Warner, Conant and writing researchers like Falbo and Carpenter point out, many paradoxes underlie measures of social mobility and intellectual growth when they are understood as hierarchical ladders. Despite Warner and Conant's valuing of individual achievement, their midcentury analyses actually pointed out that power lies not so much in individual achievement as it does in those who sit at the top of the ladder and define those goals. The remnants of Warner's and Conant's scholarship leave the
question unanswered: what can equality of opportunity mean when the playing field continues to be an uphill incline for over half of the population?

Yankee City Schools Today

“Eileen, the computer loves you.”
--Yankee City High School teacher

Consolidation and Computerization

Like most urban school districts over the past half century, Yankee City’s schools have been continually consolidated since the time of Warner. In the first quarter of the last century, the city boasted six neighborhood public grammar schools and two parochial schools serving the Irish and French Canadian communities. Yankee City High School served as the regional school not only for the city but also the surrounding rural communities. When my participants entered the school system in 1990s, neighborhood elementary schools serving grades K-4 had dwindled to three public, and one parochial, K-8. A K-8 Montessori charter school opened its doors to over two hundred fifty children from the city and two neighboring school districts. In 2012, the city will begin construction of a consolidated elementary school to serve the entire city.

Alongside school consolidation, the loss of neighborhood schools, and the increased size of school populations, has been the computer networking of students, teachers and parents. The use of quantifiable data has increasingly become a factor in the everyday lives of students at Yankee City High School. In the past decade, wired classrooms and sophisticated software have enabled teachers to take daily inventories of their students’ class participation, homework completion, and quiz and test data. Students, teachers and parents can access students’ daily performances through software
that updates students’ course grades on a daily basis. As one of my children’s friends told me, her Spanish teacher showed her utter surprise—dismay actually—when she realized the computer evaluated Eileen’s classroom performance far more favorably than she did. These spreadsheets give a sense of the role of surveillance by mathematical abstractions in this young people’s lives.

**English Language Arts Curriculum**

Because the city has a long urban and working class history, its curriculum has tended to be more conservative and centrally managed than many of the surrounding rural and suburban districts. For example, in 1980s, when many localities were influenced by the whole language and writing process movements, Yankee City purchased Open Court, a basal reading program that was stringently enforced throughout the city’s K-4 classrooms and less so in the middle school 5-8 classrooms where the teachers were given some choice in designing their own curriculum. Notably, all 5 and 6 grade teachers taught Language Arts (and one other core subject in which they had expertise) under the premise that “anyone can teach English.” During my participants’ middle school experience, one 7th/8th grade teacher developed a “writing process” classroom which provided numerous occasions for her students to publish and perform across multiple genres. Her language arts colleague on the other teaching team used a current traditional writing pedagogy favoring the five paragraph essay and regularly posted a list of the ten highest ranking students in his room. One participant noted how intense the competition for earning one’s way to the top of his list was: “I don’t know how Krista kept managing to get averages like 100.7. I never got less than a 100 in that
class and never was first on his list.” This participant explained that there was a mystery to earning that top position that went beyond the objectivity of numbers.

Although Yankee City’s elementary reading program finally discarded its basal readers and adopted an integrated reading and writing program in 2008, Yankee City High School’s English literature curriculum in many ways resembles the English classrooms found in the earlier moments of the 20th century. Despite being tracked across four ability levels, all students share a similar curriculum selected from a canon of largely Western literature written largely by men. All ninth graders study *The Odyssey*, *Gilgamesh* and a unit on sonnets while the eleventh grade reading list includes more recent American literature like *The Great Gatsby*, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Catcher in the Rye*. While an honors ninth grade English class reads the complete *Odyssey*, college prep classes read selected, photocopied chapters, and remedial classes read an abridged, sometimes, comic book version. Although the 9th grade English curriculum includes student writing of a myth and a personal narrative, the focus of composition throughout the high school is the five-paragraph essay. In the spring of each year, the 10th and 11th grade curriculum includes a sustained research project that combines both history and literature curriculum.

Relevant to my descriptions of Conant and Warner’s notion of the comprehensive high school, an important theme of 11th grade English is American values, including the American Dream. The description for 11th grade honors English reads:

This course is designed for the able student of English who wishes to move at an accelerated pace. Extensive reading and discussion of literature is required. The American Literature curriculum for eleventh grade is aligned with the ….State Frameworks and complements the second semester United States History curriculum….A major emphasis is placed on multi-paragraph expository and persuasive writing skills and their application
to literary analysis. Skill development continues in vocabulary and grammar usage, writing process, and oral presentation. SAT and vocabulary application are critical in this instruction year. Emphasis is placed on the importance of American values as they shape our culture. The Junior Analytical Research Paper assessment will demonstrate students' understanding of content and skills developed this year in both history and English classes by formulating a focus on a chosen theme/idea, gathering valuable resources, organizing a clear argument, and synthesizing their evidence in a written format...Time frame: Colonial America to Present.

Throughout my conversations with my participants I prodded them not only for information on how their teachers worked the theme of the American Dream into their curriculum, but how my participants understood the theme themselves. In the following response, Steve tells me how Mr. A addressed the American Dream in his English classroom and encouraged the US history teachers to do the same.

Basicall...
which many of them were raised. In the following passage, Luke defines his understanding of the American Dream which he ends up relating to Americans’ consumption and desire for material wealth. Like Steve, he notes that the concept has little value to him today.

Fifty, sixty years ago [it meant having] some measure of freedom to be able to vote, especially as a male, of course, and to religious freedom as well and also the idea that you could better yourself with hard work and with a solid work ethic you could advance yourself in life. And I think it was that idea of social mobility that was the American Dream. But once in the fifties and sixties, we talked about how that changed. We talked about with the rise of mass consumerism in the fifties and sixties, how suddenly the American Dream was to own two Fords and live in a really nice house out in the suburbs, and it became much more material than it had been in the past.

Honestly, I don’t feel like the phrase the American Dream means too much to Americans anymore. I think it means far more to people living outside America who still believe in America because a lot of us take for granted the fact, the things that made up the American Dream especially in Yankee City, the fact that there’s going to be food on the table, there’s going to be clothing, you’re going to have some of the modern luxuries, you know, the TV, computers, jobs, the right to vote is a given, freedom of speech all these things that made up America’s core beliefs are taken for granted now, so I don’t feel like the phrase the American Dream means too much to a lot of people anymore. I know it doesn’t mean much to me, personally.

Luke understands the American Dream from the position of middle class American privilege. The American Dream, he suggests, has lost its force because Americans have food on their tables not to mention a TV in every room. Luke’s comment implies that poverty can be found in third world nations, but not here at home. Despite all of my participants’ keen liberal awareness of the “good luck” of their birth into positions of privilege, their belief in the relationship between hard work and success in school and in life trumped all other values. It seems that their understanding of their literature curriculum supported this belief.
It is important to note that although all participants felt that their high school writing curriculum was dominated by the five paragraph essay, they encountered a very different perspective in their junior year honors English class. Mr. A was a fairly young teacher in his first years teaching at Yankee City High School. One participant, a young man, said, "You can tell Mr. A just really loves literature." Mr. A's requirements for success often puzzled my participants, but then again provoked them to do much thinking about the qualities of the writing he was asking for. When assigning the short story, Mr. A. told them their task was "to make me feel human." In other instances, Mr. A. told his students to make their writing "beautiful." When I asked my participants what he meant by beautiful, they were often at a loss for words but referred to Mr. A's oral reading the final last paragraph of *The Great Gatsby*. "Now that's beautiful language," Annie told me. Ultimately, participants explained that "beautiful writing" required the careful choice of words. Mr. A's personal, aesthetic, and emotional appeal was quite different from what participants described in their other high school classrooms although participants were rarely, if ever, critical of their teachers. All participants, however, clearly admired Mr. A for his love of language and literature and for his teaching.

**Compulsory State Testing**

Beginning in the 1990s, students in Yankee City schools were mandated to take state comprehensive exams in reading and math in grades 3 through 8 and grade 10. Tests in composition are required in grades 4, 7 and 10. These tests require students to compose an essay in a prescribed genre: 4th grade, personal narrative; seventh grade, exposition; and 10th grade, literary analysis. Students must pass 10th grade comprehensive exams in reading comprehension, composition, math and science to
receive a high school diploma. Beginning in the 2012-2013 school year, teachers will be evaluated with on the same scale their students currently are: advanced, proficient, needs improvement, and warning/failing. One of the factors included in these ratings will be their students' scores on state testing.

All seven participants discussed the impact of the state comprehensive testing on classroom instruction. Although honors students typically pass these tests with scores in the advanced category,17 participants indicated that their tenth grade literature teachers spent an inordinate amount of class and homework time covering “packets” of former test questions and essays. In this brief exchange, Anna and Eliza explain the tedium of test prep.

ANNIE: I remember tons of packets of old tests, but the same old questions. You go through and answer them.

ELIZA: I remember, “Yeah, we’ll take time off from having a discussion or something.” Mrs. G would say, “This is a very good discussion, but we need to use the last half hour to go over our packets.” And I just remember one experience when, I can’t remember what book it was, but everyone was just said ugh.

Although all participants claimed significant class time was spent preparing for the composition portion of state testing, none mentioned preparing for the SAT in their honors English class despite its mention in the course description.

**Gender Ratios in Advanced Classes**

Particularly relevant to my participants’ school experience was the ratio of girls to boys in Honors and Advanced Placement classes. As similarly reflected in national trends, the girls at Yankee City High School outperform the boys not only in their GPAs and class

17 For example, in 2008, 38% of Yankee City High School students scored “Advanced” in English and 61% scored advanced in math.
ranking, but also in the level of challenge of the courses they took. During the time of this study, approximately equal numbers of boys and girls took honors science, math and history classes. On the other hand, boys made up only 16% of the students in honors and AP English classes. My three male participants were three of five males in their junior honors English class of 26 and three of four boys in their senior AP English class of 26.

There are many potential reasons for this discrepancy, not the least of which is what Thomas Newkirk refers to as the feminization of the literacy curriculum. Newkirk maintains that “boys underperform girls in school literacy tasks” because our schools have failed to understand the sorts of tasks that will provide more boys a connection to school literacy (Misreading Masculinity 169). Newkirk writes that today’s school sanctioned narratives have “thematic weight” and feature “introspection and the expression of feeling” (171), which Newkirk contends appeal more to girls than to boys. The literature curriculum of Yankee City High School, drawn almost exclusively from classics written before Salinger’s 1951 publishing of The Catcher in the Rye, fits Newkirk’s criteria of the feminized literature classroom.

Parents in Yankee City, on the other hand, do not blame their son’s failure to be recommended into honors English on the nature of the curriculum so much as they blame the expectations of the teachers for “perfect performances.” At the time my participants were headed into high school, placement in an honors class required teacher recommendation and a minimum classroom average of 92. A group of Yankee City parents challenged the gender gap found across honors and advanced placement classes at that time in the high school. These parents argued that teacher’s recommendations were biased against their male students who were not as compliant as their female counterparts.
and subsequently did not always earn A averages despite their mastery of course material. In response, middle school administrators added yet another standardized test, the Scholastic Services High School Placement Test, as a further requirement for honors placement.

As I came to know my participants and as differences across the boys’ and girls’ responses to my research protocol became strikingly apparent, insights into their understanding of the absence of boys in their honors English classroom became one aim of our collaborative investigation. As Eileen explained and as the boys confirmed, “The computer loves girls.” In the wired classroom with the capacity to calculate a students’ every action on a spreadsheet, those who are most willing to conform at every moment are those who most assuredly rank highest.

The Participants

My participants are the children of college educated, professional parents who relocated from various parts of the country and bought homes in Yankee City during the early years of its downtown’s restoration. A number of my participants’ grandparents are first generation US citizens. Unlike past generations of immigrants, however, their grandparents were largely college educated and worked in white-collar professions. Their ancestries include Italian, Slavic, Irish and English.

Voting records of the neighborhoods my participants grew up in suggest that their parents are far more likely to vote for democrats and for progressive reform than their counterparts in the suburban neighborhoods of the city. Their mothers’ professions include nurse, social worker, minister, textbook editor and teacher. The fathers’
professions include research scientist, mental-health therapist, sales representative, health care worker and science editor. Their parents attend schools like Harvard, the University of Virginia, Boston College, and Boston University and several held masters and doctoral degrees. Five participants’ have grandparents, aunts or uncles who write professionally as poets, journalists, fiction writers, or essayists. Several of their parents, both the girls’ and the boys’, write fiction and poetry but maintain full time careers in other professions.

All participants were friends and would candidly speak about one another and their classroom antics. It required some time before they realized which of their friends and/or classmates I was also working with, although this realization did not seem to alter their candid discussion. Despite their many similarities, interesting differences arose across the seven participants. One I found particularly profound was participants’ attitude towards jobs, whether after school jobs or during the summer. Three participants, one boy and two girls, worked year round at clerical and/or restaurant jobs. Their attitude towards work was that making money was a necessary part of life and included helping their parents to fund college. While the other four participants had occasional jobs like summer camp counselor, their summer activities reflected a different attitude about how a young person spends free time. These participants took part in numerous summer adventures from attending writing and science programs on college campuses to exploring remote cities in Eastern Europe. The jobs they worked were perceived as educational and paid little or were described as “internships.” I found these differences striking because they seemed to reflect very different senses of class privilege across participants which was not otherwise reflected in their consumptive practices or their tastes for education or the arts.
As I have already suggested, a most striking difference across my seven participants was their grade point averages and the commitments they professed toward achieving good grades. Although all seven participants believed that the luck of their birth and their innate intelligence had something to do with school achievement, all believed that their commitment to and their enjoyment of their school work accounted for most of their academic success (or lack thereof.) The four girls ranked 2, 3, 5 and 12 in their high school class of about 180 students. The three boys ranked 8, 29 and 30. Nevertheless, all three boys took honors English throughout high school and the three were among the four boys recommended for AP English. One of the girls who went on to major in physics at a top research university chose not to take honors or AP English. These differences in GPAs could be attributed to many factors from academic ability to conflicting demands on time and motivation. Understanding the differences between the girls’ and boys’ motivations to succeed in school became important to understanding the particular discourses participants took up as they imagined the lives of good writers of the SAT essays.

Today, all seven participants are engaged in their college careers. Five attended highly competitive liberal arts colleges in the Northeast and the Midwest. One of the girls who noted that she was tired of academic competition elected to attend a small, selective research university known for its somewhat quirky student body. Another girl attended one of the country’s leading institutes of technology.
CHAPTER IV

PERFORMATIVE PLAYING: THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this multi-case study was to explore the psycho-social beliefs and feelings revealed in the performances of highly successful students as they collectively imagined the writers of high scoring SAT essays. Entering into this study, I believed that the psycho-social beliefs and feelings that students draw upon when preparing for and participating in a standardized writing test would provide insight into the consequences of these tests to student identity construction as proficient writers and participants’ understanding of what it means to be a member of “the writing class.” Furthermore, I believed that the projective, playful, and performative research techniques used to generate the data that informs my findings would provide a contrastive method to the scientifically based method used by the College Board. In order to explore the identity performances of the writers of high scoring SAT essays, my research focused on four questions:

1) How do participants collectively imagine the writers of high scoring SAT essays;

2) How do participants collectively imagine the writer of an SAT writing prompt;
3) What do participants’ descriptions reveal about the nature of their relationship to the imaginary characters they perform; and
4) What, if any, psycho-social beliefs, feelings and attitudes toward compliance underlie these descriptions?

In this chapter, I describe the study’s research methodology and include discussions of the following areas. In the first section, I provide the rational for devising a research technique that I describe as *projective*, *playful* and *performative*. Because this technique is nontraditional and provoked the core data for this study, I pay particular attention to the history of this research technique in the fields of projective testing, object relations theory and performance studies. In the second section of this chapter, I provide an overview of my research design, the five research methods I used to generate data, and the procedures I used to analyze and synthesize this data. In the third section of the chapter, I discuss my participant selection method and rational for generating material from the collective work of small friendship groups rather than individual participants. Finally, I close this chapter with a discussion of issues of the trustworthiness of my data and the limitations of this study.

**Performative Playing**

Cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete. And, worse than that, the more deeply it goes the less complete it is... There are a number of ways of escaping this—turning culture into folklore and collecting it, turning it into traits and counting it, turning it into institutions and classifying it, turning it into structures and toying with it. But they *are* escapes. The fact is that to commit oneself to a semiotic concept of culture and an interpretive approach to the study of it is to commit oneself to a view of ethnographic assertion as...‘essentially contestable.’ Anthropology, or at least interpretive anthropology, is a science whose progress is marked less by a perfection of the consensus
than by a refinement of debate. What gets better is the precision with which we vex each other.

--Clifford Geertz

...in the human being imagination is more fundamental than perception.

--Henry A Murray, co-creator of the Thematic Apperception Test

The most interesting problem I faced in this study was developing an evocative research technique that would engage my participants in generating rich performances of a young person's beliefs and feelings about high scoring SAT essays and about what it means to be a writer of these essays. As Geertz suggests in the epigraph above, cultural analysis, including an analysis of a cultures’ writing practices, is easily amenable to reductive analysis. From my experience as a writing teacher, I suspected that my participants would have mastered a number of Geertz’s “escapes” to describe good writing and good writers, such my participant Annie did when she complained that the writer of a high scoring essay “didn’t even write a five paragraph essay” or stated that the good SAT writer needs to “stick with that thesis no matter what.” Standardized models of the essay, like the five paragraph essay, exemplify the sort of “escapes” we teachers often use to codify and reduce the complex conventions of academic writing into a fixed genre that can be easily transmitted to a diverse student population.

While responses like Annie’s were certainly important to understanding the school discourses Anna relied upon to guide her writing of an SAT essay, I wanted to encourage my participants to generate what Geertz calls thick descriptions, that is to generate not only their descriptions of good writing for the SAT but also to explore more fully the rationales and meanings that lay below these reductive guidelines to “good” writing on a standardized writing test. I wanted to invite my participants to join me in the
sorts of cultural analysis that Geertz suggests moves beyond reductive escapes, and is, by necessity, intrinsically incomplete, subject to change, and contestable. That is I not only wanted to know what Annie thought constituted good writing on the SAT, I wanted to know why Annie thought a good writer would or should follow the structure of the five paragraph essay. Moreover, I wanted to know what kind of writer and, for that matter, what kind of person, Annie thought would be successful in [re]producing this genre and for what reasons. Finally, I wanted to know how Annie felt about this kind of writing and person. Did she like this person? And was this kind of writer and person she wanted to be?

As Geertz contends, these questions do not lend themselves to stable or complete answers. In fact, I did not expect that my participants would generate consistent responses to these questions, nor did I want them to. Rather, I hoped my research protocol would invite participants to bring to words the unarticulated ambivalences and tensions that lay below their understanding of what it means to be a “good writer.” My hope was that inviting them to explore the conflicts and ambivalences of their own responses would help us, not to define fixed answers, but to describe the contours of the tensions that underlie the identities they are asked to perform when they engage in the discursive practices that surround a standardized writing test.

Two previous studies, though occurring seven decades apart, are examples of studies that helped me think about the difficulty of inviting young people to articulate their understandings of identity performances. In a study of the meaning of teenage pregnancy, Wendy Luttrell found her young participants struggled to narrate their life stories. Through her work with the girls, Luttrell discovered that the girls “enjoyed
performing" rather than "telling" about their lives (*Pregnant Bodies* 15). Luttrell shifted her view from her young participants as narrators of life stories to “improvisational actors whose performances held rich and multiple clues to the girls’ self and identity making process” (150). To generate data for her study, Luttrell designed research activities in the visual and performing arts that invited the girls to perform *imagined* others and “themselves as they are, as they wish they might be and as they think others might wish them to be” (150). Like Luttrell who invited her participants to perform the lives of imagined others, I invited my participants to invent the lives of others based upon their reading of high scoring SAT essays. In this way, the data that forms the basis of this research has been generated by participant performances as they imagined the lives of others rather than collected from the more traditional stance of the ethnographer as participant-observer of a “naturally” occurring event or as the ethnographic ear who receives life stories from her participants.

A second body of work which informed my research methodology draws from the long history of projective techniques and particularly from the work of Henry Murray who co-developed the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT). Beginning with the father of psychometrics, Francis Galton, psychologists and psychoanalysts have experimented using ambiguous shapes to provoke their subjects to reveal mental content. At the turn of the last century, Hermann Rorschach turned a Victorian parlor into his famed inkblot test which he believed provided a window into the mind’s internal workings (Masling 260). In the first half of the twentieth century, psychologist Henry Murray and cultural anthropologists George and Louise Spindler further developed projective techniques or
“provocative stimuli” to generate data they believed was otherwise unobtainable about the individual personality or about a culture’s values and beliefs (Spindler xxii).

In the development of one of the most popular projective tests used by clinical psychologists today, Henry Murray (1943) had an experience much like Luttrell’s in provoking subjects to engage with the research protocol. Murray devised a set of cards, each pictorially representing an ambiguous social situation, and assumed that when he asked clients to tell him what they saw in a card, their response would reveal hidden aspects of their personality otherwise unavailable to them (Anderson 28). To his disappointment, however, Miller found that his respondents told him little more than precisely what they perceived in the picture. To remedy this situation, Murray altered the instructions he gave his subjects and told them to “imagine something,” “get away from the facts” (Anderson 28). These new directions engaged Murray’s respondents in a profoundly new way. In his 1943 *Manual for the Thematic Apperception Test*, Murray made a special note of the importance of the imagination in bypassing defense mechanisms which he argued inhibit access to the self’s “inner world” (Anderson 36).

While my study does not assume a contained, stable, inner self, I do assume that inviting participants to engage their imaginations in collaboration with friends as they invented the lives of SAT prompt and essay writers would provide them and me with an object of attention for our mutual speculation, analysis and ongoing interpretation. Over the course of our meetings together, the imagined lives of two SAT essay writers and one SAT prompt writer were increasingly embellished and often ignited participants’ stories about their own and others’ writing experiences. The success of this technique in
generating an abundance of data, however, neither defines nor justifies the data inspired by an evocative, imaginative activity.

The history of projective testing exposes both the promises and the limitations of the psychological processes of projection and imagination. Since the early parts of the twentieth century, the most scathing critiques of projective testing came from those engaged in psychometric research methodologies. Despite decades of statistical trials, projective tests have been criticized by the psychometric community for failing to produce statistically reliable norms and for their inability to control for researcher interference and especially the interactions of race, sex and class (Masling 260). Today, clinicians who continue to rely upon projective testing to develop greater understanding of and rapport with their clients accept that interpreting the results of the TAT requires the tester to “read” test responses relationally, contextually, and psycho-socially as one piece of data among many (Dr. Maura Abate, Dr. Richard Shulic, personal communication). Despite the TAT’s inability to provide valid and reliable norms for the psychometric community, the test remains one of the top ten most frequently used psychological tests by clinicians (Paul 97).

In contrast to the psychometric researcher, however, my purpose has not been to assess and normalize but to explore the psycho-social consequences of assessment and normalization to student writers’ understanding of identity performances. For the designers of psychometric testing such as the SAT writing test, an important purpose of method is to provide a boundary between the subjectivities of researcher and participant in order to prevent the contamination of the later by the former. This is readily seen in the protocols needed to train and to re-calibrate scorers throughout the assessment process to
prevent them from slipping into "subjective" or idiosyncratic readings of student essays ("SAT Reasoning Test"). The methodology of this study, however, assumes that method can also be used to provide a mediational means for the subjectivities of researcher and participant to merge and differentiate in a space where both parties can look and look again at the perhaps idiosyncratic, perhaps psychological, perhaps cultural performances we enact for one another (see Hesushius, "Methodological Concerns"; Conquergood, "Poetics, Play").

Murray's and Luttrell's recognition that their participants became noticeably more engaged in the research project when they were encouraged to use their imaginations raises the essential question: how do we understand the data generated when we ask participants to use their imaginations to invent the lives of fictional others? As my participants sat side by side at the conference table reading aloud high scoring SAT essays and imagining young writers, as one participant insisted that she wore glasses, as another said she reminded her of their friend Sara, and as yet another added that Mr. A would have hated this essay, what psycho-social processes were they engaged in? Over the three or four month span of our meetings together, my participants did not forget the imaginary lives they had begun creating weeks earlier; rather, participants frequently embellished these imaginary lives as they compared and contrasted their imaginary writer with their own experiences as writers and students. To understand this imaginative

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18 Anthropologist Dwight Conquergood called this relationship between the researcher and the researched "co-performative witnesses" (Donker, Cultural Studies). While Conquergood was not naïve to think that these co-performative witnesses shared similarly in the performance, he was committed to overturning the hierarchies that labeling entailed and to recognizing the interplay of multiple subjectivities in any social performance.
process, I turned to the object relations theory of D. W. Winnicott and his concepts of potential space, transitional object and playing.

**D. W. Winnicott: The Spaces of Me/Not Me**

After being—doing and being done to. But first being.

---D. W. Winnicott

Feeling real is more than existing; it is finding a way to exist as oneself, and to relate objects to oneself and to have a self into which to retreat for relaxation.

---D. W. Winnicott

I begin this section with a brief biography of British pediatrician and psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott (1897-1971) because Winnicott’s object relations theory, which has been central to the generation and analysis of the data for this study, arose during an era that parallels James Conant’s contribution to educational policy in America and Lloyd Warner’s descriptions of Yankee City during the years of the Great Depression. A most formative experience in Winnicott’s life was the Second World War and his appointment as Psychiatric Consultant to the Government Evacuation Scheme. In this post, Winnicott established evacuation hostels for London’s children and developed management plans to bring back to psychological health those children who suffered most severely from the war and being wrenched from their families and homes. Also, having witnessed the consequences of Fascism and a nation of compliant individuals who willingly committed moral atrocities, Winnicott was deeply invested in understanding the consequences of coercive environmental pressures on the individual child (see Phillips, *Winnicott; Rodman, Winnicott: Life and Work*). While Conant’s fascination was an educational policy that would bring about a democratic meritocracy, Winnicott’s
fascination was understanding the processes that enabled individual children to engage passionately and ethically with their environments. The contrasts between these two worldviews are essential to my study. For Conant, the research chemist, social policy built upon data that was measurable was essential to a better society. For Winnicott, the pediatrician and therapist, understanding and accepting the paradoxes that lay at the core of the human condition was essential to creative living, human happiness and emotional health.

While the concerns of the early twenty-first century may seem radically different from Winnicott's post World War II work with suffering children, critical theorists are similarly concerned with the effects of an increasingly coercive environment on our current generation of school children. Systems of surveillance such as high stakes testing, locker and backpack searches and cameras in school hallways have become accepted as necessary to twenty-first century life (see Lipman, "Educational Ethnography"; Smith *The New Urban Frontier*) This study of the good writer in a time of high stakes testing turns to Winnicott's object relations theory because I share Winnicott's concern for the consequences of a coercive external environment on the child's psychological health and capacity for creative engagement with her environment. The projective, playful and performative methodology I propose for this study is a response to a culture of educational research that increasingly claims that the most important variable in understanding student learning is statistical, normalized, and hierarchical.

Unlike today's pressing concern for how our children measure up against one another and against the children of other first world nations, Winnicott's primary concern was the individual child's capacity to live creatively by maintaining a healthy and
creative relationship with her external environment. Although Winnicott does not separate epistemology from ontology, his primary interest was not what the child knows but rather how the child maintains psychological health through regulating his or her capacity to relate to the outside world. Marti Ruti notes that while contemporary education identifies autonomy among its primary goals, development, for Winnicott, requires “increasing intricate involvement in social networks that allows [the child] to cultivate its capacity for creative living” (363). Somewhat similar to Piaget’s notions of assimilation and accommodation, Winnicott understands the child’s engagement with her environment through the psych-social mechanisms of projection and introjection. 19 Unlike Piaget, however, Winnicott’s concern was not the development of cognitive structures, but the mutuality of human recognition, and in the case of the young child, a developing trust in an environment that recognizes the child as a being in her own right. Winnicott’s healthy child receives the assistance necessary to regulate the interrelationship of her own desires and fantasies and the demands of a coercive external environment. Winnicott’s ideal environment permits the child to creatively express her individuality, and, in return, recognizes that individuality in the child (Nussbaum 391). Residing in a coercive environment, the child can only receive recognition when she complies with the desires of an external other and takes up a role Winnicott calls the “false self.”

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19 Despite the similarities between Piaget’s understanding of the human organism who changes her environment as she changes herself in relationship to the environment, there are essential differences between the two men’s epistemologies. While Piaget’s dialectic between assimilation and accommodation was readily amenable to Western notions of cognition that are both structural and hierarchical, Winnicott’s emphasis is not on the knowing subject, but the relating subject whose life long task is to maintain a relationship between self and other.
Winnicott's lifelong fascination was to understand his patients and their individual, if not idiosyncratic, ways of maintaining a healthy balance between self and other, mind and body, internal and external, and fantasy and reality (Winnicott, Phillips, Salvio and Boldt). Prescient of postmodern understandings of the self, Winnicott blurred the boundaries between binaries that were becoming increasingly separated and fixed by modernist and positivist social sciences and, more particularly to this study, psychometric ways of understanding who the child is. In the following sections, I elaborate upon three metaphors Winnicott proposed to explain the psycho-social processes individuals use to traverse the blurred boundaries between the self and his or her environment while maintaining psychological health: potential space, transitional objects and playing. These three concepts, each intertwined in the definition of the others, are central to my understanding of the research space and the psycho-social processes my participants engaged in as they imagined the lives of high scoring SAT writers. In my discussion of these three concepts, I turn to Winnicott's writings in which he analyzes the mother-child environment to forward his thinking about the relationship between individuals and their culture. The mother-child relationship works as a metaphor for the teacher-student relationship and, in the case of this study, the researcher-participant relationship.

**Potential Spaces**

Winnicott's first contribution to object relations theory and to the problematic modernist splitting of subject and object was the introduction of the concept of *potential space*, first experienced by the infant in its relationship with a nurturing caregiver. In

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20 Winnicott's focus on the caregiver as mother and the individual child makes for difficult gender choices in writing. For the sake of consistency I call the care giver mother as does Winnicott writing from the mid twentieth century and the child "it." I found both choices troublesome.
contrast to more scientifically based epistemologies that demand a putative, controlled environment and the maintenance of an objective distance between the researcher and the object of study, Winnicott was interested in the development of the experiencing self as an embodied, sentient and creative being whose development originates in relationship with its caregiver(s). He called this merged space between caregiver and child potential space. Winnicott traced all cultural experience from the creation of art to adult conversation back to this first relationship and the caregiver’s ability to endow the child with a capacity to trust its environment and to live creatively.\(^{21}\) Winnicott postulated that potential space is experienced by the child as neither internal nor external: it is neither “me” nor “not me.”\(^{22}\) In potential space, the child projects internal needs, desires, and fantasies into a space where the mother can attend to them, feeding her child when hungry, soothing her child when anxious, and, most importantly, recognizing and mirroring back to the child its emotional state through their shared gaze. Through her response to her infant’s projections onto the world, the mother provides her child with a sense of its own omnipotence, endowing the child with the sense that it is the child who creates its own world, a world in which the child is fully confident to express itself without incurring undo harm. At the same time, however, the mother must introduce her child to an increasingly more complex and threatening external reality that allows the child to discover an external world that is genuinely other and resists the child’s attempts to control it (Phillips 110). The role of the mother then is to balance these processes.

\(^{21}\) Winnicott defined living creatively as performing in ways that come from one’s sense of one’s self and not in compliance to another’s requirements. Perhaps problematically, Winnicott believed one’s station in life was not a factor in one’s capacity for creativity.

\(^{22}\) If potential space invites the merger of baby and mother, self and other, then it follows that the psychological processes that are the vehicles to this merger, projection and introjection, are similarly not clearly distinguishable.
Should the balance between inner and outer become skewed, and the infant is permitted too much control of the mother-infant environment, the child will suffer from a false sense of its own omnipotence and the grandiosity of the child’s fantasy life will prove ineffectual in living in concert with a shared external world. If the mother is overly coercive, if she fails to mirror back to her child its own subjective response to experience and instead imposes her own regime upon the child, the child learns that it must safeguard an internal sense of self by complying with the mother’s demands. Having learned to present a false front to the mother, this child loses its capacity to project its own meanings onto the world and its capacity for joy. Although this definition of child rearing suggests that the work of mothering is potentially perilous, Winnicott’s conviction was to impress upon mothers precisely the opposite. Through his concept, “the good enough mother,” Winnicott argued that the “ordinarily competent mother” is surely good enough and, in fact, he suggests the greater problem is the too “good mother” who bends too much to her child’s whimsy, on one hand, or exerts too much external control, on the other. 23 24

Winnicott uses the following cooking anecdote to explain the felt differences of these two states.

I know that one way of cooking sausages is to look up the exact directions [...] and another way is to take some sausages and somehow to cook sausages for the first time ever. The result may be the same on any one occasion, but it is more pleasant to live with the creative cook, even if sometimes there is a disaster or the taste is funny and one suspects the worst. The thing I am trying to say is that for the cook the two experiences are different: the slavish one who complies gets nothing from the experience except an increase in the feeling of dependence on authority, while the original one feels more real, and surprises herself (or himself) by what turns up in the mind in the course of the act of cooking. When we are surprised at ourselves, we are being creative, and we find we can trust our own unexpected originality. We shall not mind if those who consume the sausages fail to notice the surprising thing that was in the cooking of them, or if they do not show gustatory appreciation. (Home is Where We Start From, 51)

Winnicott’s construct of potential space is instructive about the dangers of the researcher-participant relationship and points out the difficulty of separating one’s own fantasies and projections from participants.
Winnicott’s notion of potential space provides a metaphor for understanding the space of research as a shared space but more importantly his notion of potential space points to the relationship between power and the multiplicity of selves who may emerge in the context of research. In this study, understanding the research space as potential space meant looking for evidence that the performances enacted by my participants were creatively and/or coercively engaged in. This often required a subjective listening to participants’ voices. Were participants parroting a teacher’s script, indicating they believed in the truth value of what they had been taught in school or could I hear the tones of parody or sarcasm as they “double-voiced” (Bakhtin 156) a teacher’s script? And in what ways were their performances hybrids, creatively formulated as they engaged with activities of the research project? Often pragmatic language clues like a sudden change in intonation, the spontaneous mimicry of teacher’s voices and moments of self-surprise gave clues to the participants’ felt relationship to the selves they were performing.

Finally, understanding the research space as potential space required that I ask the same questions of myself. In reviewing video and audio tapes of our time together, it was own visions of who they are. By extrapolation, I see an important parallel between Winnicott’s “good enough mother” and the qualitative researcher’s responsibility for supporting a researcher-participant relationship that invites participants to perform creatively while minimally imposing the researcher’s regime on her participants. Using Winnicott as a lens to critique her own research methodology, Wendy Luttrell (2001) argues that the “good enough” qualitative researcher must “accept rather than defend against healthy tensions in fieldwork” (515). She elaborates on this position by defining researcher reflexivity as “an exercise in sustaining multiple and sometimes opposing emotions, keeping alive contradictory ways of theorizing the world, and seeking compatibility, not necessarily consensus. Being reflexive means expanding rather than narrowing the psychic, social, cultural and political fields of analysis” (516). I would like to extend Luttrell’s analysis and suggest that when we provide potential space for our research subjects, we also provide them to opportunity to be reflexive, defined as the capacity to sustain multiple and opposing emotions, keeping alive contradictory ways of theorizing the world. I contend that inviting participants to imagine people who are like them, but not them, has been one way to provide participants with a potential space that allows them to sustain conflicts and anxieties in ways that interviewing them about their own life’s experiences cannot. Through their reflections on these characters they could identify parts of themselves previously unnoticed.
necessary to ask who was the self I was performing for each of my participants and in what ways and to what degrees was I imposing my own agenda on them. For example, I found substantial differences in the ways my male and female participants responded to my interview questions. In response to my questions, the boys could monologue for several minutes at a time while the girls more often shared the interview space equally with me. Were the gendered differences I was finding in their turn taking a response to me, the female researcher? Or were these interactions performed by the eight of us a response to the larger cultural expectations, beliefs and feelings about gender that each of us embodied mutually and differently? Or both?

**Transitional objects**

In his microanalyses of mothers and children relating, Winnicott observed that children discovered particular objects, like a stuffed animal or blanket, in which they endowed a special meaning. These “transitional objects,” which symbolized for the child its attachment to its caregiver, helped ease the child’s anxiety as it negotiated the boundaries between self and other. Winnicott’s interest was not in the transitional object itself but in the child’s use of the object to bridge the worlds between inner subjectivity and outer reality. The existence of the transitional object in this blurred intersubjective space requires that the object take on a paradoxical ontological status. Paradoxically, Winnicott insisted, we must accept that the child creates the transitional object and that the transitional object has its own existence in the world separate from the child. In a similar way, the imagined lives of the writers of high scoring SAT essays became transitional objects in this study. While it was the participants who invested life into the imaginary writer, the imaginary writers were treated as if they had lives of their own,
separate and distinct from the participants themselves. This is a particularly important insight for both research and teaching. As we probed the lives of their imagined writers, it was not necessarily my participants’ lives I probed, but imagined lives, drawn from the merger of their personal and cultural lives.

In his last writings, Winnicott proposed the notion that all of cultural experience is "an extension of the idea of transitional phenomenon" (Playing and Reality 99). For example, we understand that an object of art has an objective and external existence separate from its creator and yet we also understand that the object is an extension of the artist herself. Winnicott would say the art object has a paradoxical ontological existence as both created by the artist and an object separate from the artist. Winnicott’s understanding of transitional objects shares only in part with the original designers of projective tests who assumed that the imagination freed their clients from defense mechanism to reveal their internal fantasies and desires. Unlike Murray and Rorschach, Winnicott theorized that the “inner” or the authentic self is not stable and fixed, nor articulable or capable of being fully revealed (Phillips). Winnicott’s “real” self is only experienced when the child, or the adult, engages in a transitional world that is experienced as neither inner nor outer. Winnicott elaborates:

It interests me…that in any cultural field it is not possible to be original except on the basis of tradition…The interplay between originality and the acceptance of tradition as the basis for inventiveness seems to me to be just one more example, and a very exciting one, of the interplay between separateness and union. (99)

While the Freudian perspective identifies culture with repression and sublimation, for Winnicott cultural is the medium through which a self is experienced (Phillips 119).
My participants’ performances of the imagined personae was not an unveiling of an interior self; rather it was a creative performance of a hybrid self, a “neither me—nor not me” vehicle that invited participants to generate new understandings of what it means to be a good writer and to write well under the conditions of a standardized test.

Winnicott’s notion of transitional objects is essential to my understanding of participants’ relationships to their imaginary writers. The imaginary writers when understood as transitional objects provided useful data for both my participants and me to explore their relationship to the culture of testing and schooling. As my participants conjured up the lives of their imaginary writers, seeing them in their classrooms, engaging with their families and articulating their motivations for writing and for success, these imaginary writers became transitional objects. Participants often became aware that although their imaginary writers were not them, in many ways these fictional characters reflected back to them insights about themselves.

**Playing**

Play is more than merely the expression of individual interiority or the discursive exchange between “doctor” and patient.” Playing is a creative, communicative experience where subjects meet; it is not wholly the domain of either participant.

---Michael Szollosy

Winnicott’s concept of playing unites his concepts of potential space and transitional object to explain human psychological growth. Playing is the active discovery and use of transitional objects in potential space (*Playing and Reality* 41). Most importantly, for Winnicott, it is through playing that the child finds and becomes a self while simultaneously understanding the existence of a shared world that exists in its own
right separate from the child’s desires to destroy or control it (Phillips 114).

Psychoanalyst and Winnicott scholar Adam Phillips explains that for Winnicott development through playing was not about increasing mastery over an external reality but a “process of inclusive combination.” As in description of the domineering mother I cited early, Winnicott believed that those who continually seek to maintain the separation of subject from object are most out of touch with their own and others humanity, or, as he notes, those who are “most reliably objective are often comparatively out of touch with their own inner world’s richness” (qtd. in Phillips 114).\(^\text{25}\) In this way, Winnicott would have been critical of a teaching model that relies so exclusively on psychometric testing to drive student learning.\(^\text{26}\)

Essential to Winnicott’s notion of playing is the felt sense of being alive that arises when the isolated and differentiated self is momentarily forgotten as it merges with external reality (Playing and Reality 65). Other researchers have described a similar phenomenon. Central to Maria Montessori’s philosophy of education is the concept of normalization whereby the child joyfully engages with the classroom environment for extended periods of time (The Absorbent Mind 202). Similarly, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes the ecstasy felt in states of “flow” when self-consciousness is lost in times of complete focus on a goal directed activity (Flow 220). This felt joy is not only a response

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\(^{25}\) Winniecott’s understanding of the positivists need for objectivity and separation from one’s own subjectivity has important connections to Hannah Arendt’s analysis of Nazi Germany and her notion of the banality of evil which she associates with Eichmann’s inability to maintain contact with his own interior sense of humanity. She writes, “It was not the presence of hatred… [but] the absence of the imaginative capacities that would have made the human and moral dimensions of his activities tangible for him.” Arendt argues that Eichmann’s compliance with the Third Reich inhibited his capacity for internal dialogues where he would have encountered a sense of humanity.

\(^{26}\) As above, I see in Winniecott’s critique of the domineering mother, a critique of schooling that does not recognize the subjectivity of its students. In this vein, Helen Fox Keller uses Winnicott to describe a scientific method that does not seek mastery but retains its relationship to and compassion for its object of study.
to the self's engagement with the world, but as object relations theorist Marion Milner suggests, from a forgetting of the self ("The Role of Illusion"). In play, Milner notes, the discriminating ego, which tries to observe objectively and rationally, can be forgotten, permitting the child to release the anxiety provoking boundaries between self and other, internal and external, fantasy and reality. While playing, the child is free to introject elements of an external reality into her own subjective space while simultaneously projecting a self into the external world. Through this constant balancing of inner and outer, self and other, fantasy and reality, the child maintains a personal relationship with an external world. Finally, it is through this capacity for merger, Milner explains, that the child begins to recognize and tolerate difference in others and to understand that difference resides in the self too. Through the temporary release of self-other boundaries in play, through the merger with difference, the child discovers that difference resides within the self too. Milner's work explains the frequency of my participants' discovery that their imagined SAT writers were in many ways just like them.

Playing with Personae: A Winnicottian Analysis

I have turned to Winnicott's notions of potential space, transitional object and playing to define the psycho-social processes my participants engaged in as they collaboratively and individually created the personae of high scoring SAT writers. I argue that this evocative activity was, in theory, an attempt to provide participants an opportunity for playing in Winnicott's "me-not me space" where the nature of their attachment to their fictional characters was not questioned. These imaginative personae were often the focal point of our discussions over the three or four sessions we spent
together. Originally created in collaborative sessions with friends, the personae re-emerged in our one-on-one sessions where they accumulated more meanings in our conversations about the high scoring SAT essays and my participants' own writing. As my participants elaborated upon, reflected upon, and critiqued the writing and the lives of these imagined personae, the personae became transitional objects, crafted from a merger of my participants' own fears, desires and concerns and the multiple discourses and stereotypes passed between friends, teachers and their SAT study guide books. While specific character traits of the invented personae were at times disputed by participants, their differences were argued based on participants' readings of the essays and on their understanding of a shared culture and not solely upon idiosyncratic projections onto a character. In other words, because the personae were fictions, no one ever suggested, "Is this you?"

Nevertheless, in our later one-on-one sessions as the focus of our discussions turned to the participants' own writing and their experiences with the SAT, participants began to recognize themselves in their fictional personae. As one participant frequently exclaimed outright, "You know, I am him, I am him." Elaborating on Winnicott's concept of playing, Milner describes this phenomenon as a consequence of an environment which does not require the participant to tolerate the anxiety of differentiating self from other (31). Rather Milner argues, paradoxically, in order to understand difference, and more importantly in order to see difference in the self, the environment must provide opportunities for "a framed space and time and a pliable medium, so that, on occasions, it will not be necessary for self-preservation's sake to distinguish clearly between inner and outer, self and not-self" (31). It was during these
moments in "potential space," when a participant temporarily gave up "the discriminating
ego, which stands apart and tries to see things objectively and rationally, and without
emotional coloring" (31), that a participant recognized himself in the group’s description
of an imaginary character. For my participants, the invented personae became transitional
objects that allowed them to play with their own, their community’s and the broader
culture’s understanding of what it means to be a writer of a high scoring SAT essay.

For me, the researcher, Winnicott’s concepts of potential space, transitional
objects and playing are the lens through which I understand the nature of data which is
central to this study. My reflections on my participants’ imagined personae and our
conversations about them do not point to static cultural facts which outline a common
definition of the Good SAT Writer. Rather, our collective playing with these imagined
personae were performances which revealed insights into their sometimes shared and
sometimes conflicting beliefs about the person they believed a standardized writing test
was asking them to be.

Winnicott as Performance Ethnographer

Although Winnicott’s insights into the relationship between the developing child
and its culture were produced fifty and more years ago, they aligned closely with the
scholarship in contemporary performance ethnography. While Winnicott described the
healthy individual as one who has the capacity to creatively merge with an external
environment, Victor Turner, the father of performance ethnography, turned to the
metaphor of drama to highlight “humankind,” not as fixed by universal systems and
structures, but as creative, playful, provisional, imaginative inventors of culture (Turner,
Conquergood). While Winnicott’s commitment to understanding the psychological health of children was a response to the consequences of a coercive and authoritarian culture, Dwight Conquergood notes that performance ethnography’s commitment to understanding “humankind” as culture-creating has been a “counterproject to logical postivism” (83). Performance ethnographers argue that the fixed categories posed by neo­positivist perspectives reify hegemonic structures of power by failing to recognize the inextricability of subject from object, internal from external (Conquergood, Phelan). And much as Winnicott theorized a psycho-social third spaces where subject and object meet in health, Conquergood notes that a performance ethnography theorizes culture as dramatological spaces that “resist and displace” the key concepts of a positivist social science like “system,” “distance,” “objectivity,” and “neutral observer” (Conquergood 83).

Performance theory then rephrases the question that underlies this study: how can preparing for the SAT exam, writing the SAT essay, and inventing an SAT persona be understood as theatrical performance? Or put slightly differently, what more can we learn about the cultural practices that define the SAT exam when we understand them as theatrical performances? In the following sections, I build upon three concepts from performance ethnography that I argue have compelling parallels with the Winnicottian methodological lens which forms the basis of this study:

1) Poetics emphasizes the creative, constructed aspects of culture which invites the researcher to “unmask” cultures to understand the tensions and ambiguities which keep them “open and in a continuous state of productive tension” (Conquergood 83)
2) *Restored behavior* emphasizes the iterative nature of ritualized cultural performances which once restored take on a “me but not-me” ontological status and invite reflection and the possibility for social change (Schechner, Taylor); and

3) *The apparent mutability of the repertoire versus the apparent fixed and authoritative nature of the archive* (Taylor).

**Poetics**

Poetics alludes to the creative elements of cultures, as performance ethnographer Dwight Conquergood notes, emphasizing “the fabricated, invented, imagined constructed nature of human realities” (83). Although Conquergood understands that the ethnographic situation is inexorably embedded in situations of power and authority (84), an emphasis on those aspects of culture which overtly recognizes poetics helps draw attention to the fact that, “Cultures and selves are not given, they are made; like fictions, they are ‘made up’” (83). Performance ethnographers are particularly attracted to the study of cultural fabrications such as rituals, fictions and games because they help to reveal the “ambiguities and the artifices” of everyday performances and emphasize the “re-imagined” and re-invented nature of everyday performances (83).

The SAT can be recognized as an occasion for the poetic when it is understood as a significant coming of age ritual that brings a student’s identity both past and present into high relief. A student’s score on the SAT invites child, parents, teachers and college administrators to “re-imagine” the child, to “re-fashion” his or her identity as they interpret scores in concert with their understanding of the cultural meanings of testing and schooling, the child’s history as a student and their desires for the child’s future.
Furthermore, the scores invite parents, teachers and child to narrate an identity as a function of a hierarchical comparison as they interpret and evaluate one child’s performance in relation to other student’s scores, histories and futures. And although the child as a psycho-cultural human subject can project little more than a relational identity onto the objective elements of the SAT, the written essay requires the test taker to invent, “re-imagine,” and to “re-fashion” a self on paper. Because of the heightened cultural importance of this coming of age ritual, the SAT essay provides the opportunity for poetics which Conquergood claims can help reveal the “ambiguities” and “artifices” which surround our cultural understandings of what it means be a “good writer” on the SAT.

Conquergood’s conception of poetics as “humankind’s” capacity to creatively construct culture is most closely aligned with Winnicott’s notion of playing. While Conquergood’s concern for the creative capacity of culture is a response to the tendency of structuralist analysis to reify the status quo, Winnicott’s commitment to playing is a response to ideological systems that denied individuals the capacity to be active participants in culture producing activities which he understood as the joy of living creatively. Although Conquergood, too, employs the concept of playing as essential to performative ethnography, his concept of play stands in opposition to the “real” unlike Winnicott’s.

**Restored Behavior**

I'll have grounds
More relative than this—the play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.

--Shakespeare
Much like Hamlet who noted the capacity of the play to engage the conscience of his audience, the King, the performance ethnographer conceives of play as an opportunity to frame cultural performances in a space separate from the real. In the spaces of play, Conquergood notes, cultural performances can be reflected upon, re-scored, and allow the ethnographer to engage in “improvisation, innovation, experimentation, frame, reflection, agitation, irony, parody, jest, clowning and carnival” (83). Richard Schechner uses the term “restoration of behavior” to recommend this capacity of play to move performances outside of the real where they can exist in a space “separate from those who ‘do’ these behaviors” (36). Conquergood’s concept of play and Schechner’s restoration of behavior draw attention to the materiality or thingness of performance scripts and so too to the everyday behaviors that have their origins in ritualized cultural behavior. The restoration of behavior for Schechner, whether the script for a play or the conventions of cultural ritual, can be framed by the ethnographer so that they have an existence separate from those who “do” the behaviors in the same way an actor exists separately from the script he or she performs. Metaphorically, Schechner argues “restored behavior” can be understood as “a strip of film” (35) that the film editor can analyze, rearranged or reconstruct. The concept of twice behaved behavior is central to Schechner’s conception of culture as performance and the human capacity for understanding, reflexivity and cultural transformation. In a similar way, Conquergood notes that “The metacommunicative signal ‘this is play’ temporarily releases, but does not disconnect, us from workaday realities and responsibilities and opens up a privileged space for sheer construction and deconstruction” (83). Nevertheless, as Hamlet notes, the play and the real are never truly separate. Object relations theorist Marion Milner reminds
us of this in her assessment of how the self is changed through play, through the individual’s open engagement with the other. So too, both performance theorists, Conquergood and Schechner, argue that performance as play and performance as ritualized cultural behavior are never truly disconnected.

This close alignment between play as performance and play as ritualized cultural behavior can be read in Schechner’s description of performers learning the script of to a play. I believe this passage can be read just as informatively as a description of a student receiving direct instruction in any writing skill such as the five paragraph essay. Schechner’s analysis of this “restored behavior” suggests a range of relationships a student may have with the conventions being passed down by a teacher:

Because the behavior is separate from those who are behaving, the behavior can be stored, transmitted, manipulated, transformed. The performers get in touch with, recover, remember, or even invent these scripts of behavior and then rebehave according to these scripts, either by being absorbed into them (playing the role, going into trance) or by existing side by side with them (Brecht’s Verfrerndugnseffekt). The work of restoration is carried on in rehearsals and/or in the transmission of behavior from master to novice. Understanding what happens during training, rehearsals, and workshops—investigating the subjunctive mood that is the medium of these operations—is the surest way to link aesthetic and ritual performance. (36)

Schechner’s description of a restored behavior provides a methodological lens for exploring the child’s process of learning a schooled behavior. While the evidence based scientific researcher turns to the written text to validate the transmission of the behavior, Schechner turns to the metaphors of dramaturgy and questions the nature of the child’s

27 Brecht coined the term Verfrerndugnseffekt to identify an approach to theater which worked to alienate or distance the audience from identification with an actor. Verfrerndugnseffekt distances the audience and the actor from the script through devices such as direct addressing of the audience or drawing attention to the play itself as a work of fiction. Such devices prevented the audience from losing themselves emotionally in the play and invite critical and intellectual response from the audience (Brecht qtd. in Willett (1957) 91-99). In a similar way, participants described a range of relationship to the scripts for formal essay writing they learned in school, some absorbing the rules and others working with them from a critical distance.
relationship to externally imposed behaviors. He asks, “What happens during training, rehearsals, and workshops—investigated in the subjunctive mood?” When the behavior is twice behaved, does the child absorb the script by going into a trance, does she play a role or does she exist side by side with the script and integrate it into a larger repertoire of performances? And who in this transaction, teacher, student, ethnographer is invited to use the subjunctive mood and wonder “what if” we were to rescore this script to considered alternative lines and motivations? How then might we understand this performance differently?

My research protocol invited participants both to composed and to enacted Schechner’s “performance script” as they collectively imagined the SAT writers over the course of preparing for and taking their SATs. Much as the director of a play directs a performance, participants re-scored the lives of people like them using their knowledge of local culture and the wider academic world. As Schechner notes, the original sources of the script, whether cultural or psychological, “may be lost, ignored, or contradicted” (35) somewhere in their pasts histories as students, sons and daughters, and writers; nevertheless as the imaginary SAT writers took on lives of their own separate from my participants, the source of origin no longer mattered. Understood as restored behavior, the imaginary writers provided opportunities for participants to embody, enact and try on another’s life like a mask or a costume. Much as psychoanalyst Milner understood the child’s need to forget the discriminating ego in order to play and discover a self, Schechner notes that twice behaved behavior is experienced as “‘me in another state of feeling/being,’ as if there were multiple ‘me’s’ in each person” (37). Schechner’s twice
behaved behavior intimates Milner's understanding that creativity requires a momentary forgetting of the self in the merger of a sentient, agentive self with cultural tradition.

The imagined SAT personae, understood as play or restored behavior, provided participants with a transitional space, a space that was neither interior psychological space nor the exterior world of mandatory schooling and testing. The personae as "restored behavior" as "out there," and "distant from me," provided participants with a way to en_act, to re-score and potentially to better understand the everyday conventions and the compulsions and desires that guided their writing of their SAT essays (Schechner 36).

**The Repertoire Versus the Archive**

The final, and arguably, most essential element of both performance ethnography and Winnicott's object relations theory is a commitment to understanding that knowledge is always limited, imperfect, and temporary. By turning to performance as a way to understand and communicate cultural knowledge, performance theory acknowledges that what one can know about another is always mediated through embodied experience. For example, critical ethnographer Tara Goldstein turned her research of multilingual high schools into a fictional, although ethnographically researched, play. Goldstein uses the play in her work as a teacher educator to provoke conversation among actors and audience about what it means to represent others and to explore the ways identities are made. Goldstein uses playwriting as a way to radically oppose realist ethnography's colonization of others' identities or what she calls the construction of the destructive ideas of other people (295). The idea of a performance as a temporary, embodied experience, always available for re-scripting, re-scoring and re-staging, opens up
possibilities for understanding rather than fixing knowledge in a written text divorced from the context and processes that created it.

Performance ethnographer Diana Taylor elaborates on the epistemologies that inform performance theories noting that Western epistemologies have long relied on the written word to archive and to transfer knowledge across contexts and time, much like our current educational data warehouses store static knowledge of our students. Those who determine what student writing will be produced and commodified create a people’s “archival” memory which comes to represent those elements of culture most resistant to change (10). Taylor points out several myths about the archive including the notion that the archive is unmediated and that the knowledge contained there has an abstract meaning outside of the archival process that placed in there. A second myth is that the archive is resistant to “change, corruptibility or political manipulation” (10). Taylor argues that these myths of the archive undergird normative theories of social behavior and produce social theories that belittle human agency and attribute human behavior to reified social norms.

The radical move of performance theory is to turn away from the archive as primary source and as warehouse of cultural knowledge and turn to what Turner calls the “repertoire” or embodied social knowledge. Unlike the archive, the repertoire requires the presence of people who “participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there’” (15). And unlike the archive, human performances, the routines and rituals that make up the repertoire, are never the entirely the same. This mutability of embodied knowing is particularly important for performance theorists because as always embodied and always in flux, performance resists normalization and commodification.
Peggy Phelan argues that because performance only exists in the present, “[P]erformance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does it becomes something other than performance” (165). Joseph Roach endows performance with more continuity than Phelan by extending the concept of performance into history and memory. Roach excavates “genealogies of performance” to document the transmission of cultural practices like ritual burials and dances on both sides of the Atlantic to understand how cultures are transferred, recreated, and transformed (25). Central to Roach’s understanding of performance and memory is the notion of the “kinesthetic imagination” which includes both the embodied memory of the individual and the shared embodied gestures and performances of the community. Whether performances exist only in the present as Phelan theorizes or endure through the kinesthetic imagination as Roach theorizes, or both, performance theory resists understanding knowledge as a commodity that is reducible to “variables that can be measured, manipulated, and managed” (Conquergood 83). Quite simply, performance theory opposes the very worldview that drives standardized testing as the springboard for providing a fair and just education.

Like performance theorists, Winnicott locates knowing in an embodied, sentient individual who is always and already culturally embedded. Knowing is synonymous with active, embodied playing for Winnicott because it is in playing that the child relates to and collaborates with an increasing more complex and differentiated world. From Winnicott’s perspective, abstract knowledge and power are potentially dangerous to the child because they prevent the possibility for reciprocity and mutual recognition between the child and the external world. An important example of Winnicott’s view of
knowledge and power arises in his discussion of the role of interpretation in the analytic setting. Winnicott draws an analogy between the child’s caretaker and the analyst who must like the “good enough” mother “be an attentive but unimpinging” other who provides the child opportunities for self-discovery. Playing in the analytic setting ends, Winnicott warns, when the analyst provides an interpretation to the child that “is not of a piece to the [child’s] material” (Phillips 142). Interpretations that are coerced upon the child are a form of indoctrination and result in the child’s performance of a compliant false self, a self who conforms to an image provided by a more powerful other. It is in this vein that Winnicott argues that ontology must precede epistemology; relating must precede knowing.

The data generated by this study and my presentation of it should be understood as playful performances. I engaged in a research technique that is not replicable because it assumes that the interaction of participant, researcher, methodology, context and history are playful, generative and not reproducible. While a reader should assume no one-to-one correspondence between the responses generated by this study with the details of the participants’ lived experience, the fictions—including those of the invented personae of SAT writers and those narrated by my participants as they interpreted their own experience—provide moments for what ethnographer Norman Denzin calls a form of kinesis: understanding performance as a way of “decentering agency and person through movement, disruption, action, a way of questioning the status quo” (10). In short, my motivation to engage in performance theory is not to reify abstract knowledge about learning to write for a standardized test but to open up our common sense assumptions about standard administration and fairness of a high stakes writing test.
What can I learn from my participants' engagement with SAT performances that I could not have learned through an inspection of their SAT essays alone?

The Research Design

Participant Selection: A Limited Community Nomination Process

My original intention was to select participants through a process of community nomination (Ladson-Billings) whereby I would turn to the young people in Yankee City to identify who they believed to be the "writers" in the junior class. In this way, I would privilege the ways Yankee City's young people identify good writers over their teachers who by the nature of their work adhere in some fashion to normalized conceptions of proficient academic writing. Yankee City provides a variety of public venues for young writers whether it is the yearly poetry contest whose winning entries are posted in the window of a downtown bookshop, the regular spots as editorialists that our high school students secure in two local newspapers, or the monthly meetings of poetry clubs, one sponsored by the high school and the other through the local artists' association. I intended to make connections with young writers through these venues and to ask them to nominate friends who they felt self-identified as writers and would be interested in my project. My expectation was that participants selected in this manner would provide a pool of writers quite different from those nominated by their high school teachers. It was significant to me that Janet Emig regretted her reliance on high school English chairpersons in selecting students for her study of the composing processes of twelfth graders (29). The limitation, I feared, was that teacher nominated participants would be more prone to mimic the values of their English teachers rather to show evidence that
their values toward writing had been more consciously earned through dialogue with or in contrast to those values espoused by the high school writing curriculum.

I first understood the value of community selection process in the work of Ladson-Billings who turned to the standards of the local community to recruit successful teachers rather than their institutional sponsors, school administrators. In her work to identify successful teachers of African American students, Ladson-Billings’ intent was to select teachers who could see beyond the conventional expectations of schooling: “getting good grades, scoring well on standardized tests, graduating from high school…” (The Dreamkeepers 147). Ladson-Billings turned to parents to nominate teachers they felt were most effective because, Ladson-Billings argued, parents’ concerns would reflect the values of the community and their children’s need to identify positively with that community (147). Although Ladson-Billings’ research in urban schools encounters power differentials far greater than those found in Yankee City, recognizing power differentials within Yankee City and the ways some of its more successful young students take on, resist or transform official school performances was similarly important to my study. Subsequently, I hoped to recruit young writers who self-identified as writers and were known to their peers as writers, whether they performed hip hop at the Elks Club, read their cinquains at poetry club or argued their opinions in the local paper. Like Ladson Billings and Emig, I was concerned about recruiting my participants through their high school, the very institution whose work it is to evaluate, sort and label their identities as academic writers.

The IRB, however, could not support my making initial contact with minors. Subsequently, I needed to find an alternative way to recruit participants while
maintaining my commitment to avoid nomination via their high school English teachers. To that end, I wrote an advertisement calling for young writers to participate in a study of the SAT writing test (Appendix A). The ad described the study as occurring in three two hour sessions over the winter and spring of their junior years in high school and promised a payment of $75. I placed a call to the high school creative writing teacher and sponsor of the high school poetry club, Mrs. D, and together we discussed the broad range of students who become engaged in her creative writing class and poetry club. Through our discussion, I learned that creative writing was an elective, and, from Mrs. D’s perspective, success in creative writing did always correlate with success in the required English literature courses that valued writing about literature in thesis driven academic essays. I gave Mrs. D the advertisement to pass on to the juniors who were taking or who had taken her creative writing classes.

Within two weeks I heard from approximately a dozen students who were interested in participating in the study. As part of my research design, I asked the girls and boys who made these initial calls if they would recruit one or two friends they considered fellow writers to participate in the study with them because my research design relied upon small friendship focus groups. My expectation was that friendship groups working collaboratively would engage in decidedly different conversation about writing than one-on-one interviews between a young writer and a university researcher.

Despite the dozen or more phone calls I received, only four of the original callers ultimately followed through and scheduled appointments with me. As my descriptions of participants will show, the need to recruit a friend and schedule an appointment during the busy months of their junior year worked to sort out the type of students who
ultimately participated in the study. In the end, I recruited three friendship groups, one group of three boys and two groups of two girls. The gender homogeneity of the groupings was largely coincidental. Originally one of the girls had been recruited by the boys. When Carol’s schedule proved to be incompatible with the boys, she recruited a girlfriend to take part in the study with her. Subsequently, all three groups were single gender.

**Generating and Collecting Five Data Sets**

While the collective, imaginary characters generated by my seven participants provided the central data set for this study, my participants engaged in five separate activities over three or four meetings between the spring of their junior year and the fall of their senior year in high school. During this same time span, all seven participants took the SAT Reasoning Test and were deeply involved in preparing for the start of their lives outside of Yankee City by making numerous trips to college campuses and finally applying to them. In this section I expand more fully upon the research activities that transpired over this period of my participants’ lives. These data generating activities included:

1. The construction and oral presentation of a writing history with self-selected friends and the researcher as audience;

2. The collective, imagining of the writers of an SAT prompt and two exemplar SAT essays; and

3. Two semi-structured one-on-one interviews:
   i. In the first interview, participants were invited to reflect upon their imaginary characters as “restored behaviors.” Through
these one-on-one conversations, participants were asked to try on these characters again in order to refute, elaborate upon or make connections to their imaginary characters and to more fully articulate developing themes, ambiguities and contractions underlying their performances of good SAT writers.

ii. In the second interview, I posed the same questions to participants about the discoursal authors of the self-selected writing and their own SAT essays as I had posed previously about the exemplar SAT essays.

These research techniques generated five different kinds of data sets: 1) narrated writing histories, 2) the projective data from participants’ collective imaginings about the identities of good SAT writers, 3) participants’ reflective assessment of the projective data, understood as “twice behaved behavior,” 4) participants’ assessment of the writer they projected in their self-selected writing and in their SAT writing and 5) four written texts from each participant including three pieces they feel best represent themselves as writers and their SAT essays.

**Improvising a Writing Timeline: Generating Memories of Writing**

I always told myself stories. Like if we were driving in the car, I wasn’t myself, I was someone else, you know. I just liked to fill other people’s roles and then I would write those down. I remember loving being someone else, creating characters where they lived, what they did, but I didn’t know what do to with them once I introduced them in the story, so I kind of just stopped because I didn’t want anything bad to happen to them. I knew that you can’t always have a happy ending so I would just stop. That’s still something I have trouble with. Endings can’t always be happy.

--Eliza, Writing History Time Line
In third grade, we had to write in a journal every day. I hated it. I never had anything to say. I had Miss M, she’s like my favorite teacher ever, and she’s so nice but I guess what’s an overall theme here is I don’t like writing when it’s too loose. I can’t just sit down and write about something. I have never had anything that I thought was important enough to write about as a child or even now. Even in first grade, we had this assignment, we had to draw a picture and write just one sentence. I never felt like I did anything good enough to write about. I don’t know. I just never felt like I had anything important to say. Other people led more interesting lives than I did.

--Kay, Writing History Time Line

For several decades, literacy narratives have been a featured assignment in many first year composition programs, helping students to forge a path from the high school writers they once were to the reflective literate citizens we want them to become.

Stephanie Paterson points out that the rationale behind the literacy narrative assignment is to “reflect both consciously and maybe unconsciously [the] emotional, intellectual and social benefits that are accrued through literate practices” (Embodied Narratives 3). Paterson notes the important learning teachers can also glean from their students’ literacy narratives because they serve as opportunities to understand their students’ perceptions of their struggles with writing and the social contexts in which writing occurs. Literacy researchers like Carpenter and Falbo have also turned to student literacy narratives, understood as “complex cultural artifacts” (92), to answer questions about how college students identify themselves as writers, how these identities change over time and how their student participants account for these changes (93).

Like Paterson, Carpenter and Falbo, I believed that access to my participants’ perceptions of their histories as writers would lead to a richer understanding of their engagements with standardized writing tests. Nevertheless, I had concerns about the data generated by the literacy narrative and literacy history interviews such as the interview
protocol used by Deborah Brandt in generating her case studies for *Literacies in American Lives*. My primary concern was the impact of context and audience on my participants' selection of the writing selves they would perform when their primary audience was me, a teacher/researcher. My hope was that producing and performing their writing histories amongst a group of friends would provide us all with access to a broader range of writing selves than if their performances were solely aimed at me. After all, this particular group of young people had already proven themselves to be tremendously successful at pleasing their teachers. Subsequently, to discourage these teacher/researcher pleasing performances and to engage students in conversations about their literacy histories that were open ended and more amenable recognizing contradiction and ambiguity than written narratives might invite, I borrowed a technique from art therapy called "the symbolic graphic life-line" (Martin 261).

For our first activity together, I asked participants in friendship groups of two or three to construct a time line of their histories as writers. I gave each participant a large trifold board and colored markers and asked them to think back as far as they could remember, back to their toddler years and then to dream into their futures. Pointing to a facsimile of their trifold boards, I asked participants to draw a horizontal line across the middle of their boards. On this horizontal axis, denoting time, I asked them to think back over the history of their lives and remember moments, people or projects related to their writing. On the vertical axis, above and below the time line, I asked participants to associate each of these memories with a positive and/or negative emotion and to note through words or images their positive memories above the time line and the negative
below. Importantly, I encouraged my participants to talk with their friends while working and to feel free to borrow ideas from one another.

All seven participants engaged actively with the exercise. The friendships within all three groups dated back to their preschool or early elementary school days so participants were helpful in reminding their friends of events in their pasts. For example, when Luke pondered aloud, “I wonder when I first started to write creatively, just on my own?” the boys answered questions about their friends’ past.

STEVE: I made comics. Lots and lots.
LUKE: Oh yeah, I remember that.
NICK: Yeah, yeah, Super Monkey. Remember Super Monkey?
STEVE: Yeah. (Speaking to me) They were about a talking monkey named Super Monkey so that was about the extent of my creative writing for a while. I’ll write that down.
NICK: (laughing) A lot of time he was writing them in school.
STEVE: I’d usually write them in school.
NICK: Sometimes when we were supposed to be doing other stuff.
STEVE: Yeah, sometimes when we were supposed to be doing other stuff, sometimes during recess, sometimes even at home. They would always be around so I’d always be showing them to people and I was really proud of myself, though I don’t think that I finished more than two comics. But there were a lot of unfinished ones kicking around up there.

For all three friendship groups, the writing history time line was, in part, a collaborative project as participants bantered back and forth, sharing conflicting opinions about a particular assignment or helping a friend draw out memories of experiences they were merely spectator to. The video tapes of these first activities revealed sustained moments
when individual participants withdrew from the group as they quietly engaged their memories, only to be jogged back into the conversation when a friend’s reminisces caught them up in a new memory.

Participants spent about thirty minutes on their time lines. Upon completion, I asked each participant, “Looking at your timeline, walk us through the most memorable experiences, people and places in your writing history.” Participants took turns using their trifold board as a road map to narrate their histories to us. I invited peers to stop the presenters if they wanted to ask questions or if they could share more information on an experience being addressed. Upon completion of their individual presentations, I asked each participant, “What can you tell us about the experiences that you have place above/below the line?” The three friendship groups spent between one hour twenty minutes and two hours fifteen minutes on the construction and presentation of time lines.

Although the writing history timelines did not provide the core data from which the findings for this study were drawn, the exercise was invaluable. First, it allowed me to establish rapport with my participants in a rather open ended activity over which they maintained a large degree of control. Although I designed the activity, my interactions were largely limited to requests for elaboration. It was my participants’ collective and individual work that determined the content and the direction of the conversation. Second, the presentation of these writing histories revealed that each of my participants identified recurring themes and unresolved conflicts playing out through their writing histories. There was some degree of thematic coherence in participants’ writing histories that they elaborated upon over our multiple sessions together. For example in the epithet above, Eliza ruminates over her lifelong love of imaging she is various fictional
characters and her problem with difficult endings. Later Eliza would share a personal breakthrough in which she was able to find a resolution to short story she has struggled to write. Her protagonist, a woman much like her own mother, learns to contend with the dissolution of her marriage. In other conversations, Eliza spoke about her difficulty learning to write essays for her AP history class, explaining that she had to prevent herself from fabricating the lives of historic figures and confine her writing to the more abstract intellectual material found in the primary sources her teacher made available.

While the scope of this project does not permit me to report findings from the timelines themselves, they provided an important set of explanatory data that both my participants and I returned to in order to better understand the genealogy of a theme in their evolving sense(s) of themselves as writers. A pointed example of this is Kay’s frequent mention of her insecurities about writing when she was asked to write about personal experience or when the guidelines for an assignment were “too loose.” Although Kay was a top student in her AP history and English classes, these more “personal” and “creative” assignments sent her into paralysis. A request for a personal essay by her English teacher resulted in Kay’s writing a single paragraph about a jigsaw puzzle in her closet. Later when Kay described her image of the writer of her own history essay, she noted, “She doesn’t have any ideas of her own.”

The open ended nature of the writing history timelines allowed me see how wonderfully and substantially different my seven participants were from one another. Despite sharing the same classrooms and curriculum for most of their school years, despite growing up in the same middle class, white neighborhood, and despite friendships
some trace back to their preschool years, each participant carried his or her own hopes, desires, and anxieties to their understanding of themselves as writers.

**Collective Imagining of Writers and the Semi-structured Interviews**

After completing the writing history time lines, I introduced participants to the activity of imagining the writers. For the imagine the SAT prompt writer activity, I gave each participant a copy of the SAT essay instructions and a sample prompt. I asked participants to read the document aloud and then to work together create an image of the prompt writer using the materials lying before them on the conference table. These materials included white poster board, multiple colors of tissue paper, colored markers, scissors and glue. I told participants that I hoped they would be playful and have fun with the activity, and that I was most interested in their conversations. All group activities were video recorded.

All three groups readily engaged in the activity, albeit differently. I occasionally interjected into their discussions if I believed that my asking for elaboration or clarification would facilitate my understanding of their speech or when they mentioned referents I was not familiar with. When it was clear that a friendship group was finished with the task, I turned to a set of guiding questions that I used throughout the research process:

- Is there anything more you can tell me about this writer?
- What characteristics would you attribute to this writer?
- How/where do you see this in the writing?
- Describe the reader you feel this writer was writing to?

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28 This document was created using the SAT essay instructions from the College Board website and a sample prompt from ScoreWrite.
• What sort of impression about him or herself do you feel this writer was trying to convey to the reader? Why?

• Now that you have imaged this writer, what do you think was going on inside his or her head while composing this prompt/essay?

I followed this same process for the collective imaging of the high scoring SAT writer. For this activity, I chose two exemplar SAT essays from a College Board publication, *ScoreWrite: A Guide to Preparing for the SAT Essay*, a manual produced to “train teachers to score essays holistically using the SAT Scoring Guide” (1). Notably, all examples of the highest scoring “6” essay are written in a third person, academic voice and rely upon historical and literary evidence to support their claims. The gender of the writers in all three essays is ambiguous. Once again, I used the guiding questions to direct discussion after groups completed their representation of an imaginary SAT writer.

The guiding questions were repeated throughout the project regarding seven different texts. During one-on-one interviews, I asked participants to reflect on these questions as they considered their own writing, beginning with the three pieces of writing they felt best represented who they were as writers and finally as they considered the essays they wrote on their first and/or second sitting of the SAT.

In sum, the data for this project consisted of the construction and oral presentation of writing histories by all seven participants, the collaborative imagining of the writer the SAT prompt writer by the friendship groups, the collective imagining of two writers of high scoring SAT essays by the friendship groups and two one-on-one interviews with each of the seven participants. I personally transcribed the audio and videotapes which 29 The total essay score is the combination of two readers scores making the essay scores range from a low of 0 to a high of 12.
comprised about six hundred pages of text. Written data included three pieces of writing selected by each of the participants as writing they felt most represented who they were as writers. These twenty-one pieces include a few one page poems, several research projects of ten to fifteen pages, three editorials written for the local daily newspaper, three short stories (including the genres romantic realism, parody of a vampire story, and high fantasy), two graded essays from AP history class, one English test essay, two personal narratives, a book review and sixty pages of the opening chapters of a novel. While I did not include an analysis of these texts in my findings, my participants' responses to guiding questions regarding these texts contributed to my understanding of the beliefs and feelings that lie below the writing performances participants valued. Finally, six of my seven participants provided ten different essays they had written for the SAT Reasoning test. These momentarily produced but permanently scored performances of my participants' writing provided important data. The SAT essays allowed participants to reflect upon the discrepancies between the intended and the actual discoursal identities in their essays and to consider the conditions that may have guided these self-presentations. Finally, an analysis of these ten SAT essays demonstrated the wide variation in the ways participants assumed the positions of "good writers" on the SAT.

Analysis of Data

As described earlier, data most central to this study were derived from observations and videotapes of my participants' performances as they collaboratively imagined SAT prompt and essay writers. I began analysis of these videotapes using an interpretive method inspired by Winnicott's notion of the capacity to play in cultural
space. Not only was I interested in the actual content of the writers my participants collectively imagined, that is their descriptions of the good writers of the SAT essays, but I was particularly interested in my participants' collective creation of the psycho-social spaces in which their SAT writers performed. These psycho-social spaces potentially included participants' projections of an infinite number of real and imagined others from the imagined writers of SAT essay, the imagined SAT scorers for whom their imagined SAT writers wrote, to their imagined writers' parents, teachers and friends. And not only did these psycho-social spaces potentially include an infinite number of selves, but, more importantly, they included an infinite number of relationships. To this end, I turned to Winnicott's key concepts, playing, defined as the capacity to engage reciprocally with external objects, and complying, defined as relinquishing one's own desires to the demands of others, to interpret the variation in my participants' psycho-social spaces of the SAT writing test. Specifically, as participants imagined their SAT writers, I looked at nature of the relationship between the imagined examinee and his or her relationship to my participants' imagined SAT prompt writers and scorers. A professional colleague provided a reliability check by independently reading the transcripts and interpreting the data through Winnicott's notions of playing and complying.

The validity of these interpretations was first confirmed, disconfirmed or elaborated upon through member checking. I emailed participants transcripts of their writing histories and their contributions to the collective imagining activities. All participants confirmed the transcripts as valid representations of their previous performances. Following the confirmation of transcripts, all one-on-one interviews
began by returning to portions of the transcripts that my participants or I found particularly surprising, revealing or discrepant. By inviting my participants to reconsider their previous performances—Schechner’s “restored behavior”—my participants re-experienced their imagined writers as something “out there” and “distinct from me.” As participants reconsidered their previous performances, they often made the claim, “But that is me too” or “She reminds me of someone I know.” As participants drew out these connections between their imagined “good writers” and themselves or others they knew, they began to identify and address their feelings and beliefs about being a good writer on the SAT and more particularly, their feelings and beliefs toward compliance that often undergirded these imaginative performances. Finally, because my findings revealed a substantial interaction between my participants’ gender and their performances of the good SAT writer, and because the strength of this finding across my seven participants was not anticipated, I returned to the available scholarship on gender, writing and highly successful students. Although findings from my seven participants is not generalizable to a broader population, the variation across genders in my findings was cause for me to reconsider previous assumptions about gendered performances in writing and the gender constraints placed on high achieving girls and boys in their interactions with curriculum and testing.

The Research Setting

My participants and I met in their friendship groups on Sunday afternoons in a business office in downtown Yankee City, an old brick home long ago converted to commercial and retail use. For most of my participants, our meeting place was just a few
blocks from their homes, and they often arrived with a bagel or coffee in hand from a shop around the corner. On Sundays, the office sat empty and its upstairs conference room gave us a large open work space to occupy. I had no previous acquaintance with five of my participants and so we spent our first moments together sitting in a first floor reception area chatting and waiting for their partners to arrive. The other two participants I knew only superficially because they lived in close proximity to my home. Once the groups assembled and consent forms had been explained, signed and collected, we climbed the stairs to the second floor conference room where they found the large conference table filled with poster board, tissue paper, markers, glue sticks and scissors. My participants arrived generally knowing that my research concerned their thoughts about the SAT writing test, and here I was ushering them into a room to perform a number of activities that were anything but the "naturally occurring" literacy events of their everyday lives. No ballpoint pens and lined paper here; only materials for composing large visual representations on poster boards.

Later, as I listen to video clips of these first sessions, I was surprised to hear the authoritative teacher in my voice as I described the activities I wanted them to embark upon. "Here is what I want you to do," I said, as I describe how I would like them to work through their writing histories. Or, "Now let's take a five minute break and then I'm going to ask you to ...." My participants responded to me differently. Kay, for example, frequently checked me out of the corner of her eye and seemed to me to be asking, "Are you watching me? Are you judging me?" In contrast, Luke spoke forthrightly, his voice taking up the space in the room confidently. On one occasion, he looked at his watch and told his group, "Gotta go in five minutes. Got things to do." Understanding the dynamics
of the events that took place in this room, how each of participants and I positioned ourselves in relation to one another and to the tasks I orchestrated, would become an important variable in my understanding the variations in their responses.

**Validity Considerations**

Triangulation is a procedure used to evaluate the credibility of a qualitative researcher’s inferences, most often by employing different types of data, different types of methods, or considering one’s inferences in light of a larger body of research on the topic. Triangulation requires the investigator to consider her inferences from a variety of standpoints.

The most powerful form of triangulation used in this study was achieved through the use of mixed methods. The collaborative imagining of various persona based upon the reading of SAT materials as I have argued earlier did not provide data with any particular “truth” value: that is, the data generated did not purport to specifically reflect any singular and specific participant’s life experience or even attitude or perception about an experience. As I argue above, these collective imaginings blur the boundary between what belongs to the culture and what belongs to the self. Nevertheless, what these collective imaginings provided was a data set that became the object of attention for both participants and researcher, to verify or to contest based on other research methods employed. The writing histories, the open ended interviews during which participants reconsidered their imagined writers and the exploration of their own writing were all opportunities to reconsider the credibility of the inferences drawn from collective imagining. Triangulation of methods was achieved when the themes that arose through
the writing histories, the one-on-one interviews, and writing samples confirmed participants' imaginative descriptions of SAT prompt writers and good SAT writers.

Because information from this study was generated from a small number of participants residing within the same community, my findings are context dependent and, therefore, not intended to be generalizable. Nevertheless, conclusions drawn from this study should provide opportunities for what Patton (1997) calls extrapolations, or "modest speculations on the likely applicability of findings to other situations under similar, but not identical, conditions" (289). While generalizability must rely on statistical probability, Patton explains that extrapolations "are logical, thoughtful, and problem-oriented" (p.289). In this way, my participants provide in depth cases for the interested reader to imagine what it might be like to be a high achieving, middle class youth writing learning to write in the twenty-first century.
CHAPTER V

EXCURSIONS IN POTENTIAL SPACE:

IMAGINING THE PSYCHO-SOCIAL SPACE OF THE SAT

Writing Test

Introduction

LUKE: He probably has to crank out dozens of these things a day, and he probably gets pretty sick of it. He probably just wants to play his guitar and...

STEVE: Maybe he should have a guitar. Let's make a guitar.

* * *

KAY: How can they determine if it's your original work in a twenty-five minute essay? They don’t even know who you are, so they’re like, oops, this doesn’t sound like you. But you’re like, you don’t even know me, so how can you even say that it doesn’t sound like me?

These two short excerpts point to the qualitative differences that ran throughout the conversations of my male and female friendship groups as participants collectively imagined the SAT prompt writer and two high scoring essay writers. Luke, Steve and their partner Nick imagined a prompt writer who was a confused bureaucrat. Interested in literature and music, their bureaucrat found himself stuck in a stifling job that conflicted with his personal tastes and values. In contrast, Kay and her partner Carol imagined a prompt writer who was a judgmental authoritarian. As Kay notes, he went so far as to mandate how the girls should “sound” despite his insufficient knowledge of them. There
are striking differences in these two images, especially given that these four young people grew up in the same neighborhoods, received the same instruction since their elementary grades, and even sat side by side in many of their high school honors and AP classes. Yet, these character sketches, the confused bureaucrat and the judgmental authoritarian, point to the extraordinary differences in the spaces my participants described as they imagined the SAT writing test as a space—not the neutral space of scientific measurement—but a psycho-social space peopled by an array of various examiners and examinees. In this chapter I explore these differences.

Earlier I claimed that the unit of analysis for this study, the “good writer,” is an invention, an analytic construct I use to make visible the variable cultural performances student test takers engage in when they write for the SAT. Student writers, I have argued, perform iterations of the “good writer” when their internal anxieties and desires engage with the external discourses and images that circulate around notions of good academic writing, test taking, and the expectations of others. Borrowing from the object relations theory of D. W. Winnicott, I have argued that my participants’ performances of imaginary writers function as transitional objects in a psycho-social third space, an in-between space “that is in fact neither a matter of inner psychic reality nor a matter of external reality” (italics are Winnicott’s) (Playing and Reality 96). That is to say, there is no interiority/exteriority about performing in this psycho-social space that would enable an observer to determine what belongs to the participant and what belongs to his or her culture (100). Finally, I have claimed that the transcripts of my participants’ performances of these imaginary writers provide durable artifacts that allowed us (and my reader) to re-perform, interrogate and reflect upon the beliefs, values and attitudes
toward compliance they experienced when they engaged in their collective imaginings of SAT prompt and essay writers.

In keeping with post-structural notions of the self as multiple and fluid, I do not argue that my participants identified with the gendered stereotypes that dominate much of my data. Rather, I argue that when my participants engaged in my research activities, they variously “took up” the discourses of school achievement and gender that “positioned” them (Davies and Harre) in relation to their imagined SAT prompt writer and essay writers. My participants’ gendered performances did not reflect a natural gendered identity. Rather, their performances reflected their conscious and unconscious selection of appropriate cultural discourse as they performed these activities, perhaps for me, for one another, for themselves, or, perhaps, for an internalized critical other who monitored their imaginative processes (see Walkerdine).

Although problematic in their tendency to polarize gendered behavior, the terms “boy” and “girl” proved to be necessary in order for me to describe and to think about the differences that arose across my seven participants’ performances, differences that at times were almost caricatures in their polarizing of gender stereotypes. And yet because the categories “boy” and “girl” were so important in describing and understanding these differences, the terms “boy” and “girl” need to be continually problematized. As the differences in my participants’ imagined prompt writers suggest, dichotomies like active/passive, peer/authority, intellectual/student dominated my data. To this end, I situate these findings in the feminist, post-structural scholarship that locates gendered differences in the range of performances made available to students through the structural forces of family, class and schooling, and the currently powerful discourses of student
accountability and standardized testing. The collective processes of imagining these characters that people the SAT provided participants agency, however limited, as they chose one set of discourses over another. At the same time, however, the conflicts between the available discourses (e.g. discourses of the high status masculine/feminine teenager often conflicted with the discourses of the highly successful student) left participants ambivalently positioned and, at times, contradictorily positioned. Rather than use the data from this study to normalize my participants’ performances, my work with my participants allowed me to understand how they experienced living within these tensions and the consequences of their choices on their understanding of their own subjectivities as writers and scholars. As I analyzed the very different responses to the SAT materials performed by these boys and girls, I was careful to remember that when I attribute a participant’s response to a more or less powerful discoursal position, it is the web of institutionalized discourses that I critique and not the individual child (see Walkerdine, Baxter).

This chapter is divided into three sections: each section addresses the interrelated components of this research: 1) participants’ descriptions of the imagined SAT prompt writer, 2) their descriptions of the imagined high scoring SAT writers and 3) descriptions of the discoursal selves participants performed on their own SAT essays. Underlying each of these descriptions of the examiner, the examinees and participants’ SAT discoursal selves, lies the literacy histories as narrated by my participants, most notably the feelings and beliefs that emerged as they experienced success and failure, recognition and invisibility, confusion and mastery as developing young writers. In the following three sections, as I describe their imaginary prompt writers, their imaginary high scoring
SAT writers, and their own SAT discoursal selves, I turn to my participants’ narratives and to the scholarship on gender, schooling and writing to better understand the influence of a standardized writing tests on these young people’s sense of what it means to be a “good writer” in a time of high stakes testing.

**Part One**

The Imaginary SAT Prompt Writer: Accessing/Assessing The Constructs of Standard Administration and Situation

**Definition**

A first requirement of a psychometric test like the SAT is a condition called standard administration, which simply asserts that if all participants take the same test, under the same conditions, and time restraints, then the test is presumed fair (Zwick 98). While a psychometric test defines fairness as a condition of the test itself, a qualitative study considers the potential for variation in participant responses to the testing situation that is not amenable to measurement. Sociocultural theorist James Wertsch calls this variation in response the “situation definition” (Vygotsky 175). Drawing on the theoretical work of Vygotsky and Bakhtin, Wertsch argues that an activity cannot be defined by the parameters of the activity itself regardless of its standardization. To the contrary, he

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30 It can be argued that I am oversimplifying because the psychometric community certainly looks for differences across populations, particularly race and gender. The test for fairness, however, is a factor of a tests’ ability to predict future behaviors, which in the case of the SAT writing test is the test takers’ grade in first year of college. While SAT scores demonstrate some predictive validity, historically SAT scores have under predicted girls’ first year GPA while over predicting boys. Furthermore, the psychometric testing community has little interest in the qualitative differences across more subtle understanding of test takers that are not amenable to measurement such as the psycho-social differences I will describe in my findings. As Ortner notes, psychometric research tends to consider only the crudest notions of qualitative differences across groups like race and gender. Furthermore, researchers of a positivist slant are generally not interested in the ways that testing may interact with individual psycho-social beliefs and feelings and the broader culture of education. This is what Melnick calls consequential validity or what the ELL community calls the wash over effect. Often within the psychometric community, testing is viewed as a benign, value neutral instrument.
contends, activities must be understood as defined by the participants engaged in the activity. Different subjects, bringing their unique combination of experience to the testing activity, will construe the nature of the task differently.

My intention in asking participants to imagine the writer of an SAT prompt was to engage them in an activity that would provoke them to articulate a situation definition of the SAT writing test and their relationship to its authority. Bakhtin's concepts of the speech utterance and addressivity are particularly useful in explaining how an image of the prompt writer was provoked when each participant, bringing his or her own psycho-social history to the research context, engaged the SAT prompt. Bakhtin, whose predominate linguistic interest was exploring the functions of speech in social contexts, argued that meaning does not reside in the utterance—or the SAT prompt—but comes into existence when "two or more voices come in contact: when the voice of the listener responds to the voice of the speaker" (Wertsch, *Voices* 52). Bakhtin's understanding of the utterance, however, is not limited to the meaning that arises between two voices in the moment of encounter. Rather he argues that a speech utterance—or SAT prompt—exists within a network of past and future voices that have previously "articulated, disputed, elucidated and evaluated" this topic (*Speech Genres* 93). And in addition to all these voices, the utterance is shaped by the speaker's (or the writer's) conceptualizations of those he or she addresses. Bakhtin understood the addressee to be a constitutive element in speaking/writing and explained, "both the composition and, particularly, the style of the utterance depend on those to whom the utterance is addressed, how the speaker [or writer] senses and imagines his addressee, and the force of their effect on the utterance" (85).
Bakhtin's understanding of the speech utterance helps to elucidate Winnicott's engagement of subject with a speech object in psycho-social space. From this perspective, the SAT prompt understood as a Winnicottian object or a Bakhtinian speech utterance is not a static, neutral directive to the test taker. Rather, for each participant, the SAT prompt evoked traces of the innumerable voices in their pasts, of caring and critical teachers, of parents and friends, of history text books and English class novels to name but a few. Furthermore, the prompt carried traces of the selves participants perceived the prompt writer expected them to perform created not only from their reading but also from a history of their responses to the comments and gestures made by parents, teachers or friends about their writing. As my participants encountered the SAT prompt, they drew from these myriad voices as they performed these reciprocally and dialogically constituted subjectivities: the voice of the SAT prompt writer and the writer of the SAT essay, the addressee and addressee, the examiner and the examinee, the test maker and the test taker.

In the following two sections, I explore the performances of my boys' and girls' friendship groups as they collectively imagined the writer of the SAT prompt. As I analyzed the transcripts across the friendship groups, I split the data into three orientations that help to isolate differences across the groups. These include:

- The group's orientation to the prompt writer. Where did the group locate their prompt in cultural space and how what does this location reveal about their relationship to the prompt writer and his/her authority?
• The group’s orientation to the SAT prompt: What elements of the prompt did participants attend to as they imagined the prompt? How do these elements reflect what the group values or deems important about writing the SAT essay?
• The group’s orientation to group processing: How did the group collectively engage in the process of imaging the prompt writer? What do the group’s conversation patterns reveal about the group’s understanding of the nature of the activity, their relationship with one another, and the nature of the SAT essay test?

A single orientation never appeared in isolation in the groups’ conversations but always, it seemed, all at once. Isolating the orientations, however, was useful for comparing and analyzing differences across the friendship groups, and, more importantly, for suggesting the pedagogical implications the variations across gender responses indicate.

The Boys: “Maybe he’d just rather be playing his guitar.”

The SAT Prompt Writer as Peer

The boys exhibited authority over the research space almost immediately as they responded to my request that they read the SAT prompt aloud to one another. In his turn, each boy read the prompt in his very best “foreign” accent: Irish brogue, Cockney or just plain goofy. As I laughed along with the boys, I recognized they were simply responding to my own goofy request to give a public reading of an SAT prompt before their seventeen-year-old friends. I was entertained and so were they as their spontaneous reading turned this official document into satire. Nick was the first to speak when the boys’ multi-voiced reading concluded. Noting the prompts’ repetitive use of the imperative mood, he mocked it by calling: “You will...You will’ That’s taking liberty!” Nick’s comment on the presumptuousness of the prompt’s instructions was the only
moment the boys made a direct reference to the prompt's rules or instructions in the forty minutes they required to complete their image of the SAT prompt writer. From this moment onward, the boys attended only to the intellectual content of the prompt. This shift from attending to the prompt's rules and instructions to its intellectual content would stand in stark contrast to both groups of girls.

The following excerpt provides a more detailed snapshot of how quickly the boys established and maintained their orientations toward the prompt writer, the prompt and group process. In this short excerpt, occurring in the first few minutes of their conversation, the boys 1) dismantled the authoritative voice of the prompt by imagining a prompt writer in a shared psycho-social space; 2) interpreted the ideology in the intellectual material in the prompt (the prompt's passage and question) in order to determine the emotional and intellectual life of their prompt writer; and 3) engaged in a playful and open ended process, trying and testing out multiple identities as they looked for a good fit between the prompt and their imagined writer. Despite frequent moments throughout their conversation that might be construed as silly or off task, the boys' conjoint play became an important component of their process as it opened up rather than shut down the possibilities for who this prompt writer might be.31 Nick's question to Steve and Luke, which begins the excerpt, invites all three boys to explore the mind of their prompt writer.

NICK: Do you think that [the prompt writer] thinks that the majority is a good guide or do you think that he would prefer …

STEVE: Let's look at the quote he provided us with.

31 The boys assume immediately that their prompt writer is "he." They have no discussion on the matter of gender.
We must seriously question the idea of majority rule. The majority grinned and jeered when Columbus said the world was round. The majority threw him into a dungeon for his discoveries. Where is the logic in the notion that the opinion held by a majority of people should have the power to influence our decisions?

Adapted from James A Reed, "Majority Rule"

NICK: Yeah, but is he trying to be facetious?

LUKE: Are you trying to be facetious?

STEVE: Um, I don't know. I feel based on the prompt that we've got, he definitely sounds like a very clean cut majority rule kind of guy. He's definitely implying that he wants us to write the opposite of what this quote...

NICK: Maybe he wants to rise up.

LUKE: Maybe he's cracking up.

STEVE: Maybe this guy has a lot of repressed feelings. Repressed feelings. So let's put a lot of crazy things on the inside. How about that?

NICK: Do you think he wants to be the leader? Do you think, do you think he distrusts, I bet he distrusts majorities.

STEVE: I think he does but....

NICK: Do you think he's a pawn in it?

STEVE: I think he's the pawn of the majority.

LUKE: He probably has to crank out dozens of these things a day and he probably gets pretty sick of it. He probably just wants to play guitar and...

STEVE: Maybe he should have a guitar. Let's make a guitar.

NICK: Yeah, I think that's what he was getting at.

STEVE: That's the real subtext of this prompt right here (silence, scratching his head.) Should the majority play the guitar? (Laughing)

NICK: (Quietly to self.) Awesome. Maybe the majority plays guitar.

LUKE: Yeah (quietly laughing). Let's not talk about guitars.
Putting the rules and instructions for writing the essay aside, the boys tried on a number of possible interpretations for their prompt writer, his political ideology, his attitude towards his work and whether he plays guitar. In fact, as the boys expended so much effort identifying a hidden agenda in their prompt writer’s selection of the Reed passage, I wondered if they were exhibiting a naïve understanding of the SAT essay test, as though the College Board were a cabal whose purpose was to politically indoctrinate the essay writers. Over time, I learned that the very question asked by this prompt, a debate between individual and normative decision-making had been a central theme of their English and history curricula. Later the boys explained:

STEVE: There’s a phrase that school teachers can never use enough.

LUKE (Parodying teachers’ voices) Rebelling against the norm,

STEVE: In every prompt ever. We’ve written about it so often that I’m kind of sick of it.

BARBARA: Sounds like there’s some irony in there.

LUKE: In history we covered all the different rebellions, everything from black power to the American revolution.

STEVE: Yeah, so there’s a lot of that.

BARBARA: Does school then encourage rebelling against the norm?

STEVE: Well that’s the thing. There’s a double standard going on. I think that’s the same problem with the SAT. ...it wants to encourage us to be independent thinkers but at the same time, you know our school administration, the College Board, these are all organizations whose job it is to organize us and to keep us under control so there’s a certain element of hypocrisy going on there...that’s unavoidable.
Despite sharing Steve's concern for a regime of testing that "[keeps them] under control," I had trouble understanding the boys' assumption that the prompt was calling for student writer's to write from one ideological stance, what they frequently called "the expected answer." On the other hand, as I listened to comments like Steve's, "I am so sick of this concept" and as I watched the boys discover issues in the prompt document I might never had considered, I understood that the boys were turning what might have otherwise been a silly cut and paste task into a creative, intellectual game they enjoyed playing together. Their collective imagining of the prompt writer became a way to play out their resistance to the request that they conform in school.

The boys’ process in the above excerpt, the casting aside of real world conventions of the SAT, the inversion of roles of the examiner and the examinee, the exploration of new identities, reflects Winnicott’s notion of playing. Through playing, the boys brought their prompt writer into a shared psycho-social space, which invited them to enter an imagined interior life. As they walked around inside his life, they met a not so threatening guy, who, much like them needed to repress his passions to succeed at a conventional, rule oriented job. As the boys fleshed out this imaginary character, they unwittingly ascribed attributes to him that they themselves shared. Luke thought surely if he has to crank out so many prompts a day, he must grow awfully sick of the work. In later interviews, Luke lamented the banality of his school work in a similar way. “The memorizing for tests, the taking the notes, I personally feel it’s unfortunate, but that’s the reality of the situation we’re in…and one that I constantly grapple with.” Luke, who began playing violin and fiddle before he could write, gave their prompt writer a guitar: “He probably has to crank out dozens of these things a day and he probably gets sick of
it. He probably just wants to play guitar...” All three boys, each involved in music, immediately respond to the image of their writer with guitar in hand. Although Luke’s response (“Let’s not talk about guitars”) suggests he believed his “guitar” comment was off task, the image seems to have completed the work of bringing their imaginary prompt writer into a shared space, where he existed neither inside the private mind of each boy nor in the external world of the SAT with its rules and regulations, but somewhere in-between. Imagining their prompt writer in this third space, the boys felt little restraint as they drew from their own intellectual and emotional lives to imagine the subjectivity of the writer of this abstract and official document. Engaging their prompt writer in this third space of me-but not me, the boys related to him from a position of mutuality: one human subject addressing another.

Having emphasized the importance of the boys’ capacity to play in order to engage with the prompt writer as another human subject, I must note that Winnicott did not define playing in opposition to work nor did he use playing in opposition to seriousness. Adam Phillips, psychoanalyst and Winnicott scholar, notes that the opposite of playing is not work, but coercion. “Playing stops,” Phillips writes, “when one of the participants becomes dogmatic…” (142). I turn back to the boys’ playing now to point out that while the boys blurted the occasional unrestrained comment or irreverent detail, their conversation was an open-ended, mutually respectful, exploration into the political ideology and emotional life of their prompt writer. The following excerpt highlights the intellectual content of the boys’ conversation as they use a piece of tissue paper hair to explore their prompt writer’s political ideology, the concept of what it means to be “well-read,” and, once again, to re-assess the James A Reed passage.
STEVE: Here, that’s the hair.

NICK: I just wanna know what that’s based on?

STEVE: It’s short.

NICK: Okay.

LUKE (Laughing) Has anyone’s hair ever looked like that?

NICK: (Nick moves the tissue paper hair from head to chin to cheek.) Sideburns. It looks like long sideburns.

STEVE: Maybe we should use it as sideburns. I don’t think he’s radical enough for a beard. He’s meso-radical. So I think he would have burns.

NICK: He’s meso (laughing). So he’s not radical? Is that what we decided?

STEVE: I think, I think there is repressed radicalism.

...

STEVE: Maybe he’s like one of those guys who they’re in a corporation, but they’re still a free spirit. They’d have a beard.

LUKE: (Laughing) A beard is the ultimate expression of freedom from corporate tyranny.

STEVE: ‘Cause I’m thinking he’s really well read. He’s part of a broader thing but...

NICK: How well read is he? I’ve never heard of Majority Rule. Have I ever heard of Majority Rule?

STEVE: That’s how you know he’s well read. Are you serious? If you heard of it, then he wouldn’t be well read at all.

LUKE: Did we say a beard? I thought we were going to do side burns.

STEVE: I don’t think he’s nonconformist enough to have a beard. But I think he’s nonconformist enough to have facial hair, just based on the structure of the assignment. I think it sounds very formalized, sort of like he’s part of a broader organization, but the quote that
he’s feeding the student from James A. Reed about majority rule is definitely very anti-authoritarian.

NICK: It sounds (pause) anti-authoritarian?

STEVE: Yeah, anti-conformist. Maybe not outright anti-authoritarian, but it implies it in the assignment. It’s the “majority—in government or any other circumstances” (reading prompt).

NICK: (Reading prompt) “Where’s the logic in the notion that the opinion by the majority of people should have the power to influence our decisions?” I thought that that meant like against democracy (pause). So is this guy a very independent thinker?

STEVE: That’s what I was thinking. Yeah.

NICK: Is the problem that he’s bitter that he has to write this (pointing to prompt)?

LUKE: Yeah. That’s what I think.

NICK: (Picking up prompt) It does say “in government,” it says it right there. It seems like he wants to, it says, “In government or in any other circumstance.” But that’s the example he gives. (Silence)

... What would this guy rather be doing?

NICK: I think the prompt is implying a creative self. But the nature of the problem, based on the criteria, it’s a very formalized essay because SAT essays inherently are. So there’s only a degree of inventing that can go on in this kind of essay. So you know, I don’t think he entirely agrees with what he’s doing.

LUKE: He’s very well educated. Yeah. I picture an educated person.

STEVE: Oh absolutely. Well, I picture a well-educated person. He’s very literate especially based on the quote.

NICK: He’s been questioning himself for a while?

STEVE: I think so. Yeah.

NICK: I don’t know if he really enjoys this job. He’s starting to think that he should think for himself especially when he read Majority Rule.
Although this conversation is important in demonstrating Nick’s frequent return to the Reed passage and his evolving comprehension of it, I want point out two characteristics of the boys’ engagement with one another that are not always associated with academic performance and which, in fact, are what motivate Nick to return to the passage. The first is the boys’ engagement, or playing, with the tissue paper hair. In this moment, the boys actively engaged in play as a process of symbolization. The boys’ primary concern was not that the piece looked like hair (as was often the overriding concern in the two groups of girls) but what sort of hair a fellow in this job, with this political ideology, and with these repressed desires might wear. The tissue paper was not hair to the boys but a symbol they used to gain entry into a cultural world that was at once both malleable and fixed. Let me explain. As Nick moved the tissue paper from head to chin to ear, the boys took the opportunity to imagine and articulate multiple possibilities of who this prompt writer was. As the boys articulated different political orientations for their prompt writer, Nick recognized a discord between his own position and that of his friends. The hair provided a malleable symbol to explore the possibilities, but the prompt document gave the boys evidence to interpret which articulation fit best. Letting go of a cultural world that is static, fixed and compliant to the rules, the boys were able to imagine a more pliable social world that at once conformed to their internal desires and to the meanings they found in the text (see Winnicott, “The Concept of a Healthy Individual”).

Second, the excerpt demonstrates the boys’ particular patterns of engagement with one another, and how their engagement, sometimes competitive, sometimes off task (although what constitutes an off task behavior is not a simple determination), fostered
their exploratory, imaginative and intellectual work. Instances I have called playing may well have been construed as spontaneous and disruptive male behaviors by previous researchers of classroom discourse (see Myhill, Baxter, Spender, Blair) For example, although Luke chastised himself for distracting his partners with his mention of a guitar, his off-hand remark provided the boys with a tactile image, one they had held in their own hands, that invited the boys to enter into the subjective space of their prompt writer where they related to him as a fellow human subject and peer. From within the framework of this research protocol which explores the nature of my participant’s imaginative work, I claim that the boys’ spontaneous and “off task” interactions were part and parcel of the boys’ broader engagement in playing, an engagement that required them to inhibit the discourses of school compliance such as remaining focused and staying on task.

Ironically, while the boys may have committed a number of classroom infractions such as “no blurring,” or “stay on task,” their conversation represents the very sort of “dialogic discourse” (Nystrand et. al ) or “substantive conversation” (Godinho and Shrimpton) that classroom researchers struggle to find. Nystand and his team of researchers rely on Bakhtin’s concepts of monologic and dialogic discourses to differentiate classrooms that are conducted by a teacher who “operates from a predetermined ‘script’” and classrooms in which “participants expand or modify the contribution of others as one voice ‘refracts’ another” (“Question in Time” 2). A closer look at the patterns in Nick’s interactions show the frequency with which he used what Nystrand calls “dialogic bids” (8) to invite his partners to contribute to the conversation and to articulate points of view that he recognized were often different from his own. For
Nick, these bids were typically in the form of “authentic questions,” questions a speaker asks because he or she is genuinely interested in the addressee’s response. These dialogic bids are particularly evident in the transcript above when Nick inferred that he had interpreted the Reed passage differently than his friends. Nick turned to each partner separately and asked him to explain why Reed is “anti-conformist.” After listening to their answers, he returned to the passage to read the text yet another time. Throughout the boys’ collective work, Nick asked questions and, in their turn, Steve and Luke “took up” Nick’s questions. This conversation pattern was often responsible for the boys’ engagement in dialogic discourse. Nystrand explains the importance of dialogic discourse to learning and collective decision making noting that it “makes public space for student responses, eliciting and accommodating the differing values, beliefs, and perspectives of the conversant, and ideally including the voices of different classes, races, ages, and genders (6).” Nick’s genuine desire to understand the differences in his own and his friends’ interpretation of the Reed passage rather than to impress his own upon them seems largely responsible for creating this public space.

Nick’s history is relevant here. He was class president for two years and ranked in the top ten of his class. Nick was “popular,” involved in multiple extracurricular activities from varsity sports to lead roles in theater. Nick had “high status” girlfriends and worked two jobs during the school year, evenings and weekends. Despite his higher ranking, Nick also claimed that Steve and Luke, among his earliest childhood friends, were more invested in literature and writing than he and that their lower class rankings had everything to do with their not being as motivated as he by grades. Throughout my time with Nick, he frequently restated that what he most valued was a person’s ability to “hold
a good conversation.” Although he valued the work he put into his classes, he argued that was a personal choice and not one he necessarily admired in others. In fact, Nick was quite critical of high ranking students who he claimed had no social life outside of school and who “probably couldn’t hold a good conversation if they wanted to.” The many times Nick turned to his partners to ask a question, he seemed to do so with respect for their intellect and genuine interest in what they would have to say. In a conversation that was at times goofy and competitive but also intellectual and cooperative, the three boys worked conjointly, listening to one another’s opinions, shifting their own positions and exploring alternative theories.

Performing an instance of Winnicott’s playing, the boys engaged in this conversation as if knowing that should they settle for a single, definitive answer, they would bring their process, their fun, to an end. On this point Bakhtin and Winnicott agree. Fundamental to Winnicott’s understanding of what it means to feel alive is one’s capacity to reside in this potential space, the in-between space between self and other. A dogmatic solution to a complex issue brings play to an end, the cessation of relationship and a return to tolerating a social world where dominance or submission more often control human connection. Bakhtin’s understanding of “genuine human thought” has much in common with Winnicott’s understanding of what it means to reside in potential space. For both men, consciousness and culture are born at the point of human contact. This notion is explicitly expressed in Bakhtin’s understanding of the birth of an idea, which he writes can arise...

...only under conditions of living contact with another and alien thought, a thought embodied in someone else’s voice, that is, in someone else’s consciousness expressed in discourse. At that point of contact between voice-
consciousness the idea is born and lives. (*Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 88)

Nystrand explains that the asking and taking up of authentic questions are features of discourse that invite the meeting of consciousness with consciousness. Asking and responding that originates in one’s personal and idiosyncratic longing to connect with another creates the intersubjective space in which a subject’s consciousness is transformed by experiencing the consciousness of another. As the boys taught me more about their histories as writers, they instructed me in the many occasions they had subverted classroom writing assignments or explored their teachers’ subjectivity to turn their writing projects into playful engagements in potential space. Not so for the girls.

**The Girls: “How can you say it doesn’t sound like me?”**

**The Prompt Writer as Coercive Other**

We all wanted to be in the top five, and the guys were never part of the competition. I’m friends with a lot of people who are up in the upper group and we’re all competitive among ourselves, I mean we’re friends but we’re still competitive…Maybe girls just get upset more about their bad grades. A guy can joke it off, like laugh about it with their friends, like it’s a funny thing. But with girls it’s embarrassing. We don’t let people know. It’s like you should be doing your best. I would like it not to be as competitive as it is.

— Annie

The kids that are one through five, none of them are really good friends with each other because there is that “we’re the top” thing… It’s hard to be friends with someone who has .07 better grades than you.

— Eliza

Despite my frequent observation that my seven participants had much in common, from growing up together on the “liberal side” of the city to their shared classrooms,
there were important differences across the groups. Gender related differences became apparent to me the day I received a high school bulletin that announced the new National Honor Society inductees. Of the thirty inductees, twenty-six were girls. All four of my girl participants were included, and, of the boys, only Nick. As Annie noted, "We (girls) all wanted to be in the top five, and the guys were never part of the competition." I had not realized how committed these girls were to their grades and class rank, but names and rankings seemed to arise spontaneously whether the girls were chatting while working on their writing histories or while taking a break. Without my asking, all seven participants at some point rattled off who stood at what position in the class. From the top spot down to thirty, these young people seemed to know where their friends—and/or their rivals—stood. Carol, who arrived early for our first meeting, informed me that the friend she invited to join us, Kay, was ranked second in the class and she, Carol—"not meaning to brag"—was ranked fourth. As the girls soon taught me, the students who held these top spots had more reason to worry than those who fell below them. As Eliza noted, only hundredths of a point separated their rankings and a simple slip of the pen on a chemistry quiz could mean losing the coveted number two position and the public recognition of class salutatorian and graduation speaker.\(^{32}\) While all seven participants were serious about their schoolwork and college admissions, the girls claimed their success in school was far more important to their self-esteem than the boys, "in general"; as Annie noted, "a guy can joke off a bad grade. But with a girl, it's embarrassing. We don't let people know." And the boys agreed. Luke explained that the "top girls" were far better at "the

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\(^{32}\) Valedictorian had long been locked up by a girl the others claimed set the school record for Yankee City's highest GPA ever. All seven participants granted that Meghan was brilliant beyond competition. Only after my research was complete, did I learn of Kay's fall from the number two position and Annie's rise to class salutatorian and graduation speaker.
school thing.” “They pay attention. They take the notes. They understand the rules, and they follow them.”

Perhaps this particular group of girls’ exquisite attunement to grades helps to explain their imaginary prompt writers. Both groups imagined a prompt writer who was a rule-oriented authoritarian and about whom they knew little else. Kay and Carol described a male prompt writer who was faceless, “threatening,” “fault-finding,” “unfriendly,” and a “cold machine.” Annie and Eliza imagined a broadly built, middle-aged woman who dressed in a navy blue suit and pulled her hair back from her face in a tight bun. They described her as “smart,” “mathematical,” “ominous,” “unnatural,” and “trying to be feminine” but failing. To both groups of girls, the prompt writer was an abstract, judgmental authoritarian with whom they had little connection beyond attending to the rules he or she directed at them. Both groups located their prompt writer in an external psycho-social space: they made no attempt to explore her subjective life and they found nothing mutual between them.

Above, I described Nick’s first comment upon reading the SAT prompt as he reacted to its repetitive imperative mood: “You will...You will!” This was the boys’ only direct reference to the prompt’s instructions. Coincidentally, the only reference either group of girls made about the James A Reed passage occurred the moment Kay finished reading the document. In fact, Kay was the only participant, six of whom were AP US history students, to comment on the historical inaccuracies in the Reed passage. The following excerpt begins the moment Carol and Kay look up from reading the prompt aloud.

KAY: It’s interesting they used this example about Columbus because I was just reading this article about the notion that Christopher
Columbus wanted to prove that the earth was round was not even true because the same year that he set out from Spain was the same year that they invented the globe. So they already knew that the earth was round at that time and people had just made it into this fictional thing but...

CAROL: That’s interesting.

KAY: OK, there’s silver tissue paper? I’m excited about silver tissue paper.

CAROL: I think we should make him silver.

KAY: Okay, can he be wearing a silver suit?

CAROL: I think that’s an excellent idea.

Despite Kay’s immediate recognition of the inaccuracies in the Reed passage, the girls never looked to the passage itself to imagine their prompt writer. The spurious information presented in the passage was nothing more than a curious anecdote and did not diminish the girls’ sense of the prompt writers’ authority nor provoke any insight into his character. Moreover, Carol interrupted Kay’s discussion of the mythologizing of Columbus as if to tell Kay to get back on task. The girls’ imaginative process began with the instantaneous assertion that the prompt writer was male and dressed in a suit: “I think we should make a silver suit.” Carol’s response, “I think that’s an excellent idea,” typifies the congenial support all four girls gave their partners when it came to moving efficiently through the task, a process which enabled both groups of girls to complete their imaginary writers in less than half the time required by the boys.

Using the three orientations I named earlier, important differences arose across the boys’ and girls’ groups. In contrast to the boys who located their prompt writer in a shared psycho-social space, the girls located their prompt writer in an external space to which they had limited access. The girls simply did not imagine the prompt writer as a
complex human subject with an interiority of his or her own. In contrast to the boys who attended to the intellectual elements of the SAT prompt, the girls rarely drew their insights from the prompt itself, and when they did turn their attention to the prompt, it was to its instructions and rules. And finally, in contrast to the boys who engaged in an open ended, playful discussion about their prompt writer, the girls’ engaged in a monologic, task-oriented job, oriented to accuracy and efficiency. When a girl raised an issue or question as Kay does in the excerpt above and the excerpt to follow, their partners seemed to interpret the comments as merely rhetorical and not worth the time to consider. The following excerpt occurs in the first moment of Carol and Kay’s process and demonstrates how their concerns for efficiency and accuracy seem to direct their interactions.

KAY: Talk about vague. What is standard written English? I don’t like how “it should be this” but how are you supposed to know?

CAROL: Cut a suit, quick. (Carol hands Kay the sheet of silver tissue paper.)

KAY: I’m not a tailor. You cut a suit quick. Draw it on the other side.

CAROL: Good idea. I didn’t think about that. I’m just going to draw a basic outline here.

KAY: We’ll give him a tie in a different color.

CAROL: Definitely. (Draws suit on back of silver tissue paper.)

KAY: This is disproportionately short (referring to Carol’s suit pants.).

CAROL: I think you’re right. I can’t draw.

KAY: That’s ok. You’re not being graded on appearances.

CAROL: That is true.
KAY: I love when teachers say that. “Keep in mind (in a high pitched sing-song) that you will not be graded…”

Not only are the girls’ concerns for speed and efficiency prominent in this short exchange, but in this very first moment of their collaboration, Kay interjects her internalized voice of a teacher and an image of grades into their imaginative process. This disposition to be self-critical of their drawing and cutting was maintained throughout their work and suggested to me that the impulse to “get it done quick” was, in part, a way to silence this internalized critic. As in the previous excerpt, Kay again raises a problem that invites a response from Carol: what is standard written English and how I am to know? This time Carol silences Kay and tells her to start cutting “quick.” The presence of an internalized critical authority loomed over many of the girls’ actions. Kay criticized the man Carol was drawing and immediately Carol owned the insult: “I think you are right. I can’t draw.” Kay’s orientation to the voice of this critic became even more evident, when she parodied the voice of a teacher in a high pitch with erudite articulation: “Keep in mind that you will not be graded…” In her single utterance, Kay brings the specter of teachers and grades into this social space. Notice, however, that as Kay ventriloquized the voice of a teacher she also parodied it, a shift in intonation which Bakhtin noted was indicative of the double voiced parody (Wertsch Voices 55). Kay’s response suggests that the SAT prompt was an authority that she simultaneously complied with and resented.

As Carol and Kay completed the body of their silver suited man and shifted their attention to the features of his face, the tenor of their conversation changed. Now, as the girls moved to create the man’s facial features, their voices quieted and their interest
seemed to pique, as if by attending to his eyes, ears and mouth they were trying to peer into him and, instead, met resistance. By the time the conversation in the following excerpt transpired, the girls had completed their imagined characters’ silver suit, given him a belt and shoes, and double checked the number of fingers on each hand. That is to say, other than to critique their cutting and pasting job, their work had been quite literal and concrete. As this excerpt opens, Carol noted their character needed a face.

KAY: He seems very evaluative.

CAROL: Yeah.

KAY: If that’s a word.

CAROL: Yeah, that’s a word.

KAY: It just seems like he’s judging you.


KAY: Maybe he wouldn’t have a mouth. He just sits there and marks: “Yours is bad. I’m not going to talk to you about it though.”

CAROL: Yeah.

KAY: Yeah. It feels like a silent person.

CAROL: Yeah. Speaks through his writing and not...

KAY: But not even his writing. He’s giving you a grade.

CAROL: Yeah, he’s speaking through a number and not anything else.

KAY: So I’m not giving him a mouth.

CAROL: No, I think you shouldn’t.

KAY: OK, I don’t want to make much effort on his face.

CAROL: Yeah, I think he should have really blank staring eyes.
The girls' concern for the realism and the accuracy of their image dissipated as they began to consider the nature of communication between themselves and this examiner. They found his authority particularly troublesome because he used no words to communicate: "I'm not going to talk to you," Kay intoned for him in a stern voice. Imagining him silent and with "blank staring eyes," the girls seemed to say that this authority did not possess the sensory apparatus that would allow him to recognize or communicate with them. In his ominous presence, the girls suggested, they were invisible. As they tried to visualize this imaginary creature, they moved away from realism and turned to metaphor and science fiction. Carol suggested they place filters over his ears and Kay agreed, yes, "He hears only what he wants to hear." Kay's observations presented their problematic positioning. Their prompt writer demanded that they address him with their "original words," but there could be no mutuality in this relationship. He only heard what he wanted to hear, and he neither saw nor spoke back to them.

The girls' prompt writer is an example of Winnicott's coercive caretaker. From the girls' perspective, he imposed his own expectations and desires on them, but in return, he failed to recognize them as fellow human subjects with desires and dreams of their own. Like Winnicott's complaint child, the girls are exquisitely attuned to the authority of testing, to its rules and instructions, because it is through the mastery of these rules that they have received recognition as superior students, as limited, silent, and impersonal as that recognition may be. The girls' responses suggest too that compliance to the coercive prompt writer has had consequences for them. As Kay's frequent parody of the authoritative voice suggests, the demands of authority can be capricious, even
dangerous, denying her the opportunity to feel personally connected to her school
writing.

None of the girls described a prompt writer with whom they shared psycho-social
space: there was little space “in-between” where they could have imagined the mutual
meeting of voices and converse as one human subject to another. Rather, when the girls
confronted the prompt, they engaged in a monologic, task-oriented activity haunted by
the critical voices of teachers and the image of grades. Despite the many academic and
literary achievements my participants shared, despite how closely their total SAT writing
scores resembled one another’s, differences in their collective imaging process suggest
that the boys and the girls inhabited a very different psycho-social space as they engaged
the SAT prompt. And perhaps more importantly, the converse is also true; the testing
occupied very different spaces in their lives.

Differentials of Power and Playing in Psycho-Social Space

A young child will adapt his speech to his sense of
the person he is addressing, either bowing to imposed
constraints or recognizing and meeting some need
in the other person.

--James Britton, The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)

I return to Winnicott and his concept of playing to consider my friendship groups’
positioning in relation to their imagined SAT prompt writers. What factors were at play
when the girls imagined themselves positioned as the passive subject to a more powerful
authority? What factors were at play when the boys positioned their prompt writer as a
subject with limited agency much like themselves? The concepts “power” and
“discourse” as used today by critical theorists to describe cultural discourses and
practices that form human subjectivity were not concepts available to Winnicott, nor was
the understanding that gender is not a property of the physical body but a product of performances selected from a range of culturally sanctioned practices and discourses (see Butler). Nevertheless, Winnicott was acutely concerned about the way power was manifested in the subject-object relationship. Winnicott’s seminal notion of the capacity to play, his hallmark of psychological health and “feeling alive,” necessitated the momentary collapse of power differentials between subject and object—if only in the mind of the child. In this momentary forgetting of what belongs to the self and what belongs to the other, in this momentary putting aside of rules and regulations so that something other or new can be imagined, Winnicott’s subject creatively engages with and newly invents cultural experience.

Winnicott’s primary concern was to understand those environmental conditions that prohibited the individual from playing whether it is the actions of the tyrannical caregiver who coerces the child to comply or the indulgent caregiver who allows the tyrannical child to impose her fantasies on others. Both these children suffer from their failure to connect internal desire with the exigencies of the social world. Winnicott’s overriding concern for the child’s capacity to playfully engage culture implores us understand why the four high achieving girls in this study positioned themselves as passive objects to the authority of testing while the three boys positioned themselves as agentive subjects.

James Britton, brother-in law to Winnicott, was similarly fascinated in the developing child’s awareness of audience and the developing “sense of audience” exhibited in children’s school writing. The two men shared key assumptions about the relationship between therapist/client and teacher/student, claiming that intrusive
interventions by the “expert” prevents the “novice” from collaborating in his or her own learning. And like Winnicott, Britton believed that children have an innate desire “to express themselves to an interested audience,” but are often stymied by teachers too distracted by external demands to creatively engage with their students (Wyatt-Brown 297, Salvio and Boldt 7).

Britton’s studies of students’ sense of audience were central to the shift in writing pedagogy paradigms during the late 1960s and 1970s. Most Americans scholars at the time emphasized formalist theories of textual scholarship and understood the writing classroom as the place where students are taught this body of knowledge (Harris). Unlike the Americans, Britton and his British colleagues understood writing as something that is learned by doing and not by direct instruction. Britton’s scholarly studies turned to the psychological and social theories of scholars like Vygotsky, Piaget and G. H. Meade to understand the developing writer (Language and Learning). Much like Winnicott who claimed, “There is no such thing as a baby,” to emphasize that the baby does not exist without a mother, Britton would have claimed, “There is no such thing as a student writer.” Both men understood that the concepts of expert and novice, student and teacher, writer and reader, were bipolar unities, the meaning of one contingent upon the meaning of the other. In their massive study of school writing, The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18), Britton and his colleagues explored this relational construct noting that the student “define(s) himself in a way complementary to the role he assigns to the teacher as reader on any given occasion” (194, italics mine). Britton explained that a writer who has “communicative competence” (62), must “carry out a procedure of self-editing, of arresting, reorganizing and adjusting his message for his absent audience”
Britton’s important insight as it relates to my participants’ imaginary prompt writers is that the process of self-editing occurs as the writer “internalizes” his audience, requiring that he “be able to call out in himself the responses which his gestures evoke from others” (62, italics are Britton’s). Given the very different “situation definitions” my participants imagined, Britton’s work predicts that my male and female participants would “call out” in themselves very different gestures as they encountered the presences who hovered over the space of their writing.

Britton’s conclusions about student audience awareness are particularly relevant to my findings because of his concern for the effect of an authoritarian school environment on student writing. Echoing the responses of Carol and Kay, Britton worried that a “hierarchically ordered” system of schooling “will lead the writer not only to regard the teacher’s demands as paramount but also as requiring a writing decorum which expresses the inferior status of the writer” (65). In his scholarship, Britton explained that the teacher-student relationship may interfere with or support the maturing writer’s sense of audience and so he encouraged teachers to assume a variety of roles as readers to their students’ writing. Nevertheless, in his empirical studies, Britton put much of the burden for growth on the child’s social-emotional development and explained that writing development, as it pertains to audience awareness, is a consequence of the “mature” student writer who has “abandoned his inferior status and speaks to adult peers” (65). As if describing the very differences I found across my female and male friendship groups, Britton defined the development of audience awareness as a progression from “bowing to the imposed constraints or recognizing and meeting some need in the other person” (58). Britton’s claim, that it is the “mature” student who “abandons his inferior
status and speaks to adult peers" is a classroom commonplace in the teaching of writing today. If we are to hold this commonplace as truth, then we must also accept that my high achieving female participants are rendered perpetually "immature." Paradoxically, because the discourses of schooling have brought these girls so much personal success, they have exquisitely learned "to bow to the imposed constraints."

Unlike Winnicott, however, who continued to develop his understanding of child development from his personal encounters with children and parents through talk and through play, Britton’s "sense of audience" findings were drawn from the analysis of student "scripts"—not students. Britton and his team of researchers analyzed thousands of school texts to classify the writer’s "sense of audience," assuming "sense of audience" to be a feature in the writing itself and not a consequence of the child’s psycho-social encounter with context. This process of analyzing student writing based solely upon textual analysis resembles the method used for evaluating essays on a standardized writing test. Features in the text are coded, readers are trained to recognize these features, and texts are sorted into categories defined by the test design. Despite the importance of Britton’s work to the understanding of writing development as a relational process, the methodology that produced his sense of audience findings failed to explore the psycho-social spaces of school writing. The girls in my study suggest that given their experience in schools, the harder they worked to be recognized, the more they felt the need to demonstrate their inferior status as writers. And as I will report in the next section, being a good writer to the girls meant something very different than it meant to the boys.
Part Two

Imagining Good Writers of the SAT: Competing Discourses of Gender, School

Achievement and the Literate Person

STEVE: Actually, I’m thinking of fictional characters giving speeches to parties of dragons or something.

LUKE: What? Armies of dragons?

STEVE: *Lord of the Rings* style movie where the hero gives some sort of “tonight we die in hell” type speech.

LUKE: OK, now I’m picturing King Leonidas shouting at Woodrow Wilson for the Treaty of Versailles. “Compromise or tonight we die in hell.”

* * *

ELIZA: Her letters are messy but her spacing is good.

ANNIE: Yeah.

ELIZA: So I feel like she should kind be a little bit messy. I don’t know. Like her hair’s not perfect, her clothes aren’t perfect.

ANNIE: I don’t know. I feel like the way she forms her letters is kind of perfectionist. They’re not really messy looking, but it’s kind of every letter, every g, looks the same.

In these two short excerpts, the boys’ and one of the girls’ groups imagined the writer of an SAT essay we titled “Majority Rules.” Here, the boys responded to the essayist’s frequent use of repetition and especially the passage, “We shall be as cattle—as animals. Never improving our lot in life, never innovative, never genius.” Interweaving popular culture and history, the boys merged scenes from *Lord of the Rings*, the film *300*, and the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in order to bring a life and a setting to the young woman (surprisingly!) they imagined wrote “Majority Rules.” In response to the
same essay, Annie and Eliza were drawn to the writer's formation of her letters, the uniformity in the curves of her g's and the spacing between her words as they envisioned a very different young woman who drafted the words of "Majority Rules." The boys' writer of "Majority Rules" was a young woman who used her knowledge of history to rally a crowd through her use of rhetoric and a passion for social justice. The girls' writer, in contrast, sought perfection in the shapes of her letters, a perfection, Eliza noted, that she could not quite achieve. The boys' female writer attained status and power by conjuring up an authoritative voice and a meaningful context for writing; the girls' female writer attained status and power through her arduous attention to the molding of her letters and essays into the forms the girls had been taught at school.

Given the differences in the two groups' situation definitions exemplified by the confused bureaucrat and the authoritative judge, it makes sense that participants would impose their own situation definitions—replete with the gender schema each participant drew from—as they read the exemplar essays and imagined their writers. But my participants' renderings of their prompt writers were far more layered. As they read the SAT essays and drew inferences from them to imagine their writers, they recognized that at times these writers construed the testing context quite differently than they had. As Kay said when responding to an essay that did not comply with her requirements for the formal, five paragraph essay, "She's certainly not writing for our cruel hearted prompt writer, is she?" Although all participants were largely critical of the second essay, "Spanish American War," both groups of girls were critical of both essays in the research protocol. As Kay's comment suggests, the task of imagining the writers of high scoring
SAT essays unsettled the girls’ perceptions that there is a single correct way to write for a
standardized writing assessment.

In my analysis of the differences across the groups’ collective imaginings of the
SAT essay writer, I return to the three orientations I described earlier: the groups’
orientation to the prompt writer, their orientation to the SAT essay and their orientation to
group processing. In this section, I report my findings on the following orientations:

1) The group’s orientation to their SAT writer. Where did the group locate their
prompt writer in cultural space? This orientation revealed where participants’
positioned the good SAT writer in cultural space and, more specifically, where
they positioned their writer in relationship to the discourses of schooling and
gender.

2) The group’s orientation to the SAT essay. What elements of the essay did
participants attend to as they imagined their SAT writer? As with the SAT
writing prompt, participants were selective about the elements of the essay they
attended to as they imagined its writer. As suggested above, these elements
ranged from the girls’ fascination with the uniformity of the writer’s handwriting
to the boys’ fascination with the writer’s use of rhetorical devices.

3) The group’s orientation to group processing. How did the group collectively
engage in the process of imaging the prompt writer? By and large the groups
demonstrated the same group processing patterns as previously described. The
girls were concerned with the efficient completion of the task and generally did
not question a partner’s choice. The boys generated tentative ideas, revisited the
text and drew from personal experience to garner support for their ideas. The boys
demonstrated responsive to one another by asking questions and elaborating on one another's ideas. These findings on group processing support my earlier discussion and so will not be repeated here.

A brief summary of the essay, "Majority Rules" is necessary because participants generated substantially different readings of the essay's thesis. The College Board publication, Scorewrite, evaluates "Majority Rules" in this way: "Well organized and clearly focused on the distinction between courageous individuals and stubborn leaders, the essay shows clear coherence and smooth progression of ideas.... This outstanding piece of writing deserves a score of 6" (41). Despite Scorewrite's insistence that the essay demonstrates focus and coherence, both groups of girls criticized the essay writer's inability to maintain a thesis throughout the essay. As Annie explained, "I mean she introduces, she argues one point, she argues a different point, and she concludes. Like it's not like there's a thesis, yeah, there isn't really a thesis."

The reason for this mismatch lies in the girls' failure to recognize the writer's use of subordination in the essay's thesis. Written in a third person, academic voice, the essay opens with its thesis:

There is no question that majority rule can be highly flawed in some situations. However, the question here is what would happen if the majority's rule was not heard by the select few who must inevitably in any form of government, take the position of power. Perhaps having your own opinion is beneficial when acting as an individual, but is hazardous when one is entrusted with the well being of others. (ScoreWrite 34)

The essay is four paragraphs long. In the second paragraph, the writer supports the first premise of the thesis using biographical examples like W.E.B Dubois, Frederick Douglass, and Albert Einstein, who "acting for what they know is right" (34), were able to overcome the opinion of the majority and bring about important social and scientific
change. In the third paragraph, however, in accord with his/ her thesis, the writer subordinates this first premise to the requirements of good government noting, “In government, it seems individual propensities, inclinations and grudges must be left at the door. A leader’s job is to protect and take care of their people at their own expense.”

Rather than understand the writer’s use of subordination to qualify her position on individual decision making, all four girls argue that the essay is “wishy washy” or takes “the middle of the road.” Given that the girls’ average critical reading score on the SAT was over 700, they certainly did not lack for “standard” reading ability. As I will claim later, the girls’ experience with school writing had so highly attuned them to the thesis driven essay that they the assumed the thesis in an essay written for a standardized test must be a categorical: unconditional and unqualified. For all four girls, qualifying one’s thesis when writing for a standardized test or in the academic arena was a sign of intellectual weakness.

**Writing “as if”: Luke and Steve’s Spontaneous Excursion into Potential Space**

Word are indeed things to conjure with. But so are the voices, the roles, the contexts associated with them. These, too, are subject to manipulation and interpretation—and in ways that are enormously consequential.

--George Otte “In Voicing”

As Steve and Luke studied “Majority Rules,” its thesis and the author’s use of evidence and rhetorical devices, they free associated figures from history, literature and popular culture. Again taking far more time than the girls to finish the task, the boys made connections from historical and literary times and places, from the Spartan King Leonidas to Lord of the Rings, from Woodrow Wilson to Che Guevara, from Rosa Parks to Emily Dickinson, and from Condoleeza Rice to Barack Obama. Ironically, however,
the boys did not summon up voices typically associated with writing for the SAT, not even a crafty student who wrote to bedazzle their confused bureaucrat. Rather than relegate the writer of "Majority Rules" to a schoolroom and sitting for the SAT, the boys associated her with characters and contexts far away from any classroom. As the list of characters above demonstrates, they fashioned the writer of "Majority Rules" after revolutionaries, social activists, politicians (left and right) and poets who demonstrated the passion and power for social change. Breaking the conventions of a 'real' world where examinees are only examinees, the boys' imagined an SAT writer who, herself, successfully imagined a voice, a role and a context with far more authority and situational meaning than the student who position herself as the examinee writing to examiner.

As I studied the hour-long transcript of the boys’ imaginative process, I too found it easy to forget that Steve and Luke were, in fact, discussing an essay written for the SAT. For example, one of the themes that ran throughout the boys’ discussion was whether “Majority Rules” was an essay or a rabble-rousing speech. Except for the moment Luke turned to ask me if this essayist really is a “high schooler?” the boys persistently imagined this writer as if she were genuinely engaged in “real” work in a public, political sphere where her words made an impact on others. In the following excerpt, the boys recapitulate much of their conversation. The excerpt provides a fine example of the two boys imagining their writer in Winnicott’s potential space, a psychosocial space that frees her (and them) to take spontaneous journeys into new roles, new performances and new identities.

LUKE: I think we can be pretty comfortable that the person is very socially conscious.

STEVE: Oh yes totally.

LUKE: (Looking to me.) And this is a high schooler you say?
BARBARA: I think these essays come from pilot studies the College Board did in high schools.

LUKE: She's truly a good speechmaker (pause), um, speechmaker or essayist.

STEVE: I mean there are good female speechmakers but when I hear repetition, I think of, I picture shouting and I can't picture too many female advocates shouting. Am I being sexist?

LUKE: Yeah, yeah, quite a bit.

STEVE: Well, yeah, I picture, the rhetoric is making me picture somebody very passionate and like shouting and...

LUKE: You said Che or Dr. King.

STEVE: Yeah, Dr. Martin Luther King and, well, I think I'm picturing a lot of specifically black power advocates because they keep coming back, they keep referencing civil rights activists or black power activists and the tone is very similar to one of those speeches. So I think, I'm just picturing one of those and those are almost entirely men. I think I'm just picturing that sort of rhetoric, tone, it being sort of aggressive and masculine.

LUKE: I'd almost say the opposite view because the rhetoric is so sharp in this, it almost belies someone who is skilled at expressing themselves on paper while maybe not so much spoken. I'm not seeing speechwriter; I'm seeing essayist.

STEVE: Yeah, I'm thinking it's gotta be either a very quietly strong bookish girl or a very fiery black guy.

LUKE: I'm picturing almost Emily Dickinson with kind of a fiery background. She was that bookish secluded type. She wrote those really fiery...

STEVE: Yeah, I know all about her. I just can't picture...

LUKE: Emily Dickinson, with a fiery background. OK, so black, white, what is she? A minority?

STEVE: I think so. Now I'm picturing Rosa Parks. OK, we could do that. Um, what color do you use for that? I'm not very good at, uh, do we know specifically what minority? Black? Hispanic? Asian?

Overlooking the racist and sexist stereotyping that escape the boys' mouths for the moment, the excerpt reveals a spontaneous Winnicottian excursion as the boys located
this powerful SAT writer in a cultural space far removed from the predetermined examiner-examinee positionings of the testing context. Fiery revolutionaries, black power advocates, King Leonidas, Emily Dickinson, these are not the first persons who come to mind when we imagine a student sitting for the SAT writing test. Certainly as Luke and Steve imagined this host of characters, they too were well aware that neither Che nor Leonidas sat to write this SAT essay. And yet, the boys drew from their knowledge of these powerful cultural figures to forge their image of a SAT writer who wrote as if she were writing—perhaps even orating—to impassion a crowd.

An essential paradox lies beneath this imaginary excursion that the boys surely recognized but did not speak, as if to speak it might ruin the illusion that their imagined writer was mobilizing a crowd to action—and not sitting under the watchful eye of the SAT monitor and the ticking of a classroom clock. Ivanic and Simpson emphasize how remarkably difficult it is for writers in an evaluative context to free themselves from authoritarian control noting that “the person who sets the assignment is posing a challenge and a threat to the student, and … exercise[es] control over him. However stimulating the assignment may be as an intellectual exercise, it is also face-threatening because it will be judged” (146). Remarkably, the boys’ imaginary writer of “Majority Rules” tolerates this paradox: to write well in the testing situation she must simultaneously imagine herself writing for the SAT with all its inherent genre demands and personal threats and not writing for the SAT so that she may take up the identity of one who transforms the testing context into an imaginary social arena that will propel her to write with authority.

college writers. Male/female dyads in group projects elect the male to make the speech and the female to write the essay (Wanzenfied, Franks, & Powell, 1989, cited in Haswell and Haswell, 1996).
The boys' imaginative rendering of this writer suggests George Otte's call to invite student writers to "invoice," that is to write from identities that are not intended to represent the student's self, but nevertheless are voices of the student's own making. Writers, according to Otte, not only must conjure up theses and evidence, intros and conclusions, but more importantly, they must conjure up the "voices, roles and contexts associated with them," at times intentionally and, at other times, only incidentally. Otte notes that the "speaking self is less the origins of one's discourse than the representation created by it" (152-153). Like the boys who imagine their fiery, black Emily Dickinson writing an SAT essay, Otte contends that student writers must be provided with opportunities to "in-voice," to explore how voice, role and context are deliberate rhetorical choices that are "enormously consequential" to writing. The writer of "Majority Rules," speaking on behalf of victims of social injustice, succeeds because, as Otte suggests, she conjured a voice, a role and a context that enabled her to address her SAT examiner as her social and intellectual peer.

The boys were not so kind in their evaluation of both exemplar SAT writers. All three boys were critical of the writer of "Spanish American War" who they felt denigrated herself to pander to the SAT reader. The essay relies upon an extended example of the "Spanish American War" and claims that, "After all, a majority does not always equate to the sum of its parts (a lesson learned in the disciplines of human behavior) and it may not always be the most responsible course of action." The boys argued that the essay was "overwritten," and its thesis "obvious" and the "expected answer." In contrast to the brilliant orator who delivered "Majority Rules," all three boys...
confirmed that their rendering of the writer of “Spanish American War” suggested the “stereotypical, over-achieving girl.”

“Like one of the top ten girls,” Steve noted, who “is driven by a compulsion to impress other people by any means necessary. This person uses every trick in the book.” Luke agreed with Steve’s assessment. “She’s definitely well-educated but in a way primarily concerned with fulfilling the technicalities of education, with words and organized thoughts.” Class rankings had arrived in the mail only weeks before this meeting with Luke and Steve and so their fixation on rankings was acute. Girls held all top five spots in the class and seven of the top ten. The writer of “Spanish American War,” they explained, fit their image of these girls. Although Nick worked alone when he read “Spanish American War,” his image of the writer was very similar to Luke and Steve’s. This writer, he said,

...wants to show that they’re above you, like kids who focus only on their grades, kids who work really hard to look like this cultured intellectual who couldn’t hold an interesting conversation and maybe don’t want to. They have no social life. They go home from school, do their homework and study so they are well prepared for the next day.

And that person, Nick concluded, would probably be like one of the “top girls.” When questioned about the imbalance of boys and girls in the top five and on the honor roll, the boys frequently and unanimously resorted to gender stereotypes, which were not always kind to the girls, all of whom they shared many classes with. As Luke repeated multiple times throughout our four sessions together, they “pay attention in class, they take the notes, they memorize the stuff, they do well on the tests. Whether they are actually learning anything, that’s another question.”

To be fair, the boys were never critical of individual girls in their classes. When they did speak highly of a female classmate, however, the praise was almost always for
her performance in math, the traditional domain of the male student. On one occasion, as
Steve and Luke explained their distaste for math and chemistry, the issue of successful
girls came up. Luke described his experience in honors chemistry class with Kay who sat
right in front of him.

When our chemistry teacher says this will be very difficult and you will have
trouble because it’s lots and lots of math, we both groan, but next year she is
taking like some ridiculous math course that isn’t even in the syllabus
because it would frighten small children. And she gets such ridiculously good
grades in her math courses but she still hates it! She hates it just as much as I
do. And it doesn’t seem fair. How does she do it? I don’t know.

Luke’s narrative proclaims his struggle to accept that Kay is a brilliant math student but
also suggests Kay’s uneasiness at being perceived as such. Whenever Mr. S announced
that a topic would require a lot of math, Luke noted, Kay groaned along with the rest of
them. While these gender performances took place in the chemistry classroom, they
clearly carried over to the girls’ perceptions of what it meant to stand out as a student
among their peers and more particularly what it meant to be a successful high school
writer. They struggled to be seen but not seen: to receive the recognition of their teachers
via perfect grades and yet not risk personal exposure.

**The Highly Competent Feminine Writer: Nice, Neat and Striving For Perfection**

Via perfect writing, I desired to deliver the perfect mind
to my teachers. The predictable and painstakingly even shape
of my words signaled my willingness to conform, to be
Controlled, which pleased my teachers....

—Alison Jones, “Surveillance and Student Handwriting”

Now I begin to understand that Griselda's approach to
writing stifles herself for the sake of the reader, puts
aside the excitement of chasing a good idea, ignores
her doubts, and works very, very hard to be sure that
the finished product is very good. This all leaves very
little room for fun. It also, not incidentally, protects
her from having to flex her muscles, or shout, or try
out her full powers, while assuring her that she has
"done the right thing." So there is a payoff, but the personal costs are high.

--Joan Bolker, "Teaching Griseda to Write," 1979

In contrast to Luke and Steve’s passionate warrior for social justice, all four girls were critical of both high scoring SAT essays and believed neither deserved a score of “6.” Eliza criticized “Majority Rules” because, “It doesn’t follow the rules of the conventional essay.” Her partner Annie agreed, “The writer didn’t stick to one main thesis. Obviously,” she continued, “she didn’t plan before writing” because, “it’s not a five paragraph essay.” Kay and Carol read the essay somewhat differently. They assumed the writer of “Majority Rules” was a boy. Kay argued that the handwriting looked sloppy like a boy’s and boys, she said, are more likely to break the rules: “He doesn’t stay with one example in a paragraph, which is the writing we were taught in school.” Carol agreed. To her, the writer of “Majority Rules” was clearly “pretentious.” “Perhaps I’m a little sexist,” she said, “but thinking that he can state his opinions like they’re already facts and nobody’s going to disagree with him seems like a rather male trait.” Nevertheless, Carol admitted to being attracted to this writer’s risk taking honesty when comparing the writers of both SAT essays.

[He] seems a lot more honest, but the writer of Spanish American War seems a lot nicer. But I would probably prefer “Majority Rules.” He’s not scared to voice his opinion. He doesn’t care about the grader. He writes just what he wants to write.

This sense of ambivalence, being torn between a compulsion to comply with teacher defined rules and admiration for those who are “daring” enough to “voice their own opinion” lay beneath the girls’ attitudes towards these two high scoring essays and their writers. The girls explained that their own academic success was dependent upon
compliance to curricular and teacher demands and included in this success was their mastery of the five-paragraph essay. And while all four girls took tremendous pleasure from their academic work and achievements, in one way or another, all four expressed a sense that in the process of complying some sense of the self was lost, particularly when it came to school writing.

In contrast to Steve and Luke’s playful engagement with characters from history, literature and popular culture, the girls engaged both SAT essays through the formulas and conventions of the formal essay in order to imagine their writers. They girls routinely suggested that a writer’s failure to use the five paragraph essay form and his or her use of the first person, contractions, and the occasional sentence fragment were infractions that revealed the writer’s character. Ironically, however, it was when a writer broke a “permissible rule” or “one of those rules teachers tell you it’s okay to break sometimes,” that some of the girls made positive assertions about the essay writers. Kay noted that the writer of “Spanish American War” was “daring to use only one example for the entire essay.” Carol said using only one example, rather than three, demonstrated that the writer had “confidence” because she knew she could write well enough not to follow the rules. Nevertheless, regardless of their positive or negative assessments of the writers, the girls’ imagined writers were inexorably relegated to the cultural spaces of schooling and testing where they were judged by their knowledge of the rules and their decisions to comply or disobey. Unlike Luke and Steve’s passionate social warrior whose purpose was to rally a crowd, the girls’ writers were condemned to write to a testing authority who inevitably knew the rules better than any SAT writer.
Knowledge of and compliance to the rules of the formal essay came with social consequences for the girls, particularly when they imagined the high scoring SAT writers to be female. Revealing that one is too superior compromised a female writer’s affiliation with her peers. The intellect of the superior female writer “removes” her from social sphere of her peers where she risks isolation. Similarly, the girls explained, the successful academic female writer does not reveal herself in her writing, but assumes a “voiceless,” rational position that functions to mask her subjectivity in general and her femininity in particular. These themes arise in the following short excerpt as Eliza and Annie critiqued “Majority Rules” and the regularity of the writer’s loops and spacing. In this first moment of their conversation, the girls show how quickly their attention shifted away from the writer’s content and her knowledge of history, to the shapes of her letters, to their concerns for her physical appearance, and her status among her peers. These issues, compliance, physical appearance and affiliation with one’s peers weighed heavily on the girls as they imagined the female writers of both high scoring SAT essays.

ELIZA: It looks like girl’s handwriting. I think she’s pretty smart. She pulled in a lot of outside information.

ANNIE: She did a good job. I think she’s in AP history. She knows a lot of history.

ELIZA: So what was her closing argument again? (Reading) “Individuality is beneficial to single people but the majority’s opinions and needs must be the constitution—the absolute rule for those in leadership positions.” OK, so I don’t know. She’s a girl. She took AP history, maybe or just a good history class. And (pause to study the essay) her handwriting is kind of messy so I feel like...

ANNIE: It’s messy but it’s very like, you know...

ELIZA: Her letters are messy but her spacing is good.

ANNIE: Yeah.
ELIZA: So I feel like she should kind of be a little bit messy. I don’t know. Like her hair’s not perfect, her clothes aren’t perfect.

ANNIE: I don’t know. I feel like the way she forms her letters is kind of perfectionist. They’re not really messy looking but it’s kind of every letter, every g looks the same.

ELIZA: Yeah. I feel like she’s seems really nice though. I don’t know, (laughing) I get the feeling that she really likes to talk to people, and she has a lot of friends and she’s funny.

ANNIE: Yeah (pause). And she has brown hair.

ELIZA: Brown hair? Dark brown or light brown? But the thing is her conclusion, it’s in the middle, she doesn’t, I mean, so I think her hair color should be in the middle.

ANNIE: That’s one thing. She doesn’t come across definitively.

ELIZA: So where’s an ‘in the middle’ brown?

The same essay that evoked a passionate, active female writer from the boys evoked a “pretty smart,” “wishy-washy,” “funny” girl from Annie and Eliza. Both girls elaborated on the relationship they saw between the writer’s ability and her popularity. Eliza explained that because she was “middle of the road,” and not “brilliant or anything,” she got “along with a lot of different types of people.” Annie too understood an inverse relationship between their writer’s intellect and her popularity. “She came across friendly because she was kind of a good writer and she had some good examples, but it wasn’t like too in depth…like crazy history. And that kind of made her seem friendly cause like she wasn’t so smart that she was removed.” Comparing the writer of “Majority Rules” (“a good, but not great writer”) to herself (one of “the top five”), Annie explained that her peers generally did not like girls like herself because they resented that their schoolwork and grades came to them “naturally.” The writer of “Majority Rules,”
Annie explained, spared herself this ill will because she was one of those students who had to work hard to do well in school. This Annie said was revealed in her writing: "Majority Rules"’ lack of an unwavering, categorical thesis indicated that the writer’s intellect was somewhat weak and her essay writing just not strong.

Relegating their imaginary writers to the cultural space of schooling and testing, the girls oriented themselves to those elements of writing that are almost exclusively driven by their school’s formal writing curriculum. Given the girls’ rule oriented prompt writer, it makes sense that they attended closely to the essayist’s compliance to the conventions of the formal essay. What surprised me, however, was the girls’ close attention to handwriting, as though the way a writer formed her letters revealed her character and her attitude toward schooling. In contrast to the boys who located the writer of “Majority Rules,” in a cultural space where the writer assumed an active position, the girls’ imaginative work was confined to the highly regulated space of schooling and testing, a space that the girls’ fascination with handwriting implies, disciplined not only their minds, but also their bodies and hands. Annie, who eventually graduated salutatorian of her senior class, told us that she “had to go to extra help” for her handwriting when she was in elementary school. And it was Annie, who still struggled with “messy” handwriting, who looked for traces of the perfectly disciplined student in the uniformity of the loops and spaces in the handwriting of “Majority Rules.” Much like Annie and Eliza, feminist scholar Alison Jones argues that for her handwriting “provides a landscape in which can be read students’ pleasurable, obedient and willing—or resistant, careless, contemptuous—participation in the disciplinary power of pedagogy” (154). The girls’ attention to the handwritten word, according to Jones, is a reenactment
of their own participation in the disciplinary power of pedagogy, of the pleasures obtained through their careful attempts to perfectly mold their letters and their essays to conform to their teacher’s expectations.

Annie traced her fascination with handwriting back to fourth grade when she was sent to Mrs. J for “extra help.” Extra help in handwriting, she explained, was a pleasurable experience. Mrs. J gave her “those huge pencils and the wide lined paper” and, although she never achieved the perfect handwriting she worked for, Annie said she enjoyed the chance to work on her letters with the warm and nurturing Mrs. J. In contrast to these personable sessions with Mrs. J, Annie described the fear she often felt back in her fourth grade classroom. “Mr. Z used to yell at me because I’d always mix up a-r-e and o-u-r. He’d yell at me so I’d get freaked out and that carried over into other areas of school. I’d always be freaked out if I did anything wrong.” Carol, Kay and Annie each related their own stories of breaking rules in school and the fear and shame they felt when confronted by a teacher. Unlike the boys who named handwriting as a negative experience because of its dreary tedium, handwriting reminded Eliza and Annie of pleasurable moments when they strove to copy the perfect letters that crossed the top of their classroom walls. Handwriting, as Jones’ scholarship and Annie and Eliza’s response to the SAT essays suggest, provided them with a vehicle to fulfill a desire to comply, to be directed, to be subjected without risking public shame and embarrassment.

While Luke and Steve attended to the essay’s meaning, voice and context as they imagined various characters from history, literature and popular culture, the girls engaged in the discourses of schooling, ranking and testing which positioned their writers in the persistent gaze of an evaluative authority. Their SAT writers were “good” but never
“brilliant”; their female writers strove to be compliant, controlled, neat, nice but certainly never so bright that, like the boys’ “fire-brand,” they might upset social hierarchies, question convention, or especially bring too much attention to themselves. The more Annie and Eliza worked with the physical appearance of their female writer of “Majority Rules,” the more they connected the compliant, good writer to someone who desired not to stand out or be seen. When Eliza suggested pink tissue paper for her t-shirt, Annie was concerned, “Yeah, but it’s a little too (pause); she doesn’t want to stand out.” Eliza agreed and together they chose a brown t-shirt because “that’s pretty neutral.” Annie suggested they give her jewelry, maybe a necklace, but Eliza warned, “I don’t think she should wear any of those long ones.” Looking at Annie’s necklace, a simple, silver circle pendant, Eliza made her choice: “I think she should just wear one just like yours.” The physical appearance of their writer increasingly matched Annie and Eliza’s. Dressed in jeans and a brown t-shirt, this iteration of the good SAT writer masked her femininity in more masculine dress. Later, when all four girls reflected upon their school writing and the essays they wrote for their SATs, all composed in the third person academic voice, they recognized their attempts to present themselves as smart, compliant and abstract, a writer who risks success if she positions herself as a subjective, feminine “I.”

These opposing caricatures of the female writer of “Majority Rules,” the boys’ fire-brand social activist and the girls’ compliant student were of obvious concern to me and so I sought further explanation from my participants. The boys’ writer was passionate, connected her own life experience and to concerns for social justice: she wrote to take action in her world. The girls’ writer was compliant, feared drawing attention to herself, and maintained a disconnect between her gendered, personal self and
the self she presented to her examiners. Concretely, it concerned me that the girls read a far more simplistic version of the “Majority Rules” essay than the boys and I had read. More abstractly, it concerned me the girls were describing the very experiences that credentialed them for their future social and economic lives as one that positioned them as perpetually self-critical, personally passive, and compliant to external authorities. And as the girls reflected upon the characters they were imagining in the SAT essays and performing in their own school writing, all four voiced varying degrees of concern that their compliance in school had come with some sense of a loss of the self.34

The reason for the girls’ reading of “Majority Rules” eluded me. All four girls were exceptional readers, for example, scoring in the 96 percentile or better on their SAT critical reading tests. But not one of them accepted the writer’s more nuanced position as a proficient response to the SAT prompt. Later, Annie, winner of the junior year English award, went back through the essay with me, parsing each paragraph, as she critiqued the writer’s inability to “hold that thesis.”

I mean, she introduces, she argues one point, she argues a different point, and she concludes. Like it’s not like there’s a thesis, yeah, there isn’t really a thesis... It’s like there are two body paragraphs and they’re from a different essay almost. ...what I remember when I was writing my SAT essay, it was like I wanted to hold that thesis, that’s what I was thinking about, I wanna hold that thesis.

As the girls described much of their academic writing to me, it became clear that their difficulty engaging with the writer’s use of a qualified thesis rather than a categorical one

34 I believe in the best of all worlds, the two groups would have shared their imagined writers. Luke and Steve would have introduced their firebrand to the girls and how they came to imagine her. And in return, Annie and Eliza would have introduced their compliant student and how they came to imagine her. The four high school students would have shown one another how they read “Majority Rules” and, perhaps, they might have taught one another about how their life’s experiences had led them to make the judgments they had.
was a consequence of their over-generalizing the rules for writing the formal essay they had learned in school. Ironically, while the traditional academic essay has been vigorously identified with masculinity because it relies on adversarial positioning (Lillis, Frey), all four girls associated this writer's use of a qualified thesis as a sign of her intellectual weakness. Either this writer had failed to master the rules of the formal essay or she lacked passion and commitment to her idea, a failure to take up the more powerful masculine position. Although all four girls complained that the five paragraph had been "hammered into their heads" and although the girls reiterated their honors English teacher's lecture that they needed to be weaned away from the form, the girls both condemned and clung it. In their own ways, the girls described how the formula provided them safe passage through their academic writing where they could be recognized for holding fast to the form while protecting a subjective self from public shame or criticism.

When the girls reflected on their own SAT essays and the writing they chose to share with me, they often connected the issues of form, compliance and the loss of the self in their school writing. Kay explained that her favorite writing was the weekly essay she wrote in her AP history class. Mr. S, she said, provided students with a statement and, in return, they wrote an essay that either accepted or rejected his statement. "It's kind of good in a way," Kay explained. "You don't have to come up with an idea of your own but you have to prove or validate a statement the teacher gives us. It makes you think about how to use facts to back up a point." When I asked Kay what the history essay she had selected to represent her writing revealed about her as a writer, she said, without stopping a moment to think, "That I don't have any thoughts of my own."
Kay frequently returned to this theme, having no thoughts of her own or lacking a self to write about, when she explained why she was an academic writer and not a creative writer. Kay traced her fear of revealing herself in her writing back to elementary school when she was required to write daily in a classroom journal. “My life just wasn’t as interesting as other kids,” she insisted:

I felt like I had nothing to write about....It was intimidating ‘cause I felt like I’m not going to write enough, I’m not going to write about what they want me to write about. I’m so forced to measure up to other people who are funnier than I am or smarter than I am so I didn’t know where to go. But I knew there were people in my class who did.

On more than one occasion, Kay said, she resorted to inventing stories about her life to find any words to put in her journal. In third grade, when Kay and her classmates were asked to share their journals at parents’ night, Kay believed she had been caught in her crime. As if she were confessing a shameful act to me, Kay explained that she lied to her parents telling them that their journals were meant to be fiction. “It wasn’t that I was being imaginative,” Kay said, “but that I had lied.” Kay laughed as she often did when her words expressed hard felt sentiments, “I still haven’t told them. I felt horrible. I felt so guilty.” Academic writing provided Kay with the facts, the abstract context and the objective persona, she believed she needed to become a successful writer in her high school classes. Kay’s words echoed the finding of many women in the academic disciplines who lament that they can find nobody in their writing (Bolker, Lillis 116)

Like Kay who insisted she was absent in her essay writing, Carol explained that revealing herself in her school writing was far too risky. She saved her more personal writing for her private journal and fiction. Although Carol loved fiction, especially horror and fantasy, her academic interests were very different from my other six participants who went on to liberal arts colleges to study English, political science and
history. Carol, in contrast, went to one of the nation's finest technological institutes to study physics. Still, Carol loved reading fiction and making up stories just for the pleasure she received from the process. She traced her love of fiction writing back to the stories she wrote alongside her father, a science writer, and, sometimes fiction writer. Carol selected a short story to share with me as representative of her writing. Unlike the meek writer Carol described in her academic essays, the heroine of "Zombie Invasion!" single handedly saves her neighborhood from the titles' promised invasion. Bending the gender stereotype that boys write hero narratives and girls write about relationships, Carol's heroine, "decided it was her duty in this insane situation to fight off the zombies and get out of this neighborhood alive. Taking up this new responsibility with pride, she pulled a handsaw out of the toolbox…" In this story which Carol called "just a fun piece of writing," her female character assumes a substantially different relationship to power and authority than the one Carol assumed in her academic writing. As Carol would go on to explain, far more than an invasion of zombies was at stake in her success in school writing. Earning good grades across all of her classes, English and history included, required her at times to compromise her values.

Through our conversations together, Carol developed a theory about the two kinds of writing she engaged in: honest writing and innocent writing. Stories like "Zombie Invasion" were honest writing because they were guided by her own conscience, she explained. In her honest writing, Carol said, she could explore her opinions and beliefs and she often used this writing to follow her thoughts in her dreams and her day dreams. In contrast, Carol explained, the innocent writer is the student writer who writes to please her teachers and to protect herself from their judgments. For Carol, the expository essays
she was assigned in school and on standardize tests were innocent writing. I asked her to explain why she called this writing “innocent.”

CAROL: Well, almost scared to express their own opinion in case they may be judged or considered a bad person even. I think of the goody goody two shoes type of teacher’s pet that always says exactly what the teacher wants and doesn’t have their own personality. I see that a lot in expository writing for school and it’s definitely what I think of when I read through my stuff...because I’m writing what the teacher expects, what the teacher wants and not so much what I want.

BARBARA: Have you ever written an expository essay where you’ve presented a position you felt was risky or stepped over that boundary? Have you ever done that?

CAROL: I don’t think so. I care very, very much about my grades and as much as I would love to bring [my honest writing] into stuff that’s being graded, I would be too scared of getting a bad grade because the teacher doesn’t agree with it... I’d be scared to turn something like that in to a teacher.... If I had enough confidence in my ability to write good enough (laughs) then I would probably ignore a couple of the guidelines that teachers set in order to do my own thing because some teachers will, if you do a really good job with it, still give you a good grade, but I don’t feel as though I could do a good enough job for me to be allowed to.

Carol and Kay’s choice of words to describe their relationships to school writing and to their teachers and evaluators gives a sense of their emotional response to the selves they perform as writers: guilty, fearful and never quite good enough to receive permission to come out from hiding. Despite both girls extraordinary success in school, they believed that by following orders, so to speak, they protected themselves from harsh evaluation they believed could do them personal harm. Success and recognition in the school writing meant compliance to the rules and the presentation of an impersonal and abstract self who does not reveal that she thinks for herself.
Annie and Eliza presented a somewhat different response to the persona of the good academic writer. Annie agreed with Kay and Carol that the good academic writer must be abstract and compliant. Annie described the concept of voice they were learning to “put into” their writing in Mr. A’s English class, but she argued that writing “with a voice” would be dangerous in history writing and on standardized tests. “I would never put an ‘I statement’ in a history essay,” she said, “And I think it would be dangerous to put voice in an SAT essay. You’d be risking your score.” Annie explained that you can never trust what a scorer’s personal preference might be and besides, “It’s a standardized test,” she said, implying that the writer must assume the position of the abstract, rational thinker, neither emotional nor personal. As Annie and I spent more time together, she began taking my research questions with her into the classroom. In our final meeting, Annie told me she had come to some realizations about who she perceived herself to be as a history writer. “You know who I am in my writing?” Annie laughed. “I’m a little historian.” Annie had given some thought to who “the little historian” was and additionally to the writing persona some of the other students took up in her AP history class. Annie described the little historian persona she evoked in the essay she shared with me from her history class:

They do well in school and they try hard and they put effort into their work and in this essay...I think it does kind of come off that I liked this particular era, progressivism. ...and I think history is kind of a passion for them...
I don’t really get the whole feeling like this person is a friendly person, but I think they’re a nice person, Um, I can almost see them being someone who doesn’t have many friends, not that I don’t but, I could see this person kind of really being into school as opposed to a social life.

Annie described the writer of her essay, in the third person plural, to describe a gender free, abstract, hardworking, passionate student. Once again, Annie brought up the
connection she had made earlier about the successful student writer and her limited affiliations with others. As Annie elaborated on the image of herself she wanted to project to her teacher, Mr. S, she made it clear that she did not want him to have access to a more subjective, personal self in the classroom or in her history essays. The degree of her desire to maintain the persona of a rational, abstract student struck me when Annie began describing her insights into why Nick would write very different papers in history than she.

Do you know Nick a little bit? I was thinking about him and he was in my AP US history class. I don’t think this is the kind of writing he would write for Mr. S. He tries to be friends with his teachers and I think maybe it’s part of the guy thing, like I could see Steve doing this too, but I don’t think he’d try to portray that he’s the perfect little student without a social life...I think he’d probably try to make it look like it’s a little easier for him or not less effort but that he’s writing the paper for a different reason, not so much for the grade. I think of him in class with Mr. S. You know the boys definitely didn’t act the same way. I mean him and [the other boys] definitely didn’t act the same way like the girls would toward Mr. S. We wanted him to think we were good students and that we weren’t out doing whatever.

Annie believed the “top boys” friendly relationship with Mr. S spilled over into their writing where she believed the boys presented themselves as humorous and friendly, a persona which identifies hard work as an negative character trait. Annie said, “I’d feel really uncomfortable doing that. It’s not their [the teachers’] fault. I just want to keep that separate.”

Annie could not elaborate on why the top boys and girls sought different relationships with their teachers, but she did sum up her narrative on Nick and the boys with the problem of the top girls’ need to be perfect. “Eliza and I were talking about this the other day...I don’t know about all the girls but the competitive girls, we don’t [ask for extensions.] We just think we have to be perfect and we have to get these papers in on
time. I don't think the same kind of pressure is there [for the boys].” Despite the gender differences Annie was beginning to notice in her classrooms, and despite her awareness that she survived by maintaining a split between her sense of an academic self and a personal self, of all the girls, Annie presented her situation as a student and as a writer as most positive and issue free.

When it came to suppressing the self in her writing, Eliza was the outlier. Raised by several generations of women writers, Eliza found tremendous pleasure in dreaming up and writing stories about imaginary characters. She described pushing her scooter through the city’s neighborhoods on her daily paper route making up a new character for herself each day. She said, “I remember a favorite one that lasted the longest. I was a girl in Colonial America carrying messages to warn families about British ships coming into the harbor.” Eliza’s love of dreaming up and writing fiction made high school history difficult for her because her first impulse was to turn the lives of historical figures into fictional accounts. “I just wanted to invent the characters,” she told me. “I know that everyone really liked this person but there had to be something bad I could stick in there.”

Eliza explained, however, that she quickly found pleasures in history and research writing. In all my work with the girls, only Eliza talked about academic writing as a joyful activity that could be driven by the writer’s own insights in the material. Describing a lengthy research project that culminates the high school’s English and history curriculum each year, Eliza said:

I was uncovering something totally new. I was awe struck by what I was finding and putting together...I absolutely loved reading the books and then making a time line of German history and then seeing, ok, this fairy tale is like this war... I loved that project so and I have only good memories of it.
Like Carol who wrote “Zombie Invasion,” Eliza had a passion for fiction and journal writing outside of school and on her own time. And like Carol, Eliza rarely shared that writing with anyone: the process was pleasurable and had its own rewards.

Unlike the other “top girls,” however, Eliza explained that now that she had reached her senior year, she realized that for her striving to be number one had been an empty pursuit for perfection that had little connection to learning for her.

I worked so hard for my whole school career to get where I am and in the end it comes down to this. I think that I’m totally over the whole trying to be number one. I don’t want to go to a school where it’s going to be another four years of that. I want to go to a school where people want to explore things that they love and they don’t want to have to excel at something they hate just because someone said they should.

There are people who are ranked in the thirties who I know are so much smarter than people ranked in the teens. They just don’t care about school as much. But it’s not the end of the world if they’re not in the top ten percent. And I was like that for so long. Being number two wouldn’t make me any better at writing; it wouldn’t make me any nicer of a person. It took me a long time to get here.

Ranked 12th in her class, Eliza had come to believe competition had done more to get in the way of her learning than to propel it. As she claimed above, by her senior year, she was dropping out of the competition and focusing on learning and defining her own standards for success. As she made her college choices, Eliza was careful to select a college that emphasized learning as pleasurable and self-sponsored and downplayed competition and ranking. While my other six participants went off to colleges on US News’ top twenty-five lists, Eliza turned down some of these schools to attend somewhat less competitive research university which she felt would provide her with greater diversity of people and curricular choices.
I began these findings on the girls’ iterations of the good SAT writer claiming that these high achieving girls relegated the good female writer to the cultural spaces of schooling and testing where she was inevitably and perpetually a passive object to external authority. The girls’ imaginative work suggests that this high achieving female writer strives to appropriate the voice of a rational, masculine and abstract speaker whose intellectual power is demonstrated by her ability to hang on tightly to a proposition, with little regard to her personal commitment to or understanding of the issues involved. Taking up this rhetorical position, however, required the girls to confront a number of ambivalences and contradictions as they simultaneously engaged in the discourses of traditional femininity and the “popular” teenage girl. Despite the similarities across the four girls, each girl, given her own disposition, her own dreams, talents and desires, situated this collectively imagined “good writer” differently within the shifting contexts of her life. For Annie, the pursuit of the rational academic voice, absent of feelings and a personal voice, was a worthwhile endeavor. At that moment in her life, maintaining the persona of the perfectly disciplined student and maintaining a clean separation between the authorities that credentialled her public life and the personal conscious she turned to in her private life allowed Annie to navigate and to rationalize the many contradictions and ambiguities she discovered being a “good writer” and a “top five student” entailed. Satisfied with the rewards she received from being a top student, Annie appeared quite matter of fact when she explained to me why other students do not like the “top five.” These ill feelings were something she had learned to accept as the price to pay for being one of the brightest. Annie did not articulate the sense of loss that both Kay and Carol encountered when they took up their pens to write for schooling and testing. Although
both Kay and Carol received outstanding grades for their school writing, both clearly experienced their writing as performed exclusively for an authoritative other which left them feeling that their personal positions were potentially shameful or deserving of rebuke and that their academic writing was an empty shell built upon the ideas of others. Finally, Eliza was working to recover a passion for writing and learning, but this required her to give up her aspiration to be the authority driven, high scoring writer the girls collectively imagined. In a less competitive environment, Eliza hoped, she could escape the clutch of these powerful norms and rediscover the “awe” and “fun” she experienced as a younger writer.

Despite current claims that the educational goals of second wave feminists have been achieved and that the crisis of education today is the failure of boys to thrive in what have become the feminized institution of schooling (Newkirk 2002), there is an eerie similarity between my female participants feelings about their school writing and the young women Joan Bolker called Griseldas in a 1979 College English article. Over thirty years ago, Joan Bolker told the stories of two of her female students, one at Harvard and the other at Yale, who despite successful college careers were unhappy with their writing despite the steady stream of B+’s and A-‘s their writing received. Listening to these young women tell her why they felt absent from their writing, Bolker compares these young women to Chaucer’s Griselda because, like Griselda who traded away her children to please her husband, these writers were willing to please their reader no matter what the cost to themselves. Bolker suggests that the pull of traditional gender discourses on these high achieving young women, particularly the need to please, conflicts with the
requirement that the academic writer confront issues that have solutions that “are not neat” and “may offend.” She writes:

[P]art of learning to be “a good girl” means learning what pleases those around you, and acting that way. Griselda has no difficulty thinking about the reader of her writing—she always thinks about the reader, because she is used to thinking about others. She has a different problem: she thinks too little about the writer. (907)

Bolker’s claim that these young women know their readers all too well adds an additional complicating factor to Britton’s understanding of the maturing writer. Bolker’s work and my participant’s insights into their own writing suggest that the relationship between student and teacher, writer and reader, is not a simple reciprocity, the more one knows the other, the more one knows the self. Bolker suggests that the “top five” female writers suffer because they are far more attuned to the demands and desires of the other than they are “paying attention to [their] own state of mind while writing” (907). Britton claimed that the maturing writer must relinquish the hold external authorities have over their writing so that he or she can address their reader as peers. And while Britton is often quoted for his memorable line—“Reading and writing float on a sea of talk” (Language and Learning 164)— Britton did not have the post-structuralist tools to understand that the sea of talk is far from homogenous because it provides very different rides across diverse populations of individuals, even when they share the same communities and classrooms.

More recently, Britton’s “sea of talk” has been explored by linguistic and educational researchers who bring a feminist post-structuralist framework to understanding the ways that educational discourses and practices constitute the gendered, literate subject (Baxter 2002, 2003; Gornick 2006, 2007; Arnot 2006; Davies &
Saltmarsh 2007). These scholars argue that although literacy practices may be understood and presented as gender-neutral skills, they are built upon discourses that include gender values and beliefs contrary to the claim of gender equity. As my participants have shown, the form of the five paragraph essay may be the same across all students, but the discourses each student took up to understand the authority of this prescribed essay was very different. Judith Butler’s understanding that “the terms that make up one’s gender are from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author,” (qtd. in Davies and Saltmarsh 6) suggests how the discourses my participants drew on to constitute who they were reside at a level of unconscious awareness and make it difficult for them and for us to recognize how important gendered values are when our students draw from them to become “recognizably someone” (Davies and Saltmarsh 7) The work of these feminist post-structuralist scholars concurs with my findings: despite the tremendous gains girls have made in academic achievement and access to post-secondary education, traces of the obedient female persistently constrain high achieving girls in their ability to take on authoritative, critical positions (Davies & Saltmarsh 2007, Ringrose 2007, Gornick 2007). Furthermore, these constraints make the path to becoming a competent essay writer filled with personal contradictions and ambivalences that often distance the writer’s sense of her own subjectivity from her academic writing performances. Our contemporary sea of talk continues to reward high achieving girls when they bow to authority rather than provide them with opportunities to engage with authority as authentic and critical individuals.
Part Three

Writing the SAT Essay:

The Tug of True and False Self Performances

If we were to reorient the ways social memory and cultural identity have traditionally been studied, with disciplinary emphasis on literary and historical documents, and look through the lens of performed, embodied behaviors, what would we know that we do not know now? Whose stories, memories, and struggles might have become visible? What tensions might performance behavior show that would not be recognized in texts and documents?

--Diana Taylor

Today, the standardized test scores of Yankee City students are “warehoused” by a state department of education that encourages teachers and administrators to use these archives to write curriculum and to guide their instruction of children. The following introduction to educational data warehouses by the Data Quality Campaign suggests the pressure upon teachers to understand their students through the lens of archived histories:

Imagine if, at the start of the school year, a teacher could have detailed information about the academic history of every student in her or his

107 The state Department of Education maintains an internet cite titled “Education Data Warehouse” (EDW). The EDW “is a collaborative effort of the...Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and local school districts to centralize K-12 educational performance data into one state coordinated data repository hosted by the Department.” Currently the warehouse contains a student level information system (SIM) and individual and aggregate scores on state mandated testing in math, reading, writing, and science. While federal law restricts access to these files only to those school personnel who have been “determined to have an educational interest in the child,” state law requires that only “school personnel working directly with the student may have access to information in the student record without the specific, informed, written consent of the parent or eligible student” (2, 1). Student data moves with the child should he or she move from one district to another. Currently, three six hour courses are available online to school district personal on the use of the warehouse to interpret data and design curriculum (Educational Data Warehouse).

108 The Data Quality Campaign a “collaborative effort to encourage and support state policymakers to improve the availability and use of high-quality education data to improve student achievement” has over 90 partners including the College Board, ETS and the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education is funded by philanthropic organizations like The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation (“About DCQ”).
classroom. This is possible if the teacher can log on to a Web site that provides access to an educational data warehouse. The teacher would see not only several years of state assessment results, but also enrollment history, demographics, program participation, discipline records, and schedule and transcript information. With this reliable and easy-to-access background information, the teacher could design an appropriate academic approach to meet the needs of each individual student and the class as a whole. (1)

From the perspective of the Data Quality Campaign, effective teaching is measured by improved educational outcomes, e.g. test results. Given the tremendous differences across the performances of my seven participants that are not revealed by test scores, one must ask how informative—or perhaps more to the point, how destructive—standardized writing scores are to "design(ing) an appropriate academic approach to meet the needs of each...student..." Neither Carol nor Kay's perceptions of the spaces of academic writing as overtly rule oriented and judgmental suggest that they would benefit from a curriculum designed from the scores earned on a standardized test of writing. I would further contend that the girls response to the authority of schooling and testing suggest that neither would make gains from direct instruction in writing the essay from a teacher authority.

Just as Winnicott argued that there is no such thing as a baby without its mother, I situate these findings about my participants' writing of their own SAT essays in a similar assumption: there is no such thing as an SAT essay without the third space created when writer, prompt and context meet. As Diana Taylor asks in the passage I use to introduce this section, what more might we learn if we look at SAT essays, not as a durable artifacts to examine in isolation, but as human performances that rise from the bodies of students in the testing environments we create for them? This assumption allows us to consider the limitations of the educational data warehouses and the psychometric claim to
objectivity that testing agencies' like ETS rely upon to evaluate the reliably, validly and fairness of their tests to measure large populations of test takers. Performance theorist Diana Taylor asks us the question, what would happen if we turn our lens away from the archive, the warehouses, and the essays themselves and turn instead to the performing body to understand what learning to write means. In this third section, I first report my findings from the archive, the SAT essays written by my participants where once again the boys' and girls' essays took up distinctly different discourses. I then turn to two participants' performances of their essays, the "restored behaviors" or "twice behaved behavior" (Schechner) of Carol and Steve as they read their SAT essays aloud to me and we consider them in the context of the conference room on a Sunday afternoon. These oral performances of their essays, in a different social space, occurring several weeks after their writing, provided participants with what Schechner describes as "experience(ing) 'me in another state of feeling/being' as if there were multiple 'me's' in each person." As they read their SAT essays aloud, Carol and Steve discussed with me their SAT performances from the new position of the 'me's' available to them in the interview context. From these "twice behaved behaviors" and our ensuing discussions, Carol, Steve and I derived insights about their SAT performances that are not visible from the texts themselves.

In the previous sections of this chapter, I state that the girls and boys collectively imagined the context of testing quite differently, and, more particularly, these high achieving girls were especially vulnerable to the discourses of gender and school compliance that often left them feeling absent from their writing. Given the differences across participants' descriptions of these psycho-social spaces of testing, the SAT essays
my participants composed begin to make more sense—not in terms of better and worse, mature and immature, higher and lower—but as reasonable responses to the idiosyncrasies of the psycho-social spaces of testing formed from the nexus of the cultural environment provided for them and their construal of it.

Given my previous findings, it makes sense that the three boys composed literary essays with strong personal—and at times satirical—voices, while all four girls wrote academic essays in the abstract, disembodied voice of the scientific report. The girls’ turn to abstract reasoning rather than the subjective personal voice to gain recognition for their writing has an interesting historical parallel in the development of the genre literacy scholars call “essayist literacy” in the early modern era (Scollon and Scollon, Olson, Trimbur). Essayist literacy, much like the essays composed by the girls, arose when shifts in cultural ideology such as those resulting from the Protestant Reformation and the rise of the empirical sciences worked to move the authority of the text away from the status of its writer and into the discourses of reason situated in the text itself (Trimbur 79). This shift in authority away from the status of the writer and into a text’s conformity to the discourses of reason was an important emancipatory move to the extent that it entitled individuals access to public deliberation given, as Terry Eagleton notes, “the degree to which they are constituted as discoursing subjects in a consensus of universal reason” (Eagleton 9, qtd in Trimbur 79). This historical shift provides an analogy for understanding why the girls attached themselves to the abstract authority of the five paragraph school essay. Lacking the conviction that they possessed the authority to speak for themselves and fearing the potential for public rebuke for exposing an unconstrained subjectivity, the girls clung to an essay form that shifts authority away
from the subjective voice of the author and into the text, where culturally sanctioned rules
and facts—not personal authority, nor individual interpretation, nor artistic flourish—
provided them a safer avenue to school and teacher recognition.

Similar differences across the boys’ and girls’ essays persisted in all the SAT essays my participants contributed to the study: girls wrote their essays in the disembodied voice of the academic essay while the boys wrote literary essays, Steve and Luke’s in a first person, familiar voice. All three boys, taking up the personal voices of the literary essay received a score of 11. Writing in the abstract, disembodied voice of the academic essay and relying largely on information learned in their history and English classes, the girls received scores of 11, 9, 9, and 8 for theirs.109 As Diana Turner suggests, many surprises came to light as my participants performed and reflected on the discoursal selves they discovered in their SAT essays. These surprises included mismatches between the selves participants experienced while writing their essays, the discoursal selves participants discovered in their texts upon later reflection, and my own interpretation of my participants’ identity performances drawn from my reading of their essays. Put differently, from my perspective I could not have interpreted my participants’ experience of writing these essays from my reading of them. And from their perspectives: the external forces that impinged upon their writing often lay below the level of consciousness and only became apparent to them when their essays were re performed (twice performed) in a different context. Away from the conditions of testing, in an environment that provided both my participants and me the luxury of time and space to

109 Three of the girls’ essays received a score of a 4 from one of their readers. Because these essays were almost flawless in mechanics, the College Board’s explanation of their scoring suggests that the essays weaknesses were the superficiality of reasoning and/or uneven development (Scorewrite, 6).
bring our “multiple me’s” to the conversation, there was much for all of us to learn that was not apparent on the written page.

**Case Studies of Two SAT Essays: Steve and Carol**

The openings of Carol and Steve’s SAT essays:
(See Appendix B for complete essays)

Many people spend their lives striving for fame. The quest for notoriety is, however, a fool’s errand; once attained, fame is precious and fleeting, like a seductress’ kiss. Andy Warhol’s famous quote about everyone having their “Fifteen Seconds of Fame” rings true today and many one-hit wonders and toasts of the hour fall prey to America’s chronically short attention span. Even if long lasting fame is attained, however, the reward is still empty like so many other things in life. Fame simply cannot bring lasting happiness.

---Steve

For the most of the history of man on Earth, there has been a large amount of unnecessary hard labor. Recently, in the past 100 years or so developments have been made to take the labor out of the hands of man and put it into machinery. All this wonderful modern technology is very helpful in that it gives people more time to spend doing what they want and further the progress of humanity, and yet some people believe it is a good idea not to get too wrapped up in the fast-paced world of computers, electronic devices, appliances, and machines. They have the right idea; using technology too much can lead to some poor consequences.

--Carol

I turn to Carol and Steve’s SAT essays because they represent the range of differences that arose across my seven participants’ SAT writing experiences. Steve’s essay response to the prompt, “Are people motivated to achieve by personal satisfaction rather than money or fame?” quickly shifts from his display of rather erudite literary references to a satirical account of the writer’s decision to maintain happiness by choosing not to publish his writing in *The New Yorker*. Although Steve’s facility with language and his knowledge of literary culture stand out in this short essay, the essay’s
meaning depends on this satirical turn which asserts several paradoxes given the testing context: the examinee professes his own brilliance to his examiner and the examinee chooses personal happiness over public recognition.

In contrast to Steve who risked asserting a counter-intuitive and subjective perspective, Carol responded to her prompt, "Do changes that make our lives easier not necessarily make them better?" by situating her essay in "most of the history of man on Earth." Writing her essay in the disembodied voice of the academic essay, Carol supports her thesis, "using technology can lead to some poor consequences," with general references to "the average American's" dependence on iPods, cell phones and washing machines. Such dependence, the essay concludes, "could quickly turn into a destruction of humanity's creativity and ability to think." As all four girls had proclaimed earlier, Carol did not waver from her categorical thesis. And despite her extraordinary background in physics and her rather extraordinary conclusion that our dependence on technology could destroy "humanity's creativity and ability to think," her essay fails to engage her subject in a substantive way. Both Carol and Steve received almost perfect scores on the multiple choice section of the SAT writing test. Carol received a score of 8 on her essay which placed her total score in the 94 percentile all test takers. Steve fared better. He received a score of 11 on his essay which placed his total score in the 99+ percentile of test takers.110

My conversations with Carol and Steve about their essays reveal the sorts of mismatches that arise between our professional assessments drawn from student texts and the students' own assessments drawn from their experience of writing. For example, I

110 To date, the College Board has not released concise data on essay scores and test taker demographics.
was surprised to hear Carol explain that writing her essay was a “joyful” experience because, she explained, it was the first time she felt “free” from the judgments of her teachers to write her “honest opinions.” Steve, however, expressed how anxiety provoking this writing experience was for him given that only a few months earlier he had cancelled his SAT scores because he was barely able to get his essay started. Given Carol’s stilted use of abstract language and Steve’s personal voice and subtle use of satire and paradox, a reader of these texts might find these writer’s experiences puzzling. I turn to Winnicott’s understanding that creative activity occurs in psycho-social spaces through the dynamic interaction of selves he labeled the true and false selves to understand Carol and Steve’s experiences as they wrote their twenty-five minute SAT essays. Winnicott’s concepts of the true and false selves allow us to understand the many conscious and unconscious forces and the intentional and unintentional drives at play as participants creatively and/or compliantly composed for their SAT scorers.

**Writers Performing as True and False Selves.**

It is lamentable that Winnicott chose the labels true and false selves to describe the nature of the individual’s experience as he or she relates to an external environment. Given the postmodern rejection of an essential self, the terms true and false do little to provide an image of a self that is multiple and discursively constructed. Nevertheless, it should be understood that as with much of Winnicott’s theoretical work, his concepts were derived from his patients’ descriptions of their own experience. Much like Carol who explained that she suppressed her “honest writing” when she wrote essays for her English and history teachers, Winnicott described the false self as those self-performances individuals feel they perform to comply with the demands of an external
environment. On the other hand, Winnicott refused to define the true self other than to note that these “spontaneous” performances allow the individual to feel “real” and “alive.” Today we might describe true self performances as those which occur in the moment when internal desire engages an external object in a way that is experienced as uniquely one’s own. These are the Winnicottian moments I described earlier as “playing,” when relations of power slip away and subject and object merge.

Psychoanalyst Adam Phillips explains the paradox of Winnicott’s use of the terms true and false in this way:

He proposed an essentialist theory but with an essence, the True Self, that by definition could not be formulated except in the most rudimentary of terms. “It does no more’, he wrote, ‘than collect together the details of the experience of aliveness.’ ...It was, for Winnicott, not a question of what was real about humans—which would presuppose a known essence—but what, for each person, ‘gives the feeling of real.’ This could only be found by each person for himself. (127, italics mine)

Unlike Freud’s infant who is motivated by instinctual, narcissistic drives, Winnicott’s baby longs to “act spontaneously” to engage with her environment in ways that make her “feel real,” “authentic,” and “alive.” Unlike contemporary conceptions of human development that value the increasing autonomy of the self, Winnicott’s notion of this drive to “feel real” describes a natural impetus to engage the world in increasing mutual and inclusive ways (Tuber 51). While the individual’s capacity to “live creatively,” “authentically,” and to “feel real” was the goal of Winnicott’s work with his patients, he was highly attuned to the danger of defining the true self for his patients, particularly given the threat of totalitarian regimes in Europe in the first half of the last century. To define “the feeling of real” for another, he argued, denies them access to that very feeling and fails to recognize the other as an individual in his or her own right. Subsequently, the
importance of the term, the true self, served largely to elucidate an understanding of false self-performances: those compliant selves who emerge in response to a coercive environment in order to maintain relationship, recognition and to protect the true self from harm.

In Jane Flax’s description of Winnicott’s false self, one can hear the echoes of my participants’ descriptions of the writing selves they often felt compelled to perform for their teachers, most notably the girls who described their need to dissociate a personal, interior self from the self they performed in their school writing. Flax writes:

The false self is marked by a “disassociation between intellectual activity and psychosomatic existence.” Persons with a false self are also likely to be pervaded with a feeling of being “fake” or “pretender”—split between an external performing “self” and an inner world of different qualities, feelings and yearnings. (113)

Carol’s decision not to reveal her “honest opinions” in her school essays, Annie’s determination to keep her private life separate from her relationships with teachers, and Kay’s comment that her writing shows that she “doesn’t have any ideas of my own” are examples of Winnicott’s false self-performances. Unlike teachers today who are mandated by the federal government to use common standards to assess their students’ work, Winnicott’s primary concern was understanding the environmental factors that produced these false self-performances in order to help his patients recover the experience of their own self agency. Without some experience of themselves as agentive writers, without some experience of an environment that recognized them as individuals who has something worthwhile to say, Winnicott would have argued, Carol and Kay felt particularly compelled to rely on false self-performances to be recognized as legitimate writers and scholars. As the two girls noted, their school writing experience often left
them feeling personally absent, inauthentic and, at times, dishonest. These performances of a compliant self were Winnicott’s concern, not only for the sake of the child’s development, but for the sake of a civil society that values multiplicity and the uniqueness of the individual (see Nussbaum on Winnicott and civic life).

Despite his overriding concern for false self-performances, Winnicott claimed that compliant performances are not only necessary to everyday living in a civil society but also as a way of “enabling the True Self to start to live” (“Ego Distortion” 148). From waiting in line for one’s turn to recognizing the individuality in another, these restrained behaviors are essential to provide others the space necessary to perform spontaneously and creatively themselves and to provide for those moments when two individuals encounter one another as equals, mutually responding to one another in play. At the heart of Winnicott’s understanding of just society is this notion of a shared, mutual space where individual voices are given the space to deliberate with one another (Nussbaum 391). What was of concern to Winnicott was the child—and the adult—who could not internally deliberate with her multiple selves and had no experience of herself as the agent of her own behavior. This child overdevelops her identification with authority figures and performs as a compliant false self in order to maintain a positive, if one sided, relationship with the authorities in her environment (Tubin 62). This experience of lost personal agency is wonderfully expressed in a reflection written by a first year college student who repeats the sentiments of several of my girl participants.

*Being a perfect little intelligent blond girl all my life has produced in me the almost unconscious skill of kissing ass....The one thing that I really worry about now is not that I am being unoriginal, but that I am being unoriginal in order to reach a goal that may not be what I truly want.*

(Nick Tingle, “Mastering Academic Writing”)
The "perfect little intelligent blond girl" is not particularly concerned about "kissing ass." She is concerned, however, that her history of compliant behavior has led her to accept normalized goals rather than experience her own desires. Like the "perfect little intelligent blond girl," the girls in my study persistently described their school and SAT writing performances as performances in compliance that rarely involved their sense of an agentive or "true self." Unlike the three boys, they experienced their school environments as potentially unsafe spaces where the expression of a subjective, agentive, self was too risky to undertake. Nevertheless, despite the many similarities within the gendered friendship groupings, as Carol and Steve reflected on their SAT experiences, they described an unfolding hybrid of true and false self performances, few of which I could have predicted from their SAT essays and few of which they could have brought to conscious awareness without re-experiencing their writing as "twice behaved" performances.

**Carol's Experience of Feeling Real**

I like to think of my work this way, and to think that if I do this well enough the patient will find his or her own self, and will be able to exist and to feel real. Feeling real is more than existing; it is finding a way to exist as oneself, and to relate to objects as oneself...

(Winnicott, Mirror-Role 117)

As Carol described her SAT writing experience a few weeks after the exam, several key phrases kept reappearing. Her writing experience was "joyful," she said; "I kept losing myself in my thinking"; and "it was kind of like stream of consciousness writing," which allowed her to reveal her "honest thinking." Carol's description of her experience writing her SAT essay provides an example of Winnicott's understanding of
the "spontaneous," "authentic" engagement of the "true self." Ironically, Carol's first foray into engaging a "real self" in essay writing occurred on the SAT which for her was a far less anxiety provoking experience than writing essays for her teachers. To explain her comfort, Carol said, she usually did well on standardized tests, and, as an intended major in theoretical physics, she felt confident she would do well enough on the writing test; beside, she said, the technological institutes she was apply to would not consider her writing scores. Writing in an environment she found less authoritarian than school, Carol explained, "It was one of my first chances to write from the science and technology part of myself... I spent a lot of time after thinking about it, like when I got home. It was just a very interesting question." It is this sort of engagement that Winnicott believed made a person "feel real" "alive" and was essential for the unfolding of an individual, agentive self.

As Winnicott's definitions of the "true self" suggest, what determined Carol's self agency was Carol's own felt sense and not another's interpretation of her experience or essay. From my description of Carol's essay, it should be obvious that I could see none of Carol's "joyful" engagement in my reading of the essay. Rather, I worried how this sometimes sexist and grandiose language had seeped so deeply into what she experienced as honest deliberations with herself without recognizing these discourses for what they were (or rather, for what I saw them as). But from Carol's standpoint, she was describing an experience she claimed never to have experienced before. What mattered at that moment to Carol was her experience writing the essay, an experience she noted that was very different from the school writing she had described earlier. Recall that it was Carol
who stated that she had never risked expressing her own opinion in a school essay. It was uncovering this experience of an agentive self that I wanted to explore with Carol.

Because this newly felt experience was not something I could see on the written page, I asked Carol where I might see signs of her “forgetting the rules” and her “honest thinking.” Her answer was immediate; she knew the precise moments when she had committed an infraction. She told me, “I used rhetorical questions, lots of opinions and not a whole lot of specific detail.” Carol expressed her liberation from the rules as if she were ticking them off from a memorized check list of does and don’ts that invaded her thinking when writing school essays. She explained that as she wrote she hoped that the scorers would understand that these infractions were indications the writer was a “serious student,” “someone more concerned with important issues than with proving how well they can write an essay.” Carol understood that she had made a purposeful decision. She interpreted this decision to break the rules and to expose her “honest thinking” as an act of resistance that should reveal that she was in truth a scholar and not a poser. Through Carol’s eye, the seriousness she experienced in her engagement with the topic and her decision not to comply with all the rules of essay writing should be noted and valued by her scorers. Although the resultant essay was not a high scoring SAT essay, Winnicott would have argued for the importance of this very experience to Carol’s development as an agentive writer. Carol felt enough at ease with this external environment that she engaged a self she experienced as “feeling real.” Ironically, for Carol, the SAT writing test, as she construed it, allowed her to experience a more agentive sense of herself as essay writer than she had previously described in her school essay writing.
What Carol was not able to see was that despite her purposeful decision to break rules and expose her “honest thinking,” below the level of her consciousness awareness, she was still complying with the discourses of the pseudo academic essay. Because she had never written outside the boundaries of this genre, because she had always written as a “false” compliant self, Carol had little prior experience imagining a self or a context to write from. As she looked for the words to embark on her essay, Carol had little recourse other than to unconsciously take up the only essay writing voice she knew: objective and distant. Regardless of her desire to resist the genre that had been “hammered into [her] head,” Carol’s writing was still confined to a psyche-social space defined by authoritative and abstract rules. Writing within this isolated, disembodied psycho-social space, Carol had few internalized voices from her cultural surround to engage with as she worked to articulate her “honest thinking.” Having experienced writing essays as a compliant, false self, so routinely disassociated from her experience of herself as agentive subject, Carol had minimal experience as a writer recognizing, monitoring and engaging with the many conversations that circulated around her topic.

Despite the positive feelings Carol associated with the actual writing of her SAT essay, she decided that in retrospect the lesson she learned was a cynical one. Her score of 8, she believed, was a decidedly poor one, and, as we talked, she came to the conclusion that despite her knowledge of science and technology, her essay revealed a writer exploring a subject “they don’t fully understand.” And as much as her desire was to explore her “honest thinking” about the prompt, her mistake was not to “fake an opinion for the sake of getting a good grade... and even if you don’t necessarily believe in one or the other of the sides...just pick one anyway, like the one you can think of the
most specific details for.” Because of her mediocre score, Carol’s first experiment in writing as a “real self” became yet another object lesson in her need to value compliant performances. Carol decision was to return to the comfort and safety of compliance: following rules and supporting positions that were not of her own making. When her senior year SAT came around, Carol explained, she would be prepared to “fake an opinion” and “obey the rules of the five paragraph essay.”

**Steve: Monitoring the Push and Pull of True and False Selves**

Unlike Carol, Steve’s SAT writing score mattered. He intended to major in writing in some form in college and noted that, “A horrible score on the essay would look just terrible.” Soon after I began meeting with Steve, he took the SAT for the first time and immediately cancelled his scores. He was barely through his first paragraph when time ran out. “I was just completely unprepared,” he said. “I know that shouldn’t matter. I knew I was going to take it, but the fact that I got there, and I was still waking up, and I was just handed an essay question, I panicked.” In response to his panic, Steve was the only participant to seriously prepare for writing the SAT essay. “My parents made me,” he said:

...when they found out I hadn’t finished the essay. They made me answer a ton of prompts ’cause they wanted me to get in the practice of writing with time constraints. I don’t think they even read them. They just handed me prompts. They’d be, “Here, write an essay.”

The practice paid off, helping Steve to deal with more than his panic. On test day, Steve opened his test book to find a prompt much like one his parents had given him a few weeks earlier. Moreover, he claimed the topic of happiness and celebrity was a favorite of his and of one of his favorite writer’s, Chuck Klosterman. Speak of a level playing field?
Steve brought to his testing site a wealth of already digested, manipulated and spun out material on the subject of celebrity and happiness.

Much of Steve’s advantage can be attributed to the reading and writing experience he brought to the test. Nevertheless, the nature of Steve’s experience was qualitatively different from Carol’s. Unlike Carol who kept her writing compartmentalized between those spaces where she felt free to write “her honest thinking” and those spaces where she felt compelled to “follow the rules,” Steve had a long history of writing school papers that reflected not so much the teacher’s assigned topics, but Steve’s playful adaptation of them. From his elementary teacher condoning the writing of Super Monkey comics in the back of the classroom to his sixth grade teacher’s puzzlement at the way Bart Simpson and Mel Brooks kept working their way into his school essays, Steve managed to find ways to keep his school writing lively and personally engaging and to keep his teachers listening. While Steve was very attuned to the external forces that rewarded compliant performances in his high school, when it came to writing assignments, he often looked for ways to resist and manipulate “the expected response” in order to engage himself, if not his reader. Winnicott would call Steve’s manipulation of these writing assignments “authentic” performances, not because they allowed Steve to project a “true self” into his written text but because they allowed Steve to experience himself as a subjective agent. This distinction is important. Unlike the “authentic voice” pedagogies of the 1970s and 1980s which located “authenticity” in the text and in the voice of a discoursal self, Winnicott locates “authenticity” in the embodied, felt experience of the creative process. For this reason, authenticity is only discernible by the writer him or herself through embodied experience as the case of Carol attests. In Steve’s conversation about his SAT
essay, what became apparent is that Steve's motivation was not so much that he present a "real self" in his essay, but that he maintain agency over the design of a discoursal self through navigating and resisting the structural tensions presented by the testing environment.

For Steve, the problem of authenticity and writing for an evaluative audience like the SAT meant contending with a persistent tension between compliance and resistance, between asserting a resistant self and complying with the demands of the test. As he tried to grasp an understanding of how he navigated this conflict, Steve explained his understanding of authorship as the creation of various "masks" he felt were most suitable for the writing occasion. Unlike Carol who saw her English teachers as the arbiters of rules, Steve had a long history of experiencing his own agency as a writer by manipulating these masks, at times delighting and/or bewildering his teachers. Nevertheless, Steve was well aware that some genres compel the writer to self-identify more than others and for Steve the SAT essay was just such a genre. He explained that the SAT essay posed a difficult dilemma for him because the prompts invite a personal response, and revealing oneself in writing, he claimed, was particularly problematical. "I mean," he said, "I don't have a clearly defined view of who I am, and I don't want to either, so that's why my essays sometimes end up jumbled... But you can't do that on the SAT. You need to give them a short, concise, well-structured argument in a very short time."

To succeed at writing the SAT essay, Steve explained, he "put on a mask" that allowed him to "gloss over his opinions," so that he could limit his subject and contend with the test's time constraints. "The SAT questions," he continued, "aren't too difficult
in that you need to lie to paint an intelligent portrait of yourself ... you just can't give it
the amount of introspection that would make a good essay.” Nevertheless, he said, he
refused to “write the cookie cutter responses” he felt the SAT prompts tend to provoke.
Rather than reduce his response to the “expected position,” Steve explained that he could
write a more engaging essay by getting “a few conflicting ideas going on a topic.”
Writing to reconcile the conflict, he said, engaged him in the process and allowed him to
write a “more nuanced” and “original” essay. In Winnicott’s terms, Steve understood
SAT writing as the designing of masks that variously engaged in true and false self-
performances. These agentive, if contrived, masks, were of his own design and allowed
him to simplify questions of personal identity that he believed otherwise reside outside
the limitations of the essay. Paradoxically, Steve’s invention of these false self masks is
what allowed him to experience himself as an “authentic” writer because he understood
that he was the one who created the masks to suit the occasion. While not particularly
pleased with the writing he felt forced to produce for a time test, he believed his capacity
to design his own masks served a function. Steve got the results he desired without
betraying his personal identity or beliefs.

Steve drew further insights into his performance of a discoursal self on the SAT
essay as he read the written words of his essay out loud to me. This oral reading — his
“twice behaved behavior”— provided Steve with a material script and a context apart
from his original performance that provided him other standpoints, other “multiple me’s”
to deliberate upon what he had written. As Steve read aloud, he stopped frequently as he
noticed the constraints the testing context placed upon his writing decisions. After
reading the first few lines of his essay—“...fame is precious and fleeting, like a

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seductress’ kiss”—Steve stopped short and laughed out loud. “Wow,” he said, “That’s an
embarrassing sentence! I did the exact same thing I went on a rant about before. I do
everything I hate… Oh god, I am so pretentious.” Steve referred to a discussion we had
previously about his imagined writer of “Spanish American War,” a “pseudo-intellect”
who worked too hard to impress his reader. Steve explained the connection:

You can totally see examples of me using … the big words and the
obnoxious words, like I used the word shadenfreude in the essay. (He
laughs.) Stuff like that which actually pissed me off when we read it coming
from somebody else. But I did it too.

Noting that the pretentious opening of his essay was not the performance he had
intended, Steve said that the influences of the testing situation on his writing were not
entirely under his or any student’s control.

I mean even without realizing it, I fell into that trap. I don’t even
know what it is that makes students want to do that, but it makes us
want to use big words, exaggerated language, five paragraph structure…
and you know a clear, strong point….

Having expressed disappointment in himself for “falling into that trap,” Steve said he
could see that the process of writing his essay was “a push and pull between me trying to
be myself and me doing all the things I hate,” between designing a “mask” that didn’t
betray him while writing to please the SAT scorer. Unlike the “perfect little blonde girl”
who believed she had to disregard her own desires to climb an external power structure,
Steve asserted his “true self” desires as he navigated within and without the structures of
compliance to resolve what he understood as a paradoxical situation. Using the metaphor
of the “mask” to design a discoursal self and drawing upon multiple and, at times,
conflicting notions of “good” essay writing, Steve was conscious of himself as an
agentive writer who navigated a psycho-social space of writing inhabited by the voices
of multiple "we’s" and "they’s" speaking from their relative positions in various structures of power.

Steve further interpreted the push and pull between the constraints of testing and "trying to be myself" as he reconsidered what motivated him to write his opening paragraph with "obnoxious" words. He hypothesized that as he was taking up the "fake mask" of the "scholarly student," he must have become revolted by his own pretentiousness and, in response, pushed his language to the point of sarcasm. What began as an intentional attempt to "sound scholarly" suddenly became a "tongue in cheek" display of literary snobbery, a sarcastic and "spontaneous gesture" that pointed to the self-importance of the compliant SAT writer. The idea of closing his essay with the satirical move of professing himself a brilliant but never to be discovered writer, Steve said, came as a surprise even to him, another "spontaneous" response to his felt sense that the test was pushing him into the trap of pseudo-intellectual writing and being someone he resented being. "So yeah," he concluded, "...I turned to sarcasm because I was resenting them making me do that. That’s what I’m saying." Steve’s paradoxical conclusion to his SAT essay, one I find refreshing if not brilliant, provides another example of Winnicott’s conception of the "true self" experienced in the "spontaneous gesture," those fleeting moments when the individual experiences the fusion of internal desires with an external world.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, Steve’s essay addressed the research question of this study, "Is this the self you want to be?" No, he responded through sarcasm. Steve’s thesis claimed that he neither wanted to be the pretentious, self-important scholar he believed the testing
context demanded that he be, nor did he want to depend on his scorer's evaluation to validate himself as a "good writer" (although paradoxically his subtext was testimony to that very fact that his college acceptance required that he did). Steve’s understanding of what it means to navigate the power structures of the SAT essay are quite similar to his imaginary writer of "Majority Rules," the fiery, social activist essayist/orator, who suppressed the authoritative context of testing so that she could conjure up an a voice, a role and a context for writing that would propel her into writing from a position of personal agency. Both these writers had access to a psycho-social space of writing qualitatively different from Carol’s. Carol too resisted complying with what she understood to be the demands of standardized testing, but confined to her history of suppressed personal desire and compliance to authoritative rules, Carol’s resistance could not penetrate the power structure of testing. Unlike Steve and the fiery, social activist, Carol had little access to the "multiple me’s and they’s described by Steve and Luke as they invented multiple roles, contexts and voices for their fiery social critic. Rather, drowning in a sea of authoritative, rational, discourse, Carol found herself isolated and abstract, free to express her "honest thinking" but with few cultural contexts, roles or voices to engage in or to resist.

The two writers Carol and Steve described writing their SAT essays add another layer to their earlier collective images of the testing environment. Carol’s prompt writer was authoritative and hostile; Steve’s, more mutually constituted and relatively safe. Their actual SATs brought a new set of expectations for each. For Steve, it was high stakes; for Carol, it was of lesser account. Nevertheless, each brought his or her own psycho-social histories with them to the test. Carol who had always performed school
writing as a compliant "false self" experienced herself on the SAT as an isolated writer, free to express her "honest thinking" once set free from the rules. From a Winnicottian perspective, Carol's experience of joy as she wrote the essay that allowed her to express "honest thinking" was an absolutely essential experience if Carol was to attain a sense of her own personal agency. According to Winnicott, this sense of personal agency, of "feeling real," can only be acquired when the child is permitted moments when external power momentarily fades away so that the child not only feels the "joy" of enacting her desires, but sees them recognized by another. Having always written her academic papers to comply, Carol had few experiences in which her "honest thinking" came face to face and engaged with the writing/thinking of others, not as right and wrong, or better or worse, as 11s and 8s, but through the voices and words of others who read and recognize her in her writing. Winnicott's work suggests that it is only during these moments when structures of power melt away that the child internalizes the voices of others, not as external mandates, but as equals who also have something to say. And when these voices of others are internalized as equals, inner speech becomes an arena for internal deliberation, a form of Bakhtin's internal dialogic speech, to be navigated by an agentive self who can both acknowledge her own desires and recognize the importance of others'.

Surely we could agree that Steve performed as the more sophisticated writer and that his SAT essay was "better." Nevertheless, this insight is not particularly helpful in developing the supportive environment that will provide opportunities for writers like Carol to develop a similar trust in their agency as writers. Like Steve, Carol needed opportunities to experience herself as a "real" writer who wrote not first to comply with sets of rules but to "feel alive" through the push and pull of her ideas engaged those of
others. As this exploration of the psycho-social spaces of my participants suggests, some of these young people needed less direct instruction in writing formal essays and fewer quantitative assessments that positioned them as compliant subjects writing within an abstract and closed system of power. Moreover, some of these young people needed far less instruction in writing from an objective, academic voice and far more opportunities to experiment with conjuring up multiple voices in multiple contexts for writing. Like the boys who experienced their prompt writer as a fellow human subject similarly entrapped by the limitations of structural power, the girls needed to experience the cacophony of human voices and subject positions that compel writers to take a personal stake in their writing.

In my last chapter, I take a final look at the state of education in Yankee City and consider the implications of these findings to a community where teachers and students are increasingly required to teach to common standards and tests that emanate from government agencies, nonprofit organizations and private corporations who have insinuated themselves into our city's schools. Finally, I will ask, given the coercive conditions of our times, how do we invite students to experience "feeling real" and "alive" as writers while we encourage them to engage in a more inclusive understanding of what it means to be an individual within a literate community.
CHAPTER VI

TEACHING AND ASSESSING WRITING IN THE TIME OF HIGH STAKES STANDARDIZED ASSESSMENTS

Introduction

Insights drawn from this study indicate that despite their shared neighborhoods and classrooms, my participants expressed a high degree of variability in their response to the SAT writing test, a standardized test rigorously designed for validity, reliability and fairness. Patterns that arose within participant responses suggest that these high achieving girls took up very different school and gender discourses than their male classmates. In turn, these patterns influenced a) the features of essays participants attended to as they read and evaluated them, b) the qualities of essay writing participants valued, c) participants' sense of personal agency in their school and test writing, and d) their characterizations of a writing self who negotiates between performances of a discoursal self experienced as coerced and a discoursal self experienced as the product of their own design.

Many changes in the Yankee City school system occurred over the past year of this study particularly those emanating from "Race to the Top." Our current era of educational reform increasingly requires that any exploration into student subjectivity consider social forces that originate in the political and economic realms. My findings
about the variation in response to the SAT across a group of honors English students makes little sense in an isolated classroom where an isolated teacher instructs writing and assesses her student’s growth. Therefore, I situate these findings in the contemporary moment in Yankee City.

This chapter includes three sections. In the first, I consider the findings of this study as they relate to the recent changes in educational policy and funding through the “Race for the Top” competition and its implementation methodology called “deliverology.” I argue that this implementation methodology works to exacerbate the differential impact of standardized testing, especially on marginalized students who must rely on the education system for personal recognition and social mobility.

In the second section, I consider the findings of this study as they relate to the Common Core State Standards requirement that the logical argument and a formal and objective tone are the centerpiece of the high school writing curriculum. I argue that the tradition understanding of the argument essay written in a formal and objective tone differentially impacts students, once again, diminishing the agency especially of those who rely on the education system for personal recognition and social mobility. More positively, I address the question, what would Winnicott do?

Finally, I turn to the limitations of this study and more particularly to the question, “Where are the Boys?” Here I confront the problem presented by my sample of student writers from a high school honors English class. As noted throughout this study, the ratio of boys to girls in honors English classes was disproportionately low. In this final section, I consider what my research findings suggest about the increasing absence of boys from advanced English courses.
Deliverology arrives in Yankee City

**Deliverology (n.)** is a systematic process through which system leaders can drive progress and deliver results.

--Sir Michael Barber *Deliverology 101*

**What is Deliverology in Massachusetts?**
...Deliverology is a systematic approach to implementation that emphasizes the use of real-time data, focused analysis and reports, and strong leadership involvement to drive implementation.

--*Race to the Top: Massachusetts Report* (5)

Yankee City felt the effect of the US Department of Education's "Race to the Top" competition this past winter. The daily paper reported that our superintendent of schools was "poring over a set of educator evaluation regulations... released by the state and [was] voicing mostly support for a plan that promises to increase student achievement by changing the way the job performance of teachers and school officials are measured"(1). Beginning in the 2012-13 school year, the article explained, Yankee City teachers will be publically evaluated by value added-models (VAMs), statistical calculations that quantify student learning based on the change in student test scores over a period of time. The state Department of Education explains that VAMs are "complex statistical models... [that] generally attempt to take into account student or school background characteristics in order to isolate the amount of learning attributable to a specific teacher or school" ("Race to the Top: Massachusetts Report" 23). There will surely be a buzz among parents at the bus stop one morning in the fall of 2013 when the first set of teacher evaluations hits the front page of the local paper. And as much as I believe that the public measuring and sorting of teachers harms teachers, children and
schools, I'm sure I'll be among the first to see how well my own children's teachers have fared.

The move to enter teachers, administrators and schools into the accountability equation is part of a neoliberal reform methodology called "deliverology" adopted by the US Department of Education and our own State Department of Education. Sir Michael Barber, Chief Advisor to Tony Blair's "Prime Minister's Delivery Unit" coined the name "deliverology" and formulated this methodology of implementing social policy. A bit of history about Sir Michael, dubbed Mr. Targets by the UK press (Caukin), is important because Barber's biography points to how much authority over education reform rests in the hands of people who work in the private sector beyond the boundaries of public discourse. Upon leaving public service in Great Britain, Barber became partner and head of McKinsey and Company's\textsuperscript{111} Global Education Practice. From his position at McKinsey, Barber and his methodology for implementing social policy, deliverology, became hugely influential. For example, Barber personally mentored high ranking governmental officials and educational organizations in the US including New York City Chancellor of Schools, Joel Klein; Los Angeles mayor, Antonio Villaraigosa; the Ohio State Board of Education; and the California State University System (Dillon). Today, US Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan embraces the principles of deliverology as essential to the success of the Obama administration's 4.35 billion dollar "Race to the Top" competition that rewards states that adopt the Common Core State Standards and use performance data from high stakes testing to evaluate teachers ("Race to the Top: "

\textsuperscript{111} McKinsey and Company provide management consultation services to two-thirds of the \textit{Fortune} 1000 (Chowdhury).
Executive Summary”). Our northeastern state was one of the first to win 250 million dollars in “Race to the Top” funds while claiming that deliverology will be its methodology for implementing educational reform (*Race to the Top: Massachusetts Report*).

The web of links between Barber, deliverology and school reform in Yankee City run deep. The success of deliverology depends on the continuous updating of the data warehouse which reports and analyzes information on every child in our state and back into the schools for curriculum re-design. To construct and fund the data systems necessary to comply with the requirements of Race to the Top, our state department of education relies upon an organization called the US Educational Delivery Institute (US EDI). US EDI is a nonprofit organization that helps states construct the data and human resource management systems necessary to implement “large-scale system change in public education” (US EDI). US EDI’s founder was none other than Michael Barber. Our former state Education Commissioner, David Driscoll, not only sits on US EDI’s nine member board but is also the “Honorable Chair” of the National Assessment Governing Board, the Congress-appointed agency that writes policy for the NAEP, more commonly known as the Nation’s Report Card. Not surprisingly, US EDI’s largest funder is the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (EDI) which has been criticized for interfering with public education from outside the arena of public discourse and for supporting neoliberal reforms like charter schools and standardized testing (Ravitch 211). In 2011, Barber took the newly created position of Chief Education Advisor at the education publishing giant—and scorer of the SAT writing test—Pearson (“Sir Michael Barber to Join Pearson”). Today, Pearson Publishing, the Gates Foundation, the
Educational Delivery Institute, the Common Core State Standards, and the College Board all have a hand in teaching and learning to write in Yankee City.

Eighty years ago, when Lloyd Warner’s team of thirty social scientists arrived on the streets of Yankee City to interview, count and survey the city’s 15,000 residents, they had little intention of changing the city: rather they came to understand the working of social class within an industrialized city. In time, however, Warner saw what he believed to be the devastating consequences of a class system on America’s poor which forever dashed his belief in equality of opportunity as a vehicle to social mobility. What Warner witnessed in Yankee City was clearly not what Tocqueville had observed a century earlier in his travels across America. Warner’s response was to provide people with a tool to measure where they stood on the social ladder and the social know-how to perform like their acquaintances on the rung above them. When Warner and colleagues arrived in Yankee City, the anthropologists’ faces and clipboards were everywhere present from recess at the Smith School playground to afternoon tea at the Breckenridge mansion. By no means did all city residents greet these outsiders with open arms. The city’s Pulitzer Prize winning writer John Marquand, whose novels satirize the Northeast’s upper class, satirized Warner’s methodology in his novel *Point of No Return*, claiming Warner’s work reduced people to mere generalizations. Later, Peter Fonda would play the lead role in its Broadway adaptation.

In contrast, the faces of deliverology recede behind the large scale public and private organizations that creep into Yankee City in the form of barely visible though ubiquitous surveillance systems built upon abstractions like “target goals,” “educational data warehouses,” and “complex statistical models.” Mocking Barber’s self-importance
for coining the term “deliverology” and for using a Webster style dictionary definition for his methodology, British management consultant John Seddon (Systems Thinking in the Public Sector) retorts:

**Deliverology (n.)** is a top down system by which you distort a system, undermine achievement of purpose and demoralize people.

One’s estimation of deliverology depends largely upon how one values education and upon the angle of one’s view. For Barber (2004) who views education from the top down, reform requires “implementation of a strong accountability system” to meet a leadership’s ambitious and measurable targets (7). For Seddon, who views education through the belief systems of individual actors, measurable targets serve as mere proxies for what people truly value. When targets are used to guide and measure people’s performances, Seddon argues, individuals become motivated for all the wrong reasons. I offer three examples: In the case of my participants, the high achieving girls strove to write perfect essays they believed fulfilled the requirements of authority and in so doing understood personal agency as a dimension of how hard one works to comply. In the case of the state of Georgia: 49 teachers and 11 principals were recently implicated in a cheating scandal that improved students’ test scores. This followed the discovery that 44 of 56 principals in the Atlanta cheated to improve their students’ scores (Strauss 2011).

By the 2013-2014 school year, performance evaluations of all math and English Language Arts teachers in Yankee City will include their students’ performance on state mandated standardized tests. For English language arts teachers, this assessment includes their students’ writing of a short, impromptu essay composed on a single spring day of their fourth, seventh and tenth grade school years. The human frailty behind the state writing assessment became particularly apparent in the spring of 2002 when the fourth
grade prompt required children to write a personal account of how they would spend a snow day. When teachers complained that some of their children had never experienced a snow day, a new prompt was written and the test was repeated across every fourth grade classroom in the state. In the fall of 2013, when student tests and essays have been scored, when teacher and school VAMS have been calculated, our local and regional newspapers will report and compare schools and teachers across the region. In some communities, parents and real estate brokers will find new reasons for bragging rights. And in others, parents may wish they had incomes that would allow them to pack up their families and move.

When an impromptu essay, written three times across a child’s school career comprises a substantial portion of a teacher’s performance evaluation, it is hard to imagine a teacher who would not make the tested genre the centerpiece of his or her writing curriculum. And it would be hard to imagine a teaching staff, with little background in children’s development as writers, who would not reduce the tested genre to a set of prescriptive rules. Placed in an authoritative environment themselves, teachers will find it necessary to comply for the sake of their own survival. The College Board’s own study of the impact of the new writing test (Mattern, Krista, Wayne Camara, and Jennifer Kobrin 2008) and George Hillocks’ (2002) large scale study across several states have provided substantial testimony to this response to standardized writing tests. Teachers have little choice but to teach to the test.

I argue that behind Barber’s deliverology lies a scientific, totalizing ideology whose roots can be traced back to Conant’s first dream for an instrument that could fairly and reliably measure intelligence and identify a natural aristocracy, Warner’s structural
functionalism and his assumption that a stable society relies upon people who are motivated to take on the social personality of the class above them, and the College Board's spokesperson who argues that ultimately the SAT is good for everyone.

Furthermore, I contend that behind this shared ideology lies the unspoken belief system most of us in Yankee City hold: we believe we have earned the right to own our homes and the right to mold Yankee City to fit our personal dreams, because, more or less, the community of our dreams should define everyone's ideal community. Behind each of these character's beliefs—Conant, Warner, the SAT's young man, and my neighbors and me—lies an ideology that understands the individual as instrumentally rational and responsible for attaining his or her own position in life; and because we have earned our positions, we have not only the right, but like Conant's natural aristocracy, Warner's upper upper class and Barber's leadership unit, the duty to define what is best for others. Furthermore, like both Conant and Warner who worked to dissuade the public from adopting collectivist ideologies, I will demonstrate that deliverology understands that the function of leadership is to perpetuate the public's belief in its goals, not only by monitoring performances but by distracting the public from taking up conflicting points of view that would interfere with the quick and efficient achievement of these goals. In the following section, I take a closer look at Barber's three essential components of deliverology and his understanding of how education reform—the way to create a society of literate individuals—is built not only upon measurable targets but an elite whose very function is to manipulate the public's beliefs and morale. This is justified, Barber would argue, because leadership's targets and goals serve the common good.
The Three Essential Components of Deliverology and Their Ontological Implications for Being a Writer

Barber maintains that the success of deliverology relies on three essential components: 1) the delivery unit, 2) a set of prioritized measurable, ambitious, and time-bound goals, and 3) routine assessments (Barber et al). Together these three components define a system of human interaction that is calibrated, monitored and set to function like a complex industrial machine whose end product is a set of numerical data which promises to indicate the success of educational reform. In fact, in a video on his publisher’s website, Barber recommends that readers approach his most recent book, Deliverology 101, a “workbook” for school administrators, “as though you are following the instructions for a great piece of equipment” (Corwin). As I report Barber’s understanding of these essential components, I point to their ontological consequences to student writers and to issues raised by my participants about being a “good writer” in an age of standardized writing assessments.

The Delivery Unit

Barber’s delivery unit is a small team “of dedicated individuals focused exclusively on achieving impact and improving outcomes” (Barber, Kihn and Moffit 33). This small cadre of experts defines targets and monitors the performance of the “links” in the chain of a hierarchical system, be they state education officials, school administrators, curriculum specialists, or those on “the frontline,” teachers and students. This central tenant of deliverology, that a group of experts can readily agree upon what constitutes measurable target goals, is central to deliverology’s success. Although experts from both leading organizations of literacy instruction in the United States, the National Council of
Teachers of English and the International Reading Association, argue against the reduction of literacy to “measurable targets” (NCTE: Standards for Assessment). Barber fails to find their arguments convincing. In response to debates over targets, Barber (2004) argues:

[...]

As Barber points out, accountability systems like common standards and standardized tests arose only after politicians wrested control of education from educators themselves (9). Subsequently, despite extensive scholarship on the necessity to recognize literacy as culturally embedded socially practices, deliverology’s success depends on the capacity of leadership to quantify target goals which Barber fervently asserts, “can be measured perfectly well” (9).

Despite conflicting claims over the value of deliverology’s reductive goals and regardless of the inherent power wielded by the delivery unit by virtue of its power to define these goals, Barber contends that the delivery unit must maintain a “non-hierarchical relationship” within the system “it is trying to influence” (35). That is the delivery unit must not be managed by those who “it is trying to influence,” nor should it manage those it tries to influence. Rather, Barber contends, the “delivery unit” acts as an objective instrument, “outside” the system where it can effectively communicate “difficult messages” while remaining a “critical friend” (35). Power for Barber is not embedded in the discourses of a school discipline; rather power lies in the objective nature of the disciplines themselves. While Barber defines the delivery unit as a rational,
even benevolent, instrument that measures and monitors the “links” in a chain of command, he insists that the delivery unit’s objectivity not be tainted by subjective interactions with the system itself. Barber’s requirements for a concept of literacy that “can be perfectly well measured” and a split between the student tested and the instrument of measurement clearly indicate an objectivist understanding of learning and knowledge that is difficult to square with contemporary work in many fields, particularly literacy and history. Nevertheless, maintaining this split between the delivery unit and the object of assessment assures that the delivery unit *qua* assessment instrument maintains a non-arbitrary status: it must neither be available for public critique nor tainted by human subjectivity.

Many argue that today’s requirement that students demonstrate proficient writing on standardized assessments has both positive and negative impacts upon teachers’ performances in the classroom. Positively, external assessments provide teachers with a common vocabulary and shared concepts of proficient writing and best practices that will help their students attain that goal (Wessling). Negatively, external standards and assessments have shifted the authority of who defines good writing away from face to face deliberations within classrooms and schools to faceless experts who operate, as Barber insists, in an objective and external space. In the following passage, an English teacher from Oregon talks about the training she received in evaluating student writing in a standards based teaching environment. Notice the teacher observes that standards training has taught her to turn away from considering her students as important factors in her assessment of writing and turn to external guide lines and outside expertise to attain an accurate assessment.
If we can come to common ground first before even looking at student work, and if the scoring guide is clear enough to be used in justifying one's assessment, then it is possible to come to an agreement... We tend to adapt our expectations' to what we see; therefore, when teachers access their own work without any opportunity for 'refocusing,' then they may be straying from what is generally agreed upon as proficient performance. When a classroom teacher and an outside educator can agree, then the student is clearly proficient. (Tell, Bodone, and Addie 22-23)

Oregon's move to use common standards to define writing proficiency has encouraged this teacher to operate in an objectivist space where she fears her interactions with students and their writing may unduly affect her capacity to evaluate their work accurately. Through “refocusing,” that is disengaging from her students, she understands that the primary goal of her teaching emanates from an authority outside of her own jurisdiction. Rather than working towards a more contextually based understanding of the classroom as a complex psycho-social space where teachers and students engage with one another and a curriculum that is always evolving, this teacher is working towards becoming a more reliable assessment instrument whose success is registered in the moments she and an outside reader agree that a student is proficient. As my findings suggest, this movement away from understanding the psycho-social environments our students write in will merely impress upon our most committed students that they are agentless writers, writing to fulfill the demands of a faceless, abstract reader. As James Britton warned, authoritative writing environments “will lead the writer not only to regard the teacher’s demands as paramount but also as requiring a writing decorum which expresses the inferior status of the writer” (65).

Barber's definition of the delivery unit and the Oregon teacher's understanding of proficient performance evoke the external authority imagined by those participants who described their SAT prompt writer as a judgmental authority with whom they could have
little interaction. Like their prompt writer, Barber’s delivery unit resides in an objective, rule bound, autonomous space separate from the social world it measures. As my participants noted, writing for this external evaluator posed serious obstacles to their writing, not the least of which was a felt need to comply to a set of arbitrary “rules” which seemed to exist for little reason other than to appease their evaluator. Most consequential for some of these young writers was the overriding sense that they were performing a “false self,” their personal iterations of an objectivist, pseudo academic self who performed largely to appease their evaluators, a performance that inhibited their authentic engagement with their writing. On the other hand, those young writers who imagined that their reader was a complex human subject conjured up discoursal selves and writing contexts that impelled them to engage freely in multiple literary genres. These participants experienced themselves as agentive writers who could, at times, experience writing as an authentic, human interaction. My participants’ responses suggest that increasing students’ opportunities to write for an objective, evaluative authority may have a deleterious influence on students’ capacity to develop into the sort of writer Britton defined as mature: not the writer who bows to the imposed constraints of authority, but the writer who “recognize[s] and meet[s] the need in the other person (58).

Despite Barber’s insistence that academic skills like writing can be measured “perfectly well,” Barber (2004) is fully aware that at times the goals defined by the delivery unit must be reduced to fuzzy measurements which may potentially provoke public debate. For this reason, a second important function of the delivery unit is to manipulate public opinion. Deliverology’s success, Barber openly admits, requires the delivery unit to manage public opinion and stifle public debate. Put another way, Barber
would not have encouraged the Oregon teacher to question the particular set of guidelines provided by experts; rather, standardization requires this teacher to accept the guidelines and apply them uniformly. In the following passage, Barber describes his method of discouraging an organization from questioning the delivery unit’s goals.

The delivery unit constantly challenges performances and asks difficult questions, taking any excuses off the table. While a delivery unit should acknowledge competing priorities and unexpected situations, it should also consistently push for faster progress, knowing full well that the tendency of any system is toward inertia. (33)

Constantly pushing, challenging individuals to reach ambitious targets, Barber suggests that the delivery unit should acknowledge conflicting perspectives for the sake of appeasement, to get discomforting issues “off the table” and to avoid “inertia.” Sarah Brown Wessling, the Obama administration’s 2010 Teacher of the Year, made a similar comment regarding Common Core State Standards (CCSS). In a speech to Chicago teachers on aligning the CCSS with their classroom practice, Wessling noted how standards take “pressure off collegial conversations” that she once found troubling. Because of the Core, Wessling explained, “You don’t have to disagree with each other.”

She continued:

The only way to resolve [teacher disagreements] is to talk about what you disagree in each other. When you have the core to talk about, you don’t have to disagree with each other, right? You get to frame those conversations around the core itself and I think that’s helpful.

I am reminded of the composition staff meetings at the University of New Hampshire when instructors rated student essays to elicit our different points of view on what constitutes “good” first year writing. Invariably, a literature professor or two insisted that a particularly well-crafted personal narrative warranted a D, while the fiction writers on the staff argued for an A. While a few instructors left these meetings feeling the time
spent in debate was wasteful because consensus would never be reached, I believed that coming to understand the very tensions among us and the arguments posed by the various positions was the very purpose of these dialogues. I would argue that learning to accept that tension was essential to both our capacity to grow as teachers and to act creatively and spontaneously—Winnicott’s “authenticity”—in our teaching and in responding to student texts. Like my participants who could flexibly shift their positioning from one context to another as they imagined contexts for writing, I would submit the “good enough” writing teacher must flexibly shift her positioning too, letting go of an image of an ideal text so that she may imagine the multiple contexts from which her students write.

Barber’s understanding of inertia, however, condemns moments like those composition staff meetings or, similarly, the open ended discussions of a high school English department who convenes to discuss their own differences of opinion and the different needs of the children in their community. Deliverology’s goal is to get differences of opinion “off the table” so that measurable targets, like the state mandated thesis driven essay, are the focus of teachers’ attention. An emphasis on speed and efficiency works to distract Barber’s frontline from engaging in deliberative moments which may lead some teachers and students to question the delivery unit’s goals. By drawing people’s attention away from conflict, Barber designs an authoritative delivery system that is antithetical to the call for critical and culturally relevant pedagogies that address the arbitrariness of discourses of power and their influences on defining success in America’s schools (e.g. Street, Delpit, Ladson-Billings).

In Barber’s insistence for speed to keep the system on target, I hear the voice of Carol, the participant who frequently silenced her partner Kay by encouraging Kay to get
back on task. On a few occasions, Kay suggested penetrating questions such as why would the College Board perpetuate the myth that Columbus challenged the accepted opinion that the world was flat. But these issues were never “taken up” by Carol. When Kay asked who determines what is standard written English, Carol cut her off saying, “Cut a suit, quick.” Now with a better understanding of Carol, I can imagine the interior dialogues between her honest self and her innocent self, and the innocent self’s persistent struggle to quiet the anxiety provoking questions raised by the honest self. Maintaining a task orientation to earn almost perfect grades allowed Carol to momentarily silence the internal chatter about who she should please when she wrote. Speed and attention to the physical task of creating their imagined writers led the girls to finish their work in half the time required by the boys. These task driven performances inhibited the girls from veering off the concrete path where they may have faced far more penetrating, if anxiety provoking questions, about what it means to write well.

Prioritized Measureable, Ambitious, and Time-Bound Goals

Barber argues that deliverology’s most “important tools” are a set of “prioritized measureable, ambitious, and time-bound goals” (35). Because my study has already addressed the consequences of measurable goals to student identity, I focus here instead on Barber’s insistence that the need for these “important tools” is the power of numbers to rally public support and morale (35). Barber notes that that the reason for producing maps of a system’s growth trajectory is to provide a “visual impact that clearly communicates the gap between performance and expectation at any point in time” (36). Constant publication of trajectories and gaps maintains a public focus on the delivery unit’s targets. In effect, the delivery unit’s function is to provide a perpetual score board
for public screening, with the intent of making everyone, whether player or fan, invested in the game.

Wary, however, that data will not always provide evidence of continuous success, Barber suggests the use of comparison measurements to help “ground the target and its trajectory in available evidence” (37). Barber’s concern, once again, is managing public opinion and morale. To maintain the public’s focus on the importance of the targets, Barber recommends the use of comparison data such as “internal peer comparisons.” Although an internal peer comparison cannot indicate the system’s movement towards achieving a particular target, comparing peers, like two teachers in a system, focuses the public’s attention on the targets by pointing out those who are and those who are not successful (36). For example, when the data fails to show a school’s progress toward a targeted goal like 95% passage rate on a mandated literacy exam, comparison data is useful in sustaining the public’s faith in that goal by pointing out those teachers who have, in fact, attained that goal. The public’s recognition that some individuals can attain targeted goals injects competition into the system, and once again, distracts the attention away from public debate concerning the value of those goals. Why question the value of mandatory testing if tests continue to “prove” that Yankee City students are doing just fine, Yankee City residents imply, by giving up the fight to protect their students to so much testing. Barber understands that numerical measurement invites competition and it’s just plan hard to resist joining in on the game.

In a similar way, the competition between Carol, Kay and Annie who vied for the top spot in their class, kept them focused on maintaining almost perfect grades. Regardless of the loss of self these girls attested to, their competition with one another
worked to ensure their compliance to the schools’ formal writing curriculum and the “rules” they believed ensured their success. Barber advocates comparison and competition because they encourage people to compete for the delivery unit’s targets and prevent people from questioning the value of these targets. This is the insight of “the perfect little blond girl” who recognized that her “unconscious” capacity to “kiss ass” had rendered her incapable of defining her own goals (Tingle). In effect, deliverology, a system powered by externally defined goals, speed and competition works to produce an efficient and docile workforce.

Using Routines to Ensure a Focus on Performance

Third, Barber argues that the delivery unit must require regular assessment routines in order to maintain the system’s constant focus on targeted goals. Regular and routine monitoring of performance, Barber notes, provides greater opportunity for the “system” to “identify problems” and to “act faster” (37). “Routines work,” he writes, “because they create deadlines, which in turn create a sense of urgency” (37). Constant surveillance, attention to target goals, fast action and urgency are central to the social reform deliverology seeks. While our Northeastern state works to train teachers in the use of an educational data warehouse, our school systems too are training teachers to use data systems like A2 Aspen, which give teachers, students and their parents constant access to student grades, assignments, homework completion, class attendance and disciplinary records. These data systems have many advantages over the old time teacher grade book; they make student records available at any moment and teacher grading seemingly more transparent and objective to students and their families. But, as Barber points out, routines operate as wonderful surveillance systems which also serve as constant
reminders of what the system values. With the click of a mouse, students and parents can receive frequent and immediate feedback on student performance typically in the form of a spreadsheet of digits.

In the writing classrooms at Yankee City High School, routine and efficient evaluation of writing most often occurs in the form of rubrics, which often operate like deliverology to focus students’ attention on a select number of genre features their teachers select for classroom instruction. While rubrics in the writing classroom will likely change in response to the state’s commitment to the Common Core State Standards, currently Yankee City teachers use the Collins Writing Program which instructs teachers to “[zero] in on a few key aspects of [student] writing with each assignment” (Collins Writing Associates). Collins calls these key aspects “focus correction areas” (FCAs) and provides the following examples on their website:

- Use a clear topic sentence and a strong conclusion
- Explain ideas with sufficient, relevant details
- Use content-specific vocabulary accurately
- Vary sentence beginnings and lengths
- Use end marks and commas correctly
- Include graphic illustrations with labels

(Collins Writing Associates, Focus Correction Areas)

These examples of “key aspects” of writing are the sorts of decontextualized, non-rhetorical components of writing that Brian Street (1984) calls “autonomous literacy”: each bulleted item focuses on a textual feature of writing that can be mastered independently from an understanding of writing as a social practice. These tasks assume, much like Carol, Kay and Annie, that the academic writer operates in an objective space where texts are constructed by a voiceless writer who must comply with the rules of authority. Participants recalled that in their middle school years, some teachers routinely
required them to write FCAs and their point values in the upper left hand corner of all of their essays. A few participants decried that fact that they could earn full credit on all FCAs but if they forgot to copy the FCAs themselves, they would lose ten points and receive no higher than a B+. They understood that their teachers valued compliance to their classroom directives more than they did the goals of the writing curriculum itself. Much as Seddon warns, when classroom instruction focuses on targets that are mere proxies for what the system values, “you distort a system, undermine achievement of purpose and demoralize people.”

A Case: When the Targeted Goal is “Feeling Human”

All participants claimed they favored teachers’ written comments over numerically scored rubrics. Kay pointed out that often rubrics gave her little constructive feedback on her writing. “Like what’s eight out of ten supposed to mean,” she pointed out, “when the rubric says, ‘Include introductory and closing paragraphs?’” All participants spoke favorably of their junior honors English teacher, Mr. A, who assigned a variety of writing assignments including poetry, short story and book reviews and often responded personally to their writing. One assignment left an indelible impression on many of them: a piece with the single requirement that it “make me feel human.” Beyond this requirement, Mr. A placed no minimum or maximum number of pages on their writing. He met students individually to discuss possible revisions and required everyone to revise. Their revisions were not always extensive and, it is important to note, everyone seemed to do well on the assignment. What stood out for my participants, however, was not their grades but their deliberations, both public and private, about how to compose a piece of writing that would make Mr. A “feel human.” Both Kay and Nick said they
started new drafts nightly for weeks before they hit upon a topic that "felt right." I suspect participants would not have retained such positive memories of this assignment if Mr. A had judged them harshly, turning "feeling human" into an opaque lesson in a teacher's ruthless subjectivity. However, because Mr. A placed the responsibility to understand what it means to make a reader "feel human" within his students' authority and because he recognized all his students' attempts favorably, he created the sorts of conditions for writing that Winnicott claimed support a child's capacity to play: these conditions include a "good enough" teacher who provided a space for writing safe from a coercive and judgmental authority, enough personal support to allow each student to feel confident in pursuing their chosen project, and the personal recognition of how their writing made him "feel." Although an outsider may complain that Mr. A's assignment was unfairly vague or perhaps even self-serving, given Mr. A's relationship with his students, his enticement to make him "feel human," invited students to engage with their topics and their reader in ways they experienced as particularly educative.

Nick's description of how he came to write a personal essay for Mr. A's assignment reveals how important his trust in his reader was to his writing, not only because trust allowed him to take on a topic he felt was personally revealing (his evolving understanding of masculinity), but also because this trust invited him to imagine how Mr. A might interpret this subject himself. That is, Nick's concern was not trying to obey the rules of authority; rather his writing was an attempt to merge the boundaries between his more traditional sense of what it means to be masculine and how he imagined Mr. A would make sense of the subject for himself. Despite Nick's social success and his apparent self-confidence, he explained the gist of his essay was to
reconcile an understanding of his own masculinity and, quite literally, his hairless arms.

He explained:

I’ve tried everything to prove my masculinity and nothing seems to work, ‘cause nothing is putting hair on my arms. (Nick laughs) But at the very end [of my essay, I’m sitting around a campfire with my uncle] who lives up in Vermont and has like a hundred and fifty acres that...he hunts and fishes. He used to be a fisherman in Alaska so he’s pretty masculine....Yeah, (he laughs) he pretty much doesn’t have hair on his arms.

Nick discussed his invention of the discoursal self who narrates this essay and how he felt his writing fulfilled the requirement to make Mr. A. “feel human.”

You know, it shows a lot of things about me in the present, right now, and um, it’s, you know, trying to be funny too...[It shows I’m] a kid who is pretty confident but has always been self-conscious about, I mean not horribly self-conscious, it’s just always been looming that although I do like to go fishing and do a lot of those kinds of things, I’m not a super masculine kind of guy ....and I say that at the end, I say, “Now I’m justified to go fishing this summer with a basket of bread and gruyere and Leaves of Grass.”

Although Nick believed that he was reconciling an understanding of his own masculinity, it was also quite clear to him that he was borrowing attributes he admired from his reader, Mr. A, a man he knew loved to fish and read poetry. Unlike Kay and Carol who felt they took up obedient and abstract positions to please their teachers, Nick felt his homage to Mr. A in this essay was sincere. Still he was concerned that Mr. A might suspect he wrote about fishing “just so he would give me an A.” Instead, Mr. A wrote at the end of his essay, “That’s the best way to do it. That’s how I would do it.”

Nick’s engagement with his topic is a fine example of Winnicott’s concept of playing: discovering aspects of the self through a merger with external objects. In Nick’s case, the objects were his uncle’s and Mr. A’s perspectives on masculinity. Nick firmly believed that the discoursal self he discovered as he came to write his conclusion was his unique blend of the attributes he admired in his uncle and in Mr. A. Mr. A’s response to
Nick was personal and self-affirming for Nick. Although this was Mr. A's only assignment that "targeted" "feeling human," the assignment provides a wonderful counter example of a writing experience which may have been ultimately destructive to students if "feeling human" were clearly defined in a rubric and reduced to numerical measurements signifying winners and losers. "Feeling human" is one of those "fuzzy" social phenomena, Barber argues, that cannot be easily measured. And I suspect "feeling human" would have some difficulty wending its way into the Core Common Standards.

Finally, deliverology emphasizes the importance of a system in which all "priorities" and "links" (goals and people) are assessed as either succeeding or failing, winning or losing. Barber writes that summative assessments should be placed on "a four point scale to prevent regression to the mean and to force a decision about whether a priority is more on track or off track" (38-39). It is not by coincidence that the ratings for teachers, like the current ratings for students in our state, fall onto a four point scale: exemplary, proficient, needs improvement, and unsatisfactory. Barber's fear of "regression toward the mean" suggests the danger to the system of individuals whose work is judged "average." The danger of being average is that the position allows the individual to fall outside of the spotlight on targeted goals. When individuals can only be assessed as winners or losers, they are persistently subjugated to the values identified on the delivery unit's yardstick. As Barber seems to realize, average suggests the sort of ambivalence expressed by participants who felt they had opted out of the competition for top spots in the class. Ambivalence is another way for individuals like Eliza, Luke and Steve to assert that one does not necessarily share the same values the system persistently stresses. For instance, Eliza, who managed to maintain the twelfth position in her class,
decided not to apply to highly competitive colleges and explained that striving for academic perfection was driving her away from friendships and distracting her from learning she felt was personally relevant.

Luke and Steve’s positions are most telling of the dangers of ambivalence toward the system. Both boys knew good grades were important to getting into selective colleges, but they did not feel the urgency to compete felt by the “top five girls,” who Luke observed, “took the notes, paid attention in class, did the homework.” Freed from this sense of urgency, the boys’ ambivalence allowed them the opportunity to follow personal pursuits, often literary and intellectual, where they encountered other value systems and discourses than the more authoritarian ones typically taught in their high school classrooms. An indication of the wide cultural arena in which the boys operated was their frequent reference to writers and literature, both classical and popular, historical figures, films and musicians. In those rare instances when the girls drew from broader cultural traditions other than teacher prescribed genre rules, they were limited to material of the high school English and history curriculum.

Given Barber’s insistence on a culture of reform where all minds are focused on shared targets, the boys’ ambivalence towards schooling and grades can be understood as potentially dangerous to the system: these boys self-identified as agentive subjects and took up critical positions which permitted them to openly questioned the authority of schooling and testing as did Steve in his SAT essay. This sense of agency, in part attained by an environment that permitted the boys the space to seek recognition in pursuits outside of the hierarchical structure of schooling, is what allowed them to address their SAT essays with personal authority. Paradoxically, I am arguing that by their very
capacity to question the authority of schooling and testing, the boys consistently performed as proficient and agentive writers on their SAT essays.

As James Britton and his colleagues feared thirty years ago, the hierarchical relationships between teachers and students imposes a paradoxical and persistent problem for those young writers who have little access to discoursal selves that allow them to write with personal agency and authority. The girls in this study, to varying degrees, earned recognition by learning the lessons of classroom compliance too well where they found little if any space for authentic interaction with their classroom curriculum. As Deborah Brandt fears, those select few invited entry into the “writing class” must face the probability that one day they will be employed in the service of others whose goals and purposes they must have the authority to openly question and critique. For Brandt, and for any literacy educator committed to a critical and culturally relevant pedagogy, understanding the ways in which arbitrary discourses of power work to define and normalize what a society considers good and right must be central to any literacy curriculum in a democratic society.

Teaching Students to Write an Argument in the time of Common Cores State Standards and High Stakes Writing Assessments:

“Argument” and “Persuasion”

When writing to persuade, writers employ a variety of persuasive strategies. One common strategy is an appeal to the credibility, character, or authority of the writer (or speaker). When writers establish that they are knowledgeable and trustworthy, audiences are more likely to believe what they say. Another is an appeal to the audience’s self-interest, sense of identity, or emotions, any of which can sway an
audience. A logical argument, on the other hand, convinces the audience because of the perceived merit and reasonableness of the claims and proofs offered rather than either the emotions the writing evokes in the audience or the character or credentials of the writer. The Standards place special emphasis on writing logical arguments as a particularly important form of college- and career-ready writing.

--Side Bar from the CCSI’s “Research Supporting Key Elements of the Standards” (24)

I cite this long passage from the Common Core State Standards because it defines the CCSS’s target for high school writing: the “logical argument” written in a “formal and objective tone” (CCSS for ELA 45). Although the CCSS identifies both narrative and informational writing as important, though secondary, types of writing, it is not surprising, given deliverology’s insistence on a limited number of measurable goals, that the CCSSI decided to target this purportedly objective genre.

Prior to July, 2010, when Yankee City’s state board of education voted to adopt the Common Core Standards Initiative, the state’s frameworks for composition, touted as among the best in the country, emphasized the importance of students’ writing “frequently in a variety of forms and for a variety of purposes and audiences” (“Massachusetts Language Arts Frameworks” 69). Additionally, the old frameworks called for teachers to include informal writing, “not intended to be revised or polished,” noting its value in helping students link “thinking and speech” and in “gain[ing] confidence in their abilities as writers” (69). In a word, much of the frameworks emphasized methods to support student growth: not measurable outcomes. Of course, the mandated state writing assessment which called for “rich topic/idea development,” “careful and/or subtle organization,” and “effective/rich use of language”
(Assessment/Accountability) was interpreted by the girls in my study and perhaps some of their teachers as the thesis driven, "logical argument" written in "a formal and objective tone." Nevertheless, the old frameworks situated writing instruction within a pedagogical scaffold which, in addition to calling for writing that supported student thinking and confidence, included numerous examples of classroom projects that situated writing in "real world" social contexts. The model project for teaching argument, for example, required students to read letters to the editor concerning a local issue and to write their own letter in response. The Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) for English Language Arts, however, emphatically chose not to enter what they consider to be the more contextual and subjective problem of pedagogy, instead focusing on "what students should be able to do" (6). For the CCSSI, the logical argument written in a formal and objective tone is the outcome of the high school writing curriculum.

Given the findings of my study, I make two claims about the CCSS's decision to place the logical argument and formal and objective tone as the centerpiece of the high school writing curriculum. First, given the finding that students take up writing positions that are limited by available discourses, CCSS's definition of argument works to undermine and discredit the personal agency of student writers, particularly those whose perspectives and life experience are marginalized by discourses of power. Second, despite the CCSS's suggestion that the objective argument is an uncontested form of writing based on reasonable claims and evidence, I argue that not only is the logical argument a contested genre, but the very research and scholarship the CCSS uses to make their case for argument is indicative of this contestation. Finally, I answer the question: what would Winnicott do?
The CCSSI states that the decision to make argument the centerpiece of the high school writing curriculum is based on current research that demonstrates that the ability to write argument is essential for “career and college readiness” (24). Nevertheless, CCSS’s definition of argument, which I quote at length above, is not supported by the expert testimony they use to support their claim. While the CCSS adamantly draws a subjective/objective line between what constitutes persuasive and argument writing, in almost every case the research they report conflates the two terms. Why is this important? As Kay explained, her experience with the school writing assignments compelled her to perform as a voiceless abstraction who engaged with derivative ideas from more authoritative texts and left her feeling “I don’t have any ideas of my own.” Like Bolker’s young women, successful upper level students at Harvard and Yale, writing in an environment they experienced as authoritative and grade driven allowed them little capacity to access a agentive, intelligent and thoughtful self who writes to grapple with difficult ideas. If the desire to write a logical argument in a formal and objective tone has this effect on these highly capable young women, the consequences for marginalized young writers should be of tremendous concern.

The essential feature of CCSS’s definition of argument, “logic,” relies on the characteristics which distinguish it from persuasion, notably: subjectivity. I quote in part from the definition above:

A logical argument, [...] convinces the audience because of the perceived merit and reasonableness of the claims and proofs offered rather than either the emotions the writing evokes in the audience or the character or credentials of the writer. (25)

The value of the logical argument, the CCSS claims, is its appeal to “the perceived merit and reasonableness of the claims and proofs” over subjective appeals that draw their
claims from the writer's experience, character or personal authority. Nevertheless, when
the CCSS turns to research and scholarship on the centrality of argument to "college and
career readiness," none of their sources make the claim that the well written argument
excludes the subjective experience of the reader or the writer. Like many in composition
studies, the research CCSS uses to make their case for argument merges the genres of
persuasion and argument (see for example Lundsford's text *Everything's an Argument*).
CCSS fails to acknowledge the post-structuralist assertion that power resides not in the
"logic" of the text but in the very discourse by which it defines what constitutes the
"logical argument." And more consequentially to students, the CCSS fails to recognize
its own discourse differentially exerts forces upon students who are faced with
constructing "logical arguments" as evidenced by Kay, Carol and Bolker's young
women. In effect, the CCSS is attempting to locate knowledge in a "perceived" abstract,
metaphysical space, outside the deliberative spaces of students and teachers, without
acknowledging that the CCSS itself is complicit in the discursive production of
knowledge.

In contradiction to its own definition of the "logical argument," the CCSS
presents expert testimony on the value of the argument to civic life from four scholars all
of whom understand argument as a collaborative, deliberative process, effectively
defining knowledge as discursively constructed. Neil Postman identifies argument as the
"soul of an education because argument forces a writer to evaluate the strengths and
weaknesses of multiple perspectives" (24). Joseph M. Williams and Lawrence
McEnery note that argument is "a serious and focused conversation among people who
are intensely interested in getting to the bottom of things cooperatively" (24). And
Richard Fulkerson writes that “the goal is not victory but a good decision, one in which all arguers are at risk of needing to alter their views, one in which a participant takes seriously and fairly the views different from his or her own” (25). All these scholars understand that the argument is rooted in a writer’s social obligation to reciprocal social activity: the obligation to understand how the perspectives and views of another may merge or conflict with one’s own in a process of getting “to the bottom of things cooperatively” if only temporarily (24). The fact that Postman uses the term “perspective” and Fulkerson “views” rather than the CCSS use of “knowledgeable claims” indicates how far the CCSS has abstracted the genre of “logical argument” away from human experience. This can be seen too in numerous city’s and state’s descriptions of how to teach the common core logical argument, where evidence is defined as expert opinion, research and statistics. (See, for example, webinar for high school teachers in Hawaii: Common Core State Standards: The Written Argument Secondary). Given the broad spectrum of cultures that make up our public school populations, the CCSS’s failure to recognize the feminist, critical, and post-colonial insistence on creating opportunities for marginalized people to name and articulate their own experiences (Winnicottian potential spaces) further entrenches social policy in conventional wisdom, making most sense to those of us who have already been normalized by it. Like their theoretical forefathers Conan and Warner might have assumed, the CCSS contends that learning to write the objective argument occurs on an objective and linear trajectory, where the job of the teacher is to point his or her students at the right target. Like the methodology of deliverology, the authoritative voice of the CCSS dominates the discursive spaces of the classroom, restricting the agency of
teachers and students as they struggle to navigate the structures of power that exert constraints what is considered "good" writing.

**What Would Winnicott Do?**

**The Vigilant Teacher and Potential Space**

Recognizing the extraordinary threat of totalitarian regimes to European democracies and their citizens during the Second World War, Winnicott turned his attention to understanding the psychological health of children in potentially coercive environments. While today we send our sons to fight our wars in faraway countries with people we know very little about, the metaphors we use to make sense of education evoke the messages of a war being fought on the home front. Goals are targeted, tests are mandated, states are competing in a "Race to the Top," and the US is losing its place in a global competition. Having learned much from my reading of Winnicott about the function of power in the relationship between students, teachers and curriculum and the effect of this power on a child's capacity to learn, to feel joy and to become an agentive, creative person, I designed this study of high school writers and the SAT essay. In effect, I am claiming this study is an illustration of what Winnicott might do. As I describe in Chapter 4, my goal was to provide a potential space—a relatively safe space from the external forces of evaluation and public rebuke and from the internal forces of anxiety and shame—that allowed my participants and I the opportunity to imagine the psychosocial spaces where SAT writing takes place. Insights from this study concerning the differential effects of discourses of gender and schooling on students writing indicates the importance of providing potential spaces in classrooms to understand our most
vulnerable students and to protect them from the onslaught of an authoritative epistemology that has the potential to render even our best students compliant.

Winnicott called his caregiver the *good enough* mother because the *good* mother ran the risk of being overly coercive or its opposite, overly solicitous. Winnicott's point was that the "ordinarily devoted mother" was perhaps the most competent mother. Given the extraordinary external forces that today's teachers must contend with, I am concerned that the "ordinarily devoted teacher" runs the risk of losing her own sense of agency and slipping into compliance without maintaining the constant vigilance necessary to attend to her students and her own creative needs. Today being a good enough teacher isn’t enough; we need to be vigilant teachers. Only with vigilance can we protect the spaces in our classrooms that will permit our students to experience their authentic engagement with literacy.

The function of today's vigilant teacher must be to protect students from the damage done by a curriculum that views the student as Winnicott writes, "something to be fitted in with or demanding adaptation" (Playing 65). Vigilant teachers can create potential spaces throughout the cracks in the system as Mr. A did when he assigned his honors English class to "make him feel human" by reducing the external threat of grades, by providing personal recognition to all his students, but, most importantly, by providing a motivation for writing that was open to public debate and yet, in one way or another, understandable to everyone in the room.

My participants' responses suggest that while we may carve out potential spaces within the social spaces of our writing classroom, the vigilant teacher must also support her students as they carve out the potential spaces in their imaginations, those interior
spaces from which they write. As this study has shown, assessing a student text provides us with limited information about the writer and the internal dialogues she takes up while writing. The vigilant teacher needs access to these discourses in order to help the writer silence the coercive voices that inhibit writing and support the creative voices who risk engagement with the world in novel ways, those moments Winnicott referred to as “spontaneous gestures.” I think of Kay and the shame she still felt nine years later from inventing stories in her third grade journal. I am certain that if Ms. M understood why Kay invented fictional accounts in her journal, she would have encouraged Kay to write more, and even recommend that her classmates experiment with the same.

Finally, Winnicott would encourage the vigilant writing teacher to support the potential spaces of her students’ imaginations as they “conjure up” the voices, roles and contexts for their reading and writing (Otte 153). As Luke and Steve’s descriptions of the fiery orator for social justice demonstrates, the capacity of the SAT writer to conjure up people and contexts is “enormously consequential” (Otte 153) to understanding how the successful SAT writer imagines the space of writing. And I suspect Winnicott would want us to consider the objective argument written in a “formal and objective tone” a peopled world. I imagine Winnicott would ask us who we see when we read an objective argument. What kind of clothes do you see them wearing? What do they like to do with their spare time? Can you describe the home and family they return to at night? What do you think motivated them to write this? How do you think they feel about you? And is this the kind of person you’d like to be?
The Limitations of this Study

I consider this study a performance, a text that does not purport to prove findings but rather a narrative of my experience with these seven young people and the insights that arose collectively as we worked together and later as I reread our transcripts in conversation with multiple scholars—my own twice behaved behavior. I invite others to read this narrative differently. Despite my claims about the limited range of gender discourses available to my participants, I am certain my participants and their orientations toward authority have changed since our meeting. They are all on their way to becoming full-fledged members of the writing class. Six are well into their college careers. One of the boys has, for the moment, left his top ranked liberal arts school. As he frequently noted, a student does need to be disciplined, to pay attention in class, take the notes, do the reading. School discipline was not his forte.

As a woman, a teacher and as a mother of three sons, I was continually troubled throughout this study that I valued the boys’ responses to the imagining the writers activities more than I valued the girls. It got tiresome to repeatedly use an example from the boys’ work to indicate the sort of benchmark performance I would hope for all our students. And it got doubly tiresome as I once again pointed to another moment when one of the girls pointed to an unquestioned, external authority that directed her school performances. My intention was never to label the girls as victims, particularly when it was the girls who were winning at the high school game: at least in terms of grades and ranking. As I’ve noted throughout, my finger was always pointed at those discourses we make available to them.
The greatest limitation of this study was sampling. The participants who signed on to this study were all top ranking students and despite their many English class awards and prizes, the boys as a group and the girls as a group represented “kinds” of students that are not merely distinguishable by the gender discourses they take up. The three boys in this study, as I have indicated throughout, were among the four boys to take AP English. Yankee City High School puts significant pressure on students in honor English classes by requiring them to maintain a B+ average (sometimes A) and teacher recommendation to remain in the class. Those weeded out are most often the boys who don’t take the notes, forget to do the homework, as Luke’s lament goes. I suspect that the literary talents and interests of the three boys were extraordinary enough that a rushed homework assignment or two didn’t consign them to the college prep English classroom where we would have found the majority of Yankee City’s boys. Likewise, while the girls in honors English were exquisitely attuned to grades, I am sure there were some girls in other English classrooms who self-identified as writers and were committed to their own reasons for writing rather than their teachers. Working with a broader sample of high school students in Yankee City would provide greater insight into the ways that school compliance and gender discourses interact with student perceptions of what it means to be a “good” writer. Studies conducted in classrooms and cities where students experience marginalized lives would tell us more about the differential effects of standardized testing on groups of students.

I also worry about the way gender discourses limit the narratives that my participants were able to tell me. Despite my argument that projective activities reduce anxiety and allow participants to engage in discourses that are “me but not me,” it
concerns me that I have pictured the three boys as rather free from school anxiety and the compulsion to be competitive, if not comply. As a mother and a teacher of boys, it is clear to me that boys may well display their anxiety through different "types" of performances than the girls. The acting out and displays of detachment from authority that I argued contributed to the boys' capacity to play may at other times and in other contexts indicate a boy's school anxiety and fear of failure. I don't suspect that school is ever anxiety free for any child.

Nevertheless, the patterns I found across these students suggest that the function of authority in the form of standardized tests and common standards do differentially impact student writing, learning and the quality of a student's experience in high school. From the surveillance cameras focused on their favorite downtown hangouts to the spreadsheets that evaluate their school performances, their lives are quite different than were ours. This week, the daily paper reported that once again the high school administration invited the Yankee City police and their team of drug dogs to raid the high school. Deep into the story you find that the dogs found nothing, no evidence of drugs, in the 800 student school. But I wondered about the students' experience, laying down their personal possessions, their coats, their book bags, their purses, in the hallway and then listening for the footsteps of policemen and dogs as they paused outside their classroom door, and I wondered if they thought this was normal. Next week, the juniors will be taking their SATs in these same classrooms, some of their parents will have paid hundreds of dollars for them to take the Kaplan course, others will have paid for private tutors, and some children will arrive at the test cold, and some even hungry. And
somehow all this surveillance and measuring just doesn’t seem to make the system any better or more fair.
WORKS CITED


<http://sat.collegeboard.org/about-tests/sat>.


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APPENDIX A:

ADVERTISEMENT FOR PARTICIPANTS

WRITERS NEEDED

Wanted: High school juniors who are interested in participating in a study that will explore the question, “What does it mean to write well on the SAT?”

Hello writers. My name is Barbara Tindall and I need your help. I am a doctoral student at the University of New Hampshire where I am conducting a study of students’ understanding of what it means to write well on the SAT writing section. Participants will meet four times this spring for approximately ninety minutes each session and will receive a $75.00 stipend for their work. Consent of your parent/s or guardian is needed.

If you are interested in participating, please give me a call at .........
APPENDIX B:
CAROL AND STEVE'S ESSAYS

Carol

For most of the history of man on Earth, there has been a large amount of unnecessary hard labor. Recently, in just the past 100 years or so, developments have been made to take the labor out of the hands of man and put it into the word of machinery. All this wonderful modern technology is very helpful in that it gives people more time to spend doing what they want and furthering the progress of humanity, and yet some people believe it is a good idea not to get too wrapped up in the fast-past world of computers, electronic devices, appliances, and machines. They have the right idea: using technology too much can lead to some poor consequences.

With such new devices as the iPod, the personal computer and the cell phone, it's easy to get lost in the world of technology. The average American has so much technology and so many machines doing such cores for them, such as washing clothes and dishes, that he or she has become accustomed to it and dependent upon the technology of modern day life. What started out as simple conveniences quickly turned into machines people could not live without. It is lucky that there is only a small amount of undeveloped and undiscovered wilderness in the world (as compared to 200 or 300 years ago), because if a technology-oriented person were to get lost in the wilderness, they wouldn’t know how to survive long enough without technology to be found. While modern technology can be helpful, it is dangerous for one to become dependent on it, as it become difficult to survive without it.

Technology is dangerous for the individual, but it is also dangerous for the whole of humanity. If we let machines and computers start to run our lives, how will we be able to live? If we let computers think for us, how will we be able to think on our own to provide the creative ideas necessary for the progress of the human race? We as a species are obsessed with constantly trying to make our lives better, which is the reason why technology was created in the first place. If we let computers takeover and think for us, we won’t be able to think for ourselves and make our own lives better. Whereas such an extreme destruction of humanity through machines as shown in fictional stories like The Matrix is unlikely, the same idea could occur on a smaller scale if too many people let technology think for them.

On the whole, technology should not take over our lives too much, because modern conveniences could quickly turn into a destruction of humanity’s creative ability to think.
Many people spend their lives striving for fame. The quest for notoriety is, however, a fool’s errand; once attained, fame is precious and fleeting like a seductress’s kiss. Andy Warhol’s famous quote about everyone having their “Fifteen Seconds of Fame” rings true today, and many one-hit wonders and toasts of the hour fall prey to American’s chronically short attention span. Even if long lasting fame is attained, however, the reward is still like so many other things in life. Fame simply cannot bring lasting happiness.

The reason for this is simple. As Leszek Kolakowski explains, “Fame, it seems is among the things people most desire.” Because everyone wants to become famous, everyone resents those that already have it. We like to think that celebrities aren’t really better than us, and that we could have what they have with a little luck. We don’t want them to be better than us. That’s why tabloids are obsessed with the “tragic downfalls” and “dirty secrets” of modern celebrities, that little morsel of schadenfeude is enough to get the average person through the day. We all love to hate the rich and famous, for they are America’s scapegoats.

Of course, we do buy into this system of fame by paying close attention to the lives of these celebrities. We go to see their movies and many of us still buy the magazines that detail their personal lives. We gleefully fulfill the role of the adoring public, but we do it only because we genuinely believe that someday it will be our turn in the limelight. Deep down, we are all convinced that someday it will be our turn and that we can replace these stars someday. We don’t actually care for these people. Ironically, the most popular people in America are loved by no one.

This is why I have chosen to remain obscure. I have yet to publish any of my work in the New Yorker, and I’m trying to keep my more awe-inspiring scientific achievements to myself. I still refuse to star in any high budget films. If I let myself get sucked into the culture of celebrity I would join the ranks of Paris Hilton and whoever won on “American Idol” a couple of weeks ago as the most hated social class in America. No, I must hide the true extent of my brilliance to the world. It’s the life of the underappreciated genius for me, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.
University of New Hampshire

Research Conduct and Compliance Services, Office of Sponsored Research
Service Building, 51 College Road, Durham, NH 03824-3585
Fax: 603-862-3564

19-Feb-2008

Tindall, Barbara
Education, Morrill Hall
33 Federal Street
Newburyport, MA 01950

IRB #: 4165
Study: The role of a high stakes writing assessment in student constructions of good
taking and what it means to be a good writer
Approval Date: 14-Feb-2008

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) has
reviewed and approved the protocol for your study as Expedited as described in Title 45,

Approval is granted to conduct your study as described in your protocol for one
year from the approval date above. At the end of the approval period, you will be
asked to submit a report with regard to the involvement of human subjects in this study. If
your study is still active, you may request an extension of IRB approval.

Researchers who conduct studies involving human subjects have responsibilities as outlined
in the attached document, Responsibilities of Directors of Research Studies Involving
Human Subjects. (This document is also available at
http://www.unh.edu/osr/compliance/irb.html.) Please read this document carefully before
commencing your work involving human subjects.

If you have questions or concerns about your study or this approval, please feel free to
contact me at 603-862-2003 or Julie.simpson@unh.edu. Please refer to the IRB # above in
all correspondence related to this study. The IRB wishes you success with your research.

For the IRB,

Julie F. Simpson
Manager

cc: File
Salvio, Paula