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# Constructing Otherness: A Linguistic Analysis of the Politics of Representation and Exclusion in Freshmen Writing[1]

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*This study examines the extent to which college freshmen compositions seek to reflect and construct differences between the self and the other. The data sample consists of over 100 freshmen compositions on a variety of topics spanning a period of three years. The framework of analysis is derived from critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1994; Riggins, 1997; van Dijk, 1993). This study demonstrates that lexicalizations of outsiders, of others, in freshmen writing can often reflect univocal attitudes of ambivalence, derision, or impersonalization. Usually, differences in social groups are resolved via linguistic categorizations that absolve feelings of guilt or shame particularly if the student writes as a member of the powered group. Sometimes, however, lexicalizations reflect a unique critical stance on the part of the student writer who creatively utilizes such linguistic representations of 'others' to challenge status quo othering practices. Access to and the use of othering strategies, it is argued, is a powerful rhetorical tool. As the excerpts examined in this study will demonstrate, overt as opposed to covert lexicalizations of othering—encoded in language evocative of hierarchy, subordination, and dominance—often reflect differential rhetorical ability on the part of the student writer. The implications of this study are pedagogical, and call for a re-imagining of the teaching of writing via an examination of the actual discursive tools accessible to different writers, and how these serve in judgments of rhetorical skills in particular, and creative and critical thinking in general.*

A key question posed by composition scholars today is: "Is a composition class about products or process, about skills, strategies or attitudes?" (Tobin, 1993, p. 62). In the interrogative above, we see the fundamental questions facing composition practitioners today, namely the extent to which the teaching of composition is about form, strategy, the individual or the student as a novice member of the discourse community of academia. Of particular interest is the area of constructed meaning as evoked by the student writer. Countless researchers have chronicled the agony of reading piles of essays that are perfectly structured, but lifeless (Ceaser, 1998; Tobin, 1993). In some cases, however, there is the more pressing issue of "passivity and detachment" (Tobin, 1993, p. 116) on the part of the student writer. Elbow (1994) labels such insouciance on the part of the student writer, "credulity" (p. 187), which he defines as "the tendency to go along with whatever seems attractive or appealing or persuasive" (p. 187), a problem which he insists is recurrent in the thinking of children or unsophisticated adults. Such an approach is seen to consistently emerge in the textual renditions of freshman writing as an "unawareness" of critical thought to the socio-political milieu contextualizing any discussion of a social issue. Tobin recounts the frustrations and tribulations he encounters when a

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student of his writes a paper which he feels is imbued in bigotry.

> Stan was struggling in my class. Or at least I was struggling with him. He wrote his first essay on reverse discrimination, focusing on "the unfair advantages that blacks receive when they apply to college," "the drain on society caused by all blacks on welfare," and the fact that "we would never even be considering a national holiday for someone like Martin Luther King if he had not been black." I wasn't sure if the essay was as poorly written and organized as it seemed, or if I just was focusing on the problems because the ideas were repugnant to me. In our conferences, I pushed him to challenge his own assumptions; I suggested that his tone might turn off some readers; I asked him if he thought he needed to do some research. He passively resisted everything I tried: clearly these were ideas he had thought about and talked about before. He was confident about his evidence ("Martin Luther King had affairs, plagiarized his law school papers, and told blacks to break the law. Why should we honor someone like that?"), and he was suspicious of my political stance ("So you don't agree with any of this, do you?"). Finally out of frustration, I said, "Maybe I'm being overly critical. Why don't you read this one in class today and see what other people think?" (p. 114)

Tobin's shock however increases when the class refuses to offer any obvious cultural critique to this essay. Frustrated by this nonchalance, Tobin (1993) launches into a tirade, "an impromptu, free-form, much-too-long-and-angry lecture about racism, bigotry, and middle-class indifference in America" (p. 115).

One can ask, why is there such an impassioned response on the part of this veteran teacher? Could it be that for most teachers of composition, "criticism and skepticism are usually identified with intelligence itself" (Elbow, 1994, p. 186)? In fact, Clark (1995) goes so far as to say that modern literacy has as its primary component critical thinking, with its diametrical opposite, "ambivalence," (p. 109) often indicating the absence of critical aptitude (see, e.g., Singley & Sweeney, 1993). Validating such a speculation is Kraemer (1992) whose study concludes that "older more traveled, better read students—both men and women—write more balanced narratives and more patient and *critical* [emphasis added] analyses" (p. 334). Like all composition teachers, Tobin (1993) had hoped that his class would critique the student's claims when the particular student writer failed to demonstrate a critical stance: in particular, when he failed to reflect on his own views. Tobin posits a number of reasons why this did not happen in his class.

> Actually the idea that a productive peer critique or dialectic should or will develop in writing workshops is based on all sorts of questionable assumptions—that a true diversity of opinion, knowledge and perspective exists in our classes; that students are willing to challenge one another's political opinions and to critique one another's rhetorical ability; that in short, students have the ability to teach one another through direct debate and instruction (p. 115).

The examples given so far emphasize the fact that composition teaching has entered

a new phase. The issues are not entirely structural or organizational in nature, but rather, semantic in nature, and concern the language and content matter of the essay. The question at stake is how best to address the teaching of writing when the content area delves into issues of race, social group difference, and social justice; how best to ensure that the composition instructor handles the true complexity embedded in democratic literacy, the ability of all, student and teacher alike, to exercise their right to language, their right to say what they want in the way they want.

There is no doubt that Stan's essay, quoted above, is rich in skepticism—the problem of passivity and detachment stems from elsewhere—from the inability of members of the class to oppose or reflect on the unfashionable nature of the ideas, in short, to challenge the unconventional *othering* embodied in his essay.

*Othering* is a technical term used here to describe the manner in which social group dichotomies are represented via language. For the critical linguist, it is in and through linguistic choices that writers encode their semantic stance, more specifically, their critical stance. Consequently, it is in and through these very linguistic choices that student writers engage in the representation or exclusion of groups. Unlike variationist linguists (e.g., Labov, 1972), who view the relationship between language and social difference to be neutral and unidirectional (i.e., language merely reflects social difference), for the critical linguist (e.g., Fairclough, 1994), the link between language and the social difference reflected in such language is subjective and bi-directional (i.e., social differences are encoded and *sustained* in and through linguistic choices). To clarify a key terminological distinction, *discursive stances* are linguistic choices which reflect and sustain critical stances. Consequently, the two strands of structure and semantics—lexico-syntax (i.e., the othering strategies utilized) and meaning (i.e., the consequent critical stance evoked) are cyclically linked. This fact is perhaps most succinctly captured in the words of Berlin (1992), who states that "language is a pluralistic and complex system of signifying practices that construct realities rather than simply presenting or representing them" (p. 19).

If language is a way to comprehend and understand the world, the category of *the Other* has to be viewed as primordial as consciousness itself for it is through nuances and polarities inherent in language that meaning is conveyed, and the world categorized. Speculating on the nature of this categorizing principle, philosopher Sartre (1965) writes, "The Other is the indispensable mediator between myself and me" (p. 189) for as he concludes "I need the Other in order to realize fully all the structures of my being" (p. 190). It is no wonder then that social reality is often represented in dichotomous terms, a juxtaposition of *Us* versus *Them*.

In the composition class, the dichotomy between the basic and advanced writer emerges in terms of how othering strategies are utilized to encode meaning. In other words, the question is the following: are the othering strategies utilized in order to encode a nuanced or complex idea of Us vs. Them thinking, or are the othering strategies employed to reflect and support a popular, status quo distinction—the rendering of Us vs. Them groupings via common simplistic polar dichotomies?

If critical stance is most effectively evoked via strategies of othering that present nuanced thinking (in lay terms, the challenge of received opinion) as opposed to othering strategies, which present simplistic thinking (in lay terms, the replication of status quo representations of Us. vs. Them categorizations), we see the extent to which the distinction between basic and advanced writing emerges in the way othering practices are utilized to represent social differences by the writer.

To clarify this situation further, consider another example of student writing entitled *Hey There Ladies* taken from the present project in which the writer builds a causal argument between the rise of Feminism and the breakdown of discipline in schools.[2]

**Excerpt 1**

> Ask ourselves this. Was there corporal punishment before women had the right to vote?....When did all this public corrosion and corruption start? I'll tell you in 1920 when the 19th Amendment got passed and women got the right to vote, the damn women's suffrage movement that's when. Corporal punishment was a wonderful thing. There was no gray area on what to do if you got into trouble, you got a whooping [sic]. Then some "feminist" got the idea in her sick little head that teachers shouldn't have the right to punish her poor, can-do-no-wrong child. Then she started whining and sniveling and then she recruited more PMSsers until everyone got so fed up with it [sic] they gave in and let the Femmies have their way.

The above excerpt, though extreme as an example (Excerpt 5 below will provide another such example), suffices to draw attention to the dilemma facing most composition teachers. The writer of the above piece is similar to the student writer cited in Tobin's example earlier—they are both skeptics. However, the incredulity and the skepticism are encoded in polar terms, Us (non-feminists) vs. Them (feminists). The consequence is not a nuanced rendition of social reality, but rather, an oversimplified grouping which may turn off some readers who are in fact feminists. The question facing teachers is how best to approach the teaching of writing when the problem is not structural but semantic.

As the above examples consistently demonstrate, student writers participate in the social mechanisms of exclusion—the representation of social groups in their discourse, via predominantly oversimplistic portrayals of social groups which fail to present alternative views. These asymmetrical practices are often evoked through common semantic mechanisms of othering such as stereotyping, overt and covert insulting, blaming, disbelieving, misrepresenting or silencing—often manifested as ignoring—a passive acceptance of the status quo with a concomitant failure to consider the complexity of alternative perspectives in such renditions. Portrayals of the poor, the homeless, minorities, the elderly, in short—the Other—are generated via both simple (overt) and complex (covert) strategies of othering, discursive forms, that either misrepresent lived experiences of othered groups or discursive choices that offer a nuanced, complex questioning of status quo group

representations. Teachers of writing often respond to the negative portrayals and the misrepresentations embedded in the othering practices, failing to see how this very strategy encodes a complex argumentative potential. A way to maintain a student's right to his/her ideas is for teachers to focus on the othering strategies incorporated in the essay whether these evoke negative or positive portrayals, and to challenge students to question the rhetorical effectiveness of the othering devices being utilized to portray social reality. The solution to the above dilemma lies in understanding how best to maintain students' voices while at the same time equipping them with linguistic strategies with a semantic potential to convince the widest audience. For a compositionist, the answer lies in examining composition through a linguistic lens.

This paper argues that more than anything, readers react to the strategies of othering encoded in a paper. Consequently, strategies of othering which present social dichotomies in "honest face personae" terms, appealing solely to the power of pathos such as Excerpt 1 above, are likely to have reduced persuasive appeal for an informed audience. The goal of a teacher is not to prevent students from engaging in Us vs. Them writing, but to provide explicit instruction in the strategies of othering which increase the persuasive power of an argument. The analysis of excerpts below consistently demonstrates that if student writers are to be persuasive, their discourse strategies of othering should reflect and encode "elaborate ways of tactically speaking in strategic loci" (Probyn, 1993, p. 87). The dilemma between democratic literacy—the free expression of thought—and critical literacy—the transformation of content to aid in audience uptake (Gees, 1990), between free speech on the one hand, and transforming potentially offensive content on the other, is discussed in great length in the concluding section of this paper. It is important to emphasize that the teaching of critical literacy cannot be achieved in isolation from considerations of democratic literacy, in other words, the goal of the composition teacher is two-fold: the maintenance of both critical and democratic literacy, in other words, the enhancing of rhetorical potential without the silencing of ideas. This paper calls for a curriculum that ensures students' recognition of their own social agency by challenging them to actively examine the strategies of naming, inscription, objectification, silencing, co-option, in short, the othering practices utilized in their writing. Student writers are members of social communities, and consequently reproduce "the silent hierarchies of society" (Powers-Stubbs, 1992, p. 312) of which they are a part.

## UNDERSTANDING THE DIALECTICS OF RESISTANCE AND IDENTIFICATION: A LINGUISTIC APPROACH

That language is the primary conduit of meaning has been reiterated by the earliest of innovative educators. As far back as 1965, Maria Montessori noted that a child's initiation into a discourse community occurred when the individual had grasped the social signification potential of this tool. Explaining this process she

says: "Language now comes to fix by means of exact words the ideas which the mind has acquired" (pp. 137-138). The saliency of language is of crucial significance to this paper since meaning in freshman writing, as in all forms of communication, is evoked in and through the non-neutral tool of language. In her award winning essay, *The Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change*, Cushman (1999) alludes to the pivotal role of language insisting that "we need to take into our accounts of social change the ways in which people use language and literacy to challenge and alter the circumstances of daily life" (p. 215).

What this means is that particularly for the student, linguistic practices are a crucial area of investigation and instruction for it is through this socio-semantic tool that a student's group membership is mirrored. It is in the linguistic practices of othering (Riggins, 1997) that we can understand the social, cultural, historical and political divisions and asymmetries that a student writer both reflects and sustains. In such an approach, language has to be viewed as "interested and invested rather than a transparent conduit conveying truth" (Kennedy, 1998, p. 285). If we are to define composition as a "complex set of symbolic practices" (Jarratt & Worsham, 1998, p. 11), it is in the positions adopted by the student writer in the textual description of Otherness; and it is in the affiliations and identifications signified by the student writer towards social dichotomies being represented, that teachers can best approach the effective teaching of composition. Consequently, it is in the examinations of the discourse of affiliation, or the discourse of distance from social groups—created in and through language by the student writer—that teachers can begin to resolve this dilemma.

Bourdieu (1990) would argue that student writers, as members of a social group, reproduce the *dispositions*[3] of which they are a significant part. If writing, the marker of literacy of an individual, is to serve as an icon of culture, one can make the argument that it is in *discursive practices*[4] that we will see the reproduction of the fundamental hegemonies of a culture (Fairclough, 1992). Consequently, it is in the construction of Otherness that students signify their membership in the "acquired system of generative schemes, the habitus" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 54). The link between linguistic choice and critical stance becomes clearer if we can see that othering practices utilized by students reflect and simultaneously sustain their unconscious reproduction of their habitus. It has to be emphasized that writers "write not just as individuals but as members of communities" (Haussamen, 1999, p. 206). This point will become clear in the analysis of excerpts below, where we see student writing that reflects conventional binary or diametric stances on social groupings juxtaposed against conceptualizations which proffer nuanced portrayals of the very same social realities. In both cases, othering devices are used, but differently. This discursive fact emphasizes the point that "linguistic choices have profound epistemological consequences" (Bizzell, 2000, p. 499), for as will be seen in the excerpts below, "these choices are made within stringent social and political constraints" (Bizzell, 2000, p. 499).

Consequently, the differences between basic writers and advanced writers

emerge in their use of othering strategies. Basic writers consistently allude to an "Honest Face Personae" (Bizzell, 1992, p. 195), a feature absent in academic writing, a discourse genre which overtly exhibits a "repudiation of the honest face personae" (Bizzell, 1992, p. 195). In the academy, "the main goal is not the discovery of one's inmost honest feelings, but rather articulation of a public voice that will allow participation in the academic intellectual community" (Bizzell, 1992, p. 195). What seems to emerge from such ideas is that basic writers often encode group ideologies in binary terms, Us vs. Them, whereas advanced writers often utilize othering strategies to either challenge or to present nuanced perspectives on conventional Us vs. Them group representations. While such a dichotomy captures extremes in rhetorical ability, it is crucial to emphasize, as the excerpts below will demonstrate, a *continuum of rhetorical potential* based on a writer's critical awareness of his/her own and others' points of view. Consequently, writers who take an extreme position, often with an unawareness of alternative views, emerge at one end of the continuum (e.g., Excerpt 1 above, and Excerpts 5 and 8 below) as contrasted with those that attempt to examine issues from "the other's" perspective appearing at the other end of the scale (e.g., Excerpts, 4, 6, and 12 below). Writers demonstrating at least some awareness of possible views (e.g., Excerpts 17, 18, and 19 below) would fall somewhere in between these extremes on the continuum. While the degree of critical thinking (in short, the ability to demonstrate an openness to alternative points of view) among college writers emerges along such a continuum, the analysis below focuses on the strategies of othering which are often at the extreme ends of such a continuum. While a solo focus on singular strategies is indeed artificial and awkward, since it is the cumulative effect of these strategies that actually points to the rhetorical potential of writers, for the sake of comprehending how these specific strategies work to create rhetorical effect, each is treated in isolation.

## EXAMINING STUDENT WRITING: THE CONSTRUCTION OF GROUP IDEOLOGIES

The paradigm of analysis being utilized in this study comes from the multidisciplinary arena of critical discourse analysis whose primary emphasis is the study of "the intricate relationships between text, talk, social cognition, power, society and culture" (van Dijk, 1993, p. 253). Such an approach examines the extent to which social attitudes and perceptions are reflected and sustained in the microstructures of words, sentences, and text, and the extent to which language as utilized by student writers serves to reflect and sustain social asymmetries. Since a claim has already been made that students write not as individuals, but as members of a social group, the solution for teachers lies not in eradicating portrayals in which student writers engage in othering practices, an act which would take away a student's right to self-expression—an act of transgression on their rights as individuals—but rather, a solution in which a pedagogical model is made available to novice writers which

triggers an astute examination of the linguistic tools of othering of the strongest persuasive appeal in society. Even though the exact pedagogical model triggering a close analysis of issues related to social justice is beyond the scope of this paper, what is crucial to emphasize is that a pedagogical model of critical literacy will instigate in young writers an awareness of how their strategies of othering can both disempower or empower others and consequently have resultant positive or negative effects on their readers.

## THE PRESENT STUDY: SOME BACKGROUND CONSIDERATIONS

The focus of this paper is on transactional or extensive styles of writing (e.g., Bizzell, 1992; Britton, Burgess, Martin, Mcleod, & Rosen, 1975; Emig, 1971), defined as a discourse form in which "a student seeks to convey information or argue for a position for an audience of the teacher in the role of examiner" (Bizzell, 1992, p. 183). This style of writing is diametrically opposed to expressive or reflexive styles where the focus is predominantly on narrative essays. The transactional essay requires command of numerous rhetorical strategies. At the very heart of such writing is the assumption that writers envision opponents with opposing views and prepare an a priori response to anticipated rebuttals. In this style of writing, meaning construction proceeds via the juxtaposition of ideas in the form of evidence. This might be why the composing process of students writing in this genre is "most truncated and least successful" (Bizzell, 1992, p. 183). A number of reasons can be postulated, but one hypothesis proffered in this study is that requiring students to take a position on an issue forces them to utilize complex discursive strategies, primary among them being the strategies of othering. Perhaps this is what Reynolds (1998) means by "tactical rhetoric," a rhetorical method incorporating notions of strategy and tactics in the construction of positions of "resistance" (Reynolds, 1998, p. 58) on the part of the student author (e.g., Certeau, 1988; Probyn, 1993).

The data sample examined in the present study consists of a discourse analysis of 15 randomly selected freshmen essays (among a set of 100) spanning a period of three years in a large-scale upper plains/Midwestern American State University. What makes this group fascinating for this study is that the students come predominantly from the same socio-cultural and economic background—a background of predominantly middle class Scandinavian and Germanic heritage. This homogeneity emerges quite overtly in some of the excerpts below. The prompts used to trigger these essays were based on sets of readings dealing with numerous social issues, and after a number of class discussions, students were specifically asked to write an essay arguing for a point they found interesting. Sample prompt sheets are found in the appendix of this essay.

## LINGUISTIC PROCESSES OF *OTHERING*: A THEORETICAL APPROACH

Based on the data, the following list of linguistic strategies of othering can be identified. It is important to note that the different strategies identified do not occur in isolation, but rather in tandem with each other. The theoretical model identified below is devised on the basis of strategies of othering identified by numerous sociolinguists and discourse analysts of discourse settings. For the sake of reference, author affiliation is provided after the identification of each strategy.

### Theoretical Framework

Linguistic strategies to encode Us vs. Them dichotomies emerge in the following lexico-syntactic ways.

a) *Lexical strategies*: overt denigration (O'Barr, 1994; Riggins, 1997)
b) *Distance markers*: voice and speaking space (Fairclough, 1994, 1995)
c) *Declaratives*: *constructing semantic overgeneralizations in and through syntax*: stereotypes (Essed, 1997; Karim, 1997; Riggins, 1997)
d) *Linguistic contrasts and qualifications*: positive self-representation vs. negative other presentation (Bhabha, 1994; van Dijk, 1997)
e) *The use of passive voice and other syntactic strategies*: mitigated and disguised othering (Simpson, 1993; van Dijk, 1997)

Othering strategies typically utilized in portrayals of social reality as attested to by Todorov (1982, p. 185) emerge in the form of three dimensions of othering which *the Self* consistently utilizes to distinguish between and distance the Other. These are *value judgment*, *social distance*, and *knowledge*. The strategies outlined above incorporate these three dimensions in some form. Consequently, it is in and through semantic portrayals of social distance which either replicate or challenge status quo representations and exclusions (i.e., discourse forms that either incorporate limited or extensive knowledge of the collectivities being portrayed) that student writers are able to engage in the sociolinguistic practice of othering the other.

At the outset it can be hypothesized that advanced student writers create dichotomies that reflect a complexity of viewpoints of the group being represented—what could be characterized as layered or nuanced rendition of meaning. Basic writing emerges, on the other hand, when writers create value judgments and social distance based often on limited knowledge about the other. Excerpt 1 would be viewed by some to be exemplary of this. Since the data sample examined exhibited a wide variety of examples, the strategies are divided into overt and covert strategies of othering. This distinction is made in this study primarily because of the pedagogical implications of such strategies. Even though explicit instruction in strategies of othering is beyond the scope of this paper, it is crucial to note that advanced writers usually engage in more covert strategies of othering, a point that will be discussed in some detail in the final section of this essay. This point is most

evident in the juxtaposition of student writing samples below, where it is evident that the persuasive appeal of a rhetorical piece is linked to the prowess the writer exhibits in exploiting strategies of othering to create new meaning.

## IDENTIFYING OVERT STRATEGIES OF OTHERING— THE CASE OF PRONOUN USAGE: US VS. THEM

A number of researchers have examined at length the socio-cognitive schemata underlying polarities such as Us vs. Them. Such binary categorizations and demarcations have a tendency, La Capra (1989) argues, to assume either in overt or covert ways a privileged position, a dominance of one group's perspective over the other (pp. 23-24). Such a hierarchy of meaning often emerges in freshman writing where the distinction is made evident in the use of pronouns, the most overt linguistic markers of alliance and distance. In actual linguistic terms, "expressions that are most revealing of the boundaries separating Self and Other are *inclusive and exclusive pronouns and possessives* such as *we and they*, *us and them*, and *ours and theirs*" (Riggins, 1997, p. 8). Via a manipulation of these structures, writers can overtly create rhetorical perspectives. In the excerpts on the homeless below, student writers utilize pronouns to express affiliation with 'naturalized' (Fairclough, 1992) or mainstream positions on the homeless, and in so doing distance themselves from this underprivileged group. For emphasis, pronouns appear in boldface, with some crucial words being italicized.

**Excerpt 2**

> Granted that *most* of **them** [the homeless] are fine, there still are *a few* that set a bad view on *the group as a whole*.

In the excerpt above, the matching of the quantifiers *most* and *a few* juxtaposed with the nominal phrase (*the group as a whole*) accentuates the point of view and the distance from the group being identified—the homeless. This abstract use of quantifiers to describe real people (e.g., in this excerpt, *most of them*) has been studied at length by Sykes (1985) who concludes that "any discourse that treats large numbers of people as though they were homogenous, and hence denies normal social variety" (p. 100) often functions to create judgments and social distance from the group being described. Here difference is described in simplistic terms, a polar rendition of Us vs. Them. Consider a similar use of pronouns to create distance in the excerpt below, also about the homeless.

**Excerpt 3**

> Homelessness, is it **our** problem or someone else's? Granted *the homeless* are down on **their** luck and don't really have a choice weather [sic] or not **they** are poor, but that is not **my** fault.

In this excerpt, we see an opposition being created between *our* and *my* on the one

hand, and *they*. Van Dijk (1984) labels such pronouns "demonstratives of distance" (p. 125) since their major function is to establish a contrast in the groups being described. In this way, a writer succeeds in "establishing a perspective" (p. 125). In this excerpt, the student writer creates distance and detachment from the group being described via a simple binary portrayal. In the literature (Riggins, 1997), such a discursive position often permits for a lack of responsibility for existent social divisions, and consequently, a lack of responsibility for social change.

In both of the excerpts above, the writers distance themselves from the homeless via overt linguistic pronominalizations. It is statements such as these that often frustrate teachers since the students present the viewpoint of the powered group with detachment and with an unquestioning acquiescence. Contrast these excerpts with a conceptualization of the homeless by another student writer, who utilizes the same pronouns of distance to question status quo representations of social difference.

**Excerpt 4**

> **These people we** shun, with no reasoning as "drunkards" (at least **we'd** like to believe it) are really many good men, women, and a growing number of children. This section of *society* has learned important things, the rest of **our** "classes" ignore, like community involvement, perseverance in the toughest of situations, and just the basic "have[ing] a little heart." This is a community with enough leadership skills and enough knowledge to set itself outside of the ruthless and chaotic order **our** "higher status's'" supposedly have. And this being so even though **they** knowingly will be termed as "less" no exceptions made.

In linguistic terms, the collocation of the reduced relative clause in the form of "these people we . . ." affords the writer the ability to immediately encode a critical stance which challenges conventional portrayals of social dichotomy, and consequently sets the tone for the essay. Using distance markers, the use of punctuation—scare quotes, to indicate disaffiliation with commonly ascribed nominal labels such as "Drunkards" or "classes," the writer questions the traditional othering of the homeless by a creative discursive strategy—the use of deictic pronouns (i.e., *these*) rather than the use of distal pronouns (i.e., *those*) which results in a presentation of social groups not as incongruous semantic contrasts—Us vs. Them— but rather, as a more complex narrowing of social distances—*these people* (as opposed to *those people*), that *we* (inclusive) as opposed to *me /my* (exclusive—see Excerpt 3). Othering is still utilized in this piece though on a different linguistic level. By overtly reversing the conventional othering of the homeless, this writer successfully presents an alternative critical stance on this issue.

## OVERT DENIGRATION: LEXICAL STRATEGIES

Excerpt 4 brings us to yet another strategy of othering frequently used in

freshman writing, the use of overt denigration of Othered groups through name-calling and various other lexical strategies. The use of epithets such as *"damn women's suffrage movement,"* diminutives such as *"sick little head"* and overt taboo words (Culpeper, 1996) such as *"PMSsers"* in Excerpt 1 examined above, fall into this category. Consider the excerpt below, similar in tone to the excerpt used at the opening of this paper. For emphasis, words of negative semantic import are italicized. It is noteworthy to emphasize the fact that this writer utilizes a consistent strategy of indefinite nouns (i.e., *something*) with indefinite pronominal antecedents (i.e., *it*) in order to represent social distance. These linguistic items are boldfaced to ease recognition.

**Excerpt 5**

> There is **something** in the world so *terrible* and so *terrifying*, I don't know if I should even talk about **it**. For years **it** has *struck fear* into the hearts of many and *paralyzed* **us** with **its** *whining*, *crying*, *pissing* and *moaning*. **It** has made us believe that there is nothing we can do to stop **it**. I feel it is my duty to start the rebellion against Feminism. The [sic] very **thing** that is wrong with our educational system today and the *monster* that is crumbling a country that could once bring the world to its knees.

Notice the use of gerunds, adjectives, and verbs of semantic import meant to stir up emotions in the reader culminating in the nominative substitute, *monster*, for a socio-political movement of renown. What is particularly important to see is the manner in which the writer creates an argument via the distinction between *us* versus *them*, a valuation also encoded in lexical choices. For instance, the writer successfully develops the metaphor of the monster via lexical choices in the same semantic fields (such as, *terrifying, fear,* and *paralyzed*), to create the hyperbole needed for the argument, a device that van Dijk (1997) documents in his research about political attitudes towards immigration in Western Parliaments, namely, "perfidiously appropriate metaphors for persuading public opinion" (p. 47). Fairclough (1989) argues that the expressive value of lexical forms serves a function since the writer's or speaker's "evaluation of the practices described is implicit in the vocabulary" (p. 118). For any firm believer in the equal rights of men and women, it may be particularly hard to read this piece and appreciate the powerful structures of othering encoded in the text. However, once again, to deny this student the right to express such arguments, to brandish the writer as a chauvinist, would constitute authoritarianism. One way that this scenario could be approached would be to make the student realize the othering being constructed and the ramifications on the audience of this paper, who without any quantitative research could safely be assumed to be 'turned off' by the choice of colloquial items of lexical denigration such as *whining, crying, pissing* and *moaning* when formal semantic equivalents, such as *protesting, lamenting*, and *demanding* may prove to induce a more effective reader reaction to this issue.

Let us turn our attention to another student writer who challenges the kinds

of expletives and derogatory nouns (Culpeper, 1996) traditionally used to label the homeless, and in so doing utilizes othering strategies to offer a nuanced unconventional representation of the homeless. This strategy of othering emerges in the use of distance markers on the part of the student writer, a device which forces a critical look on the part of the reader on conventional, status-quo 'labels' levied against the homeless. It is perhaps this critical stance which makes this excerpt emblematic of an advanced writer.

**Excerpt 6**

> Society's "upper" class perceptions have mislabeled this large part of humanity for centuries by calling them *"hobos," "bums," "tramps," "winos,"* and the already mentioned —"homeless". Society has desperately tried to shun them out, not only from their uncaring hearts, but especially from "making it in this world." Unable to get a job, as they are *"slobs,"* they choose to turn away from a society which turns away from them . ... We'd maybe view the humans and the hearts we place behind our fancy labels like *"alcoholic," "drug abuser," "socially incapable,"* and *"scum of society."* These *"scum"* might be rubbed beautiful, not with the soap of society as we may like to believe, but with tears from the culture realizing its grave and sorry mistake of generations of negligence and cruelty towards these misnamed —*"scum."*

The traditional epithets that this student writer questions in this analysis make this use of othering a complex nuanced linguistic act, one that most teachers would be impressed by. Like the previous excerpts examined, this example confirms that it is not the principle of othering that is at issue, but rather, what the writer chooses to do with it—in this case, to challenge, rather than to replicate conventional wisdom about the homeless. To recapitulate, othering is a linguistic tool that has the dual potential of turning readers on or turning them off.

Student writers as members of the status quo for the most part tend to reproduce the same asymmetries of the society of which they are participants. One common area of such othering occurs when talking about the medical field (Oaks, 1998). Excerpts 7 and 8 below present critical stances on the power sources in the medical industry, doctors, and drug companies. Writes one student of doctors,

**Excerpt 7**

> But instead of hippies running our hospitals, we have *vampires* running them —doctors who literally *suck the life* from people.

Even though the student utilizes a strong verb phrase in the form of *suck the life,* it is noteworthy to say that this choice is triggered by a semantically appropriate collocational label, *vampires*.

Commenting on a similar segregation of doctors from the rest of "us" is another excerpt which puts the recent overuse of drugs such as Ritalin on doctors and the pharmaceutical industry.

**Excerpt 8**

> Again it would take more time to diagnose children individually, so out comes the prescription pad to hurry **them** [the children] on **their** way. The last and one of the most contributing [sic] factors is [sic] the drug companies. The *rich fat cats* making a fortune on the Ritalin rage aren't going to speak up and say that it is getting out of control.

Nouns of strong semantic import such as *vampires* and *rich fat cats* in just two short excerpts on the medical industry, demonstrate the manner in which student writers reflect larger societal attitudes. Though representing a popular view against a social institution, these pieces are effective in that they present a critical view of power via othering practices that juxtapose two social groups — the medical industry vs. the patients. What is not as nuanced is the replication of mainstream views on this social dichotomy.

Participating in the 'traditional' othering of 'mainstream' establishments, we have another student denigrating the elderly. By attacking the speech patterns of the group, this writer mirrors common attitudes towards a segment of society that offers 'no obvious function.'

**Excerpt 9**

> Some of the people that live in this nursing home have no brain function, when it comes to speech and vocabulary, creativity etcetera. Some of **these** people can't talk, and the *ones* who can talk can only *mumble gibberish*.

The separation that most young freshman draw between themselves and the elderly is a common theme in most essays. The use of the amorphous demonstrative *these* (Simpson, 1993) with the negatively charged verb *mumble* and noun *gibberish* only confirms the attitude of the writer towards this group. Social dichotomies are represented in this excerpt via a simplistic representation of Us (the young) vs. Them (the elderly).

## DISTANCE MARKERS

Perhaps the most overt manner in which dichotomies of difference manifest themselves in discourse is via distance markers, overt linguistic signals serving to distance the writer from the group being discussed. We have already seen their use in previous excerpts. For instance, the social division between ordinary people and the experts of the medical industry gets played out in the excerpts below where the student writers utilize distance markers to sway opinion on the practitioners of medicine, once again an effective rhetorical use of an othering strategy similar to Excerpts 4 and 6.

**Excerpt 10**

> Many doctors use passive euthanasia when they feel their need to *wimp out* on saving a dying person's life—a perfect solution for doctors who don't want to get their hands ***"dirty."***

**Excerpt 11**

> Therefore, by allowing doctors to use euthanasia as a remedy, we alter their role as ***"health preserver"*** to a lofty contributor to the graveyard population, which is contrary to their Hippocratic promise.

Distance markers frequently appear in discussions about the homeless. One student writer uses distance markers to trigger thought with the opening sentence: "'The Homeless Disease' in our society is not something that should be forgotten about," the quotes signify semantic distance from a traditionally used epithet on the part of this student writer. Along similar lines, consider the excerpt below which uses distance markers to question common assumptions. The distance markers in Excerpts 10 and 11 above, and in Excerpt 4 earlier, function in this way. A questioning of status quo perspectives in these excerpts is achieved by a discursive strategy in which the writers use both pronouns and distance markers to establish distance or perspective from "us" as readers:

**Excerpt 12**

> After supporting these people with our prison, or at least detoxification-imitating programs, the populace spits on their existence, for dirtying **"our"** streets, and **"our"** lives. As though their lives are less important. [sic] It's shocking how America, and its history - whenever anything was desired - have just **"claimed"** it. **"Our"** streets, and **"our"** lives for that matter, are owed just as much to these **"unwanted humans,"** as is to anyone else.

## COVERT STRATEGIES OF OTHERING IN DECLARATIVES: CONSTRUCTING STEREOTYPES IN AND THROUGH SYNTAX

One typical syntactic strategy of othering employed by student writers involves the use of short declarative statements often encoding a semantic generalization about a group. This strategy in rhetorical terms has been called the use of stereotypes. "Through stereotypes, the self expresses ambivalence toward others," writes Riggins (1997, p. 9). Stereotypes are often discussed from the point of view of logical fallacies by most teachers of composition. However, critical linguistics offers a means to examine the manner in which macrostructures such as scripts, "the primary stereotype or topos (plural: topoi)," function to sustain social asymmetries on a semantic level, and in particular, how they succeed in making "a textual account seem coherent within a particular culture's norms" (Karim, 1997, p. 153). Karim sees this discoursal strategy as making overt the "collective cultural memory" of a group via textualizations stated in the modes of "dominant discourse" (p. 155). Though stereotypes have been the 'weeds' that teachers have

consistently tried to eradicate from student's writing, one can make the argument that it is in the stereotypes adopted by a student writer that teachers can understand a students' conceptualization of social issues. Consequently, discussions about the nature and purpose of syntactic declaratives encoding semantic stereotypes may be one area to empower students to analyze their own writing.

Student writers' affiliations with the powered group often emerge in their declarative assertions which can often encode semantic generalizations. Consider the excerpt below which unveils the stereotypes that most student writers have towards the homeless encoded in three declarative statements encoding two semantic entailments namely, "The Homeless are addicted to drugs and alcohol," and "The Homeless are not to be trusted." Here othering is utilized to present a common stereotype against the homeless.

**Excerpt 13**

> Why should I give up money and goods I worked hard for, for what they do not have? The thing that really ticks me off though is when you see a homeless person spending the money that they get on drugs or alcohol. The biggest problem with the homeless, I believe is that there are not enough people who trust them. To be honest, I do not trust many of them until I talk to them, and even then, I don't trust a lot of them.

Rimstead (1997) and Waxman (1983) have explored similar semantic generalizations or stereotypes towards working class individuals on the part of authors writing from the perspective of the dominant culture. In their extensive study of the politics of exclusion, Shreve and Richards Shreve (1997) have consistently alluded to this othering practice as the "just us" mentality (p. 173), a semantic distinction signified via the contrast in the pronouns 'me' vs. 'them' as this occurs in generalizations: declarative statements about social groups.

Below is an excerpt on the homeless that topples the usual stereotypes concerning this social group. In it, the student accomplishes what "Kurt Spellmeyer describes as social imagination, an awareness of the human 'world' as a common historical project, and not simply as a state of nature to which we must adjust ourselves" (cited in Herzberg, 1994, p. 317).

**Excerpt 14**

> Living like our ancestors, they search out their food and earn it by digging their hands deep into the dirt. The idea behind such "scavenging" as is so naively termed, is to seek out that which has been considered discarded by society—not unlike themselves. It is as much a valuable social ritual, and should be seen as such, as is wine with dinner in France. They have found comfort in simple pieces of life that the rest of us have "thrown away." A thought strikes me as odd though: society has thrown concrete jungles around our only remaining, truly free people, deglorifying them to "savages"—and yet society claims these people "without homes" as the wrong doers. Seems American history knows how to conquer this system of doing business to a tee. Only in the

> present though can we change naming another's land as our own, and throw the confinements of our powerful and dominant government's way of doing things, by easily destroying others' customs and cultures—which the homeless have a strong sense of both.

In this excerpt, the writer scrutinizes traditional descriptions of the homeless and in the process, generates a new set of stereotypes about the homeless. Here othering is being used to create, not replicate. Semantic entailments embedded in some of the declaratives are atypical namely that, "The Homeless are free" and "Our government is imprisoning." What this excerpt shows is that in advanced writing, othering strategies are utilized to portray meaning via creative, not conventional ways.

A typical domain in which declarative generalizations abound is in discussions about race. This is played out in the excerpt below where the sociological classification scheme utilized, belies the stereotypes the student writer seems to have inculcated, i.e., that minorities are still to acquire the full blown status of Americans, a fact hard to comprehend if we look at the history of certain minority groups who have been in this nation for over three hundred years. The example below though simple in statement is a classic example of othering often found in basic writing.

**Excerpt 15**

> May be you cannot blame *most Americans* to think the same as *minorities* because of their way of life.

What is particularly interesting to note in the above excerpt is the use of the generic pronoun *you* which adds yet another dimension to the use of pronouns to encode and sustain group differences. The generic use of *you*, in addition to functioning as a proximal pronoun, adds another dimension to the expectation of a "majority" reader since its use while proximal, could refer to any number of referents i.e., *you* the reader, *I* the writer, or in fact, *you* and *I*—all of whom are assumed to be different from the other group—in this case, all minorities.

In a revealing analysis of the "rhetoric of tolerance" (p. 4) in the era of multiculturalism, Blommaert and Verschuren (1998) utilize the innovative term "homogeneism" (p. 117) to describe othering strategies such as the bifurcations in the excerpt above, discursive strategies utilized by majority groups which have "granted the 'other' a secure place in the consciousness of average members" (p. 44) of highly 'multicultural' societies (p. 44). For most students writing in such a social paradigm, this contrast signifies a contrast between "the majority" (most) and "the minority"—a syntactic choice marking the minority as not fully belonging to the "majority" society. The use of the generic pronoun *you* in Excerpt 15 adds yet another dimension to the expectation of a "majority" reader which the discourse creates a perspective for.

In yet another excerpt below, a student utilizes point of view to create dichotomies, adopting first a distal view (Simpson, 1993), via a category adjective, (if

a *white* person) and gradually moving toward a proximal point of view (Simpson, 1993), via a personal pronoun (If *you* were walking...). It might be added that the choice of the generic use of *you* in the following excerpt as opposed to *I* may be an attempt on the part of the writer to disassociate herself/himself from attitudes such as these which are politically incorrect. This shift is particularly relevant since the power of perspective (Fairclough, 1989) is still afforded the dominant group with its conventional regional and racial stereotypes.

**Excerpt 16**

> An area where racism is really bad is down south. If a white person were to go to Harlem they would be considered either really brave or really dumb [note the passive voice]. If you were walking down the street and you saw a black guy in a trench coat walking toward you, you would immediately turn the other way [take note of the point of view, cf. Simpson 1993)]. Right away you think that you're going to get mugged. Black people always stick together. It's okay for a black person to call another person a "nigger." A white person wouldn't even think twice before calling a black person a "nigger."

Linguistic choices of othering become particularly relevant in revealing the amount of exposure students may have towards social groups outside their own. This fact is captured most overtly in the excerpt below where a student chooses to refer to an ethnic group via the defunct noun phrase *colored people* as opposed to the more recent prepositional nominal, *people of color*. Also in this excerpt is a dichotomization between social groups using stereotypical racial and socio-economic icons. Take note of the use of the highly connotative semantic label, "inner-city."

**Excerpt 17**

> In the metro area, where there are a higher percentage of *colored* people at schools, I think this problem gets even worse. I have talked to people in the cities that go to large *ethnically diverse* schools. They say that there is an extra group other than the upper class, lower class of kids, and that is the *blacks*. The reason why they separate is because of the type of lifestyles that they go home to after school. Some go to nice upper class houses, while others are bused to the slum part of the city where *rape*, *robbery* and *assault* are everyday occurrences. Here these people have no choice, but to *fight* to get ahead or even stay alive. This is an example of why people who are higher in power view these kids as troublemakers. The truth is that they have no way out or around it.

The above excerpt confirms Essed's (1997) claim that "the racialized dimensions of social relations constitute part of the macro framework within which everyday interactions take place" (p. 137), a confusion reflected in this student's writing. Note the student's shift from *colored people*, to *ethnically diverse*, to *black*—nominative labels reflective of the turbulence surrounding the labeling of these social groups in current society. What is nuanced however, about the othering strategies encoded in this excerpt is the shrewd observation about power plays embedded in status quo

sociopolitics. To make a student rewrite this piece of text without comprehending why the othering is constructed in such subversive terms would be missing out on the voice of the student—yet another excerpt reiterating the need for students to critically and independently examine their othering strategies.

## LINGUISTIC CONTRASTS AND QUALIFICATIONS: POSITIVE SELF-REPRESENTATION VS. NEGATIVE OTHER-PRESENTATION

Positive self-representation is often accomplished by othering practices in which linguistic contrasts and qualifications are proffered in order to qualify semantic propositions. (We have already noted the potency of the quantifier, *most* [Americans] in contrast to the implied *all* [minorities] in Excerpt 15 above). A typical manner in which racial difference is foregrounded and its deficiency "justified," is via a commentary on accent which in monolingual societies is seen as an anathema to be avoided at all costs rather that an indicator of linguistic richness. Lippi-Green (1997) devotes an entire book to this strategy of exclusion. We saw an example in Excerpt 9 of speech habits being the target of difference in a comment about the elderly.

The excerpt below is an example of how valuation is conflated between and within ethnic groups using accent as the area of comment, a syntactic construction in which linguistic strategies of contrast emerge via an embedded subordinate clause coordinated with an independent clause, for example, "We were **not directly ridiculing** her **because** of her race, **but** because I was **unable to understand her,**" and adjectival qualification: "I later realized that she may have felt **slight** discrimination." A key point to note is that the causation structure encodes this semantic subordination of causes in syntactic terms, (i.e., "race" is presented as subordinate to "accent" in the ridicule incident): "We were **not directly ridiculing** her **because** of her race" emerges as a main cause that was subordinate to "*because* I was unable to understand her."

**Excerpt 18**

> Another related issue occurred while I was eating at a Chinese restaurant this past weekend. My waitress was Chinese and came to wait on us. We began to laugh as she walked away because of the way she talked. We were not directly ridiculing her because of her race, but because I was unable to understand her. I later realized that perhaps she may have felt slight discrimination.

The use of the qualifying word *slight* coupled with the modal auxiliary *may*, which suggests only a slight possibility (Simpson, 1993), makes this excerpt a classic instance of deracialization (Essed, 1997), a strategy of othering which seeks to trivialize exclusionary practices. Essed (1997) states that "the mechanisms of racial exclusion and the repression of other cultures are integrated in the mundane and routine practices of everyday life" (p. 132), and that via this strategy, the dominant group comes to perceive and experience the marginalization and problemitization

of the other as "normal" (p. 133). In the above excerpt, exclusionary practices towards the waitress with the Chinese accent are presented via "justified" linguistic judgments on accent. No one explains this strategy of othering more succinctly than Lippi-Green (1997), who argues that

> Accent serves as the first point of gate keeping because we are forbidden, by law and social custom, and perhaps by a prevailing sense of what is morally and ethically right, from using race, ethnicity, homeland or economics more directly. We have no compunctions about language however. Thus, accent becomes a litmus test for exclusion, an excuse to turn away, to refuse to recognize the other (p. 64).

It is crucial to note that the discursive choices in the above piece encode some complexity on this issue. Thus, the student writer's questioning of this act is an attempt to instigate in the reader the need to evaluate a situation from another's point of view.

In yet another excerpt, this one on homelessness, a student writer utilizes the conventional differences between *giving* and *receiving* frequent among conceptualizations about the homeless and the "homed" to make a point about the homeless.

**Excerpt 19**

> Don't label, give low class people better housing, and in turn a better chance to make something out of their life, **and if they don't want** to take that lead **then they *deserve* to be looked down upon**.

Contrast the above excerpt with the one below, which creates an unconventional juxtaposition between two very well known social groups, the homeless and the "homed." The excerpt uses the device of othering to question common perspectives on positive and negative self representation.

**Excerpt 20**

> Yet, they [the homeless] do not return our war cries with violence, as we're made to believe by our egocentric education; in fact the only strategy of fighting they use is seclusion and refuge. Seclusion as in living a quiet life away from our *Gucci* leathers, perfumes and *Rolexes*. A quiet life where society can toss *their* pennies, nickels and dimes at them and walk past displaying *their* bulging pockets. They take refuge by drawing away from this bitter treatment our cold society has raped into American life.

Via a series of semantic propositions of contrast, the writer instigates a different, and one could say novel, commentary on current attitudes towards the homeless.

## OTHER SYNTACTIC STRATEGIES OF *OTHERING*: A LOOK AT MITIGATED OTHERING

It is important to end this analysis by examining a final example of covert othering, an outcome of modern socio-politics. Riggins (1997) recognizes an important fact concerning modern conceptualizations of intolerance. According to him, today, "intolerance is more complex than it was in the past because it tends to occur in situations where tolerance of diversity is a socially recognized norm, frequently one that is legally sanctioned" (p. 7)—a statement of the politically correct times we live in. The consequence he argues, is a conceptualization of otherness that mitigates or disguises tendencies towards discrimination—articulations which "appear to be more temperate, less severe and cruel" (p. 7).

Notice how the student writer in the excerpt below conceptualizes 'normalized' notions of the alliance between homelessness and mental insanity, a judgment made in an eloquent and poignant way.

**Excerpt 21**

> **There is** fear of the homeless because **it is** believed that many of the homeless were deinstitutionalized in the 1970's, as stated in "Distancing the Homeless" (pp. 310-319) by Jonathan Kozol. **The idea that** many of the homeless came from mental institutions brought fear to people. **People feel** that all of the homeless are former patients from mental hospitals, even today.

This semantic construction proceeds via the classic use of cleft sentences—(*There is*...or *It is*...), a semantic portrayal developed via a fronted relative clause in the third sentence. The resultant effect is one instigating a questioning of these generalizations. The use of the general "there is" claim distances the writer from these generalizations since the use of the empty subject *there* or *it* instigates an immediate attempt to locate a viewpoint on the generalizations being purported via the concatenation of such empty subjects.

Riggins (1997) goes so far as to maintain that members of privileged groups express their affiliations in "univocal and monologic terms" (p. 6) specifically because it is "relatively easy for dominant groups to express and confirm their shared identity publicly" (e.g. Riggins, 1990; 1992). In contrast, he argues, "the discourses of identity articulated by members of subordinate minorities tend to be contradictory, complex and ironic" (p. 6). It is the first two strategies that are of significance here.

As most teachers of composition can testify, rhetorical tools such as irony are utilized by mainly advanced writers, a fact best explained by the relative non-occurrence of particularly irony and humor in most student writing. This might be because these rhetorical tools function at a covert, mitigated 'subterranean' level, and are often dexterously woven into a piece of discourse taking an innovative position on the representation of reality. Most overt forms of othering as seen in earlier excerpts (e.g., Excerpts 4 and 6) utilize conventional dichotomies to represent the

social groups being distanced. If most students envision reality in dominant group terms, it is almost understandable why mitigated othering as a rhetorical tool is so sparsely utilized on their part (Rosaldo, 1990).

To understand how student writers can successfully manipulate othering practices utilizing this strategy, consider the excerpt below where the student offers a scathing attack on society's obsession with external perfection, the consequence of which is a banishment of the *elderly*, the *sick* and the *deformed*, to eternal labels, ironic appellations, which the writer italicizes.

**Excerpt 22**

> We've already discussed how "they will never be 'normal' again; but **we** only get worse with our explanations. **The patient has become *disfigured, crippled, underdeveloped, mentally incapable, physically impaired*** and the list goes on and on [italics on the part of the student].

Questioning and utilizing linguistic othering in such a manner, permits the student writer to proffer a nuanced representation of reality which challenges given mores and values concerning what is considered 'normal.' This is achieved via a concatenative list of such conventional labels used to other the disfigured. It is only appropriate to end this section with this excerpt which has embedded in it a layer of commentary. The writer's own use of othering strategies, in particular, the use of a sentence with an implied agent (i.e., *to us)* utilizes an unconventional point of perspective as the starting point of the discourse. The result: The group being othered is in fact "us."

It is important to stress that even though othering strategies have frequently been examined in the literature as serving exploitative functions, a textual means through which dominant groups assert and maintain powered positions (Riggins, 1997), the occurrence of othering devices in student writing may not be entirely exploitative in nature. Rather, these devices signal group ideologies, and function as barometers of student affiliations with and distance from groups. It is in this polysemy of meaning that teachers can better comprehend the representation of social reality. There is no doubt that this paper provides a very superficial account of how students represent social inequality in linguistic terms. What it does show, however, is that student writers as members of society can replicate their conceptualizations of collectivities regarding the homeless, the elderly, minorities, to name a few examples, in textual terms that constitute othering. Creative uses of this device as the excerpts have shown trigger innovation in writing—one of the key goals of most teachers.

That these collectives are presented through a multiplicity of perspectives authenticates the need on the part of teachers to examine this strategy in detail, and to exploit this already existent potential. If anything, this paper has drawn attention to the fact that it is in the discourse embodied in student writing—it is in "the language used in representing a given social practice from a particular point of view" (Fairclough, 1995 p. 56)—that teachers and students can best comprehend

the true complexity of representation and exclusion.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS: PEDAGOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Numerous researchers have argued that students be offered explicit instruction on resisting portraying offensive views (Brandt, 1990; Nystrand, 1986, 1989; Reynolds, 1998; Yagelski, 1994). However, such explicit intervention runs the risk of producing student texts that are clones of the instructor's views. The analysis of the excerpts so far confirms that the 'problem' in freshman writing is not passivity and detachment on the part of the student writer. The dilemma concerns the representation of difference, "a paradox in which differences can be stigmatized both by being privileged and by being ignored" (Desmet, 1998, p. 162). Excerpts in this paper demonstrate what happens when student writers 'expose' differences as simplistic, conventional *us* vs. *them* linguistic divisions vs. complex, innovative discursive practices. Rather than present a premature and false resolution of the depth of complexity embedded in such a dilemma, I offer the reader three ways in which othering practices can be approached in classrooms.

**Approaches: Three Potential Pedagogical Solutions**

1. **Promoting Cognitive Dissonance**: In terms of pedagogical practice, one step would be to utilize the paradigm proposed by Elbow (1994) which advocates promoting cognitive dissonance, "a non dominant mode of binary thinking to have situations of balance, irresolution, nonclosure, nonconsensus, non winning" (p. 181). Such an approach could trigger students to view social dichotomies, *us* vs. *them* thinking, in neutral terms before engaging in a portrayal of stigmatization or privileging of one group over others – in short, before engaging in asymmetrical portrayals of representation and exclusion of social dichotomies. This would work effectively for the student writer who chooses not to take an overtly skeptical stance. However, for those for whom skepticism is as part of writing as its conventional structural patterning, strategies of othering need to be explored, explained, and discussed in detail.

2. **Promoting Critical Literacy vs. Democratic Literacy**: For a teacher seeking to ensure that content in students' writing reflects a complex rather than an oversimplistic or conventional rendition of reality—one in which content is innovative rather than imitative (a model of critical literacy, rather than democratic literacy), one proposal would be the teaching of transformative styles of thinking. This methodology could be developed via exposure to literature and reading that would permit for nuanced positions on social issues.

In such an approach, students are reminded that there are other ways of saying—doing—believing—and valuing reality than those they possess (Gee, 1990), and at the very least, they have to defend their othering practices in relation to

these other discourses. In such a model, (see e.g., Clark & Ivani, 1997; Ivani, 1998; Kamler, 2001), students would have to recognize their own agency in the reproduction of social asymmetries. This model of critical literacy would entail an analysis of power and a social justice agenda – one in which, via close analyses of social justice issues, students come to terms with their othering practices and the extent to which such discourse practices perpetuate or deviate from the disempowering of others. Students would be encouraged to see that it is in the collective portrayal of groups, and is in the choice of othering practices, that social injustices have a potential of being replicated in the collective consciousness of all. In this method, students are consciously made aware of the extent to which "social injustices affect our lives, and a sense that responsibility for social justice includes but also carries beyond personal acts of charity (Herzberg, 1994: 315).

What the analysis so far seems to suggest to teachers of composition is a pedagogy that offers students a means to explore a repertoire of othering strategies, a designing of assignments that would trigger textual accounts that appeal to the broadest audience the writer desires. The actual implementation methods to be utilized are much beyond the scope of this paper, but explicit instruction in othering strategies is a direction of promise. It must be emphasized that such a curriculum does not imply that practitioners of composition have to have a thorough knowledge of linguistic procedures, or be adept in grammatical jargon. Rather, such a grammatical framework would provide both a framework as well as a helpful shorthand for analyzing these strategies.

Researchers such as Bizzell (1992) have consistently argued that learning to compose "is a socialization process, a process of initiation into the discourse community's world view" (p. 194). It becomes the responsibility therefore of the profession (Ceasar, 1998) to ensure that students are offered explicit instruction on the means and methods of creating a public, nuanced voice in writing that appeals to the widest audience possible. By motivating students to consider their portrayals of asymmetry, we can in a sense achieve what Freire (1971) had hoped any pedagogical curriculum theorizing about oppressed groups would attain, namely a rhetorical method that produces "authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication" (p. 64). Enacting agency via an inventive critique of routinized or status-quo sociolinguistic dichotomies, evoked most explicitly in othering practices, is empowering to the student writer both in the short and long term. Cushman (1999) argues that activism proceeds mainly in and through linguistic practices. Overtly forcing students to examine the othering practices utilized in their writing triggers a more effective comprehension of how "exchanges create and maintain oppressive structures" (Cushman, 1999, p. 219). Only then can students "pay conscious attention to the power structures produced and maintained during their interactions with others outside of the university" (Cushman, 1999, p. 219).

**3. A Model of Social Action through Service Learning:** Fiercely opposed to

any notions of liberatory ideology offered by composition practitioners which has no utilitarian social application or follow-up in social activism in the larger society, Cushman (1999) offers the following commentary:

> In fact, some scholars make no distinctions between social change and empowerment, as though to empower is to liberate, and to liberate is to produce social change. Underpinning this slippery discourse is an equally slick assumption--social change and empowerment lead to some kind of collective action or resistance involving the masses of people we teach. When we view the impact of critical pedagogy from these grand levels though, we miss the particular ways in which our teaching and research might contribute to students' abilities to take up their civic responsibilities once they leave our classrooms. (p. 226)

However, one can question if this really is a "slick assumption" on the part of an educator. True empowerment, I argue, comes from providing choices and options. Whether students opt to resist or not to resist is a choice they are entitled to have. Forcing students to work "to take up their civic responsibilities" (Cushman, 1999, p. 226) does not provide choices, the true definition of education.

For some, depriving people of choice is indicative of a burdensome praxis since it shifts the agency of empowerment solely to the teacher, relegating students to subject positions, a point that Cushman would herself concede to. For such researchers, transforming content can only occur via a transformation of the context of exposure of students. In such a model, service learning combined with critical literacy would trigger a more complex discourse on the part of student writers.

A number of researchers have recently emphasized the need for service learning (Haussamen, 1999; Herzberg, 1994), a paradigm of functional education through writing which prompts "reflection as well as action [and] combines community work with classroom instruction" (Schultz & Ruggles Gere, 1999, p. 179). Herzberg (1994), in a study on service learning which prompted freshmen students to work as literacy tutors in homeless shelters, acknowledges the extent to which students replicate the collective categorizations of the society of which they are a part. He reports that his students found it "extremely difficult to transcend their own deeply ingrained belief in individualism and meritocracy in their analysis of the reasons" (p. 311) for the problems they saw. Consequently, he argues, "very few of his students ever became indignant of what they saw" (p. 311). The consequence of such stereotypical thinking, reports Herzberg (1994), is that it becomes extremely hard for students to ever examine constructions of asymmetry in non-stereotypical terms, since as he notes "if our students regard social problems as chiefly or only personal, then they will not search beyond the person for a systematic explanation" (p. 309).

As Haussamen (1999) rightly observes, even though forcing students to volunteer in the community is an invaluable pedagogical milestone, the two goals of reflection and experience have to proceed hand in hand. According to him,

"Reflection—through discussions, journals, and research prompts the student to unpack a host of impressions and to reach for an understanding of them. Service by itself is not learning; the learning occurs in the examination and analysis of the service" (p. 204). It is conceptualizations such as this that make the model of service learning proposed by composition teachers such as Haussamen (1999) so appealing. In his model, students are roused to corroborate their own reflections with actual experience. Haussamen (1999) describes what happens when students actually go into a nursing home.

> The students at Raritan Valley who volunteer for the nursing home project spend an hour or two at a time during the middle portion of the semester befriending an elderly man or woman. Each week I ask a couple of these students to talk in class about what the resident is like, what the home itself is like, how they feel about being there, how they think they are perceived, and what sources they are finding in the library that amplify the life stories they are hearing (p. 204).

According to him, encouraging students to be this reflective is an invaluable part of their learning for it forces them to understand the nature of their impressions and views, and consequently, triggers a deeper reflection of social structures on their part. In a study analyzing the attitudes of college students towards elderly women, Waskel, Dubes, and Riviere (1997) report a trend towards more positive attitudes in the sample studied, a marked contrast to the ageism reported in previous studies (e.g., Barrow, 1986; Collete-Pratt, 1976; Luszcz & Fitzgerald, 1986). What is crucial to note however is that Waskel, Dubes, and Riviere (1997) emphasize that solutions to improving inter-generational relations are linguistic and lie in an astute "understanding of how words are used as descriptors and the connotations which these words may have" (p. 175) to the elders being labeled and described.

In compelling students to work with the social groups they write about, and in challenging them to examine their descriptions, teachers can induce critical thinking—an analysis of alternative points of view—via additive rather than subtractive means. In the excerpts examined in this study, students conceptualize reality in different but similar terms—a testimony to the polysemic social potential embedded in discourse. To label some of these conceptualizations, as completely deficit is to miss out on the actual potential students bring into a composition class as participants of a social system.

The examples so far demonstrate that students need to proceed by first reflecting on the social realities portrayed in their papers. For teachers, one option is to make students examine the repertoire of othering options available; challenge them to question the dichotomies they utilize to represent reality, and explicate upon the reasons why such linguistic dichotomizations are utilized in the first place. However, it is key to conclude by saying that true agency, true empowerment, comes when decisions are volitional, not forced—the product of independent, ingenious self-reflexive reflection on the part of a student. Only then can an educational

establishment truly verify its status as a project of democracy.

## APPENDIX: TWO SAMPLE PROMPTS USED

ENG. 110: Spring 2000
Instructor: Anjali Pandey

### ESSAY #1: SYNTHESIS ARGUMENTS
### Race and Class

*SCENARIO*:

In his narrative "Shame" Dick Gregory says: "I never learned hate at home, or shame. I had to go to school for that" (4). Toni Cade Bambara in "The Lesson" recounts the same feeling when she enters a ritzy toy store as a child "... But I felt funny, shame. But what I got to be ashamed about?...But somehow I can't seem to get hold of the door..." (p. 45). Norman Podhoretz in his article "A Question of Class" reiterates a similar feeling when he says; " I no longer remember when or in what form I first discovered that there was such a thing as class, but whenever it was and whatever form the discovery took, it could only have coincided with the recognition that criteria existed by which I and everyone I knew were stamped as inferior: we were in the *lower* class" (p. 74). These narratives illustrate the extent to which race and class resulted in overt and covert forms of discrimination against the writers.

*QUESTION: (**Choose one**)*

1. Using the various narratives discussed in class, write an argumentative paper (3-4 pages) that argues a point worth supporting. You can use any of the points raised in class or an argument that you find original.

2. Your paper could also take the form of a detailed critique on any of the above sources.

3. You could choose to write your essay in the form of a narrative that recounts a similar feeling.

*NOTE:*

Keep in mind the fact that others will read your paper, and if you want to keep them reading, you must 'solve' a **problem** that has a **cost** for them as **readers**. You may use any of the issues we've discussed in class or you may choose ones that are of particular interest to you. Try and make your argument as **unique** as possible.

In evaluating your papers, I will be looking for the following elements of structure:

1). A complelling introduction which contains:
- A destabilizing condition or disturbing scenario of considerable relevance to your reader(s)
- A cost or specification of what will be lost if the matter raised in your paper is NOT addressed
- An appeal to readers who care/a clear audience
- A clearly stated and supported **central claim / point.**

2). Evidence or support in the form of examples, illustrations or quotes and
3). A final draft, free of grammatical, mechanical and spelling errors.

- Refer to at least two of the assigned readings.

Your essay should have a suitable and creative **title (**stated on the title page)
**********

Bring two copies of your rough draft to class on Friday, May 19 for the peer-editing session.*** Final draft due: Tuesday, May 23 (two copies).

ENG. 122
Spring 2001
Instructor: Anjali Pandey

## ESSAY #2: PROBLEM-SOLUTION ARGUMENTS
## Euthanasia

*SCENARIO***:**

The ongoing debate surrounding the issue of Euthanasia or "mercy killing" raises several questions, including: Who decides to pull the plug?; What legal laws should be imposed?; Is Euthanasia an act of charity or a moral sin?; Should it only be limited to adults and not children, and will the increasingly widespread acceptance of such deaths lead to a more relaxed attitude toward the taking of life in general? The powerful real life documentary: "Please let me Die" has demonstrated that solutions to this issue are complex.

*QUESTION***:**

After carefully considering the moral, social, ethical, and legal challenges our medical institutions and representatives face, write an argumentative paper that clearly supports a *claim* that you find interesting. Your claim **should not** focus on whether you are *for* or *against* euthanasia, but rather, on **WHY** you are for or against it. Try and make your claim as *unique* as possible.

*NOTE: Cite evidence from at least three sources. Feel free to cite the real-life*

*cases debated in class.*

Keep in mind that others will read your paper, and if you want to keep them reading, you must address **a problem** that has a **cost** for them as **readers.** You may use any of the issues we've discussed in class or you may choose ones that are of particular interest to you.

In evaluating your papers, I will be looking for the following elements of structure:

1) A clear statement of the *context* of the existing problem that your essay will address
2) A clear and specific claim (It could be a claim of *Fact, Value* or *Policy)*
3) Evidence or support in the form of examples, illustrations or quotes. Use the list of scenarios as examples for your claim. Also use examples from the readings.
4) A compelling conclusion.

## NOTES

[1] The author of this paper would like to express her sincere appreciation to the reviewers and editors of Issues in Applied Linguistics for the valuable insight and input provided on the manuscript submitted to the journal.
[2] Student writing samples are reproduced exactly as they occur. Typographical and grammatical anomalies are part of the excerpts, and not editorial oversights on the part of the writer. Obvious errors are indicated via the notation [sic].
[3] Dispositions would be defined as social habits signified in this data sample in students' social proximity to, or social distance from groups/individuals being talked about in their essays.
[4] Discursive practices would refer here to the specific linguistic/discoursal choices utilized by a writer from among a set of potential choices.
[5] Defined here, as saying exactly how you feel in spite of the risks involved in the reception of your speech act. An extreme concocted example would be a statement such as, "I hate it when minorities come to this country and take away our jobs." This statement would be an example of The Honest Face Personae.
[6] To maintain a reasonable sense of brevity, representative examples are provided in each section though it must be noted that each of these strategies needs to be explored in more depth.

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