

Keith Gilyard

## Literacy, Identity, Imagination, Flight

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This article examines issues of literacy and identity relative to the development of a critical pedagogy and a critical democracy. An earlier version was delivered as the Chair's Address at the Fifty-first Annual CCCC Convention on April 13, 2000.

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**A**s I prepared to come to Minneapolis for this convention, I could not help, given the locale and theme of our gathering, to remember to pay homage to a special person of great imagination, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. When King was gunned down in Memphis in 1968, the nineteenth annual CCCC convention was being held in this city. Fortunately, his dream of non-racist societies lives on and, in fact, has inspired some of the best work done by members of our organization over the past thirty-two years with respect to creating courses that have gestured toward a more socially just world.

When I thought more of King in relation to this present conference, I realized anew the tremendous sacrifices he made beyond the most obvious one. He chose to subordinate certain other imaginative pursuits, such as leisurely study and contemplation of music and literature, to the taxing demands of the civil rights movement. And I thought of how often that kind of tradeoff has been made, how people have set aside particular and perhaps preferred flights of fancy because they have become absorbed in pressing matters that often

CCC 52:2 / DECEMBER 2000

have weighed them down and have not seemed very fanciful at all. I also thought, as I geared up to come here, about literal, machine-powered flight. Still musing about King and his unfinished mission, I noted how the airways remain our most segregated channel of mass travel, of how flight—both fanciful and business-like—links to economics that in turn link to the color line that concerned King so much and that W.E.B. Du Bois wrote about on several occasions, most memorably in 1903. Then I recalled that in 1903, the same year Du Bois was suggesting that the color line was indeed *the* problem of the twentieth century, Wilbur and Orville Wright construed a fundamental problem of the new century to be that of flight. They solved the conundrum that most consumed them, contributing vitally to the age of aviation that has been one of the most spectacular stories of the last ninety-seven years. It is an age during which the world has shrunk considerably, the color line not as significantly. And I conjured up the image—just started imagining and re-imagining all kinds of things because of this convention—of a childhood friend and schoolmate of Orville Wright who had to pass on one of his own notions of flight because he stood in a disadvantaged position in relation to the color line. He desperately wanted to go to Harvard University to pursue becoming a lawyer, but it was not to be. Fortunately, both for him and for us, this fellow, Paul Laurence Dunbar, did get to soar through his poetry and other writings, partly and ironically because of the Wright brothers' assistance.

Among their many creative ventures, the Wright brothers established a printing company in 1890. Wilbur served as publisher, Orville, as editor. One of their publications was a four-page weekly titled *The Tattler* that was aimed at an African American readership. Dunbar wrote and edited this short-lived vehicle. He also wrote a poem on a wall in the office testifying to Orville Wright's genius. A couple of years later, Dunbar approached Orville Wright to see if he would print his first book of poetry. Wright lacked the mechanism to handle a job of that size but directed Dunbar to a printer with whom arrangements were made. By the time Orville Wright took off at Kitty Hawk in 1903, Dunbar had persevered to publish thirteen professionally produced books, including three in 1903 alone as he, at age thirty, was already succumbing to the tuberculosis that would claim his life. A too brief career, like King's, and, like King's, an ascending career despite intense social pressures, ended in 1906.

Now I do not argue that Dunbar or Du Bois or King would not have chosen in any case to devote almost their entire talents to the progress of African Americans and the resultant healing of the national soul. My point is that they could hardly have ignored that option given an enduring racism. I thank them continually for their choice and their example. Nor will I tie up neatly the large

and noble notion of humane interaction along the color line, a conception that I am alluding to in some respects. I'll let all that suggestiveness simmer a bit. I want to press directly forward on some specific ideas about me, you, and the topic (Educating the Imagination, Re-Imagining Education) that brings us together today, and about how I hope this convergence is helpful as we continue to work on ourselves and with our students.

I have let my mind roam over this topic, a novel experience, knowing all along that such endeavor would evoke prior experiences, thus leading to a synthesis of new and old. I was encouraged by the fact that you have agreed to hear

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me and perhaps be kind. I have made connections that maybe only I would, all that politicized African Americanness rubbing up against historical curiosity about poets and the biographies of poets as well as biographies of prominent

people in general, not to mention a sense of CCCC's history. But these connections were initially vague, not in the fairly mature form in which I now present them. I had to put in research time to flesh out ideas, to shore up my memory. With your implied indulgence, I was and am motivated to make some of the cultural and personal suppositions that I hold as clear to you as I can. This learning contract, then, is what I propose as a model. If we agree to aim for a radical, transcultural democracy, as King did, then we need pedagogies to foster the development of the critical and astute citizenry that would pursue the task. In this regard, the best strategies involve maximizing various epistemologies, searching for transcultural understandings, opening up spaces for imaginative wanderings, for scholarly recreation. These are our best chances of obtaining and maintaining the widespread student-citizen involvement we seek.

A former student of mine, Chang Chun Tao, helped me to appreciate the educational value of creative cross-cultural conversation. At the end of a semester of first-year English, in which he studied alongside African American and African Caribbean classmates, my curiosity about his perceptions of the course led to a talk in my office. My colleague and friend Steve Cannon intruded, as he usually did, and we all decided to tape the whole exchange, of which I'll share a couple of excerpts.

**Gilyard:** So what were some of the works you liked this semester? I know you like Tolstoi. You did your research paper on Tolstoi. Now I know about your father [who taught Russian literature in China]. What else drew you to Tolstoi as a writer?

**Tao:** First, he looked at people of different classes. I was also influenced by the sociological approach, Marxist interpretation. I was born in a communist country and they always use that way to evaluate a piece of work. It's true. So this is why I like the sociological approach. I think Tolstoi does all his literature basically in this approach.

**Gilyard:** You mean it lends itself to a sociological explanation?

**Tao:** That's why I like it. I also like another piece of work very much, *A Raisin in the Sun*.

**Gilyard:** [Lorraine] Hansberry's play. Why do you like it?

**Tao:** Because it reflects the conflict between two generations. A generation comes from an underdeveloped area to a developed area. When they are in the underdeveloped area, they favor the values they had, moral values. But when they go to developed areas, when they go to Chicago and see all the industry, they like money only.

**Gilyard:** So you don't like Walter Lee Younger?

**Tao:** I cannot say I don't like him. But I say this is a real figure in society. In my country—

**Gilyard:** They have Walter Lee Youngers in China?

**Tao:** Yeah. Something like that. Before they came through the economic reform people really appreciated moral values. But after reform they just like money.

**Gilyard:** Well, money is a value, isn't it?

**Tao:** It's a value, but it's not a moral value.

**Gilyard:** No, it's not a moral value, but then maybe it is. You tell me. You like philosophy, economics. You like Marx.

**Tao:** No, I don't like Marx. I like money, too. But money cannot do everything, especially in a family relationship. You shouldn't choose money over your family. Walter chose money.

**Cannon:** He chose money over and above the family.

**Tao:** He chose money over and above anything else.

**Gilyard:** What about *Antigone*? I know you had fun with that.

**Tao:** Yeah. I like it, too. This play criticizes dictatorships.

**Cannon:** The whole idea of dissent.

**Tao:** So this play is like what happens in communist countries when they take everything over. They don't want to allow the people—

**Cannon:** To dissent—

**Tao:** They don't like to listen to different voices.

**Cannon:** Other points of view.

**Tao:** This is why they clamped down on the demonstrations in Tienamen Square. That's the same thing. I can imagine—

**Cannon:** You can immediately identify with that, huh?

Then we rambled about universality, canon formation, and reader-response theory. Both Steve and I sensed that Chang was not likely to make that quick, right, anti-Black turn that several Asian immigrants we knew made. We figured his introduction to Black students and his willingness to see Black texts to be as worthy as others would help him to remain fairly open-minded. We pushed on to popular culture, where Steve and I often wind up.

**Cannon:** Do you spend time going to the movies?

**Tao:** I watch movies on television. I don't go to the movies.

**Cannon:** You don't go sit in the audience?

**Tao:** I might borrow some tapes from the video store. I'll tell you what I like, *The Color Purple*.

**Gilyard:** Why do you like *The Color Purple*? I know people who hate that movie.

**Tao:** This movie reflects how housewives suffer in the underdeveloped areas and how they become strong and finally how they choose their own way.

**Gilyard:** Now would that interpretation have something to do with the traditional role women have played in Chinese culture?

**Tao:** It's very similar because in China a husband always dominates a family. Women have little power.

**Gilyard:** So Steve, he would be sitting there relating the movie to his experiences in China, and he wouldn't even know what all the Blackfolk were fussing about, positive and negative images and all that. He's not even in that one. He's connecting it to something else.

**Cannon:** Matriarchy-patriarchy.

**Gilyard:** Or the effects of patriarchy. That's right. Of course, from there he can eventually get to the so-called *Purple* debate—through the side door in a sense, which is actually the front door for him.

Although Chang Chun Tao asserted and demonstrated the universality that all fine literature possesses, he was never seduced, nor should we be, by the argument that because this is so, it doesn't matter if we try for a culturally diverse mix. It may, in fact, *not* matter in the absolute, but the absolute is not where we live and learn and teach. Our choice of materials and our classroom concerns communicate messages as well, largely about whom we value. Chang knew I was in his corner. He, Steve, and I went on for quite a spell, clashed somewhat, contradicted ourselves, tried to work that out, all three of us widening our critical gazes, casting out from our primary cultural shores. We talked about, among many things, Chinese literature, publishing politics, and radical lesbian feminism.

Looking back, I wonder if Chang, who thought I was pretty sophisticated about literature and literary theory, knew that I acquired a lot of knowledge similar to the way he did. A lot of my initial observations are the old "go for what you know" variety that are important back in the 'hood. For example, what I comprehend about structuralism and post-structuralism is due to James Brown. On his recording "There Was a Time," Brown opens by singing/stating that "There was a dance, hah / There was a time, hah / when I used to dance, hah."

Let's examine this. The dance is the structure, the pattern of rhythmic movements. For Brown to repeat the movements establishes a certain meaning inside a particular system of signification. When we understand this dancer in relation to the codified motions that precede him, that's structuralism. Of course, defining these "-isms" can be slippery, but I'm pretty centrist in my reading here according to the *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. So *there was a dance*. And *there was a time*, Brown's acknowledgment of the social construction of dances, his sense that although the dances precede the dancer, they cannot precede history. In other words, they are not natural; they are situated articulations derived from specific human encounters. So there was a time *when I used to dance*. This is Brown talking about specific occasions on which he makes predictable meaning. Again, that's structuralism. Then Brown takes the listener on a tour of structuralist understandings as he speaks of doing the mashed potatoes, the jerk, the camel walk,

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and the boogaloo. We may even term these substructuralist understandings insofar as these movements are components of the larger socio-historical dance. The song really is this deep. Quincy Troupe wrote that James Brown was “the philosopher of the Black masses” and that has always rung true to me. Brown knows as well as anyone this side of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida how meaning can be shifting, unstable, inside a given dance. He thus announces his poststructuralist stamp on the dance with the words, “But you can bet you haven’t seen nothin’ yet until you see me do the James Brown.” In other words, he can extend beyond the received structure in ways he would wager you could not have anticipated had you been a personal witness at Harlem’s Apollo Theater in 1967, the very same year Barthes’s *Elements of Semiology* was translated into English and Derrida published *Of Grammatology*.

This same street-level approach makes composition theory accessible to me as well. The theorists I’m feeling most right now are Romy Clark and Roz Ivanič, whom I relish for their explicit discussions of writing as a social practice in their book *The Politics of Writing*. As Clark indicates,

I have learned that it is important to see writing as a social practice, embedded in social relations within a specific community, each with its own complex ideological and conventional practices within which individual students have to find identities as writers that they feel confident and comfortable with. (5)

Of course, there has been voluminous research produced on this side of the pond about writing as a situated and constructed endeavor, for example, Linda Brodkey’s *Academic Writing as a Social Practice* and Pat Bizzell’s *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness*. And, to be sure, Clark and Ivanič call upon this body of work, as I hope we all have. But they and their colleagues at Lancaster University have also coined the term *Critical Language Awareness*, which marks the teaching mission I am on more and more these days in several courses. If the ascension toward a more perfect democracy depends upon citizens being able to interrogate and resist discourses that impede such instantiation, as I suggest is the case, then students need to comprehend as completely as possible how discourse operates, which means understanding how the dominant or most powerful discourse serves to regulate and reproduce patterns of privilege. Who is deemed worthy of being marketed as an author? Whose stories get to be preserved in published, well-distributed formats? Which genres are privileged? Who is included in that consensual “we” that writers habitually try to impose on readers? Why are many of Noah Webster’s 1783 preferences still the bane of so many writers’ existences? Why, even, is sloppy handwriting a mark of status if

one is a doctor or celebrity, but a negative sign if one is an adult of relatively low status, a trait perhaps excusable in the writing of boys, but never in that of girls? In short, students will need to engage in discussions of culture, ideology, hegemony, and asymmetrical power relations—all that rugged theoretical terrain that sometimes seems far removed from the texts they are generating in seemingly smooth sites. The whole journey sometimes gets confusing for them and me. I see their vexation, the eye queries: “What’s this all about, professor?”

“Look a here,” I say, “There are things operating in the language on the down-low. You use the language uncritically, you are employing what’s in it on the down-low. Malcolm X found that out in a prison library more than fifty years ago when he could find only negative connotations associated with the word *black* and positive ones associated with the word *white*. And check this: in your lifetime, according to Donald MacKay, you likely will read the word *he* used as a generic, so-called neutral pronoun more than ten million times (355). What does that say about the standing of women? Even, as Clark and Ivanic point out, the use of the term Standard English as op-

posed to Standardized English makes it seem like the standard variety dropped from the clouds (211). Get that *IZE* up in there and you can focus more on the fact that the standardIZED variety was selected by the linguistic elite. And this standardIZED variety is packed with all this down-low elite material. So you see how

we can perpetuate ideas without even realizing it. But luckily that’s not the end of the story. We can become cognizant of how these conceptions circulate and resist them. We can create nonsexist language, for example. We can look at language on the up-high. That’s the move to make, to get used to writing on the up-high as much as possible, right at eye level, with ever-increasing awareness of the dynamics of contestation and replication. The media do it all the time to play you, and you need to do it all the time so you don’t get played, player.”

Again, this is how theory and I get along. Unfortunately, neither theory nor I have all the answers. Even as the view of language and learning I have been describing prompts us to develop courses that are broadly inviting with respect to linguistic and cultural differences, that encourage students to contribute through their writing to fuller accounts of the world, that establish contexts beyond a narrow student-teacher relationship for the dissemination of students’ ideas, that question the implications of rhetorical choice, there still is no getting

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around the double-bind that, whenever we participate in the dominant discourse, no matter how liberally we may tweak it, we help to maintain it. Therefore, we are complicit in whatever that discourse accomplishes with respect to the unjust distribution of goods and services. Yet, not to engage in the dominant discourse may diminish some very real material possibilities for ordinary people struggling to do better. Obviously, these are possibilities we generally should not oppose even if individual successes help to reify wider inequity. Nonetheless, I think we—and by *we* I mean folks who more or less think about literacy the way I do—can remain optimistic in the face of this dilemma if we view it as part of a productive tension, a heightening of the contradiction, to invoke terminology from my old study groups.

In more recent times, with more contemporary critical precepts in mind, this problem has been addressed remarkably well by Rodrigo Crenshaw, the young alter ego of Richard Delgado's brilliant chronicles. He sees normative discourse as being unable to burst the bubble of social inequality given that such discourse is "circular, reassuring, empty, 'inscribed'" (94), given that such conversations "prefigure the answers one reaches, at least unless one is very, very careful" (100). Rodrigo then suggests the need to "seek out someone unlike us, someone who sees things with new eyes" (103–04). He warns that "if we do not do this, we will pay a price, namely the inability to see system-wide defects that cause our bubble, ever so imperceptibly, to drift downward" (104). Then Rodrigo prepares to dash off to work on a paper for one of his law classes (time to play the game). His interlocutor halts him with a series of questions:

But won't we just be co-opted, you and I, I mean? We'll take our "outsider perspective," as you call it, in your case to the law faculty committee, in mine to the audience at my conference. Won't we just join the bubble, merge whatever meager insight we can offer into the general cultural mix, reinscribing ourselves in the current dysfunctional, hierarchical, and often racist culture of which we both complain? Won't we just become part of that bubble? (104)

Before departing, Rodrigo beams his answer, "At least it'll be a larger bubble" (104).

I take hope in that vision of an expanded bubble, one more likely to burst into a more open state. I am reaffirmed in the notion that being critically careful does make a difference, and I know that there are the likes of Rodrigo, like Delgado himself, who are not fictional insider-outsiders, but real.

As I consider further these ideas about insiders and outsiders and recall Clark's belief that "individual students have to find identities as writers that they

feel confident and comfortable with” (5), I am reminded that no matter how we envision literacy and curriculum, we have to reckon with how students, and teachers as well, describe themselves. For any progressive pedagogy to achieve respectable results, students, among whose ranks are some of the important outsiders we need, have to feel invested in the roles they play in the process. This problematic often translates into debates about race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disabilities, multisubjectivities, contact zones, essentialism, social class, social constructionism, and postmodernism. There can be no quick or easy tour through the land of identity politics. Nor is anyone going to sum up and settle the issues once and for all. I’ll just offer a case study pulled from the G files; they’re like the *X Files* but can be more surreal.

I was in the ticket line in the bus station in Syracuse. A woman was taking an inordinately long time at the window. She was buying a ticket for her son who was in college somewhere in New England, and she was asking the same questions repeatedly. Others in line grew frustrated, as did the ticket agent herself. Me, too. But I figured I’d chill, be polite, patient; I worry about kids also. However, this Indian brother right in front of me became quite agitated. If he wasn’t drunk, he had a good down payment on it. He started harassing the purchaser and the agent, articulating some of what I was thinking. The purchaser ignored him, but the agent began chastising him and threatening not to sell him a ticket if he were drunk and couldn’t calm down. He warned her not to try that stuff this time because he couldn’t be late getting to Buffalo. I started chuckling a bit and the guy spun around and asked me pointedly, with a strong whiskey breath, “You Injun?” I said, “Naw, I ain’t Injun.”

He repeated the question. “You Injun?”

“Naw, I ain’t Injun.”

Then he showed me his massive, rough fists and explained that he worked steel and that this woman was always giving him a hard time even though he might marry her someday.

“You Injun?”

“Naw, I ain’t Injun.”

He pointed to another man, apparently his traveling buddy, who was playing video games. “He’s Injun,” he announced. “We work steel.” Then he went back to harassing other folks.

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Eventually I got my ticket and waited around a moment to witness his fate. The agent had explained to me that sometimes he got to go, sometimes he didn't. This time he didn't.

I probably have spent too much of my life trying to read profundity into inebriated ramblings, but I did think about this fellow while I was en route to New York City. I thought about this "Injunes" and of my great-grandfather, Toby Townsend, the 6'6" Cherokee shop owner who refused to labor in the fields for anyone else. Good image. I also thought about the "Trail of Tears," the seizure of Cherokee lands. Poignant image. But I recalled reading that the Cherokees were the most assimilationist of the Indian nations. Not the image I want to romanticize. So then I considered how Indian scouts aided the confederacy, but also how Blacks served in the U.S. Army as agents of genocide against Indians. But that was all mental exercise, perhaps useful in widening and deepening perspectives about family history and the world. However, I knew my primary identity. Not a single bad thing has ever happened to me because someone pegged me for Indian. When I arrived in New York City, I tucked my wallet in my shoulder bag and tried not to appear threatening to the NYPD.

I respect postmodernist projects designed to disrupt injustice. I'm for traversing some boundaries myself, aren't I? But what I'm driving at here is that academic postmodernism, including that which gets valorized in composition classes, often gets stuck in passive relativism, just a classroom full of perceived

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instability. It's useful at times to complicate notions of identity, but primary identities operate powerfully in the world and have to be productively engaged. I think King had it right, for example, when he dreamed of Black kids and White kids holding hands (219). There are whole realities attached to those Black hands and White hands that have been insufficiently dealt with to date and won't be if we insist on prematurely converting King's dream to one of hybridity kids holding hands with junior border crossers. When we engage in discussions about fluidity, we ought to keep in mind the question of who can afford to be anchored to a focus on the indeterminate. As Natalie Cole sings clearly, "You gotta serve somebody." Who are we serving with the identity politics we push? And how are those politics consistent or inconsistent with what we say about pedagogy overall? Those aren't easy questions, and they don't get any easier from here. But we spend a lot of time in

classrooms talking about identity, and we need to continue to strive to make those discussions serve a critical, democratic project.

We have a lot to solve. The nation and the academy are going to become even more complex arenas. Given population projections, the largest and most socially diverse teenage population in U.S. history is on the horizon, which may fuel higher and more intense enrollment pressures, which in turn would intensify debates about policies of access and exclusion. I suggest that we are poised between scenarios suggested by Dr. Dre and Jay-Z. In Dre's line—"full effect of intellect so I could collect respect plus a check"—there are prospects for positive engagement with academe and with English studies. If student intellects

are indeed in full effect, then our willingness to accord them certain respect along linguistic and identity dimensions can help set them up for the check, which will include basic, old, not to be ignored loot, but may also mean attainment of insight and energy to be spent on achieving social justice. Allow my optimism. By all means, remember King's

dream. Also recall Dunbar's early pessimism, as he wrote, "But the work you've got to do / Dreams won't ever do for you / Even if they did come true" (qtd. in Braxton xii). And recall Dunbar's eventual artistic flight, as important as any flight physical, as the inventors of machine-powered flight understood. But let us not lose sight of Jay-Z's apocalyptic warning that "When my situation ain't improvin, I'm tryin to murder everything movin." I would say that we should work on that situation.

If we are to diminish appreciably the hard knock life, if visions of a better society are to come to fruition, I think that we, as teachers, could play a pivotal role in such a movement. I'm not overestimating what compositionists can do. I made that mistake already when I was watching *Saving Private Ryan*. When Tom Hanks's character revealed that in civilian life he was a composition teacher, I figured he would easily make it to the end of the movie. He didn't, so I understand that we have limited powers in the face of all we confront. But we also have great imagination, splendid playfulness, wonderful resourcefulness, and, I think, serious intellectual and social commitment. Both today and over the course of my career, these are qualities that I have always attempted, however inadequately, to perform.

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