

Social Class Bias in Evaluator Commentaries for the AP Language and
Composition Exam (2000-2010), a Critical Discourse Analysis

by

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ABSTRACT

This study is a discourse analysis and deconstruction of public documents published electronically in connection with the evaluation of the Advanced Placement Language and Composition Examination, found on the educational website: apcentral.collegeboard.com. The subject of this dissertation is how the characteristic of writing identified as Voice functions covertly in the calibration of raters' evaluation of student writing in two sets of electronic commentaries: the *Scoring Commentaries* and the *Student Performance Q&A's* published between the years 2000-2010. The study is intended to contribute to both socio-linguistic and sociological research in education on the influence of inherited forms of cultural capital in educational attainment, with particular emphasis upon performance on high-stakes examinations.

Modeled after Pierre Bourdieu's inquiry into the latent bias revealed in the "euphemized" language of teacher commentary found in *The State Nobility*, lists of recurrent descriptors and binary oppositions in the texts are deconstructed. The result of the deconstruction is the manifestation of latent class bias in the commentaries. Conclusions: discourse analysis reveals that a particular Voice, expressive of a preferred social class identity, which is initiated to and particularly deft in such academic performances, is rewarded by the test evaluators. Similarly, findings reveal that a low-scoring essay is negatively critiqued for being particularly unaccustomed to the form(s) of knowledge and style of writing required by the test situation. In summation, a high score on the AP Language

Examination, rather than a certification of writerly competence, is actually a testament to the performance of cultural capital.

Following an analysis of the language of classification and assessment in the electronic documents, the author provides several “tactics” (after de Certeau) or recommendations for writing the AP Language and Composition Examination, conducive to the stylistic performances privileged by the rating system.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

“Well, --he told me once he was an Oxford man.”

A dim background started to take shape behind him but at her next remark it faded away.

“However, I don’t believe it.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know,” she insisted, “I just don’t think he went there.”

(Jordan Baker to Nick Carraway on Gatsby’s origins, from Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*)

Marjorie Garber convincingly argues in *Sex and Real Estate: Why We Love Houses*, that Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* is, at its core, “a book about houses” (133). Garber contrasts Gatsby’s “trophy house” (133) with the Buchanan’s stately mansion and determines the home as the marker for social identity, par excellence. In Garber’s study, Gatsby’s “wannabe” faux-European colossus (135) screams fake against the stately, Ralph Lauren-cool of the Buchanan’s Georgian Colonial. But architecture only goes so far in explaining the exclusionary principle that is at work in Fitzgerald’s novel.

I would argue that the issue of language is more crucial to explaining the novel and the peculiar sorting mechanism within, as differential markers of Voice (in the language of the 6-Traits of Writing) are everywhere. More specifically, Voice is the hidden sign of belonging or tool of exclusion in *The Great Gatsby*. In the passage cited above, there is *just something* about Gatsby that ferrets him

out as an interloper among the well-to-do, an indefinable quality that manifests both in verbal and non-verbal markers that are built out in the narrative. Jordan is unable to explain to Nick precisely on what grounds she senses Gatsby is a fake or poseur, she just intuits it; but that is grounds enough to oust him from the “secret society” or the upper echelon of class to which Gatsby aspires (Fitzgerald 22). This unidentifiable quality later materializes more clearly as Voice.

Fitzgerald’s obsession with Voice begins with a description of Daisy’s “low, thrilling voice” (13) which signifies “money” to Gatsby in the famous exchange with Nick:

“She’s got an indiscreet voice,” I remarked. “It’s full of—”

I hesitated.

“Her voice is full of money,” he said suddenly.

“That was it. I’d never understood before. It was full of money—that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals’ song of it. . . . High in a white palace.” (127)

Throughout the novel, Daisy’s voice signifies entrance to a world of privilege. And what makes this metaphor (Voice = currency) especially poignant is that it is conceived by an outsider, someone looking in, with envy and fantasy, at a life of social and economic advantage denied, just as Fitzgerald himself viewed the insular and excessive world of the wealthy (Yardley 259).

Gatsby is identified as an interloper not only in terms of the most obvious markers of the nouveau riche (e.g., his garish home, his gaudy wardrobe, his “trophy” car, and his showy parties), but for the more subtle marker of his social

class—his voice. Most obviously, this is seen in his affected tag phrase “Old Sport,” which the wealthy see through easily, as Buchanan demonstrates: “All this ‘old sport’ business. Where’d you pick that up?” (134). It is important to observe that, long before mention of the most blatant markers of Gatsby’s status as a social climber, Nick becomes suspicious of Gatsby on linguistic grounds. Observe what Nick says upon *first* meeting Gatsby at one of the infamous, West Egg parties: “Precisely at that point [the illusion of Gatsby] vanished—and I was looking at an elegant young rough-neck, a year or two over thirty, whose elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd” (Fitzgerald 53). Here, Nick picks up on Gatsby’s linguistic self-censoring, the unnatural and pretentious character of his word choice, which indicates that Gatsby is ill at ease—a quality *not* indicative of Nick’s social class, where people are steeped within a particular milieu of conversation. Directly following this observation, Jordan makes the comment noted in the epigraph in which she states that she does not believe Gatsby could have attended Oxford. Nick’s commentary suggests that a certain quality of language, call it Voice, registers social identity invisible to all but those in possession of that particular form of cultural capital. And there are many other illustrations of language as a barometer of social class and exclusionary tool in the novel. For instance, Nick comments on Gatsby’s inability to make interesting conversation:

I had talked with him perhaps half a dozen times in the past month and found, to my disappointment, that he had little to say. So, my first impression, that he was a person of some undefined consequence, had

gradually faded and he had become simply the proprietor of an elaborate road house next door. (Fitzgerald 68-69)

After which Nick observes, “We hadn’t reached West Egg Village before Gatsby began leaving his elegant sentences unfinished” (Fitzgerald 69). Later, Nick listens to Gatsby’s manicured autobiography and remarks: “The very phrases were worn so threadbare that they evoked no image except that of a turbaned ‘character’ leaking sawdust at every pore” (Fitzgerald 70). And, on the drive in to New York, Nick observes: “[Gatsby’s] correctness grew on him as we neared the city” (Fitzgerald 72). All of these examples demonstrate how carefully Nick monitors Gatsby’s speech for *nuances* and *subtleties* that might betray his social class identity (the two italicized words figure prominently in this study as they recur in the lexicon of the Advanced Placement Examination commentaries discussed in this dissertation).

When Nick is summoned by Gatsby to arrange a meeting with Daisy, Gatsby commits a gross faux pas in attempting to *tip* Nick, about which Nick indignantly reflects: “the offer was obviously and tactlessly for a service to be rendered” (Fitzgerald 88). Later, to confirm his suspicions regarding Gatsby’s origins, Nick catches Gatsby off guard in his elation over the reunion with Daisy and reports: “I think he hardly knew what he was saying, for when I asked him what business he was in he answered: ‘That’s my affair,’ before he realized that it wasn’t an *appropriate* reply” (Fitzgerald 95) [emphasis mine, as this is another important buzzword in the Advanced Placement Language Examination commentaries]. And later still, in a chance meeting with Tom Buchanan and

some other socialites, Gatsby receives a courtesy invitation to dinner which he inappropriately accepts and Tom observes: “My God, I believe the man’s coming Doesn’t he know she doesn’t want him” (Fitzgerald 109). Although one might argue that this instance indicates more an inability to read social cues, in the broader context, Gatsby here demonstrates that he is uninitiated to a particular type of discourse. Gatsby’s responses throughout the novel, as reported by Nick, seem untutored, inappropriate, and prone to easy error; he does not know the “secret handshake” of class that is invisibly executed in a certain type of *conversation* (yet another important word in the Advanced Placement Language Examination commentaries). Tom condescendingly concludes this interview by remarking on “all kinds of crazy fish” one meets in the world, which is an interesting metaphor for class and one that I develop later in this study. Taking a cue from Fitzgerald, I argue that the gate-crashers of class are like “fish out of water,” as judged by their linguistic *habitus* (i.e., Bourdieu’s terminology signifying the class-imbued knowledge and strategies that individuals employ in certain situations) and, more importantly, as judged by the self-appointed arbiters of social class distinction.

A Familiar Story Retold: The Origin of the Advanced Placement Program and the AP Language Examination

Who are the contemporary arbiters of social class distinction? This is a question I often ask my students in Advanced Placement Language and Composition after reading Fitzgerald and pondering aloud the notion of distinction. They either say that such archaic rules of class no longer apply, or

that Fitzgerald's view of country club culture reflects only an idiosyncratic regional elitism that is dead in the water (like the book's protagonist by the end), or else they say that current access to opportunity is unchecked because that it is an iteration of the rhetoric of upward mobility that they hear everywhere and believe. In fact, I am asking a rhetorical question. Owning the right looking home in the "A" neighborhood, wearing fashionable clothes and driving a trophy vehicle are ancillary to the authentic source of social class distinction; these are only bi-products of education which—outside of the inheritance of cultural capital—makes all such acquisition possible. The answer could only be found in education, for education enables opportunity via access to the system of credentials and elite occupations—so claims Bourdieu. Therefore, the contemporary gate-keepers of opportunity are test-raters: readers who sort through demonstrations of voices on the page and determine which ones possess a superior sense of style and acuity and which ones lack it, test readers who, by their judgments, assign kids to wholly different trajectories of study and labor. In place of Carraway and Buchanan there is the state exit exam rater, the college admissions officer and the Advanced Placement Exam reader.

Thinking about the latter example, the Advanced Placement Program was historically designed to serve a particular group of students, and perhaps it still is, though, quizzically, few have taken on this legacy of elitism and contemplated its potential vestiges in the present in terms of the evaluation of the many AP subject exams. That is, few have challenged how the apparatus of judgment in exam assessment actually works. Certainly scholars have wondered at the Sphinx riddle

of a proprietary algorithm used for calculating the single digit score based on a scale of 1-5, derived from the FRQ's (free-response questions) and multiple choice sections (Hansen et al., "Are Advanced" 466). But there are more commonplace points of entry for determining how the sorting mechanism works in, for example, the AP Language and Composition Examination. I am thinking of Bourdieu's study of adjectives and metaphors found in *The State Nobility*, the most potent deconstruction of social class bias in the language of assessment of a high profile competition/examination (the Concours Général). And, similar to the thesis of virtually everything by the journalist Lemann who writes on the myth of meritocracy, any serious rumination on the influence of social class in education will, inevitably, find its way to the door of ETS and the College Board.

This is an old story. The origin of "Advanced Placement" began as a vision of several elite eastern preparatory schools and colleges. Concern over needless repetition of coursework between the last year of high school and the first year of college led faculty members to envision a way for talented students to circumvent duplication by taking accelerated coursework and a series of "achievement examinations" which would enable them to enter university with college credit (Rothschild 177). That the AP program was designed for a select few is evident in the following statement from *General Education in School and College: A Committee Report by Members of the Faculties of Andover, Exeter, Lawrenceville, Harvard, Princeton and Yale* (published in 1952): "There is no intent in what follows to call for reform of the whole educational system for the sake of a relatively small group of students" (qtd. in Rothschild 177). The

program began with seven pilot schools and participants were solicited by invitation and, “in some cases . . . student selection was made by department heads or based on data such as I.Q. scores” (Rothschild 179). According to Schneider, the ideological impetus behind the program was not only an interest in gifted education, but a manifestation of Cold War anxiety, post-Sputnik, and the push to cultivate “the so-called ‘best and brightest’ to meet the intellectual demands of political and scientific leadership” in the interest of national security (815). Due to early elitist assumptions about the individuals who would people this program, and the fact that the “opportunity would only be provided to the strongest students in high-status schools,” AP was soon considered a “mark of academic prestige” and “curricular status symbol” (Schneider 816). The program officially came into being in 1955 under the auspices of the College Board, “the same organization that ran the Scholastic Aptitude Test” (Schneider 816), and was basically used as a tool to leverage entrance to Ivy League schools (Schneider 817-18). Soon, enrollment in the program exploded as the perception spread that access to “‘better’ colleges and universities” was contingent upon taking AP coursework (Schneider 819). Later, in response to criticism regarding racism and exclusivity leveled in the 70’s, the AP Program expanded to include underserved populations (Schneider 819). Finally, in the 90s, AP “be[came] a standard aspect of US secondary education, whether public or private, elite or otherwise” (Schneider 821); and, currently, the program receives massive federal subsidizing in the form of “financial reward” to participating students, teachers and schools (Schneider 821-22). However, as Schneider notes, the cachet of the AP

trademark has diminished as the “brand” has been democratized (i.e., accessed more equally and liberally) and high SES schools are abandoning the program in favor of more rarified forms of cultural capital (822-29).

The AP Language and Composition Examination, the subject of this study, came into being as a unique test apart from the AP Literature and Composition Examination in 1980, according to the *AP Language and Composition Home Page*. This bifurcation reflects a general departmental schism experienced within university English departments between scholars in rhetoric and composition and literary studies and has nothing to do with the Advanced Placement Program in general. Like many other AP subject tests, the AP Language and Composition Examination is divided into two parts: a multiple choice/passage analysis section, and three FRQ’s or free-response questions requiring students to undertake tasks such as rhetorical analysis and the construction of researched arguments (a new variety of question piloted in 2007). In terms of the assessment of the exam, Hansen writes:

multiple-choice questions are scored by computer, while free-response essays are scored at the annual AP reading by hundreds of college English teachers and secondary-school AP English teachers, who read exams for a full week under the direction of the Chief Faculty Consultant for English. After the readers receive training to ensure that the scoring will be reliable, each essay is typically read once and rated using a nine-point scale. The accuracy of scoring is checked by subjecting randomly selected essays to additional reading by experienced raters and by periodic norming

of raters with practice essays. When all the essays have been rated, raw scores on multiple-choice and essay test are combined into a composite score, which is then converted to a five-point scale using a predetermined distribution. (“Are Advanced” 466)

Surprisingly little scholarship concerns the AP Language and Composition Examination and/or Program specifically, the work of Joseph Jones and Kristen Hansen being most noteworthy. The extant scholarship takes up questions such as how closely the AP Language and Composition course and examination reflect general expectations and outcomes of the FYC (first year composition) course, and the work explores the ethics of dual credit coursework in terms of whether it authentically serves students to “eliminate” prerequisites at the high school level and to grant advanced standing in writing at university. To my knowledge, no one has done an investigation of documents related to the scoring of the AP Language and Composition Examination, although judges’ commentaries on the yearly rating sessions have been available publicly, online, on the apcentral.collegeboard.com website for many years. The teachers who participate in the professional online community or *listserv* dedicated to AP Language Examination, by their comments, seem primarily to mine the apcentral.com website for previous test-questions; little to no commentary is exchanged regarding the process of rating or the published commentaries. Along the same lines, and possibly due to non-disclosure agreements, little timely commentary is available on the annual test readings, with most personal accounts of the process

published years after the fact of the rating (see Literature Review: Schwartz; Vopat).

Paradoxically, researchers from the Fordham Institute awarded the AP Program with “Gold Star Status,” on the basis of evaluation of the AP Literature course, despite the “density and verbosity of the *AP Teacher’s Guide*” (Byrd 15), and the critical observation that

reading the information contained in the course outline is not the best path to understanding what’s expected of teachers and students. Rather, teachers must review old exams to grasp what their pupils will be tested on. (Byrd 17)

The same criticism might be leveled at the AP Language and Composition course: specific curriculum in terms of course content is undefined and left largely to instructor discretion. In other words, course curriculum is not standardized, though syllabi require approval through an internal audit process with the College Board. So, basically, as many AP teachers as there are, there are as many versions of the AP Language and Composition course. The Fordham Institute observes more generally,

in most cases the AP course outlines and teachers’ guides don’t provide course instructors with as clear a picture of what’s to be taught as do the exams themselves. It seems to us that teachers should not have to infer from the exams what the priorities are for students’ acquisition of knowledge and skills. (Byrd 19)

For this reason, the Fordham group recommended “adopting a common syllabus for each course” (Byrd 19) which could rectify discrepancies of preparation and performance on a national level. At the same time, however, it seems obvious that a course in composition is markedly different from a course in psychology or world history in that composition could be said to be a “skill based” versus a “content based” course. So, the very openness of the AP Language and Composition curriculum—the fact that an AP Language teacher could just as effectively teach composition skills in the context of the history of furniture as cultural studies—may well be the greatest strength or weakness of the course. The absence of a standardized curriculum suggests two contrary propositions simultaneously: on the one hand, student performance on the subject exam might be entirely reliant upon instruction; on the other hand, student performance on the subject exam might have nothing whatsoever to do with instruction. If the latter proposition is true, then conditions are ideal for the deployment of cultural capital because performance would be predicated upon the particularized forms of knowledge students bring to the exam situation outside of scholastic knowledge. That is a possibility I explore rigorously in this dissertation.

At the same time, there is the problem of the form of writing assessment used to evaluate the AP Language Examination: the holistic method. Huot outlines, among the various types of writing assessment, three methods, viz. holistic where writing is appraised “for a general impression of quality”; assessment by analytic traits where writing is evaluated “for specific traits

endemic to writing quality” and assessment by primary traits “which treats rhetorical features of the writing assignment as the traits to be evaluated” (“Toward” 86). Researchers have critiqued holistic assessment as vulnerable to subjective appraisal and problems of inter-rater reliability more so than the trait methods. For instance, Charney observes that holistic, qualitative assessment could not provide reliability because “[s]tudy after study demonstrated that readers who evaluate writing samples apply widely varying standards” (67). Furthermore, Charney writes that “readers’ judgment is strongly influenced by salient, though superficial, characteristics of writing samples” [. . .] “characteristics which are easy to pick out but which are irrelevant to ‘true writing ability’” (75) such as word choice. Similarly, Greenberg points to research which indicates that, although raters of holistic writing assessments pre-agree upon criteria for rating, that is no guarantee that they follow the criteria; in fact, “superficial aspects of writing, such as handwriting, spelling, word choice and errors” exert influence upon raters (16). Likewise, a correlation was made between diction and perceived quality in rater evaluation. Grobe notes: “the results of the analyses of data presented in this paper indicate that what teachers currently perceive as ‘good’ writing is closely associated with vocabulary diversity” (qtd. in Huot, “Literature” 248). Similarly, Neilsen and Piche report that “lexical, rather than syntactical, features have a significant influence on rater judgments about writing quality” (qtd. in Huot, “Literature” 248). This is especially interesting considering the close correlation coefficient between the qualities of Word Choice and Voice. Huot’s review of the literature of

assessment concludes with the following observation: “More research about the influences of writing quality on rater judgment is needed, and these studies should focus on the raters themselves” (“Literature” 257). This study is a direct response to Huot’s proposal.

Voice and the Deployment of Cultural Capital

The subject of this dissertation is Voice and the way it imperceptibly calibrates raters’ evaluation and classification of student writing in two sets of electronic commentaries published for the Advanced Placement Language and Composition Examination posted yearly on the apcentral.collegeboard.com website.

A graduate student in English Education, at a meeting of the Central Arizona Writing Project in the summer of 2009, defined Voice as “the cherry on top of the ice cream,” but Voice is so much more than that. This is the reason why Voice should be a primary concern of English Education. Voice is, considered from the perspective of the sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the *habitus*, one of the key markers of the projection of social identity, and this is why teachers should recognize its influence in the assessment of writing. Voice is the “ghost in the machine,” perhaps the most difficult trait to account for because it semi-eludes the otherwise fairly concrete and systematic rendering of other discrete aspects of effective writing. This is because in practice, rather than theory, Voice is not one of the traits but *all* of them: the sum total expression or performance of the writer-ly identity, the closest thing to what Bourdieu defines as the *hexis* or physical presence of the individual as it materializes on the page.

Apropos of this observation, Murray remarked, “the writer’s voice may be the most significant element in distinguishing memorable writing from good writing” (“Handout” 79). Even Diederich, the renowned statistician and researcher for ETS, ascribed a kind of ineffable quality to this one feature of writing—so differently labeled in contrast to his other more clinical terms for qualities of effective writing—in metaphorically characterizing the authorial sense of authenticity or presence as “flavor” (57). This becomes especially important as Voice is the medium through which the most highly valued aspect of writing, per Diederich, Purvis and Freedman, content or ideas, is conveyed.

By an inversion of Jeffersonian logic, it stands to reason that not all voices are created equal; that is, not all voices are created under equivalent social circumstances. Different voices will register differently on the page which is unimportant—all things being equal under Labov’s argument of linguistic relativism (*Language*)—except for the fact that some voices, in particular circumstances, like a high-profile writing examination, are authorized whereas others are refused. This idea originates in speech act theory and is an iteration of both Austin and Bourdieu who point to the authority conferred upon certain individuals to speak in socially sanctioned ways on certain occasions and/or in certain formal situations (Austin; Bourdieu, *Language* 55; 69-73).

Sociolinguistics highlights (a) people’s different and differentially legitimized ways of “representing the world” as well as the resultant occupation of differential positions within the world (Fairclough, *Analyzing* 124; 87-104, 124-33); (b) preferred modes of expression which tend to align with a cultural predisposition

for dominant forms of linguistic cultural capital (Labov, *Language; Sociolinguistic*); and (c) negative categorization or “framing” of some people on the basis of race, class and gender (Bloor and Bloor 85-99; 121-38). All of these issues are demonstrable in the rater commentaries for the AP Language Examination, so to point this out is to properly view the test (i.e., the structure of judgment or classificatory mechanism at work in the commentaries) as an unwitting vehicle in social class reproduction.

A point underestimated in the education-based, sociological literature on Bourdieu is that his theory is grounded not only in Weber’s work on “status cultures” but in sociolinguistics, specifically in the work of Labov (Bourdieu, *Language* 52-53). Bourdieu looks to Labov’s study of the differential pronunciation of the letter “r” in three class-hierarchized shopping venues: Saks Fifth Avenue, Macy’s and S. Klein’s (Labov, *Sociolinguistic* 45-47), and Labov’s *Language in the Inner City*. Regarding the latter, Bourdieu’s theory of competing forms of linguistic competence is grounded in Labov. Bourdieu and Wacquant write:

Let us turn now to the situation, which in fact is by far the most frequent one, where it is the dominated who is obliged to adopt the language of the dominant—and here the relation between standard, white English and the black American vernacular provides a good illustration. In this case, the dominated speaks a *broken language* [original emphasis], as William Labov (1973) has shown, and his linguistic capital is more or less

completely devalued, be it in school, at work, or in social encounters with the dominant. (*An Invitation* 142)

Bourdieu and Wacquant utilize Labov's rejection of the label of "linguistic impoverishment" placed upon the speech of black, urban youth as a warrant for their claims about the invisible struggle for authority and position in vying for and assigning academic honors. This has direct relevance for any discussion of rater influence in the evaluation of writing and the primacy of Voice in writing assessment. These studies, collectively, point to the reason why some voices are considered more legitimate than others.

Assumptions of the Study

Perhaps more so than any other text, Bourdieu's *The State Nobility* is vital to this study. Bourdieu's analysis of teacher commentary, in the evaluation of the Concours Général, for "euphemized" language indicative of social class distinction and bias provided me with the critical lens through which I read the AP commentaries. Along these lines, as I read through the educational-sociological literature, it struck me as curious the number of researchers who challenged Bourdieu's work and why. Principally, they objected to Bourdieu's supposed failure to provide precise definitions of key terminology (e.g., the definition of cultural capital) and to sufficiently operationalize the concepts so that they could be measured (de Graaf, Lareau and Horvat, Lareau and Weininger, Kingston, Sullivan, etc.). From another disciplinary point of view, however, from the perspective of literary theory—and this study represents the intersection of complementary disciplinary perspectives such as sociology, linguistics, literary

theory and education—Bourdieu’s key concept of cultural capital reads more like a metaphor. This is why cultural capital may not be effectively measurable so much as observable as coded in subtle semiotic and linguistic indicators like Voice. From a literary perspective, Bourdieu’s theory offers a social-semiotics of class identifiable as an initiation to particular ways of being. From a literary perspective, the empirical data that the educational sociologists demand appears everywhere. Everywhere language, verbal and non-verbal, marks out class; everywhere language marks out “specific locations in a stratified social order” (Swartz 107). This is identical to Fitzgerald’s literary technique in highlighting socially sanctioned ways of speaking and acting. Therefore, one key assumption in this study, besides the assumption that there is a bias for social class evident in the evaluation of the AP Language Examination evaluation, and the assumption that the bias is perceptible in the trait of Voice, is that one could read an educational text the way one reads a novel.

If certain linguistic expressions (in particular social contexts) are perceived as more or less legitimate, then to have one’s linguistic strategies confirmed as valuable is a measure of power. I argue that the AP Language and Composition Examination is less about composition and more about power, or a certain kind of “power play”: the ability to confidently enter a particular “game” (Bourdieu’s dominant metaphor for competition (*Distinction* 54) and play it. This ability to “play the game” of the test is most evident in the quality of Voice as it is alluded to, directly and indirectly, by test evaluators. The test “shakes hands” with or tacitly confirms a particular Voice or identity, just as speech act theory

suggests in the reciprocal recognition of speaker and situation (Austin). It is the job of the analyst, then, to demonstrate how this accord materializes and, taking a cue from Bourdieu, I suspected that the answer would be found not in student writing but in the evaluator commentary, so that explains my emphasis.

Again, no other research explores the language of the commentaries for the AP Language and Composition Examination or the electronic documents available on the apcentral.collegeboard.com website. Therefore, this was an opportunity to explore a familiar subject (assessment of writing on a high-stakes examination) in an emergent and non-traditional context—an educational website—via public documents associated with the rating of the AP Language Exam.

Challenging the Myth of Meritocracy

In critiquing a high-profile, national examination like the Advanced Placement Language Examination, I am also, ultimately, critiquing the notion of meritocracy which is intimately tied to the subject of public education and standardized testing, but the ideological roots run much deeper than that. The promise of the ability to rise on the basis of one's merits, industry and effort, rather than by birthright or inheritance, is discovered (as so many others have observed), in the earliest national literary artifacts, such as in the writing of de Toqueville, Jefferson, Franklin and Alger. For instance, de Toqueville wrote exuberantly of fledgling America:

[N]o man is different from his fellows, and nobody can wield tyrannical power; men will be perfectly free because they are entirely equal, and they

will be perfectly equal because they are entirely free. Democratic peoples are tending toward that ideal. (503)

The chiasmic structure (free—equal / equal—free) positing syntactic equivalence is the direct expression or mirror of the state of the people and their unchecked potential. De Tocqueville further observed: “there is no obvious impediment in the mores or laws of America to put a limit to ambition or to prevent its taking wing in every direction” (627). The metaphor of flight amplifies the transcendent possibility of the individual to will a destiny, to rise above the dead weight of European, aristocratic privilege (de Toqueville’s consistent contrast point).

Fast-forward this conversation to the present and the promise of standardized testing, as it was envisioned by its pioneers, was to enable the revelation of talent, from no matter where it issued, based upon objective, scientific appraisal (Lemann, “The Structure” 14-18). According to Lemann, author of *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy*, that was the dream of Chauncey, the first head of ETS (the Educational Testing Service), the organization to administer the first large scale standardized examination, the SAT (and later, the AP exams). Lemann explains the early conviction that standardized tests could “level the playing field” by a value-neutral scientific gauge of ability which would ultimately channel those demonstrating the most potential into good schools and, ultimately, professions that would benefit society.

Jefferson’s dream of an educated citizenry as the guarantor of democracy seemed to find its perfect expression in the scientific efficiency of testing; but,

needless to say, inequalities of material conditions between test-takers could not be erased from educational psychometrics (Au). So, this study, based upon the enormous body of research that already exists in terms of the influence of socioeconomic status in standardized testing (see Literature Review: Popham; Johnson and Johnson; Hillocks; Hursh; Jones, Jones and Hargrove; Nichols and Berliner; Au; Koretz; and others), attempts to restore the “situated-ness” of those material conditions with respect to test-taker identities as they materialize in high stakes assessment. Put differently, the works I discuss in the Literature Review suggest that some people (and schools) score favorably on standardized examinations, in Bourdieu’s words, “simply by virtue of who they are” (i.e., variables associated with socioeconomic status (*Distinction* 23; Wacquant 32). Without the move to reify the identities of test-takers, all things would appear equal as writers across the nation sit down to write the AP Language Exam. So, toward this end, I employ the sociology of Bourdieu which directly challenges the notion that test scores and grades have nothing to do with social hierarchy and class origin (Bourdieu and Passeron, *Reproduction* 145-147; 157-159; 164).

“Advantageous Attribution”

Especially useful in this regard is Bourdieu’s emphasis upon the beneficial influence of “advantageous attribution” or favored social dispositions which garner privileges (e.g., prestige, power, belonging, etc.) in certain situations versus socially stigmatized qualities (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 476-479). This is the classificatory principle which marks out “insider” versus “outsider” status (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 478-479). It seems obvious that “advantageous

attribution” would exert an influence in writing as writing is one expression of an individual’s “social being” (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 478) and assessment activates the process of sorting which, Bourdieu argues, reproduces categories of culture rather than nature. Bourdieu metaphorically frames the possession of “advantageous attribution” as a credit of “membership” (*Distinction* 479). In practice, “advantageous attribution” works like the trademark rhetoric for the American Express Card: “Membership has its privileges.” Belonging marks one as possessing all of the qualifications and entitlements of the category—and the obverse is also true: being perceived as different incurs immediate dispossession and the delimiting of chances. Finally, Bourdieu observes that, in “advantageous attribution,” the “approved, valorized behavior tends to be contrasted with the despised, rejected behavior of the other group” (*Distinction* 479). This polarization principle was foremost in my thinking as binary oppositions emerged in the language of the commentaries which formed the descriptive categories of “good” and “bad” writing. Binary oppositions, as Bourdieu suggested, were, a veiled (“euphemized”) way of talking about social class distinction.

The main thing that Bourdieu’s theory of “advantageous attribution” suggests, as applied to academic demonstrations like high-stakes writing assessments is that, if one already possesses the preferred qualities valued in a given context or setting, then the performance of these qualities is actually a *personal* versus *academic* competency. The confusion of personal qualities for academic proficiencies is something Bourdieu refers to as “misrecognition” (*State Nobility* 30-53). Bourdieu argues that academic judgments are framed in a

“euphemistic” language which conceals or “neutralizes” their relation to class structure (*State Nobility* 36-37). Put differently, academic “verdicts” mirror the social positions as evident in the descriptive language of the various tiers of students; academic descriptions are really just reflections of the students’ *habitus* (Bourdieu and Passeron, *Reproduction* 161). By extension, then, successful performance on a standardized exam, in some measure, rewards personal qualities rather than academic proficiencies. This becomes relevant for English Education in

the hidden services [the educational system] renders to certain classes . . . by concealing social selection under the guise of technical selection and legitimating the reproduction of the social hierarchies by transmuting them into academic hierarchies. (Bourdieu and Passeron, *Reproduction* 152-53)

For Bourdieu and Passeron, “misrecognition” is a motivated “masking,” a move of “concealment” to “consecrate an inequality of chances of access” (*Reproduction* 158-59). Deception, however, is *not* an issue in this study. I assume that the AP test readers are unaware of their complicity in rewarding a particular Voice, style and/or identity, just as the teachers and students who prepare for the AP Language Exam are unaware of their complicity in participating in an examination calibrated to reward certain individuals on the basis of preparation garnered largely outside of school.

I demonstrate, ultimately, that favor (i.e., a favorable rating) goes to the individual in possession of qualities that would make the meeting between the test-taker and the test “fortuitous,” in the language of Austin. The “high-range”

writer (as s/he is referred to in the commentaries) materializes as one who is comfortable with, “attuned to” and “adept at” the kind of tasks that the test places before them, and this “naturalness” or “ease” (Bourdieuian keywords) presupposes a familiarity that is precisely *not* acquired in ten months of study (the ostensible aim of the AP Language and Composition course). Critical discourse analysis of the test commentaries for the AP Language Exam reveals that the kind of “richness,” “sophistication,” “fluency,” and “nuance” lauded in the writing of “high-range” writers (descriptive language in the commentaries) is actually the performance of cultural capital. And Voice on the page is the purest expression of this invisible class initiation—outside of being in the writer’s physical presence.

This examination of the language of evaluation places the rating process under scrutiny and problematizes evaluator classification of writers. Bourdieuian sociology and deconstruction enable the understanding that the AP Language Exam is actually a test of adeptness at one social ritual, and that initiation to the exercise (which happens largely outside of school) may ultimately be the gauge of successful performance. Restoring the identity of the test-taker as s/he materializes in the raters’ commentary, the emphasis upon Voice, explains why some people succeed and others score less favorably on this subject examination. This dissertation situates earning the coveted score of “5” as less a measure of academic competence and more a measure of social class privilege. Put blatantly, some schools celebrate their AP scores as a personal triumph (Hursh 92; Nichols and Berliner 23; Koretz 119-21). However, as Bourdieu observed in the elite

academic setting, the teacher and/or school may not deserve much if any credit toward preparing students for assessment; more authentically, they may only be “teaching the fish to swim” (*State Nobility* 73).

Limitations of the Study and Verification

This study, admittedly, has limitations in terms of data available on the SES (socioeconomic status) of the AP test-taking population; however, that limitation is a general one which applies to all research that seeks to account for the influence socioeconomic factors exert upon standardized test performance. Koretz discusses this in *Measuring Up: What Educational Testing Really Tells Us*, and his comments are worth reproducing at length:

In the databases that include test scores, SES is often gauged by whatever measures are at hand or can be gathered easily, and these are often weak. As I mentioned [previously], school districts and states are allowed to collect only limited information about the characteristics of students, and even most of the large-scale testing programs gather only weak information about socioeconomic status. . . . Therefore, we usually have to make do with weak proxies for the SES data we would really want—using indicators such as students’ eligibility for free and reduced-priced lunches, for example, and their estimates of the number of books in their home.

(128)

Understanding that SES entails much more than the financial status of a family sheds light on the sheer informational heft of Bourdieu’s data in *The State Nobility*, as he had access to virtually *everything* about the test-taking population,

including but not limited to parents' income, education, occupation, and place of residence (--even knowledge of particular families). Bourdieu collected extensive personal interviews with Concours Général prizewinning students and their teachers in elite institutions in order to evaluate attitudes and create composite portraits of test-takers akin to the panorama of sketches representing the social-strata of French society he assembled in *Distinction*. All of this Bourdieu was able to access in order to warrant his assertions about the influence of inherited cultural capital or the "credit" of social class origins.

Conversely, the data provided by the College Board in *The Sixth Annual AP Report to the Nation*, by comparison, yields scant information about SES that might be useful to such inquiry. In fact, one might say that the data available is exactly *opposite* of what would actually be useful in order to draw conclusions about the influence of SES on performance on AP Examinations. This is because socioeconomic information available addresses low-income students who are "experiencing success" on AP Examinations in order to promote the program's mission to close the "equity and excellence gap" of differential test performance. The report published in 2010 includes the following note: "Because the total number of low-income students in the total graduating class is not available, we are unable to report on equity and excellence gaps, as defined above for low income students" (*The Sixth Annual AP Report to the Nation*, "Highlights" 2). What one would, ideally, want and need to know in order to judge the influence of SES as a mediating factor in test scores would be things like: Who scored a "5" and what do their parents do for a living? Where did their parents go to school?

What were the reading habits in the home? Beyond this, a “wish-list” of data would include required response to some of Bourdieu’s survey questions put to prizewinners of the Concours Général, such as: Desired future career? Favorite writers and painters? Frequency of attendance at concerts and museums? Taste in films? Travel experience? Knowledge of poetry, theater, art and jazz? Preferred extra-curricular activities? (*State Nobility* 64-69). Au might narrow the required data to 5 digits—a phenomenon he refers to as the “Zip Code Effect” (1-5), a metaphor variously termed the “Volvo Effect” in Jones, Jones and Hargrove (118); others might need only know the number of bathrooms in one’s home (Brown cited in Greenberg 10). Certainly, it would have been useful to know not only the zip code but the complete demographic portrait of the schools and communities boasting the greatest concentration of “5’s,” those schools with statistics that sit majestically above the national average. Such information would likely demystify claims that affluent communities make about their test-scores and place a dent in the validity of the measuring instrument in general, something Popham stated years ago (18).

Does the lack of such data influence the validity of this study? No, because this reflects the general problem of data experienced by all researchers who attempt to critically examine the AP Program. For instance, representatives of the Fordham Institute noted, in a report issued in 2009:

We know dreadfully little about the impact of the AP Program on student outcomes, much less the impact of a more-open doors policy on the program and its student outcomes. The primary cause of that ignorance

isn't analysts' lack of interest or capacity; it's that the College Board has been distressingly tight-fisted with AP data. According to its own data release guidelines, the Board typically declines requests for high school-level and student-level data. Researchers must get permission from individual states and schools. . . . Another dismaying element: the College Board reserves the right to approve how its data are analyzed and used.

(Finn and Winkler iv)

For this reason, qualitative methods, like tools of inquiry drawn from literary theory, may be most useful of all as the documents published online act as texts open to analysis.

Regarding the question of verification, I examined a specific educational text comprised of electronic documents as a window onto a broader cultural phenomenon (i.e., the mechanism of social class reproduction). I utilized methods drawn from literary theory to do the work of qualitative social research, and therefore the gauge of validity is construed differently from positivist inquiry. I looked mainly to make a plausible case for the latent meaning behind evaluator comments on a powerful gate-keeping examination, the AP Language Examination, for my colleagues interested in the intersection of education and postmodern, qualitative inquiry. And, like Tobin, in order to make this case, I “tugged” persistently at linguistic moments that seemed symptomatic of the broader social forces at work in the comments made by test evaluators (14). Coming from the perspective of English Education, I believe we should not be anxious to employ the unique methodologies of textual analysis and mode(s) of

expression which characterize this border discipline. Per the ethos of critical theory, resonance with and relevance for other practitioners in the field, plus the social-transformative potential distilled in the interpretation, equals the validity of the study.

Author's Subjectivity Statement

I studied Lardner's sporting journalism at Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, for my Master's degree in English, so that project marked my earliest interest in the relationship between language and social class. And, as a high school teacher of eleven years with a suburban school in Phoenix, Arizona (first, of American Studies and, currently, AP Language and Composition), I have shared with students my enduring interest in Fitzgerald and the issue of Voice as a barometer of social distinction, classification, and exclusionary practice. Ultimately, following their reading of several authors, including Lardner, Fitzgerald, and excerpts from Bourdieu's *Distinction* (in which the sociologist most lucidly poses the theory of the *habitus*), I ask students to argue whether social class transformation is generally possible, considering the forms of symbolic capital that some people possess and parlay in their favor which have nothing to do with financial status (e.g., vocabulary, pronunciation, attitude, etc.). The concept for this study, then, materialized for me (a) in my early work at Wayne State University, (b) in my classroom, (c) in the seminars I took on Bourdieu at Arizona State University with Donald Blumenfeld-Jones, and (d) in several conversations with James Blasingame, at Arizona State University, from

2001 to the present, on the 6 Traits of Writing, with a particular emphasis upon the importance of Voice.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The issue of social class identity unwittingly playing a role in the classificatory mechanism and assessment of the AP Language and Composition Examination is housed in five “nests” or areas of research that will be delineated in this chapter, viz.:

- 1) Works Concerning the Sociology of Bourdieu and Coleman and the Influence of Cultural Capital
- 2) Problems of Standardized Testing and the Influence of SES (socioeconomic status)
- 3) Problems of Writing Assessment and Factors Influencing the Assessment of Writing
- 4) Problems Specific to Composition Theory (e.g., Defining “College-Level Writing,” Expectations and Outcomes of the First Year Writing Course, Expectations of High School Writing for College Credit, and Issues Concerning High School Writing for College Credit)
- 5) Works Concerning the Advanced Placement Language and Composition Exam, History and Criticism

These research nests contextualize the exam within the many areas that allow it to be read as a tool of sorting vulnerable to specific problems of high-stakes examinations and susceptible to social class bias in terms of the influence of inherited cultural capital. At the same time, the test is unavoidably caught within conflicts over the teaching of basic writing and assessment, arguments over

the very definition of the first year writing course, as well as ambiguities concerning AP Language's function and value as a dual credit program (i.e., a program designed to teach college-level writing in the high school setting).

Research Nest 1: The Influence of Cultural Capital

The classical and contemporary literature on the forms and influence of cultural capital constitutes a vast exchange of ideas between the fields of sociology and education. For the purposes of this discussion, the various studies may be categorized into two groups: those studies aligning with the sociologist Bourdieu or Coleman. Each school of thought demonstrates the importance and influence of varying forms of cultural capital upon educational attainment and opportunity. Most importantly, the influence of the varying forms of cultural capital are often inherited (as in Bourdieu's notion of the transmission of class-formulated tastes and attitudes) and/or derived from sources outside of the school setting, whether that includes the support of a social network (e.g., parents, friends, other professionals), possession of particularized forms of knowledge (e.g., knowledge of art, science and culture), and/or familiarity with advantageous social rituals (e.g., interviewing, social networking, and/or writing in specific contexts like a college admissions essay or a standardized examination). All of the following sources, in some sense, take up the question of the influence of symbolic capital on school attainment.

Weber not only sheds light on the exclusionary practice at work in Fitzgerald's microcosm of class relations in America, and the theory of distinction built out in the sociology of Bourdieu, but also on a brand of influence

unaccounted for in the assessment of a competitive writing exercise such as the AP Language Exam. This is so due to the recognition factor Weber's work suggests—the idea that there are certain identities and practices (“conventions”) that are not only disciplinarily legitimized (e.g., conventions of writing) but personally recognized practices which are just as aggressively and invisibly surveilled. These practices mark out the terrain of identity, relation and differential position in culture.

Weber, in *Economy and Society*, writes on status and “status groups.” This concept is wholly different from class stratification in that classes are determined by the market (i.e., strictly economic considerations), whereas status groups are determined by their commonality of life style (i.e., symbolic demonstration of “social honor” and privilege) (Weber 937). The “status order” exercises a different kind of power than, say, economic power; according to Weber, status groups hold a monopoly on specific kinds of practices (as opposed to goods and services) which favor their position of distinction in society (926-27). Members of status groups recognize others not in financial terms but instead in terms of “positive or negative social estimations of honor” based upon “conventions” of life style (Weber 932-33). Privilege is transmitted through shared preferences, such as taste in clothing, food, music, art and literature, and “monopolies” on these preferences constitute a form of “exclusion” of others outside the status group (Weber 935). A term that Weber emphasizes more than once is the notion of shared “conventions” that define the status group, the ways of being that characterize the particular shared life style of the group (936). Most

interesting is when Weber comments on those who would attempt to enter the hallowed ranks of a status group (which, by nature, is closed to status seekers):

[T]he “parvenu” is never accepted, personally and without reservation, by the privileged status groups, no matter how completely his style of life has been adjusted to theirs. They will only accept his descendants who have been educated in the conventions of their status group and who have never besmirched its honor by their own economic labor. (937)

Bourdieu’s *Outline of a Theory of Practice* is especially useful in its delineation of Bourdieu’s signature concept of the *habitus* (the embodied disposition to act in and respond to the world through a class-coded prefiguration of possibility), located in the most economical and alliterative phrases, such as: “durable dispositions” and “structuring structures” (*Outline* 72). Even the somewhat paradoxical explanation of the habitus is accessible, explained as

principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively “regulated” and “regular” without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor. (Bourdieu, *Outline* 72)

Bourdieu expresses the embodied sensibility of the *habitus* as a collective phenomenon which might prompt the subject to adopt or eschew certain life “chances” (Bourdieu writes that the *habitus* encourages or discourages certain

behaviors and might prompt the subject to determine: “that’s not for the likes of us” [Bourdieu, *Outline* 77]). Idiomatic phrases like the aforementioned one and “knowing one’s place” (*Outline* 82) give the text an uncomfortable sense of determinism for which Bourdieu is critiqued. But the notion that an invisible guide (the *habitus*) is directing—and is acknowledged by others as directing—the individual’s behavior is important in the seamless performance of social rituals like writing for a standardized examination. The outward “ease” or “naturalness” (Bourdieuian buzzwords) of the individual’s presentation is always on trial in Bourdieu. This is the way that one’s place in the competition for academic and social honor is determined; therefore, *habitus* is essential to any discussion of the influence of cultural capital as it is a class-based legacy.

Bourdieu’s *Distinction* is akin to Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* in scope and style. That is, the book presents as an impressive collage of literary, historical and sociological fragments combed with individual portraiture documenting the strata of French society per taste (e.g., preferences with respect to clothing, food, music, film, literature, art, décor, etc.) as a marker of social distinction. The main idea transmitted across the datum is the notion that taste is an inheritance; that is, preference may be misrecognized as individual, but it is more properly understood as a transmitted class-based legacy from one generation to the next (this class-based “footprint” materializes in the concept of the *habitus*). Bourdieu demonstrates how certain tastes (calibrated to dominant values) are considered more tasteful than others; therefore, taste becomes an index of social status and potential unit of symbolic exchange, a kind of currency in jockeying for social

mobility. This unconscious network of “personal choices” comes to mirror the classificatory landscape of culture; that is, broader patterns of organization become recognizable and relatable through these expressions of taste as differentially valued “knowledges.” Furthermore, this knowledge is translated through practice (*Distinction* 467) which confers important social consequences or benefits upon practitioners, legitimating or delegitimizing individual strategies and identities of “players” in the “field” (Bourdieu’s game metaphor for the space of contention upon which the struggles of class are enacted). Organization of the various “fields” tends to mirror and reproduce dominant hegemonic order and values of taste. This is important to the assessment of the AP Language Examination in that certain students will more or less mirror legitimate predispositions of style and taste in, for example, their diction and allusion base, although the process of recognition and the benefits incurred are largely invisible.

The most important cue taken from this study is the concept of “credit,” the “advance” or “head-start” (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 70) that possession of legitimate cultural capital has in the field of competition for academic awards and credentials, an expression of which would be a competitive score on a standardized exam, where, per the mechanics of sorting, there must be winners and losers due to limited positions in the elite tiers of academia and the workplace. Another element of importance is the source of acquisition of these preferred knowledge forms (the family), and the incomparable benefit of early privilege in terms of the differentially refined expression of specific forms of cultural capital (e.g., linguistic, artistic, etc.). An aspect of this often overlooked

is the premium placed upon the “scarcity” of certain forms of knowledge that only the most rarified form of acquisition (i.e., inherited knowledge obtained outside of school) could produce (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 133). Bourdieu demonstrates how the academic market, paradoxically, honors these expressions more so than its own “scholastic” teachings (*Distinction* 74-76).

Bourdieu, in *Language and Symbolic Power*, holds a meta-conversation with Austin (speech act theory) and Labov (sociolinguistics). The (then) current theory in linguistics bolsters Bourdieu’s claims regarding the class-contingent kinetics of field and the class-situated strategies enacted by “players” as they vie for positions of power. More so than his governing metaphor of a game, here Bourdieu employs metaphors of commerce and banking by drawing on Comte’s pronouncement that language is a kind of currency or “wealth” (*Language* 43). Bourdieu proceeds to demonstrate how, if the state authorizes a particular language as “official,” then it is to the benefit of the possessors of the legitimate language. Education plays a key role in the propagation of the legitimate discourse and simultaneously imposes penalties upon those who are unable to reproduce this “secret code” (Bourdieu, *Language* 51). Here Bourdieu offers perhaps the most striking illustration of “symbolic domination” or complicity of the oppressed in the violence done by the invisible curriculum of the school: the practice of hyper-correctness or obsessive attention to the form of one’s speech (e.g., self-policing of diction and syntax) which might make one appear “desperate” (for the obvious effort to sound correct) or reduce one to silence (*Language* 52). Labov’s study of inner-city youth is key in Bourdieu’s thinking:

[I]gnorance of what popular and educated usage owe to their objective relations and to the structure of the relation of domination between classes, which they reproduce in their own logic, leads to the *canonization* as such of the ‘language of the dominated classes. Labov leans in this direction when his concern to rehabilitate ‘popular speech’ against the theorists of deprivation leads him to contrast the verbosity and pompous verbiage of middle-class adolescents with the precision and conciseness of black children from the ghettos. This overlooks the fact that, as he himself has shown . . . the linguistic ‘norm’; is imposed on all members of the same ‘linguistic community’, most especially in the educational market and in all formal situations in which verbosity is often *de rigueur*. [emphasis in original] (Bourdieu, *Language* 53)

In this model, the dominants have a monopoly on the linguistic capital which matters the most and they deploy this knowledge in characteristically seamless and imperceptible ways that betray the hallmark of the *habitus* (Bourdieu, *Language* 57-61). Though the descriptive method appears structuralist in the fashion of Lévi-Strauss’ *The Raw and the Cooked*, Bourdieu offers binary oppositions (e.g., “distinguished” vs. “vulgar,” “rare” vs. “common, “loose” versus “relaxed”) *not* to propose some kind of master-grammar of understanding, but instead to demonstrate the classificatory view of educational stakeholders as they “fix and codify legitimate usage” and “impose and inculcate it” (*Language* 60). Austin and speech act theory become important later in the text when Bourdieu builds the reciprocal argument that certain individuals hold the preferred

form(s) of linguistic capital *and* a certain type of linguistic competence is authorized by the situation; instances of this tacit agreement (made transparent) reveal the taxonomy of order (*Language* 72-76). Ultimately, the greatest “credit” possessed by dominants is their ability to discern what is “possible or not possible to say” in a given situation in order to maximize “profits” (77). The degree of sensitivity to the rules valued in the “market” equals the probability of successful “returns” (Bourdieu, *Language* 80-81).

Lareau and Weininger rightly observe that few studies have utilized Bourdieu’s *The State Nobility* (581). In fact, strikingly few class-based investigations (with the exception of Peshkin, Lamont, Cookson and McDonough) delve into the culture of the American “aristocracy” (i.e., high SES samples) as opposed to the more numerous ethnographies of working class culture, for example, found in the work of Willis, Kozol, Rose and Aronowitz. Maybe the comparative dearth of high SES ethnography is due to limited access to these rarified spaces—something with which Bourdieu did not have to contend, for, in *The State Nobility*, he provides a comprehensive portrait of the youthful class of Mandarins from the *grand écoles* (the French equivalent to elite, eastern-American preparatory academies such as Philips Exeter, Groton and Choate) who have won the prestigious Concours Général. The insularity and superiority of the upper-class identity comes to be the unmooring point of the myth of meritocracy as one realizes the absolute benefit of hereditary transmission of privilege that fixes the future chances of members of society and primes every individual to inhabit a specific place in a (seemingly) invariable matrix of available positions.

Bourdieu has been critiqued for determinism and this work, perhaps more than the others, asserts the inevitability of status per birthright—but the complicity of teachers in the process (through their approbatory or derisive comments on students' work and person) makes such classification seem “natural” and the virtues and achievements of the upper class more “admirable.” *The State Nobility* is the most important of Bourdieu's works utilized in my study.

Perhaps one comes to understand Bourdieu most intimately in this work when he describes the idealized *hexis* (embodied presentation of class) lauded by teachers, evident in the ennobled accent considered the ultimate marker of distinction (*State Nobility* 35-39; also found in *Distinction* 473). The Voice of the individual (an aspect of the *hexis*) becomes an all-powerful marker of social identity, which has obvious significance for one interested in composition and assessment because Voice is the sum total of all aspects of the writer-ly performance. In *The State Nobility*, class-based verdicts predicated upon personal attributes of students are “misrecognized” or “euphemized” as academic judgments in teacher commentary; this is the primary, methodological cue I take from the work (Bourdieu 36-37). These euphemized descriptors limn out a taxonomy of individuals distilled in a series of oppositions (similar to Derrida's binary oppositions). Antithetical pairings of descriptors evident in teacher commentary are the expression of the sorting machine: adjectives and metaphors constitute the linguistic marking off of legitimate from non-legitimate identities descriptive of the social order.

The most frequently cited of Bourdieu's texts, besides *Distinction*, is the work he wrote in collaboration with Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. The book reads as a series of meditations on social organization, competition, and "gamesmanship" of a sort, in that individuals are busily "gaming" the system with strategies of advancement that they exactly do not owe to the skills and dispositions cultivated by school, but which are valued by schooling, nevertheless (Bourdieu and Passeron 143). The institution of education, in turn, "games" students with control over the credentialing system which, according to the authors, only replicates existing social hierarchies (Bourdieu and Passeron 149-52). A "negative verdict" on a dissertation or exam, then, metaphorically confirms an

ensemble of the objective relations between [the student's] social class and the educational system, since a scholastic future is of greater or lesser probability for a given individual only insofar as it constitutes the objective and collective future of his class or category. (Bourdieu and Passeron 155-56)

Recalling the reciprocal nature of symbolic violence discussed earlier in the review of *Language and Symbolic Power*, individuals, in such a circumstance, might fail and conclude: "That's not for the likes of us" (Bourdieu and Passeron 157), thus furthering the illusion of "naturalness" of the social order. In this text, the theory of meritocracy gives the lie of equal chances body, but actual prospects for individuals are decided in a much less material and insidious process, as evidenced by metaphors of entrapment and deception (Bourdieu and Passeron

158-59). Bourdieu and Passeron demonstrate how social organization is ironically concealed within “norms of educational equity” (159). In this model, the standardized exam is an exclusionary alembic (i.e., a class purifier) as tests are predisposed to reward a particular *habitus* (Bourdieu and Passeron 161-64). Of greatest importance to those interested in assessment would be Bourdieu and Passeron’s remarks concerning the “syncretic judgment” exercised by examiners, that is, a mode of ruling guided by socially constituted beliefs (163), yet “with all the outward signs of scientificity and neutrality” (163). In this book one finds the most emphatic excoriation of the meritocracy found in all of the literature. The authors write:

Nothing would better serve this function of sociability than formally irreproachable tests which could claim to measure . . . the subjects’ aptitude to occupy vocational posts, while forgetting that this aptitude, however early it is tested, is the product of a socially qualified teaching and learning, and that the most predictive measurements are precisely the least neutral ones socially. In fact, nothing less than the neo-Paretian Utopia of a society protected against the ‘circulation of the elites’ and the ‘revolt of the masses’ can be read between the lines of some descriptions which present tests as the privileged tool and guarantee of American democracy qua meritocracy. (Bourdieu and Passeron 164)

Coleman in “Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital” emphasizes a different feature of symbolic capital in enhancing educational attainment than Bourdieu: social capital. Social capital is congruent to Bourdieu’s notion of

cultural capital in that it is acquired outside of school and parlayed for personal gain. Most useful is Coleman's delineation of the various types of symbolic capital, viz.: financial capital (pertaining to "family wealth or income"); physical capital (pertaining to such things as literal space for study, "materials to aid learning, and the financial resources that smooth family problems"); human capital ("approximately measured by parents' education" and parents' ability to provide "the potential for a cognitive environment for the child that aids learning" (109), and social capital (the study's emphasis), which is described as the interactional benefit between individuals, small groups, and across communities. Coleman's data concerns drop-out rates measured between a parochial, public and private institution; he speculates as to why the drop-out rate in the private institution is higher than the parochial. Coleman attributes this to the private school's absence of a "closed network" of relation ("closed" by commonly held values, attitudes and relationships) between individuals as compared to the parochial school. Most interesting is the following paradox: Coleman finds that a family could have low human capital (i.e., parents possess no academic credentials) but very high social capital; therefore, the children might enjoy good educational attainment if parents make a concerted effort to support children in the educational process.

DiMaggio and Useem's, "Social Class and Arts Consumption: The Origins and Consequences of Class Differences in Exposure to the Arts in America," is congruent with the Bourdieuan paradigm and details the long-term and extensive benefits of early initiation to high culture. The researchers write:

[For the upper- and upper-middle classes] high-arts consumption is a matter of unconscious deciphering with an ease that is rooted in prolonged family socialization into the world of elite culture. In the absence of such a family background, others can self-consciously though sometimes awkwardly acquire the necessary training through other means, particularly schooling. Still others, lacking either appropriate family background or educational experiences, remain deprived of the means for appropriating the high arts throughout their lives. (DiMaggio and Useem 149)

In DiMaggio and Useem's study, cultural capital is the example par excellence of the "gift that keeps on giving" by granting the possessor leverage not only in terms of how to understand and appreciate legitimate works, but initiation to the manners and rituals involved in the social-cultural milieu, to forging status alliances with others of like experience and tastes, to elite educational and career opportunities because cultural capital converts easily into other forms of capital (DiMaggio and Useem 155).

DiMaggio's "Cultural Capital and School Success: The impact of Status Culture Participation on the Grades of U.S. High School Students," assigns a large measure of influence in academic attainment to cultural capital. He reports that "[f]or English, History/Social Studies, and all grades, the impact of cultural capital is of the same order of magnitude as the effect of measured ability" (194). Further, based upon earlier studies (e.g., Picou and Carter), DiMaggio observes that "English, History, and Social Studies are subjects in which cultural capital

can be expected to make a difference; standards are diffuse and evaluation is likely to be relatively subjective” (as contrasted with Mathematics) (194). DiMaggio twice asserts that: “cultural capital has an impact on high school grades that is highly significant and that, in nontechnical subjects, approaches the contribution of measured ability” (199).

Cookson and Persell’s *Preparing for Power: America’s Elite Boarding Schools*, is like the sociological companion to Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger is, in fact, quoted several times). It may be closest in comparison to Bourdieu’s *The State Nobility* in terms of researcher access to the elite, American preparatory academies, and the study follows similar organizational lines in providing the stately *mise-en-scène* of the New England boarding school, followed by the social and academic rituals and traditions which shape leadership skills of and foster esprit de corps in the youthful American power-brokers (this process is called “socializing for power” or “elite hot-housing” [22]). Ironically, Cookson and Persell liken the environment not to a resort, but instead to Goffman’s description of a “total institution” in that

- 1) all activities are conducted in the same place under a single authority;
- 2) daily life is carried out in the immediate company of others; 3) life is tightly scheduled and fixed by a set of formal rules; and 4) all activities are designed purportedly to fulfill the official aims of the institution.

(Goffman cited in Cookson and Persell 35)

This process engineers a class mind-set. And concomitant with the micro-management of students’ academic and personal lives is immersion training in the

aesthetics of upper-class life complementary to the aesthetic education students receive at home. The authors make visible Bourdieu's observations regarding the process of early initiation to the signs and symbols of privilege (Cookson and Persell 44-48) which include cultivation of appreciation for and understanding of taste communicated through art, landscape and interior design. Along these same lines (i.e., appreciation for legitimate taste and works expressing a dominant aesthetic) the authors explain that the "classical, humanist tradition of scholarship has been the core of boarding school curricula" (Cookson and Persell 47).

Culture, much like real estate or stocks, can be considered a form of capital. As the French scholars Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron have indicated, the accumulation of cultural capital can be used to reinforce class differences. Cultural capital is socially created: what constitutes the "best in western civilization" is not arrived at by happenstance, nor was it decided upon by public election. The more deeply embedded the values, the more likely they will be perceived as value free and universal. Thus curriculum is the nursery of culture and the classical curriculum is the cradle of high culture. (Cookson and Persell 74)

Interestingly, the authors describe prep school education in the imagery of artisanal culture, where "learning experiences are hand crafted" (Cookson and Persell 95), like the beautiful artifacts and objects of art that fill the dominants' homes. Advanced Placement classes play an important role in this sort of customized educational experience (Cookson and Persell 94-100).

Alice Sullivan, like many sociologists, initially critiques Bourdieu for “assum[ing] much of what he sets out to prove” (“Cultural Capital” 7). She observes that the operationalizing of Bourdieu’s theory has been insufficient, and so her study is designed to measure the precise “return” of cultural capital in educational attainment. She is also interested in verifying Bourdieu’s claim that the most important kind of knowledge (which influences teachers) is obtained outside of school (Sullivan, “Cultural Capital” 15-16). Ultimately, Sullivan determines (a) that parental cultural capital is strongly associated with parental social class and with parental qualifications; (b) that cultural capital is transmitted from parents to their children [as supported by] the case of pupil’s participation in cultural activities; and (c) that “linguistic ability and cultural knowledge are more strongly transmitted within the home than in the school” (22). In terms of the effect of cultural capital on educational attainment, per scores on the GCSE exam (General Certificate of Secondary Education), “pupils’ cultural capital is a significant determinant of pupils’ GCSE score, as is parents’ cultural participation” (“Cultural Capital” 23). Sullivan concludes that

Parents’ social class retains a large and significant direct effect on GCSE attainment, controlling for the cultural capital variables. Therefore, it seems that cultural capital is one mechanism through which higher-class families ensure educational advantage for their children. (“Cultural Capital” 24)

Initially, de Graaf challenges Bourdieu in “The Impact of Financial and Cultural Resources on Educational Attainment in the Netherlands,” stating that

although “there is a strong relationship between educational and occupational characteristics and participation in formal culture” (245), “there is a lack of empirical evidence to support Bourdieu’s theory of reproduction through associations between formal culture climate and family educational attainment” (246). But then De Graaf reverses his position by concluding with the words: “Cultural resources may be more important at some selection points in educational careers than at others. For instance, entrance into elite schools and entrance into medical school and law school could be such special selection points” (246). Later, de Graaf (and others) confirm the importance of cultural capital on educational attainment in a follow-up study, “Parental Cultural Capital and Educational Attainment in the Netherlands: A Refinement of the Cultural Capital Perspective,” in which he writes: “several researchers found positive effects of parental cultural capital on children’s educational attainment,” and concludes “Bourdieu’s cultural capital hypothesis is not far-fetched” (de Graaf, de Graaf and Kraaykamp 94). The researchers arrive at this conclusion by making a distinction between influence derived from parent involvement in the Beaux Arts (e.g., “cultural activities, such as attendance at theaters, museums, classical music concerts, and arts exhibitions and galleries” [de Graaf, de Graaf and Kraaykamp 96]) and parents’ reading habits. They determine that the “effect of parental reading behavior is about four times as large as the effect of parental beaux arts participation” (de Graaf, de Graaf and Kraaykamp 104). Researchers find that parental reading behavior enhances children’s “linguistic and cognitive skills” which has a positive effect on educational attainment; the researchers report: “it is

much less parents' mastery of highbrow cultural codes than parental reading behavior that brings advantages in children's educational careers" (de Graaf et al., 107). The researchers note that, in so far as there is a positive match between the cultural milieu of home and school, children will be habituated to schooling and fair better (de Graaf et al., 108).

In their study, "Race, Cultural Capital, and Schooling: An Analysis of Trends in the United States," Kalmijn and Kraaykamp conclude that "integration of Blacks in Euro-American high culture has made a positive contribution to the relative gains of Blacks in the educational system" (32); further, the researchers propose that, due to this, cultural capital acquisition should be considered as a "route to upward mobility for less privileged groups in society" (33).

Crook, in "The Dimensionality of stratification-related cultural practices in Australia," similar to de Graaf et al., calls for the separate consideration of knowledge of the Beaux Arts and reading practices. He draws this distinction to enable more fine tuned assessments of varying forms of cultural capitals' influence upon school attainment, concluding: "by dividing reading behavior and beaux arts participation, the differentiated cultural model enables researchers to directly test whether well-educated parents can boost their children's chances of socioeconomic success by furnishing them with skills that are rewarded by schools and employers" (Crook 235).

Dumais discusses the influence of not only cultural capital but the role of the *habitus* in school success (46) in terms of facilitating a promising relationship between the student and school culture (i.e., what the student "brings to the table"

in terms of prior experience and/or ability establishes a good relationship with the school). Dumais, citing the earlier studies of DiMaggio and Useem, and De Graaf, De Graaf and Kraaykamp) writes:

[W]ithin the dominant classes, teachers have the most cultural capital, value it, and tend to reward students who possess it. Children who have more cultural capital (having been exposed to it from birth in their upper middle- and upper-class families) feel more comfortable in school, communicate easily with teachers, and are therefore more likely to do well in school. (46)

One form of access for high SES students to gain such knowledge comes from their participation in enrichment activities which take place outside of school such as “art lessons, music lessons, any type of lesson, library visits, concerts, and [visits to] art museums” (Dumais 52). “Even going to the public library,” Dumais writes, “the most popular activity for all students, was far less likely to occur for low-SES students than for high SES students” (53).

Ultimately, congruent with Bourdieu, Dumais observes that because younger children (the participants in her study were eighth graders) are reliant upon their parents for exposure to cultural-enrichment opportunities (i.e., they rely upon parents for tuition, transportation, support, etc.), the family’s “commitment” to the accrual of these experiences (rather than school) is responsible for “maintaining such long-standing cultural training” (53). Dumais also finds that certain cultural activities are stereotypically considered “masculine” and/or “feminine,” therefore, gender exerts an influence in the consideration of cultural capital.

Lareau and Horvat in their study “Moments of Social Inclusion and Exclusion: Race, Class, and Cultural Capital in Family Relationships,” argue with and against Bourdieu. On the one hand, they concur with Bourdieu’s thesis (based upon Bourdieu’s game metaphor for the accrual of power and influence in a given situation) that certain “players” will more or less successfully jockey for position in a given field based upon the kinds of capital they possess congruent with the forms of capital valued in a specific context. However, they argue that race is the most important variable in exclusionary practice, and one that should be considered independent of class (Lareau and Horvat 21).

Paradoxically (but still useful for the contradiction), Lareau and Horvat demonstrate the opposite of their thesis. That is, they ultimately show that class exerts more influence than race in their comparison of the successful and unsuccessful interventions enacted by two black families (one working class and the other middle class) who suspect a Midwestern school of differential treatment of minority students. The low SES parents, in interactions with the staff, utilize specific verbal strategies which antagonize school personnel and therefore delimit their child’s chances in the environment; whereas the middle class, black parents demonstrate considerable savvy in utilizing veiled political tactics and verbal subterfuge in order to guarantee their child’s chances in the racist environment (they form an alliance with staff and administration which they parlay to their advantage). Not discounting the virulent history of racism in America which likely pervades every interracial social interaction, Lareau and Horvat more effectively demonstrate Bourdieu’s contention that factors such as knowledge of

dominant social rituals (e.g., a facility with manners), vocabulary, tone, volume and certain dispositions conveyed through non-verbal cues override consideration of race and govern differential chances of social promotion.

Lareau and Weininger in, “Cultural Capital in Educational Research: A Critical Assessment,” set out to clarify two misconceptions in the English translation of Bourdieu’s research: (a) that cultural capital only assumes knowledge of “highbrow aesthetic culture” (568); and (b) that cultural capital is perceived as something apart from technical “skill or ability” (569). In order to reveal the limitations of this “dominant” reading of Bourdieu, they review the literature committed to such errors and demonstrate what research would look like liberated from such misconceptions. Again, Lareau proves instructive for what could be considered an oversight or potential misreading of Bourdieu. Lareau and Weininger claim that *Distinction* “allots very little consideration to the educational process itself”; further, that “Bourdieu does not here elaborate the process by which ‘inherited cultural capital’ contributes to educational outcomes” (578). The authors’ critique could be challenged by Bourdieu’s explanation that the major “credit” or advantage of the dominant disposition is its ability to not only recognize “legitimate works” but to be able to *use and talk about them in culturally authorized ways* which school culture recognizes and values (but does not create exactly the same). Bourdieu writes:

[N]othing more rigorously distinguishes the different classes than the disposition objectively demanded by the legitimate consumption of legitimate works, the aptitude for taking a specifically aesthetic point of

view on objects already constituted aesthetically—and therefore put forward for the admiration of those who have learned to recognize the signs of the admirable. (*Distinction* 40)

Bourdieu suggests that this rarified, non-academic (aesthetic) sense of familiarity is conferred with specific privileges (e.g., academic recognition and/or honors). Further, Bourdieu states that the school is unable to technically reproduce or “short-cut” this level of “symbolic mastery” through academicism (*Distinction* 67-68). This is the meaning of his argument regarding the limit of “scholasticism.” What Lareau and Weininger miss is that this untutored sensibility is the emblem of distinction in the academic market. As this is the most critical point Bourdieu makes about the inherited mode of acquisition of cultural capital, the misreading is a serious one.

Several studies follow in the tradition of Coleman; for instance, Sutton and Soderstrom’s “Predicting Elementary and Secondary School Achievement with School-Related and Demographic Factors.” The researchers note:

Since the findings of Coleman, the debate over how much a student’s background affects academic achievement has continued to rage. The results of this study appear to be consistent with the findings of Coleman et al. and emphasize the importance of the effect of socioeconomic and demographic variables (over which schools have no control) on school achievement. . . . Specifically, we found that variables over which schools have no control accounted for as much as 74% of the variance of achievement. (7)

The variables the authors indicate over which the school has no control include “percentage White, low income, attendance, mobility, high school dropout rate” versus the variables schools can control such as “average class size, teacher experience, high school pupil-teacher ratio, teacher salary, expenditure per pupil” (6). The emphasis upon factors pertaining to student background congruent with the expectations, competencies and rituals valued by school culture is also a Bourdieuan concept of great importance for my thesis.

Other proponents of the sociology of Coleman argue the importance of social capital, that is, capital gained from sources outside of school such as relationships with family and in the community. McDonough’s study, *Choosing Colleges: How Social Class and Schools Structure Opportunity*, makes a compelling case, through ethnography of high school girls from varying SES groups, for the importance of social capital in the influence of a vast social network (comprised of such individuals as parents, tutors, and friends) in educational attainment and, ultimately, admission to the “right” university. McDonough demonstrates that the *habitus* of high SES students is intensely important for the “context” or familiarity base it provides kids from privileged backgrounds (136-37) such that they can sit down comfortably to write a college admission essay or the SAT, or interview with an admissions officer and feel confident in the measure of skills and experience they possess which would make the encounter a success. McDonough describes these kids as feeling “bright” and “entitled” (137); this vision of the self (similar to Lareau and Weininger’s portrait

of middle class parents' initiative to assertively advocate for their children [590-93]) is ultimately what facilitates vertical mobility.

The same phenomenon is demonstrated in Alvarez and Kolker's documentary *People Like Us: Social Class in America*, where, in one segment concerning a hyper-stratified high school in Texas, students occupying positions in varying SES groups are interviewed and reveal distinctly class-engineered conceptions of their life-chances in terms of future academic and professional opportunities available to them.

Parcel and Dufur, in their study, "Capital at Home and at School: Effects of Student Achievement," think through the varied resources students tap in striving for educational attainment (886). The authors prefer to re-conceive the issue of competing forms of cultural capital derived from school *or* family as "parallel" in importance; meaning, Parcel and Dufur argue that *both* sources of cultural capital (attained at home and at school) complement each other and, in differing circumstances, enhance or limit the effect of one or the other source of capital (899). Parcel and Dufur ultimately find that some exceptionally conservative, traditional factors concerning the family exert influence on achievement in math and reading, such as: "grandmother's education," "having the mother come from an intact family," "stronger home environments, "parental knowledge" of child's whereabouts (899) and "family size" (902). Optimistically, Parcel and Dufur's findings support the idea that family social capital can attenuate the effects of a lack of school social capital (for instance, for children who do not attend private school) (902).

Croll in “Families, Social Capital and Educational Outcomes,” also argues the importance of families and the specific kinds of support they provide to children which enhances academic attainment. Croll draws upon Coleman’s theory of “closure,” defined as “the mutuality of relationships” “which strengthens social networks by strengthening norms and providing sanctions” (399). Croll explains how this form of social relation and capital, as theorized by Coleman, can be possessed across class lines and mobilized to great effect (e.g., families monitor children’s progress in school, offer support and encouragement, intervene as necessary, and supply resources). Croll argues that, in Bourdieu, the concept of social capital is elitist and exclusionary (i.e., social elites forge relationships with each other, and exclude others, based upon common possession of rarified knowledge) (401). So Croll positions Coleman against Bourdieu to show how social capital can act as a “public good” or “community benefit” (402). Croll perceives his research as a counterpoint to Ball’s Bourdieuan study, *Class Strategies and the Educational Market*, on “how social connections of middle class parents, the doctors, lawyers, bankers and so on they know, can provide advice, information, and examples which their children can use to their educational advantage” (403-404).

In terms of “con arguments,” some researchers have posed various objections to Bourdieu’s theory and/or they have claimed that Bourdieu’s sociology has limited application for American society. Even so, these objections prove exceptionally fruitful in thinking through Bourdieu’s theory and the influence of cultural capital and so I have here included a selection.

For instance, Dika and Singh, in “Applications of Social Capital in Educational Literature: A Critical Synthesis,” provide a comprehensive review of those studies which utilize social capital as “an explanatory variable in educational research” (31), and their commentary seeks to assess the empirical evidence that researchers are able to provide between social capital and educational attainment (32). Although the theoretical emphasis is upon Coleman’s notion of social capital, Bourdieuan theory is also evident. The authors claim that “[o]verall, social capital and indicators of educational attainment are positively linked” (Dika and Singh 41). And then, paradoxically, the authors conclude the essay by stating:

Although most of the relationships are significant in the expected directions, the current body of research does not provide sufficient theoretical or empirical support for hypotheses about the positive relationship between social capital and education-related factors. (43)

The rationale behind the skepticism, similar to the leit motif that runs throughout most of the sociological research, is that Bourdieu’s theories are too “fuzzy” to be properly tested. Even so, the authors concede that Bourdieu’s theory was intended only as a “guide to empirical work” (Dika and Singh 44) which is, actually, the most insightful observation in all of the literature. From this I derived the idea, in the Introductory chapter, that Bourdieu’s theory is a metaphor.

Another objection to Bourdieu may be found in Lamont’s *Money, Morals and Manners: The Culture of the French and American Upper-Middle Classes* which takes up problems in the application of Bourdieuan sociology to American

culture. Specifically, Lamont doubts the applicability of Bourdieu's claims as applied to American versus French society. Lamont writes: "even if Bourdieu is not concerned with the American case, it is useful to stress again that many Americans . . . do not acknowledge the legitimacy of high culture and the importance to accumulate knowledge about it" (186). In saying this, Lamont inadvertently exposes an important aspect of American competition through a form of cultural capital which was thoroughly explored by Fitzgerald—and which continues to be explored in contemporary Rap music—cultural capital associated with East versus West coast culture (i.e., alliance with and reflection of taste and attitudes congruent with regionalism). Lamont betrays surprise when she meets with "cultural boundaries" such as Easterners' disdain for Midwesterners. She, defensively, describes these borders as "particularly surprising because quantitative comparison of approximative scores reveals that overall the New Yorkers I talked to are not more culturally exclusive than their Indianapolis counterpart" (Lamont 106). This seems especially myopic in light of Fitzgerald's novel which centralizes regional antipathies with respect to taste and cultural capital and the rewards which accompany possession of a distinctly Eastern sensibility. As conveyed by Fitzgerald, it is the East as opposed to the West in literary and historical traditions, which represents a kind of cultural aristocracy associated with American "first-ness" (e.g., the "original" Americans (Colonists), first settlements, first universities, etc.). Therefore, a particular mode of expression and aesthetic sensibility carries a cultural cachet which may be

capitalized upon like currency. Per Bourdieu's theory, East-coast style would figure as a form of "advantageous attribution" (*Distinction* 475-79).

Similar to Lamont, Kingston poses objections to the applicability of Bourdieu's theory in "The Unfulfilled Promise of Cultural Capital Theory," when he asks "whether cultural capital theory has delivered what it has long promised: an explanation of the connection between social privilege and academic success?" (88). Kingston's answer is "no" for myriad reasons such as the failure of researchers to operationalize Bourdieu's theories, the murky definitions and ideas contained in Bourdieu's work, and the inapplicability of a parallel between French and American society. For instance, Kingston asserts that, in America, the artifacts of high culture are simply not valued equally as they are in French society. As Kingston puts it, the question is not "Mahler—who? [But] who cares?" (90). By way of backing, the author cites Peterson and Simkus who observe that "although 20-30 percent of blue-collar and routine white-collar workers chose country as their favorite musical style, the rate among high-level managers was just slightly lower" (cited in Kingston 90-91). This is intended to problematize Bourdieu's notion of taste varying with one's position in the social strata but, thinking about Bourdieu in broad-scope, it seems like a false analogy. The question actually is not "Mahler—who? Or who cares?" but rather, who cares about Mahler in which (educational) setting and where is this rarified form of knowledge deployable for dividends?

Research Nest 2: Problems of Standardized Testing and the Influence of Socio-Economic Status (SES)

The research nest pertaining to the influence of socio-economic status (SES) in standardized testing is important to my thesis in that it highlights the influence of contextual variables like class which is presumably controlled for in the objective science of psychometric assessment. At the same time, works located within this nest challenge the notion of meritocracy (the ability-based system which enables one to rise purely on the basis of aptitude as opposed to inherited status and/or privilege). If standardized tests, as shown in the myriad examples to follow, demonstrate a latent bias for a class-based perspective, knowledge base, and/or predisposition to a specific set of abilities, then the results invalidate the meritocratic promise of assessment and instead institutionalize inequality.

I first became aware of the roots of standardized testing in the eugenics movement in 2002 in a Human Development course at Arizona State University; a visiting professor pointed out a series of articles that appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* (Fallows; Lemann; Gardner). These pieces, particularly the ones by Lemann setting up the research for his book *The Big Test*, are like compelling “bio-pic’s” of the emergence of the testing Goliath ETS (the testing company that administers the AP Examinations). The first in the series, Fallows’ article, “The Tests and the ‘Brightest’: How Fair Are the College Boards?” delves into the myth of meritocracy and how early initiation (both inside and outside of school) to the language and logic of standardized exams, as well as economic privilege,

contribute to garnering high scores on standardized tests which, in turn, gains entry to America's elite academic institutions and access to financial prosperity. Two features stand out in this piece. First, Fallows reports ETS' long-standing denial of the possibility that coaching techniques (in the manner of Stanley Kaplan) could improve a score on their exams (because such an admission would diminish the test's validity and demonstrate that what is authentically tested is test-preparedness and exposure to a particularized set of tasks rather than aptitude (13-14). Next, Fallows cites the charismatic scholar Loewen (author of *Lies My Teacher Told Me*) who challenges ETS' contention that "A GRE score of 500 . . . has the same meaning whether earned by a student from a small private liberal arts college or a student at a large public university" (17). Fallows argues: "patterns strongly suggest that what the tests measure is exposure to upper middle class culture—perhaps even the culture of the professional class of the east coast" based upon Loewen's proposal that students take "the American College Testing Exam, written in Iowa City" which would be a "better predictor of performance for students from all backgrounds than the ETS tests written on the outskirts of Princeton" (18).

The second article in *The Atlantic Monthly* series on standardized testing in America is produced by Lemann. This is an interesting biographic study of two men: Conant (then President of Harvard College) and Chauncey (Assistant Dean to Conant, key player in the College Board, which would later oversee the Advanced Placement Program and, ultimately, head of ETS, the first private, American organization to initiate large-scale standardized testing). The story

recounts Chauncey's break with Harvard to forge what he believed would be the country's most significant sorting machine in terms of natural ability matched with future educational and occupational prospects (the SAT being the divining mechanism). The historical set for this narrative is the ugly backdrop of racist-classist, pseudo-scientific claims leveled from intelligence tests taken by Eastern-European immigrants who, because they were poor and non-English speaking, were declared feeble-minded. This underscores the importance of one's background playing a key role assessment, despite the fact that scientific measurement presumably controls for the influence of context variables.

Lemann establishes a strong case for SES (socioeconomic status) as a determinant in standardized testing in the third article in the series, "The Great Sorting." In this piece, Lemann traces the public relations nightmare that ETS's Chauncey had to quell in order to sell his star product, the SAT, to a public soured on IQ tests, post-eugenics movement and the Holocaust. Chauncey fought internal battles within ETS as Diederich (long-time ETS researcher) declared the SAT a glorified IQ test. Diederich remarked: "IQ tests are reading comprehension and vocabulary doctored up to look like reasoning. To change the SAT to an IQ [test] you'd simply divide the score by an age measure. Basically they're the same thing" (qtd. in Lemann, "Great Sorting" 5). Lemann argues that it has always been ETS's semantic savvy in finessing the difference between "aptitude" and "IQ" that has kept them afloat ("Great Sorting" 8). However, the testing company took a serious, ideological wrong turn post WWII, during the mounting anxiety of the Cold War, in issuing "draft deferment for college

students who did well on an aptitude test” (Lemann, “Great Sorting” 13) produced and administered by ETS. As Lemann describes it, America needed to fortify future leadership and develop significant intellectual resources in order to meet the threat of foreign enemies. ETS responded to charges of elitist selectivity with the following rationale: “To subject all college students to the draft ‘would virtually stop the production of superior scientific, professional and specialized personnel” (qtd. in Lemann, “Great Sorting” 15). A larger problem was that the educational system (i.e., the mass of American colleges) supported deferment by testing because it was good business for them; and this, according to Lemann, was ground zero of a partnership that would generate myriad new products like the LSAT, MCAT, GRE—and ultimately the AP Program. This moment marked the bureaucratic management of entrance to educational programs. As an end-note, Lemann observes that nobody bothered to ask whether the test-scores could be compared equally across diverse ethnic and class-divided populations as they do today (“Great Sorting” 18); likewise, in 1951, few contested the fact that those attending college or graduate school were not required to serve in the military (Lemann, “Great Sorting” 19). In this way, Lemann collapses the myth of the American meritocracy. All of this becomes relevant because, if standardized tests are found not to have moved substantially far from their historical antecedents in terms of favoring some on the basis of factors such as social class, and engineering radically different life trajectories as a result, then measurement is a class alembic or purifier.

The third writer in the *Atlantic* series on standardized testing is Gardner. In his piece “Who Owns Intelligence?” Gardner begins with reminiscence on the early experiments of Binet and the way that the “fashion” of intelligence testing was swiftly embraced by those in America eager to (a) sort the “feeble-minded” from among the newly arrived immigrants and, (b) sort children of “normal” intelligence from those who were “gifted” (par. 4). Despite resistance, a variation of Terman’s IQ testing at Stanford served as a “primary tool for selecting people to fill academic or vocational niches” (Gardner par. 5). Gardner traces how statistical error in the computation of “g” (a general intelligence quotient) and the racist claims of Herrnstein and Murray in *The Bell Curve* were refuted by Gould’s *The Mismeasure of Man* (par. 7). Additionally, Gardner presents the same concern posed by Popham regarding class bias in the language and topics included in objective questions on exams, problems which anticipate a “canonical response” (par. 11). The critique becomes quite specific when Gardner refers to the SAT as a “thinly disguised intelligence test” (par. 15) (similar to the claim made by Diederich who worked as a career researcher for ETS).

Just prior to the No Child Left Behind Act that would initiate a firestorm of criticism from the educational community, Popham, in *The Truth About Testing: An Educator’s Call to Action*, leveled a well-reasoned and oftentimes humorous argument against the fallibility of measurement through standardized testing. The problem of the influence of SES on the validity of test scores, as a topic, receives a chapter itself. In this discussion, Popham explains how extreme difference in SES creates a chasm in the test-taking population (such that one is

not comparing students equally, as large-scale assessments purport), and also that SES invalidates single question items in that one would require initiation to the class-biased language and logic of the question in order to answer correctly (50-74).

Hillocks, known for the landmark *Teaching Writing as Reflective Practice*, does not set out in *The Testing Trap* to write specifically on social class, but Chapter 6 of the text, co-written with Wallace, effectively demonstrates the devastating effects on writing instruction in economically disadvantaged areas where curriculum and instruction are overridden by the mechanistic dictates of a standardized test. Put plainly, Hillocks shows how test preparation is actually harmful to performance as opposed to the kind of rarified atmosphere and exploratory exercises which would facilitate a favorable response on a standardized examination. The relationship to performance on a test like the Advanced Placement Language Examination is obvious in terms of which method of schooling would garner the coveted high score of “5.”

The great power of the argument lies in juxtaposition: the authors contrast the atmosphere of two Texas schools in order to provide a living portrait of how writing instruction is delivered to pupils in a disadvantaged school versus a more affluent one in a suburban community. Similar to Goffman’s portraits of “total institutions” (e.g., prisons, concentration camps and asylums), the students and teachers in the low SES school are subjected to interminable drilling, surveillance, and mandatory “esprit de corps raising” activities which demoralize everyone into a state of schizophrenic compliance (Hillocks, *Testing* 92), as they know, but

pretend not to know, what is at stake if the school does not make the state mandated test performance goals. Conversely, delightful gateway activities, exploration through quality artistic manipulate-ables, the possibility for free-form invention and inquiry across every stage of the writing process (and across every discipline) are reported as commonplace in the suburban enclave. In the well-resourced school, teachers—though Hillocks and Wallace imply rather than state this overtly—receive funding to be trained in best practices through workshops like Writing Projects, so they possess knowledge other than the restricted curriculum offered by state test related professional development programs. Therefore, when the reader learns that the students in “School B” (the high SES school) score “94.9% and 98.1% passing from 1994 through 1999” (Hillocks, *Testing* 102), it is understood as largely the product of the enriched milieu which cultivates the desired abilities in the children to which the test favorably responds. The literal openness of “School B” stands in stark contrast to the asphyxiating regimen in “School A,” and Hillocks and Wallace do little to veil their contempt at the disparity.

Inspired by Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities*, Johnson and Johnson (after actually living and teaching in the environment they researched) assembled an ethnographic study in the form of a daybook or journal of life as it is lived in a grotesquely underfunded school in rural Louisiana called Redbud Elementary, post-issue of *A Nation at Risk*. Through a year of eerily truncated anecdotes (akin to the style of a David Lynch film) that make the book a compelling literary artifact as well as argument for justice, Johnson and Johnson demonstrate how the

legislation designed to ameliorate the troubles of the disadvantaged (via aggressive testing measures tied to state standards, and the “grading” of “effective” and “failing” schools contingent upon test-scores) had the practical effect of deconstructing an entire community already bereft of prospects. The genius of the Johnson’s study is their revelation that the cohort of low SES invalidates any political pretence that students are being compared fairly between districts and among states (Johnson and Johnson 151-66). On this account the authors pointedly remark: “We have found Redbud Elementary to be a good school with not-so-good test scores for all the reasons described in this book” (Johnson and Johnson 162). They also contribute powerfully to the conversation on Voice and social class in the following recorded exchange with a third grader.

The authors report:

We are completing our daily oral language exercises. We talk about the difference between language that might be used at home and language that is used in school and “in public.” Jimmy says, “My uncle was kicked out of a fancy restaurant because he used home talk.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Yes, ma’am. He was on his honeymoon, and he said stuff he’d say at home, so they kicked him out.” (Johnson and Johnson 157)

This is one of the many idiolect-inflected, hyper-economical anecdotes that lend an almost surreal quality to the book. Simply through the clipped phrase, “home talk,” one is initiated to the issue of Voice cut along class lines perhaps inaccessible anywhere else in scholarship. Additionally, prior to the

studies of, for example, Cuban and Emery and Ohanian, the Johnsons exposed the complicity of big business in parasitically grafting onto and exploiting mass testing efforts (e.g., one chapter contains a critique of the marketing techniques of Stanley Kaplan which preys on examination anxiety). This is relevant to my study in terms of the massive test preparation industry attached to engineering readiness for the Advanced Placement examinations. One should not forget that much profit is to be gained in promise of scoring a “5.”

In a semi-autobiographical rumination on the deceptions of neoliberal discourse informed by the work of Fairclough and Apple, Hursh’s *High-Stakes Testing and the Decline of Teaching and Learning*, explores the perverse form of individualism apparent in public policy responsive primarily to the mandates of globalization. He argues that schools are currently being blamed for “the essential injustices and contradictions of capitalism” (Hursh 68). Further, that the fetish for efficiency and positivist forms of verification deceptively perpetuate belief in the progress narrative encouraged by test scores, the practical effect of which is that culturally disenfranchised kids stay in the stall of basic skills while their middle and upper class counterparts continue to receive “more complex instruction” (Hursh 82). Similar to remarks made by Jones et al., in *The Unintended Consequences of High-Stakes Testing*, Hursh deconstructs the myth of standardized testing as a barometer of the so-called “highly effective” school by explaining how “test scores strongly correlate with a student’s family income; [therefore] a school’s score is more likely to reflect its students’ average family income rather than teaching or the curriculum” (92). This is reminiscent of

Bourdieu's deconstruction of the notion of individual talent or "precocity" (also known as giftedness) as an authentic marker of socioeconomic status (*Distinction* 70; *State Nobility* 20).

The aforementioned text by Jones, Jones and Hargrove, *The Unintended Consequences of High-Stakes Testing*, reveals how legislation such as the No Child Left Behind Act, enacted, ostensibly, to "close the gap" in terms of inequities in educational opportunity via a rigorous program of accountability through standardized testing, has created an even more insidious form of academic apartheid. Especially interesting is chapter six in which Jones, Jones and Hargrove discuss the implications of standardized testing for "special populations" such as the disabled, minorities, ELL students, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. They describe discrepant failure rates in multiple studies between affluent and impoverished students and demonstrate that "socioeconomic status was by far the single most important factor accounting for the variance in test scores" (Jones, Jones and Hargrove 118). Ultimately, the authors propose myriad forms of symbolic capital as the authentic guarantor of affluent students' success on standardized examinations:

Students who come from wealthier backgrounds have usually been exposed to much richer experiences, experiences that equate to success on standardized tests. Children who have been read to, been exposed to printed materials and pictures, have visited museums, and have watched educational television are certainly more likely to identify with the scenarios presented on standardized tests. (Jones, Jones and Hargrove 118)

Not with a little irony do these authors (as does Hursh) point out that the very enrichment programs and electives that provide such exposure (e.g., art, music, science, etc.) are being eliminated in order to fund the aggressive test preparation efforts in underserved schools.

Variations on the same metaphor in the literature attest to agreement regarding the latent economic causation for superior test scores. Jones, Jones and Hargrove refer to the credit of affluence as the “Volvo” effect (“Simply count the number of Volvos, BMW’s, or Mercedes owned by the family and you have a good indicator of how well the child will perform on standardized tests” [Unintended Consequences 118]), whereas Au, in *Unequal by Design: High-Stakes Testing and the Standardization of Inequality*, refers to the same phenomenon as the “Zip Code Effect,” but the dominant style of Au’s work is quite literal. With the panoptic rigor of a historian, chapter two of Au’s study, “We Are All Widgets: Standardized Testing and the Hegemonic Logics of the Educational Assembly Line,” traces the eugenic origins of the standardized testing movement which moved synchronous with burgeoning technology in order to “sort groups of people along race and class socioeconomic hierarchies” and confirm the “ideology of natural inequalities” (Au 36; 37). Au ultimately contends that the standardized testing movement has not moved far from its origins, thus rather finally deflating the myth of meritocracy in assigning reward for “natural” abilities. In an interesting way, Au’s timeline is congruent with the one provided by Graff and Robbins in their tracking of the origin of English Education, in response to the waves of immigration, used as a “political

instrument for the socializing of otherwise heterodox groups into the mainstream of the national culture” (422). Many of these studies work in concert as they point, historically, to a preferred perspective or identity that was (and perhaps may still be) harmonious with the ideology of curriculum and the language and aims of the “value-neutral” measurements of science.

Au owes a debt to the journalist Lemann (author of *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy*) whose account of the origin of the SAT from racist IQ testing performed by Terman, Thorndike and Yerkes, demystifies the idea of an intellectual elite whose “natural” abilities are confirmed by their performance on such examinations (29-31), as well as to Gould’s *The Mismeasure of Man*, and Giordano’s historical account of the emergence of contemporary standardized testing through the early “Alpha” and “Beta” military tests.

Nichols and Berliner in *Collateral Damage: How High-Stakes Testing Corrupts America’s Schools*, argue via Campbell’s Law, that the drive to score impressively on standardized exams is encouraging a culture of academic dishonesty (25-31). The authors align with others, such as Koretz and Hursh, when they reason that students and teachers in affluent schools (oftentimes) receive undeserved or wrongly attributed accolades for their test scores; these scores are, in turn, misperceived by the popular press as successful when, in fact, such performance might more accurately be attributed to “intellectual resources” inaccessible to their underprivileged counterparts (Nichols and Berliner 23). Berliner and Nichols’ argument echoes Bourdieu’s claim that a certain population

of students will perform well on examinations simply by virtue of “who they are” (*Distinction 23*). The authors cite the statistician Raudenbush who remarks:

We cannot regard differences in school-mean proficiency as reflecting differences in school effectiveness. . . . To reward schools for high mean achievement is tantamount to rewarding those schools for servicing students who were doing well prior to school entry. (Nichols and Berliner 51)

The text’s ethical appeal, similar to the one leveled by Hillocks, Jones et al., and Hursh, is housed in the irony that the populations most disenfranchised by the overhaul of curriculum by test-driven drilling are the poor, the learning disabled, and the “ethnically and linguistically diverse populations” (Nichols and Berliner 64). Nichols and Berliner observe:

[W]e teach our poor and minority students the servile arts, business and law enforcement, catering and medical assistance, aerospace mechanics and computer technology. Wealthier students, if they are lucky, will get some of the liberal arts in their high schools and certainly will encounter them in their colleges. But poorer students may not be exposed to these ways of thinking in high school at all, and since their college attendance rates are low and apparently getting lower at the most prestigious schools, they may never get formal tutoring in the liberal arts. (134)

One item on the authors’ list that may raise questions within the category of the “servile arts” is computer technology, hailed by Gee, and other proponents of adolescent digital literacies, as a potentially democratizing force in terms of the

accrual of electronic experiences that Millennials add to their “shape-shifting portfolios” (61-63). The noble frame of the liberal arts experience, as depicted here, in contrast to the demoted one bounding digital culture, may testify to not one but two forms of literacy education delivered differentially contingent upon social class. One course of study might cultivate familiarity with the artifacts and competencies of “high culture” required of the managerial class, and another might fortify a “technobureaucratic” class with skills responsive to the needs of the information-service economy (Guillory 264). This is something to think about with respect to the Advanced Placement Language Exam which, according to Jones, looks and operates fairly unchanged from its origins in the 1950s (he calls AP a “dawdling, old dowager” (Jones, “Recomposing” 54). Digital culture may be of relevance as a topic and object of critical inquiry on the AP Language Examination but, in practice, emergent literacies and new forms of communication are not valued by the test.

Koretz, in *Measuring Up: What Educational Testing Really Tells Us*, similar to Popham’s technique of rendering the esoteric language of psychometrics accessible for the math-phobic, provides an engaging and anecdotal account of the factors that complicate the science of testing, not the least of which is the influence of SES. Koretz, through a discussion of how affluence, for example, increases the acquisition of vocabulary and complexity of language use congruent with the construction of standardized examinations, and how enrichment activities outside of school bear immeasurable influence upon test scores (129-130), provides a much needed reality check on the sense of pride

that wealthy communities take in their superior test scores. But most interesting is the way that Koretz places himself and the elite community of parents and professionals surrounding Harvard within the crucible. In a telling anecdote, Koretz assists his seventh-grade son with everything from an individualized course on probability and statistics to music theory, and his wife sarcastically retorts: “There you have it: social class differences in educational achievement” (120). Koretz persuasively argues that mediocre schools and teachers in wealthy, well-resourced areas are able to hide behind test scores through no merit of their own (119-21). Additionally, Koretz persuades the reader to think about the staff of Harvard not as teachers but as parents, and, attendant to that, to ponder the advantage of having a member of Harvard’s faculty as one’s *personal tutor*. In this way, Koretz alerts the reader to the immeasurable benefit of professional parents. This is reminiscent of when Popham called a test-item to account for SES bias when it referred to parents’ occupation as a “field”; the question being: which kind of student would even consider their parents “in or occupying a field”? (60).

Koretz cites Madeus, a colleague from Boston College who, in *The Paradoxes of High Stakes Testing*, also illuminates the influence of human (i.e., cultural) and mechanical variables on performance on standardized examinations (and thus, demonstrates why a single gauge may not adequately compare performance across a diverse spectrum of students) (74). Contra to claims of accuracy with respect to the measurement of ability and skill leveled by proponents of achievement tests, differential, class-based experiences in the world

provide an alternate explanation for variance (positive or negative) in test-scores. Also included in this study, relevant to my consideration of the AP Language Examination, is an interesting discussion on problems affecting test-takers of written versus multiple-choice oriented examinations. Madaus cites four factors that influence test-scores, namely: excessive coaching and/or preparation for the task (reminiscent of Berliner and Nichols' study); high marks awarded for length (reminiscent of Freedman's findings) and talent in the academic form of "passing," or the ability to write passable disciplinary "bullshit" (reminiscent of Smagorinsky, et al); and aesthetically pleasing handwriting (Madaus 71-74).

Mary Lee Smith, in "Put to the Test: The Effects of External Testing on Teachers," comes to similar conclusions regarding the negative effects of standardized testing indicated by Nichols and Berliner (e.g., inappropriate use of data generated by testing, preparation that is authentically cheating, and excising of all curriculum not test-related [8-10]). Correlation with SES and testing appears in a footnote. Smith states that "the double-edged danger for teachers [even as they are encouraged to help students excel on the exam] is that too much teaching to the test can result in scores that are high enough to draw suspicion of cheating" (9). The footnote related to this indicates that a teacher from a low-SES school was "being tried by a state committee on professional practices" (Smith 11). Smith never reverses the significance of the news story to highlight the reason why teachers in high SES schools do not have to drill at all (or, at least drill to the extent that their actions would be perceived as unethical), but she might have. If test-takers are socially primed to take the exam, then their

achievement appears as natural and their preparation fair and ethical, or synchronous with curricular objectives.

Spellmeyer, in “Testing as Surveillance,” comments on the unchecked movements of the testing industry as well as political and administrative/bureaucratic machinations which ensure that testing does everything except equitably distribute opportunity. For Spellmeyer, old claims on behalf of “cultural literacy” empty out into latent demonstrations of the owner of the most cultural capital (175). Spellmeyer, like his predecessors (e.g., Fallows, Lemann, Au, Giordano, Gould, etc.) recapitulates the unsavory antecedents of standardized testing synchronous with the “quantifiably justified” disqualification of impoverished non-whites, and points to the precise moment in history when the testing industry experienced unprecedented growth and became the multi-million dollar sorting industry it is today (congruent with arguments in Cuban and Au). Spellmeyer’s principle issue is the growing expansion and influence of the private sector in educational decision making which universities in general, and English departments in particular, in his view, are unwittingly enabling (177). Like the arguments leveled by Nichols and Berliner, Popham, Koretz and Hursh, Spellmeyer reasons that test scores, ill used, serve as a convenient rationale for variance in scores earned in low versus high SES schools. Spellmeyer writes:

With test results in hand, authorities are in a position to retract even the vestigial appearance of equality that a high school diploma still confers on the marginal. Armed now with solid evidence, the best and the brightest can rest assured that the poor are stupid and undeserving. (178-79)

And, with not a little sarcasm, he instructs teachers to read a bit less Jameson and semiotics and instead become actively engaged in policy committees where the real decisions are made (Spellmeyer 179). The greatest source of leverage for Spellmeyer's argument comes from first-person accounts, derived from his attendance at community and committee meetings, concerning expressions of contempt that government officials have shown for teachers (179) and the manipulation of test score data (180) that would not otherwise be known to his audience (teachers of writing).

Research Nest 3: Problems of Writing Assessment and Factors Influencing the Assessment of Writing

The next subset of readings is comprised of scholarship in composition concerning problems of assessment and factors influencing teachers of writing in assessment, starting with the early studies of Diederich, Nold and Freedman, Freedman, and Purvis. This nest is relevant to my thesis in that it highlights the lack of consensus regarding how student writing ought to be evaluated which is a precursor to the fourth research nest which will amplify the lack of consensus in terms of how basic writing ought to be taught. For instance, there is considerable debate between the holistic versus analytic method of assessment, with compelling criticism leveled against the holistic method (the form of assessment used to evaluate the AP Language Examination) in terms of lack of inter-rater reliability (i.e., lack of consistency of evaluation among reader/raters). At the same time, per the research, the holistic method seems especially vulnerable to subjective appraisal and rater influence concerning surface qualities of writing

such as handwriting and diction. The precise factors that would influence raters to assign higher or lower scores is a topic that directly concerns a high-profile test like the AP Language Exam, particularly if preferred features of writing are found to complement a specific way of being (e.g., knowledge base, skill set and/or dispositions) relative to social class.

Yancey observes that Diederich's *Measuring Growth in English* was "the first monograph to address the specifics of postsecondary writing assessment" (488). Of primary concern to Diederich was creating a consensus among test reader/raters that would minimize differences in rater judgment (i.e., subjective evaluation) and thereby enhance inter-rater reliability of assessment. As Diederich put it, he sought to develop "a common set of standards and systematic way of thinking about the qualities that should enter into their judgment of a paper," or "a common vocabulary for discussing the merits and defects of papers" (55). A bi-product of this pursuit was the discovery that readers "were most influenced by" (Diederich 6) certain attributes of writing, viz. "ideas"; "usage, sentence structure, punctuation and spelling"; "organization and analysis"; "wording and phrasing"; "personal qualities" or "flavor," identified by teachers as "style" (Diederich 6-8). Interestingly, "flavor" is the only metaphoric "factor" among an otherwise rather clinical list of attributes of writing, and its characterization slips into descriptors that Bourdieu might identify with the *hexis* (embodied person) of the author. For example, teacher comments in this category included characterizations of student writing as: "forceful," "vigorous," "outspoken," "sincere," or "inflated," "pretentious," "dogmatic," or "sentimental"

(Diederich 8). These markers of *hexis*—which sound strikingly like descriptions of Voice—are not euphemized; even Diederich refers to them as “personal qualities revealed by the writing” (8). Thus, it might be said that, in conferring approval upon the “flavor” or “style” of the writer, rater/evaluators are also conferring approval upon the writer’s identity. “Flavor” or “style” is only one of six features identified by Diederich, but it is a personal versus strictly academic aspect of the perception of efficacy in writing.

In “An Analysis of Readers’ Responses to Essays,” Nold and Freedman revisit the findings of Diederich, French and Carlton’s *Factors in Judgment of Writing Ability* to determine whether the same elements of writing exert influence upon readers as Diederich et al. indicated. Their findings reveal that raters reward the production of cumulative sentences, essay length and vocabulary (Nold and Freedman 173). Freedman in “Why Do Teachers Give the Grades that They Do?” sets out to determine which elements of writing exert the most influence on teachers. Freedman writes that teachers “valued content first and then organization,” but paradoxically adds, “when I say good teachers valued content most of all, I mean that they valued the development and the logical presentation of the ideas, not necessarily the ideas themselves” (“Why Do Teachers” 161). The third element exerting influence upon teachers was mechanics (Freedman “Why Do Teachers”163). And in “Some Reasons for the Grades We Give Compositions,” Freedman elaborates on her study in which she rewrote a set of essays produced by college freshman to appear “strong” and “weak” in specific attributes in order to determine which factors of writing had the most influence

upon teachers. Freedman restates that development had the most significant influence followed by organization and then mechanics (“Some Reasons” 88), and adds:

Teachers in this study apparently felt that if the discourse level qualities were weak, the paper deserved a low score, and strong sentence structure and mechanics could not redeem such papers. But once the discourse level qualities were strong, the lower levels mattered; strengths or weakness of mechanics or sentence structure could then raise or lower a score. (“Some Reasons” 88)

Finally, in “Student Characteristics and Essay Test Writing Performance,” Freedman looks at the assessment of writing from another perspective, the student’s, via questionnaires completed by freshman in college writing courses. Freedman reports that “the more pleasurable students found writing, the less difficult they found it” (“Student Characteristics” 318) and “self-assessments of writing . . . related to the judgment of writing quality” (“Student Characteristics” 321). In her discussion, Freedman concludes: “those who find the most pleasure are freshmen—the students for whom most “freshman” writing course are designed—and students from the more selective schools, for whom writing probably comes most easily” (“Student Characteristics” 323). All of this speaks to some students being, more or less, better suited (or initiated to) the writing task, and their beliefs about themselves are confirmed in their teachers’ evaluations.

Purves, in “Reflections on Research and Assessment in Written Composition,” reflects that: “the problem of writer interpretation of topic is minor

compared to the issue of rating” (116). He repeats the Diederich, French and Carlton study and “derives a number of adjectives” “which suggest five major factors involved in the rating of compositions: content, organization, style and tone, surface features, and personal response of the reader” (Purves 116). From these commonly identified attributes, according to reader/raters, Purves constructs and implements an “international scoring scheme” (116), but reports that

the rating teams in different countries used the scoring scheme differently.

There was a group of countries that appeared to be guided by content and another group that appeared by be guided by style and tone. Within a country and a task the interrater reliability was high But the analysis also showed that in many countries the consistency did not extend across tasks. (117)

On the basis of this, Purvis concludes: “What can we say of rated writing performance? I would argue that we must refer to it as perceived performance and not actual performance” which he terms “PDQ” or “perceived drafting quality No matter how extensive or thorough it may be, the rating is still a perception, a subjective estimate of quality” (118). Purvis concludes that “performance assessment” is no more objective than “objective testing” (118). Purvis’ study suggests the seeming inevitability of subjective interpretation in the assessment of writing, which is something raters at the yearly AP Exam reading attempt to rule out through an elaborate system of checks and balances but which may, in some sense, be inescapable.

Turning now to problems concerning specific methods of assessment, Charney in “The Validity of Using Holistic Scoring to Evaluate Writing: A Critical Overview,” challenges the notion that holistic (direct assessment of writing) is any more reliable and valid than the objective, indirect multiple-choice assessments given to students of composition in “phase one” (as identified by Yancey) in the history of writing assessment. The author explains how, because the test scores correlated with college grades, they were deemed valid (Charney 66); however, what they measured in terms of actual writing skill was too limited (Charney 67). Similarly, holistic, qualitative assessment could not provide reliability because “[s]tudy after study demonstrated that readers who evaluate writing samples apply widely varying standards” (Charney 67). Charney identifies several potentially problematic variables with respect to holistic assessment, for example, test design and method of rating and training and background of readers. The most interesting observations made in the piece were based upon McColly’s research in which he argued that the speed of rater reading is a guarantor of reliability and validity in the sense that, the faster a rater reads, the less personal judgment is able to corrupt the instantaneous recognition factor the reader will have with the “agreed-upon criteria”; McColly recommended that the suggested speed would be “one essay per minute for a 400 word essay” (qtd. in Charney 74). Charney critiques this theory by saying that such a method encourages a non-thoughtful reading, plus she indicates that research on the validity of holistic assessment casts doubt upon the notion that raters actually follow agreed-upon criteria. Considered differently, speed could work in favor of

the writer, especially if the writing contains prima facie signs that the reader—precisely by virtue of the rapid reading—would confuse for good writing (see Chapter 5, Conclusion). This is confirmed, later in Charney’s essay, when she remarks that “readers’ judgment are strongly influenced by salient, though superficial, characteristics of writing samples . . . characteristics which are easy to pick out but which are irrelevant to ‘true writing ability’” (75). One example of such a characteristic that Charney provides (based upon research) is word choice. The speed of the reading is no guarantee of accuracy—yet efficiency is one of the selling points of the holistic method of assessment for the evaluation of massive samples (Huot). In fact, speed may accentuate the “pop” of “superficial features” associated with style.

Greenberg also takes on problems of holistic assessment in “Validity and Reliability: Issues in the Direct Assessment of Writing.” She begins with a brief history of indirect assessment and the critiques leveled against the multiple choice tests used to evaluate students of composition. The centerpiece of this history is Rexford Brown’s remark on the specious reliability of objective testing:

Of course these tests correlate with writing ability and predict academic success; but the number of cars or television sets or bathrooms in one’s family also correlate with his writing ability, and parental education is one of the best predictors there is. All existing objective tests of writing are very similar to I.Q. tests; even the best of them can only test reading, proofreading, editing, logic, and guessing skills. (qtd. in Greenberg 10-11)

Like Charney, Greenberg points to research which indicates that, although raters of holistic writing assessments pre-agree upon criteria for rating, that is no guarantee that they follow the criteria; in fact, “superficial aspects of writing, such as handwriting, spelling, word choice and errors” exert influence upon raters (16). Again, certain elements of style “pop” despite the use of a rubric ostensibly designed to mitigate against isolated features having a definitive effect.

Shohamy, Gordon and Kraemer in, “The Effect of Raters’ Background and Training on the Reliability of Direct Writing Tests,” attempt to disentangle factors influencing reader reliability in direct writing assessment in order to enhance inter-rater reliability. As they are primarily interested in applying the research to evaluating writing samples for the EFL exam (English as a Foreign Language Exam), their focus is upon the raters’ background (lay-reader versus experienced reader/teacher) as well as rater training. Their findings indicate that rater background exerts a minor influence in contrast to rater training. From a pragmatic standpoint, they suggest that “decision makers, in selecting raters, should be less concerned about their background since that variable seems not to increase reliability” (Shohamy, Gordon and Kraemer 31). Contra to Elbow who argues the utility of disagreement, Shohamy et al., in a move to eliminate inter-rater variance completely, cite the research of Huang who suggests that “raters who deviate from the norm” could be “discard[ed]” like poor test questions are eliminated in pilot exams (31). Perhaps more than anything else, this study accentuates the dramatically varying attitudes between quantitative and qualitative researchers. But uniformity among reader/raters is of critical importance to the

assessment of the AP Language Exam as demonstrated by their efforts to norm readers to a common standard and monitor consistency.

Huot in “The Literature of Direct Writing Assessment: Major Concerns and Prevailing Trends,” reviews studies on the various methods of writing assessment and their short-comings, as well as influences upon raters in assessment practices. Several details are worthy of note: First, Huot reports that “analytic scores have proven to be the most reliable of all direct writing assessment procedures . . . because analytic scoring takes longer, 1 to 2 minutes per trait versus 1 to 2 minutes per paper for holistic scoring” (“Literature” 238). Huot also notes that “holistic scoring has proven to be the most economical of all direct writing procedures . . . and therefore the most popular” (“Literature” 239) with “large testing populations” (“Literature” 238).

Regarding judgment of “text and writing quality,” Huot notes that researchers failed to link syntactic features to perception of writing quality; however, such a correlation was made between diction and perceived draft quality. Huot cites Grobe who notes: “the results of the analyses of data presented in this paper indicate that what teachers currently perceive as ‘good’ writing is closely associated with vocabulary diversity” (qtd. in Huot, “Literature” 248); similarly, Huot cites Neilsen and Piche who report that “lexical, rather than syntactical, features have a significant influence on rater judgments about writing quality” (“Literature” 248). The profound influence of word choice in writing assessment has been mentioned several times in the professional literature (see Greenberg, Charney, Nold and Freedman) and it is also a decisive factor in the

assessment of the AP Language Examination, per its recurrence in the commentaries—whether the raters intend to prioritize this element of style or not.

Along similar lines, Huot reviews Hake and Williams' research which sought to test the influence of style upon raters. The researchers found that “nominal-style papers, defined by the researchers as “indirect,” “complex,” “wordy,” and “inflated” (“Literature” 252), were consistently given high rankings and comments about superior organization and mature content” (“Literature” 252). Huot concludes with the following observation: “More research about the influences of writing quality on rater judgment is needed, and these studies should focus on the raters themselves” (“Literature” 257). My dissertation takes up Huot's suggestion directly.

Yancey in “Looking Back as We Look Forward: Historicizing Writing Assessment,” provides another literature review surveying the history of writing assessment. The author characterizes the periods differentiated by method as “waves,” viz. “first wave”: objective tests (1950-1970); “second wave”: holistic scoring” (1970-1986); and “third wave”: portfolio assessment (1986-present) (Yancey 484). Rather than providing a comprehensive catalogue of the research, in the manner of Huot, Yancey provides an account of individuals whose work is emblematic of the paradigms she wishes to characterize (e.g., Diederich (wave one); White (wave two), and Elbow and Beneloff (wave three). Rexford Brown's observation regarding test- savvy and the correlation between the number of bathrooms in one's house appears again here (Yancey 491) in order to demonstrate the influence of variables such as social class which complicate

the reliability of assessment. Most interesting are the researchers Yancey details toward the close of the essay, such as Moss, who integrate critical theory with their inquiry on assessment practice. On the effects of evaluation, Moss writes: “How does such an interpretation impact students’ ‘access to material resources and [how does it] locate them within social relations of power’” (qtd. in Yancey 498). Moss’ suggestion to “study the actual discourse that occurs around the products and practices of testing” (Yancey 498), is a suggestion I take quite literally in my study of the commentaries for the AP Language Exam.

Mabry, in “Writing to the Rubric: Lingering Effects of Traditional Testing on Direct Writing Assessment,” makes a cause and effect argument about the influence of rubrics. She states: “Rubrics promote reliability in performance assessments by standardizing scoring, but they also standardize writing” (Mabry 674). In the process, Mabry makes a convincing case against the kind of holistic assessments utilized in scoring the written products generated by standardized exams in highlighting the paradox that “[b]ecause rubrics to assess writing prescribe the criteria by which papers are to be judged, claims of their holism rarely survive analysis” (675). Although she concedes that rubrics “tend to improve inter-rater reliability” (Mabry 675), they do not obviate the possibility that raters will still disagree or fail to utilize the tools in the same way (Purvis’ concern). Mabry argues that the basic content most “rubrics typically feature” includes: “mechanical format, and organizational aspects of writing” to the exclusion of “the more substantial aspects such as content, logic, compelling presentation, vivid description, figurative use of language, depth of character, or

significance of theme” (676); in effect, Mabry argues, rubrics have the effect of “simplification and homogenization of the writing process” (678). The author also states that “[i]n some cases, teaching to the test and writing to the rubric were described in the more socially acceptable language of curricular alignment” (Mabry 677). This seems potentially problematic, for it highlights not a problem with a rubric but rather, its misuse by administrative bodies. Mabry’s essay conflates the use of rubrics with their unethical use and demotes the important potential function rubrics could have over rater bias which would otherwise reward based upon subjective judgment. A tighter rubric beyond the nine tiers of adjectives and lean description of skills indicative of a quality of response on the AP Language Exam might, for instance, mitigate against subjective judgment in scoring (the Scoring Guidelines highlight descriptors such as “especially full,” “impressive control,” “effective,” “mature,” “adequate,” “uneven,” “inadequate” and “immature”).

Elbow, in “Writing Assessment: Do It Better, Do It Less,” argues the efficiency and efficacy of what he terms a “minimal holistic scoring” method which looks like a hybrid of holistic and “multiple-trait” assessment as well as the use of portfolios (120-122). The benefit of the fused form, according to Elbow, would be that that it would require specific feedback to justify rater judgment beyond the generation of a single number (which, in his view, is arbitrarily derived), as well as multiple readers’ assessment of a cross section of documents (portfolio analysis). Like Purvis, Elbow remarks that a scoring guide is no guarantor of reader agreement (“Writing” 121); additionally, Elbow notes that this

hybrid form of assessment would obviate the primacy placed on the determination of a single score based upon “one or even two samples” under the artificial circumstances of a test (“Writing” 129). The most compelling problem with holistic scoring, from Elbow’s point of view, is that the holistic scoring method is most “untrustworthy” in the “mixed ability” or “boundary decisions” that some writings demonstrate (e.g., great ideas with problematic mechanics) (“Writing” 124). Therefore, the author concludes that, even at the risk of the “‘artificiality’ of multiple trait scoring” (Elbow, “Writing” 128), the latter offers a superior scoring method. Elbow bolsters his remarks by referring to Freedman who “provides evidence that analytic scoring gives higher reliability” (“Writing” 127). Elbow mocks the “Platonic descriptions” evident in holistic scoring guides:

Holistic scoring fuels what is probably the biggest enemy of thoughtful evaluation: judgment based on global or holistic feelings (“I like it” or “I don’t like it”) rather than judgment that tries to describe and to discriminate between strengths and weaknesses. (“Writing” 126)

Providing an argument which is larger than an out of hand dismissal of quantitatively derived assessment, Elbow remarks that a hybridized form of analytic and holistic assessment would eschew the “reductive, one-dimensional” (“Writing” 132) methods of appraisal currently used in gateway and placement exams as well as well as state standardized assessments (“Writing” 128-132).

White, in “Power and Agenda Setting in Writing Assessment,” locates the enterprise of writing assessment in the struggle between the needs and wants of several conflicting interest groups (viz., teachers, researchers and theorists, testing

firms and government bodies, and students, with an emphasis upon minorities and “marginalized groups” (11-22). He contends that the operationalization of assessment shifts with testing’s situated-ness (White, “Power” 10). In representing the positions of the various interest groups, White’s personal views are often visible, such as when he writes: “The testing firms have a proprietary attitude toward assessment, rather like that of certain religions toward heaven: they think they are the only ones with the right to be there” (“Power” 18). The essay, in a sense, is an illustration of a Bourdieuan “field” in that White causes all of the players’ strategies to be made manifest (e.g., the way stakeholders attempt to undercut the professionalism of others, and the eternal critique of inefficiency and inconsistency, etc.) such that individuals’ will to power comes in full view. For instance, White critiques ETS for the inappropriate use of the SAT as a writing placement test; further, he seems to mock the construction of the AP Examinations in terms of framing the impromptu essays as a kind of interruption in the multiple choice test, or worse, as a “value added” bonus (“Power” 20). In the section detailing the position and expectations of disenfranchised students, White reveals his sympathies by critiquing testing gatekeepers who institutionalize inequity. He asks:

How can those scoring writing assessments overcome the various biases inevitably part of their privileged positions? How can assessment in context become part of learning and not be misused to exclude individuals or groups from educational opportunity? (“Power” 22)

Equally concerned about the background writers bring to writing assessment (or the lack thereof) Farr and Nardini in, “Essayist Literacy and Sociolinguistic Difference,” delineate the problematic grounds for assessing writing by one register of academic discourse which they refer to as “essayist literacy.” The authors do not distinguish between different kinds of disciplinary-based discourses, as did Bartholomae in “Inventing the University.” And yet, the message regarding the violence enacted by judging “those from culturally nonmainstream backgrounds” (Farr and Nardini 111) on the basis of their proficient command of an institutionally sanctioned discourse does reflect the views of Bartholomae (though he is represented somewhat critically (Farr and Nardini 110), as well as Bourdieu and Labov (Farr and Nardini 112). The authors concede the importance of students acquiring the cultural capital of essayist literacy (Farr and Nardini 114), but state that, “[a]s studies have found . . . a single set of discourse standards cannot validly be applied across cultures” (Farr and Nardini 113). The authors challenge teachers in the field to recognize how ethnocentric attitudes may be embedded in instruments of assessment as well as pedagogy (Farr and Nardini 118). The notion of a preferred or legitimate discourse, call it “essayist literacy,” is relevant in terms of evaluation of a high-profile examination like the AP Language Examination as some students would be more or less proficient in their command of the style and strategies typical of academic discourse. If this is true, then to score well on the AP Language Exam would be to congratulate this familiarity which is the product of exposure.

Another author who problematizes the objectivity of measurement is Huot, in “Toward a New Theory of Writing Assessment.” Huot makes a convincing case for the abandonment of evaluative practices that neutralize all site specific and rhetorically sensitive factors in favor of obtaining a mythic, “acontextual” measurement of student ability (83). Against the historical backdrop of the birth of the testing giant ETS and the positivist-driven science of psychometrics (a period of time spanning from the turn of the century to approximately 1980), Huot argues that writing assessment does have a basis in theory—but it is precisely the theory in which teachers of writing have the least knowledge and interest (“Toward” 82-84). The paradigm shift which occurred in 1980 marked a movement away from quantitative to qualitative methods of research in writing assessment. In this context, Huot identifies and compares three procedures for evaluating writing ability, viz. holistic (evaluation for “a general impression of quality”); analytic trait (analysis of “specific traits endemic to quality writing”); and primary trait (“treats rhetorical features of the writing assignment as the traits to be evaluated”) (“Toward” 86). Huot reports that “analytic and primary trait are usually considered a little better than holistic measures,” but testing practice has favored holistic because it is cheaper (“Toward” 86). The message of the chapter is that, in pursuit of an ideal, positivist confirmation of validity (e.g., obsession with the “objective test” and “true score” [Huot, “Toward” 91]), writing assessment may now have an unclear relationship with the institutional uses to which it is put and little to do with the actual teaching and learning of writing (Huot, “Toward” 94). Huot blatantly pronounces: “At present, assessment

procedures that attempt to fix objectively a student's ability to write are based upon an outdated theory supported by an irrelevant epistemology" ("Toward" 94).

Newkirk in, "The New Writing Assessments: Where Are They Leading Us?" ruminates on a historical archive of Edward Channing's writing assignments, a teacher of writing at Harvard between 1823 and 1853 (21). He observes:

Emerson and Thoreau may have been able to handle this level of abstraction, drawing on an impressive stock of literary, biblical, and historical references. But the few existing papers in the archives seem little more than a network of commonplaces—generalities about generalities. (Newkirk 21)

After thinking through the kind of artificial responses that similar, standardized test prompts elicit, Newkirk remarks that "another persistent problem with [current writing] prompts concerns evidence—the writer must instantly develop instances or examples to be used for support" (22). Newkirk observes that, out of desperation for a lack of backing, some students falsify evidence. My interest in this observation is its obverse. That is, some students already possess a very adequately stocked reservoir of allusions and experience from which to draw in their writing. Such students do not have to fabricate evidence, and the test congratulates them for this reserve.

Juergensmeyer and Peirce, in their article "Becoming the Learner: Collaborative Inquiry, Reflection, and Writing-Program Assessment," detail the process by which they organized a tri-university initiative between the three major

universities in Arizona in order to share ideas regarding pedagogy in FYC (First Year Composition) courses as well as to discuss a shared tool of assessment based upon the WPA position statement (29). The authors embarked on a portfolio assessment project that would foreground the process of inquiry required to forge evaluative documents as well as the collaborative effort required to score reliably among raters; their essay documents this process and the results of the research. In order to coordinate the process, the authors retained the assessment consultant, Edward White, and—interestingly—he orchestrated a reading almost identical to the protocol utilized in the Advanced Placement Exams. That is, he instated a holistic rating process whereby, instead of evaluating on the basis of the efficacy of independent traits of writing, readers provided a numeric representation of their “total impression” of the writing sample (Juergensmeyer and Peirce 34). Also similar to the AP reading, “table leaders” were assigned who would determine “anchor” papers representing the different echelons of scores possible and table leaders were “responsible for maintaining consistent scores across a table of readers” as well as securing consensus (Juergensmeyer and Peirce 39). Yet another similarity to the AP protocol was the range of the scoring rubric which placed student portfolios with composite scores ranging from 1 to 5. The authors congratulated themselves for assuming the role that they required of their students (i.e., the reflective learner open to revision), yet downplayed an important discovery which revealed a problem in their process. They authors noted:

It would be expected that a portfolio with a holistic score of “5,” for example, would score similarly well in each of the individual traits.

However, that was not always the case. In instances when portfolios deviated from the expected trait score, several anomalies occurred.

(Juergensmeyer and Peirce 45)

This means that significant variance between scores assigned for individual traits (e.g., reflection, evidence of learning, development, organization, mechanics/grammar) could exist. The holistic rating system could not provide answers as to how the single score was derived.

And, finally, Crovitz, in his dissertation, “State Standards Testing and Writing Instruction: Pedagogical Beliefs and Effective Instruction,” in the manner of Popham, Hillocks, Berliner and Smith, demonstrates how “best practices” in the teaching of writing under even the most optimal of circumstances (i.e., with “highly performing” teachers and within “highly performing” schools), in the face of AIMS (Arizona’s Instrument to Measure Standards), degenerate to simplistic drills, neutralize the teaching of writing to nothing more than the most minimal expression of state standards, and generally evacuate writing to a rote exercise in preparation for a single performance.

Standardized tests seem to seduce teachers and students to imagine that there is a preferred approach to response which they scramble, often self-destructively, to produce. Understanding the evaluation of writing as a conflicted process, subject to discrepancy and influences not immediately discernable, as the literature of assessment suggests, rightly positions the critical judgment of such tests as problematic.

**Research Nest 4: The Problem of Defining “College-Level Writing,”
Expectations and Outcomes of the First-Year Writing Course,
and Expectations of High School Writing for College Credit**

The problem of the AP Language Exam is housed not only in difficulties with respect to the influence of SES on standardized testing outcomes and conflicts in the assessment of writing in terms of rater reliability and reader influence, but also within active debates regarding the very definition of “college-level” writing (i.e., the expectations and outcomes of basic writing programs). The Advanced Placement Program, therefore, could be said to inhabit a kind of disciplinary gray area in that, as the research shows, there really is no broad-based consensus on how to teach and evaluate writing. College composition programs are exceptionally diverse and not only serve the local needs of institutions but vary dramatically in terms of pedagogic orientation and philosophy. One might ask whether the Advanced Placement Language and Composition program benefits from this lack of general parity between FYC (first year composition) courses and writing programs in terms of enjoying the liberty to function in relative autonomy as a result. And disciplinary ambiguities only multiply as this professional gray area extends to dual credit programs and definitional questions concerning the teaching of writing for college-credit in the high school setting. The significance of this nest in terms of my thesis is that multiple ambiguities in how composition programs function, in part, facilitate the AP Program’s insularity and idiosyncratic judgment.

On the Necessity (or Lack Thereof) to Define the Project of Composition

Several interesting articles take up the challenge of defining (or refusing to define) “college-level writing,” and not surprisingly, there is no consensus on this issue—nor need there be, except for the fact that as, Patrick Sullivan points out in “An Essential Question: What Is “College Level” Writing?”, politicians, administrators and private industry (in the form of testing firms) are prepared to the defining and sorting in the absence of an definitive statement from practitioners:

Perhaps the single most important reason to conduct this discussion with full, careful engagement is political. Increasingly, we have let college-level writing be defined for us by state and national legislatures, special task forces, national testing agencies, and even some activist individuals who have strong convictions and large political constituencies. Few of the people involved in making these decisions and shaping our public policy about education are teachers, and few have more than a passing acquaintance with the college classroom. (Sullivan 18)

Sullivan points out that, considering the definition on a theoretical level (i.e., viewed through the lens of literary theory: Derrida, Barthes and Foucault, post-”death of the Author” and considering the “multivalent” nature of language [“Essential Question” 3]), such deliberations are irrelevant. But from a practical stand-point, a lack of consensus threatens the validity of what it is that writing programs claim to teach and assess. Viewed from a macro to micro level, there is no consensus as to the skills and outcomes that practitioners wish students to

attain in the basic writing course, nor is agreement seemingly attainable with respect to the uniform evaluation of single papers (Charney qtd. in Sullivan, “An Essential Question” 5).

Knodt, in her essay, “What Is College Writing For?” dialogues with Sullivan and asks whether the question of a disciplinary definition of “college level writing” is indeed as “provisional” and “local” as Sullivan assumes—particularly in light of The Council of Writing Program Administrators’ *Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition*, adopted in April 2000, which specified the rhetorical knowledge, critical thinking, reading and writing skills, process knowledge, and knowledge of conventions that students ought to attain in a first-year writing course (reprinted in Knodt 153-54). Despite this articulation of (ostensibly) shared goals, Knodt describes six distinctly different orientations to and rationales for the first-year writing program as it is implemented on American college and university campuses, which Knodt indicates would elicit widely different outcomes and make the issues of common assessment, as well as transfer credit, extremely problematic (152).

Knodt draws on White’s “Defining by Assessing,” in which White makes a convincing case (Derrida notwithstanding) for the need for consensus with respect to writing assessment and shared notions regarding the teaching of writing with respect to expectations for competencies and outcomes. By way of backing, White points to the, sometimes, life-altering decisions that the university makes on the basis of writing assessments such as placement exams, official rulings with respect to the earning of credit and, ultimately, qualification for graduation

(“Defining” 246-48), and suggests teachers of writing look to evaluative frameworks already in place for the operational definition desired. Such a move would make local judgment accountable to shared professional practices.

Blau, in “College Writing, Academic Literacy, and the Intellectual Community: California Dreams and Cultural Oppositions”—as an advocate for teachers outside of the university, Writing Project participant, and 40 year veteran teacher of writing at “three highly respected and very selective research universities” (367)—argues that efforts to operationalize a definition of “college-level” writing have failed and instead materialized as embarrassing versions of *The Emperor’s New Clothes*. He backs this claim by tracing the debacle of the *Statement of Competencies in English and Mathematics Expected of Entering College Freshmen* (1982):

heralded [as] the new statewide document on college writing as a major intersegmental accomplishment marking the beginning of a new era of intersegmental articulation and rational vertical curriculum development in composition. (Blau 361)

The public debunking of the document was initiated by an elementary school teacher (the proxy for the little boy in Anderson’s fairytale) who recognized that the competencies described in the document as college-level were ones “she required of student writers in her 6th grade class” (362). Blau intends the story to be read as a parable of “the foolish hubris of academic bureaucrats” and

the genuine difficulty of specifying levels of competence in writing that might distinguish college-level writers from precollege writers or the curriculum and content of college writing classes from high school college preparatory writing classes (363).

Apparently, the document was revisited, twenty years later under a new title (*Academic Literacy: A Statement of Competencies Expected of Students Entering California's Public Colleges and Universities*) but to no better effect in that the competencies described in the second document were ones that the state declared students ought to have mastered in high school (Blau 367-68). The remainder of the essay is a poignant argument on behalf of local writers' collectives, modeled after the Jewish, labor organization Workmen's Circle and the National Writing Project (374-75). Blau reasons that an authentic understanding of writing may be discovered in these small, intellectual enclaves. Of particular interest is an enthusiastic end-note in which Blau praises the Six Traits of Writing method of assessment utilized by the elementary teachers to attain the proficiency of writing deemed "college-level" by the first California conference.

Another rejection of the impulse to define the project of composition is found in Gunner's essay, "The Boxing Effect (An Anti-Essay)." The author writes: "When we reify writing, we tacitly endorse a set of beliefs that assume generic shape as common sense: writing, after all, is concrete, a thing you can produce, use, sell" (Gunner 118). Through what she terms the "container" metaphor (whereby a disciplinary practice is objectified as a product to be

purveyed), Gunner wishes to eschew the neat marketing impulse to harden and package writing as a commodity. She sees the very will to define the process of composition, as well as its product, as coming from a parasitic commercial outside that requires overly simplistic definitions in order to diagnose, prescribe and economically exploit the process. Most compellingly, Gunner argues that the clinical, convenient definitions of writing make exclusion seem “natural” and even logical, as students of color, by performing poorly on standardized assessments, are demonstrating not a systemic failure, but a personal one (i.e., their inability to grasp the packaged curriculum) (115). Gunner writes: “Applied to students, this model [the “container” metaphor] regards students from certain cultural backgrounds and justifies itself in the face of poor performance by others” (116). Gunner maintains that difference, as it manifests in these artificial examples of writing, is simply the mystification of differentially held cultural capital.

This attitude is the antithesis of the one held in the early years of writing assessment described by Elliot in *On a Scale: A Social History of Writing Assessment in America*. The container construct for writing (that is, the perception of writing as a simply defined combination of basic skills) perhaps saw its most hyper-streamlined expression between the years of 1937-1947 when test-readers celebrated reaching the highest standard of inter-rater reliability with a 3 category scoring rubric which assessed writing on the basis of “organization, paragraphing and sentences” (Elliot 111). Elliot makes it clear, through repeated historical examples, that the operationalization of writing and its measurement

always worked in the service of the burgeoning testing industry, just as Gunner reads the desire for profit in the “special value” products and “add-on” features sold tandem with contemporary, pre-fabricated composition programs marketed by textbook companies (112).

Varying Approaches to Teaching Basic Writers

Each writer to follow has a unique perspective on the outcomes and objectives of a program in composition, as well as a distinct view on the pedagogy most useful to accomplish those goals. So, as many scholars that have written on the subject of teaching basic writing would be a sign of the number of divergent approaches one might discover in writing programs at universities and colleges across the country. To one uninitiated to the debates in the discipline of rhetoric and composition, the conversations between the scholars might register as “white noise” (e.g., the competing protocols and prescriptions for teaching composition to basic writers). I propose that the “white noise” or insistent buzz of professional disagreement, the general lack of consensus, works in the service of insulating some programs from the forces of outside. Such is the case with the AP Programs in English, which have maintained a relatively static ideology of writing and analysis (i.e., the New Critical approach) as noted by Joseph Jones (“Recomposing” 54), despite radical transformations in the field resulting from new theoretical approaches.

Berthoff, in her essay, “Is Teaching Still Possible? Writing, Meaning, and Higher Order Reasoning” seeks to provide an explanation for the general failure of positivist-driven writing instruction and its assessment. Via Vygotsky,

Berthoff reasons that the artificial analysis of elements of speech is irrelevant absent the social circumstance; and so is the evaluation of the writing process absent the context of “meaning making” (744; 747). Ultimately, the study of writing, in the scientific frame of a “context-free evaluation” is, for Berthoff, a deluded exercise, one that could only generate misleading results. Berthoff writes, not a little sarcastically, “[r]esearch on cohesive devices easily seeps into composition theory because it sounds scientific and because anything that lets us count will seem helpful in evaluating what we think we are teaching” (746). The essay closes with an impassioned description of a “pedagogy of knowing” in which teachers “encourage the discovery of mind by assuring that language is seen not as a set of slots, not as an inert code to be mastered by drill, but as a means of naming the world” (Berthoff 755).

Bizzell, in a very tentative and consistently qualified way, arrives at the conclusion in “What Happens When Basic Writers Come to College?” that acquisition of the hegemonic discourse of the university (an idea, similar to Bartholomae’s) may be the ultimate use-value of the introductory writing program. Bizzell reasons that the appropriation of this institutional way of writing (concomitant with a new way of thinking) ultimately pays the beginning writer dividends in enabling him/her to access power upon acquiring dominant linguistic competence and mastery of academic genres. At the same time, Bizzell is sensitive to the potential loss in the transaction described above (reminiscent of Bartholomae’s recognition that this learning process entails an element of “violence”), but she hesitates to define or quantify precisely the loss and gain, as

the class structure in America, she argues (as opposed to Bourdieu and Passeron's study of class) is much less clearly defined (297). Her assertions are tempered by a kind of meta-conversation she holds with Britton (advocate of "home dialects" [295]); and, in a way, the essay presages arguments that Hooks makes regarding the legitimacy of voices simultaneously within and outside the academy in *Teaching to Transgress*, as well as Giroux's conception of the "border intellectual." Strangely, however, Bizzell chooses a very problematic term to characterize this sense of dissonance that the basic writer has for academic discourse: "outlandishness" (294; 298).

Bizzell critiques the work of Lunsford and D'Angelo and identifies the problems of a cognitive psychological approach to the issues facing basic writers. She writes: "[t]he teachers task then becomes similar to the therapist's, in seeking ways to correct basic writers' cognitive dysfunctions" (296). And, to the extent that one is sympathetic to that critique, Lunsford's study "The Content of Basic Writers' Essays" reifies the complaint. After reviewing 500 examinations (i.e., those pursuing entrance to a community college or university) written on 1 of 5 possible questions selected by the students, Lunsford determines: "the basic writers I have been quoting, then, seem to represent the egocentric stage of cognitive development [theorized by Piaget] and the conventional stage of moral development [theorized by Kohlberg] (284). This is a kind of psychologizing of the subject to which Berlin objected as pseudo-scientific in the work of Emig (480). Lunsford argues: "we badly need help from psychologists in designing studies that will probe the relationships among self-image, cognitive style,

perceptual system, and development of writing abilities” (284). Following this, Lunsford launches into a parsing effort in which she categorizes content words used in the student essays into seven groups and provides frequencies per group (284). Lunsford determines that basic writers’ egocentricity is confirmed in their more frequent use of personal pronouns (285); whereas “better” writers demonstrate an ability to distance themselves from the material as evidenced in their “higher degree of nominalization” (286). With the discovery that the “more skilled writers” utilize a greater number of abstract nouns, Lunsford is cued to study vocabulary for a “precise taxonomy of the academic vocabulary that might enable us to identify those words and those features of words that would lend themselves to direct instruction” (Shaughnessy’s qtd. in Lunsford 287). Ultimately, Lunsford concludes that “vocabulary choice and linguistic virtuosity are closely tied to levels of writing skill, to cognitive development, and to self-concept” (287), without, for instance, as Berlin might require, considering the influence of social class. Composition directed by structuralist-scientific inquiry, however, would not see this as a blind-spot. The study closes out with what, for Lunsford, constitutes the primary objective of the basic writing course. She quotes Wittgenstein: “The limits of my language are the limits of my world,” which implies that the writing teacher ameliorates linguistic “deficits.” The politics of the assertion would obviously offend practitioners of composition from the perspective of cultural studies.

Berlin locks upon and deconstructs the work of noted compositionists Flower and Hayes, among others, utilizing techniques common to critical

discourse analysis (e.g., interrogation of single words and phrases; revelation of contradictions or problems with propositions as viewed against other propositions). Despite its seeming neutrality, Berlin reveals the research as an instance of writing instruction in the service of capitalism: “As we have seen in Flower, the rationalization of the writing process is specifically designated as an extension of the rationalization of economic activity” (483). Drawing upon the Frankfurt School’s critique of capitalism, Berlin writes:

Certain structures of the material world, the mind, and language and their correspondence with certain goals, problem-solving heuristics, and solutions in the economic, social, and political are regarded as inherent features of the universe, existing apart from human social intervention.

The existent, the good, and the possible are inscribed in the very nature of things as indisputable scientific facts, rather than being seen as humanly devised social constructions always open for discussion. (484)

Elbow and Murray and the school of expressionistic rhetoric are subject to deconstruction similar to the cognitive rhetoric school (Berlin 484-487).

Deconstruction proves to be an object lesson for Berlin’s broader point. Berlin contends that the objective of composition studies is the revelation of latent ideologies, the centralizing of the situated-ness of rhetoric in social, historical and material conditions, and the opening up (for students) of the possibility of contestation or resistance of the taken-for-grantedness embedded in certain objects, institutions and narratives in the world. This is a project Berlin calls “social-epistemic rhetoric” and it is epitomized in the pedagogy of Shor.

Interestingly, the title (and general description) of Shor's book, *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, sounds very like de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, but Berlin makes no mention of this antecedent.

Bloom, in "Composition as a Middle-Class Enterprise," defines the unwitting complicity of the basic writing curriculum in reproducing the ideology of the middle-class as outlined in early American rhetoric stemming from Benjamin Franklin. She cites the *Autobiography*, Franklin's famous program for the attainment of the thirteen virtues, and formulates a tandem set of "virtues" or values that the basic writing curriculum subtly inculcates, whether or not teachers are aware that they are prioritizing and inculcating this set of beliefs. The transmission of the value system, according to Bloom, is Jeffersonian in the sense that literacy education is the foundation of an informed citizenry and ensures thoughtful selection of elected officials (655); but the program also inculcates a specific mindset that initiates students to the expectations not only of the university but of the workplace (655-56). This causes Bloom to observe that (unconsciously) most high school and colleges "prepare their students to do mainstream work and seek mainstream careers" (658). The middle-class virtues Bloom maintains composition is effective in cultivating include: self-reliance (responsibility); respectability ("middle-class morality"); decorum (propriety); moderation (temperance); thrift; efficiency; order; cleanliness; punctuality; delayed gratification and critical thinking (658-66). One notices that the category of critical thinking looks like an outlier on this list (a colleague suggested it to her when she first gave the paper as a talk in her department [Bloom 666]) in that it

does not complement her other cardinal virtues which brilliantly highlight a living Puritan legacy of thought and behavior projected onto the teaching of composition. Despite this, Bloom provides one of the most searching portraits of the intersection of composition studies and class.

Grego and Thompson in “Repositioning Remediation: Renegotiating Composition’s Work in the Academy,” rely upon a Bourdieuan description in order to define the tenuous place, as they view it, of the basic writing program in their college (University of South Carolina), just after a government agency (the State Commission on Higher Education) ruled that no credit would be granted for basic writing courses (62-63). The borrowing from Bourdieu comes from *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, wherein Bourdieu discusses what he terms the “synoptic illusion,” the deception of looking at a cultural artifact (such as a calendar) as a coherent, “lacuna-free, contradiction-free whole” (Bourdieu, *Outline* 98). Bourdieu exposes the limits of such an explanation as a fiction; he posits that such sanitized accounts exist only “on paper.” Likewise, the authors of the article view the practice of composition as generally misrepresented, and ultimately silenced, in the refusal of the diverse identities and needs of students as well as the basic responsibilities of the work of teachers of writing. As the authors explain it:

Once we look at the world through the ruling apparatus (its categorical systems, rules, laws, and conceptual practices” mediated by texts), many of the specific details, actions, and events of the everyday, micro-social world which do not fit these general patterns become effectively invisible. Basic writing teachers teach the production of texts in a system of ruling

mediated by texts to those identified by the institution as unable to produce texts. (Grego and Thompson 68)

In this non-space to which the authors believe they and their students have been relegated, they redefine the practice in composition fused with feminism in order to re-imagine themselves outside of an institutional view that delegitimizes the personal (Grego and Thompson 64). They borrow from several other theorists, like Althusser, in order to conceptualize a new theory of composition (Grego and Thompson 70). The authors determine that there is a perpetual tension in composition studies between an efficient, “containable” and institutionally sanctioned form of teaching (reified in “current traditional” types of assignments and assessments), and a competing pedagogy which resists such pre-packaged programs and which acknowledges that the teaching of writing may be “messy” (Grego and Thompson 75).

Problems Concerning High School Writing for College Credit

As a separate but related topic which falls beneath the consideration of what “college level” writing is and how it ought to happen “on the ground,” the next, related subset of readings concerns the teaching of composition in the high school setting or dual credit coursework. In this case, students take accelerated curriculum which *might* (an operative term, as there are no guarantees, despite the College Board’s promotional rhetoric which seems to promise great savings in completing one’s first year of studies prior to actually entering college) enable them to enter university with advanced standing, contingent upon passing out of coursework by virtue of favorable performance on either local placement

examinations or the Advanced Placement Examinations. The scholars to follow argue that earning college credit prior to matriculating is one of the most seductive “selling points” of the AP Program, as well as other concurrent enrollment programs like the IB (International Baccalaureate) curriculum. But, if the competencies and outcomes of the FYC course are disparate and contradictory on the college level, they do not become clearer in the high school setting. Ethical questions abound concerning whose interests such programs authentically serve (e.g., students or corporations?) and the Advanced Placement Program is particularly susceptible to such inquiry.

In the absence of professional consensus on the outcomes and objectives of teaching basic writers, coupled with the loose relationship that the AP Language Course, according to scholars (Hansen; Joseph Jones), has with the kind of activities which actually occur in composition courses (e.g., multiple drafting, collaboration, revision, etc.), in terms of my thesis, I concur with Joseph Jones (“Beginnings” 64) that the AP Language Examination’s measurement of competence is problematic and represents only one particularized performance of competence in writing—proficiency in testing.

Hansen is among the leaders in the conversation as to whether high school composition courses positioned for granting college credit are adequate substitutes for first year writing course; tandem to this question is whether these composition programs are actually being steered by corporate entities more interested in profit than education. Hansen’s essay “The Composition Marketplace: Shopping for Credit versus Learning to Write” takes up these issues

in centralizing the marketing rhetoric of programs like Advanced Placement which utilizes phrases such as “take care of” the college writing requirement or “get it out of the way” (Hansen, “Composition” 2). Hansen demonstrates that this diction cultivates a perception (for parents and students as well as administrators and teachers) that the first year writing course is something that can be packaged and, in some sense, completed (Thalheimer 129), such that the “consumer’s” need for writing education has been met in a kind of “one-stop-shop.” She frames her reading of the AP and IB programs within Labaree’s critique of the commodification of composition studies:

[W]hen the value of education is more extrinsic than intrinsic, Labaree warns, credentials—grades, credits, diplomas, and degrees—take on a life of their own and become commodities sought for their own sake rather than for the learning they should represent. The danger is that formal markers of education may displace its substance, resulting in schools that allow students to meet modest performance requirements, not demonstrate mastery. (Hansen, “Composition” 5)

Within this frame, the AP Language program appears not far removed from the “McEducation” critique Hansen levels earlier in her discussion of the “diploma mill,” the University of Phoenix (“Composition” 6).

Here and elsewhere (Hansen et al., “Are Advanced”) Hansen notes the astronomical revenue generated by the College Board which encourages the maximum number of students to take the AP Exam, as well as various state’s complicity in subsidizing efforts to expand the AP Program to underserved

communities and pay for students to take the exams, despite the fact that many students are “ill-prepared” to do so and ultimately fail (“Composition” 18). This is coupled with the unusual circumstance, Hansen notes, that the AP Program, similar to a “franchise,” “pays each franchisee high school a rebate for every AP test taken by its students” (“Composition” 22). In her article, Hansen differentiates between the objectives and outcomes of the AP Language and Composition course (instated in 1980) and the AP Literature and Composition course (instated in 1953); however, she explains that an acceptable passing score on *either* AP Exam might enable a student to earn college credit and/or pass out of a university’s first year writing requirement, despite the fact that these courses appear very different on paper with the Language course being more congruent with a “typical” first year course in composition (posited by Hansen as a reality, despite earlier contestation over whether a typical FYC course exists) versus its more “belletristic” counterpart, the Literature course (“Composition” 18-22). Still, Hansen points out that, per the course description of AP Language and Composition, the examination is a weak barometer of the skills presumably attained in a first year writing course in the omission of process, revision, collaboration, and integration of technology in research (“Composition” 19-20). Additionally, she critiques the descriptors utilized by the College Board to characterize student performance on the exam as a predictor of their ability to do college-level work (e.g., 5 = *extremely qualified*, 4 = *well-qualified*, 3 = *qualified*, 2 = *possibly qualified*, 1 = *no recommendation*; reproduced in Hansen, “Composition” 21).

In terms of assessment of the AP Language Exam (a topic rarely addressed in current research), Hansen writes: “the College Board recruits armies of temp workers, mostly high school teachers, who are trained on the job to make holistic judgments of AP exams for eight days every summer” (“Composition” 23). Further, Hansen explains that, as opposed to the assessment of the IB program where teachers and test-evaluators produce a combined assessment, “only the AP exam readers’ judgment counts. Everything comes down to the work the student produces for the test” (“Composition” 24). Considering this criticism, it is curious that Hansen, in an end-note, positively credits Jolliffe (past Chief Reader for the AP Language Exam) for “transforming the description of the AP Language course into one that parallels generic FYC and for transforming the related test” (“Composition” 35). It should, however, be noted that Jolliffe objected to the abuse of the AP Exam as a way to exempt the first year writing curriculum (Hansen, “Composition” 24).

Joseph Jones, in “The Beginnings of AP and the Ends of First-Year College Writing,” drawing on Applebee, contextualizes the emergence of the AP Program as a “model of special attention to intellectually gifted students [which] offered the public school [a] relatively direct way to respond to the growing criticism of progressive education” (47). As in many studies, Jones situates the history of the AP program in its elite origins as a combined prep and Ivy League school response to the growing threat of competition and dominance post-Sputnik and effort to home-grow an intellectual elite for the purpose of leadership. The predominant fear, at the time, was that the nation’s most talented students were

“wasting time” with repetitious coursework between the first two years of both high school and college and so a solution was devised to “fast-track” the education of such gifted individuals through completion of “advanced placement” coursework whereby college credit could be earned through successfully passing an exam (Jones, “Beginnings” 47-56). In the committee’s demarcation of subject areas of emphasis, they considered the study of literature as distinct from composition (language) and thereby demoted composition in considering the latter to be more “elementary” or basic and less reflective of college-level study (Jones, “Beginnings” 50). Joseph Jones contends that the nature of the current FRQ’s (free-response questions) reflect the same attitude toward composition studies as the one described in the earlier bifurcated theory of the disciplines, questions which ask for little more than a basic demonstration of competencies (e.g., students are required to demonstrate “atomistic” skills such as “identification” and “explication” of “devices” and “techniques” [“Beginnings” 53]).

Joseph Jones historicizes the AP English program by referring to its direct antecedent: the Kenyon Plan, a program conceived by presidents and deans of Kenyon College, “Bowdoin, Brown, Carleton, Haverford, M.I.T., Middlebury, Oberline, Swarthmore, Wabash, Wesleyan, and Williams” (“Beginnings” 59). The opinion of this committee was that “For the bright student who is well taught, the American system wastes time”; therefore, curriculum was developed for eleven subjects, ETS was commissioned to prepare exams, and the first “AP-oriented” exams were given in 1954 (Jones, “Beginnings” 59). Jones’ position is

that the AP English Examinations have always been at odds with the evolving aims and outcomes of the subjects they purportedly represent (“Beginnings” 55-56) and that they more so demonstrate particularized skills in testing (“Beginnings” 64). He points to the general acknowledgement that “there is no common curriculum for first-year college composition” (“Beginnings” 63) and thereby exposes a kind of fiction upon which the AP English programs are founded: namely, that the AP English courses represent a consensus in the discipline regarding the teaching of writing. Jones explains that the skills which first-year composition courses probably do value in common, namely, “engage[ment] in the recursive processes of composition, and most particularly . . . revision as well as peer response and collaboration” (“Beginnings” 64), are not represented on the AP English exam. Considering these problems, Jones questions whether assigning college credit for AP English courses is warranted.

Whitley and Paulsen, in “What Do the Students Think? An Assessment of AP English Preparation for College Writing,” claim to perform the first study of its kind surveying student attitudes toward the curriculum delivered in their high school AP English courses as compared with the curriculum delivered in the mandatory FYC course (Honors 150) at Brigham Young University. The study builds upon Hansen et al.’s (“Are Advanced”) work which demonstrated that “those students who had taken an AP English course and a suitable FYC course performed significantly better than those who had only AP English or only FYC” (cited in Whitley and Paulsen 88). The results produce no surprises: Between AP English and H150, there is relatively equal emphasis upon such skills as thesis

writing and editing for conventions (Whitley and Paulsen 96), whereas attention to the writing process (with an emphasis upon revision) and collaborative learning were stressed more so in H150 than in AP English (Whitley and Paulsen 99). Most significantly, the authors discovered a deficit in coverage of research skills in the AP curriculum (e.g., finding and evaluating sources, integrating the views of others, documenting sources, etc.) which Whitley and Paulsen argue is perhaps the most valuable, cross-disciplinary skill that one acquires in an introductory writing course (103-104). However, the AP curriculum, per the authors' findings, produced no shortage of practice with timed-writings (the authentic focus of the AP English curriculum, per personal experiences reported by many students) (Whitley and Paulsen 106).

The authors document a decided perspective that students believe AP English provided a kind of foundation, but that the two courses (AP English and H150) were by no means an equivalent experience (Whitley and Paulsen 110). In the end result, students felt that H150 prepared them as writers in a way that “the focus on timed essays” and the “formulaic, five paragraph approach” (in high school AP English courses) did not (Whitley and Paulsen 114). The authors' conclusion is worth quoting at length: The course description from the 2007-2008 College Board AP Handbook for AP English Language and Composition states that, upon completing the course,

“students should be able to analyze and interpret samples of good writing; . . . write for a variety of purposes, produce expository, analytical, and argumentative compositions; . . . move effectively through the stages of

the writing process with careful attention to inquiry and research, drafting, revising, editing, and review; . . . revise a work to make it suitable for a different audience . . . evaluate and incorporate reference documents into researched papers” (9). However, students in our study consistently said they had little to no experience in learning to achieve any of these goals in writing; their greatest focus in the AP courses was on writing timed essays to practice for the test. (Whitley and Paulsen 115)

The authors intend their study to provide university administrators with a caution that the AP English experience is insufficient to exempt students from the first-year writing requirement.

Puhr in “The Evolution of AP English Language and Composition,” explains the identity-crisis, of sorts, that the AP Language Exam underwent between its inception in 1980 and approximately, 2002, as it sought to define itself against its “bellevue” doppelganger, the AP Language Exam. Puhr explains that, early on, the sort of tasks required by the Language Exam were more so literary, for instance, requiring students to perform what she calls an “abridged” form of rhetorical analysis with an exaggerated emphasis upon style to the exclusion of the other canons of rhetoric (71; 74). She cites the early existence of an argument question and the omission of poetry as evidence that the test was transforming toward the individuated subject exam seen today (Puhr 71). Puhr locates 2002 as the turning point of differentiation for the AP Language Exam because this marked the AP Test-Development Committee’s attendance at the WPA conference (73); prior to this, many teachers were running a combined

curriculum which prepared students for both the AP Language and Literature Examinations (Puhr 72; Hansen, “Composition” 18-20). She refers to the earlier orientation of the program as prioritizing the “Holy Trinity” of “analysis, synthesis, and argument” and explains that, post-WPA conference, “AP Language [became] a rhetoric class focused primarily on nonfiction” (Puhr 74). In 2005, the test-development committee split in two per subject exam (Puhr 75). Further differentiating the project, 2007 witnessed the inception of a new DBQ (document based question), the synthesis question or researched argument, which required demonstration of the use and documentation of sources (75), a task most synchronous with the FYC course, in Puhr’s view.

Following an explanation of how the AP Language course, on paper, is congruent with the WPA Outcomes Statement adopted in 2000 (77), Puhr explains that, on the ground, course outcomes (gauged by test-scores) are less than desirable for three reasons: (a) teachers teach AP Language congruent with an eleventh grade American literature curriculum, (b) students are “unprepared,” and (c) teachers are “untrained” or “underqualified” (79). No mention is made of the problems the course’s “identity crisis” (maybe spanning as many years as 1980 to 2007) would necessarily have had in terms of assessment, nor is any mention made of assessment practices at all which might problematize the less than desirable outcomes to which she refers (e.g., debates over the efficacy of holistic rating). Expanding on her three points, Puhr laments the incorrect critical lens teachers of literature apply to the teaching of writing; unabashedly critiques the College Board’s “commitment to access and equity” which enables the

admission of less-qualified students to the program (despite the fact that the program has always embraced open-admission without prerequisites); and takes to task the employment of many “not ready for prime time” teachers (Puhr 80). The rest of the article consists of transparent promotion of the College Board sponsored workshops and praise for the 2007 Audit as a guarantor of quality control (82-84). Puhr openly hails the benefit of a test-driven curriculum when she lauds an activity, promoted at the AP sponsored professional development seminars, where students are encouraged to write their own synthesis questions (they are told to assemble 5 or 6 sources and simulate writing a DBQ [document based question] [81]). This activity is the perfect synthesis of education and commerce as students are enlisted not as learners but as test-developers. Puhr is quick to admonish teachers in rural areas for their lack of subject knowledge (82), but never interrogates the suburban contingency for its surplus of kids with cultural capital that far surpasses the teachers’ professional acumen.

**Research Nest 5: The Advanced Placement Language
and Composition Exam, History and Criticism**

There is a fair amount of scholarship (but not as much as one might imagine, considering the power and influence of the College Board) concerning the AP Program: its elitist inception, problems of equity, inadequate reflection of the FYC curriculum, and problems of subject exam assessment. Most of the approbatory scholarship, that is, research that promotes the efficacy of the AP Program, is found on the College Board website (collegeboard.org), but it does little to distinguish the conflicts and contradictions which make the AP Program a

point of contention for so many disparate stakeholders such as politicians, professors, administrators, teachers, parents and students. Everywhere in the research one notes the recurrence of certain irreconcilable tensions. For instance, there is the ghost of the heritage of exclusivity and isolationism which threatens to topple contemporary claims to democratization and inclusivity; there is a highly rationalized scientific instrument of measurement which, paradoxically, as it is implemented on the ground, acts strangely particularized and unaccountable; there is the claim to college-preparedness which may not provide an adequate level of competence when education is (mis)perceived as “complete-able,”; there is the hint of earning college credit for a reputable score on a national exam but few excellent grades given; there is the contradiction between a curriculum which ostensibly prioritizes the social and heuristic practices valued in the composition classroom yet measures competence by a single, three-hour, solitary, performance seemingly divorced from what students actually do when they write in real world situations; and, most importantly, there is the generalized claim of irrelevance of context variables in standardized testing playing a role in assessment (such as student demographics), met with the troubling sense of initiation which makes some students more or less in tune with the language and logic of the exam and the test situation. Such contradictions and tensions problematize the authority and judgment of the AP Language Examination as a sorting mechanism. Its verdicts appear not only as potentially fallible and idiosyncratic but perhaps even detrimental, if they ultimately work in the service of social class reproduction.

Vopat, in “Going APE: Reading the Advanced Placement Examination in English Composition and Literature,” approximately thirty years before Hansen and Farris asked whether students were more interested in “getting English credit out of the way” than learning how to write, cautioned that a score earned on a three hour exam did not qualify students to be exempted from introductory and/or further writing classes. Vopat indicates in, essentially, a public resignation letter to ETS after three years serving as a reader for the AP English Exam, that the College Board sells the program as an “economic transaction”; that is, by an emphasis upon financials associated with the exam, they unwittingly position the program as a way to get “out of, rather than taking more English courses” (290). Vopat, as a veteran Reader, discloses details regarding the AP reading process which destabilize the validity of its assessment. For instance, he refers to the rubric as “complicated as a legal agreement” (286), and confesses that “by days 4, 5, and 6, I hardly know what I am reading” (289). In an attempt to “maintain standards,” ETS hid (i.e., covered) previous raters’ ratings from other readers, however, Vopat maintains that these ratings were surreptitiously consulted; further, that repeat-readers came to sessions with detailed records of previous scores given out of desire not to “be singled out by the ETS computers as erratic, eccentric, and out-of-step” (290). Vopat suggests that inflated pass rates for the exam rate the unqualified as qualified (i.e., qualified to be exempted from Freshman English) (291); and, as a result, he muses whether “ETS-CEEB is not already the largest credit-giving institution of higher learning in the country”

(291). Vopat's article is one of many to come that would challenge the testing giant on ethical-economic grounds.

Contra to Vopat's perspective, Modu and Wimmers, two in-house researchers in the employ of the College Board, in a study titled "The Validity of the Advanced Placement English Language and Composition Examination," seek to demonstrate the rigor of the (then) newly conceived AP English Language and Composition Examination. In addition to determining the rigor of the test, they wish to confirm whether it might serve as an appropriate "instrument for determining college placement and credit in composition" (Modu and Wimmers 610), therefore, they offer the newly conceived exam to 463 freshman composition students from 21 colleges, as well as 4,034 AP candidates in secondary school, and compare performance results. From the data, the researchers conclude that

AP candidates in secondary school performed better than college composition students on both the multiple-choice and essay sections of the validity examination. The data also seem to indicate that the level of performance required to get an A or a B in a college composition course is lower than that required to get a 5 or a 4 on the AP English Language and Composition Exam. (Modu and Wimmers 615)

Modu and Wimmers suggest that college instructors examine the test materials and the data in order to make their own determinations as to the granting advanced placement credit to qualified students.

Interestingly, the study performed by Modu and Wimmers was not unlike the administration of the first AP Examination in 1954. Rothschild, in “Four Decades of the Advanced Placement Program,” recounts the inception of the program where the test was administered in 10 disciplines “to compare the high school students’ test results with those of freshmen in the twelve colleges participating in the program” (179). However, Rothschild reports that, “on the surface there was consistency” in scores between the disciplines, but exam results from 1955 also demonstrated unevenness (180). For instance,

in the Literature examination, there were twenty-three 5.s, twenty-eight 4’s, eight-six 3’s, one hundred nineteen 2’s, and fifty-nine 1’s. English Composition, by way of contrast, was a killer: of 337 students who took the Composition exam, there were no 5’s and only three 4’s; there were thirty-two 3’s, one hundred twenty-one 2’s, and one hundred eighty-one 1’s. (Rothschild 180)

Rothschild further reports that the first director of ETS, in 1955, “found that the ways in which examination scores were determined in the different subject areas were wildly idiosyncratic” (180). Despite this, the author notes, the program was sold as a predictor of future college success and universities were encouraged to offer credit (Rothschild 182-183). Universities challenged the equivalence of the experience and suggested instead “stronger prep courses for those that can take them” (183). One might ask, if the AP Language Exam was first offered in 1980 (according to both Modu and Wimmers and the AP Language and Composition Homepage), how could it have been given in 1955?

Rothschild explains that the College Board was financially struggling and, among other moves, chose to “combine the Composition and English Literature examinations into one, thus saving the costs of designing and grading two exams” (184). The history is interesting for the intersection of the interests of business and education and confusion of competencies between two distinct disciplinary fields.

Regarding the intersection of social class and the AP program, Rothschild explains that “unlike their predecessors in the sixties, who took AP with a certain amount of guilt, seeing it as a vehicle of social exclusivity, students of the eighties accepted its academic advantages and got on with it” (191). He reports that: “In 1986, a longitudinal study of AP students concluded that “The AP Students were . . . more likely to come from homes where the parents were highly educated or held prominent occupations” (Rothschild 196). But the late eighties and nineties saw a radical change in terms of diversity of participation in the program (Rothschild 196-197). Though this shift seems to speak well of democratized access to and participation in the AP program, Schneider reveals that as participation diversified, the cachet associated with the “AP label” diminished as elite students and schools pulled out of the program and sought other more rarified modes of distinction.

Oberjuege, in “Raising the Bar: Historically Disadvantaged Students Can Meet the AP Challenge,” provides an argument for the benefit of the AP program for students uninitiated to the reading, writing and critical thinking required of honors coursework. But the curriculum he outlines is dominated by test-

preparation, and the overarching value of AP is the savings to families upon entering college with “advanced standing” (Oberjuerge 267). Maybe students in disenfranchised areas, through participation in the AP program, are exposed to ideas and expectations not previously experienced, but some of Oberjuerge’s best arguments are actually his worst. For instance, he reasons that because now both AP teachers and general education teachers are “on the firing line” for standardized test scores, all teachers should take a cue from AP as it is aggressively test-driven (Oberjuerge 266-67). The article leaves one wondering: is learning the language and logic of the various AP subject exams the best that an underserved student may hope for, and will earning a “3” even gain entrance to university?

Lichten, in “Whither Advanced Placement?” disparagingly refers to Advanced Placement as simply “Placement” (1; 11), and argues that the College Board’s inaccurate representation of “successful examinations” (5) ultimately misleads students that they will earn college credit as well as diminishes the general claim to quality that the AP brand presumably represents. Lichten writes:

The College Board scale overestimates the fraction of successful examinations by over a quarter of the total, by no means a trivial amount. In 1999, this would amount to approximately 300,000 examinations incorrectly predicted by the College Board’s scale. These examinations produce a revenue to C.E.E.B. of over \$20 million and cause an obvious conflict of interest. (5)

Lichten compiles data which demonstrates that “highly selective schools” require students to earn a “4” or higher on the AP Exam; “non-selective schools usually accept a ‘3,’ but only one out of three exams qualify. Overall, scores of 5s and 4s qualify, 55% of 3s pass, and essentially all 1s and 2s fail, for an average pass rate of 49%” (Lichten 3); this data belies the AP program’s claims of utility post-matriculation to university. Furthermore, Lichten demonstrates how governmental initiatives and state mandates are in harmony with the growth of the AP program through such actions as subsidizing exam fees, requiring high schools to participate in the AP program, and “required acceptance into advanced courses of candidates with a score of ‘3’” (8). Lichten is suspect of mass initiatives to encourage participation in the program, owing to the fact that “in some [unselective schools], not a single AP candidate passes the exam” (12). The author persuasively argues that “national and standardized tests fail to cover the abilities needed in college” as the fastest growing area in college coursework is remedial coursework (Lichten 13).

Lichten’s claim that, as “the program becomes less selective . . . quality declines” (12) is tactically misrepresented by Camara, Dorans, Morgan and Crawford (all employees of ETS and/or the College Board) as an elitist move to exclude diverse participants. Camera et al. presume that Lichten is suggesting “access to AP must be restricted or limited in order to restore AP quality” (Camara et al., 3). The authors accuse Lichten of wishing to “turn back the clock” of progress in equity; they claim that Lichten espouses views counter to the mission and vision of AP and the College Board (Camara et al., 8). What Lichten

actually writes is: “To reestablish quality, major reforms to AP are needed. These include an honest grade scale which is aligned with college standards, removing unwise mandates, and better selection of faculty and students into courses” (14). One might argue that Camera et al. have a point concerning potential elitism distilled in the “better selection” remark; however, they avoid entirely Lichten’s broader point concerning the revenue the College Board stands to gain on selling tests irrespective of candidate preparedness. The “composition business” is something that Hansen et al. rightly foreground.

Ganeshanathan weighs in on the Lichten-College Board controversy by noting that many schools consider the score of “3” as insufficiently qualified, congruent with Lichten’s findings (par. 19-22). Most importantly, he cites Schaeffer, Director of FairTest: The National Center for Fair & Open Testing, who remarks: “The people who make very good livings writing and promoting AP and other exams may not be the best judges of those products” (qtd. in Ganeshanathan par. 27). This point regarding a conflict of interest is exceptionally significant as a good deal of the research on the Advanced Placement Program is produced by the College Board and is available on their website (apcentral.com).

In 2000, Lee Jones (then) Executive Director of the Advanced Placement Program, wrote “Dispelling the Culture of Mediocrity: Expanding Advanced Placement,” an intensely metaphorical argument for the necessity of the Advanced Placement Program in ensuring minority students’ equal access to educational opportunity as well as staying competitive in the world at large (the

latter being a claim not unlike the one made at the inception of the AP Program). The description of the piece as metaphorical refers to Jones' figurative framing of the AP program within the context of a lock-out: "Not too long ago, a high school diploma combined with a strong work ethic was the key to opening the gates of access to good jobs and a better future. But now the lock on the gates has been changed" (Jones, "Dispelling" par. 3). Jones offers the AP and IB programs as panaceas for ensuring "rigorous curriculum" and masterful teachers ("Dispelling" par. 10). Also found here is the savings "pitch," now so controversial for professors of composition, the suggestion that AP is an adequate substitute for first-year coursework. Lee Jones writes:

A grade of 3 or higher on the comprehensive AP exam can earn students college credit or advanced standing in their college coursework.

Receiving college credit means some students can enter college as sophomores, reducing college attendance by a year and potentially saving over \$30,000. ("Dispelling" par. 14)

One should remember that savings of a different sort (time), directed at "high-end" clientele, was the leit motif in the promotional rhetoric for the program at its inception as AP offered talented students the option to bypass redundant coursework between the last year of high school and the first year of college (Joesph Jones, "Recomposing"; Rothschild; Hansen et al., "Are Advanced"). Yet another "selling point" for the AP program is the allure of measurable outcomes (a phrase which Lee Jones repeats several times), as the

program is tied to a national exam which Jones un-problematically positions as a barometer of achievement and college preparedness.

The study produced by Roth et al., in “The Effect of High School Course-Taking and Grades on Passing a College Placement Test,” is reminiscent of the questions posed by instructors of composition regarding the equivalence of a college basic writing course and a high school course intended for college credit. In the study, the authors confront the unsettling reality that, per a report issued by the National Center for Educational Statistics, an “estimated 68% of 1992 high school graduates who enrolled in public 2-year institutions were not academically prepared” (cited in Roth et al. 72). The CPT (computerized placement test) utilized in Florida produced results which called into question whether high schools were “equip[ping students] with the skills needed to do college-level work” (Roth et al. 73). This study is especially interesting for teachers of dual-credit composition courses (such as AP Language) for the differential pass rates between Whites and Blacks and Hispanics on the Reading and Writing portion of the CPT. The authors note that “this discrepancy was emphatically not the case for students passing Math,” and they report that

[c]urriculum specialists have consistently distinguished mathematics as the academic subject matter most sensitive to school instruction, in contrast to the language arts of reading and writing which are substantially influenced by and amenable to out-of-school experiences. (Roth et al. 81).

The authors contrast the purely objective, “logical sequencing of topics” in math to the “cultural parameters that mark the study of language and literature”

(Roth et al. 81). Despite the uncomplicated portrait of mathematics framed in logical positivism, the conclusion suggests (a) the susceptibility of writing to the influence of cultural capital (referred to by Roth et al. as “out-of-school experiences”), and (b) from the perspective of mathematics, the problematic contingency of the study of language and literature.

Concerning the favorable influence of the background knowledge that some test-takers bring to standardized exams, Zwick asks the question: “Is the SAT a ‘Wealth Test’?” Despite the specificity of the exam under review, Zwick draws from multiple achievement and exit examinations in order to contextualize the importance of the influence of SES upon earning a high score on the SAT, and high-stakes exams, in general (such as AP exams). For instance, for the first exit exam offered in the state of California, “pass rates were quite dismal overall—44% for math and 64% for language arts. . . . For ‘economically disadvantaged students,’ pass rates were even lower: only 45% passed the language arts section, and only 26% passed the math section” (Zwick 309). Further, Zwick notes that mathematics results on the 2000 NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) revealed that,

like eligibility for the federal lunch program, parent education is strongly associated with NAEP performance [O]nly 45% of students neither of whose parents had graduated from high school attained at least the basic level, compared with 77% of those with at least one parent who had graduated from college. (310)

In terms of data on grades provided by the National Center for Educational Statistics, “24% of the high SES group (compared with only 10% of the low SES group) had high school grade-point averages of at least 3.5”; further, “[s]tudents from high SES families received better teacher ratings and reported more extracurricular activities” (cited in Zwick 310). Zwick also indicates that studies conducted by the College Board confirm the correlation between test results and family income (310). Therefore, the author concludes that if the SAT is, indeed, a “wealth test,” then so is “every [other] measure of educational achievement” (Zwick 310). Based upon (then) current research, Zwick notes the impossibility of academic measurement that does not ultimately reflect the student’s home environment (311). This piece has a critical relationship to my thesis concerning the relationship between cultural capital and academic rewards.

Joseph Jones (“Recomposing”) is perhaps the only scholar whose work is singularly focused on the AP English Examinations; and, although he tends to collapse the Language and Literature Exams in his discussions (i.e., he moves too briskly between discussion of them which suggests that they are the same entity), his work is invaluable in terms of providing a retrospective of the class-based history of the program, and discussing the problems concerning whether the AP English Exams are a reflection of the college curriculum(s) they purport to mirror, as well as problems of assessment. In his article, “Recomposing the AP English Exam,” Jones addresses the most prominent objections to the first issue, whether the AP Language Exam reflects the college composition curriculum, by explaining that proficiency on a multiple choice exam, which is proportionately

more heavily weighted” than the three timed essays” (“Recomposing” 53) demonstrates a disconnect from the kinds of activities that would actually gauge performance in an FYC course. Furthermore, despite reference to the importance of the writing process in the course description for AP Language (multiple drafts, collaborative learning, and peer editing), Joseph Jones notes that the ultimate gauge of proficiency in writing—the AP Exam—does not reflect such values in its construction, nor could a timed test (Jones, “Recomposing” 54). This second argument for non-congruence with FYC curriculum also functions as an argument regarding problematic assessment of the AP Exam, for if the kinds of writing on the AP Exam do not mirror the “authentic experiences” that students would have in the college composition classroom, then this form of standardized assessment is not measuring what it purports to measure; ergo, the test presents a significant problem in terms of its validity (Jones, “Recomposing” 55). Also interesting is Jones’ metaphoric reference to the AP Program as a “dawdling old dowager” in its static, New Critical approach to textual analysis (54), despite obvious changes in approaches to thinking and writing about texts (in the fashion of Barthes, Derrida, and Fish, etc.). In another metaphoric reference, Jones refers to teachers “pick[ing] over the carcasses of previous AP exams” (“Recomposing” 54) because the program has no standardized curriculum; therefore, Joseph Jones suggests teachers really do not know what to teach and they look to previous exams for cues, making the course that much more test driven.

Klopfenstein, in “Advanced Placement: Do Minorities Have Equal Opportunity?”, in an attempt to explain minority underachievement in the AP

program, concludes that “family income is the single most important factor behind the minority participation gap” (116). Despite recent initiatives to increase participation of minorities in the AP Program (e.g., through subsidizing exams, paying for program start-up, materials, and teacher training), Klopfenstein concludes that

in many ways, black and Hispanic students do not have equal access to AP programs even when AP courses are offered in their school. Low income diminishes the AP participation of all races, but black and Hispanic students are three times more likely to be low income than white students. (130)

Klopfenstein explains that low income influences such factors as the possibility of parental assistance with schoolwork as well as the specialized knowledge required to “navigate the educational system” (130). Furthermore, low-income students likely have to carry additional work and family responsibilities simultaneous with school, as well as having “diminished access to a culture of learning” that would facilitate and encourage college attendance (118). Klopfenstein, multiple times, notes the results as “discouraging” and adds that the tracking system may compound the situation as “minority students have been tracked such that they do not have the preparation necessary to perform college level work while in high school” (Klopfenstein 118).

Schwartz in “Reflections of an AP Reader” provides an “insider account” (a few years after the fact) of the 2001 Daytona AP English Language Exam reading. He refers to the operation as “extremely organized” (53), with norming

through “benchmark essays” (Schwartz 55) and close collaboration with table-leaders to “establish accuracy” (a synonym for accord among readers) (Schwartz 54). Schwartz challenges the notorious 45-second rumor (the rumor that readers take only 45 seconds to rate individual essays) by stating that each essay was read in about 2 minutes; however, on the final day of the reading, Schwartz reports that the College Board brought in some “hired guns” (famed speed readers), and these people “read two or three times faster, or practically a page at a glance” (54). As researchers conflict in terms of the positive or negative effects of the speed of reading in terms of the accuracy of writing assessment (see Charney 74), it is difficult to say if speed enhances or diminishes the validity of evaluation. Still, the speed-reader scenario would likely unsettle most compositionists dedicated to thorough and reflective assessment.

In terms of my thesis, the most important detail conveyed in Schwartz’ narrative concerning the AP reading is his elaborate description of his boredom. By day 4, Schwartz states, “I began to crave surprise—the surprise of a well-turned sentence or complex idea . . . anything to break the monotony of clichés and sameness” (54). Is Schwartz still evaluating strictly by the rubric here and elsewhere when he remarks: “The most brilliant essay I read began with a quote by Jean-Luc Godard on film and proceeded to argue, with evidence from film theorists, about different understandings of truth” (54)? He comments that “the choice of examples did not affect the score” given (Schwartz 55), but then observes, when reflecting on an FRQ (free-response question) based upon a statement of Susan Sontag’s, that “only a few [students] actually knew the history

of photography and could name Ansel Adams, Matthew Brady, or Dorothea Lange” (Schwartz 54); whereas, “more typically,” students alluded to “family snapshots, prom photos,” *Survivor* or *The Home Shopping Network* (Schwartz 54). Obviously, the first set of references has greater cachet for Schwartz than do the allusions in the second group. Do students in a first-year writing course need to know the history and aesthetics of photography? The answer is obviously no, but Schwartz’ narrative and aesthetic sense hints at the particularized knowledge base and Voice ultimately sought and rewarded on the AP Language Exam. Schwartz’ essay is instrumental to my thinking in the suggestions (tactics) I provide for earning a high score on the AP Language Exam in the concluding chapter of this dissertation.

Almost directly repeating a concern of Elbow’s (“Writing”), Schwartz notes that the most difficult scoring judgment calls were the essays that fell into the “midrange” (54). Regarding one such circumstance, Schwartz, disturbingly, utilizes a personal pronoun in order to justify his rating: “The better essays in that category that met *my* standards for a good, solid essay . . .” [emphasis mine] (54). Schwartz’ explanation is irrelevant beyond the fact that independent judgment here supersedes the rubric as illustrated by the word “my.” If one is using a common tool of assessment, there is no such thing as “my standards.” Later, Schwartz muses that “the best essays always showed the most complex thinking and were written with the most elegant style” (55). In reading Schwartz’ essay, one notes the juxtaposition of “elegant” with the descriptor “workmanlike”—a word which actually appears in this account as a characterization of a midrange

essay earning the score of “6” (54), just as it appears in the Scoring Commentary for the AP Language Exam. Schwartz’ narrative perfectly demonstrates 1) the problem of a non-standardized curriculum measured by a standardized exam, and 2) a holistic assessment gauge seemingly susceptible to subjective judgment.

Van Sciver, in “Closing the Diversity Gap in Advanced Placement Course Enrollment,” describes an initiative undertaken by the Seaford School District in Delaware, not unlike the Advanced Placement program’s concept of Vertical Teams (i.e., the initiation of middle-school children and high school underclassmen to an academic milieu that will prepare them for the “rigors of the AP program” (Van Sciver 57). Van Sciver argues that low-income students “underschedule” themselves (i.e., elect an insubstantial academic course-load) because their life-chances are set by the limits of their experience; whereas, privileged students do just the opposite: avail themselves of every opportunity, especially one like participating in the AP Program which ensures future prospects in college and beyond (Van Sciver 57). Van Sciver (though he neither cites Bourdieu or Coleman), refers to the early acquisition of cultural capital (“as early as sixth grade”), the sensibility cultivated in the home environments of advantaged school children which enables them to thrive in honors courses (57). The author argues, by way of Locke’s metaphor of the social contract, that the AP program, as evidenced by the experiment in Seaford, DE, ameliorates inequality in the redistribution of cultural capital (58). Van Sciver twice lauds school officials’ monitoring of select, low-income, minority students for grades, behavior, attendance and the need for support as though the actions taken by the

school could compensate for the privileges (e.g., resources, attention, advocacy, etc.) he identifies in abundance in the lives of high SES students (57). The sociology of Bourdieu and Coleman suggest that the kind of “head-start” high SES students possess much predates sixth grade, and consists of immersion in a way of being that is *specifically* difficult for the school to replicate.

In 2000, The National Council of the Teachers of English released a report “Trends and Issues in English Instruction,” in which they identified dual-credit courses as an emerging trend that had both positive and negative potential. Specifically, the six NCTE commissions noted that college credit for high school work, “could, in some cases, result in courses that do not meet the curricular goals or student needs of a college or school” (Allender par. 9). Congruent with this, as mentioned earlier in this literature review in the section pertaining to the problem of college credit granted for high school courses in composition, Hansen et al., in “Are Advanced Placement English and First-Year College Composition Equivalent? A Comparison of Outcomes in the Writing of Three Groups of Sophomore College Students,” challenges the “selling point” of the AP program, that taking AP composition necessarily enables an individual to be exempted from taking a FYC course. The authors interrogate the language of assessment, that is, what it means to be “well-qualified,” per the College Board’s designations regarding performance on the AP Language Exam. And they document a growing movement of resistance among American universities to the assumptions of the exam and its evaluation. They review the research and question “how college courses are judged to be equivalent to AP exams” (Hansen et al., “Are

Advanced” 463) such that one could ultimately be a substitute for the other (the AP Exam for the FYC course). The authors (referencing Lichten) point to the documented trend of grade inflation and state that if college grades are inflated, and if AP scores presumably reflect college grades (as the AP program claims), then AP scores must be inflated, too (Hansen et al., “Are Advanced” 463).

Further, they question the financial motives of the College Board in encouraging the administration of the exam to so many students, the majority of whom will probably not perform well (Hansen et al., “Are Advanced” 463-464). In the end result, their research concludes that “two general writing courses are better than one” (Hansen et al., “Are Advanced” 464), which is to say, AP Language alone is insufficient to ground an individual in the foundational writing skills required for college.

The authors pose questions as to how the AP Language is scored, as it is a peculiar blend of both norm and criterion referenced testing (Hansen et al., “Are Advanced” 466). Following an explanation of how the essay portion of the test is first evaluated by rubrics, Hansen et al. state:

the statisticians take over and introduce a factor into the scoring that makes the scores come out in a normal distribution. How the second step in this two-tiered process is performed remains a secret. Because the formula for calculating composite AP scores from the raw data of multiple-choice test scores and essay scores is known only by a few employees at College Board and ETS who direct the AP scoring each year, the rest of us really have no way to know whether the tests are truly

criterion-referenced. Norm-referencing seems to be playing a role as well. The score points for a particular exam are determined by reference to student performance on previous exams. In addition, the criteria in a given year are normalized through the selection of sample essays, “range finders,” that indicate the type of essays that should be given a particular score. Thus, the standard is a hybrid between criterion- and norm-referencing. (Hansen et al., “Are Advanced” 466)

If the scoring method is a proprietary “secret,” the authors question how colleges may rightfully assign credit in composition, as they currently do both for the AP Language and Literature Exams, despite the different focuses (e.g., the former emphasizing rhetoric and language analysis, the latter literary analysis). Also included in their inquiry are questions concerning how students learn to write and how this knowledge is “generalized and transferred to new situations” (Hansen et al., “Are Advanced” 471). The authors seek to examine whether one FYC course is equivalent to AP Language in writing preparation, and they examine this through the direct assessment of writing of 3 groups, viz. those who had taken AP and FYC; those who had taken AP and no FYC, and those who had taken FYC but no AP (Hansen et al., “Are Advanced” 475). The authors conclude that students who took both AP and FYC were evaluated as strongest; therefore demonstrating that one writing class is insufficient (Hansen et al., “Are Advanced” 482-483) contra to the AP Program’s claims that students who score a passing grade on the subject exam are “qualified” and/or “well-qualified.”

One of the greatest benefits of the AP program, as promoted by the College Board, is its preparation of students for the rigors of university. However, the findings of Thompson and Rust, in “Follow-Up of Advanced Placement Students in College,” do not confirm studies which argue that AP students will outperform (i.e., earn higher grades) non-AP students. Thompson and Rust write: “Based on the present sample of high achieving students [per a questionnaire], there is no reason to conclude that taking AP classes in high school results in higher GPAs in college (6). Further, “AP students did not rate the benefit of their high school courses higher than did their high achieving peers who did not take AP courses” (Thompson and Rust 2).

Similarly, Rhoades asks the question: “Accelerated Learning for What?” in the context of the uncertain value and/or benefit of both AP and IB programs. Rhoades refers to the programs as “off-the-shelf curriculum(s)” and problematizes the variability of rigor between programs as well as test-driven content coverage which “many AP teachers argue . . . trumps time spent on developing other valuable outcomes (e.g., improved writing skills)” (Rhoades 11). Rhoades cites Sadler and Tai who

found that while students who had taken AP courses in those subjects [physics, chemistry, and biology] in high school received better college science grades than peers who had not, the differences were minimal . . . the AP advantage shrank by half when controlled for difference among students in prior achievement, other high school coursework, and parents’ income and educational levels. (qtd. in Rhoades 12)

The data above concerning parent income and education, pursuant to my thesis, speaks to the influence of inherited forms of cultural capital on attainment and test scores. In the end result, Rhoades articulates the concern that AP “might erroneously confuse content knowledge and credit hours with inculcating “higher-order habits of the mind” (9).

The Fordham Institute, in 2007, the year of the College Board’s audit of teacher syllabi for all AP courses taught across the country, audited the AP and IB (International Baccalaureate) programs in order to determine if they “deserved gold star status.” Although the report focused upon the AP Literature and Composition course as representative of English courses offered (as opposed to AP Language and Composition), the commentary is still instructive. In the Institute’s view, AP Literature and Composition earned a “B+” with the major weakness identified as a lack of clarity in the existing course guides and descriptions (Byrd 13). Specifically, under Institute recommendations, the author notes: “streamline bloated thematic overlays and unessential prose, which tend to confound—rather than clarify—expectations (Byrd 19). Just as Joseph Jones (“Recomposing”) observed regarding AP teachers’ perpetual mining of test prep materials, the Fordham Institute representative notes that the lack of clarity regarding what should be taught causes teachers to “have to infer from the exams what the priorities are for students’ acquisition of knowledge and skills” (Byrd 17; 19). Byrd specifically observes, in the case of AP Literature, that there is no “‘required’ or even ‘recommended’” course content (15). Further:

that the exams depend so heavily upon classical texts makes the College Board's decision not to be more prescriptive in its reading list all the more confounding. The College Board does say in the Curriculum Guide that teachers should focus on the "best books." (Byrd 32)

Strangely, the loaded word "best" goes unchallenged, and Byrd requires only that the "best books" be identified. Also paradoxical, despite the important ambiguities noted above, Byrd concludes that the "academic expectations for these courses are decently expressed, the end-of-course exams are well aligned to the curriculum, and the grading standards are clearly described and accessible to students" (17). Another contradiction in the report is that the "assessment" portion of the information addresses test question construction but not the process of evaluation, beyond a cursory explication of the 5 point rating system.

Klopfenstein and Thomas, in "The Link Between Advanced Placement Experience and Early College Success," "find no evidence that AP course-taking increases the likelihood of early college success beyond that predicted by the non-AP curriculum for the average student, regardless of race or family income" (par. 4). The authors' findings become critical in the face of governmental pressure to financially support and make mandatory the expansion of the AP program on the basis of its perceived benefit in terms of college preparation (Klopfenstein and Thomas par. 7). Most importantly, Klopfenstein and Thomas write:

Our findings support a clear distinction between courses that are "college preparatory" and those that are "college level." The former type of course emphasizes the development of skills needed to succeed in college, such

as note-taking, study skills, and intellectual discipline; the latter type assumes that such skills are already in place. (par. 34)

Such a misapprehension of college readiness may be detrimental to underprepared students who act in accordance with the program's marketing rhetoric as well as governmental initiatives (Klopfenstein and Thomas par. 36). These findings challenge the idea that AP coursework is a necessary piece in the admissions process. The authors ultimately recommend that increased hours in math and science (as these subjects are more strongly predictive of future success) will have the constructive effect desired (Klopfenstein and Thomas par. 36).

Moore and Slate, in "Who's Taking the Advanced Placement Course and How Are They Doing: A Statewide Two-Year Study," conclude that although "the AP program continues to grow . . . a disparity is still present between the enrollments of White students and various minority groups" (10). Specifically, the researchers found that, in the state of Texas during the target years of the study,

approximately 19% of White students were enrolled in these advanced courses in both 2004-2005 and 2005-2006, whereas only slightly more than 10% of African American students and slightly fewer than 12% of Hispanic students enrolled in these courses during the time frame. (Moore and Slate 10)

In terms of success rates, "the highest percentage of students scoring at or above the criterion in Advanced Placement courses was Hispanic students," with African Americans scoring lowest and "40% of all students were at or above the

criterion in Advanced Placement courses (Moore and Slate 8). The authors remark that further research is required, for instance, in order to gauge the effect of economic disadvantage, a factor they did not include in their study, but which they believe will be necessary to consider with growing numbers of AP participants (Moore and Slate 11). The authors' comments regarding the potential intersection of AP participation and performance and socioeconomic status are based on Sirin's "Socioeconomic Status and Academic Achievement" in which he writes:

[P]arents' location in the socioeconomic structure has a strong impact on students' academic achievement. Family SES sets the stage for students' academic performance both by directly providing resources at home and by indirectly providing the social capital that is necessary to succeed in school. (Sirin 438)

My thesis is entirely contingent on such literature which stresses the influence of SES in school attainment and outcomes on academic performances such as standardized examinations by virtue of the "credit" of material and human resources as well as initiation to ways of being translatable to academic performance.

Schneider's article, "Privilege, Equity and the Advanced Placement Program: Tug of War," provides the most concise history of the inception of the AP Program, its original goals, and contemporary transformation(s). The article moves, organizationally, along the lines of the Hegelian dialectic. Thesis: the author traces the inception of the AP Program as a Cold War anxiety-driven tool

for “hot-housing” (Cookson and Persell’s terminology) the country’s most “talented” and socioeconomically privileged students to assume positions of leadership in academia and the workplace (815-20). Antithesis: critics decry the AP Program as having a racist-classist strangle-hold on educational opportunity which leads to growth and democratized outreach of the program, which, in turn, leads to a plunge in prestige attached to the “AP brand” (820-24). And, finally, synthesis: Schneider explains how the program’s current, ironic and unwonted function as a guarantor of “basic skills” for underfunded schools may reduce its status to “pre-fabricated” curriculum, while high-status schools are on to “home-growing” newer and more rarified markers of distinction (i.e., prep schools are dropping AP and writing “in-house” curriculums which they bill as superior to AP coursework, ones that “are more like college work in tone and depth”) (826).

The most interesting rhetorical move in the article is Schneider’s shift of the blame (for inequality) from the College Board and the AP Program administrators to the administrative bureaucrats at the country’s status-holding secondary schools (e.g., Philips Exeter, Choate, etc.). The author demonstrates how the AP Program has always worked for them as a kind of status symbol to leverage admission for their students to elite, Ivy League universities. Despite real advances made to democratize the program—and the College Board’s receptivity to criticism—Schneider implies that program cachet diminished because prestige schools dropped AP, ostensibly, in the name of best practices and the rejection of test-driven curricula. Also, the 2007 AP Audit (the required submission of syllabi for College Board approval), as framed by Schneider,

appears as a political move to pacify prep schools rather than as a general assurance of quality control, as the audit was presented to teachers (824). In the end, Schneider frames the story of AP as another allegory of competition. As an interesting side-note, the ETS researcher Diederich appears here, as elsewhere, with an attitude of amused derision toward the program of the moment. On the (then) emergent AP Program he remarked:

there is simply too much sitting down, listening to talk, talk, talk. We say that these students ought to learn to “work hard,” and that they would not mind that in the least; it is the sitting down and listening all day in a space half the size of a grave that gets them down (qtd. in Schneider 818)

In other words, for Diederich, the version of college the elite schools were performing with their (then) new gifted program (the Advanced Placement Program), was not even a good likeness of college.

In 2009, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, as part of a multi-part examination of the AP program, performed what it deemed a “first ever” account of teacher attitudes on the AP Program, titled *Growing Pains in the Advanced Placement Program: Do Tough Trade-offs Lie Ahead?* The overarching attitude of AP teachers conveyed in the report is: “A little more gate-keeping, please” (Finn and Winkler ii). Concerns emerge over the exponential expansion of AP ranging from loss of quality of the program to lamentations over the lesser quality of students enrolled. But more interesting than the elitism of AP teachers (betrayed by the aforementioned concerns) is the admission of a kind of “gaming” of the AP program, done both on the student and school level. For instance, Finn

and Winkler report that (a) “students appear . . . to be focused on AP for utilitarian or pragmatic reasons, not intellectual aspirations”; and (b) “High schools seek to burnish their reputations by showcasing AP” (vi). In the sense that only high-end schools (i.e., high SES) could most effectively play this “game,” stocking transcripts and boasting AP scores far beyond the national average (the authors of the study report that “In high-poverty schools, only 25% of AP teachers say most of their students score a 3 or better; 70% of AP teachers in low-poverty schools report likewise” [Duffett and Farkas 18]), the program’s trumpeting of its democratization seems rather meaningless. For example, what good does expanded access do if “half (47%) of AP teachers in high-poverty high schools have less than six years of experience teaching AP, compared with 27% of AP teachers in low-poverty schools” (Duffett and Farkas 18)? The authors, unsettlingly, conclude that the AP program is a relative enigma to the research community:

We know dreadfully little about the impact of the AP Program on important student outcomes, much less the impact of a more-open doors policy on the program and its student outcomes. The primary cause of that ignorance isn’t analysts’ lack of interest or capacity, it’s that the College Board has been distressingly tight-fisted with AP data. According to its own data guidelines, the Board typically declines requests for school-level data. . . . Another dismaying element: the College Board reserves the right to approve how its data are analyzed and used. (Finn and Winkler iv)

The College Board publishes multiple reports generated by in-house researchers available on their website, but, as pointed out in the piece by Ganeshanathan as well as in the Fordham Institute's 2007 report (Byrd et al.), objective assessment of the program ought to be conducted by outside, independent researchers. This situation is not merely a lack of "transparency" as the researchers assert, but a conflict of interest.

Weaver, a headmaster of an independent school in California, in "Having the AP Conversation: Why It's Time to Re-evaluate Advanced Placement Courses," argues that "for some reason, the AP program is often exempted from . . . thoughtful scrutiny because it has become something like the wallpaper of 'academic excellence,'" and he asks: "Does the AP arguably the ultimate test-prep curriculum, really deserve that kind of free pass?" (38). Weaver is part of the phenomenon described by Schneider whereby private schools are critiquing the AP Program and are creating their own "internally authored, advanced-level curricula" (Weaver 38). However, contra to Schneider's analysis, rather than seeking newer and more rarified modes of distinction, Weaver seems in earnest about interrogating the AP Program for the benefit it provides a school from within, rather than the dividends (presumably) to be gained without. For instance, Weaver asks provocative questions of high school administrators, like: "Does the AP drive course selection by students in positive ways?" (38); and "Are your students getting the putative preparation, course placement, and credit advantages in college that they believed would accrue to them through taking AP courses?" (40). The latter question is iterated in the work of many authors previously

mentioned such as Lichten, Joseph Jones, “Recomposing”; Hansen et al., “Are Advanced”; and Klopfenstein and Thomas. Weaver is one of the only authors to date who identifies the AP program as a kind of taken-for-granted ideology that has been “purposefully cultivated for many years” (41). Challenging this sense of taken-for-grantedness—in terms of the AP Program having a salutary effect for students and composition studies in general—is a primary objective in my analysis of the language of assessment in the AP Language and Composition exam commentaries.

Finally, Bleske-Rechek, Lubinski and Benbow, in “Meeting the Educational Needs of Special Populations: Advanced Placement’s Role in Developing Exceptional Human Capital,” make a somewhat ironic and confounding appeal (in light of the various histories of the program already recounted in Joseph Jones, Rothschild and Schneider, for example) for the AP program to remember its origins in terms of the special population it was intended to serve (223). Through surveys of “AP involvement” among the “top 1% in ability” of students “identified at age 12 or 13 by Scholastic Assessment Test scores” (218), the study confirms the utility of the AP Program in meeting the special needs of the “gifted” and “talented.” Researchers argue that the AP Program provides “precocious” kids with the particularized environment they require, such as the opportunity to study and socialize with others of tremendous intellectual gifts, and a level of coursework which appropriately challenges them as opposed to the academic stall of the average, Indiana high school classroom (the setting of the study is the Midwest). In a way, the study reminded me of the

excellent coming of age movie *Breaking Away*—also an Indiana story—which featured a class war between the college kids and the “townies” or “cutters” (stone cutters’ kids). The promotion of the “gifted” as a people apart from the regular people recalls Bourdieu’s rejection of such labels which he found euphemized class talk. “Precocity” Bourdieu argues in many places (e.g., *Distinction* 70; *State Nobility* 20), is a mystification, a more direct register of the “credit” or “leg up” of social class origins than of innate ability.

The metaphor contained in the title of Bleske-Rechek, Lubinski and Benbow’s study seems especially intriguing in this regard: the authors make reference to the gifted as “exceptional human capital.” The idea that smart kids drive the economy or are a kind of economic resource (an extraordinary commodity)—unlike the regular kids who “nominated homework and term papers” as an aversion and “complained about getting up early . . . and about long school hours or days” (220)—is misleading, from a Bourdieuan perspective. Interestingly, the achievement of some is often framed in astonishing terms, like when the authors propose that “those who score above the SAT mean of college-bound seniors . . . can, under the right circumstances, assimilate a full year of a rigorous high school course (e.g., chemistry, English literature, mathematics) in 3 weeks” (Bleske-Rechek, Lubinski and Benbow 221). This highlights the extraordinary potential of some kids but, at the same time, diminishes the qualifier: “under the right circumstances,” which might apply in every case, considered more broadly (i.e., everyone might achieve “under the right circumstances”). Bourdieu’s work suggests that much of what appears as gift or

talent is contingent upon this qualifier. The phrase: “under the right circumstances” is the return of context, the latent response to gift attributed to nature as opposed to culture. And it is to the benefit or advantage of context to which I now turn.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY AND THEORY

This is a qualitative study of documents maintained, at least for the present, on an educational website, www.apcentral.collegeboard.com, produced by the College Board. Documents published on the Internet are subject to change, no matter how subtle, at any time; therefore, this represents the state of electronic records as I found them between 2009 and 2011 when I conducted my research. On the ephemeral nature of online documents, Merriam writes: “[t]he Web page cited today may be gone tomorrow or the content changed so radically as to be unrecognizable. Managing data assumes a new dimension when its stability can no longer be taken for granted” (130). True enough, the transitory nature of e-text may pose problems for the researcher; however, to use a literary analogy, the possibility of revision or even, ultimately, disappearance did not invalidate the interpretation of the documents found by Orwell’s protagonist in *1984* before their consignment to oblivion via the pneumatic tubes in the Ministry of Truth. In fact, the literary lens is especially fitting here, as this study utilizes literary methods (e.g., critical discourse analysis and deconstruction) in order to perform social research.

The documents found on the College Board website are available publically and require no password to access. My attention is focused specifically upon two groupings of published commentaries on the College Board website pursuant to the AP Language and Composition Examination: the Scoring Commentaries (2000-2005) and the Student Performance Q&A’s (2001-2010).

These narratives, written by the Chief Reader and other test reader/rater consultants, provide commentary on the national performance of test-takers every year the AP Language and Composition Examination is administered. The emergent field of web-based research has its own set of aesthetic criteria, for instance, discussed by Landau and Kress and Van Leeuwen, but elements of web-design, the graphics and tempo of hypertext, are not under consideration in this particular study. I am instead interested exclusively in the language of the published reports as opposed to digital imagery (which, intriguingly, is sparse to non-existent on this particular website, an anomaly, considering the infinite possibilities of web-design, which could be read as a rejection of the new way of purveying information). Whether or not the absence of interesting digital design signifies a latent statement of “business as usual” on the part of the College Board, the website looks and acts like a giant file-cabinet, and I mine it as such. Considering the subject as I have described it thus far, I will add that there are no “participants” in this study, at least not in the typical sense of the word. Of course, people wrote the narratives I analyze, but the focus of this study is on text: commentaries pursuant to a high-profile, gate-keeping examination, the AP Language and Composition Exam. The authors of these commentaries, as individuals, are irrelevant.

Data Collection and Analysis

Merriam writes: “When collecting data from the Internet, the researcher is no longer the primary instrument for data collection; a variety of software tools must be used in order to locate, select, and process information” (131). Along

these lines, I downloaded and produced hard-copies of the entire series of Scoring Commentaries, from 2000-2005, and Performance Q&A's, from 2001-2010. This served as a record of the material fact of the commentaries, and acted no differently than the copious pages of notes a researcher might generate in the form of interview transcripts and/or observations made in the field, the only difference being that the information in this case "pre-dated" the researcher, or came before the researcher "arrived on the scene." Whether this method of information acquisition, in some way, insulates the research endeavor from bias (in terms of the absence of influence of the researcher on the environment) or contributes to interpretive bias in a way yet unknown (Merriam 131) is indefinite. In either case, from the point of view of postmodern, qualitative research, the construction of meaning necessarily foregrounds the role that the researcher has in piecing together an explanation of a setting, artifact or event rather than in pointing, neutrally, to some empirical reality (Peshkin "Nature"). Again, to use a literary analogy, this method of textual selection and analysis is not unlike the interpretation of a novel. It would be rare (at least, today) for someone in literary studies to ask: Is this the definitive account of the book? Rather, along the lines of textual analysis described by Fish, one would be more prone to ask: Given the disciplinary tools available to make meaning, does this account make sense to members in a specific "interpretive community"? This would also be a barometer of verification for the study.

No theoretical or practical maneuver will erase the fingerprints of subjective construction from inquiry (Peshkin describes interpretation as

“perspectival accounting” [“Nature” 108]), not even the seemingly objective use of computer programs to perform a function as simple as counting. Merriam writes, citing Carroll and Kellogg: “Software tools . . . shape the user’s perception of what is possible”:

Software tools will also shape a user’s ‘policy’ for handling information; after all, they determine which actions are possible to take towards a particular piece of information. A user’s mental model of goals . . . possible to have vis-à-vis Internet information will arise, at least in part, from the functionality of the software. (Merriam 131)

One might even say that the speed of the technology, as Virilio long ago observed, constitutes a politics or perspective. This notwithstanding, my relationship to the electronic tools of research is often pragmatic: I use them to do what would otherwise be overly time-consuming, such as scanning documents with ICR (writing recognition) software rather than retyping them in preparation to subsequently run them through a parsing program; or overly tedious, such as checking the number of times a word occurs across texts. The real analytic work, that is, the determination of categories (coding) and the interpretation of what the relationships among the categories might suggest, still happens in an “old school” fashion through exhaustive rereading and scrutinizing both for pattern and puzzlement (i.e., “aporia” or contradictions [Eagleton 133-34]). Charmaz writes on how coding creates a kind of “scaffolding” for understanding (“Grounded Theory” 517). Electronic tools of research, in addition to the ones I noted above (e.g., online dictionaries, corpora and parsers), may cause these categories (i.e.,

the scaffold) to “pop,” but not in a way wholly dissimilar from epiphany in organic reading. And there is still the matter of what to do with these codes once they emerge as they are only the “means of developing the analysis” (Charmaz, “Grounded Theory Method” 112). That portion of the interpretive process is guided by the theory of Bourdieu and Derrida, and will be discussed later in this section.

Methodology and Research Questions

In this study, I utilize a variety of computer programs in order to explore the saliency of language in the commentaries, some programs as basic as the Control-F function in Microsoft Word in order to locate the frequency of appearance of a single word or phrase in the narratives. Other programs I access via the Internet, such as the WordNet Lexical Database for English from Princeton University and online corpora from Brigham Young University, such as the Corpus of Contemporary American English. I utilize the aforementioned tools in order to establish what is referred to by Mautner as a “collocational profile” (128), that is, to identify “multiple instances of [a word’s] occurrence” within and across texts to see “how it is used” and “what sort of message is being conveyed, and what other lexical items tend to co-occur” (Bloor and Bloor 130). Also toward thinking about the constellation of associated meanings that revolve around given words and phrases, I utilize a variety of online dictionaries, such as the Online Etymology Dictionary, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, or the Encarta Dictionary drag-down synonym option available through Microsoft Word. The assumption in such lexical study is that connotation is a way of

“framing” the world, and “framing” or “contextualization” is a way of placing some ideas/people/institutions in a more or less favorable light (Bloor and Bloor 121-129). And, to the extent that some “cognitive frames” are shared, as in the case of Lakoff’s research on metaphor, single instances of language might reveal ideological bias (Bloor and Bloor 11). Interestingly, Bloor and Bloor refer to this methodology as *deconstruction*: “the process of investigating meaning by breaking it down into its components parts” through analysis “of grammar and choice of words in a text to reveal the undercurrents of association and implication” (11). This is like and unlike the definition of deconstruction in literary theory. For instance, Eagleton describes deconstruction in terms of binary opposition, how “one term of an antithesis secretly inheres within the other,” such as the dichotomy of male and female (132-133). Both ways of operationalizing the term apply in this study. Additionally, I utilize a computer program titled Writer’s Workbench in order to run a specialized form of analysis on the commentaries for the percentage of abstract and vague content per definitions and allowable frequencies determined by the American Psychological Association.

By now it is apparent from my discussion of tools that the methodological underpinning of this study is critical discourse analysis. Specifically, I draw upon the version outlined by Fairclough in *Analyzing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. Some of the practices delineated by Fairclough for fruitfully mining a text include analysis of “representation” or “framing” devices (53); analysis of the structure of arguments (premises, assumptions, evidence, and conclusions) (81); analysis of “semantic and lexical relations” within and between

sentences (89-94); analysis of “legitimation” (i.e., authorization of certain ideas, institutions and/or identities) (98-100); and analysis of the sorting mechanism or process of classification active within a text (100-101). The emphasis upon arrangement in a text, as Fairclough points out, is especially relevant concerning Bourdieu’s theory of reproduction as organizational relationships in texts tend to reflect broader categories of social organization (101; 130). Citing Bourdieu and Wacquant, Fairclough writes: “we need to look particularly closely at how things are being classified, at the ‘classification schemes’ which are drawn upon to impose a ‘di-vision’ on the social—a division, a classification, which constitutes a particular ‘vision’ (*Analyzing* 138). Other elements of text identified by Fairclough in *Analyzing Discourse* as objects of critical discourse analysis include metaphor (112; 131) and “collocational patterns” (130-31).

Elsewhere, Fairclough points out that critical discourse analysis makes manifest “*the relations between semiotic and other social elements*” (“Dialectical-Relational” 163) [original emphasis]; put differently, critical discourse analysis makes transparent “complex and invisible relationships” (*Language* 22). Reisigl and Wodak say something similar: discourse analysis situates the text within “the broader sociopolitical and historical context which discursive practices are embedded in and related to” (93). Fairclough highlights the unstated assumption behind this idea (i.e., the need for discourse analysis) which is that people are largely incognizant of ideology:

Institutional practices which people draw upon without thinking often embody assumptions which directly or indirectly legitimize power

relations. Practices which appear to be universal and commonsensical can often be shown to originate in the dominant class or the dominant bloc, and to have become naturalized. (*Language* 27)

Discourse analysis, therefore, interrogates the “taken-for-grantedness” of certain real world and textual practices and shows how they are the “complement to economic and political power” (Fairclough, *Language* 27). At the same time, in an explanation of the method, Fairclough points out that discourse analysis is deployed in the face of a problem, some situation which requires address, such as an inequality or imbalance of resources or power which a discourse practice obscures (Fairclough, “Dialectical-Relational” 163; 167-68). Therefore, I am going to assume that the AP Language and Composition Examination commentaries potentially pose a problem; that is, the commentaries may reveal a competing tension between their ostensible aim (i.e., to help teachers and their students) and their language which evidences bias for social class.

In thinking through the meaning of these texts in terms of their possibly paradoxical function, I pose the following research questions:

1. What is the structure of judgment in the Scoring Commentaries and Student Performance Q&A’s? More specifically, does the language of the narratives sort or classify students subjectively with a bias for social class?
2. How do we come closer to identifying the “euphemized” (Bourdieu’s terminology) class content in the descriptions of writers in the commentaries? How do class-coded identities manifest in the commentaries in a certain Voice?

Discourse analysis is employed not only to read the text or discursive practice symptomatically as a sign of a more broadly situated problem, but also prescriptively as a hopeful indicator of a form of resistance individuals might take with respect to the problem and/or source of suggestion for how relations might be more equitably structured (Fairclough, “Dialectical-Relational” 167).

Theoretical Grounding of Data Analysis: Pierre Bourdieu

The taxonomy that expresses and structures academic perception practically is a neutralized and misrecognizable, in other words, euphemized, form of the dominant taxonomy. It is structured according to the hierarchy of qualities commonly attributed to members of dominated classes (servility, vulgarity, awkwardness, slowness, poverty, etc.), to occupants of the middle positions (small-mindedness, narrow-mindedness, mediocrity, uprightness, earnestness, etc.), and to the dominant groups (sincerity, breadth, wealth, ease, skill, finesse, ingenuity, subtlety, intelligence, culture, etc.). Bourdieu, *The State Nobility* (36-37)

Taking a cue from Bourdieu’s method in *The State Nobility* (22), I look to the Scoring Commentaries and Student Performance Q&A’s for iteration of specific patterns of descriptors and metaphors used by teachers to characterize student behaviors and embodied personas (hexis). For Bourdieu, these descriptions suggest a hierarchized mode of organization or categorization metonymic of social class, as the qualities of superior performance float ethereally beside the concrete deficits of poorer writers:

[T]he most positive comments appear with increasing frequency as social origins rise . . . the comments become more severe and more harshly and less euphemistically expressed as the social origins of the students descend. (*State Nobility* 32-33)

Elsewhere Bourdieu refers to this phenomenon as “explaining the higher through the lower” (*Distinction* 472). Bourdieu reveals that the descriptive language used by teachers is a “euphemized” way of speaking about social class difference, “naturalized” by certain terms and references that appear to speak to academic distinctions (*State Nobility* 32-37). So, following Bourdieu’s logic that the language patterns within a text mirror “the social process of classification” (noted in Fairclough, *Analyzing* 101), I was prompted to discover if individual instances of language in the Scoring Commentaries and the Student Performance Q&A’s demonstrated a way of sorting test-takers that seemed to have less to do with rhetorical competencies and more to do with locating students within correspondingly hierarchized levels of the social strata.

I utilized Bourdieu’s theory of the *habitus* in order to make sense of the differentially coded language (i.e., positively and/or negatively connotative diction) used to describe the strategies of the various test-takers. As he defines the concept:

The *habitus* is not only a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure: the principle of division into logical classes which organizes the perception of

the social world is itself the product of internalization of the division into social classes. (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 170)

Elsewhere, Bourdieu refers to these ways of acting and perceiving as “embodied dispositions” (Bourdieu, *Outline* 89) “placed beyond the grasp of consciousness” (*Outline* 94), which originate from early experience in the home and school.

As an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted, the habitus engenders all the thoughts, all the perceptions, and all the actions consistent with those conditions and no others. (Bourdieu, *Outline* 95).

Because the effects of these experiences are embodied they manifest in certain performances such as taste, manners, “bodily *hexis*” (e.g., stance, dress, pronunciation and charisma) (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 474), and academic demonstrations such as writing. Individual *habitus*’, as well as the strategies employed by individuals, may be judged as more or less favorable and/or efficacious contingent upon their recognition by certain players within specific fields (Bourdieu’s terminology). And, according to Bourdieu in *The State Nobility*, structures of judgment in academia (as demonstrated by teacher commentary on a high-profile, gate-keeping examination such as the Concours Général) are calibrated to respond favorably to the dominant social class identity; that is, academic judgments are congruent with the taxonomy of social class division (17-19; 32-41).

The difference between “good writing” and “bad writing,” at first glance, appears as a relatively basic, value-neutral, academic distinction; that is, the evaluation of writing appears to be objective, disciplinarily criteria-based, and empirically “measurable.” But, Bourdieu reminds us that academic judgments, among other types of distinctions, are enmeshed in broader forms of social organization, for instance, in the sanctioning of some to speak in particular contexts, in the authorization of what they have to say “by virtue of who they are.” Bourdieu draws upon Austin and speech act theory in order to back this claim (*Language* 72-76). And Bourdieu repeats Austin’s best joke in order to frame the “institutional recognition” which is required for the “magical efficacy” of discourse: “the person who wishes to proceed *feliculously* with the christening of a ship or of a person must be *entitled* to do so” (*Language* 73) [emphasis in the original].

Categories which appear to be objectively derived may ultimately be attributable to what Bourdieu refers to as “advantageous attribution” (*Distinction* 475). Certain identities and certain rhetorical moves, in the context of a writing examination, for example, may be prefigured as favorable; conversely, certain ways of being (and writer-ly attributes) might be prefigured as illegitimate. Here, Bourdieu owes a debt to Labov’s various discussions of “prestige forms” (Labov, *Language* 5) of linguistic capital, such as Labov’s study of the presence or absence of the pronunciation of the “r” sound within and across varying, class-differentiated New York City department stores (*Sociolinguistic* 43-69), and the delegitimation of Black English speakers’ language as “verbally deprived”

(*Language* 201-40) despite the equality of standard and non-standard dialects. Bourdieu's work makes manifest the connection between certain linguistic/cognitive practices (i.e., the predisposition to think, act and possibly write in specific ways) and the broader social forces within which these practices are inscribed, similar to the work of certain linguists and critical discourse analysts, notably Labov, Fairclough, and Van Dijk. The objective, then, of a critical discourse analysis of the commentaries pursuant to the AP Language and Composition Exam, guided by Bourdieu's theory, would be to explain how the evaluative judgment of the exam might be an expression of the divisions of social class.

Theoretical Grounding of Data Analysis: Jacques Derrida

Deconstruction is not a method or some tool that you apply to something from the outside. Deconstruction is something which happens and which happens inside; there is a deconstruction at work within Plato's work, for instance . . . So, to be true to Plato, and this is a sign of love and respect for Plato, I have to analyze the functioning and disfunctioning of his work. (Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*)

Derrida here primes *every* text for the possibility for deconstruction in conveying deconstruction less as a methodology (something that is *done to* texts) and more as something inherent to texts or characteristic of language. In his entire oeuvre, the condition of polysemy (*Dissemination* 71) is the fluid constant he points to again and again, perhaps most famously in *Plato's Pharmacy*, with the shifts in meaning associated with the word *pharmakon* ("the word *pharmakon*

is caught in a chain of significations” [*Dissemination* 95]). No one sense of the word seems to “stick,” and this propensity of language causes Plato’s project to come unmoored (this is “the structure of ambiguity and reversibility of the *pharmakon*” (*Dissemination* 112)). In this way, “disfunction,” as stated in the quote above, becomes the ironic norm and accomplice to function.

In the body chapter, I utilize the theory of Derrida in order to demonstrate how the language of critique of the AP Language and Composition Exam operates on the basis of certain binaries that structure critical or evaluative judgment in the narratives as well as limn out the voices of the various test takers. Per the characteristics of a deconstructive critique, to be delineated below, each pair has one preferred term and the other term is subordinated beneath that. I show that the reappearance of the objectionable term in each binary opposition is so persistent that it oftentimes elicits incoherent advice and rather unsympathetic responses (e.g., sarcasm, jokes and ad hominem attacks), seemingly at odds with the helpful rationale behind the critiques themselves. These tense moments, termed *aporia* in the critical terminology and defined by Tobin as “sites of doubt or perplexity where the apparent coherence of a text can be unraveled” (14), simultaneously point to stress points in the broader conversation about the teaching and assessment of writing. The “inappropriate” voices in the test narratives (student writing is oftentimes described in the commentaries in terms of its appropriateness) are like the “errant” ghosts, specters and phantasms that haunt *Plato’s Pharmacy* (*Dissemination* 103-104; 143). These unwieldy ghosts threaten

to dislodge the ostensible logic of the test narratives and make the process of writing assessment increasingly confusing.

But before I engage in the project of deconstruction as it applies to an educational text like the commentaries for the AP Language Exam, a brief overview of the theory and method is required. The following is an abbreviated portrait of deconstruction drawn from two key texts of Derrida's, *Dissemination* and *Of Grammatology*. Derrida's entire oeuvre confronts the Western metaphysical notion of a "natural and universal" Truth (*Of Grammatology* 11), the kind of "indubitable," "indefeasible," "eternal" or "necessary" Truth sought by Descartes in *Meditations on First Philosophy*. The Cartesian lexicon is an expression of the concept of logos: Ground Zero Meaning, Origin, Presence, Essence, Nature, God's Mind-Word (*Dissemination* 76-77), and *logocentrism* is "the orientation of philosophy toward an order of meaning—thought, truth, reason, logic, the Word—conceived as existing in itself, as foundation (Culler 92). Considering the logocentric belief in the self-identical nature of "voice and being . . . and the ideality of meaning" (*Of Grammatology* 12), writing, from this perspective, is considered a second-order form of signification, a degraded proxy for "Truth in presence" (*Of Grammatology* 17). A good deal of Derrida's time in each essay is dedicated to tracing the marginalization of writing as speech's degraded Other (this introduces the importance of binary oppositions which I discuss in the coming material).

Despite aggressive insistence upon the primacy of speech wed to beliefs regarding meaning and presence, Derrida seeks to unsettle or disrupt the idea of

essence by instead showing how everything is enmeshed in discourse. Derrida is able to make this assertion by drawing upon Saussure's unwitting (in Derrida's view) but vital realization of the "arbitrariness of the sign," later refined by Peirce to speak the contemporary idea that there is no ideal essence behind or 1:1 correspondence between a word and its meaning (*Of Grammatology* 44-49).

Derrida reasons this out through a paradox strand:

The disappearance of truth as presence, the withdrawal of the present origin of presence, is the condition of all (manifestation of) truth. Nontruth is the truth. Nonpresence is presence. Difference, the disappearance of any originary presence, is *at once* the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of the truth. (*Dissemination* 168).

Deconstruction, then, proves to be a kind of antidote for the Western fetish for beginnings, endings and centers: in the "absence of the transcendental signifier" there is "only the limitlessness of play" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 50).

In examples of the "method" (now perceivable as an inaccurate term considering deconstruction is a response against systems of truth and coherence) like Derrida's *Plato's Pharmacy*, binary oppositions (word pairings coding one term in the binary as superior) such as the speech/writing dichotomy mentioned above, both structure a text as well as contain the possibility of their deconstruction. This is because "polysemy" threatens the "internal coherence" of a text by making contradiction and/or multiple meaning(s) inevitable. Derrida demonstrates that the privileging of one term over another in a binary opposition

is actually a political maneuver (e.g., a product of ethnocentrism) (*Of Grammatology* 56). Deconstruction endeavors to reveal, if not reverse, the hierarchic structure of binary oppositions.

This intellectual path is important to trace. And it bears repeating that the Derridean possibility for textual inconsistency is something that would manifest in *any* text; put differently, contradiction is inherent to discourse. Derrida writes: “language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique” (“Structure, Sign, and Play” 284). The semantic or argumentative structure of a text is always subject to inward collapse (i.e., things fall apart). Barbara Johnson explains this in the Introduction to *Dissemination*: “The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or generalized skepticism, but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification *within the text itself*” (xiv). And Derrida returns continuously to this same notion: “The reading or writing supplement must be rigorously prescribed, but by the necessities of a game, by the logic of play, signs to which the system of all textual powers must be accorded and attuned” (*Dissemination* 64). Again:

The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them in a certain way, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it. Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure. (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 24).

The very architecture of the text, ironically, betrays the text's "meaning," hence the metaphor of habitation or occupancy of a structure. Deconstruction is something that happens *from within*.

Despite some irresponsible demonstrations of deconstruction, it is not apolitical or malicious (Eagleton 148). I undertake this process in good faith. I use deconstruction not to discredit an institution or an individual. For this reason, I do not name the people connected with the authorship of the narratives I analyze because the views and/or personalities of individuals are not my focus.

Deemphasizing the importance of the Author corresponds with post-structural theory's de-centered portrait of textual production which situates the act of meaning making in a given text with the reader, as seen in the work of de Certeau (169), Barthes (16) and Fish (21), rather than the writer. Authorial intention becomes largely irrelevant for such a theory as the "meaning of the text" is not fixed in congruence with the intentions of the Author. Correspondingly, this piece is not about individuals because discourses are larger than people; the narratives sign to broader conversations, arguments over the definition of good writing and problems of assessment.

Two Protocols for Deconstruction

Barbara Johnson, the translator of *Dissemination*, advances three strategies in order to "undo" a text or demonstrate that the "text signifies in more than one way" (xiv). First, Johnson advises looking to the "double-edged word[s]," polysemous terms that offer multiple interpretations; next, the text might suggest a tension between the literal and figurative meaning; and finally, a text might

demonstrate inconsistencies in the logical lines of its argument (xiv-xv). Jonathan Culler fuses the close analysis of language delineated by Johnson above with the Derridian mission to upset the “violent hierarchy” of binary opposition (85). He writes:

to deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies, by identifying in the text the rhetorical operations that produce the supposed ground of argument, the key concept or premise. (86)

I utilize both of these protocols in order to get a better understanding of the tensions within the test commentaries.

Binary Oppositions

A common practice in qualitative research is the coding of data, defined by Charmaz as “the process of categorizing and sorting data. Codes then serve as shorthand devices to label, separate, compile and organize data. Codes range from simple, concrete, and topical categories to more general, abstract conceptual categories emerging from theory (“Grounded Theory Method” 111). This “researcher created” versus “researcher received” method of categorization, a distinction noted by Charmaz as the difference between qualitative and quantitative coding practices (“Grounded Theory Method”111), is used to highlight patterns across a range of written texts. The specialized coding I utilize is suggested by *both* Derrida’s and Bourdieu’s commitment to seek out the binary oppositions within texts. Therefore, looking across the Scoring Commentaries and Student Performance Q&A’s, several categories emerge as binary oppositions

which seem to structure the evaluative logic of the exam. I return continuously to this master list of categories or central oppositions in order to demonstrate the logic of sorting evident in the commentaries.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The Mechanics of Sorting

In this section I attempt to answer the following question: What is the structure of judgment in the Student Performance Q&A's? More specifically, does the language of the narratives sort or classify students subjectively with a bias for social class?

Contradictory Expectations and Cruel Appraisals

The Student Performance Q&A from 2001 states that: “We want our students to understand that the flawed ‘something’ is almost always preferable to the well-wrought nothing” (What can teachers do to improve their performance? [par. 13]). This statement is admirable because it promotes the importance of ideas over form or style. I interpret it to mean that evaluators of the AP Language Exam value *what* the student has to say over the *way* that it is stated. Evidence of this priority exists in multiple instances of specific, content-based explications of why certain essays scored as they did. However, the expectations of what constitutes an effective response are less transparent than they first appear, and the subtleties of expression, the *nuances* of language (i.e., word choice and voice or style) are actually more important than the Student Performance Q&A's and Scoring Commentaries explicitly convey. Additionally, the comments can be extremely unforgiving (or, conversely, laudatory), the derisive tone of which seems to contradict the ostensible objective to help teachers and their students.

Conflicted Expectations

Between the *Student Performance Q&A*'s produced in the years 2001-2003 and 2004-2007, there is conflict regarding the precise emphasis of course content, the "tools" required to do the analytic work required on the exam, and contradiction as to the critical gaze (meaning intensity of focus, akin to photography's feature of the zoom lens rather than film theory's conception of a power-look) required to produce an effective response. This is evident in the conflict between the desire of a "holistic" versus a more "atomistic" focus. There is also disconnect between the quality of analytic and/or argumentative prose the test claims to seek (defined multiple times as: "clear, correct, mature prose" [*Student Performance Q&A: 2005*, Question 1, par. 1]), and what evaluators ultimately seek ("artistic" prose) (*Scoring Commentary: 2004*, Question 2; Question 3). And, finally, evident in these documents are myriad instances of unduly critical language (e.g., sarcastic remarks, jokes, and harsh appraisals) leveled at the expense of the teachers and students whom the comments would presumably assist. The contradictions in the commentaries, coupled with the caustic language that appears in the narratives, demonstrates Bourdieu's notion that the process of social distinction functions "below the level of consciousness" for, certainly, there is no motivation in the production of these materials to intentionally conceal information or deprecate individuals; the process of social distinction does not point to "distinct knowledge," but rather alludes to certain vague, acquired critical capacities to "differentiate and appreciate" (*Distinction* 466).

The Chief Reader in the *Student Performance Q&A* from 2002, emphatically states: “[AP Language] is not a course in advanced logic and rhetoric, in the appreciation of literature, or in the memorization and cataloguing of rhetorical or literary terms” (Question 1, par. 4). Whereas the Chief Reader in the *Student Performance Q&A* from 2004 definitively states: “The AP Language and Composition Exam is an exam in the theory and practice of rhetoric” (Question 1, par. 6). Although the second definition of the exam (the summative expression of the course) does not use the word “advanced,” the tone and direction of the commentaries produced between 2004-2007 prioritize a more specialized address of the theory *and terminology* of rhetoric than the account indicated in the first statement. The forceful definition of what the AP Language course is *not* results from the persistent student error of cataloguing rhetorical devices without properly explaining the effect of these devices in the reading passages. Example: “Weaker papers” “listed strategies without attempting to explain how and why they worked” (*Student Performance Q&A 2001*, Question 1, par. 5). Another example: the *Student Performance Q&A* for 2001 states, “Students continue to be more comfortable identifying strategies and techniques than explaining how these aspects of language work within the specific test they are being asked to analyze” (What were common threads of error?). And the same idea is advocated even more forcefully—to the extent of recommending the excision of professional jargon—in the *Student Performance Q&A* for 2003 which declares that an effective essay can be written “[w]hether or not students referred to specific rhetorical techniques, which are simply more specialized

terminology for persuasive methods” (Question 2, par. 1). This idea is elaborated upon further in the same *Student Performance Q&A*:

Rhetorical terminology . . . provides a shorthand method for discussing many of the most important methods a writer uses—but it is less essential in writing an analytical essay than the use of critical thinking skills and a clear understanding of how language functions. If we are spending so much time having our students memorize rhetorical terms that we overlook teaching these essential skills, then we should throw away our lists. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2003*, Question 2, par. 5)

The *Student Performance Q&A*'s produced between the years 2004-2007 do not promote the substitution of rhetorical discourse for analysis; in fact, the *Student Performance Q&A* for 2006 states: “students need to understand more deeply how the organization, structure, diction, and syntax of a piece . . . manifest and flesh out the text’s meaning and purpose” (Question 1, par. 4). However, as suggested above in the definition of the course and its exam, there is a difference in terms of emphasis upon or intensity of the study of rhetoric which will be demonstrated in the *Student Performance Q&A*'s (from 2004-2007) in the requirement of a specialized palette of language in order to do effective analysis.

Again, the *Student Performance Q&A*'s from 2004-2007 have a different emphasis upon the intensity of instruction in rhetoric; they even have a different textural quality (the project is animated in a different way) to convey this emphasis, as evident in the romantic, classical backdrop in which the AP enterprise is set: “[Teachers] should emphasize a function of rhetorical training

that has roots in the Classical period, particularly in the works of Isocrates in ancient Greece and Cicero and Quintilian in Rome” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2005*, Question 1, par. 4). The different emphasis is described in the *Student Performance Q&A* for 2005 which instructs teachers to “explicitly incorporate theories of rhetoric and practices of rhetorical analysis” (Question, 2, par. 7). “Practices of rhetoric” will include, among other methods, knowledge of and proficiency in utilizing a particular vocabulary (i.e., the discourse of rhetoric). That word choice is a priority of the exam is evident in repeated comments regarding the *dearth of appropriate vocabulary* or specialized language required to do the work of “sophisticated” rhetorical analysis—a point of view seemingly at odds with the one stated in the *Student Performance Q&A*’s from 2001-2003. This deficiency is evident in the observation that: “middle range [writers] frequently lacked vocabulary needed to write specifically about rhetorical strategies” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2004*, Question 1, par. 3). And, this observation is repeated in a subsequent comment that “many students lacked a working vocabulary of concepts from rhetorical theory and practice that they might have employed in an analysis such as the one called for in this question” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2004*, Question 1, par. 5). The repetition underscores the importance of specialized discourse, a particular lexicon important to constructing an effective response, *unlike* the demotion of particularized language described as peripheral or irrelevant in the *Student Performance Q&A*’s from 2001-2003. Another illustration: “Students who earned scores in the lower half of the scoring range . . . generally showed little success at

understanding the central concepts and terminology of rhetorical theory” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2006*, Question 2, par. 4). By these examples, I am claiming that 1) the course/exam emphasis seems ambiguously drawn between two seemingly competing notions of the intensity of instruction in rhetoric, and 2) there seems to be a differential value, between the *Student Performance Q&A*’s from 2001-2003 and 2004-2007, placed upon the value of specialized language.

Another contradiction in the *Student Performance Q&A*’s concerns the critical gaze (intensity of focus) desired for effective response on the AP Language Exam. Both sets of *Student Performance Q&A*’s promote what they call the “holistic approach” to reading and writing: “The most successful essays showed evidence that the writers had read . . . holistically” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2004*, Question 1, par. 2); and “Most students would be better served by our use of a more holistic approach. We should begin by examining and discussing a text’s major ideas and its intended purpose before moving on to analyze its pivotal rhetorical moves (*Student Performance Q&A: 2002*, Question 1, par. 4). The “holistic” method is offered as a kind of prescription for the complaint described above regarding student “listing” of devices without properly explaining “the relationship between the parts and the whole” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2001*, What can teachers do to improve performance? par. 6). Both sets of *Student Performance Q&A*’s maintain that isolated noting of devices is no substitute for a “full” (i.e., integrated) account of the architecture of a work obtained through a kind of *gestalt* way of looking (i.e., holistic). This reflects the Aristotelian view that “the whole is more than the sum of its parts,” and the theory

of genre in which certain conventions are common to particular types of writing (Jolliffe 52). The *Student Performance Q&A* for 2001 states: “We need to help students understand the conventions of genres and their relationship to rhetorical situations” (What can teachers do to improve performance? par. 2). These comments express one point of view in the *Student Performance Q&A*’s; however, there is another way of looking—a competing gaze—that I will explore.

Within the *Student Performance Q&A*’s there is an internal tension or contradiction. Even as the “holistic” (gestalt) reading is advocated, that is, attention to form and macro aspects of argument, features of writing that might be identified as opposite (“atomistic,” the negatively charged binary to “holistic” used in the *Student Performance Q&A* for 2004, Question 1, par. 4), seem to hold increasing value. This becomes evident in the strange omnipresence of the word: “nuance” in the *Student Performance Q&A*’s—a term used to describe a desired aspect of writing as well as a factor that an effective analysis trains upon).

Example 1: The Chief Reader in the *Student Performance Q&A* from 2001 observes that “middle-range responses” “often seemed to sense the [passage] was subtle in its appeals, but they were unable to discern or elaborate on its nuances” (Question 1, par. 4). This demonstrates that students might have adequately understood certain macro-level rhetorical concepts, such as the appeals, but were unable to make speak the more subtle, deeper layer in the text: its “nuance.”

Example 2: The *Student Performance Q&A* for 2001 observes that “middle-range papers” “did not deal with the nuance of their own claim. . . . Not surprisingly, such essays also demonstrated less success in employing the arts of persuasion”

(Question 3, par. 4). This comment suggests not precisely a “holistic” focus but more of an emphasis upon the finer elements of style, especially evident in the subjective assessment of their deficiency in the “arts of persuasion.” Example 3: The *Student Performance Q&A* for 2002 states that: “far too many [students] interpreted ‘language’ in its most limited sense, discussing parts of speech when their interests would have been better served by focusing upon such aspects of language as nuance and structure” (Question 2, par. 2). Iteration of the keyword “nuance” throughout the *Student Performance Q&A*’s suggests a competing critical focus (more narrow and specialized, more subtle in distinction, more invested in shades of meaning) than the critical gaze seemingly desired in the “holistic” advice. Interestingly, regarding this sample, it seems that students *did* actually focus on nuance in their exploration of grammar, but apparently it was too nuanced, or the wrong type of nuance (although it is difficult to imagine what could be a more nuanced study of language and structure than grammatical analysis). Example 4: The *Student Performance Q&A* for 2002 states: “We need to incorporate more non-fiction prose that relies upon nuance and insinuation into our syllabi and help students learn how to read such prose with an ear for its implications” (Question 2, par. 4). This is an especially interesting comment as it demotes the “holistic” emphasis established prior and suggests that students cultivate a critical disposition (i.e., the ability to read “with an ear” for “implications”) that would render them more sensitive to “nuance.” The “ability to read with an ear” could be construed as a vague expression of the capacity to appreciate legitimate works that some students would possess, to a greater or

lesser degree, a kind of “connoisseurship” developed from exposure to such works. On this ability, Bourdieu writes:

The competence of the ‘connoisseur’, an unconscious mastery of the instruments of appropriation which derives from slow familiarization and is the basis of familiarity with works, is an ‘art’, a practical mastery which, like an art of thinking or an art of living, cannot be transmitted solely by precept or prescription. Learning it presupposes the equivalent of prolonged contact between disciple and master in traditional education, i.e., repeated contact with cultural works and cultured people. (*Distinction* 66)

Whether or not one views this comment regarding the ability to read “with an ear” for “implications” as a latent marker of social distinction, it is apparent that the emphasis upon “nuance” is a micro versus macro concern. There is thus a contradiction in the commentaries in terms of emphasis upon the precise critical gaze required for a successful response.

Continuing to track the ubiquity of the word “nuance,” the *Student Performance Q&A*’s from 2004-2007 say the same thing; that is, they prioritize “nuance” over features of writing seemingly valued in the “holistic” account of reading and writing. For example, in the *Student Performance Q&A* for 2004, teachers are advised that “students need to practice reading nonfiction texts from a variety of historical periods, looking for subtleties and nuances in these texts rather than simply propositional meaning” (Question 1, par. 6). This suggests readjustment of the critical gaze to a much more finely tuned focus, certainly in

addition to but strangely rivaling emphasis upon central contentions. Likewise, question three from the *Student Performance Q&A* for 2004 indicates that students should “understand and explain the syntactic and lexical nuances” of a passage (par. 1). This abstractly rendered and, seemingly, highly specialized critical requirement, again, sounds less an expression of “holism” and more an immersion in “atomism” which was originally demoted in terms of the preferred critical gaze. One might even say that, paired with the previous example, a vaguely identifiable critical sensibility is emerging: that of an *aesthete*. More examples include: “Essays that scored in the low range in general failed to comprehend the complexities and nuances of [the] text” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2004*, Question 3, par. 5); “The most successful students were able to see the nuances” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2006*, Question 1, par. 2); and [Teachers] “must ensure that students can comprehend complicated nonfiction prose in which the argument is sophisticated and nuanced rather than baldly stated and developed” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2007*, Question 2, par. 4). I am proposing, by tracking the instances of appearances of this word, that 1) iteration demonstrates a conflicted point of view in the commentaries with respect to the authentic critical focus or gaze required for a successful response on the AP Language Exam whereby the authentic value of the “holistic” versus “atomistic” gaze is reversed; and 2) that the “ability to see nuance,” to note fine distinctions in “legitimate works” and reproduce that sensitivity in one’s writing, is what Bourdieu would refer to as a “transformed” expression of social position (i.e., a

shared way of looking, a disposition or tendency, cultivated by a particular social experience). Bourdieu writes:

Nothing more rigorously distinguishes the different classes than the disposition objectively demanded by the legitimate consumption of legitimate works, the aptitude for taking a specifically aesthetic point of view on objects already constituted aesthetically—and therefore put forward for the admiration of those who have learned to recognize the signs of the admirable. (*Distinction* 40)

This is the unstated reason why we must “help students learn how to read [nuanced] prose with an ear for its implications”—because some students *lack* this exposure, and that is a *social rather than academic* fact (Jones, Jones and Hargrove 118). Rather than the “holistic” point of view that the *Student Performance Q&A’s* ostensibly value, iteration of the word “nuance” suggests that an opposite, competing critical sensibility is *desired and rewarded*.

Another contradiction concerns the paradoxical influence that word choice exerts in the commentaries, sometimes seeming to act as a competing (if not more) influential factor of writing than ideas. I say “paradoxical,” as so much content in the *Performance Q&A’s* and the *Scoring Commentaries* is dedicated to the exact opposite; that is, the precise rendering of students’ argument structure and evidence in order to justify the classification of writers. Therefore, these oddly competing moments of subjectivity which seem to prioritize elements of *style over substance* (moments less consistent with the “holistic” account) take the reader by surprise and threaten to destabilize the otherwise carefully wrought

rationale for sorting and evaluating of student work. Consider the following examples:

Although [the paper] is more than competent in its development, this essay is not particularly adept in its use of language.” (*Scoring Commentary: 2000*, Question 3)

The discussion of what the essay redundantly terms “overexaggeration” in the fourth paragraph again reveals imprecise diction and incomplete development. Thus, the essay remains inadequate in its response . . . even though it correctly identifies some satirical strategies and has a unified overall focus. (*Scoring Commentary: 2005*, Question 2)

Many of the essays earning a 9 obtain this score because of their impressive control of language, and this sample is an excellent example of a compelling response that draws much of its power from its lively use of language. (*Scoring Commentary: 2003*, Question 1)

The first example suggests that the paper is intellectually solid but lacks “adeptness” in its word choice. The solid intellectual content in the second sample is derailed by “imprecise diction.” And the third quote in the grouping states that essays that rate highest do so, largely, on the basis of word choice. This is important in the way that emphasis upon word choice reverses the significance of the careful rendering of claims and support bolstering student ranking in the preponderance of commentary, and also in the way that it amplifies the latent emphasis upon word choice in the commentaries, noted earlier (whether professional or idiosyncratic).

Other instances of the rather arbitrary and competing influence word choice exerts upon the judgment of writing (alternately superseding or cinching the efficacy of ideas) include the following comments:

--While the student's language occasionally slips into rather unpolished diction and unconvincing hyperbole, it frequently displays a sense of humor and engaging playfulness that strengthen and counterbalance the essay's purposeful argumentation. (*Scoring Commentary: 2001*, Question 3)

--The essay's success is certainly based upon its persuasive argument, but the writer's language is equally impressive with its demonstration of fluency, expressive vocabulary, and syntactical variety. (*Scoring Commentary 2002*: Question 3)

--In the process of substantiating [the] claim, the writer offers explicit evidence from the texts and skillfully incorporates it into his or her essay. But the student's essay is neither as full nor as skillfully written as the preceding essay. Because [this essay] has less fluency and syntactical variety, its overall effect is not as impressive. (*Scoring Commentary 2003*, Question 3)

The samples demonstrate that "artfully" wrought prose (i.e., word choice and voice) can function as a kind of "credit" (to use Bourdieu's metaphor for symbolic capital [*Distinction* 70]) in its ability to potentially recuperate and/or complement logos (quotes one and two). And the reverse is also true: problematic word choice and/or style can repossess any capital gained from otherwise

reputable logos (sample 3). The implications of this contradiction are two-fold: (a) although not more important than ideas, word choice is a mightily competing factor in the classification of student work, and (b) following Norman Fairclough's definition of the *habitus* as "embodied dispositions to see and act in certain ways based upon socialization and experience, which is partly dispositions to talk and write in certain ways" (*Analyzing Discourse* 28), word choice is a powerful articulation of the class "footprint" of the speaker/writer. Commanding a powerful vocabulary on the AP Language Exam can reap considerable rewards—despite a substantial amount of commentary detailing the logos of student papers that would suggest otherwise.

Yet another problem in the commentary concerns the, understandable, criticism of "formulaic" or "programmatically" responses, such as the five-paragraph essay; however, it is less evident why certain students receive amnesty and others consequences for committing the same error. As vehement as the commentary is in condemning such "generic" and imitative regimens—it is willing to forgive these faults in the case of individual talent. The following remarks constitute examples of the disapproval for mechanistic approaches:

--While such structures as the five-paragraph essay may be useful when introducing students to the writing process, these programmatic structures are inappropriate for continued use in a college-level composition course. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2001*, What can teachers do to improve performance?, par. 12).

--The essay has the added appeal of seeming to be shaped by its own content and not by any Procrustean design. (*Scoring Commentary: 2000*, Question 3)

It is apparent that the author of the commentary finds such approaches “introductory” at best and facile and stultifying at worst. However, paradoxically, some students are able to “transcend” this most banal of “Procrustean design[s]”, rise above the limitations of the form and arrive at an original product by virtue of individual talent and/or style. Here is an example: “While the essay does follow to some extent the ubiquitous five-paragraph format, its content and style clearly transcend the formula (*Scoring Commentary: 2003*, Question 1). The next example is a more pointed illustration of what precisely enables a student to rise above a “programmatically” approach: “Despite his use of a programmatic, five-paragraph structure, the student manages to write this insightful analysis with considerable aplomb, proving that the ubiquitous form can work when used by a gifted writer” (*Scoring Commentary: 2000*, Question 2). However, another writer, of seemingly lesser abilities, does not receive the tolerance granted to the “gifted” writer: “[T]he essay’s reliance upon the five-paragraph format weakens its overall effectiveness, leading the young writer into needless repetition and preventing him or her from developing a more organic structure that would strengthen his or her strongest insights” (*Scoring Commentary: 2001*, Question 1). This is a very serious contradiction as the penalty for the same fault is differentially applied. But perhaps more important is the telling language of the comments, one lauding the “giftedness” of one student, and the other mourning

the lack of an “organic” quality that might have developed without reliance upon the mechanical form.

John Berger would likely refer to such language as “insightful,” “aplomb,” and “gifted” as instances of mystification, or “explaining away what might otherwise be evident” (16). The words seem to free-float in a totally abstract, positively connotative universe of writing descriptors absent any concrete connection whatsoever to the social circumstances that would generate such distinctions in the first place. “Giftedness” or “precocity” is a concept problematized by Bourdieu as a “retranslation” of social class privilege (*Distinction* 70; *State Nobility* 20). From that perspective, the reason why one writer is able to transcend a stultifying form and the other becomes a prisoner of it is, perhaps, less a question of style, and more of the conception of possibilities. Put differently, where would the idea come from that one even could “break the rules” in the setting of a high stakes test? The second student’s refusal to take a risk and improvise upon or venture beyond the predictable form is explained not by lack imagination to realize a fictive “organicism,” but more likely a calculation of real “chances” (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 471), for success or failure, the latter of which, ironically, happened in any event.

The last contradiction in the commentaries has to do with another inequality of judgment. Per instructions given to the readers of the AP Language Exam on the Scoring Rubric, evaluators are advised that:

All essays, even those scored 8 and 9, may contain occasional flaws in analysis, prose style, or mechanics. These lapses should enter into your

holistic evaluation of an essay's overall quality. **In no case** should you score an essay with many distracting errors in grammar and mechanics higher than a 2. (*AP English Language and Composition Scoring Guidelines: 2001*) [emphasis mine]

I submit that there are several instances in the *Scoring Commentaries* where students escape the severity of the mandatory “2” rating for distracting mechanical errors by virtue of their charismatic voice; conversely, others less eloquent fall subject to the penalty. Example 1: The following commentary concerns a paper rated as an “8”: “The writer uses language effectively, even though the essay could certainly have benefited from the use of spell check” (*Scoring Commentary: 2000*, Question 1). Example 2: The following commentary characterizes a paper rated as a “9”: “While the student’s spelling is sometimes as imaginative as his or her prose, the essay clearly elucidates less-than-obvious aspects of [the author’s] style and more than compensates for its lapses in mechanics” (*Scoring Commentary: 2001*, Question 2). Both of these examples, on the basis of the description of error, address potentially “distracting” technical flaws, but the errors are seemingly off-set by the “effective,” “imaginative” prose. Conversely, writers scoring in the lower-half of the rubric receive mocking comments regarding their mechanical errors: “If the essay had been able to rise to this level of discussion throughout, it would have earned a higher score, but the writer also discusses diction in a limited way, and the treatment of compound/complex sentences is baffling” (*Scoring Commentary: 2002*, Question 1). Another essay rates a “4” because it “exhibits lack of

precision and an immature control of language in its diction and sentence structure with phrases like ‘Great quantities of power,’ ‘abundent [sic] amount of power,’ and ‘the element of power exists in a wide range of people in the US’ (*Scoring Commentary: 2005*, Question 1). The lack of sentence fluency and mechanics is here less forgivable, but the adjective “immature” seems overstated and potentially personal (i.e., a comment that could apply to a person rather than a person’s writing—a point to be taken up in a later section).

Caustic Remarks

Speaking as a high school teacher, the first thing that I notice when reading the *Student Performance Q&A’s* and the *Scoring Commentaries* is the sarcastic and deprecating language which frames the errors of students, such as students’ understandable but no less problematic tendency to catalogue rhetorical devices without providing adequate explanation as to their broader function (mentioned previously), and their use of “canned” essay structures. The criticism is logical, but the condescension which frames the problem is not constructive. For instance, student pursuits to locate and explain the function of rhetorical terminology are referred to variously as “scavenger hunts,” “treasure hunts” and “laundry lists”:

--This ‘scavenger hunt’ for terms and/or strategies lead them to read with little real attention to the direction of the author’s writing or her intended purpose and audience. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2001*, What were common threads of error?, par. 1)

--Many students interpreted analysis as a command to go on a treasure hunt. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2002*, Question 1, par. 3)

--Analyzing argument without paying attention to the author's purpose and intended audience is an empty exercise that produces essays in which students merely present laundry lists of techniques they can identify. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2003*, Question 2, par. 4)

--Too many students were relying on memorized laundry lists of stylistic terms without reading carefully to see if such terms were significant in the overall thrust of [the author's] text. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2001*, Question 2, par. 2)

A Bourdieuan reading of metaphor (i.e., consideration of students' efforts at analysis likened to children's games and dirty clothes) would say that the comparisons "barely mask social prejudices" (Bourdieu, *State Nobility* 22). This sort of negative framing or "[de]legitimation" (Fairclough, *Analyzing Discourse* 101) has the effect of representing one group and their writing as inferior or subordinate (versus the attribution of qualities that will be ennobling to another group of students and their writing). Similarly, verbs used to characterize the actions of students are worthy of note: "we hoped to avoid essays in which students *parade* [emphasis mine] a long list of memorized terms without providing explanations of how and why these rhetorical devices are appropriate choices" (*Student Performance Q&A: 2003*, Question 2, par. 1); and "Middle-range papers often seemed to be stretching to use some memorized formula, *trotting out* [emphasis mine] a list of terms that frequently seemed unconnected to

the texts” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2003*, Question 3, par. 2) [italics mine]. The sarcastic language implies that the writers are ridiculous as they naively show things that would not inspire admiration to be seen. Bourdieu refers to this as “euphemized language” in that it translates dispositions of dominant and subordinate positions into terminology less recognizable as a reference to social class (*State Nobility* 36); his point is that positively or negatively framed language works to “consecrate” or diminish social identity (*State Nobility* 37).

Other examples of unduly negative criticism in the *Student Performance Q&A*’s take the form of judgmental pronouncements, like: “Mark Twain complains that ‘we do not think, we only imitate.’ This criticism is certainly true of many students” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2002*, Question 3. par. 6). And, “[t]eachers need to train students to stop settling for their first impression, which is usually too obvious to be interesting” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2003*, Question 3, par. 5). In these two cases, the arrogant tone of the commentary is non-constructive and elitist, which is paradoxical, as the ostensible objective of the *Student Performance Q&A*’s is to help teachers and their students “improve their performance on the exam.” Excessively sarcastic appraisals of student errors (like utilizing a mechanical approach) would also fit into this category: “Sometimes the holy trinity of style analysis (imagery, diction, syntax) helps a reader sort out how a writer has accomplished his effect. Often it does not” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2002*: What can teachers do to improve their performance?). That some students are “religious” in their application of formulaic methods is true, but this reads as more demoralizing than encouraging

because of the snarky, staccato barb that closes out the comment (I reference here Denby's notion of snark as a degraded form of invective which "flatters you by assuming that you get the contemptuous joke. You've been admitted, or readmitted, to a club" [Denby 7]).

Some of the most arbitrary and offensive commentary in the *Student Performance Q&A's* has to do with students utilizing literary methods, terminology and references. The "requirement" to view the disciplines of literature and rhetoric as mutually exclusive is part of a broader debate over the discrete disciplinary "cultures" of literature and rhetorical/composition studies (Elbow "The Cultures" 539). And the language of the *Student Performance Q&A's* vigorously polices this disciplinary divide:

--More than ever, this year's students frequently seemed to be writing for the literature exam, even though their prompts had specifically asked them to look at passages of nonfiction and their assigned activities called for the discerning eyes of a rhetorician rather than those of a literary critic. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2001*, "What were the common threads of error?" par. 1)

--Students were challenged by [the author's] language because they had been trained to look for literary techniques and, when such techniques as symbolism were not present, they shoehorned them into their discussion anyway. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2001*, Question 2, par. 2)

--[Some students] felt compelled to talk about literature—even though such references never seemed appropriate. Hester Prynne made unexpected and inappropriate appearances in the essays for Question 3 as well, as though some students were determined to use something from the novel that they had read during the year” (*Student Performance Q&A:2001*, Question 3, par. 5).

--[S]tudents went looking for symbols as though they were interpreting a work of overly symbolic literature or literary allegory, failing to recognize that in nature writing, an owl is usually just an owl. (*Student Performance Q&A:2001*, Question 2, par. 6)

As evident in the preceding quotes, the methods (and perhaps even the texts) of literary studies are de-legitimated from the vantage point of the “discerning eyes of the rhetorician.” Students’ understandable attempt to use material from their coursework (albeit, perhaps unsuitable for their purpose) is mocked by the word “shoehorned.” The rigor of studies on the high school level is called into question with the: “determined to use something from the novel they read” remark. And disciplinary separatism, again, appears in another highly arbitrary pronouncement from the *Student Performance Q&A* for 2001: “While the conventions of literature and nonfiction prose share some features, others are rarely present in both genres” (What can teachers do to improve performance? par. 2). Viewed charitably, the emphasis of the quotes above could be seen as a retranslation of Flower’s view that “[g]ood writers not only have a large repertory of powerful strategies, but they have sufficient self-awareness of their own

process to draw on these alternative techniques as they need them” (cited in Berlin 686). However, in the context of dominant cultural capital, it is not difficult to imagine that many students believe literary allusion to be a strategy that they can deploy for dividends—and not unjustifiably, as a particular kind of literary knowledge still constitutes, for many, a (presumed) confirmation of what it means to be “cultured” (Graff and Robbins). So, to disallow this form of school acquired knowledge further narrows the specialization of the tasks required on the exam as well as the knowledge base required to respond successfully.

Finally, one might identify another category of negative commentary: the “left-handed compliment,” that is, a negative remark delivered as, presumably, positive. For instance: “the least successful responses” were “occasionally interesting in their own right” (*Student Performance Q& A: 2006*, Question 3, par. 3). And, “[w]hile the essay offers more insight than an essay earning a 6, it is less accomplished than the higher-scoring responses” (*Scoring Commentary: 2000*, Question 2). And: “Yet even the weakest papers were able to offer some comment about [the author’s] rhetoric or purpose” (*Student Performance Q& A: 2003*, Question 2, par. 2). Bourdieu observes that “even the virtues [students from the “middle-regions of social space”] are esteemed to possess are themselves negative ones: ‘bookish,’ ‘painstaking,’ ‘careful,’ ‘earnest,’ ‘methodical,’ ‘timid,’ ‘well-behaved,’ ‘decent,’ ‘reasonable’” (*State Nobility* 33). If “middle-range” students in the *Student Performance Q&A’s* and *Scoring Commentaries* were granted “virtues” enough times, then perhaps an investigation might be possible, but usually they are not. When the “middle” to “lower-range” students do receive

praise, the compliment incorporates a kind of “take-back,” like: “Students were savvy about this text being a piece of prose specifically crafted to convey meaning, purpose, and effect to a particular reader—but they often did not perceive the overall argument the [passage] makes” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2004*, Question 1, par. 4). As a rule, in the *Student Performance Q&A’s*, “middle” and “low-range” responses serve only as illustrations of “errors or omissions.” They are the perfect bad examples, the dim obverse to the high-scoring students’ “gift.” And what I am pointing out here is that the excessively critical voice in the aforementioned samples from the commentaries would probably not benefit the group that needs assistance the most.

Images of Schooling

Similar to the predominately critical representations of school in popular culture (e.g., *The Breakfast Club*, *Carrie*, *Election*, *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, *Heathers*, etc.), school is represented in the *Student Performance Q&A’s* as the opposite of an intellectually stimulating environment. The lessons of school culture are mechanistic and stifling, and secondary teachers subject students to misleading information which the professorate must long-sufferingly “unteach.”

For example:

Those of us who teach college-level composition often find that teaching students to forsake such methods [“generic prescriptions” for writing] can be as difficult as convincing them to use the word “I” in an essay. We are often forced to devote too much time in composition courses to “unteaching” such carefully memorized rules and programs. (*Student*

Performance Q&A: 2001, What can teachers do to improve performance?
par. 12)

This contains elements of truth but, as I stated in the previous section, the language is so off-putting, particularly in the construction of the: us versus them dichotomy (established by the imperious use of the pronoun “We”) that this would likely be another missive that would fail to reach its intended recipient (i.e., the teacher who would need to hear it the most).

More to the point, school acquired knowledge—ostensibly the desired outcome of an AP course—is discounted or disqualified (as in the edict against literary methods) in the *Student Performance Q&A’s* in favor of a more ambiguously drawn kind of knowledge and skill set which would, likely, be attained *outside* of school. Evidence of this is found in the critical renderings of the “generic,” rote or “programmatically knowledge” acquired in school; in comments painting school acquired knowledge as simplistic and misleading; and, alternately, comments regarding less tangible, privatized forms of knowledge and abilities alluded to in the narratives which are difficult to isolate as descriptions are often abstract and fleeting. The antithetical renderings of school culture, in turn, generate different portraits of students as, on the one hand, drones and automatons who mindlessly carry out the prescriptions of secondary teachers, and others who seemingly “free-style” beyond the limitations of the institutional environment.

The following quote sampling represents the continuum of portraits of school in the *Student Performance Q&A's* and *Scoring Commentaries*.

Commentary follows each aggregate of quotes.

Formulaic Instruction

--Following formulaic structures can certainly help students learn to write commentary and opinion which is a first step toward analysis, but these models often produce thesis statements that are too broad, general, or obvious. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2001*, What can teachers do to improve performance?, par. 12).

--While the five-paragraph response may work quite well in answering examination questions, and can give a semblance of organization it frequently leads students to a number of problems . . . [such as] the omission of a necessary fourth [point] because it does not fit the magical number of 3. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2001*, What can teachers do to improve performance?, par. 12).

--As I mentioned last year, programmatic methods discourage [original] thought teaching students to imitate by substituting form for substance. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2002*, Question 3, par. 6).

--This essay offers an analysis of [the author's] rhetorical strategies that relies too heavily upon programmatic approaches and, as a consequence, fails to make the most of the student's insights. (*Scoring Commentary: 2001*, Question 1)

Crovitz, in his study of writing instruction overwritten by standardized test preparation, noted the tendency of teachers to follow similarly hollow and generic templates for composition contra to best practices (2; 33; 80-82; 88; 90-94; 97; 111), such as the Schaffer method of essay construction which looks something like a Mad Lib (i.e., a fill-in-the-blank prescription for components of an essay). And Graff and Birkenstein's templates for arguments provided in *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing* are not without controversy (xiv-xvi). Still, school knowledge framed as mechanistically produced and intellectually desiccated, as well as the implication that school inculcates the banality of routine (Bourdieu, *State Nobility* 27) and is largely insensitive to the higher-order thought and skills that are compromised in the process, is not without a sense of reductionism. Bourdieu notes that certain expressions of knowledge have clear signs of the source of their acquisition, and that the most highly prized forms of academic expression appear pristine or untouched by an obvious "scholasticism" (*State Nobility* 21).

In this sense *only*—recognizing that the five-paragraph essay is an artificial construction that has been abused by educators—from the perspective of social distinction, the five paragraph essay is also a telltale expression of an illegitimate form of knowledge precisely because it is so grotesquely *fingerprinted by the hand of schooling*. Put differently, the five paragraph essay hyper-betrays the source of its acquisition. In Bourdieu's study, and as I will demonstrate in the commentaries on the AP Exam, "superior" student performance is described to have an indefinable, original, *ex nihilo* quality (*State*

Nobility 21), and that is exactly opposite of the kind of “generic” (*Scoring Commentary: 2003*, Question 1), “formulaic” and “derivative” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2002*, Question 3, par. 6) writing produced by middle to low range writers.

School as Misleading

--After reading the comments on the Electronic Discussion Group (EDG) for AP English Literature and Composition and talking with several AP teachers and students, I realized that some teachers had told their students that the first question is always an analysis. The Development Committee has no set pattern for asking questions, and teachers need to discourage their students from making assumptions about the intention of a prompt based upon the placement of question types in past exams. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2003*, Question 1, par. 5)

--Perhaps having been schooled to expect such a question, students frequently produced relatively predictable academic themes, with one paragraph about, for example, [the author’s] diction, one about his syntax, and one about his tone. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2004*, Question 3, par. 6)

--Students were challenged by [the author’s] language because they had been trained to look for literary techniques. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2001*, Question 2, par. 2)

The AP Language Exam commentary here warns students and teachers not to forecast test content, generate patterns of address for question types, imagine

that what has come before will come again, or attempt to inhabit the mind of the evaluators. The message is that the institution does wrong to do this kind of prognostication. While this is true, there is also a certain level of myopia expressed here, especially in light of Berliner's application of Campbell's Law to high stakes testing (i.e., the higher the stakes, the more likely one will see unacceptable forms of test preparation [Nichols and Berliner 27]). This does not justify teacher efforts to "outsmart" the exam or teach writing for the eventuality of the exam. But teachers' misguided efforts in these quotes should demonstrate that the AP Exam is *not an intellectual exercise*, in the sense of David Hume's challenge of the inductive argument that just because the sun always rose in the past it will continue to do so. The AP Exam has serious potential benefits and consequences, and attempts to strategize for it might be viewed, in the context of power relations, as the tactics of the weak deployed against the strong (de Certeau 34).

Devaluation and/or Restriction of School-Acquired Knowledge

--Other students seemed to spend far too much time locating [the prompt] in its time and era, perhaps providing information about the Civil War that they had studied in their American history course. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2003*, Question 2, par. 3)

--[W]e need to teach our students how to find appropriate evidence for public discussions of current events and issues, recognizing that the literary works one reads for a course—fiction, poetry, and drama—might

not always provide the best evidence to support claims about issues in the public eye. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2006*, Question 3, par. 4)

Similar to the complaints in the previous section regarding the “inappropriateness” of literary-analytic methods, in these statements, one sees the devaluation and/or attempt to establish conditions to limit use of certain forms of school acquired knowledge. Perhaps the students’ historical set described in the first quote was excessive and/or misplaced; but coursework, for many, is the sole or, at least, one of the most significant sources of dominant cultural capital from which to draw, so it seems problematic to critique students for tapping that reserve whenever possible. If certain disciplinary references are “off the table,” for political reasons (e.g., the “culture wars” between rhetorical and literary studies), and reference to one’s coursework is intermittently allowable—then from where *should* students draw examples to fortify their writing?

Students as Drones and Automatons

--Middle-range responses . . . evidenced a somewhat mechanical approach, applying a generic template that made for mediocre analysis and writing. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2001 AP English Language and Composition Free Response Questions*, Question 1, par. 4)

--Lower-range papers paraphrased, summarized, misread, or listed. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2002*, Question 2, par. 2)

--Middle-range papers . . . frequently seemed to be going through the motions of argumentation. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2002*, Question 3, par. 4)

Again, teachers of composition would not disagree with this assessment; the condemnation of writing by “auto-pilot” is correct. And the “lower-order skills” (calibrated by Bloom’s Taxonomy) noted above, such as paraphrasing, summarizing, and listing, are weak substitutes for the creative investment required by effective writing. However, in the sociology of Bourdieu, such characterizations are not “strictly academic” but rather “euphemized” accounts of “social positions” which, when viewed against the full range of expressions, paint a metonymic portrait of the taxonomy of class (*State Nobility* 36-37). The comments seem to commence as writer-ly descriptions (e.g., “mechanical”) and then subtly blend into characterizations of human “presence” (Bourdieu and Passeron, *Reproduction* 163) (e.g., “going through the motions”), markers of distinct ways of being (and perhaps even working) in the world. This is a topic that I ultimately explore by looking at the full range of positive and negative descriptors which suggest the *habitus* or “social footprint” of test respondents.

Symbolic Capital

--[T]he best writers were able to demonstrate their abilities with ease. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2001*, Question 1, par. 6)

--[T]he prose of this paper is full, articulate, and fluent. (*Scoring Commentary: 2004*, Question 2)

--[T]he faculty consultants generally found the student’s fearless confidence to be refreshing. (*Scoring Commentary: 2001*, Question 3)

Some students in the commentaries do not need to rely upon canned formulas (like the students noted earlier who were able to transcend prescribed

forms and templates and free-style with “gift” and “aplomb”). The precise origin of this talent, this sense of style and confidence, is never overtly addressed in the commentaries, but *only its effect* (i.e., it manifests as the tendency to write in a way that is especially “full,” “apt,” “fluent” and “sophisticated”—all actual descriptors from the commentary that I elaborate upon in the coming section). The sense of “aplomb” attributed to high-range writers, a variation on the word “ease” or self-assurance is a vital marker, for Bourdieu, of inherited cultural capital (*Distinction* 66). The juxtaposition of high-range writers’ “aplomb” with the awkwardness of low-range writers *sets the social compass* in the commentaries (i.e., it establishes the class polarities euphemized in the descriptions). As the quotes above demonstrate, what is admirable about the high-range writers may be *less a matter of their writing and more a manner of their being*.

That these qualities (i.e., ways of being, dispositions) are congruent with different forms of symbolic capital already in possession of some students is difficult to substantiate as the proof is diffusely and obliquely registered throughout the *Student Performance Q&A’s* and *Scoring Commentaries*, and is therefore perhaps accessible only by inference. One piece of evidence, at this point, for the influence of differentially held cultural capital is found in the idea of experience, the value, in the commentaries, placed upon some students’ ability to draw upon *their own experiences* which others, seemingly, have in limited store. For instance, consider the following comments:

--These students gave evidence of being self-aware—their positions were consciously chosen, considered carefully, and emerged from their own reading, experience, and observation. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2006*, Question 3, par. 2)

--[S]tudents synthesized ideas from their reading, observation, and experience. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2005*, Question 3, par. 4)

--These students were able to draw on and reflect what they already knew about advertising and its effects. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2007*, Question 1, par. 2)

--The strongest writers often drew on—and specifically rendered—their own experience with school-based charity events. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2007*, Question 3, par. 2)

Versus:

--Weaker students often wrote long harangues . . . without offering sufficient support for their exaggerated claims. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2003*, Question 1, par. 2)

--The low-range essays were frequently ill informed about their topic. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2004*, Question 2, par. 5)

--Students made four common errors. The first, and most prevalent, was producing an essay that had neither a strong claim to make . . . nor clear, appropriate evidence to support a claim. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2005*, Question 1, par. 3)

--The second [error] involved producing essays that relied on thin generalizations . . . and a passing acquaintance with current events.

(*Student Performance Q&A:2005*: Question 3, par. 3)

The idea of a personal bank or repository of knowledge constituting one's own experience is something that everyone would own, but which would be "stocked" differently, in that personal histories are differently socially and historically constituted. According to Bourdieu, dominant holders of symbolic capital "only have to be what they are" (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 23), which registers as the sum total of their privileged experiences. What is especially useful to "the most successful writers" in the third quote from the first set above? "--what they already knew." What is the chief liability of the second group of writers? The knowledge they lack to generate meaningful backing and discussion. So, I am suggesting that the element offered up as the most generally accessible reservoir of knowledge (experience) is actually the most class-coded form of knowledge because it is, largely, *not acquired in school* (as the previous section on devaluation of school acquired knowledge suggests). On this subject, Bourdieu remarks that the educational system "reserv[es] its favors for those students who owe it the least with respect to what matters most" (*State Nobility* 23).

Consider the following:

--Students who succeeded on question 3 evidently . . . came from classrooms where students synthesized ideas from their reading, observation, and experience, from the social sciences, natural and life sciences, literature and the arts, as well as from their travel, work

experience, and immersion in whatever media outlets they could find that reflect multiple viewpoints. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2005*, Question 3, par. 4)

--In preparing for the synthesis question, as with the traditional argument question, students need to be given opportunities to develop their own voices, to understand themselves as agents of their own learning. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2007*, Question 1, par. 4)

Regarding the first quote, there is much pre-existing “credit” in this classroom, to use Bourdieu’s dominant metaphor for symbolic capital (*Distinction* 70), credit of varying types. Academic capital leaves off after literature and verges into capital associated with familiarity with the arts, which is followed by the social capital of travel and work experience (though, admittedly, the latter may vary widely). As for “media outlets” (preference for which is dictated by taste which is informed by social class, as Bourdieu demonstrates in his study of the relationship between social class and cinema [*Distinction* 26-27]), this form of capital might include knowledge of *specific* films, familiarity with *particular* websites, membership with *select* list-serves, or listenership of NPR.

The second quote seems important in the way that it sets the individual apart from the institution of schooling: I am referring to the phrase: “agents of their own learning.” This bears a relationship to the remarks above concerning Bourdieu’s notion that the most prized form of scholarship appears as the least “handled” by scholastic culture (*State Nobility* 27). The “agents of their own learning” perform an act of transcendence: they “develop their own voices.”

“Agents of their own learning” implies a kind of romantic “autodidacticism” (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 24). The language is almost Emersonian in the premium placed upon individuality and self-reliance. “Agents of their own learning” are strictly DIY (do-it-yourself). On one hand, this seems like the perfect realization of Dewey’s dream for a purely experiential education—except for the fact that autodidacticism is an ahistorical fiction. We know that some students already possess many types of resources to do the work of becoming “agents of their own learning” and that others rely upon pre-packaged models due to a scarcity of resources (Nichols and Berliner; Jones, Jones and Hargrove).

The question now becomes: How do we come closer to identifying the “euphemized” class content in the descriptions of writers in the commentaries? How do class-coded identities manifest in the commentaries in a certain Voice?

Classification: The Sorting Mechanism within the Commentary

--Essays that scored in the low range on this question showed little success in the same areas in which the successful essays excelled.

(*Student Performance Q&A: 2004*, Question 2, par. 5)

This is what Bourdieu calls “explaining the higher by the lower” (*Distinction* 472). The low scoring students and/or their papers (essays and responses are often attributed with agency in the commentaries) are the obverse of the high scoring ones. What the low scoring papers do wrong implies what the high scoring papers do right. The implicit logic is that one can come to know excellence through its absence, that deficit indirectly suggests surplus. Weakness can be identified and prescribed for in a way different from excellence.

“Superior” is remote; inferior is tangible. This implicit logic is borne out in the following way. The presence of “high-range” writers and their writing in the commentaries is depicted in abstract, largely idealized terms; whereas, the presence of “low-range” writers and their writing is depicted in elaborated, concrete and deprecating detail. This demonstrates Bourdieu’s concept of the “euphemized” language of assessment; he argues that the taxonomy of writers is metonymic of the taxonomy of social class where “the comments become more harshly and less euphemistically expressed as the social origins of the students descend” (Bourdieu, *State Nobility* 33). As I stated in the introduction to this study regarding its limitations, data is limited regarding the socio-economic background of the test-taking population (*The Sixth Annual AP Report to the Nation*, “Highlights” 2); however, this does not preclude the analysis of commentaries associated with the AP Language Exam from viewing some of the comments as implicit and explicit expressions of the social class history of test-takers. For instance, on the explicit end of the continuum of descriptors, reference to student writing as having a “workmanship-like” quality” (*Scoring Commentary: 2000*, Question 1) or as being “workmanlike in its structure” (*Scoring Commentary: 2000*, Question 3) constitutes the most overt, concrete expression of the correlation between social history and writing. Conversely, on the opposite end of the continuum of descriptions there are comments vaguely signing to the talents and dispositions of those with higher socio-economic status, like: “sophisticated,” “impressive,” and “gifted” (*Scoring Commentary: 2000*, Questions 2-3), or “distinctive” (*Scoring Commentary: 2001*, Question 2). I here

produce a grouping of descriptors which seem to sign to distinct social groups. The list reifies the classificatory mechanism at work in the commentaries. Per Bourdieu's study, evidence of the correlation between descriptors of student work and social class may be found in certain "oppositions" (*State Nobility* 37; *Distinction* 468) that recur in the commentary (e.g., full vs. empty, knowing vs. incognizant, artful vs. mechanical, etc.). Bourdieu writes:

The network of oppositions between high (sublime, elevated, pure) and low (vulgar, low, modest), spiritual and material, fine (refined, elegant) and coarse (heavy, fat, crude, brutal), light (subtle, lively, sharp, adroit) and heavy (slow, thick, blunt, laborious, clumsy), free and forced, broad and narrow, or, in another dimension, between unique (rare, different, distinguished, exclusive, exceptional, singular, novel) and common (ordinary, banal, commonplace, trivial, routine), brilliant (intelligent) and dull (obscure, grey, mediocre), is the matrix of all the commonplaces which find such ready acceptance because behind them lies the whole social order. (*Distinction* 468)

Short of data on the socio-economic status of individual test-takers but based upon Bourdieu's study of teacher commentary in *The State Nobility*, it is in the language of test assessment that the *habitus* or social history of the test-takers is located per dualities like the ones noted above. Bourdieu explains:

The taxonomy that expresses and structures academic perception practically is a neutralized and misrecognizable, in other words, euphemized, form of the dominant taxonomy. It is structured according to

the hierarchy of qualities commonly attributed to members of the dominated classes (the ‘classes populaires’) (servility, vulgarity, awkwardness, slowness, poverty, etc.), to occupants of the middle (‘petty bourgeois’) positions (small-mindedness, mediocrity, uprightness, earnestness, etc.), and to the dominant groups (sincerity, breadth, wealth, ease, skill, finesse, ingenuity, subtlety, intelligence, culture, etc.). (*State Nobility* 37)

It is important to have an idea of these polarized characterizations in order to determine which descriptors in the commentaries seem consonant with Bourdieu’s findings. Obviously, the specific class hierarchy Bourdieu describes in French society is not a mirror of social stratification in the United States, nor does it need to be. My interest is only whether evaluator descriptors, inadvertently, contain markers of class distinction, and what form such evidence takes.

But first I address the uneven distribution of remarks in the commentary, the imbalanced proportion of negative to positive remarks, especially evident in the earliest *Student Performance Q&A*’s (2001, 2002 and 2004), but seen generally throughout. This is important to consider due to the fact that the ideal performance on the AP Language Exam is a relatively fleeting image in the commentaries compared to the all-too-material presence of error. This is reified in three ways: (a) more paragraphs in the commentaries are dedicated to rendering student error and/or problems of composition than paragraphs are dedicated to the effective strategies that students employ, (b) despite distinct sections in the

commentary that will, ostensibly, provide discrete data on how “well” students did versus “errors or omissions,” negative commentary is dispersed throughout; and (c) positive comments regarding high-range writers are rendered in more abstract language than the concrete (and often harsh) expression of errors committed by the low-range students.

To begin, as it was the first of the *Student Performance Q&A*'s and established the organizational format for the reports to follow, the *Student Performance Q&A* for 2001 is representative, in its arrangement, of the disproportionate number of negative to positive comments. This is so because comments are organized on a tri-part principle (i.e., divided by range between “high,” “middle,” and “low”). As a rule, middle and low-range papers receive only comments that describe their weaknesses (i.e., their work represents only “errors and omissions”) because the comments provide a rationale for why these papers did not score higher. When middle and low-range writers are discussed separately, this yields two paragraphs of negative commentary. Conversely, discussion concerning what students did “well” is limited to papers that score in the high-range category; these papers are praised for their strategies and this yields one paragraph of positive commentary. The ratio, therefore, in the earliest *Student Performance Q&A*, of negative to positive commentary is 2:1. For a more comprehensive portrait of content, the following is a paragraph by paragraph detail of the *Performance Q&A for 2001* with the paragraphs coded for predominately positive, negative or neutral content (see fig. 1).

Student Performance Q&A: 2001

One paragraph: explanatory (neutral)

One paragraph: General overview (mixed)

Question 1

What was intended by this question?

One paragraph: explanatory (neutral)

How well did the students perform? What were common errors or omissions?

One paragraph: General overview (mixed)

One paragraph: “best papers” (positive)

One paragraph: “middle-range responses” (negative)

One paragraph: “weaker papers” (negative)

One paragraph: general overview (mixed)

Question 2

What was intended by this question?

One paragraph: explanatory (neutral)

How well did the students perform? What were common errors or omissions?

One paragraph: General overview (mixed)

One paragraph: “best papers” (positive)

One paragraph: “middle-range papers” (negative)

Two paragraphs: “lower-range papers” (negative)

Question 3

What was intended by this question?

One paragraph: explanatory (neutral)

How well did the students perform? What were common errors or omissions?

One paragraph: General overview (mixed)

One paragraph: “best papers” (positive)

One paragraph: “middle-range papers” (negative)

One paragraph: “lower-range papers” (negative)

What were common threads of errors?

One paragraph: General commentary (negative)

What can teachers do to improve performance?

One paragraph: Advertisement for College Board workshops (neutral)

(Aggregate) twelve bullet-point notes on problems and recommendations for solving them (mixed)

Fig. 1. Positive, negative and neutral content (2001).

A snapshot of content, therefore, per data contained in fig. 1, for the *Student Performance Q&A for 2001* is 5 neutral paragraphs, 6 mixed-content paragraphs, 3 positive paragraphs, and 7 negative paragraphs. Here, it is empirically evident that the number of purely positive paragraphs is less than the number of predominately negative and mixed-content paragraphs.

Later *Student Performance Q&A's* (except ones produced in the years: 2002 and 2004) do not report separately on the performance of high, middle, and low-range scorers; later reports convey, instead, what students did “well” in one section and relegate “errors and omissions” to another section. Although this appears to limit the amount of “air-time” devoted to negative commentary, that is not actually the case as negative commentary is even found in the paragraph(s) dedicated to the question: “How well did students perform?” This is because, in the *Student Performance Q&A's*, middle and low range authors seemingly do little to nothing “well.”

Here is one instance of proof of the predominance of the negative commentary that I describe above. As I mentioned, after 2001, the distinction between high, middle and low-range commentary was abandoned in all *Student Performance Q&A's* except reports from the years 2002 and 2004. Commentary for Question 3 on the 2002 Exam and all Questions on the Exam for 2004, however, still addressed categories of students separately as high, middle, and low-range papers. Paradoxically, negative paragraphs of commentary on middle and low-range scorers appeared within the “How well did students perform on this question?” section as opposed to the section in which one might expect to see

them: “What were common errors or omissions?” This makes it appear that there are more paragraphs containing positive commentary in the tests for 2002 and 2004 than there are in reality. Actual content reportage (negative, positive or neutral) for paragraphs related to the question: “How well did students perform on this question?” for the years 2002 and 2004 include (see fig. 2).

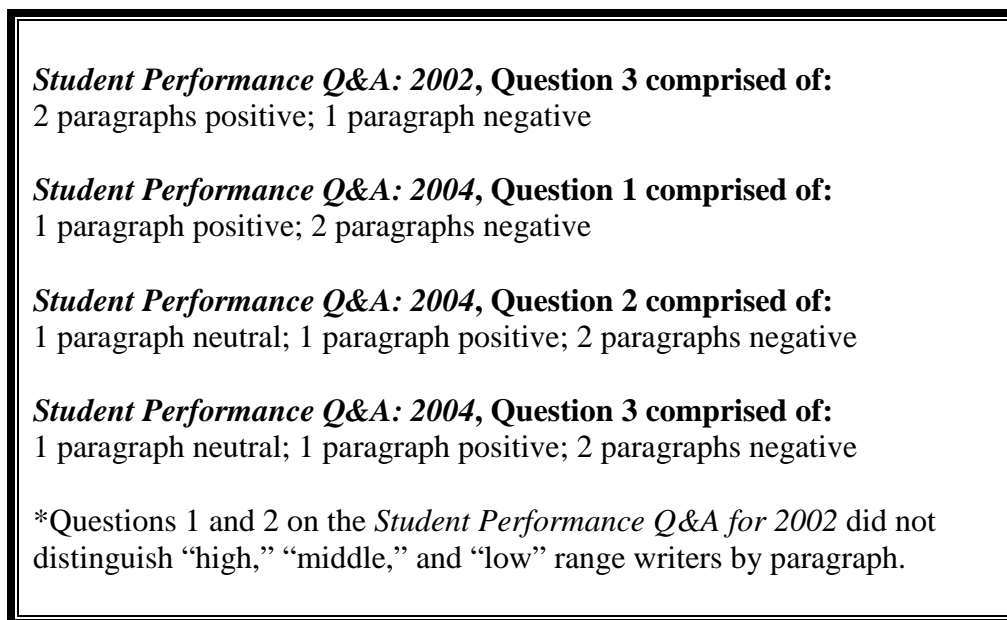


Fig. 2. Positive, negative, and neutral content by paragraph (2002, 2004).

In a sense, pointing out discrepancies of this kind is going a long way to say something relatively simple about the *Student Performance Q&A*'s. If there is less positive commentary, there is less of an opportunity for students and teachers to actually see what it is that they should aspire to in a response. To put it in an even more homely way, it is harder to hit a moving target. A section dedicated to “how well” students performed should address that content (that is, presumably, why there is a separate section for “errors and omissions”). And

even though, one might argue, the balance of negative to positive commentary is righted in the section that provides teachers with suggestions for improving student performance in the future—that is no substitute for a fully-elaborated portrait of what high-scoring students did well. A Bourdieuan reading of this situation might locate the “scarcity value” in effect (i.e., rarity increases market value) or, that which is least visible is prized most highly [Bourdieu, *Distinction* 120; 133]). The glimpse of excellence in the *Student Performance Q&A*’s is transitory and difficult to grasp because 1) it is rarely seen, and 2) positive remarks are often rendered in more abstract terms.

For instance, consider the different texture of the following comments: “Many of the better essays addressed the sensuousness of the passage or commented upon the relationship between its lyricism and the emotional swoon [the author] experience,” versus “Lower-range papers reflected their author’s confusion with the passage. . . . Many attempted to summarize the passage or to elaborate on the insignificant, or they invented an oxymoron that did not exist” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2001*, Question 2, pars. 3; 5). There is a completely different feel to the commentaries above which could be described in terms of a soft/hard dichotomy, but that would address only one aspect of the textural difference. The first characterization of writing seems, for all its evocative language, fairly vague about precisely what the “better” essays did well. But there is no such confusion concerning the second commentary—students performed lower-order functions, misunderstood the passage, and, seemingly, fabricated evidence. One glimpse of good writing is obscure, the other is lucid.

How could the precise expectation of good writing be plainly drawn from the first sample?

Here is another illustration of the same situation. One comment reads: “Students who succeeded . . . developed a thoughtful, sophisticated, evidence-rich argument”; whereas, another comment asserts that those who scored in the “lower-half of the range” offered “assertions, leaving their opinions unsupported and undeveloped” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2007*, Question 3, pars. 2; 4). Again, although the first comment may appear replete with description, what is actually meant by the words: “thoughtful,” “sophisticated,” and “rich”? These words are not quantifiable in the same way that error is quantifiable in the second comment. That is to say, one could express (measure, show degree or frequency of) the absence of supporting detail in a way that one could not quantify a demonstration of “sophistication” (though, in Bourdieu, such intangible qualities are meticulously scrutinized and weighted by the arbiters of taste) (*Distinction* 92). Likewise, I am not certain how “thoughtfulness” or “richness” can be scaled. The texture of difference in this second example might be expressed by the dichotomy: full/empty, but that does not concretely establish the quality of writing desired on the exam. From comments such as these we may conclude that a desired response on the AP Language Exam is somewhat elusive, but a miss is all too evident.

The intangible, vague quality of the positive descriptors in the test commentaries (both in the *Student Performance Q&A*'s and in the *Scoring Commentaries*) derives from the abstract language used to characterize good

writing, whereas problematic writing is described in more concrete and harsh terms. The following is a lexicon derived from the *Student Performance Q&A*'s with an emphasis upon positive and negative modifiers. Repetition and emphasis upon certain motifs (themes) builds out a relationship to class identity. The following de-contextualized catalogue places salient terms in high relief and renders visible the individuals who possess these qualities. A system of differences is here evident which translates the subjective judgment of the exam. This register is *the sorting mechanism* of the AP Language Exam (see fig. 3).

This list is suggestive but signifies nothing until it is rearranged to locate dichotomies or oppositions that will signify specific ways of being. A common practice in qualitative methodology is the coding of data which is defined by Charmaz as “the process of categorizing and sorting data. Codes range from simple, concrete, and topical categories to more general, abstract conceptual categories emerging from theory (111). This “researcher created” versus “received” method of categorization, a distinction noted by Charmaz as the difference between qualitative and quantitative coding practices (111), is used to highlight patterns across a range of written texts. The specialized coding I will create is suggested by both Bourdieu’s location of oppositions as well as Derrida’s commitment to search for the binary oppositions within texts (*Of Grammatology* 56). Looking across the lists of descriptors, several categories suggest themselves or recur as oppositions, beyond the primary opposition of positive and negative (see fig. 4).

Student Performance Q&A: 2001

Pos: Best, intellectual, perceptive, clear, superior, full, fully, carefully, discerning, appropriate

Neg: Unable, mechanical, generic, mediocre, plodding, belabored, unproductive, generic, unwilling, underprepared, less successful, (not) coherent, sad, flat-footed, (not) insightful, inappropriate, predictable, pedestrian, broad, general, obvious

Student Performance Q&A: 2002

Pos: Better, more capable, successful, careful, superior, stronger, original

Neg: Less successful, weak/weaker, less capable, thin, limited, inappropriate, formulaic, derivative

Student Performance Q&A: 2003

Pos: Successful, fully, careful, plausible, fluent

Neg: Weaker/weakest, exaggerated, overly judgmental, amorphous, superficial, less successful, less well, obvious, inaccurate

Student Performance Q&A: 2004

Pos: Successful, holistically, strong, mature, abundant, appropriate, best, sophisticated, fully, intelligently, fluently, informed, concrete, specific, genuinely, effective, full, clear, complete, distinctive, correctly, carefully

Neg: Atomistically, less, broad, general, ill-informed, (not) plausible, (not) sufficient, (not) convincing, (not) credible, one-sided, limited, predictable

Student Performance Q&A: 2005

Pos: Successful, best, clear, rich, self-sufficient, full, broad, clearly, ample, appropriate, sophisticated

Neg: (not) strong, (not) clear, tangential, incoherent, inappropriate, irrelevant, simply, briefly, summarily, (not) substantial, thin, passing

Student Performance Q&A: 2006

Pos: Successful, correctly, specific, abundant, self-aware, consciously, carefully, authoritatively, thoughtfully, transparent, clear, appropriate

Neg: imprecise, faulty, perplexed, occasionally interesting

Student Performance Q&A: 2007

Pos: Self-reflective, successful, full, solid, thoughtful, sophisticated, rich, strongest, broader, authoritatively, appropriate

Neg: Confused, relatively unable, undeveloped, unsure, sketchy, imprecise, unconnected

Student Performance Q&A: 2008

Pos: well-prepared, better, successful, effective, clear, cogent, convincing, sound, creditable, sincere

Neg: poorly, merely/mere, simply, generally, only, sketchy, imprecise, loosely connected, distorted

Student Performance Q&A: 2009

Pos: successful, strong, sophisticated, personal, well-chosen, appropriate, strongest

Neg: merely/mere, formulaic, little, adequately, less-successful, dark, formulaic, dutifully, wrong, simply

Student Performance Q&A: 2010

Pos: original, clearly, effective, compelling, coherent, convincing, appropriate, accurately, forcefully, full, engaging, lucid, alive, healthy

Neg: Ineffective, faulty, formulaic, jarring, random, disorganized, blatant, duty-bound, distracting, competent, adequate, pedestrian

Fig. 3. Positive and negative descriptors (2001-2010)

Full full /-y plausible abundant informed complete self-sufficient broad / broader ample solid well-prepared holistically	Empty unproductive underprepared limited thin superficial ill-informed little (not) sufficient limited less irrelevant mere / -ly simply briefly summarily (not) substantial passing undeveloped sketchy only one-sided atomistically	Distinctive / Artful discerning appropriate original distinctive rich sophisticated well-chosen perceptive	Artless / Uninspired mechanical generic inappropriate predictable pedestrian obvious occasionally interesting (not) insightful derivative formulaic blatant
Strong / In Control more capable strong /-ger /-gest better / best superior effective correctly cogent compelling convincing successful accurately sound forcefully authoritatively	Weak / Not In Control unable mediocre less capable less well (not) convincing (not) strong (not) plausible (not) credible wrong less successful adequate competent ineffective faulty poorly	Precision / Focus coherent lucid clear /-ly concrete specific transparent careful /-fully	Vagueness / Diffusion unconnected tangential exaggerated incoherent disorganized distorted (not) clear random amorphous general imprecise broad
Positive Personal Hexis consciously thoughtful /-fully self-reflective creditable sincere self-aware mature sophisticated intelligently engaging genuinely alive healthy personal fluent -ly	Negative Personal Hexis plodding belabored unwilling sad flat-footed confused overly judgmental unsure dark dutifully duty-bound distracting perplexed jarring		

Fig. 4. Researcher categorization of positive and negative descriptors.

First, per a content analysis performed with the Writer's Workbench computer software program trained to isolate the percent of vague and abstract vocabulary, both the positive and negative descriptor lists (prior to reorganization) registered as problematic in surpassing the acceptable percentage of vague and abstract vocabulary content suggested by the American Psychological Association (Writer's Workbench indicates an acceptable level of vague vocabulary as below

3%, and below 2% for abstract vocabulary). Content analysis for both lists, scanned independently, yielded the results shown in fig. 5.

Positive descriptor list 7.83% vague vocabulary and 11.30 % abstract vocabulary
Negative descriptor list 11.45% vague vocabulary and 3.82% abstract vocabulary

Fig. 5. Calculated percentages of vague and abstract vocabulary.

The unacceptable levels of vague and abstract vocabulary for both the positive and negative descriptor lists might suggest the following: the more vague and abstract the language of assessment, the more room for subjective judgment in scoring (statistical analysis of how readers in the real world characterize the traits of good writing, including Diederich et al., Purves and Murray yielded a more systematic, “common vocabulary” of qualities for the assessment of writing to avoid this problem). The evaluative language of Six Traits writing lessons, for instance, provides “useable feedback” as opposed to non-constructive value judgments (Blasingame “Thoughts on”). It also seems important to add that common practice in writing instruction is the use of trait descriptors in order to characterize the writing in its current phase of the writing process (i.e., consideration of the work as a draft on its way to becoming whatever it will eventually be, with no broader implications concerning the writer’s overall ability and/or competence) (Blasingame “Thoughts on”; Foster 7-8; Murray, “Teach Writing”). But equally important is Bourdieu’s claim that abstract vocabulary

acts as the medium for the transmission of the euphemized, class-based (and often personal versus strictly academic) judgments seen in the language of assessment, and it is to that possibility that my comments now turn.

Full versus Empty

Drawing on Lakoff's theory of metaphor and cultural coherence or value correspondence (Lakoff and Johnson 22-23), one term in a binary opposition is generally understood as positive and the other is coded as negative. Lakoff's theory, similar to Derrida's binary oppositions, speaks to the social valence of language. In the first set of descriptors (see fig. 4), the language seems consonant with Lakoff's "container metaphor" where "linguistic expressions are containers for meaning" (11). Good writing is described in terms of fullness or plenty (i.e., good writing is a full container); bad writing is described in terms of paucity or lack (i.e., bad writing is an empty container). For instance, high-range essays "generally evinced a strong, effective style characterized by full, clear, complete sentences and distinctive, appropriate diction" (*Student Performance Q&A: 2004*, Question 2, par. 3); and, high range writers "made strong claims" and "supported these claims with abundant and appropriate references" (*Student Performance Q&A: 2004*, Question 1, par. 2). In this sense, the portrait of good writing is of a container "abundantly" stocked; good writers are resource "rich" (a word drawn from another category but it works equally well here); their word choice and syntax are described as "full" and their reservoir of knowledge for backing is "ample." This plenitude works to their credit and gives them scope and latitude that lower-range writers do not own or command, thus high-range writers appear

well “informed” and “prepared.” They possess much to work with and, for this reason, they are able to see the big picture; they command the “holis[ti]c” view. Conversely, the key disposition of the lower-range writer is that s/he speaks from a space of deficiency (whether that concerns a dearth of language, scarcity of acceptable examples for backing, or the inability to work a topic and produce an “intelligent conversation”). What lower-range writers own, in terms of skills and resources, is “thin,” “[in]substantial” and “[in]sufficient”; they therefore appear as “ill-informed” and “underprepared,” and their efforts are “unproductive” and “superficial.” The chief liability of those who are deemed “limited” is their “sketchy” inheritance. Lack prohibits them from seeing the big picture and they are therefore mired in “atom[ism].”

An objection may here arise. It might be said that I am projecting meaning onto these fragments, but the situation is actually the reverse—the lexicon suggests a unity, a theme among the terms. In Critical Discourse Analysis this is referred to as collocation, the phenomenon of “co-occurrence” of certain salient terms within a text: “Collocations overlap to some extent with associated ideas, but they do not correspond exactly” (Bloor and Bloor 130). The collocates within a text might also be an expression of Derrida’s view that a text demonstrates certain unwitting tendencies counter to the principles which ostensibly animate its logic (such as the surfacing of a peculiar, judgmental vocabulary like the one noted above) (Derrida and Caputo, *Deconstruction* 9). Recall that the stated objective of the *Student Performance Q&A*’s is to help teachers, and their students, *to improve their performance* on the AP Language

Examination. But, what is actually seen in this lexicon or “collocational profile” (Bloor and Bloor 130) is that the language of assessment unconsciously flatters dominant dispositions or the lived social and academic experience of a particular group. The full versus empty metaphor expresses the sum total of a different experience in the world which registers in a different voice on the page.

Strong/In Control versus Weak/Not In Control

The most effective essays evinced writers who were not subsumed by the discourse of the sources. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2007*, Question 1, par. 2)

In short, the successful writers controlled the sources, rather than being controlled by them. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2007*, Question 1, par. 2)

Interestingly, this very category of commentary (see fig. 4) emerges in Bourdieu’s research. Bourdieu explains that, although physical strength is usually perceived as a quality attributed to the “dominated classes” in terms of “labor power and fighting strength,” this

does not prevent the dominant groups from similarly conceiving the relationship in terms of the scheme strong/weak; but they reduce the strength which the dominated . . . ascribe to themselves to brute strength, passion and instinct, a blind, unpredictable force of nature, the unreasoning violence of desire, and they attribute to themselves spiritual and intellectual strength, a self-control that predisposes them to control others. (*Distinction* 479)

What we see in the descriptors for strength, besides the subjective judgment of superiority and the efficiency of correctness, is a charismatic predisposition to command or lead, evident in the words: “compelling,” “convincing,” “forcefully” and “authoritatively.” High-range writers’ accuracy, coupled with the possession of powers of charm and/or influence, gives them the authority to speak, and what they say is “effective.” Austin in *How to Do Things With Words*, argues that anyone is capable of uttering words, but the “*circumstances* in which the words are uttered should be in some way, or ways, *appropriate*”; further, that it is the fortuitous union of speaker and situation that gives meaning and/or authority to words (8) [original emphasis]. In his classic example, Austin demonstrates that anyone can break a bottle against a ship and name it the *Queen Elizabeth*, but one must be entitled to do so for the act to have meaning (7). For this reason, the word “authoritatively” among this grouping of descriptors strikes me as extremely important, for Bourdieu argues that the “relations of order which define the social order” confer legitimacy upon individual speech acts (Bourdieu, *Language* 73). The union of correctness and accuracy with individual charisma and authority demonstrated upon a formal occasion (Bourdieu notes that “students from the upper positions . . . more easily impose their positive qualities on the occasion of final exams” [*State Nobility* 23]) all seem like “fortuitous” conditions for success on the AP Language Exam for the dominant social group.

Perhaps this is why descriptors in the same category attributed to the performance of lower-range writers conjure the exact opposite persona: “The

prose of the low-range essays suggested that their writers were *not in full control* of their writing” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2004*, Question 2, par. 5); and, “[t]heir writing was *dominated by* the sources” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2007*, Question 1, par. 3) [all italics mine]. They lack the “compelling,” “convincing,” “authoritative” presence of higher-range authors (looking ahead to the Positive/Negative Personal Hexis grouping (fig. 4), weaker writers are described as “unsure” as opposed to high-range writers’ projection of conscious poise and self-awareness); and, coupled with the deficits in their analysis, what they produce is not “plausible” and they are not perceived as “credible.” These writers are “unable,” “less capable” and prone to error (their reasoning is “faulty”); they present “poorly.” From the perspective of Austin and Bourdieu, one might say that descriptors of their performance signal the least auspicious meeting of writer and occasion.

Distinctive/Artful versus Artless/Uninspired

Written with panache, this response offers both a sophisticated argument and an impressive control of language. (*Scoring Commentary: 2001*, Question 3)

Combining the analytical and the personal, this essay uses vivid, distinctive style to demonstrate a deep understanding of [the author’s] relationship to nature. (*Scoring Commentary: 2001*, Question 2)

The third paragraph begins with a well-constructed transitional sentence that announces the counterargument with clarity and finesse. (*Scoring Commentary 2005: Question 3*)

While the gist of the student's claims is correct, the essay fails to provide the finer distinctions that can make such discussions especially fruitful.

(Scoring Commentary: 2002, Question 1)

She is also able to convey a distinctive personal voice that greatly enhances her persuasive ability. *(Scoring Commentary: 2002, Question 3)*

In a previous section, I spoke about the anathema of school culture's "fingerprints" left upon student writing, and (from the perspective of the AP Language Exam commentaries) nowhere is this more overtly demonstrated than in comments regarding the banal form of the five-paragraph essay. The familiar complaint is revisited here, in condensed form, in the list of negative descriptors within this category (e.g., "mechanical," "generic," "predictable," "formulaic"), yet with some new features (fig. 4). The words "pedestrian" and "obvious" signify more than a criticism of following a prefabricated model—they are aesthetic judgments and pertain to a different quality of production beyond the test evaluation's stated expectation of an effective response (the exercise calls for students to produce "clear, cogent, mature prose") (*Student Performance Q&A: 2004*, Question 1, par. 1). The precise quality sought is limned out in the introductory quotes to this section and might be identified, vaguely, as "distinctive."

If a response is "obvious" it means that it is too apparent or lacks subtlety (elsewhere in the descriptors the word "blatant" appears which collocates with "obvious"), but where in either the criteria ("clear, cogent, mature") or, more generally, in the objectives of an English 101/102 course, is subtlety noted as an

outcome? If a writer offers something by way of content or style that is “original,” “distinctive,” and “sophisticated” in the course of essaying a response, or if the writer demonstrates an especially “perceptive” or “discerning” critical instinct and/or analysis, that is admirable. However, these qualities do not seem to reflect any commonly held expectation of the quality of student prose, or facility of critical reading, produced in an *introductory* college writing course, at least not in terms of those identified by Juergensmeyer and Pierce when they sought accord in “the commonality of goals and their assessment” in university writing programs across Arizona (33). Those goals are shown in fig. 6.

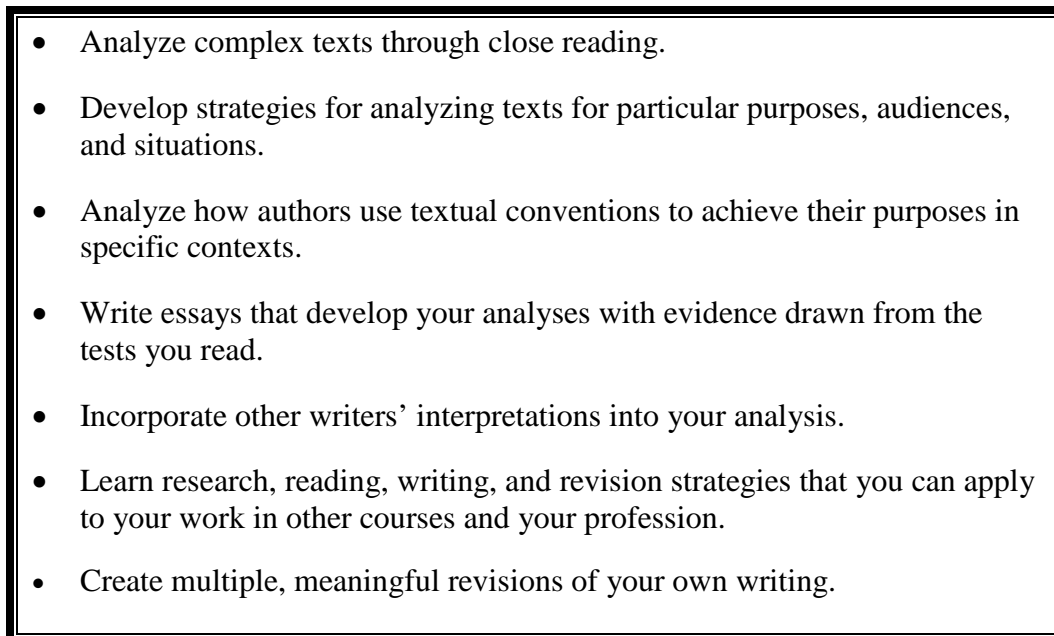
- 
- Analyze complex texts through close reading.
 - Develop strategies for analyzing texts for particular purposes, audiences, and situations.
 - Analyze how authors use textual conventions to achieve their purposes in specific contexts.
 - Write essays that develop your analyses with evidence drawn from the texts you read.
 - Incorporate other writers’ interpretations into your analysis.
 - Learn research, reading, writing, and revision strategies that you can apply to your work in other courses and your profession.
 - Create multiple, meaningful revisions of your own writing.

Fig. 6. Suggested common goals for the basic writing course (Juergensmeyer and Peirce 37)

Nor do the terms from the category noted above, and the latent skill set they praise and/or disparage, seem synchronous with outcomes and objectives for

an English 101/102 course as established by the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) and Writing Program Administrators (WPA). I attended a Teaching Assistant Seminar in 2001 at Arizona State University in which we were asked, as new teachers, to reproduce the following information within our respective syllabi for English 101 and 102, reflective of the outcomes and objectives indicated by the CCCC and WPA (see fig. 7).

In fact, looking across this statement of objectives and outcomes for English 101 and 102 and the language of assessment of the AP Language and Composition Exam—particularly the Distinctive/Artful versus Artless/Uninspired category noted above—one notices an insular and particularized gauge of workmanship calibrated by an elite aesthetic sense of what constitutes good writing. What I am calling attention to here is not whether the AP Language and Composition course content aligns with the vision of the CCCC or WPA in terms of what an introductory writing course ought to accomplish, but that students are being assessed by features of writing that would not even measure the outcome of such goals. The descriptors suggest that students are being evaluated instead by an isolated, narrow, and distinction-based system that classifies specifically with an eye toward style, which is to say Voice.

This is where the salient terms noted above such as “perceptive” and “discerning” become especially revealing, as they collocate with other descriptors found within the *Scoring Commentaries* such as: “stylistic flair” (*Scoring Commentary: 2000*, Question 2); “panache” (*Scoring Commentary: 2000*, Question 3); “striking” and “profound”; “successful and appealing” (*Scoring*

Course Goals: The Composition Program at ASU supports the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) and Writing Program Administration (WPA). They have drafted the following outcomes for first-year composition students. The outcomes are provided here to help you better understand what materials and knowledge you will be expected to acquire in first-year composition.

Rhetorical Knowledge: This covers the kinds of things you will need to know about the writing situation, such as who the readers are and what kind of information they may be expecting from the text. By the end of your first-years writing courses, you should be able to:

- focus on a specific purpose
- Anticipate the needs of different kinds of readers
- Recognize the differences among kinds of writing situations
- Use the conventions of format, organization, and language appropriate to specific writing situations
- Understand what makes writing types different (e.g., a book review, a project proposal, a research report)

General Reading, Writing, and Thinking Skills: This covers general reading, writing, and thinking skills you must acquire to meet the demands of diverse writing situations. By the end of your first-year writing g courses, you should be able to:

- Use writing to record, explore, organize, and communicate ideas
- Find, evaluate, analyze, and synthesize appropriate primary and secondary sources in order to meet the demands of different kinds of writing situations
- Understand relationships among language, knowledge, and power

Processes: This covers the processes you will need to follow in order to produce successful texts. By the end of your first year of writing course, you should know how to generate, organize, revise, and edit as appropriate to specific writing situations as well as use:

- Multiple drafts to improve your writing
- Strategies like brainstorming, outlining, fast-writing in all stages of your writing process
- Effective collaborative strategies to investigate, write, revise and edit
- A variety of media, including particularly standard computerized media, in ways that permit you to make your writing available and acceptable to a wide variety of readers

Conventions: This covers specific conventions such as spelling and punctuation that readers expect strong writers to control.. By the end of your first-year writing courses you should:

- Control general conventions of spelling, grammar, and punctuation expected in standard written English
- Be able to document primary and secondary sources appropriately
- Know How to check unfamiliar conventions
- Understand that different conventions are appropriate for different kinds of writing situations.

Fig. 7. Excerpt from an English 101/102 syllabus (Ramage and Dugan)

Commentary, 2001, Question 3); “especially perceptive” (Scoring Commentary: 2003, Question 3); “worth noticing and emulating” (Scoring Commentary: 2004,

Question 2); and “strong, if not artistic” (*Scoring Commentary: 2004*, Question 3). Similarly, negative collocates for descriptors in this category from the *Scoring Commentaries* demonstrate the vulgar antithesis of artistic production: “workmanship-like” (*Scoring Commentary: 2000*, Question 1); “perfunctory” (*Scoring Commentary: 2001*, Question 1); “unpolished” (*Scoring Commentary: 2001*, Question 3); “not particularly artistic” (*Scoring Commentary: 2004*, Question 2); “relatively strong if not particularly original” (*Scoring Commentary: 2004*, Question 2); “not distinguished . . . but clear” (*Scoring Commentary: 2005*, Question 1), and “particularly unsophisticated” (*Scoring Commentary: 2005*, Question 3). Based upon Purves’ research, these words demonstrate a clear illustration of the “PDQ” flaw of writing assessment, that is, the problem of “perceived drafting quality” or “a subjective estimate of quality” (118). And though most writing assessment is susceptible to this problem, the Advanced Placement Exam demonstrates an extreme case in that it is different from other high stakes exams (such as a state exit examination for a high school diploma) in terms of the symbolic capital it might confer. A high score on the AP Language Exam is capable of directing substantial scholarship money as well as brokering entrance to elite academic institutions, and even (potentially) defraying the cost of tuition, once admitted, by enabling the recipient of a “5,” in some cases, to pass out of prerequisite coursework. Consider this flaw magnified a few hundred thousand times by the trajectory of lives it potentially influences: In 2010, 374,620 students participated in the AP Language and Composition Program (“AP Program Summary Report: 2010”).

Precision/Focus versus Vagueness/Diffusion

Some writers in the lower half seemed unsure of their own position and, while attempting to do justice to the many complicated facets of this issue, never fully established their own stance. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2007*, Question 3)

Some of the weakest essays consisted of random, disorganized assertions without any sense of central claim or commitment to a reader. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2010*, Question 3)

I originally conceived of the lexicon in this category as part of the Strong/In Control versus Weak/Not in Control grouping because it seemed as though certain words could belong to the former group, like “coherent,” “lucid,” “clear,” “concrete,” “specific,” and “careful”—all of which signified strength (of mind) and clarity (of purpose or resolve). Similarly, certain negative words in the dichotomy signified the absence of those aforementioned merits, like “exaggerated,” “incoherent,” “disorganized,” “random,” and “imprecise.” And then I realized that, in rhetorical terminology, the lexicon in the Strong/Weak category actually addressed what would be called the appeal to ethos, or the transmission of the speaker/writer’s credibility, whereas, the language in the Precision/Vagueness dichotomy more so addressed the appeal to logos or the logical presentation of the argument or message. If that is the case, then the Strong/Weak category would speak more so to the person (i.e., personal qualities) than the Precision/Vagueness category, in that the former foregrounds qualities of

the individual purveying the information whereas the latter centralizes the message.

Perhaps that is why this category, Precision versus Vagueness (fig. 4), most closely correlates with the kind of comments that teachers and other professionals actually give on student writing in what would be called the domains of ideas (content) and organization (Diederich 9; Purvis 116). The lexicon speaks to some fundamental features of writing such as the focus of the topic and theme, the logical structuring (staging or sequencing) of points and effective selection of supporting detail and/or evidence, the sufficiency of evidence as backing for the claim/central idea, and the logical flow of the writing from the beginning of the essay to the destination dictated by the thesis (Diederich 55-56). Based upon the features of effective writing identified by Diederich (as well as his initiative to systematize the rating process and lessen the variability of scoring among readers [55]), the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory developed a pedagogy and shared assessment rubric called the 6+1[®] Trait Analytical Writing Rubric. From the perspective of the 6 Traits, then, this category is most justifiable, most reasonable, as an illustration of commentary trained upon the writing versus the qualities of the individual.

However, the dichotomy of precise/vague is also seen in prejudicial teacher descriptions from Bourdieu's study, reproduced here in commentary arranged per correlation between teacher comments and parents' occupation:

--Child of a woodworker: "incomplete," "awkward," "solid but incomplete"

--Child of an assistant manager in an export company: “confused,” “flat,” “doesn’t define subject clearly,” “too many misunderstood terms”

--Child of a physics/chemistry teacher: “precise,” “careful,” “clear,” “fine” (Bourdieu, *State Nobility* 34)

The suggestion seems to be that those less tutored in or initiated to a particular type of inquiry, and way of representing the product of that pursuit, receive progressively worse comments. Further, Bourdieu connects teacher criticism not only with prejudice toward parents’ occupation but with the students’ place of origin: the woodworker’s child comes from the Provinces and the two other children from Paris. Bourdieu notes: “The modality of the relationship an individual maintains with the school, with the education it transmits, and with the language it uses and requires depends on the distance between her family milieu and the academic world” (*State Nobility* 21). Bourdieu consistently demonstrates the “leg up” or “credit” (Bourdieu’s terminology) that a specific social history provides by way of inherited cultural capital that would make one predisposed to do well in a specific social circumstance, such as a high stakes examination. Can a correlation be made here between commentary and social class when the language seems less suggestive than that within other categories, less immediately indicative of the slippage between academic and personal judgment?

When one intently examines the juxtaposed words within this grouping, what materializes are the polarities of order and disorder (fig. 4). On the left side (positive descriptors), one sees a portrait of positivist virtues: a presentation

which is “lucid,” “clear,” “specific,” “concrete,” and “careful,” and the suggestion of a linear process of reasoning from which a necessary conclusion might be drawn (this accounts for the “lucid,” “transparent” quality noted in the descriptors). On the right side, conversely, one discovers a portrait of “fuzzy thinking.” There is no linearity but only that which is indirect (“tangential”) and twisted (“exaggerated” and “distorted”), perhaps even shapeless (which would account for the words “amorphous” and “random”). The words on the right seem absent any sense of correct form (randomness is the nemesis of method). It is, therefore, not inconceivable to say that the words in this category represent two very different ways of seeing and representing the object of vision, with one way of looking institutionally sanctioned and the other considered a “mutation” of structure (Foucault 152). One is a type of seeing/thinking to be inculcated, the other avoided. In the two quotes that introduce this section, weaker writers’ difficulty is isolated to a problem of perception (i.e., acknowledgment of multiple perspectives eclipses their ability to take a stand; their assertions are “random” and they fail to “commit” to a position). In *The Order of Things*, Foucault remarks: “To observe, then, is to be content with seeing—with seeing a few things systematically” (134). Logical orientations (ways of looking) are housed within specific attitudes about order (i.e., that things can be understood, that the world and its contents are neat and representable). This is why, in order to historicize the emergence of the sciences, Foucault tracks in on the early naturalists as they fasten a little corner of the visible world to one, limited model of explanation and claim it on behalf of knowledge (134-38). Linking back to the

lexicon in this category, the difference in texture between the words on the left and the words on the right has to do with a specific, academically constructed way of seeing—one that complements a scientific perspective. And, as Laureau and Weininger point out:

[A]cademic skills should not be excluded from the purview of cultural capital research. Academic skills are, instead, part of what we should be conceiving of as cultural capital. (It is also important to understand how academic skills are constructed as legitimized and meritorious). (598)

What do we really see in the list of descriptors in this category? By appearances, one way of looking is clean, the other chaotic; one comes to a point, the other resists a center. Instead of serving as a benchmark of error versus correctness, could the two sets of descriptors just as well limn out the contours of two different accounts of reality (one definitive, the other conflicted)? And, if so, which account is in accordance with the perspective rewarded by school culture; which is, literally, closer to the desired world where such knowledge is transmitted?

Positive Personal Hexis, Negative Personal Hexis

There is probably no more Bourdieuan notion than the embodied dispositions of the *habitus*, that is, the signature of social class history written on the body which signs (invisibly) to others in a way that supersedes language and confirms group solidarity or outsider status. The markers of the *habitus*, variously referred to as “mode of utilization” in *Distinction* (65) and “hexis” in *The State Nobility*, indicate “an entire set of diffuse indices, never explicitly recognized, laid

out, or systematized” (35); these signs effectively convey one’s educational history and personal upbringing. For Bourdieu, the individual’s social history is distilled in physical aspects such as “bearing, posture, presence, diction and pronunciation, manners and usages (*Distinction* 91); personal taste; and, in terms of an individual’s presentation on paper, handwriting and style: “bodily hexis provides spontaneous physiognomy with the entire system of indices through which class origin is recognized” (Bourdieu, *State Nobility* 36). This is why certain buzzwords in Bourdieu such as “ease” and “naturalness” are metonymic of an individual’s experience, such that s/he would present as at ease or relaxed in a given situation. In *Distinction*, this brand of “ease” is described as a sort of “confidence” or “competence,” “casualness amid familiarity,” the “self-certainty which accompanies the certainty of possessing cultural legitimacy” (66). In the sociology of Bourdieu, whether literal (i.e., written on the body), metaphoric (i.e., transmitted via taste in film, music, furniture, or food), or transmitted on paper as an articulation of one’s Voice or style, the individual presents in a way that signifies a total history. From a Bourdieuan frame of reference, presentation *is* the expression of class.

Therefore, based upon the theory described above, the Positive/Negative Personal Hexis category is the most important group to emerge from the descriptors in the Performance Q&A’s as it is a “euphemized” expression of the presence of test-takers of the AP Language Examination. And it is the most important category of all the groupings above as it constitutes the expression of the class-dictated sorting mechanism employed, unconsciously, in the assessment

of the AP Language Exam. More so than the other categories of descriptors, this grouping speaks to the personal qualities of people rather than academic judgments (i.e., descriptors in this grouping are most susceptible to “misrecognition” as personal judgments). Further, the positive characterizations favor and reward a particular identity by dominant standards and de-legitimize the identity of those who do not possess privileged qualities. Again, per Bourdieu’s study, evidence of the correlation between descriptors of student work and social class may be found in certain “oppositions” that recur in the commentary:

One can thus draw up a table of the categories that, deeply inscribed as they are in the minds of teachers and (good) students, are applied to all academic and academically thinkable reality (this reality itself, moreover, being organized according to the same principles)—in other words, to persons, teachers or students, as well as to their output (courses, research, ideas, discourses); brilliant/dull; effortless/laborious; distinguished/vulgar; cultured/scholastic; inspired/banal; original/common; lively/flat; fine/crude; noteworthy/insignificant; quick/slow; nimble/heavy; elegant/awkward, etc. (*State Nobility* 17)

Here and more broadly, as has been shown, there is evidence not only of academic judgments which could be construed as personal judgments, but of the promotion of dominant dispositions and competencies over the qualities of a seemingly inferior and subpar-skilled Other. The habitus of the students, as

suggested in the descriptors to follow, seems to align with specifically socially constructed identities.

--The most successful essays responded to this prompt fully, intelligently, and fluently. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2004*, Question 2, par. 3)

--The most successful writers could present their own texts with a voice that illustrated a mind at work. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2007*, Question 1, par. 2)

--A number of weaker writers also added sad personal asides. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2001*, Question 2, par. 5)

--Some [students] drew on emotional crises, and in some cases students revealed the dark worlds that they inhabit. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2009*, Question 3, par. 3)

In the Personal Hexis grouping (fig. 4), the positive and negative qualities reify the individuals behind the words. What comes to the fore, more so than qualities of writing, are *ways of being*. That is, even as these descriptors speak about writing, they also sign to qualities of the people doing the writing. Who are these people? On the positive side, the modifiers introduce a psychological portrait of wholeness and “acuity” (*Student Performance Q&A’s: 2004*, Question 1, par. 6). These are “self-aware” people who present “consciously,” “thoughtfully,” “self-reflective[ly],” “intelligently” and “fluently”; and, for these reasons, they are deemed “credible” and even “sophisticated.” Psychology is a translation of character and the same individuals appear as “sincere,” “genuine,”

“mature,” and “engaging.” Finally, mental qualities inform a physical sensibility suggesting that what these people do is “alive” and “healthy.”

Conversely, the flow of commentary in the negative descriptor category is opposite of the movement suggested above: whereas flow in the positive group moves from psychological to physical portraiture, the flow in the negative group moves from physical to psychological portraiture. Put differently, individuals in the Positive Personal Hexis group are first considered as minds (and then bodies) and the individuals in the Negative Hexis group are first considered as bodies (and then minds). For example: individuals in the Negative Personal Hexis group receive embodied critiques such as “plodding,” “belabored,” and “flat-footed”; likewise, the things they do are tactilely framed as “jarring” and “distracting.” They proceed “dutifully,” and betray a psychological character located as “confused,” “unsure,” “unwilling,” and “perplexed.” Finally, physical qualities inform a mental sensibility suggesting that what these people do appears “sad,” or that they inhabit a “dark” place.

Some descriptors from the Scoring Commentaries that collocate with the positive lexicon above include: “insightful” (*Scoring Commentary: 2000*, Question 1); “impressive” (*Scoring Commentary: 2000*, Question 1); “perceptive” (*Scoring Commentary: 2000*, Question2); “sophisticated” (*Scoring Commentary: 2000*, Question 3); “vigorous” (*Scoring Commentary: 2000*, Question 3); “energetic” (*Scoring Commentary: 2000*, Question 3); “entertaining” (*Scoring Commentary: 2000*, Question 3); “lively” (*Scoring Commentary: 2000*, Question 3); “especially apt” (*Scoring Commentary: 2001*, Question 1); vivid (*Scoring*

Commentary: 2001, Question 1); “distinctive” (*Scoring Commentary: 2001, Question 1*); “fearless” (*Scoring Commentary: 2001, Question 3*); “brave” (*Scoring Commentary: 2001, Question 3*); “compelling” (*Scoring Commentary: 2003, Question 1*); “convincing” (*Scoring Commentary: 2003, Question 1*); “powerful” (*Scoring Commentary: 2003, Question 1*); “exemplary” (*Scoring Commentary: 2004, Question 2*); “articulate and fluent” (*Scoring Commentary: 2004, Question 2*); “admirable” (*Scoring Commentary: 2004, Question 3*); “original” (*Scoring Commentary: 2005, Question 1*); and “well-controlled, well-balanced, well-informed” (*Scoring Commentary: 2005, Question 3*).

Some descriptors from the Scoring Commentaries that collocate with the negative lexicon above include: “less substantive” (*Scoring Commentary: 2000, Question 1*); “less accomplished” (*Scoring Commentary: 2000, Question 2*); “not particularly adept” (*Scoring Commentary: 2000, Question 3*); “workmanlike” (*Scoring Commentary: 2000, Question 3*); “less impressive” (*Scoring Commentary: 2000, Question 3*); “unproductive” (*Scoring Commentary: 2001, Question 1*); “limited” (*Scoring Commentary: 2001, Question 3*); “considerably less able” (*Scoring Commentary: 2002, Question 1*); “uneven and inconsistent” (*Scoring Commentary: 2002, Question 1*); “confused and confusing” (*Scoring Commentary: 2002, Question 1*); “baffling” (*Scoring Commentary: 2002, Question 1*); “rudimentary” (*Scoring Commentary: 2002, Question 2*); “obvious and unnecessary” (*Scoring Commentary: 2002, Question 2*); “less sophisticated” (*Scoring Commentary: 2002, Question 3*); “little more than adequate” (*Scoring Commentary: 2003, Question 2*); “inadequate” (*Scoring Commentary: 2003,*

Question 2); “inconsistent and uneven” (*Scoring Commentary: 2003*, Question 2); “immature” (*Scoring Commentary: 2005*, Question 1); “particularly unsophisticated and unconvincing” (*Scoring Commentary: 2005*, Question 3); and “especially vague” (*Scoring Commentary: 2005*, Question 3).

The positive modifiers from the *Scoring Commentaries* embody individuals who possess an impressive repository of qualities and competencies that would bode favorably in garnering a high score on the AP Language Exam. On the promotion of a dominant standard of judgment Bourdieu writes:

The academic taxonomy, a system of principles of vision and division implemented at a practical level, rests on an implicit definition of excellence that, by granting superiority to the qualities socially conferred upon those who are socially dominant, consecrates both their way of being and their state. (*State Nobility* 36)

These individuals possess significant charisma, evident in the words “impressive,” “lively,” “energetic,” “entertaining,” “fearless,” and “brave.” They demonstrate self-possession and the ability to direct others in being “compelling,” “convincing,” “powerful,” and “well-controlled.” And they possess a preternatural ability to do the tasks provided by the exam in being “perceptive,” “especially apt,” “well-informed,” and “articulate and fluent.” In all ways, these individuals appear, by virtue of qualities ascribed to their work but which might just as well be ascribed to them as individuals, as the right people for the job as defined by the latent emphasis upon style (hexis) evident in the assessment of the

AP Language Exam. Bourdieu's description of the scions of legitimate culture is appropriate to repeat here:

What is learnt through immersion in a world in which legitimate culture is as natural as the air one breathes is a sense of the legitimate choice so sure of itself that it convinces by the sheer manner of the performance. . . . It is, ultimately, the self-assurance, confidence, arrogance, which, normally being the monopoly of the individuals most assured of profit from their investments, has every likelihood . . . of imposing absolute legitimacy, and therefore the maximum profitability, of their investments. (*Distinction* 92)

Conversely, the negative descriptors paint a dim portrait of the group, also through qualities ascribed to their work but which might as well frame the individuals working. These people possess considerably less ability to piece together the desired product: they are "less accomplished," "not particularly adept," "unproductive," and "considerably less able." They do not possess the charisma of the aforementioned group which might make some of their errors less egregious (a point made in the *Scoring Commentary: 2001*, Question 2): they are "limited," "less impressive," "particularly unsophisticated and unconvincing," "confused and confusing," and "immature." And what they actually manage to produce is of a considerably lesser quality: "obvious and unnecessary," "little more than adequate," and "inconsistent and uneven." The overarching sense that one gets at their presence in writing this exam is best conveyed by the word "baffling."

We should here recall Au's caution that standardized examinations— of which the AP Exam is certainly one— for their validity, must assume that local, individualized conditions and local, individual factors make no difference in either student performance or test-based measurement. Indeed, that the assumed validity of objective measurement provided by standardized tests rests upon this denial of individual differences. (40)

The most significant thing that Bourdieuan methodology is able to accomplish is to restore the mystified piece of the puzzle which is the actual presence of the test-takers. Bourdieuan analysis reinserts the personal factors that are “misrecognized” or “euphemized” as academic judgments, re-inscribes the importance of individual difference in the test-taking population and the heavy advantage of some in (pre)possessing the very skills and dispositions to which they owe their success in the context of the exam.

To close out this section, I will say that, originally, upon discovery of the words “workmanship-like” and “workmanlike” I believed that the relation between commentary on the AP Language Exam and social class was sealed. That is, I did not imagine that there could be a more blatant, wholly undisguised, articulation of class bias than a description of writing likened to blue-collar production. If, as Derrida's work seems to suggest, a text might turn on a single word, then I believed I had discovered the fulcrum. But now I think that is not the case, or that even more evidence is possible to provide. There is a better way to get at or describe the authentic relation of commentary to social class in the

language of assessment. It has to do with the Bourdieuan notion of inheritance—the invisible province of symbolic capital from which certain people draw imperceptibly and amply. All along, the warrant for my argument has been that the test language complements orientation to a specific set of values and competencies that “high range” writers probably already possess; that “high range” writers are being rewarded for a Voice they already possess and that “low range” writers receive consequences for failure to possess this Voice. It is to this circumstance that I now more singularly turn. The logic of assessment of the AP Language Exam is not (solely) found in the word “workmanlike,” but in the iteration of the word “apt” and its collocates (e.g., “attuned,” “adept,” “appropriate,” etc.). Such language study has the ability to demonstrate how some test-takers are “endowed with a set of dispositions that imply both their propensity and their ability to enter and play the game” (Bourdieu, *State Nobility* 38). In Bourdieuan terms, the habitus of (some) test-takers is in perfect synchronicity with the task, and the task with a particular habitus.

“You Teach the Fish How to Swim”

Bourdieu, in an interview with Loïc Wacquant, remarks:

The Romans used to say: “You teach the fish how to swim.” There are schools where, when you look close up, teaching asks little of their students other than to be themselves, that is, to have the attitudes and aptitudes (ways of being, accent, bearing) that are the hallmark of their class or origin . . . and destination. (32)

Although this remark pertains to the schooling of a certain class of students, I think that the fish metaphor goes a long way in providing a useful analogy for the fit between the test taker and the Advanced Placement Language Exam. Thinking about the bank of Bourdieuan terms from *Distinction* (e.g., “ease,” “naturalness,” “competence,” and “unconscious mastery” [66]), some students (per the commentaries) seem predisposed to do well while others seem ill-suited to the task at hand—like fish in or out of the water. These terms apply to a state of mind (understanding the unwritten rules governing a particular situation), and a bodily state (understanding reified by seamless practice). So I scanned the commentaries for words that signified this judgment of competence or appraisal, from the Readers’ perspective, of a more or less appropriate fit between subject and task. Then I performed a computer-generated analysis on both the *Student Performance Q&A’s* as well as the *Scoring Commentaries*, with the Control F/Find function in Microsoft Word, to tabulate the frequency of appearance of these terms. The assumption being, if the words recurred with significant frequency, then they were salient in terms of the qualities evaluators sought synchronous with (or not) the disposition of the test-takers. The results are shown in Table 1.

It is apparent that the *Scoring Commentaries* are replete with the suggestive terms for test takers being more or less attuned to the test’s tasks, whereas the *Student Performance Q&A’s* show only a couple words as especially salient (e.g., forms of “fluency” and “appropriate-ness”). This may be because the *Scoring Commentaries* speak to actual, individual student papers (so they

Table 1

Frequency of Salient Descriptors in the Commentaries

Year	ease	fluent/-cy	apt	adept	insight/-ful	perceptive	appropriate	appreciate	attuned
Scoring Commentaries									
2000			3	2	3	4	2		
2001	2	2		2	1			1	
2002	1	2	1	1	4				
2003	1	2	3	2	3				
2004	2					2		1	
2005		1	6	2	5				
Student Performance Q&A's									
2001	1	1			1	2	7		
2002							3		
2003		1					3		
2004		2					2		
2005							5		1
2006							3	1	
2007							2		
2008								1	
2009				1			3		
2010							2		1

would be more specifically descriptive), whereas the *Performance Q&A's* speak to performance on the entire exam as a whole (and therefore in more general terms). In any case, examination of the most salient terms is necessary in order to establish the comfortable relationship between test-taker and exam. Regarding my use of the word “comfortable,” I am speaking about comfort in the sense that one knows the rules and/or expectations of what is deemed appropriate to do or say in a specific context. Bourdieu uses two terms to capture this sensibility: *de rigueur* (*Language* 70), defined by the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary “as prescribed by custom,” and *comme il faut*: “the art of how things are done” (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 472). Possessing comfort in understanding “how things are done” promises infinite advantages; not possessing this understanding amounts to terminal losses. And, though it seems obvious, it is important to note that this sensibility is not cultivated in a short time, but is the product of

protracted immersion in a particular cultural milieu (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 66). Bourdieu writes that dominant dispositions are “only acquired with time and applied by those who can take their time” (*Distinction* 72). So, if the aforementioned words signify approbation, on the Readers’ part, for student demonstration of “knowing how things are done,” then what is actually being congratulated in a “high range” performance on the exam is not a skill set acquired in one year of study (i.e., the AP Language class) but rather something some students already do quite proficiently because it has been practiced over a long period of time. Conversely, if some students are critiqued by the language of test assessment (for not really “getting it”) then it is for lacking that which they could not reasonably acquire or perfect in one year of study (--the fantasy of *Pygmalion* notwithstanding).

Ease

While the best students were able to demonstrate their abilities with ease, more students than usual seemed unwilling or unprepared to rise to the challenge we provided. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2001*, Question 1, par. 6)

As the table demonstrates, this quintessential of all Bourdieuan keywords actually only appears once in the *Student Performance Q&A*’s, but it is so potent a distillation of the concept of inherited cultural capital that it reads precisely as it does in the sociological literature and collocates with other words in the grouping signifying a comfortable fit between writer, task and situation. It is the right tone-setter for the language to follow. Those in possession of the desired skills

perform effortlessly (with “ease”), whereas others are interpreted as recalcitrant or judged as incapable of such fluid performance. The metaphoric use of lower-range writers’ inability to “rise to the challenge” in the example above deposits failure with those who lack the resources and/or the inclination to answer the question. This assumption regarding student lack of preparedness is probably close to the truth, as students would not all come to the test equally prepared. So, certainly, some would seem more at “ease” than others in the demonstration of “their abilities.” “Ease,” in addition to being a gauge of skill, can signify a more or less appropriate fit with a social circumstance, as suggested by its antonym, the idiomatic phrase: ill at ease (defined by a WordNet 3.0 search, a lexical database of semantic relations, as “socially uncomfortable; unsure and constrained in manner”). So, to be more or less at ease signifies a level of initiation to and comfort with a specific context, but comfort level does not seem like a gauge of proficiency in an introductory writing course.

Fluent/Fluency/Fluently

--[S]tudents need ample opportunities to read and discuss examples of excellent nonfiction prose written for both academic and general audiences so that they can themselves develop the syntactic fluency and verbal acuity that are the hallmarks of a strong, mature prose style.

(Student Performance Q&A: 2004, Question 1, par. 6)

--The most successful essays responded to this prompt fully, intelligently, and fluently. *(Student Performance Q&A: 2004, Question 2, par. 3)*

--The best papers . . . also evidenced their writers' command of language and fluency of expression. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2001*, Question 1, par. 3)

--Because the essay H has less fluency and syntactical variety, its overall effect is not as impressive as that of essay DD. (*Scoring Commentary: 2003*, Question 3)

The word fluency, in all of its incarnations, is a common term for the discussion of prose quality, but it is not without problems. In one sense, fluency refers to the prosody of syntax (i.e., poetic flow or internal rhythm); in another sense, the seamlessness of a fluent presentation signifies an elite level of command or proficiency that may sign to an inherited "mode of acquisition" (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 77). Fluency, per the synonym strand offered by Microsoft Encarta Dictionary, connotes: ease, facility, confidence, and smoothness. Again, this suggests that the writer seems particularly attuned to the task (as demonstrated above in examples two and three). And fluency, with respect to second language acquisition, suggests a degree of control close to an indigenous command of a language. A fluid presentation, therefore, *appears* to issue from the individual talent of the writer but might also be viewed as a socio-linguistic inheritance or linguistic birthright, as Fairclough describes it: "the predisposition to speak and/or write in a particular way" (*Analyzing Discourse* 28). The word "acuity" from example one above masks the social origins of fluency as a magical form of perceptiveness, wisdom or strength. In this regard, "acuity," similar to demonstrations of "precocity" and "gift" (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 70), is less a

product of innate perspicacity and more the performance of cultural capital. And, if that is the case, then such descriptive terminology which vaguely describes an apex or glimpse of writer-ly perfection that is supposedly “out there,” is more realistically located *within* the individual writer. Put differently, words like “fluency” represent the attainment of a surpassing level of proficiency presumably developed toward rather than a social reality already distilled in a way of speaking and/or writing. The language of fluency dislocates the performance from its social context such that fluency appears as origin-less gift (a thing of nature), but critical discourse analysis restores social origins. Such a vision of competency flatters those whose lived experience (social and academic) predisposes them to produce the desired prosodic effect. If others present as “less impressive” (example four), this is a social effect viewed from a rhetorical perspective. Also, it seems important to note that “sentence fluency is scored on every state writing assessment in 48 states, and a multitude of K-12 teachers have been trained on how to teach it and score [writing] according to the Six Trait model that Diederich created” (Blasingame, “Sentence Fluency”; Crovitz 43). The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory’s work, based upon Diederich’s research from 1974, has been “tested for reliability and construct validity and passed” (Blasingame, “Sentence Fluency”), whereas the idiosyncratic version of “sentence fluency” described in the assessment for the AP Language Exam is transient and esoteric.

Apt/Aptly

--Perhaps some deeper development of these examples would have made the essay stronger than it is, but the examples are apt, even when they are not fully explained. (*Scoring Commentary: 2000*, Question 3)

--This essay demonstrates both a particularly impressive control of language and an especially apt analysis. (*Scoring Commentary: 2001*, Question 2)

--While the essay's prose is effective, it is not particularly impressive nor is the analysis especially apt or full. (*Scoring Commentary: 2002*, Question 2)

--[The essay begins] its analysis with a Dickens' quotation that seems particularly apt for the discussion that will ensue. (*Scoring Commentary: 2003*, Question 2)

By definition, the word "apt" (fitting or appropriate to a particular circumstance) carries the Bourdieuan argument regarding subjects' predisposition to understand the rules and effectively "play the game" (--this is Bourdieu's metaphor: "players" vie for position through "plays" made in the "field" of power). The aptness of strategy reflects a more or less proficient understanding of what to do and say in a given situation. Aptness, from a sociological standpoint, situates the meaning of a strategy as a socially, rather than rhetorically, motivated choice. In Bourdieu's governing metaphor, players possess a specific sense of what may or may not be done which informs the logic of play. And, in some circumstances, just knowing what is fit to do may be

valued above any other considerations. For example, Bourdieu reminds us that: “The Sophists used to say that what is important in learning a language is to learn the appropriate moment, *kairos*, for saying the appropriate thing” (*An Invitation* 142). The acknowledgment of aptness then, in some cases, might simply be a validation of one’s ability to choose appropriately (i.e., to do that which looks and sounds correct). This is why example one above from the *Scoring Commentaries* is so interesting: the author has not, technically, met with the expectation of the exercise, yet there is an X factor at work (“aptness”) that does compensatory work for this lack: the example is *well-chosen*. Example four, lauding the especially a propos selection of a quote from Dickens also amplifies the importance of the ability to choose well and indirectly implies that which might be more *tasteful* to choose (considering the subject: a canonical author). Finally, in examples two and three, the writers are inversely applauded and taken to task for what appears to be the aptness of their moves heightened (or diminished) by more or less “impressive” styles. The promotion of aptness here renders the distinction between quality of analysis and quality of style as virtually indistinguishable. The point being, if some authors present as “particularly” or “especially apt,” it means they already know the plays required; they are more so initiated to the pre-existing standard of taste calibrated to and congratulatory of their abilities. It goes without saying that such criteria reduces all aspects of writing to purely subjective consideration—a matter of Voice and style. But, more importantly, an understanding of the role of aptness in the assessment of the AP Language Exam diminishes the seeming personal triumph of earning the coveted score of “5.” A

“5” is a numeric confirmation of what one already is and does—like a bank statement.

Adept

--Although it is more than competent in its development, this essay is not particularly adept in its use of language. (*Scoring Commentaries: 2000*, Question 3)

--This student understands [the author’s] tone and basic strategy but is less adept at telling us what leads him to this understanding. (*Scoring Commentaries: 2000*, Question 2)

--Less-successful essays often belabored one example rather than providing a cascade of examples, as more adept student writers often did. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2009*, Question 3, par. 4)

This word, similar to the previous one, “apt,” signifies more or less of a facility or level of skill, on the speaker/writer’s part, and bears a close relation to the fish metaphor in speaking directly to the person versus the task. Adeptness is a personal assessment of proficiency (as in example two), a personal measure of practice that rates the person (through his or her performance) as adroit. Though the language of assessment will oftentimes ascribe agency to the *papers* as if inanimate objects do the work of the test (example one: “this essay is not adept in its use of language”), that is a mystification. The writing embodies the disposition of writers who do the work; the *writers* are more or less “apt” or “adept” in their strategies. To say: the paper is not adept in *its* use of language” [italics mine] is a euphemism that softens the important critique and relation that

the language obscures, namely: the *writer is less skilled*; the *writer* makes a *less skillful* product. And, according to collocates for the word “adept,” as located by WordNet, the term not only signifies the attainment of a high level of skill but a kind of expert status. So, students faulted for a lack of adeptness actually perform well, but they lack the exceptional quality to vault the performance beyond merely “competent.” Bourdieu and Passeron might view such terminology as indicative of the logic of examinations which serves to “sanction a social definition of knowledge and the way to show it” (*Reproduction* 142).

The continual recurrence of the importance of style—a concept never explicitly defined by AP readers beyond “clear, correct and mature” prose (*Student Performance Q&A: 2005*, Question 1, par. 1)—suggests that the mode of representation of the ideas is as important as the ideas themselves (example one). But this realization is greater than the validation of a particular style—it points to the legitimization of a particular way of *being* that commands the *authorized style* (a relation the euphemized language obscures). From a Bourdieuan perspective, linguistic competence is a reflection of broader social organization made over or translated as an academic judgment (school mirrors the broader “market” of relations [*Language* 49]). Conferring distinction upon those who appear more “adept” than others is another way of legitimating a preexisting form of “linguistic currency” (Bourdieu, *Language* 43). All of these words: ease, fluency, apt[ness], adept[ness], insight, perceptive[ness], appropriate[ness], [the ability to] appreciate, and [the sense of being] attuned, signify wealth or forms of symbolic capital. These words identify the preferred dispositions required to receive a

superior score on the AP Language Exam. Now, the course description provided by The College Board does not speak to specific dispositions of test-takers in terms of the course objectives or outcomes of the AP Language course—it speaks to skills. But in the language of *assessment*, the Voice of the individual test-taker oftentimes (directly and indirectly) rises in importance above these skills. So the question is not whether the test-taker can learn the skills required in one year of study, but whether the test-taker can learn to sound “adept” in one year of study.

Insight/-ful; Perceptive

--This essay offers a full and well-written response that goes beyond the expectations for an 8. It offers both perceptive insight and stylistic flair. (*Scoring Commentary: 2000*, Question 2)

--This essay is particularly effective because of its full and perceptive comparison and contrast. (*Scoring Commentary: 2003*, Question 3)

--The prose of the essay is adequate for expressing the student’s ideas, but its ideas are neither insightful nor clearly focused upon the demands of the prompt. (*Scoring Commentary: 2003*, Question 2)

--Although [this essay] correctly recognizes the satiric intent of the article, its attempt to analyze the satiric strategies lacks the perceptiveness needed to make it successful. (*Scoring Commentary: 2005*, Question 2)

In an early section of this discussion I located the notion of connoisseurship in the commentaries (Conflicted Expectations 11) and suggested that the critical gaze preferred in the language of assessment was one that favored

a highly specialized and narrowly focused form of looking alert to nuance and subtlety. The texture of words such as “insightful” and “perceptive” does a similar kind of psychic work in promoting a particular way of looking which is inextricable from the individual performing the investigation; the words signify a subjective aesthetic assessment (i.e., the reading or interpretation produced is evaluated as more or less artful and/or artfully rendered). Already I have called into question the politics of assessment that sorts by virtue of such subjective distinctions. Examples three and four betray the central problem with this criteria: the writers fulfill the general expectations of the exercise but lack the “stylistic flair” (see example one), the special quality of “insight” and/or “perceptiveness” to carry the off the presentation. The intimate relation between Voice and efficacy of analysis has been a motif throughout this entire discussion, as have salient terms like “full” which allude to the social profile of the writer(s) and collocate with words like “perceptive” (example two). The persistent relation and recurrence of these elements in the commentaries solidify the class-biased sorting in effect in the *Student Performance Q&A’s* and *Scoring Commentaries* and should finally make apparent that some students are being rewarded for doing what they already do well. Per what Michael Apple so compellingly described as the “hidden curriculum,” the “normative and dispositional elements required to make . . . inequality seem natural” (43), the latent equivalent in the scoring of the AP Language Exam is its *artistic* requirement—the unstated but imperative stylistic component essential to superior performance, a virtuoso level of proficiency, fluency, insight and perceptiveness already possessed by few but

worked toward by the majority. This is social distinction treated as rhetorical difference.

Appropriate/-ly/-ness

Again, although this term is commonplace in the language of rhetoric (e.g., appropriate selection of evidence, appropriate authorial stance suited to the audience and occasion), it is a very problematic word. Because, like apt, appropriateness signifies not only suitability to the circumstance, but what might be more or less socially fitting to do. The possibility of this slippage, for Derrida, conveys a problem: “A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game” (*Dissemination* 63). If appropriateness, an essential term in the judgment of rhetorical efficacy, in any sense, comes unmoored in meaning from situational suitability and comes to represent that which is more or less tasteful to do in a given circumstance, then the “rules of the game” have been discerned. Put differently, using Derridean terminology, the potential “double-meaning” of the word appropriate must signify two simultaneous possibilities: one that bolsters the academic judgment of the exam, and another that betrays a class-biased, latent logic of assessment.

But, first, let us consider the use of the word as an authentic gauge of assessment. It would be incorrect to state that the many appearances of the term appropriate and its variants are not used in good faith in the commentaries. Three such instances would be: “Students were encouraged to provide support for their arguments with appropriate evidence from their reading, observation, or

experience” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2009*, Question 3, par. 1); “Students need to be taught how to identify appropriate evidence and then how to use it to support their argument” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2009*, Question 3, par. 8), and:

Literary examples haven’t been a good fit with recent argument questions, but this was one topic where a well-chosen literary example could actually illustrate the point well. However, students often chose a familiar example whether it was appropriate or not, reaching for *The Scarlet Letter* or *The Great Gatsby*. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2009*, Question 3, par. 6).

Though the third example levels the familiar criticism against the use of ill-fitting literary proofs (it does so, however, more dialogically rather than dismissing it out of hand), the three examples demonstrate among the most tightly controlled, specific and objective uses of the word appropriate to be found in the *Student Performance Q&A*’s. In each of the three examples, the word appropriate connotes that which is situationally warranted. It is not a coincidence that all three of these examples come from the *Student Performance Q&A* from 2009, nor is it a coincidence that the ubiquitous and problematic word appropriate is conspicuously absent from the *Student Performance Q&A* from 2008 (see Table 1: observe in the matrix above that this is the only year the keyword does not appear in the commentaries from 2000 to the present). One reason why this is so has to do with a change in Readership in the AP Language Examination, a subject of great importance which I take up in detail in a later section (see Conditions of

Rebuttal 239). For the present, suffice to say that, in 2008—the year marking the disappearance of the word appropriate— another Chief Reader took over assessment of the AP Language Exam and the remarks for 2008-2009 are markedly different in tone than the comments from previous years. Therefore, it is not surprising that the word “appropriate” should be used in a more restrained way.

The following quotes, however, are of a different stripe:

--This inappropriate focus led many students down paths that proved useless for the intellectual journeys they had been asked to undertake. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2001*, “What were common threads of error?”)

--They offered not only ample, appropriate evidence but also sophisticated reasoning. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2005*, Question 3, par. 2)

-- [Teachers should] devote considerable energy to helping students develop rich syntactic structures and an appropriately full and effective vocabulary. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2010*, Question 3, par. 6)

Once again, I am directed to look at the surrounding words that form the suggestive lexicon of the AP Language Examination. And, throughout this study, I have been concerned not only with single instances of language but with words that surface in concert with other words and thus suggest a deeper meaning to the combinations and patterns. For instance, in example one, the juxtaposition of

“inappropriate” with “intellectual journeys” loads the first term with much more subjective, critical condemnation beyond whether a strategy is warranted. And, interestingly, the obverse is also true in example two where “appropriate” collocates positively with “sophisticated” (a favored word in the language of assessment of this exam characterizing superior student performance, as noted earlier). Again, the degree of sophistication of a strategy is a thing apart from whether a strategy is situationally warranted. And co-occurrence of the terms “appropriate(ly),” “rich,” and “full” with respect to stylistic features like word choice should, at this point, signify the buried language of prestige and facility of connoisseurship possessed by the ideal respondent on the AP Language Exam that I have attempted to uncover from the outset. The double-meaning of “appropriate” is not a small matter: that both usages occur in the commentaries is testimony to a peculiar internal tension that Critical Discourse Analysis is able to reveal. One form attests to choices made pursuant to relations among the rhetorical triangle, the other moves within a less concrete constellation of choices that one might make pursuant to taste. That some students make moves considered more “appropriate” than others may be less an academic virtue and instead one synchronous with a dominant view of what is more or less correct, “a mastery of the signs and emblems of distinction and taste” (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 141).

Appreciate(d)/Attuned to

--The successful papers recognized Hazlitt's appeals to emotion and appreciated his somber and then ironic—and ultimately humorous—tone. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2006*, Question 2, par. 2)

--[T]eachers should explicitly incorporate theories of rhetoric and practices of rhetorical analysis into their courses so that students become more attuned to the ways in which texts shape ideas, attitudes, beliefs, and practices in their world. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2005*, Question 2, par. 7)

--The most successful responses seemed attuned to the importance of public conversations about issues involving education. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2010*, Question 1, par. 2)

I selected all of the language thus far to cause the fish in its water to materialize, as it were, to do the recuperative work required to reveal the *habitus* that would be more (or less) in synch with such descriptions. And the words in this final grouping contribute to the effort most effectively as they point directly to the kind of critical sensibilities and shared practices associated with elite schools and privileged communities rendered in multiple studies (see Peshkin, *Permissible Advantage?*; Cookson and Persell). The disposition to “appreciate” certain legitimate works (example one), moreover, to understand what about them is less obvious and therefore more important to observe, would constitute the refined critical judgment and distinctive sense of cultural competence that some individuals possess in varying degrees contingent upon exposure to those works.

The word “attuned” functions similarly in terms of being a marker of familiarity. If some students need to become “more attuned to” certain practices (example two), it is because others are more accustomed to a particular type of inquiry (familiarity thus becomes the benchmark of excellence). Due to the fact that what a student is accustomed to shapes his/her response, and due to Kozol’s career argument that students inhabit vastly different personal and academic worlds, the emphasis upon familiarity works most effectively in favor of a particular social group. And, finally, the third example places in high relief the importance of familiarity as a required disposition for successful performance on the AP Language Exam. This sense of being attuned to “public conversation” might be colloquially rephrased as “being in the know.” Here, the topic of familiarity is education—elsewhere in the commentaries it is *virtually anything*. Example: “[P]art of being good writers is being involved, informed citizens, people who are aware of important issues being discussed in their community, nation, and world and who are capable of contributing intelligently to conversations about these issues” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2004*, Question 2, par. 7). This means that the student who sits down to write the AP Exam should be prepared to be conversant on literally *any* subject.

It seems necessary to pause here and reflect on this latent expectation and what it means, because this information is available only in the commentaries for the AP Language Exam and students and teachers need to understand how the test has been evaluated in years past and by what standard. The democratic rhetoric regarding an informed citizenry in the first part of the comment above is

distracting; it draws attention away from the important qualifier regarding those who are “capable of contributing intelligently to conversations.” Peshkin’s work most aptly characterizes such “capable” individuals, and precisely what makes them so:

Academy students also fly cross country to events of certain prestige and probably scholastic opportunity paid for by the Academy. In February, some students traveled to a speech tournament at the University of California, Berkeley, and others to a debate tournament at Harvard; in March, students attended the Columbia Press Association Convention at Columbia University in New York City; in May, some students participated in the National Science Olympics in Auburn, Alabama, and others in the Catholic National Speech tournament in Washington, DC. In addition, Academy students could choose: in September to begin a semester-long evening seminar on the Maya, 7:00-8:00 p.m. offered by two teachers; in October, to visit the exhibit the librarians prepared in recognition of Banned Books Week; in March, to go to Paris for 2 weeks to study French; in April, to learn at an all-day seminar devoted to Islamic history; and in May, to watch a puppet show in Spanish performed outside the library by a troupe of six persons from Mexico. (*Permissible Advantage?* 22)

If the requirement to sit this exam is the ability to wax poetic on virtually any subject, then whose competencies and dispositions, whose life experience, would such a requirement flatter? Who could confidently and “authoritatively”

enter such a “conversation”? The AP Language Exam, as a performance, is an alembic, a power-distillery, hyper-refining what some people already have and already do into a single shot concentration. Yet, paradoxically, the AP Language Exam, with its latent emphasis upon style, congratulates some students for possessing a *Voice it did little to nothing to cultivate* (if time, as Bourdieu says, the most precious commodity of all in the dominants’ favor, is a factor in the distillation process).

On Conversation . . .

[I]nitial status-derived capital is enhanced by the advantages which precocious acquisition of legitimate culture gives in learning cultural skills, whether table manners or the art of conversation, musical culture or the sense of propriety, playing tennis or pronunciation. (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 70)

Because the “art of conversation” appears in Bourdieu’s study as a form of symbolic capital, and due to iteration of the word conversation in the *Student Performance Q&A’s*— five times in commentaries issued between 2004 and 2007—the topic merits further attention. I should also mention that this single word prompted me to undertake this study. On March 22, 2006, while driving in to work and listening to *The Diane Rehm Show*, I heard the author Stephen Miller speak about his book, *Conversation: A History of a Declining Art*. I suspected, from the title, that the text would close with a rant on digital culture sounding the death knell for *real* conversation (which it did, as I learned upon reading Miller’s book), but what I got from the texture of the discussion between Miller and Rehm

was something different, a quality more in synch with the quote above from Bourdieu in terms of the beautiful images Miller painted of conversation from the perspectives of Montaigne and La Rochefoucauld. The author carefully defined the difference between talk and conversation (the latter he referred to as *raillery*: “good-humored, intelligent wit and banter” [5]). Talk, according to Miller’s research, has a purpose (the exchange of information), whereas conversation does not, or the purpose largely derives from pleasure—the delightful tone and style of the conversation (13-14). Viewed from such a perspective, I quickly understood how conversation could fit among Bourdieu’s catalogue of “cultural skills” including manners, knowledge of music, etiquette, skill in tennis and elocution (*Distinction* 70). And, as Miller’s book was both a celebration of this exalted practice and a threnody for the so-called death of conversation (evident in the words “art” and “decline”), I knew that the simultaneous call in the AP Language Exam commentaries for “intelligent” conversation (*Student Performance Q&A: 2004*, Question 2, par. 7) likewise signified something more important than source-weaving or synthesis.

The call for “intelligent” conversation seems not unlike the appeal to get beyond a limited academicism (this is in reference to criticism I described earlier concerning formulaic approaches and generic themes). Predictable pursuits and commonplace strategies hold no allure for the “engaged and curious reader” who longs for good “conversation” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2005*, Question 1, par. 6). On one hand, such an expectation seems justified in a test of advanced composition skills; on the other hand, again, the word conversation, from a

Bourdieuian perspective, signs differently contingent upon one's social situation. In other words, if the ability to have a conversation is viewed as a "cultural skill" rather than strictly as a rhetorical competency, then the advantage of initiation to a certain type of conversation becomes clear. The suggestions to transcend the limitations of one's schooling (e.g., to "embrace the ambiguity" of texts (*Student Performance Q&A: 2004*, Question 3, par. 6), rise above rote exercises and generic templates (*Student Performance Q&A: 2001*, What can teachers do to improve performance?, par. 12), experiment with form (*Student Performance Q&A: 2001*, What can teachers do to improve performance?, par. 13), and bring worldly, seasoned examples to the table in order to craft an "intelligent: conversations (*Student Performance Q&A: 2004*, Question 2, par. 7) all complement the social group with the time and resources to do so. This suggestion flatters the proficiencies of those already in possession of the preferred form of symbolic capital. But let us examine each appearance of the keyword "conversation" in the test commentaries for confirmation.

[P]art of being good writers is being involved, informed citizens, people who are aware of important issues being discussed in their community, nation and world and who are capable of contributing intelligently to conversations about these issues. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2004*, Question 2, par. 7)

The best answers contextualized the topic for the Readers, offered a clear assertion about the selected observation, and developed an essay in a

manner that suggested the students were in conversation with an engaged reader. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2005*, Question 1, par. 2)

[T]eachers should instruct students in the difference between writing an essay and producing an answer for an exam question. The former is a rich, self-sufficient composition. It contextualizes the prompt for an engaged and curious reader, enters into a conversation with the reader.

(*Student Performance Q&A: 2005*, Question 1, par. 6)

The most effective essays evinced writers who were not subsumed by the discourse of the sources, who saw themselves as agents of their own mind and world views, and who were able to present their own opinions in conversation with and in response to the sources. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2007*, Question 1, par. 2)

Teachers should help their students understand research-based argumentative writing as writing that stakes out and develops a position in conversation with, and in response to, the issues raised in the sources.

(*Student Performance Q&A: 2007*, Question 1, par. 4)

Regarding example one, the description speaks to the *habitus* of a particular individual (i.e., one who is “informed,” “aware” and “capable of contributing intelligently”). And the situation, along the lines of Austin’s argument stated earlier, confirms the authority of the speaker such that the person is *entitled* to speak. With respect to the comment regarding those “capable of contributing intelligently,” Bourdieu writes:

[T]he weight of different agents depends on their symbolic capital, i.e., on the *recognition* . . . that they receive from a group. Symbolic imposition . . . can function only if there is a convergence of social conditions which are altogether distinct from the strictly linguistic logic of discourse.

[original emphasis] (*Language* 72).

According to Bourdieu, the situation confers recognition—not the language itself; the test recognizes particular speakers as legitimate and the test and the identity described above are in harmony. This is where words in the Positive Personal Hexis grouping (fig. 4) become relevant as they complement the “involved, informed” and “aware” citizen framed above (e.g., “conscious,” “self-aware,” “thoughtful,” “self-reflective” and “mature”).

The second and third examples build out a relation between the ideal writer and the “engaged and curious” reader who serves as his/her conversational companion. This relation, by virtue of the conversation metaphor, is personal and collegial. The *Student Performance Q&A* for 2001 posits a similar metaphor for the relationship forged between test reader and writer:

The better students were familiar with the essay as a genre, and they did not confuse writing an essay with writing an examination answer. They treated their intended audience as though they were open-minded and intellectually curious and wrote as though writer and reader were participating in a shared intellectual journey. (General Comments, par. 2)

Whether they share “conversations” or “intellectual journeys,” the closer the writer is to the preferred form of expression, the more familiar (intimate) the

relationship between the writer and the test reader. Another way to put this would be that a better relationship to culture is evident in a better relationship to the reader (the symbolic figurehead of dominant discourse). Also worthy of note is the difference drawn in example three (and the quote from the 2001 *Student Performance Q&A*) between answering a question and writing an essay which harkens back to Miller's distinction between talk and conversation. In example three, conversation collocates with "rich, self-sufficient composition," which foregrounds abstract elements of style. Yet this is precisely what White omits from the criteria for scoring essay tests used to gauge the efficacy of college-level writing. He writes:

It is also useful to notice what is *not* listed as criteria for scoring of the essay test in the minds of the developers of the scoring guide. There is no mention of creativity, or style, or allusions to literature or literary devices. Such matters as these may enter peripherally into the scoring, which is holistic, meaning that the whole of other judgment is greater than the sum of its parts. But the definition of college-level writing in this particular scoring guide for an essay test yields a definition based on careful attention to the question, full and organized development of a response, and reasonable mechanical correctness given the nature of first-draft writing. ("Defining by Assessing" 251)

Whereas style is demoted in the evaluative rubric described by White, it is now apparent how important style is in the language of assessment of the AP Language Exam. And, interestingly, in the same article, White seems to suggest

that answering the question is something of a virtue: “When we look closely at the criteria for high grades on this test, we can notice that those scoring it put a particularly high value on responding to the question asked, in all of its parts and with attention to its complexity” (“Defining by Assessing” 251). However, per example three, “producing an answer for an exam question” is considered a fault on the AP Language Exam. Overall, what the metaphor of conversation reveals is an elitist conception of writing that does not correspond with other methods of writing assessment, as demonstrated by White, but which bears a comfortable relation to one particular social identity: the individual most “attuned to” the meaning of conversation.

I interpret the fourth example as one of the most significant moments in the commentaries as it is among the most tangible description of “high-range” writers offered. Who are these successful writers (as evidenced by their performance)? These “agents of their own mind” materialize as assertive and charismatic strategists who craft something deliberate from a personal storehouse of knowledge. Their skillful and confident presence creates the conversation, as though the writing on the page were the automatic translation of their personality (the romantic individualism distilled in the metaphor, “agents of their own mind,” lends imaginative power and appeal to the authors’ persona). The implication here is that successful writers write well because of who they are; their rhetorical efficacy is an expression of the legitimacy of their identity.

The fifth example represents a comparatively sedate expression of the conversation metaphor, likely because 2007 marked the debut of the “synthesis

essay question” on the AP Language Exam and the objective of the exercise needed to be quite clear. Still, it is interesting that the AP Language test’s version of the familiar DBQ (document based question) is housed in the elite metaphor of conversation. Whatever the methods are in other disciplines employing DBQ’s—and one gets an inkling of what these are from the negative comments regarding student approaches to the synthesis question—the AP Language Exam calls for a different approach. Here is what a non-conversational response looks like:

Often [low-range] writers simply reported what they saw in the source material. Their writing was dominated by the sources. The sources directed their attention, not the other way around. Students sorted the sources into pro and con sides; they classified the sources; or they simply moved from one source to the next, paraphrasing, summarizing, or commenting on them. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2007*, Question 1, par. 3)

The lower-order tasks identified in the description above: sorting, classifying, moving vacantly from piece to piece, paraphrasing, summarizing and commenting in a cursory manner, seem like a sort of opposite employee identity compared to the more managerial identity suggested in the metaphor of the “mind at work” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2007*, Question 1, par. 2). And though one might say that the aforementioned language merely echoes echelons in Bloom’s Taxonomy, the skills could also be descriptive of tiers in the work force. This becomes more likely when one considers that the “agents of their own mind” metaphor is not so much a figurative comparison as a literal destination, as

evidenced by the following quote from a student reflecting on the destiny parents wish to initiate and avoid in sending their children to private school: “They want you to be on the top of the food chain. They want us to be the bosses, not the employees. They want us to be the people who get the high wages. They want us to be in charge. We are going to be the leaders” (Peshkin, *Permissible Advantage?* 9). Some students possess skills, like conversation, that will more so reify this destiny.

In *The State Nobility*, Bourdieu points to adjectives and metaphors as revelatory of the veiled hierarchy of social relations at work in the school system of France, and I have attempted to locate the same linguistic markers in the commentaries for the AP Language Exam. The loaded language of the exam, the latent relations among terms, the contradictions within and between explanations, have positively signed not only to a preferential system of classification but also to the very identity that is singled out and rewarded as exceptional, rather than controlled for as an expression of the symbolic capital that some people possess in the extreme. However, let us imagine that the proof has not yet been delivered. There is one Bourdieuan quality that is the quintessential marker of the transmission of symbolic capital and that is the predisposition to appreciate legitimate works, so it is to that rarified test of status that we now turn.

William Hazlitt and the 2006 AP English Language and Composition Exam: An Object Lesson in Cultural Competence

The conversation is still about conversation. Recall that the word “conversation” appeared five times between 2004 and 2007 on the *Student*

Performance Q&A's for the AP Language Exam, and showed up once in 2007 and again in 2010. In fact, conversation as a topic, at that point in time, was “in the air,” as not only Miller’s book demonstrates, but several other titles dedicated to the same subject such as Debra Fine’s *The Fine Art of Small Talk* (2005); Margaret Shepherd’s *The Art of Civilized Conversation* (2005); Benedetta Craveri’s *The Age of Conversation* (2006); Jeanne Martinet’s *The Art of Mingling* (2006); Gavin Heaton and Drew McLellan’s *The Age of Conversation* (2008); Catherine Blyth’s *The Art of Conversation: A Guided Tour of a Neglected Pleasure* (2009); and David Denby’s *Snark: It’s Mean, It’s Personal, and It’s Ruining Our Conversation* (2009). Note the common values embedded in the language of the titles imbued with either elitism or anxiety regarding the decline of conversation (e.g., conversation is referred to as an “art,” ennobled as an “age,” and is preceded by the adjectives “fine” or “civilized,” or conversation’s changing status is framed in negative terms like “ruining,” “neglected,” or “declining”). Perhaps this is because the anthropological sense of place and relation (Augé 40) is becoming threatened by digital culture’s reworking of communication. In any case, I will now turn to William Hazlitt who figures prominently both in Miller’s study as well as the 2006 AP Language Exam. This is the only section in my analysis where I focus attention on the test-prompt in addition to what the readers say about it, and I do so for a reason that will immediately be justified.

For Hazlitt, a good conversation relied upon the recognition of common ground, a presupposed relation or even friendship (Miller 181). And I would argue that the AP Language and Composition exam relies upon a similar principle

of identity and relation (i.e., people of like mind sharing an “intellectual journey” or “intelligent conversation”). Hazlitt was an atypical choice for a prompt on the AP Language Exam, but a meaningful one. The idiosyncratic exercise garnered historically poor marks making it a powerful demonstration of prior knowledge, familiarity, and attunement to legitimate works of culture.

I attended a College Board sponsored workshop in 2006 (the Greater Los Angeles Advanced Placement Summer Institute at California State University), and I recall this essay prompt being discussed by teachers as, perhaps, the least successful test prompt in AP Language and Composition history. Test evaluators in the *Student Performance Q&A* narrative reported that “the mean score was 3.96 out of a possible 9 points” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2006*, Question 2, par. 2). The reason for the abysmal performance, apparently, hinged upon mass incomprehension of one word: want. The essay question called for rhetorical analysis of an excerpt from William Hazlitt’s essay “On the Want of Money,” published in 1827. The test evaluators wrote:

The most frequent errors resulted from students’ difficulty with reading and understanding archaic prose in general and one of Hazlitt’s constructions in particular. Concerning the latter: a great many students misread Hazlitt’s use of *want*—employed as a noun in the title and as a verb in the passage—as meaning a *desire*, rather than a *lack*. [emphasis in the original] (*Student Performance Q&A, 2006*, Question 2, par. 3)

Attendees at the AP conference joked over the fact that some students thought Hazlitt wanted money. Other students, apparently, misperceived the

question type (i.e., they thought that this question called for an argument, so they wrote about why they themselves wanted or needed money). Test evaluators, perhaps anticipating objection based upon the poor national response, remarked that “the passage presented students with contextual clues to help them determine the author’s use of the term *want*, but they often ignored these clues” [emphasis in the original] (*Student Performance Q&A, 2006*, Question 2, par. 4). The use of the word “ignored” here is interesting as it situates blame with the students (their misunderstanding appears as an act of incompetence versus an error in judgment on the part of test-writers). This reflects a certain level of defensiveness. Further defensiveness is demonstrated in the semantic argument on “want” provided in the extended quote above. Basically, this question required writers to understand and analyze strategies that Hazlitt used to critique over-absorption with material pursuit. In everyday language, Hazlitt argued: having money is bad and wanting it too much is bad and, paradoxically, having money is also bad in that it ultimately comes to nothing.

Another factor in successful rhetorical analysis of this passage was to notice that the excerpt from Hazlitt was comprised of only 3 sentences—the intermediate sentence housed the elaborate syntax which carried Hazlitt’s message regarding the stranglehold of material necessity and pursuit. So, two dominant factors determined successful understanding of this prompt. Another important feature for a successful response, though more subtle, would have been to notice the turn in line 28 signaling a contrast (i.e., the problems which come with having money). The test evaluators indirectly acknowledged the difficulty

level of this prompt in characterizing its ideal interpreter as one seasoned in, “reading and understanding archaic prose” (unsuccessful writers had “difficulty” doing this) (*Student Performance Q&A, 2006, Question 2, par. 3*). In paragraph four, advising teachers of strategies for future test preparation, the evaluators wrote:

In general education course and courses throughout their majors, college students are frequently required to understand texts written before the twentieth century. In particular, teachers could help students learn to identify the meaning of terms in context in archaic texts. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2006, Question 2*)

This is true (students encounter historical prose at university) but, at the same time, disingenuous, for how representative would Hazlitt be as content in “general education courses”? Tom Paulin, from “Spirit of the Age,” reprinted from *The Guardian* on the Hazlitt Society website, remarks:

Most of Hazlitt’s work is out of print, or unavailable in paperback. He is not studied in most university English courses and those who want to read him at any length need to scour secondhand shops for old Everyman editions of his essays (gloomily each year I contemplate the tiny number of readers who buy the selection of his essays I did for Penguin a few years ago). I often recall reading through his collected works which stand on the open shelves of the Upper Reading Room of the Bodleian library, only to find that Hazlitt’s three-volume *Life of Napoleon* had remained there for more than 60 years with its pages uncut. (par. 6)

Paulin's comments betray signs of connoisseurship in suggesting that Hazlitt's readership is limited to an elite few, making this a peculiar selection for a national examination. Paulin notes that would-be readers need to "scour" for Hazlitt material; he "gloomily" contemplates dwindling Hazlitt readership, and laments that existing tomes sit "uncut." But let us think more broadly about the eclectic choice of William Hazlitt on the AP Language and Composition Exam in 2006. As I mentioned earlier, Hazlitt figures prominently in the 2006 study by Stephen Miller titled: *Conversation: A History of a Declining Art*. In the chapter titled, "Conversation in Decline: From Raillery to Reverie," Hazlitt is said to have drawn a line between argument and conversation in that he perceived argument as an adversarial activity and conversation as collegial (cited in Miller 180). Miller writes,

Hazlitt describes better than any other writer on conversation the feeling of exhilaration that one often has after an evening of good conversation. When he leaves Northcote [he remarks] "I come out into the street with feelings lighter and more ethereal than I have at any other time." Yet Hazlitt thinks the opportunities for good conversation are limited. The only conversation "worth anything" is "between friends, or those who agree in the same leading views of a subject." (Hazlitt quoted in Miller, 181)

The essential qualities for "good conversation" then, according to Hazlitt, are consensus, similarity of perspective, commonality in ways of being and general

likeness (otherwise, polite talk degenerates into partisanship and polemics; this is part of Miller's explanation as to why conversation is a "declining art").

This is interesting because I would argue that the very factors that create ideal circumstances for sharing a "good conversation" are the ones that make this an especially problematic prompt. Understanding and appreciating "archaic" literature falls within the realm of what Bourdieu refers to as appreciation of legitimate works of culture (i.e., objects which stand in stately opposition to the products of mass or popular culture). And on the disposition to appreciate such works Bourdieu writes:

[N]othing more rigorously distinguishes the different classes than the disposition objectively demanded by the legitimate consumption of legitimate works, the aptitude for taking a specifically aesthetic point of view on objects already constituted aesthetically—and therefore put forward for the admiration of those who have learned to recognize the signs of the admirable—and the even rarer capacity to constitute aesthetically objects that are ordinary or even 'common' (because they are appropriated, aesthetically or otherwise, by the 'common people').

(Distinction 40)

Understanding legitimate works is a disposition which certain people possess, as it is acquired under unique circumstances, and therefore signifies a rarified form of knowledge that only certain people could share. From Paulin's description, Hazlitt's work would fit this category, as it is described something like an antique (i.e., as an object of antiquity which requires a particular

orientation in order to understand its proper value and significance). So, even if “students are frequently required to understand texts written before the twentieth century,” would this essay actually be found in “general education . . . courses” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2006*, Question 2)? Let us be generous and say, possibly, yes. But, does its appearance on the AP Language Exam signify an ideal fit between the actual competencies required by the AP Language test—the abilities to “appreciate” legitimate works and to be “attuned to” the “subtleties” and “nuances” of “archaic” texts—and the dispositions of one particular group of test-takers? There is no more definitive test of the “fish in or out of its water” than performance on the Hazlitt prompt. Certain test takers will be more “adept” in and “attuned to” such a conversation.

The final proof that this prompt demonstrated little more than a thinly veiled confirmation of group membership and solidarity for a select set of test-takers may be found in the abrupt transition to the next FRQ (free-response question) on the 2006 exam. In a swift, time neutralizing gesture (a move to disguise and/or correct the problem revealed in the Hazlitt prompt), the test moves from archaic text to hypertext. The subject of Question 3 for the 2006 Language and Composition exam prompted kids to comment upon the legitimacy of the blogosphere, among other media outlets, as the great facilitator of democratic discourse or proliferator of useless opinion. The logic in the juxtaposition was, seemingly, that whatever knowledge kids lacked in terms of interpreting archaic texts they would not lack in contemporary media and digital literacy. Even so, the national mean for the test was not impressive: “4.33 out of a possible 9 points”

(*Student Performance Q&A: 2006*, Question 3, par. 2). Perhaps this is because the subject was not actually contemporary culture but contemporary culture as an object of inquiry: “Students who succeeded with this question demonstrated that they had read widely about current events and were aware of the ubiquity and increasing density of communication” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2006*, Question 3, par. 2). The necessity for distance from the subject could also be seen as a kind of exercise in distinction as it required students to respond not as participants in mass and digital culture, but as critics.

The test for 2006, and its tandem commentary, prompted me to think with renewed seriousness about the traditional forms of cultural capital that the test rewarded and, in some respect, caused me to wonder about Gee’s claims regarding accruing a portfolio of digital experiences that could potentially supplement and/or displace the traditional forms of knowledge and experience kids glean in school (“Millennials and Bobos” 64-65). While Gee’s thesis seemed liberatory and radical when I first read it, the Hazlitt prompt suggests that, at least for the present, in terms of the assessment of the AP Language Exam, it is “business as usual.” This prompt, and the premium placed upon a certain type of conversation prioritized in the commentaries, complements the preparatory school curriculum which is “not quick to embrace educational innovation” (Cookson and Persell 77). In these elite institutions, a classical education (Cookson and Persell 32; 74-75) is still very much de rigueur. These are environments in which AP Exams are taken most seriously (Cookson and Persell; Peshkin, *Permissible*

Advantage?) as guarantors of the right college admission and, ultimately, one's place in society, but schools only reflect broader cultural attitudes.

For this reason, and many others provided during the course of this discussion, it seems warranted to say that, rather than writing proficiency, what is being rewarded in the *Performance Q&A's* and *Scoring Commentaries* on the AP Language Exam is actually a non-specific presence on the page (the 6-Traits refers to this as Voice). This presence, per the dispositions to speak in a certain way and command a particular critical gaze, is the translation of a class identity which the AP Language Exam recognizes as more "sophisticated," "intelligent," "authoritative," and perhaps even more cultured. A way of being is rewarded on the AP Language Exam, not a way of writing. "High-range" writing is a mystification—it is little more than the performance of cultural capital.

In making this case, I have only highlighted what the test commentaries actually state quite explicitly, that is, the premium placed upon a particular style and Voice. Therefore, I conclude this portion of the study with the words of the Chief Reader from the 2010 AP Language Exam, to finally demystify this so-called meritocratic gauge of writing proficiency. In answer to the now familiar question put to the Readers of the AP Language Exam: "Based upon your experience of student responses at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve performance of their students on the exam?" The Chief Reader responds:

Devote considerable energy to helping students develop rich syntactic structures and appropriately full and effective vocabulary. At the 2010 AP

Reading, the weakest writers' problems with sentence fragments, distracting grammatical and syntactical errors, and at times simple verbal incoherence raised concerns about the state of the language in our culture. In essays from the middle scoring range, competent and adequate prose served a pedestrian function. Among the best essays, the full, engaging sentences and the lucid clarity of expression restored our faith that the written word is alive and quite healthy in a segment of high school students. (*Student Performance Q&A: 2010*, Question 3, par. 6)

In this quote one sees a taxonomy of writers emerge whose voices are metonymic of social organization as reflected in the tendency to write in particular ways. In "our culture," an assumption of consensus that does not even exist (Graff and Robbins), there are some people who sound "incoherent," others who sound "pedestrian," and still others who represent the "best" of us, whose voices are "full" and "engaging." These students "keep the faith" alive that a certain "segment of high school students" is safeguarding the "health" of the language. This rhetoric, housed as it is in the language of sickness and health (with linguistic sickness coded as incoherence and incoherence gauged by proximity to the most legitimate/healthy variation of English: the standard form), seems not unlike the criticism of the so-called degraded or "impoverished" status of black English which so provoked Labov. The issues identified for teachers above do not so much concern composition as a whole, but really just one narrow component of composition, one canon of rhetoric: style. The AP Language and Composition Exam—by its emphasis upon word choice, syntax and, ultimately,

charisma, considering the difference between “pedestrian” and “engaging”—is a test of style. Knowing what is more tasteful to do and when to do it is the difference between earning a “3” and a “5.” This is a spurious measure of competence in composition which no move to “close the gap” will easily ameliorate, as it is largely invisible.

Conditions of Rebuttal

Of course there are exceptions to my observations. Some of the *Performance Q&A’s*—most notably those composed between 2008 and 2009—are markedly different in the tone of the language and intent. The commentaries produced in those two years are focused upon strictly Rhetoric/Composition oriented competencies; they read as practical “do-plans” for teachers without (much) snarky criticism (the comment regarding the “dark worlds” that some students “inhabit” (*Student Performance Q&A: 2009*, Question 3, par. 3) came from the narrative produced in 2009). These commentaries, in plain speech, provide teachers with specific strategies for scoring well on the exam. The test objective is defined much more concretely and issues of style and content are more evenly, and even-handedly, addressed. The *Student Performance Q&A’s* for the test years 2008 and 2009 do not make the AP Language Exam look like a game or an arm of social class reproduction, but rather the logical complement of an introductory college course in composition. The summative measurement (that is, the AP Language Exam) in these narratives appears more transparent, fair and even creative.

It would be right to ask: why is this so? What makes these narratives different from the ones produced in previous years? As I stated earlier, 2008 marked a transition in the Chief Reader for the AP Language Exam from the one who served between 2004 and 2007. And, though I have intentionally not referred to individuals by name in this study (individuals are actually identified in the electronic *Student Performance Q&A's* beginning with the year 2003) because this study is not about individuals but rather the language of assessment, this is one case where a “change in the guard” presents a relevant piece of data and a paradox.

In 2006, a fascinating study was published titled: “Are Advanced Placement English and First-Year College Composition Equivalent? A Comparison of Outcomes in the Writing of Three Groups of Sophomore College Students.” The investigation basically concluded that AP Language alone was insufficient to prepare students for the rigors of college writing and that a first year course in writing was recommended in addition (Hansen et al., “Are Advanced”). Understand that this study aggressively challenged the (then) prevailing notion that obtaining a “4” or a “5” on the AP Language Exam demonstrated a level of proficiency such that students should be able to pass out of introductory writing coursework. The authors of the study challenged this on the grounds of the massive revenue that the College Board stood to generate by encouraging the maximum number possible to take the test, no matter what scores might be earned (Hansen, et al., “Are Advanced” 464). For instance, the authors reported that “in 1998, approximately 805,400 AP exams were given scores of 3,

4, or 5, but only 49% of these scores actually translated into college credit, not the roughly 66% predicted by the College Board” (Lichten cited in Hansen, et al., “Are Advanced” 463). My point in referring to this study, which was one of the important catalysts to the current conversation about the meaning and value of dual-credit coursework in Composition offered on high school campuses, is that one of the co-authors served as the Chief Reader for the AP Language Exam between 2008 and 2009.

How this arrangement came to be, especially considering the provocative relationship between the language and findings of the study and the AP Program, is unknown. But it would have seemed a logical move on the College Board’s part to recruit such a critic, as the individual, in accepting the post, was then required to defend the legitimacy of the program in putting together a credible measurement of assessment which, in turn, would bolster the College Board’s claims about the efficacy of the test. In any case, this is why the *Student Performance Q&A*’s produced between 2008 and 2009 sound the most ethical voice in the years of assessment of the AP Language Exam. One could even argue that the Chief Reader’s influence, in some sense, extended beyond his tenure, as he reshaped the look and ideological contours of the assessment for 2010 (that is, apart from the outrageous comment about the “health” of one “segment” of high school students reprinted above).

Underscoring the Qualifier

As I stated at the outset of this study, I never intended to imply nor do I believe that there is something motivated in the production of the Student

Performance Q&A's or the Scoring Commentaries. In fact, I have always thought that the evaluators through the years were totally incognizant of the possible meanings behind their words, or else I doubt they would have published their comments. What I have described is only a facet of social class reproduction in education that scholars before me (e.g., Anyon, Apple, Bourdieu, Bowles and Gintis, Lareau, etc.) have devoted careers to delineating. If the evaluators of the AP Exam are complicit in the process of reproduction, then so are the teachers who train students for the exam and the students who take it (so goes the logic of symbolic violence outlined by Bourdieu, the idea that individuals are complicit in their own oppression). No one sits "off-side" in this game (Bourdieu, *State Nobility* 53).

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

“La Perruque” and the AP Language Examination

No one would have the temerity to say that good writing is a ruse. And it would be disingenuous—a cheat to one’s students—to say that the writing process could or should be circumvented with or supplanted by little tricks. Good writing is real, and this is so not because of a holistic rubric designed to evaluate the efficacy of the product of a three-hour exam, and not because one is awarded the coveted score of “5” on a high-profile test gate-keeping test which may or may not help facilitate admittance to Yale. We know this from our own explorations as readers; we learn about good writing from books that show us the possible. For me, that is the writing of John Berger. Similarly, what I now describe is *not* a sophist’s agenda, not an ironic promotion of Aristotle’s worry regarding “making the worse argument seem the best” (cited in de Certeau 38), not a blue-print for how to produce academic “bullshit” (Smagorinsky et al.). That would be a grossly superficial and inadequate response to the unequal allocation of resources and access to opportunities that are at the base of this discussion.

The theory behind the following list of tactics for appropriating the desirable Voice on the free-response essay portion of the AP Language and Composition Exam is derived first from the *Student Performance Q&A’s* and *Scoring Commentary* narratives, and next from de Certeau’s provocative blue-print for subversion: *The Practice of Everyday Life*. The premise of de Certeau’s

work, indebted to but distinct from the work of Georges Bataille and Marcel Duchamp, is to discover leverage points in systems of unequal power relations, an “in” for the weak to use against the strong, as de Certeau puts it. The book acts as a kind of antidote for paralytic models of crisis that insist, by the terror and/or ingenuity of their construction (e.g., models of culture drawn by Althusser, Foucault, and even Bourdieu, to a certain extent), that resistance on the part of ordinary people would be (largely) impossible. For de Certeau there is *only* opposition, the clever evasion of the power bloc done by nobodies (people de Certeau considers heroes precisely by virtue of their anonymity) who live the stifling rules of the game and chip away at it still, from the inside, through tricks and jokes, games and strategies (shared Bourdieuan terminology). These “popular” rebels (i.e., rebels of mass culture) have the potential to seriously complicate productivity and the status quo (de Certeau 26). The trickster figure, for de Certeau, is identified as “la perruque,” French for “the wig” (25), and it is the element of disguise, the look of belonging and compliance, that enables la perruque to infiltrate and overturn the governing logic of a system. For de Certeau, la perruque is (among other possible forms) the worker who pretends to be industriously employed but instead makes other things, more pleasurable and personal, of his/her time rather than profit for the company (25-26). Updated by Fiske in his discussion of acts of resistance in popular culture, la perruque takes the form of adolescents who loiter at the mall without buying the goods for sale, and thereby frustrate the logic of retail (40-41). And, for the purposes of this discussion, la perruque is the student writer who possesses little in the way of

inherited, dominant forms of cultural capital but, nevertheless, is able to simulate lexical *ease* (recall that ease is identified by Bourdieu as a telling effortlessness, the transcendental marker of distinction). In the words of de Certeau, the trickster “succeeds in ‘putting one over’ on the established order on its home ground” (26). Could a student assume the *look of ease*, or the Voice of distinction, and earn a score of “5” on the AP Language Exam?

The tactics I describe here are not invented, in fact, they would be useless if they arrived out of nowhere; rather, these maneuvers for writing the AP Language Exam derive from the test commentaries themselves, as I have described them. More specifically, these tactics emerge from the margins: they are implied but not explicitly stated by the test commentaries. Only the performance narratives could instruct us in the way to successfully play the game of the AP Language and Composition Exam, which they do, overtly, at some points—in a “scholastic” manner, which would garner an acceptable score. But, as I demonstrated in the body of this discussion, the finesse, the *art* of achieving a score of “5,” is not necessarily attainable equally for all. Therefore, one must ferret out an approach to writing the exam another way. This is what Macherey refers to as the *nondit*, the unsaid: “What is important in the work is what it does not say” (Macherey 97). Macherey argues that a text does not give up information willingly, that it is “hiding” a secret, “diverting” the reader’s attention from another truth located at the “margin” (98-99). The following strategies, then, are derived from thinking about the AP Language Exam from the only place left to one not of the dominant class: the margin.

This technique is something both like and unlike the various test preparation books available from Stanley Kaplan or the Princeton Review. The key difference resides in the demarcation between the words “tactic” and “strategy” as delineated by de Certeau. A strategy is a plan of action which presupposes a certain type of knowledge and power held by the deviser (de Certeau 36). In this sense, test preparation books (and classes) are paradoxically incorporated into the production of the exam. By way of example, many prep books are created by test writers and consultants; therefore, test prep books produce and are produced by the very mechanism they profess to “crack” (e.g., I am referring to titles like: *Cracking the Code of the GRE/SAT/LSAT, MCAT*, etc.). Put differently, these books produce strategies that are embedded in the very circumstances that they would ostensibly subvert by “cracking them.”

Conversely, according to de Certeau, a tactic is employed by the powerless from a “non-place” (like a low SES public high school); de Certeau uses certain “guerilla” oriented language to describe the sudden kinetics of tactics like “blows,” “raids,” “opportunities,” and “seizing on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment” (37). More at length, the tactic, “make[s] use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse” (de Certeau 37). This resonates with Macherey’s critical method of decoding texts via the “interstices,” “fissures,” and “cracks.”

Not all of these tactics would be used at once; maybe one in combination with another if the occasion required. Similarly, no one tactic is more important or useful than the others; each one would be summoned, by necessity, contingent upon the “game” of the prompt, that is, the appropriateness of the situation and objective, and of course the audience—which is accounted for and *built into* the methods, by necessity. In terms of their efficacy as tactics, the verification factor sought after in both qualitative and quantitative research in order to ensure the validity of the results, this is ensured by the element of time: the necessarily brief amount of time allotted to the reading of each essay in standardized test evaluation. We should here recall Bourdieu’s indication that time is precisely what the dominant class has in its favor and in unlimited store (*Distinction* 71-73). But, in the case of standardized examinations, time presents an advantage to the non-dominant, specifically: a *shortage of time* works in favor of the non-dominant. Time is the misfortune of the assessment machine which does not have unlimited time and resources to perform its function, but is a gift to la perruque, and the unwitting guarantor of verifiability of these methods.

Even if each essay receives multiple readings for comparability, these are still three *rapid* readings, the test “making do” (de Certeau’s terminology) within certain temporal and financial restrictions for efficiency and profitability, just as student writers “make do” under the constraint of time in the test setting. This means that, inevitably, due to limited time, advantage might go—unintentionally—to some measure of influence unaccounted for, a certain “stand out” feature (such as word choice, an eclectic proof, a status reference, etc.) which

would promote a kind of instantaneous, prima facie understanding and even kinship between the essay writer and the Reader. Further, this understanding might be encouraged by the holistic scoring method (at least, as it operates in the test commentaries), which appears especially susceptible to subjective appraisal, such that one student would *seem* “sophisticated,” whereas another would *seem* “in over his/her head.” Such personal judgments were located in the previous chapter in terms of euphemized descriptions which suggested different ways of being and speaking expressed, indirectly, by various students and acknowledged by readers. Therefore, we have seen that there is a certain Voice that is favored, and we know it is this Voice which must be appropriated or “borrowed” (de Certeau describes the carpenter “borrowing” factory-owned tools to make furniture for his own home [25]), because the test commentaries have, indirectly, told us so.

To use Fitzgerald’s metaphor from the opening, it is apparent that some Voices “sound like money.” So, I stalked the margins of the AP Language and Composition Examination in order to locate “the money” so that such linguistic currency will no longer work only in the service of one group. The following constitutes a list of suggestions generated from that endeavor. But before I provide my recommendations, again, I want repeat that I do not wish to be misinterpreted to devalue the meaning and importance of a legitimate writing curriculum by what is to follow. I believe that such training is genuine and necessary, which is precisely why I am attempting to short-circuit the

disingenuousness of the AP Language Exam which does not represent the authentic activities of a first year course in composition (Jones, “Recomposing”).

Tactics

Tactic 1. Build a tactical allusion base. The AP Language Examination is predominately a test of cultural capital in that its subject matter is literally anything (i.e., students are expected to enter any “intellectual conversation” and to produce evidence from a wide range of sources in order to back their assertions on an unbounded range of topics). This surpasses typical school-acquired knowledge; therefore, one must accrue an allusion base sufficiently immense and eclectic in order to compensate for any deficit in first-hand experience and/or a privileged academic background.

I recommend that this allusion base specifically include “highbrow” (i.e., dominant culturally sanctioned) *and* mass or popular sources of knowledge on as wide an array of topics as one is able to survey inside and outside of class in the year of preparation prior to the AP Exam. The more eclectic the sampling of information the student gathers, the better the possibility for its broad application and generalizability across questions. In this regard, the strategy of high/low information collection cannot be under-emphasized, as the ability to “code-switch” between the extreme ends of forms of cultural capital, for example, to be able to slip seamlessly between illustrations from the Beaux Arts such as classical music, performance, works of art and architecture *and* artifacts of mass consumption such as movies by Kevin Smith and Judd Apatow, animation, culinaria, gangster rap and contemporary technologic appliances like the Wii or

Kindle, demonstrates the pervasively attentive, engaged, intellectual (while still accessible and congenial) attitude that the test, by the suggestion in its commentaries, values. The prescription for such accrual might be something as simple as routinely listening to NPR.

Tactic 2. Obtain extracurricular exposure to argument. The AP Language Examination demonstrates by its construction (e.g., one essay question on the researched argument; one essay question open to mode with a historical predilection for argument; and one essay question on rhetorical analysis), greater emphasis upon “classical rhetoric” (Knodt 148) and argumentation than an English 101/102 course might with, say, a survey of the modes of composition and integration of a cultural studies curriculum. As such, an extra-curricular activity, such as speech and debate, would train students in the structure and evidentiary composition of a tight theme required by the three, timed essay questions.

At two of the AP conferences I attended (e.g., the Greater Los Angeles AP Summer Institute, 2006, and the AP Summer Institute conducted in San Marcos, CA, 2005), participants noted the benefits of speech and debate and suggested (albeit unofficially) a correlation between participation in this extra-curricular activity and high scores on this subject examination. Whether or not this correlation is empirically demonstrable, such participation would have a compensatory effect for high school English classes that focus (from the perspective of the AP Language Examination commentaries) too narrowly upon literature. Also, training in debate (especially the kind of public policy topics in

which they engage) would expand the variety of information accrual indicated in Tactic 1 in terms of requiring the student to gather varied evidence in support of claims, and would reify the idealized image of the participatory, citizen-intellectual drawn in the commentaries. If the school does not offer an extra-curricular program in speech and debate, then of equal benefit might be enrollment in, simultaneous with AP Language, a course in communications (public speaking) in order to think more immediately about the relationship between speaker, message and audience.

Tactic 3. Frame literature in theory. A work of literature should not be mentioned (in an exam response) alone but in concert with theory to frame the work in a more acceptable way from the perspective of rhetoric and composition faculty who have debated (both inside and outside the AP commentaries) literature or fiction's relevance to the composition curriculum (see Elbow, "War" and "Cultures"; Lindemann; Tate). The AP Language Exam commentaries, as well as the AP Language Course Description, demonstrate a decisive preference for non-fiction and the excising of literary samples.

This tactic would satisfy those who argue that literature has no place in the composition curriculum while still ensuring that eleventh graders receive the useful exposure to works covered in a survey of American literature, whether the College Board approves or not (that is actually the general curriculum of an eleventh grade English class [Puhr 79]).

Students should come to know a few theorists well who would have maximum generalizability to frame texts; for instance, Foucault, Bourdieu and

Derrida. In this way, students would not be discussing Hawthorne, Twain or Fitzgerald for the sake of discussing Hawthorne, Twain or Fitzgerald, but rather they would be discussing *The Scarlet Letter* through the lens of *Discipline and Punish*, or *The Great Gatsby* through the lens of *Distinction*, or *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* through the lens of *Dissemination*. So much has been written on the teaching of literary theory in secondary school that I need not provide a “how to” explanation in this regard. Suffice to say that a command of philosophy would serve as a tool to obtain great dividends on the AP Language Examination, for 1) the non-literary treatment of literary artifacts, 2) the demonstration of analytic ability, and 3) the demonstration of linguistic competence (i.e., conversance with the rarified, and therefore more valuable, vocabulary which accompanies this high-order branch of study).

Tactic 4. Properly estimate the power of voice, style and word choice.

The AP Language Examination commentaries demonstrate the importance of Voice perhaps above all other considerations. For instance, it has been shown how interesting word choice and style, in some circumstances, potentially trump a dearth of legitimate ideas.

Therefore, it is important for students and teachers to think tactically about style—not as a cultivation and expression of the self or demonstration of investment but, in this context, which is essentially “gaming” (Attewell 268) test-takers into imagining that the SES gap is not relevant, students ought to think about style as a marker of a way of being perhaps especially different from whatever is immediately familiar; style as the symbolic expression of a form of

capital which, when appropriated, might be capable of providing a desirable return. This would necessitate thinking about style as the performance of various discursive strategies particular to privileged communities. In this way, style becomes visible to students as a marker of group alliance and potential exclusion, as Fitzgerald persistently noted. The idea would be for students to understand and strategically appropriate markers of these privileged discourses which could then be converted into advantage or gain on the AP Language Exam. This would entail more than just the use of signal words and phrases, but also the co-optation of an attitude; “the student, in effect, has to assume privilege without having any” (Bartholomae 598). Bartholomae writes about something like this in “Inventing the University,” and calls it an “enabling fiction,” that is, the “mimicking” or “performance” of “conventional rituals and gestures” in the absence of knowledge (591) en route to actually acquiring the academic discourse of a discipline. And Bartholomae, quite rightly, calls this a “violent accommodation,” when “students locate themselves in a discourse that is not ‘naturally’ or immediately theirs” (602). Bourdieu refers to the euphemism “accommodation” as “symbolic violence”:

Dominant symbolic systems provide integration for dominant groups, distinctions, and hierarchies for ranking groups, and legitimation of social ranking by encouraging the dominated to accept the existing hierarchies of social distinction. (Swartz 83)

In the case I am describing, however, symbolic violence is minimized in that the dominated are (re)claiming such methods as a tactic of subversion. I am

not saying that the strategies to appropriate “prestige patterns” of language, as Labov puts it (*Language* 5), are more correct or superior or even justified, just that they are equivalent to the form of linguistic currency valued by a particular market. They are “convertible” to the form of currency the AP test offers.

Of course, it may ultimately be impossible to simulate or “short cut” style, as Bourdieu has suggested, but thinking about it in terms of the sociological meditation on habitus and life chances posed by the movie *Caddyshack*, how long and how intensely did Danny Noonan, Michael O’Keefe’s character, have to masquerade in order to work the promise of a scholarship out of Judge Smalls, Ted Knight’s character? (That was a demonstration of Tactic 1.) Toward this end, it is advisable to capitalize on all technical and narrowly specialized discourses commanded by the student. If the student is able to talk math, music theory, digital culture or science, or if there is a specialized lexicon attached to the extra-curricular activities in which the student participates, these vocabularies, and tandem attitudes, could be productively mined to simulate the Voice desired in the essay portion of the AP Language Exam.

Tactic 5. Perhaps avoid discussing American literature altogether and sample the world. Despite the fact that many eleventh grade English classes (the typical year in which AP Language is offered) incorporate some form of survey of American literature, the commentaries, as mentioned previously, for the AP Language Examination demonstrate disdain for reference to these canonical works (e.g., the pronounced hostility toward the “inappropriate” mention of *The Scarlet Letter*). As such, mention of the most typically taught American novels,

when writing the AP Language Exam, is discouraged. [Note: if American literature is one of the only forms of cultural capital the student confidently possesses, frame as recommended in Tactic 3.]

On October 20, 2009, Kozol remarked, in a lecture to students at Arizona State University, that teachers should still teach canonical works (among many other sources, obviously). The idea was that not to do so would further enfranchise more richly resourced schools and strengthen their monopoly on traditional, dominant forms of knowledge. Though there is sense to this, I am recommending that students not mention canonical American works when writing the AP Language Exam. Instead, students should be as eclectic as possible in terms of selection from world literature, so that the specific idea of literature itself is demoted and, instead, world cultures and intellectual traditions are promoted. Again, as in the case of knowledge of a few literary theorists, this would mean knowing a few writers and/or a few works well, preferably from a sampling of genres and periods, in order to enhance possibility for the generalizability of response to any question. One would want to sample based upon eclecticism and cachet, sample for the singular aura of items, such as one would find on display at the Louis Vuitton store. For instance, sample from the Surrealists: Apollinaire, Breton, Eluard—definitely Queneau’s *Exercises in Style*—something they would never see coming (the AP reader Schwartz confessed that he longed for the element of surprise and praised the student who cited Jean Luc Godard). Draw jokes from Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo*, or isolated remarks from *The Glenn Gould*

Reader, Kafka's *Diaries*, or *Fellini on Fellini*—any of these works could provide an illustrative metaphor for whatever the student wishes to discuss.

Reference to world and alternative cinema, in this regard, would function similarly with excellent effect. The more off-center the selection and the more specialized detail the student could provide about it, would be all the better. For instance, show students *The Secret of the Grain* and ask them to think about life in France for the immigrant community from Tunisia. Or, maybe an “anti-movie,” such as *My Dinner With Andre*, which is more like a “real time” record of a happening. Maybe have them meditate on the silence in Wenders' *Wings of Desire*. Exposure undertaken to enhance the capacity of allusion does not trivialize the art or place inappropriate emphasis upon exam preparation, but instead foregrounds the endeavor in tapping the province of power, knowledge and status which familiarity with such works confers.

Tactic 6. Read the electronically published commentaries. What is a more central concept to rhetoric than knowing one's audience? That is, understanding one's audience is critical to selecting the most appropriate evidence and strategies of self-presentation to make the message worthy of consideration. Students need to know the answers to the following questions: Who are the people who read and score the AP Language Exam? How does the Voice and taste in readership change over time?

This idea is not Machiavellian but purely pragmatic, yet the majority of teachers are apparently not reading the commentaries. I know this because, in 2010, I signed up as a member of the AP Language and Composition *listserv* and

I overtly asked the participants in this online community whether they read the commentaries and for what reason. Three individuals wrote me back.

Understand that such a number is ridiculously small when one considers the prolific conversation buds, sometimes numbering ten to twenty and up, regarding a test-prep related question (e.g., *listserv* participants mostly request test-practice prompts from their colleagues and/or want to discuss the questions or results for the current year's test). I can report that one of the three respondents to my question was a previous member of the test Development Committee and AP Reader, and this person replied that it was very important to read the published commentaries. This is to be expected. But more *teachers* ought to have said this, too.

And not only should teachers read these commentaries, but they should *share them* with their students—not as another tool of test preparation, like the two other teachers who responded to my online query suggested—but as a way to think critically about not only the preferences of the readers but whether these measurements actually say something important about “college level” writing, and about whose interests these instruments authentically serve. The Student Performance Q&As represent one of the few times in the history of standardized testing that the exam actually “talks back” prolifically to the test-taking public, so teachers should take advantage of that. “Eliminate the middle man”: let the kids read these missives. This should not be information delivered second-hand through the filtering mechanism of the instructor, because hearing the voice of the past and especially the current AP Reader(s) *is the point*.

Perhaps, even more usefully, teachers should make the electronic test commentaries the object of inquiry, the course text, or subject of rhetorical analysis. Let students discover the tone and message of the various commentaries in concert with the speaker-specific diction, the allusion base, the source or substance of metaphor, and the sense of “humor” specific to the voices in the commentaries. Then the students, and their teachers, will be in a position to ask the proper questions of the AP Language Exam and they will know how to best prepare for it.

Tactic 7. Revisit Fitzgerald. The sociologists explain Bourdieu’s intellectual roots in Weber, but reading *Distinction* suggests that his muse was actually Proust. Bourdieu’s theory of the sociology of taste might as well be paraphrased by Proust’s observation concerning “the infinitely varied art of marking distances” (qtd. in *Distinction* 66). For a similar reason, namely, because he is the cartographer of class in America, teachers of composition should return to Fitzgerald.

Maybe no other American writer focused more intently on the quality of Voice—and the kind of voices which could open and close doors—than Fitzgerald. His characters perfect a form of linguistic surveillance and practice it so vigilantly and unobtrusively that it is (ironically) almost possible to miss his emphasis upon this variety of social selection. For instance, Nick remarks, while at one of Gatsby’s parties:

I was immediately struck by the number of young Englishmen dotted about; all well dressed, all looking a little hungry and all talking in low

earnest voices to solid and prosperous Americans. I was sure that they were all selling something: bonds or insurance or automobiles. They were, at least, agonizingly aware of the easy money in the vicinity and convinced that it was theirs for a few words in the right key. (Fitzgerald 46)

Nick begrudges the climbers' obvious efforts to better their position via linguistic tactics; in short, he discovers them in the act of trying to get ahead. In fact, all characters in *The Great Gatsby* are caught in (and dealt consequences for) the act of trying to get ahead—except the dominants. Nick observes: “Sometimes [Daisy] and Miss Baker talked at once, unobtrusively with a bantering inconsequence that was never quite chatter, that was as cool as their white dresses and their impersonal eyes in the absence of all desire” (Fitzgerald 17). The Voice possessed by the social elect is the ultimate confirmation of their position. This is important for teachers of writing to think about.

By the end of the novel, Mr. Gatz arrives in West Egg as the wraith of social class origin his son, Gatsby, had attempted to shake. He remarks of his son's self-improvement program:

Jimmy was bound to get ahead. He always had some resolves like this or something. Do you notice what he's got about improving his mind? He was always great for that. He told me I et like a hog once and I beat him for it. (Fitzgerald 182)

Maybe Fitzgerald here nullifies the distance between “et” and “Old Sport,” as both terms ultimately betray the identical limitation (i.e., a bankruptcy

of social class inheritance). It seems that whether one tries too hard or not at all, the result is the same without possession of the most distinguished form of linguistic capital. At the same time, as is commonly known in literary criticism, the self-improvement list drawn up by young James Gatz at the end of the novel is not read as a failure but is instead situated within the historical rhetoric of American meritocracy. That is, the list represents a viable argument for the possibility of upward mobility, an expression of belief in the “self-made man” concept blue-printed by Franklin in *The Autobiography*. Both lists, symbolically, suggest something like: Success is something we all can achieve through diligent application, without any thanks owed to circumstances of birth; the system democratically assigns reward for talent, industry and initiative. But the novel persistently does a “take-back” on that promise with the troubling ineluctability of the credit of inheritance, both in the uncouth ghost of Mr. Gatz and the obvious over-corrections of his parvenu son.

Mounting Contradictions

In their idealized form, standardized examinations were intended to ameliorate discrepancies of birth through the unbiased methods of science. That is, standardized tests, in theory, were supposed to reify the vision of the meritocracy and the attainment of opportunity by ability rather than birthright (Fallows 11) achieved through the promise of scientific efficiency and objective classification (see Giordano regarding the Alpha and Beta tests administered in the military 55-84). But, as has already been discussed in the Literature Review of the history of standardized testing, the measure of people’s ability, far from

being value neutral, was instead contingent upon factors of identity (race, class, gender) and differential early experiences which threatened the legitimacy of the screening or sorting process (Au; Fallows; Gardner; Gould; Lemann “The Big”; Lemann “The Great”; Lemann “The Structure”). In this sense, the AP Language Exam is not an anomaly in the tradition of testing which has been at odds with its ostensible reason for being. Neither is it a particular surprise to discover that part of what the AP Language Exam measures (style over substance, and a very elevated or hyper-refined notion of style congruent with the possession of particular forms of cultural capital) is at odds with the AP Language course’s objective of preparing students to do college-level writing.

But, having said that, having used the words “college-level writing,” alerts one to the fact that the problem is nested in other problems, or points to broader inconsistencies in the discipline, generally unrelated to the AP Program and the College Board. Some of these issues are outlined in a collection of essays titled: *What Is “College-Level” Writing?* The answer to which (unsettlingly or not, depending upon how one views it) is never ultimately resolved. Several of the authors restate the same reality. White writes: “There is no professional consensus on the curriculum of writing courses, at any level” (cited in Knodt 147), and Knodt concludes her essay with the following admonition: “Perhaps our biggest failure in helping students and colleagues to understand what is college-level writing is our failure to be explicit in what we seek” (155-156). Sullivan, on the inability to reach a professional consensus on the question, observes that “[a]t

the moment, we appear to have reached an unfortunate impasse regarding our discussion of college-level writing” and

[i]t may very well be that these conflicts are irresolvable and that all standards related to our students’ written work must ultimately be local, determined at least in part by our response to the complex realities of the communities we serve and the individuals we teach. (“An Essential” 2-3)

The AP Program cannot be held accountable for the aforementioned ambiguities—it merely reflects them. This is reminiscent of a driving idea in Tobin’s work, that effective research does not shore up inconsistency but instead exposes tensions in society (13; 144). In that respect, the AP Language Exam represents a small window on the ambiguities of culture or, at least, the culture of composition.

At the same time, the “local” reality (to use Patrick Sullivan’s wording) of the AP Language Exam is troubling. As the researchers for the Fordham Institute point out, the College Board is enigmatic in its methods and sparing in the information it is willing to release (Finn and Winkler). The AP Program is, essentially, a closed system that appears transparent to the public because researchers in the employ of the College Board publish reports of the data they generate and approve (Finn and Winkler; Schaeffer qtd. in Ganeshanathan). There is also the fact that, although researchers from Diederich to Huot point out some real problems with holistic assessment (e.g., the possibility of subjective rating and lack of inter-rater reliability), it is a preferred means of assessment for reasons of efficiency and cost-effectiveness (Huot, “Toward”).

Furthermore, just as there is no consensus on the content of the FYC course, there is no specifically prescribed or standardized curriculum for the AP Language and Composition course—and so understanding of the course is very much open to interpretation. The Fordham Institute made such a determination: “in most cases, the AP course outlines and teachers’ guides don’t provide course instructors with as clear a picture of what’s to be taught as do the exams themselves” (Byrd et al. 19). Though the Institute’s report specifically addressed the AP Literature Exam, the assessment is equally valid for the AP Language course. Additionally, the 2007 AP Course Audit required teachers desiring the “AP imprimatur,” as Jones calls it (“Beginnings”), to submit their respective syllabi to the College Board for approval congruent with a broadly stated list of course objectives—but how that course actually happens “on the ground” differs widely from school to school. It is that variance to which I address my remarks because that is one important source of differential preparation and results.

But more importantly, the holistic rubric used to assess student writing in the AP Language and Composition Exam reading, with its vague and therefore infinitely interpretable descriptors, is the most unwieldy nemesis the low SES student has in sitting this particular subject exam. The reason why is because, contra to the skills that ought to set the parameters of assessment, the descriptors—literally, the language used to talk about the skills required—emphasize a completely different area of performance housed in considerations of style (e.g., “especially full,” “impressive,” “purposeful,” “uneven,” “immature” [AP English Language and Composition 2003 Scoring Guidelines]). One might

say that the language of the commentaries sounds more so like vocabulary found in *Wine Spectator* magazine rather than in evaluative commentary for a national writing examination. That similarity is the point.

In this study I attempted to demonstrate how the AP Language and Composition Exam is vulnerable to problems of subjective appraisal and ultimately (albeit unwittingly) favors those who possess the “prestige voice.” My recommendation has been to “game” the exam which “games” kids and teachers. As a high school teacher and a teacher of writing, I have no doubt that I could teach my students to make arcane references, like Dennis Miller, in a voice that would garner big points on the AP Exam. In fact, given time (the magical, Bourdieuan ingredient upon which the cultivation of distinction relies) I could probably train any student to get a “5” on the AP Language and Composition Examination—but that would not be teaching legitimate composition, nor is earning a “5” on the AP Language Exam a legitimate achievement under current practices.

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