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## ABSTRACT

Richard Gambino's "Blood of My Blood" was of help to a writing instructor coming to terms with the role that her Italian ethnicity played in her life and education. Gambino's understanding of the inner tensions experienced by an individual who must negotiate between two cultures has helped the instructor in teaching working-class and immigrant students. Today's students are involved in cultural conflict. The fear is that, like Gambino, they will get so caught up in becoming American that they will disassociate themselves from their home cultures. Because some of these students may not get to graduate school and read a book like Gambino's (which might help them to keep their cultural identity intact), a pedagogy that critically challenges initiation into academic discourse and empowers students with a critical awareness of their everyday experiences could help. Students need to become cultural critics. Discussions at the beginning of the semester about popular culture and the meaning of American culture allow the students to decide what aspects of popular culture they will cover. As the semester goes on, students might discuss what programs they watch on television, what images they see in magazines, and what they see in their world around them. One semester the students became so engaged by a discussion of representations of men and women in fashion magazines that they planned a fashion show for the next class. (Contains 15 references.) (TB)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

### A Paper Presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication 1995

### Discovering the "Blood of My Blood:" The Dilemma of an Italian-American in Academia

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Learning Standard Italian in high school was an intensely disturbing experience for me. Suddenly, I began to learn that all those Sicilian expressions and words that I was familiar with at home were wrong. I learned that b's were really p's, g's were really c's, and r's were really d's. This explained why my mother pronounced "pizza" as "bizza" and why "Gabeesch?" was really "Capisce?" (meaning: Do you understand?). "Geesta ga?" was really "Questa che?" and so on. What I really learned then, was that of the two forms of a language, one is standard and one needs correction. The former was learned at school and could be written or spoken, whereas the latter was my mother's discourse and could not even be represented orthographically.

Sicilian (and those strange hand gestures) was passed down matrilineally in my family. It was the mysterious language my grandmother spoke to my aunts when they wanted to hide adult issues from the children. It was the language I always wanted to know and eventually absorbed. But, now I had to code-switch from this deficient regional dialect to this new language that was clearly better and more useful. I remember my Italian teacher telling us that Italians from Rome do not understand Sicilians so the standard is needed for wider communication. So, now I began to correct my mother. Through this correcting phase, I began to distance myself from my mother's way of speaking, a language tainted by a limited vocabulary, simple sentences, and unclear pronoun referents. All are markers of the use of

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language by the working class.

Not only was I confused about which languages to use, having begun to recognize the differences in language through the conflict between my mother's voice and the official voice, but, because of my father, I was afraid to use these languages. While I was an undergraduate, he reprimanded me for using polysyllabic words; I was forbidden to talk the school language in our home. And, once when I attempted to resolve a conflict by writing a letter to him, I learned that I was also not allowed to express myself through writing. I was effectively silenced.

Eventually, I forgot Sicilian and searched for a perfected and prestigious English, one that I did not have to be ashamed of, and one which did not reveal my ethnicity or class. This search was probably one of the things that landed me in graduate school. By beginning graduate school and moving out, I became distanced both physically and psychologically from my Italian-American identity, especially as I grew increasingly cognizant of its inherent patriarchy, sexism and racism.

When I was attending classes at the City University of New York Graduate School, I felt comfortable, like I found my place. I admired the life of the scholar and probably had been prepared for such a life since the fourth grade when I wrote my first term paper. Throughout my education I had been on the so-called "academic" track, bound for college. We were the privileged few in a disadvantaged, working-class environment. I was always considered a good writer. So, in my first year in the program, I was jostled from my idealized fantasy of scholarly life and surprised to learn that my writing was deficient much like I was surprised to learn that Sicilian wasn't the right language. I had to correct my pronunciation and

writing of English to look and sound like academic discourse. Like Emile Zola, who shocked his contemporaries by using working class language, I seemed to offend my professors with the following usage errors: contractions, split infinitives, made-up words, and unclear referents. In addition, there were the following rhetorical errors: weak thesis statements, blatant subjectivity, heavy reliance on plot summary, and unsophisticated theory. The words of literary critics would be sprinkled throughout the essay only for flavor. I consciously imitated "academic discourse," and struggled to find my own language. Though, of course, I was a good student, complicit in assimilating the language of the academy.

But, I am plagued by what Richard Hoggart accurately describes as "the problem of self-adjustment" (*The Uses of Literacy*). I see myself in his "uprooted" working-class student who lives a life of self-doubt, uncertainty and unease. While Hoggart's personal account is relevant to my understanding of myself, in terms of class uprooting, I find Richard Gambino's *Blood of My Blood* much more helpful since it explores "the dilemma of the Italian-Americans."

I came across Gambino's book while doing a research project on ethnicity and race for a cultural studies workshop. When I was told by the professor that I had the map of Italy on my face, I thought, "they can tell?" I mean, no one had ever said such a thing to me. I reacted like Hoggart's scholarship boy who realizes that "a hundred habits of speech and manners, can 'give him away' daily" (232). You see, in graduate school I had not acknowledged my cultural identity until now. In conversations, I'd easily dismiss its relevance. I thought I had become what Linda Brodkey believed she could be: the "classless, genderless, raceless scholar," something we dangerously strive for (543). In fact, I was close to

becoming what Gambino rails against, the transparent American who has rejected her ethnic identity. I was experiencing, what he terms, "shame-born-of-confusion" (363). And, at this crucial moment, I began the process of reclaiming my Italian-American identity, transforming the anxieties of uprootedness into a source of empowerment.

Gambino documents the confusion that stems from the split between the old world and the new world felt by Italian-Americans. I needed to read only as far as the first chapter, "The Family System," to realize that I experienced a conflict many third generation Italian-Americans have. We insist on being "just American," yet our lives reflect a distinct Italian-Americanness. For Italian-Americans, Gambino tells us, "it is impossible to be untouched, if not determined, by "la via vecchia" [the old way] (5). I began to understand the conflicts in my life between my parents' traditional Sicilian patterns and gender roles and my American desires for independence, intellectual fulfillment, and the middle class.

Gambino claims that we cannot study the dilemma of the Italian-Americans without understanding the importance of the family, or the "blood of my blood." The family is the basis of personal identity, offers protection and support and demands respect, loyalty and obedience. The family is also the means of transmitting traditional values. Yet, Italian-Americans may choose to completely reject these values in their assimilation process. Gambino focuses on those who are faced with, what he calls, "compromise," a level of moderation in assimilation. He asserts that this compromise between the old and the new leaves many Italian-Americans "permanently in the lower middle class" (37). It is no coincidence, then, that the working class on this panel is represented by Italian-Americans. However, I must lead you away from the assumption that at CUNY we have many Italian-

Americans getting their Ph.D's. This is certainly not the case. Many Italian-Americans in New York City do not even finish high school. (*We have the third highest drop-out rate*). And though CUNY was created for the working class, the current fiscal crisis is forcing them out. The connection between ethnicity and class certainly merits further research.

My academic experience has influenced my teaching of working-class and immigrant students also caught between two worlds. I see my students much more involved in cultural conflict than I ever was. I fear, like Gambino, that they get so caught up with becoming American that they disassociate from their home cultures. Because some of these students may not get to graduate school and read a book like Gambino's in order to keep their cultural identity intact, writing teachers who question assimilation need to offer a pedagogy which critically challenges initiation into academic discourses and empowers students with a critical awareness of their everyday experiences. We need to make them feel comfortable and build their self-confidence in multiple discourses. This approach makes me wonder whether I would have been so anxious to dismiss my Italian-American identity as irrelevant if I had been asked to write about it earlier.

When I began teaching, I asked students in my writing classes to read, discuss and write about the interactions between their ethnic, racial and immigrant identities and the dominant culture. Their conflicts of assimilation became the themes of the class and their writings have revealed a need to redefine the assimilation process. I believe the sociological paradigm of transculturation, discussed in Mary Louise Pratt's now-famous essay, "Arts of the Contact Zone," is one way of beginning processes of redefinition. Transculturation describes

the extent to which members of a marginalized or subordinated group absorb, transform, and utilize pieces of their representation by the dominant group (Pratt 36). Not only were students engaged in the practice of transculturation, but they used their own words and experiences to describe processes that didn't quite fit any established model. I would describe what I have been doing as wanting to empower my students with written language that seeks, what Gambino terms, an "educated ethnic awareness" and aims for "creative ethnicity."

While these students had probed the familiar and the quotidian in their lives, I was concerned about representation, a concern that is a significant part of cultural studies. And, though my classroom had become a meaningful site for questions of cultural assimilation, I had yet to make my students cultural critics. I wanted students to position themselves in debates concerning issues of everyday life and to be empowered toward action, especially undertaking responsibilities for their own education. In these last few years of my teaching, because I believe in cultural studies as the way composition pedagogy will go in the future, I further developed a semester's work for an expository writing course that centered around the issues of personal identity and cultural awareness.

So, like Paulo Freire's method of developing generative themes with the anthropological notion of culture in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I walked in the first day of class, two years ago, and asked students to define culture. Students then chose from their list on the board and composed essays on aspects of culture they were interested in or wanted to explore. I knew I was on the right track when students wrote moving descriptions of their neighborhoods after reading a selection from Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* and viewing Spike Lee's film *Do the Right Thing*. The same theme came up in every essay:

drugs and decay. Nostalgically, the students described their neighborhood's past beauty, comfort, and safety. Current images included garbage on the streets, drug dealers on corners, gang warfare and random violence. I came to class after reading these essays and questioned them on the common theme that emerged. Since my pedagogy was still in its experimental stages, I had yet to learn how to help empower. But I knew that with this writing assignment, we began where we should begin: with our students' lives, languages, and knowledge.

I continue today what I started that semester: helping my students become cultural critics. Now I begin the semester with discussions about popular culture and the meaning of American culture, and students decide on various aspects of our popular culture to cover. As the semester goes on, students might discuss what programs they watch on TV, what images they see in magazines, and what they see in their world around them. We create knowledge and produce texts. One semester my students were actively engaged an entire hour and a half in discovering the representations of women and men, in terms of class and culture, in fashion magazines and by the end of the class, they had decided to do a fashion show for the next class. For the first time, I truly felt my authority as a teacher slip from my shoulders to be gathered up and tried on by the students and it was exhilarating.

In the lives of these urban immigrant and poor students, race is a complex and enormously significant concept. Often, I find discussions turn to race, racial tensions and racial constructions. Min-zhan Lu's attack of Leonard Kriegel's negative view of his student's racial consciousness and Terry Dean, in his essay, "Multicultural Classrooms, Monocultural Teachers," both remind us that teaching the English language is not politically and culturally neutral ("Conflict and Struggle" 901; Dean 24). Last semester I sat and listened as students



engaged in a critique of the term "minority." During that semester, students also discussed events that characterize generations. For the 1980's, students from the West Indies immediately mentioned the invasion of Grenada while others mentioned Nelson Mandela's release and Martin Luther King's birthday becoming a national holiday. Later that semester, when the class was asked to compose a list of items passed down through their cultural ancestry, I expected and received responses such as: photos, stories, wedding portraits, letters, and jewelry. But what surprised me was that one student offered "dealing with racism" for the list. Yet, with an acknowledgement that texts are read according to the position or positions a student is in, we should not be surprised by such unexpected responses, especially in the contact zone (Pratt 37).

I know my students feel comfortable raising these highly politicized issues and taking such risks because I have given them a space and they've made it their own. They even speak freely in their own language. Toward the end of the semester, one student wrote a script in response to an essay assignment on the representation of marginalized groups on TV and asked to have it performed in class. I was impressed with his initiative in arranging the performance on his own. I took direction from him. I praised his ability to reproduce realistically Black Vernacular English and was captivated by the ease in which the student performers read it. His script was about a male high school student whose "cru" backed him up when he was unfairly treated during basketball team tryouts. Students took on characters with cru names like P-Nut and K-Dogg. When I had to ask him to define "cru," I realized that I had much to learn from him about his cultural values. Part of my classroom practice follows from Tom Fox's suggestion that , "we need to convince students that this community

is *theirs*; that it will not work against their identity and their interests" (75).

My pedagogy, thus, can be placed in a recent tradition in composition studies that privileges our students' discourse. Compositionists, like Mike Rose, Min-zhan Lu, Tom Fox, Terry Dean, and Bruce Horner, have challenged the initiation model, posed by David Bartholomae, Patricia Bizzell, Mina Shaughnessy and others, with "border" studies that acknowledge cultural differences, non-Standard language usage, and the multiplicity of discourse communities. Initiation theory, which presents a model of academic language as fixed, simplified, homogenous, univocal, and exclusionary, is supplanted by theories of cultural conflict, which see language as dynamic, complex, heterogenous, polyvocal, inclusive and multicultural. In the latter view, basic writers are seen as educable, empowered to negotiate between and within borders, and as participants who contribute their cultural knowledge. Shifting from views of education as acculturation and accomodation, Min-zhan Lu offers a model of education as repositioning in which students take an active role in the borderlands, an image borrowed from Gloria Anzaldua (899-900). Moreover, Tom Fox poses John Ogbu's theory of "oppositional culture" as one that can help "legitmate the cultural discourses students bring with them, and challenge the notions . . . that those discourses are somehow inadequate to do academic work" (82).

These compositionists, along with others like Pat Belanoff, Victor Villanueva, Keith Gilyard and even the 4C's National Language Policy, urge teachers to encourage students to retain their own language when faced with the overwhelming struggle with academic discourse. My experience in being silenced by a patriarchal figure and then complying with the silencing of my own culture makes me redouble my efforts in allowing my students the

right to their own language. I believe, like Richard Gambino, that without a strong sense of our ethnic or racial identities, we lead empty lives. But, I also believe that we need to recognize the crucial role of class in the formation of our identities.

*The author would greatly appreciate responses to this conference paper and to know whether it is being used in research. Please contact her at the City University of New York Graduate School, Ph.D Program in English, 33 West 42nd Street, New York, New York 10036. After late-1996, contact her through ERIC.*

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