Material Realities in the Basic Writing Classroom: Intersections of Discovery for Young Women Reading *Persepolis 2*

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ABSTRACT: This essay focuses on how young women students in a first-year, first-quarter basic reading and writing course wrote about their connections to the process of identity development as portrayed in the graphic novel Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return *by Marjane Satrapi. While the circumstances of becoming a student in a required university-sanctioned remedial course in an urban Midwestern university differed greatly from Marjane's privileged education at a French lycée in Vienna, these women, not unlike Marjane, dealt with struggles against marginality and invisibility in a bureaucratic and unfamiliar environment. Exploring the correspondences of coming-of-age for both my students and the novel's main character, Marjane, I demonstrate the use of the graphic novel as a means for renegotiating students' agency and identity beyond fixed categories of gender, race, and class, as well as institutional definitions of the basic writer.*

KEYWORDS: intersectionality; young women; basic writing; feminist pedagogical practices; graphic novels

The students in my first-year, first-quarter, basic reading and writing course lived and worked in Cincinnati, Ohio, and its suburbs. We began in late September 2005, four years after civil unrest in this city and three weeks after Hurricane Katrina. Both disasters were very much on the minds of students at this time as each still reflected the consequences of years of neglect of poverty-stricken urban spaces. The civil unrest of 2001, generated by the shooting death of an unarmed nineteen-year-old African-American man by a white police officer, exacerbated white flight from the city center begun years earlier. And as we were now experiencing the aftershock of Hurricane Katrina and the New Orleans flood, our moment seemed to further reveal the perils of pretending that racial polarization did not exist in the United

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States. My students, most of whom identified as African-American, were not unfamiliar with such intolerance, and our heated discussions pointed to both their empathy for Katrina's victims as well as their frustration with civic inaction and irresponsibility.

Beyond noting the complexity of race as my students lived it locally, I saw the young, working-class and poor women enrolled in my developmental English course as important to study because, in this city and in this university, they faced particular risks of erasure. In this region of the Midwest, the mix of Appalachian, African-American, and immigrant communities provided a rich confluence of cultures that often converged in classroom spaces where the significance of education for upward class mobility was clearly understood. Local traditions, rooted in resistance to outsiders and competition for increasingly scarce economic resources, not only polarized race, but also reinforced traditional gender roles. The city and the region suffered from the limited employment opportunities found in post-industrial rust-belt areas across the Midwest that had never recovered from the factory closures of the previous decades. Work was not an option for women, yet they also dealt with a background of questions and shifting expectations around women's and men's roles.

For these reasons, I was drawn to the work of literacy educator Deborah Hicks who has written perceptively about the lives of white pre-teen girls in this same city, focusing on literacy development and identity formation. Hicks discovered that the girls in her study, rather than wanting to read novels about the lives of working-class girls, instead were compelled by horror fictions by R. L. Stine. The girls were able to draw connections between the horrific details of these fantasy fictions and their own lives. By contrast, the girls found the seemingly familiar struggles of working-class girls "boring, " which Hicks perceives as "perhaps a code word for. . . unfamiliar or difficult language" (80). Probing the disconnect, Hicks took seriously the girls' reading interests and practices, working to build bridges from community-based literacies to academic ones. "Most important," Hicks reflects, "was the possibility that girls could see a legitimate place for their storied lives and their voices in a reading practice that, initially, could feel dislocating" (78; See also Hicks and Dolan; Shannon Carter).

In much the same vein, I needed to examine my own evolving relationship to race, class, and gender in a culturally honest way. Like many of the students in my Fall 2005 class, I grew up and was educated in the Midwest. However, as a white, middle-class, Jewish woman, and native speaker of English with educational privilege, I had chosen for many years to live and

work outside of the Midwest. I had returned to teach in the region and was beginning my second year at the university when this basic writing class began. In the years that I had been away, a severe economic downturn had devastated the region's smaller urban areas, leaving inner-city workers in our community without sustainable means of employment. University employment offered a sense of stability and connection that contrasted sharply with the distressed economic circumstances that faced most of the region. In this context, my white privilege remained problematic, at the same time it encouraged me to optimize students', and my own, outsider status (see Asher, Center, Green). I saw that both my students and I sought academia in a shared, Midwestern-city, cultural context. The University of Cincinnati remained the city's largest employer, and a degree (in my case, a teaching position) from the university literally and figuratively signified upward mobility for many people in the community. However, for several years the university had been in the process of downsizing its open admissions programs, effectively locking out those residents whom it might have best served. The university agreed to create our program, the Center for Access and Transition, in order to retain open admissions in a very limited form, an attempt that lasted only two years before a selective admissions policy was enacted. The Fall 2005 class would be the last cohort of students who would be admitted through open admissions, closing a door that had been open to inner-city students since the 1960s (Gibson and Meem). The fact of this door closing on my current and future students greatly bore upon our similarities and differences.

Fortunately, I chose *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* by Marjane Satrapi for our first text. This graphic novel presented unique opportunities for this first-time, mostly traditional-aged, college audience, as these students proved to be particularly sensitive to the challenges of transitioning to new and potentially alienating environments. With its interplay of visuality and text, and the reorientation toward reading it inspires, the graphic novel offered an invaluable opportunity for interpreting experience as presented in the text and students' lives. Young women, the gendered minority in the course, found the graphic novel particularly engaging as a subject for writing, and their connections to processes of identity development were especially eloquent. I was moved by their reflections on coming of age as young women in the twenty-first century. The profound dislocation experienced by the main character, Marjane, bore upon students' own movement toward new awarenesses of gender, race, and class in our society, and within academia. As readers, students moved through unfamiliar settings,

as Marjane experienced them, including French language schools, Viennese pubs, and post-war Iranian nightlife, then back to the terrain of the more familiar struggles of their own young womanhood. These more familiar struggles—the often contradictory experiences of region, home, school, and romantic lives—proved to be an important link to Marjane's story. Like the connection to horror experienced by Hicks' students, the young women enrolled in this basic writing course understood the potential for embodied horror in the material realities of late adolescence. That Marjane shared similar struggles, including experiences of drug use, intolerant communities, and unmitigated peer pressure, proved to be a significant catalyst for students to study identity formation and the intersections of gender, race, and class.

Intersectionality and Basic Writing

In undertaking this article, I wanted to investigate the formative attempts of young women to identify personal and intellectual connections to text, coincident with the added challenges of becoming readers and writers in a university setting. Taking an "emic" or insider perspective, as a participant/observer in my own classroom (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 36), I began with the question of "what happens when" students and teacher, each with unique and shared aspects of background, meet together in a six-hour, ten-week course called "Preparatory Composition 1/Fundamentals of Reading 1." My perspective required that I not only examine student artifacts, but also interrogate the traditional top-down structure of "remedial" basic skills education, inviting students to take part in this process.

As Cochran-Smith and Lytle suggest, I wanted students to become researching subjects with me, the teacher-researcher, rather than the objects of research—in other words, and in Freire's terms, problem-posers, rather than passive receptacles of "basic skills." Research evolved as the course unfolded with students and teacher working together to shape—and often shake—the agenda (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 120). Like Nina Asher, who worked primarily with white teacher-education students in Louisiana, I focused on a specific assignment sequence and how such might be informed by the cultural and material contexts of the classroom. My assignment sequence included a summary and full-length essay based on *Persepolis 2,* and addressed the material realities of coming of age as basic writing students at a specific time and place. With Asher, I contend that such work of contextualizing is necessary for ". . . a decolonizing multicultural education pedagogy, which

engages the interstices—in-between, hybrid spaces—that emerge at the intersections of different cultures, histories and locations" (1079).

The awareness of material realities in the classroom accounted for both cultural and textual "intersectionality" in our everyday practice. Critical race theorist Kimberle Williams Crenshaw describes "intersectionality" as "the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (358). Crenshaw argues that identity markers, especially race/class/gender, are interconnected, rather than distinct from each other. Intersectionality precludes essentialism by suggesting that subjects are not merely gendered, raced, or classed—but constructed by multiple social forces (see also Hourigan, Gray-Rosendale, and Birnley). It deconstructs binaries imposed by categories of preconceived oppositions such as woman/man, black/white, middle-class/poor (Cixous and Clément). Through its lens the complications and contradictions of such categories in a post-modern, post-millennial world, are acknowledged; race, class, and gender become interdependent and inextricably linked. Sengupta explains the power of intersectionality across international borders and apparent cultural differences:

> Just as parallel lines meet and intersect when one moves from Euclidean two-dimensional geometry to non-Euclidean three-dimensional geometry, so too an entirely different vision of the same realities becomes contingent in how one chooses to see . . . in a networked world, each of our individual circumstances connects to inform larger patterns of oppression and liberty. (637)

The circumstances of becoming a student in a required university-sanctioned remedial course in an urban Midwestern university differed greatly from Marjane's privileged education at a French lycée in Vienna. However, these women, not unlike Marjane, dealt with struggles against marginality and invisibility in a bureaucratic and unfamiliar environment. At the same time, Marjane's resilience and resistance proved to be a critical point of intersection for these women writers/readers, charting a pattern of liberty noted by Sengupta as vital in the process of negotiating the "minefield" of intersectionality and identity (637).

Our class would offer the opportunity for students to engage in a six-hour writing/reading seminar experience "modeled after a course for advanced graduate students" on coming of age (Bartholomae and Petrosky 47). In addition, we were joined by two white women graduate students engaged

in observations for their doctoral program as well as two senior English education majors who served as teaching assistants as part of a required practicum. Our course theme was "Coming of Age in the Twenty-First Century." Beginning with this general theme, the students would facilitate opportunities to generate more specific topics for writing, as described in the classroom scenes that I present. Although I focus primarily on the writing of five women, the interactions with the entire class also are represented, as these discussions helped to create the communal context in which students grappled with constructing a response to a writing assignment for *Persepolis 2*.

The Graphic Novel: More Intersections

Because graphic novels hold interpretive potential for disruption and generation of meaning, students may find that these hybrid texts present opportunities for renegotiating agency and identity beyond the seemingly fixed institutional category of "basic writer." As a graphic novel, *Persepolis 2* presents innovative "word/picture combinations" (McCloud, *Making Comics* 130) that invite readers to engage and resist the text in unexpected ways. In *Making Comics*, McCloud uses the term "intersecting" as a key word for creating and interpreting comics. He defines "intersecting" as "words and pictures working together while contributing information independently" (130). The late comics artist Will Eisner offered an additional point of view:

> the reader [of comics] is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills. The regimens of art (e.g. perspective, symmetry, brush stroke) and the regimens of literature (e.g. grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed upon each other. The reading of the comic book is an act of both perception and intellectual pursuit. (8)

This unfamiliar way of seeing/reading/interpreting would mean that no two pages of *Persepolis 2* would be organized in precisely the same way. The order of panels might shift, panels might be wordless, requiring readers to interpret images alone—and sometimes words would overwhelm the page. Even the thought balloons that held the words over the characters' heads could shift in both shape and meaning. The students generally had more experience reading texts that McCloud, as comics artist, describes as ". . . [moving through] a very linear progress. Just a straight line from point A to point B" (*Understanding* 106). *Persepolis 2* would thus require of the student

more "viewer participation" (McCloud, *Understanding* 106) than either informational or pleasure reading encountered in school-based settings. "Reading" in this sense would become an unstable process as continual transitions would require readers to constantly shift perspective. In other words, the new experience of reading and interpreting a graphic novel would require the "different vision" Sengupta describes in negotiating intersections of identity.

Initially students questioned the inclusion of a graphic novel, resisting a "picture book" as appropriate for college reading. Students also encountered difficulties as they had to widen their range of practiced literacy, synthesizing word and image. Yet as Jacobs suggests, "If we think about comics as multimodal texts that involve multiple kinds of making meaning, we do not give up the benefits of word-based literacy construction but strengthen it through the inclusion of visual and other literacies (21; see also James Bucky Carter). Eisner's description of reading comics as "an act of both perception and intellectual pursuit" provides the essential point of connection with *Persepolis 2*. As students discovered the promise of the verbal/visual intersections of the text, they also found ways of relating across the difficult cultural divides between Marjane and themselves. The graphic novel presented an opportunity for students to variously observe, and construct, Marjane's responses to her own multiply-determined, multiply-contextualized and recontextualized experiences. The visual/textual hybridity of *Persepolis 2* was itself a generator of intersections, offering the reader constant opportunity for making meaning from unfamiliar circumstances, and casting many of Marjane's experiences as analogous to the unfamiliar and material struggles of the young women in my class.

"Blossoming into a Young Woman"

In *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return*, the second of her two autobiographical graphic novels about coming of age in the late twentieth century, Marjane Satrapi presents a compelling narrative of an independent adolescent growing into young womanhood. Marjane, the central character, experiences her identity in a variety of intersecting and overlapping categories (Satrapi "How Can One Be Persian?"; Zanganeh). A young female upper-middle-class, Generation X, Iranian punk rocker, Marjane resides in Vienna, Austria, where her parents have sent her to escape the ravages of war in Iran in the 1980s. Because Marjane is living on her own for the first time, she faces challenges of loneliness, cultural and racial difference, peer

pressure, sex, sexuality, drug abuse, displacement, homelessness, and illness—all without the support of her family or home community.

Like Hicks' students, the young women in this basic writing course gravitated toward the "horrifying" elements of Marjane's story, set in the unfamiliar locations of Austria and Iran, relative to their own transitions from familiar, if often difficult, high school experiences to the unknown and often confusing setting of an urban public university. Women were the gendered minority, their multiple identities variously intersecting with the men in the class, including but not limited to, their university-assigned identity of "at risk" for successful matriculation. Yet such a designation did not recognize students' strengths, nor account for the ways in which it negatively inflected local culture, in which women of color, and poor and working-class women did not hold sustainable positions of authority. Given the tenuous status of "remedial" in the university that semester, the designation of being at-risk certainly did not indicate to students their strengths, nor their ability to define success on their own terms (Ladson-Billings 36). Much less could it ever address the full range of their gender-, class-, and race-related, intersecting concerns. At the same time, the expectations of families and communities for their success were often inexorable for students as concerned full-time work schedules, financial challenges, and "remedial" courses in additional subjects, especially mathematics (Mutnick 99-100).

Margaret, Angela, Isobel, Wendy, and Katharine (all names are pseudonyms) came to the course with varying levels of experience with reading and writing. (Only Angela felt that she had been misplaced in the course.) These young working-class women envisioned education as a means of improving difficult life circumstances; and thus a significant challenge for these young women would be to reconceive their own contributions as central rather than marginal to the work of the course (hooks 181-83; Mutnick 46). As the women struggled with their own transitions, they found themselves able to identify with Marjane—and were inspired by her ability to take action on her own behalf.

Critical Beginnings in Reading and Writing: Margaret and Angela

Margaret had learned English as a second language and had emigrated from West Africa, completing high school in the U.S. in our state's capital city. In class, Margaret often sat apart from the other students. Her often-difficult experiences transitioning between her country of origin and the U.S., she offered, had influenced her caution and reticence in interacting

with peers. And yet her position as an outsider gave her a unique vantage point for observation and critical thinking, by which she strongly engaged her classmates.

On our first day, I invited students to respond in writing to five questions:

- What do you already know about literacy (reading and writing)? What do you hope to learn about literacy in this course?
- What do you already know about our course theme: "What does it mean to come of age in the 21st century?"
- What do you hope to learn about our course theme?
- What special strengths, talents, and insights do you bring to the course?
- What do you need to know in order to succeed in the course and in academic literacy?

Margaret's response was especially helpful in considering this new quarter:

> My knowledge on reading and writing is the more you read and write, the more you discover and learn alot of thing. It makes your writing skills improve, you ask alot of question on things you do not understand and very careful on things you see.
> I hope to learn, discovery and improve my writing skills to the next level of my college year and also reading to be able to create thing on my own words.
> The course theme is creating, improving and discovering writing and reading skills to the next level.
> My special strengths, talents, and insights to this course will be contributing, asking questions, doing my homework, and obey instructions when is given. I need understanding, practicing more and reading and writing more outside class.
> I hope you are going to consider my few words and help me achieve my goals in the university and my future.

Although Margaret expresses her ability to obey instructions, she also highlights the importance of discovery as a critical part of the learning process. "Discover, discovery, and discovering" are her critical goals for the course, part of "improving reading and writing skills to the next level" with a focus

on "skills" as mirrored in the university requirements for students entering the one-year transitional program. Through two summaries, three essays, as well as portfolio revisions of these assignments, she would explore the contradictions of academic literacy that her first-day writing implies: the imperative to "obey instruction" and the need to find possibilities for "discovery" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule 209).

Angela, identifying as African-American and one of the strongest writers in the class, came from a small rust-belt town in the northeast corner of our state and lived in the residence halls. From the beginning, Angela was articulate in her writing, as well as fluent in reading, often offering her drafts for whole-class revision workshops. Her classmates were inspired by her writing's fluidity and her thorough attention to the course readings. Angela's first summary of *Persepolis 2* picks up on the possibilities for discovery at the crossroads of young womanhood:

> In the novel *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return*, Marjane Satrapi write an engaging story about a Middle Eastern teenage girl from Iran blossoming into a woman. Throughout the book she talks about the dilemmas and hardships Marjane had to encounter with family, adjusting to new environments, boys, and finding herself. Being that she was from a Middle Eastern country, constantly at war, communication amongst Marjane and her parents wasn't easy. "Sigh! Still the same bombings, arrests, we're so used to that the calm here [in Vienna] makes me a little nervous" (*Persepolis 2* 49). Dealing with life's obstacles that life was throwing at them wasn't easy, let alone dealing with roommates, moving to new places, and living with other people's life styles and continuously changing hers. But in the end Marjane had grown into a smart, sophisticated woman, with the knowledge of life.
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> "So I pretended to participate, but I never inhaled the smoke" (*Persepolis 2* 38). In this book, Marjane struggled to fit in, and sometimes did dangerous things to fit in. This was all a part of her growing up and transitioning in to the successful woman she became. By reading this book it will guide young audiences on how to deal with adjusting to new things. In *Persepolis 2* Satrapi really develops a great story to explain the dilemmas and battles that life puts you through.

Angela emphasizes Marjane's "blossoming into a young woman"

both in spite of and because of "life's obstacles." As her summary presents Marjane's processes of "growing up and transitioning in to the successful woman she became," Angela reads the text as a "guide [for] young audiences on how to deal with adjusting to "new things," including the many demands of college life. The point was made frequently in class, as students cross-referenced their dislocations, isolation, and adjustments to unfamiliar circumstances. Angela's essay on *Persepolis 2* addresses such transitions, comparing her adjustments to living in the residence hall to Marjane's first experiences in Austria living with a roommate:

> You will come face to face with a lot of problems when you first get to college, some you may be able to cope with some you may not. But for me my first dilemma was coming to the realization that I had to adjust to this new way of living even though I wasn't comfortable with it. I have to live in this little room with one other person, I have to use a shower that is used by thirty to forty other females. And I have to adjust to their schedules even if it involves them getting up at seven in the morning making noise while I am sleeping. One of the most important issues while living on campus is your relationship status with your roommate. You are going to be living with the person or persons for a long time, so you can either love them or hate them. In the book Marjane first roommate Lucia was a very nice person, but Marjane had one problem, Lucia like to blow dry her hair every morning. "Every morning I was rudely awakened by the sound of Lucia's hair dryer" (*Persepolis 2*). Compromising is something that is very much needed to have a good relationship with you roommate. You must agree specific times that you are going to do certain things so that it will not come into conflict with each others activities.

Angela continues to foreground gender as she addresses the need to compromise so as to "not come into conflict" with the other young women who share her space. Much as Marjane and Lucia face differences of race and ethnicity, women of color were in the minority at our university and in the residence halls. As Angela comments, "Just like me, before [Marjane] knew she was in this strange new place where she had to struggle to fit in." At this juncture, Marjane's life intersects the lives of the women enrolled in English 095, most of whose struggles, if not successfully resolved, would impede matriculation and fulfill the warning of the designation "at risk."

"Becoming a vegetable was out of the question": Margaret and Isobel

The students collectively posed problems and questions about the text specifically highlighting the triangle of visuals, text, and meaning. Marjane's metaphorical drawing of herself as an eggplant fell into this category, with several students stating that they had never seen an eggplant and so did not know how to read the image. Although eggplant is a staple of Middle Eastern cuisine and therefore connotes meaning for many readers, none of the students in my class claimed that heritage. Most lived in inner-city communities with limited access to grocery stores well-stocked with fresh produce. Gourmet shops and supermarkets, popular among the middle-class, such as Trader Joe's and Whole Foods, were located in outlying suburbs. Again, access—in terms of public transportation to these suburbs—was limited. Without financial resources to drive out of the city to obtain such foods, students faced a barrier to understanding a literal image, absent within their material realm, on an interpretative level. This unfamiliarity proved to be another sort of dislocation, as students realized that they were missing a significant metaphor.

To remedy the situation, I brought in a slightly overripe eggplant and passed it around so that the students could touch, smell, and see the material object, a kinesthetic, tactile, olfactory, and visual that would serve as an embodied experience (Fleckenstein, *Embodied Literacies* 151). After we passed the eggplant around the room, we reexamined the text. In particular, we looked at how Marjane's resolution does not keep her from struggling with displacement and alienation. She writes:

> If only they [my parents] knew . . . if they only knew that their daughter was made up like a punk, that she smoked joints to make a good impression, that she had seen men in their underwear while they were being bombed every day, they wouldn't call me their dream child. (39)

Afterwards, we created separate lists of words on the board to describe both the eggplant as material object and Marjane's metaphor of herself turning into one. We divided the lists into two categories, sensation and emotion:

Sensation	**Emotion**
Rubbery	Loneliness
Ugly	Depression
Bruises on one side	Confused
Has a stench	Anger
Smooth	Sadness
Funny shape	Love
It's old	Used
Stem on top	Disappointment
Shiny	Desire
Purple/black	Hate
Has a pushing feel	Content
Dry	Ok happy
Dense	Betrayed
Sounds hollow	

These lists, with interpretive commentary alongside sensory observation, later helped students to revise their first essays. In later reflection, students noted that they had: "added more details," "added more description and metaphors," "added more examples to make it more interesting," "changed word choice and added more verbs and emotions," and "added something to make it look juicy." Margaret reflected on this revision process in a subsequent conference, noting a connection with the eggplant activity and its relationship to students' suggestions for revision, especially as she learned to break down the different parts of her essay draft to discover what might be changed or added, and how experience must also be interpreted. Indeed, in Margaret's final in-class self-assessment essay, she indicated the need to make use of details that could serve as a catalyst for revision. She also discussed her process of making sense of the text in light of her own struggles:

> What I learn writing the essay and after writing the essay is being able to express my self, giving details and examples for readers to know what I'm talking about. Also I need to work on supporting my essays with a lot of details and quotes. *Persepolis 2* talks about self confidence, believing in your self, and fighting for what you believe in. I picture the character in my head like I'm watching a movie which makes it understanding and interesting and I will

> recommend it to everybody to read it to always fight for their equal rights.

For Margaret, learning to make sense of the details seemed to be a means toward gaining agency, for "fighting for what you believe in." As a graphic novel, *Persepolis 2* suggested multiple means of making sense of a text such as "watching a movie." As Kristie S. Fleckenstein suggests, "by adding an imagistic layer to their writing, [students] can weave self and other, self and environment, self and self into their evolving essays," wherein "writing and reading (become) intertwined." Fleckenstein argues, "Although an image is not reality—it is a way of punctuating reality—it anchors us to our identity and our being in reality" ("Inviting Imagery" 18, 6, 15). As a concurrent step toward exploring this intertwining, students learn to read beyond the limits of word and text, analyzing the verbal/visual metaphor of vegetable/eggplant, and in the process, find their way back to language as a way to experience writing and reading for symbolic detail and imagery.

The strangeness of this new tactile/visual/auditory/olfactory encounter with a material object intersected with the alienation described by Marjane and the dislocations of students' experience. For Isobel, the anchoring Fleckenstein speaks of seemed especially important. Isobel identified as an African-Caribbean student; she had immigrated with her family as a child and had attended a re-segregated high school across the street from the university. As part of an extra-credit service-learning project, she wrote poetry with students from this high school. She chose to revise one of her poems to supplement her extra credit project—and the poem became a kind of metacommentary on Marjane's experience. At one transitional juncture, Marjane speaks of "my nostalgia for the Caspian Sea" (Satrapi, *Persepolis 2* 27), linked to the drawing of a flashback of her sitting at the seaside with her parents around a samovar brewing tea. Marjane explains to the mother of the friend with whom she is staying, "at home we drink tea all day long" (27) and finds an ally in her friend's mother as someone who understands Iran and her longing for the Caspian Sea. Marjane adds, "She was also the only one to have seen a samovar" (27). Isobel remembers her own moment of sustenance, similarly conjuring nostalgia of a motherland. Aptly optimizing the critical potential within the visual, as encouraged by the graphic novel, Isobel reflects:

It was the summer of 1990.
Mama cooking in the kitchen my
favorite Mac and cheeses.
We could hear the birds singing
in the trees and Ms. Jackson
yelling out loud for us to get off
her grass.
My friends outside playing the best game ever hide and seek.
The grass is so dark that it's hard to find them.
It's summer every day for us because we live on an Island, for us it's the best place on earth and you couldn't tell us any different.
It was even better than Christmas.

The visual dimension of language, the "imagistic layer" now superimposed upon analysis, reflects for Isobel the process Fleckenstein describes wherein students "weave self and other, self and environment, self and self" within their work as integrated writers and readers ("Inviting Imagery" 19). Just as the eggplant could be examined in terms of its different but intersecting aspects, so too could Isobel's writing be analyzed for overlapping components of a finished essay, as it concerned detail and development, even organization and support (Elbow 50).

Co-Creating a Writing/Reading/Essay Assignment: Wendy and Katharine

As the class collaborated on creating the essay assignment, we reflected on the many connections that students were finding between Marjane's story and their own stories. Marjane eventually returns to Iran, begins university art classes, marries, divorces, and decides to return to Europe to further her art education. What resonated for students most strongly was Marjane's dilemma with acculturating to an alien environment while still attempting to remain loyal to her home training and values. Students wanted to write about their own transitions, their own experiences with crossing borders. I invited them to consider specific examples from *Persepolis 2* that connected to their own stories. Students were asked to imagine their essays as a letter to one of the following audiences: adults of an older generation; high school students; or college students, their same-age peers (see Appendix). Why, I asked, would any of these readers care about connections that first-quarter writers would make between a book and their own experiences? What needs would the students' essays serve? What would be their reasons for writing?

In my teaching journal, I wrote down the results of the list of possible topics that we constructed on the board.

#1 LETTER TO ADULTS
- Learning how to grow yourself up mentally to make a change for your future.
- Being open to sacrifices that you don't want to make—but have to make—examples:
    - Becoming a young mother
    - Learning how to deal with relationships
    - Learning how to deal with people who bring you down

#2 LETTER TO HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS
- Freshmen [sic] coming to high school from middle school
- A traveling family: how did you adjust to making new friends, living in new neighborhoods, attending new schools
- High school to college
- Moving to a new country
- Moving state to state

#3 LETTER TO COLLEGE STUDENTS
- Choosing between education and friends
- Changing the way you talk to people
- Learning how to cope with change of a social environment

Intersections, crossroads, and border crossings stand out as major themes, including the figurative crossings involved in coming of age at the literal crossroads of material reality: becoming a young mother, moving to a new country, choosing between education and friends.

Wendy, who had two small children, commuted from her home in the city. She would often struggle with attendance, but would use her time in class to work toward becoming a careful reader and a more confident writer. Initially, she kept very quiet in class. However, when the topic turned to feeling out of place in a new environment, she contributed powerfully. Her feelings of marginality were based in part on her status as a young working mother, and a woman of color, on a historically white campus of traditional-aged students. No matter, she became an articulate presence in the classroom. She was particularly interested, she said, in "decoding" the

deeper meanings of our course texts. For her essay, Wendy wrote a letter to her peers on learning how to cope with a change of social environment:

> Loneliness is also a topic that I wanted to touch base on, because sometimes when someone is new to an environment, such as college it's easy to get lost in the crowd, and become invisible. When I fell a lone I just try to be myself, and do things I'm comfortable with doing until I open up on my own, I can really relate to this subject, because when I first came to my new school. I felt extremely lonely, I didn't know anyone at my school but as time went by I began to see myself open up more, and every day I still felt invisible, but at least I knew a few names, and faces. Even though Marjane Satrapi didn't really know anyone in her school she became friends with a older girl in her class who introduced her to more people.

Even farther from home, Katharine commuted from a neighboring state on the interstate loop each day through crowded rush hour traffic and, like many of the students, worked long hours to help pay expenses. Moving from an isolated experience as one of the only students in her high school class who believed in evolution and who openly stated her disenchantment with religion, Katharine longed to make tangible changes in her life as she began college. She signified this desire by changing her childhood nickname "Kathy," back to the longer, and for her more elegant, Katharine. Although generally reticent in class and often ill, she soon revealed that she had a strong interest in performance, especially dance and music. Katharine wrote to older adults on learning how to deal with people who bring you down, which she identified as "peer pressure":

> I am writing you to tell you (adults) about what teenagers go through that you may not understand, or have not dealt with. Peer pressure, depression, and abuse are just to name a few. Peer pressure is probably the most popular throughout teenager. I will be giving examples of my life and also from the book *Persepolis 2* about a girl named Marjane Satrapi coming of age. She dealt with most of the things that teenagers go through. I think that Marjane responded the way that she did because she was going through peer pressure and maybe she didn't really know how to act. She tried to do what was right at the time. I know that a long time ago I wouldn't know what to do about peer pressure because I just wanted to fit in, but

> now I know that it will only make things worse and people are not going to be your true friends if they pressure you into things.

In identifying "invisibility" and "want[ing] to fit in," Wendy and Katharine address critical issues of adolescence for young women—and of life on the crossroads of institutionalized remediation.

Conclusions and Connections: A Collage of Young Women's Voices

Margaret, Angela, Isobel, Wendy, and Katharine all describe the contradictions encountered by young women in patriarchal culture, especially the desire to "fit in" and the loneliness that comes with discovering that home culture often conflicts radically with the cultures encountered in new environments (Collins 237). In her letter written to high school students, Margaret continued "asking questions" to comprehend connections and contradictions within her experience of transitioning, from West Africa, as compared to Marjane's transitions. As she concludes:

> Moving from a country to another country is like being adopted from a foster home. Every thing about you has to change because you are in a different environment which is different from where you come from. So you have to learn and adjust their culture to your own in order for both parties to live peacefully by trying to be friends with them, do what they say, applied the training you had back home including culture and religion. We should also try not to be pressured by friends all because we want to fit in.

Such conflicts of adjustment and assimilation come to no easy or comfortable resolutions for these young women. Isobel reflected at the end of the course:

> The writing I did for Marjane Satrapi wasn't that hard because I could compare it to my life, and that's always easier to do. It was fun to compare it because she leaving her country that she known for so long and leaving family and friends behind was hard for her. And that was the same thing, but different, my parent came with me so I was not so alone too much. But I miss my friends and family that I left behind and I did wish that they could come with us.

Katharine in fact saw *Persepolis 2* as a turning point:

> One of the books called *Persepolis 2*, I could not put it down. I would read at work, at school, and before I went to bed. A long time ago I never wanted to read. I hated reading for school. I would get so bored with the books. When I was in third grade I had a problem with reading. I would have to go to a special reading class. It helped a lot but I didn't feel smart when I was in it. I was always afraid someone was going to make fun of me because I couldn't read very well. I think it was because I was to slow and had a hard time pronouncing the words.
>
> I never wanted to go to college when I was in high school. I just wanted to be [a dancer]. My parents sort of made me apply and I'm glad they did because I never saw myself as being smart enough to go to college. I have learned so much by being in college and it has been only eleven weeks.

Young women who arrive at college with the added institutional requirement of remediation may learn to benefit from understanding such "conflict and struggle" as they begin their journey through higher education (Lu 55; Armstrong). As Wendy often reminded me, our autumn quarter class felt strongly inclined to relate to Marjane Satrapi's autobiographical representation of herself in *Persepolis 2*, even though her racial, ethnic, class, and cultural circumstances differed so significantly from their own.

For what the students admired in the character of Marjane was not her ability to pull herself up by her bootstraps (Villanueva 120-21) because, of course, Marjane grew up with upper middle-class privilege and education; her parents could use their connections to send Marjane to Vienna when the Iran-Iraq war escalated, and Marjane was endangered herself by the repression she faced as an outspoken adolescent girl in the midst of the Islamic Revolution. (Satrapi had candidly presented these dangers in her first autobiographical graphic novel, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, and several of the scenes from this early text were incorporated as flashbacks in *Persepolis 2*.) Rather Satrapi, in commenting on the Academy Award-nominated animated film version based on both volumes, has addressed the response that students articulated over and over again, that their own struggles and triumphs intersected with the events experienced by the character of Marjane: "Little by little, as my first book got translated into other languages, people were saying, 'That's my story too!" (Hohenadel). Marjane's

recovery and survival from drug addiction, depression, and homelessness; her strongly expressed opposition to systemic racism and sexist oppression in Vienna and Iran—all provided intersectional connections for young women who came to identify their own struggles with social constraints through the lens of Marjane's activism. Students referenced Marjane's strength and courage in leaving her beloved homeland, family, and failed marriage to emigrate from Iran to Europe, not once but twice, to further her education and to pursue her career as an artist.

As Hicks and Dolan suggest about the girls they studied in "a high poverty, predominantly white community" little more than five miles from the university:

> Close rendering of language, identities and individual histories revealed important moments of agency and discursive hybridity, amid seemingly transgressive acts of reading. Practices that did not on the surface appear to be generative of educational change became in fact possibilities for dialogic contact between girls' community voices and school-situated discourses of reading. It is through concretely situated readings like these that critical educators and theorists can hope to unravel the deeper and most meaningful relations between language, identity, and pedagogical practice. (56)

Like Hicks and Dolan's middle-school students, the young women in this basic writing course learned strategies for creating connections from their own lives to the world—and work—of the university. As participant/observer, I learned how the process of discovery might further evolve engagement with text. The intersections of personal, social, and systemic change seemed especially acute in the lives of these first-year women students who claimed a multiplicity of identities that did not seem discrete or easily separated.

And yet such intersections of impossibility remain a recognizable juncture of growing from late adolescence into young womanhood. At this juncture, women find opportunities to redefine their own experiences as central rather than marginal (hooks). "My mental transformation," Marjane says, "was followed by my physical metamorphosis. . . . In short, I was in an ugly stage seemingly without end" (35). Considering the eggplant as metaphor and material reality, these intersections appear ugly and smooth at once and are filled with both disappointment and desire. The contradictions hold open a moment wherein one may recognize, as did Marjane and

my students, that "Becoming a vegetable was out of the question."

For students in first-year basic writing open admission programs, the need to interrogate texts and material conditions—and to co-create curricula—remains particularly acute. Indeed by Fall 2006, our program, following university mandate, had eliminated open access admissions and was looking ahead to the implementation of a new state law that would no longer fund what it called "remedial" education at its four-year public universities, most of which were located in equally depressed, rust-belt cities. Yet as my experience with ENG 095 demonstrates, young women with opportunities for equal access to higher education may use their personal discoveries of the possibilities of academic literacy to define the material culture and context of their education, as they work to transform their responses from acceptance to passionate resistance.

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APPENDIX
Coming-of-Age Narrative

Consider Satrapi's coming-of-age narrative as you write your own coming-of-age narrative for Essay 1. Choose one of the prompts below as you write your narrative:

1. LETTER TO OLDER ADULTS: Tell a story about your own life and compare it to one of Marjane's stories in *Persepolis 2*. How and why do you think she responded to the problems that she faced in the story? Would you respond in the same way? How and why are you similar to and/or different from Marjane? You may write a fictional story related to a current event if you choose. Write your essay as a letter to older adults who have a difficult time understanding the problems faced by teenagers and young adults.

2. LETTER TO HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS: Tell a story about adjusting to a new environment and compare your story to one of Marjane's stories. How did Marjane deal with adjusting to her new environments? How do you deal with adjusting to new environments? What similarities do you see? What differences? You may write a fictional story if you choose. Write your essay as a letter to high school students who are considering applying to college and are interested in learning about adjusting to a new environment.

3. LETTER TO COLLEGE STUDENTS: Tell a story about a time when you experienced "double consciousness" (double identity) and compare it to one of Marjane's stories about experiencing double consciousness. Why do you think Marjane portrayed herself with different identities? How do you deal with situations that call for you to present an identity that seems alien to you? You may write a fictional story if you choose. Write your letter as an essay to college students who are dealing with the same kinds of struggles with identity as you and Marjane are facing.