CULTURE JAMMIN': USING PRIMARY AND SECONDARY DISCOURSES IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

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> "A student's heartfelt email, coming out of the energy of daily life, so often has a magic, transformative power that a dutifully-written academic essay rarely achieves." (Sirc 290)

Grinding out a syllabus a couple of weeks before the new academic year began, I had an epiphany: A new assignment. The course is a freshmen writing course, Exposition and Argumentation. The assignment would occur halfway through the semester, as we read and discussed Kalle Lasn's anti-consumerist manifesto *Culture Jam: How to Reverse America's Suicidal Consumer Binge—and Why We Must* (yes, the title is a rhetorical mouthful, and Lasn maintains his strident vision throughout). Lasn is the founder of Adbusters, the media watchdog group responsible for the annual worldwide Buy Nothing Day and the Corporate American Flag, a spoof American flag with corporate logos from companies such as IBM, Playboy, and Shell replacing the stars.[1] Lasn pegs us as mere participants in a pre-arranged life, awed by the spectacle of the commercial, paralyzed.

To exhibit the empty disillusion of this position, Lasn offers various scenarios—generalized portraits of average U.S. citizens, comfortably middle class, anxious, and alienated—to shock us out of complacency. For example, reflecting on the ubiquitous and gratuitous sex and violence that surrounds us, Lasn argues the following: "I think the constant flow of commercially scripted

psuedosex, rape and pornography makes us more voyeuristic, insatiable and aggressive—even though I can't prove it with hard facts" (18). Despite his tenuous argument, Lasn nonetheless continues:

> Similarly, I have no hard proof that daily exposure to media violence shapes the way you feel about crime and punishment, or affects the way you feel about the guy standing next to you at the bus stop. What I do know is that my natural instinct for spontaneity, camaraderie and trust has been blunted. I used to pick up hitchhikers; now I hardly ever do. I rarely speak to strangers anymore. (18)

Lasn's words are hardly inspiring; instead, they cut, deeply.

Aware that the consumerist machine will not soon give way to an energized public sphere, Lasn hopes that Americans resist empty consumption in favor of lives of personal integrity. He believes that defiance and community are possible through culture jamming, roughly, the creation of spontaneous acts of resistance that open collective eyes to the ways in which mainstream media have established pre-ordained patterns of existence. By jamming the prescriptive, we begin to compose our own lives, according to our own designs, fulfilling our own desires. Culture jamming, Lasn claims, "will alter the way we think and live . . . . Above all, it will change the way we interact with the mass media and the way in which meaning is produced in our society" (xi). It is Lasn's identification of the making of meaning—always a concern in a composition course—that solidified my choice in text. The webs of discourse through which we construct meaning are vast and elusive, and I wanted them to be both objects of study and venues for production.

My pre-semester epiphany happened as I pondered ways of matching Lasn's spiritedness with an academic exercise. I sought energy; Lasn's ideas, difficult and perhaps unfamiliar, would require energy. Wishing students would engage the material and "jam" (academic) culture at the same time, I was convinced an

alternative approach was needed. Rather than have students post reactions to the text on our course website (using Blackboard, something we had been doing earlier in the semester), I wanted them to spread the word, their words, on the book, to whomever they deemed worthy. Email, I thought. To friends, to family. Working with a familiar, living audience, students would produce and receive timely responses to their questions and comments from hand-picked others, people they know and like. Through this exchange, initial renditions of the text would give way to rich dialogue inside and outside of class. Students would further their deliberations, not necessarily through Lasn's language, but through a language embedded in their goals and values, fashioned through their individual exchanges.

While I am aware that the electronic medium of email plays a role in the nature of these exchanges, I am less interested in the medium than in the opportunities to explore the production and reception of discourse that these email discussions afford.[2] First, I set up the email exchanges to see how they might boost the energy level of our classroom work. Gail E. Hawisher and Charles Moran note how email is defined by its "rapid turnaround" response time (632). This timeliness would prove invaluable to the ongoing deliberations of Lasn's text. Second, by emailing familiar and loving friends and family, students would write with a particular forthrightness or immediacy that would help them make meaning of Lasn's text and potentially counteract the debilitating social contexts identified by Lasn, contexts disruptive of the making of meaning in daily lives. My sense was that students would resist the book, simply because Lasn attacks what I assumed was their more immediate lived experience: an over-mediated pop culture. Targeting Calvin Klein and the Gap, Lasn might be an unwelcome voice. Students could "e-channel" whatever frustration they felt toward the book, toward class, toward me. They could engage an intimate audience. They could pick and choose issues that seemed appropriate, appealing to people already known to them. Under this framework, this email exchange asks students to consider various takes on the world, including their

own.[3] Potentially less alienating than the book, their email exchange could bolster their attempts to learn from and speak back to Lasn's text.

Hephzibah Roskelly and Kate Ronald explain how such social contexts augment writing pedagogy:

> Teachers who focus only on the skills and forms that a system or textbook or curriculum validate neglect the local contexts that determine why, how, and if such skills are necessary, as well as the consequence of mastering such skills. In either case, what goes missing is connection—connection among self and other, personal and public—as well as any examination of method, the ways in which writers/thinkers make the connections, how the observe, act, reflect, and inquire in a developmental process. (37)

From this vantage point, the give and take of communicative interaction frames the opportunity for students to develop their writing abilities from a decidedly situated and communal dimension. Beyond the isolated, individual writer at the heart of expressivist theories of writing, the email exchange offers a social environment in (and from) which to deliberate how and why to write. Using email, students consider their writing relative to their relationships at hand. The communicative moves that students make (and those that their interlocutors respond with) help them appreciate the social complexity of literacy simply by being active participants in ongoing dialogues situated in and out of class.[4] The email exchange would demonstrate how language and literacy are social phenomenon immersed in the making of meaning. Exchanging emails, students are participants in the construction of knowledge, a position of agency so key to the success of the composition classroom.

My intention was not to stop at the email exchange, either. Rather, drawing from the work of James Gee, I wanted the exchange to set up an analysis of Discourses—Discourses used by my students and their interlocutors as well as by Lasn. I wanted

students to explore how Discourses shape social realities and relationships, how Discourses involve, evoke, and inform perceptions of the world and its promise.[5] As such, I am not considering my students, their interlocutors, or Lasn as isolated, individual writers. Rather, their writing reflects social and cultural contexts and Discourse communities from which and to which they compose. Because Discourses function in juxtaposition to one another (Gee 135), our classrooms should take into consideration the kinds of Discourses and communities that are represented in the room and construct possible assignments to put these Discourses to productive use.

The investigation at hand involves composition in particular contexts, asking students to sort out the complexity of their writing according to the parameters of their email exchanges: What sort of Discourses do we use when we converse with those we know well on some of the more pressing issues of our times? From where do these Discourses originate? If Lasn does not do a credible job discussing these issues, what Discourses might a credible job consist of? What communities are enacted or addressed through these Discourses? What communities are neglected, ignored, denied? How can differences be identified and utilized across Discourses if we wish to continue conversations with others possessing opposing views in the service of composing better worlds? Concluding the email exchange, then, students would analyze their email discussions relative to Lasn's text to reflect on the wonder and promise of Discourse.[6]

In Gee I see a descriptive framework from which to build productive pedagogies. According to Gee, to understand language and literacy is to understand Discourses. For Gee, Discourses are defined as

> ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles (or 'types of people') by specific groups of people . . . . Discourses are ways of being 'people like us.' They are 'ways of being in the world';

> they are 'forms of life.' They are thus always and everywhere social and products of social history. (viii)

Discourses frame literacy as social; that is, our recognition of ourselves and others as members of specific communities involves our participation in specific Discourses in a given time and place (129). We all represent various Discourses, and these Discourses, informed by tacit ideologies, coax ways of being and thinking and using language from us. Drawing from Gee, the email exchange would help students explore reading and writing as social acts according to various Discourses, those that they use and those that are used on them: Who are we when we write? How are we seen and read? How do we see and read others? How might we want to be seen and read? And what do we need to do in writing to fulfill particular and desirable purposes?

In total, the assignment sequence asked students to explore language in social context, to consider how Discourse in their emails was used to establish, maintain, and mediate social relationships. David W. Smit argues that contemporary composition theory is informed by "the fundamental assumption that the way we understand one another through language is primarily interpretive, a matter of hermeneutics; that understanding is based on a kind of socially influenced psycholinguistic guessing game" (9). This email assignment is one attempt to shape social theories of composing into productive pedagogy. Asking students to identify and explain the kinds of Discourse in use helps them begin to see connections (and disconnections) between their worlds of Discourse. Such analysis provides a sense of the ways in which we write about the issues at hand—to begin to explore why we discuss certain issues in the ways that we do—and to see if we can map the relationships in and between Discourses and the communities that use the Discourses.

A few students were initially hesitant: "Why can't we simply post responses to our website?" some asked. "I'm going to lose friends over this assignment," another proclaimed. I was surprised

at this initial resistance. I thought it an easy, innovative assignment—students write emails to friends and family all of the time, right? Although I was assigning a particular topic to discuss, I believed that I was asking them to do something they already did anyway (i.e., send emails, discuss their academic work outside of class). I instructed students to keep the language of the emails organic to the relationship they have with their respondents.[7] They could use specific cultural referents like movies, songs, and television shows to animate their exchange. It wouldn't be much different than what they do anyway, right? . . . . Right?

Elizabeth and Ed: One Compelling Example

To illustrate the utility of the assignment, here is part of an exchange between Elizabeth (Liz), a white teenager from New Jersey, and her brother, Ed, a college graduate in his mid-twenties working in the media.[8] Liz chose Ed because she thought he would provide good responses, and if he didn't, his wife would. The following email by Liz is in response to the second chapter of Lasn's book, "Winter."

> Hey Ed,
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> Definitely an interesting section of the book. His view are definitely extreme. I enjoy reading it, but I feel like some of the things he says are over exaggerated. Lasn, for example, talked about the American Dream, and how throughout the years, it has deteriorated. I definitely don't agree with him, I just think it has changed. In class the other day, we discussed about how each generation strives to be better than the one before. It makes complete sense. Think about us for instance- Dad and Mom want us to do better than they did, why else would they struggle so hard to pay our college tuitions so that we can achieve even higher things in life? And you know, when we have

children, we will want them to achieve even more than we did. It's life. [. . .]

Getting back to what I talked about earlier, Lasn raises another argument. He complains that the country dreams the same dream, and that dreams should be unique, but in our case, they're lacking in that department. I don't think it is such a bad idea to dream the same thing, necessarily. I mean, if no one wanted money and success and all the other stuff in life, competition wouldn't exist. We live in a very competitive country. I think it's good to compete, because if you have no one up against you, you don't have as much of a strive to be on top. Picture this- you're on the baseball field, playing your rival team for a chance to win the pennant. If there were no such thing as winning, and you were out there for fun, wouldn't it take a lot of the andrenaline rush out of it? Who really cares if you win? It doesn't mean anything. No competition, no reason for setting goals and working your best. It makes sense. Let me know what you think.

Love,
Elizabeth

Again, I wanted an energy to match Lasn. And Liz's response delivers much more. Writing a spirited email to Ed, who had not read the book, Liz accomplishes various rhetorical tasks in the process. Dropping allusions that are both familiar and localized (to Ed), she writes using her primary Discourses, a term that Gee uses to denote one's most intimate forms of Discourse, to provide enough context for any useful discussion.[9] She also synthesizes previous classroom discussions with points from Lasn's chapter, brushing up against what Gee refers to as secondary Discourses, or Discourses associated with various social institutions, including the academy, resisting a wholesale acceptance of Lasn's argument.[10] Last, Liz invites Ed to respond, setting up important deliberations

on the future: What kind of world do we live in? What kind of world do we want to live in? Liz addresses Ed to speak as a brother, as a son, as a citizen. Her writing is situated and intertextual. In an effort to be heard, Liz coordinates her written response with those Discourses that inform and surround her own. And Ed, working with equal aplumb, engages Liz by framing her discussion within the context of his own life. I was hoping for this sort of engagement.

Hey Elizabeth,

[. . .] The American Dream. The reason we need different dreams and goals is because that's what America's all about. Now, I haven't read this book you're reading, so I don't want to jump to conclusions. However, I do believe it is important for everyone to want to be successful, and I think that they do, its just that success is measured differently by everybody. Some want success at the expense of their children. Maybe they work 90 hours a week and aren't around to nurture them, or maybe they hold off till their late 30s/early 40's before starting a family which leads to an even greater generation gap, not to mention that they're approaching 70 when their children get out on their own, start their own families, etc. On the other hand, you have people who view success as providing for their children and families, even if its at their own expense. Those who spend all their resources on everyone else, yet havent taken a vacation in 15 years.

The danger of everyone wanting the same thing is the allienation of those who differ. You see it happening all around us right now. I'm very, very scared about the socio-political climate in this country. Our economy is falling to pieces, we're being told that we're in grave danger and another attack on American soil is "imminent" and that we're supposed to blindly follow our leaders and believe everything they say. If you disagree with them you're labled

"anti-American", "unpatrotic" or worse, "a terrorist". It's very reminiscent of another country in another time that I spent a lot of studying in school. Germany between the wars. They had no hope, they were told the world was out to get them, they put they're faith in right-wing party that promised results, waged war over all over the globe and the rest as we say, is history. [. . .]

Love ya,
Ed

A vigor builds from these sibling-emailers, informed by familial relationships and insider intimacy that, when productive, cannot be matched in a classroom discussion of peers who may or may not know or care for one another. But this isn't a mere mutual admiration exchange. Notice how particular Ed is in his response. Extending Lasn's points by connecting them to current social trends, he presses Liz to explore other dimensions of the argument at hand. Like Liz, Ed also offers counter-claims. Ed concludes his email by alluding to his own life. Ideas are expressed according to the ways in which they are practiced and lived. Liz can begin to see in Ed someone who continues to engage social issues and books about social issues in his post-graduate everyday life—working from his primary Discourses to various secondary Discourses that impact him and his worlds.

Asserting his position through this admixture of primary and secondary Discourses, Ed pushes Liz to consider relationships between Discourses. In other words, their exchange offers Liz a chance to use various Discourses—ways of being in the world—with someone close to her, offering her an opportunity to write and to explore the act of writing in more expansive ways than if she simply wrote to me or to classmates whom she may or may not know well. The assignment asks for an admixture of primary and secondary Discourses, an admixture that Gee argues makes up literacy. As thoughtful and introspective responses, these emails are writing that is communicative, interactive, and, in Smit's

word, interpretive. Liz, writing not in a vacuum but within existing social relationships, begins to tease out the difficulties and contradictions of Lasn, and more importantly, herself. She also places both primary and secondary Discourses within history—projecting a future for her and her brother to engage. This sort of give-and-take informs their next exchange, another issue-oriented exchange supplemented by sibling intimacy. Connections and allusions abound—Lasn is bent, twisted, lived.

> Hey Ed,
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> How's everything? Well, I'm almost at the end. I just read the last section, and all that's left after this is the epilogue. I enjoyed this section, I feel like to some extent, he reached me as a reader. Normally, I wouldn't desire to read a book like this one, but I was forced to. Throughout the book, I knew I would want to put it down if I didn't have to read it, but this section was completely different. It's not that the previous sections were bad, but I just felt like I couldn't relate to them in any way. This one, I feel serves a purpose. He proposes ideas as to how we as Americans can "jam the culture" and not be suckers all the time. [. . .]
>
> Lasn used the phrase "demarketing your life" to explain that if you stop giving in to corporations and the need to want and want, then you are freely making your own choices and decisions. I like that phrase actually, it makes complete sense. If you do stop giving in to these things, you are 'taking yourself off the market' as a target. You can honestly say you are living in freedom, and you do what you want. Of course there are some lines that you shouldn't cross when it comes to freedom, but as long as you keep within certain boundaries, it's alright. I think I contradicted myself there, but I don't really understand how to explain it. I mean, we are free, right? But to be completely free, shouldn't there be no boundaries? I guess

a world without limits and boundaries would probably turn into chaos, but techniqually, wouldn't that mean being completely free?

The question of whether or not our society is progressing is also raised in this section. I think we are still progressing. We've come a long way, but we also still have a way to go. What do you think?

Talk to you soon

Love,
Elizabeth

[From Ed]
Wow, this sounds like a mouthful to digest. Manny interesting points to ponder as I sit here bleeding and wounded following the Great Election Day Massacre of 2002. Are we progressing? I don't think so. Not when our President has a cabinet made up of old cold-warriors hell bent on WWIII, with no connection to what it would take to win a war in the 21st century. I can't say we're progressing as a society when more people care more about Winona Ryder's shoplifting, the Bachelor, Will & Grace, and the Backstreet Boys, than do about recession, war, injustice and security. I think we're degressing, and degressing at a rapid rate. [...]

As for the concept of "demarketing" your life, I like it. I try to stay conscious of advertising and its goals, and I try to pay more attention to the quality of a product. Here's a couple of things I've noticed: The only differene between Budweiser and Busch beers (both owned by Anheiser Busch) is the marketing. I guarantee you, pour a bud into a glass, and a bush into a glass, and only the most ardent alcoholic will tell the difference. But you don't see a Busch

commercial during every inning break of a yankees game, and it's not Busch ads that are visible in times square, or during the superbowl, so a 30 pack of Bud sells for $16.99 and a 30 pack of Busch sells for $10.99. I don't know the price difference on six packs because i don't buy them :) Furthermore, I haven't bought or worn anything made by Nike since I graduated high school in 1995. Part of it is in protest of their labor practices, but unfortunately if I were to hold everyone to those standards, I'd be walking around naked and hence I'd lose my job because we have this policy against being naked (so oppressive), so i often have to bend on that standard. THe other reason is that f$!@ing SWOOSH! Jesus christ it's everywhere. Sickens me. [. . .]

Talk to you soon,
Ed

I value the immediacy, power, and diligence of this exchange. Liz and Ed discuss some weighty issues, and they respond to one another, developing lines of exploration as they further their dialogue. Anecdotes give way to interrogation and insight. Wide-ranging concepts, including the commodification of life and culture, are explored, not in a detached manner, but with a lively candor that academic treatments generally lack. As their exchange is at times informal (a testament to their primary Discourses) and analytic (fusing secondary Discourses that border on the academic), Liz continues to shape her secondary Discourses through the primary Discourses shared with Ed. Liz uses Ed to help clarify her understanding of the reading—perhaps better than she can with other students, or with me—because she and Ed possess similar primary Discourses. Primary Discourses inform secondary Discourses (Gee 142), and since Liz and Ed possess similar primary Discourses, they productively sort out the ways in which secondary Discourses beckon her to speak and act in certain ways. For her part, Liz begins to reconstruct these Discourses for

her own uses (again, what Gee defines as literacy). Liz tries on new Discourses, and those Discourses are responded to in a non-threatening way. And her writing and her understanding of the power of writing is altered through this confluence of Discourses.

Nedra Reynolds, among others, asks composition teachers and scholars to consider the importance of place within the field of composition. For Reynolds, writing instruction is "rooted in time and place and within material conditions that affect students who are often transient residents of learning communities" (3). Why not, then, look to those places wherein students may be less transient, that is, the places from which their primary Discourses originate? Why not use primary Discourses to see how Discourses both emerge from and establish social relationships, relationships as intimate as family, relationships as potentially alienating as the ones constructed in academic settings? For David Smit, language acquisition is based on the multiple social relationships our students possess (45). Smit explains that students need to be given learning experiences that both offer students the chance to use language and to reflect on such use. Furthermore, Smit believes that students need access to various forms of Discourses and discursive experiences:

> The evidence that we acquire the ability to write strongly suggests that novice writers need at some point to be, in a sense, immersed in various forms of discourse and the contexts in which they are used, so that novices can recognize and internalize a range of sentences, paragraphing, and genre conventions, and other aspects of writing and how variations of the elements of writing effect meaning. (60)

Re-envisioning their affiliation to Discourse(s) and to the worlds constructed, students create opportunities for critical reflection, enriched social relationships, and a greater understanding of the kinds of work Discourses perform.

From this standpoint, reading and writing become forms of inquiry into the ways in which Discourses are always embedded and plural, unstable and mutating. Such inquiry asks us to explore composition according to how it is grounded in specific social, cultural, economic contexts, into the connections that make up these spheres, into the social relations that form around the Discourses used. Students begin to see themselves and their literacies as socially constructed, enmeshed in worlds larger than themselves and their concerns. Such literacies function as a connective, to establish or re-establish connections with people, places, practices, and beliefs, to augment affiliation, to bolster community.

Asking students to work with others outside the classroom is vital here: it opens up compositional designs to a wider range of Discourses, Discourses that already inform student writing but are not well understood—by students and their teachers. Confining our work to the classroom only stifles our sense of the possible. Our typical impulse toward dialogue and community-building in the classroom is not a misconceived impulse. The academy, however, offers little incentive for students to make connections beyond the classroom. And yet to separate student work in the classroom from students' social relations outside of the classroom reinforces false notions of writing as strictly academic; placing writing solely within the confines of the academy ignores potent exchanges and valued social relationships, the very venues from which Discourses issue forth, the very venues that Discourses reinforce or resist.

Much more than an interesting assignment, then, this exercise builds from what we know about literacy as a social phenomenon and recognizes the utility of primary Discourses in the service of literacy development. Inclusion of such Discourses acknowledges different ways of knowing, of making sense of and expressing social worlds and experiences. Using the variable confluences of primary and secondary Discourses may counter the homogenizing tendencies of academic discourse. It may also counter the alienation sometimes felt by students (and teachers) that is often

the byproduct of writing instruction by asking students to compose their attachments and affiliations, structuring social relationships into their growing understanding of Discourse and how they use it. Contextualizing and pluralizing literacy may pressure teachers to democratize Discursive practices—to see various primary and secondary Discourses as legitimate. It may also democratize and legitimize forms of life substantiated by Discourse—including sometimes marginalized ways of thinking, being, and living.

Liz takes the momentum of her email exchange into her analysis. Again, I hoped that students would analyze their email exchange in terms of the Discourses used and examine these Discourses relative to those used by Lasn and their email collaborators. This sort of analysis provides what Gee calls a meta-level knowledge of Discourse: roughly, the knowledge involved in participating within a Discourse.[11] Gee argues the need to engage multiple Discourses in an academic environment, to show students the ways in which Discourses act in relation to one another: "Good classroom instruction . . . can and should lead to meta-knowledge, to seeing how the Discourses you already got (not just the languages) relate to those you are trying to acquire, and how the ones you are trying to acquire relate to self and society. But to do this, the classroom must juxtapose different Discourses for comparison and contrast" (141). The goal is to enable students to learn where, how, and when to use a particular Discourse over others. Using such knowledge, students become more aware of Discourses as ways of being in the world—and they make choices according to how they wish to project themselves to others.[12]

In her analysis, Liz describes how Lasn demonstrates "strength and integrity" for standing up to what he perceives to be an American public demoralized by corporations. Lasn's book, says Liz, is an attempt to "give them [the public] an incentive to get out there and do something." Call this an interventionist Discourse. Liz also finds Lasn to be "condescending, and blameful of Americans," a tactic with which she does not agree: "He makes

you feel ashamed to be an American because we are all to blame for the way things are today." Call this a condescending Discourse. She believes Lasn is able to keep her attention, however, through the informality of his Discourse: "Lasn's book isn't an encyclopedia or a story, but merely a way of allowing the reader to know how he feels about American consumerism." Whether or not Liz is identifying another Discourse here or simply noting his narrative style or informal tone is debatable; however, what seems important is how she offers a useful analysis of Lasn in order to consider her own uses of Discourse.

Mapping the Discursive strands of Lasn's text, Liz diagrams the ways in which Lasn's text worked on her. Various Discourses ask Liz to be and to behave in particular ways, ways that she negotiates through her reading and through her email exchange with Ed. Liz correlates her findings with conclusions drawn from her email exchange with Ed:

> I say my email exchange with my brother is in some ways similar to Lasn's language because it is informal. On a normal basis, my brother and I talk to or email each other. When we have an exchange of words, it is anything but normal. Although he is seven years older than me, we converse on the same level, like friends, therefore, even when we email each other for an assignment purpose, we speak in conversation.

Here, Liz identifies concretely the importance of sharing a primary Discourse with Ed. Liz states that the informal quality of Lasn's presentation, coupled with the informality of her email exchange with her brother, helps her to learn from Lasn. She also identifies informality as one quality of her email exchange with Ed that enables the two siblings to disagree without disrupting their ongoing discussion. And, she notes how Ed's Discourse becomes increasingly similar to Lasn's: "He [Ed], too, feels that Americans are to blame for why things are not good in society, and feels that we cannot progress if something isn't done to change it."

Just as Liz is capable of analyzing Lasn's Discourses, so, too, is she capable of analyzing her own. To begin with, Liz points out a telling difference between Lasn's text and the email exchange: the tone of the exchange, as it relates to the quality of their commitment: "[W]e just didn't feel as strongly about all of the issues he raised in *Culture Jam*. When we discussed the issues, we didn't yell at one another, or tell one another we were stupid for what we thought." While Liz acknowledges that she and Ed are negatively affected by the commodification of culture identified by Lasn, they use their exchange to further their ideas, not to engage in combat with one another. Liz begins to grasp the ways in which Discourses both set up and emerge from social relationships.[13] Seeing this correlation, Liz considers altering her Discourses relative to the establishment of specific social relations more conducive to the world she hopes to shape.

Ultimately, Liz productively engages the complexity of her exchange with Ed. While power relations (based perhaps on age, experience, gender) are not discussed (except when she notes how their exchange is one of equals), Liz does raise a number of concerns central to the writing class—concerns that highlight the overall utility of this assignment and offer abundant grounds for further consideration. First, she notes that previous social relationships between interlocutors impact their use of certain Discourses, an important insight for a first-year student. Second, she explains that Discourses enact specific social relationships, another point students should take careful note of and apply to their own writing. Third, she believes that one's commitment to one's ideas may alter one's Discourse, and from this, she further acknowledges the limited utility of commitments that lead to agonistic relationships. And last, Liz demonstrates that disagreement between interlocutors need not derail mutual engagement. In fact, one can learn a great deal from concerned others, regardless of perspective, through an open exchange.

This email assignment was designed to promote the use of both primary and secondary Discourses in the service of creating stronger writers working in an academic setting. It reflects my

desire for students to tap into their existing forms of expression and develop their writing skills from what they already possess before enrolling in my course. And it reflects my belief that students have the potential—and that this potential should be nurtured by writing teachers—to develop new modes of expression, saying things in new ways, ways that they see fit, that provide the appropriate means with which to mesh their academic worlds with their worlds beyond the academy. I also wanted students to feel the effects of their writing. I wanted them to move others, and to be moved by the writing of others, to see how one's Discourses impact a known other is important. This social dimension of writing benefits writing teachers by using student writing to reconnect human encounters, to revitalize spheres of meaning-making under attack by the forces outlined by Lasn.[14] Culture jammin' helped us consider the production of meaning and the need to keep open and responsive to as vast a cache of Discourses as possible in the service of making meaning.

Simply put, if Discourses are ways of being in the world, ways of beckoning others, students can begin to understand themselves as members of a community working toward an alliance with others in the hope of some communal good. Built into this perspective on writing, then, is an ameliorative stance: students not only gain an understanding of the complexity of the Discursive situation—audience, context, language, historical moment—they also begin to consider their writing as a way of constructing local meanings. Writing becomes more than a process of inquiry into their relationships with others, more than an exploration of the negotiation of social and cultural forces that influence Discourse and its use; writing becomes an engagement with and intervention in a given place. Writing also offers students a chance to render more affirmative ways to be together. It asks them to consider the composition of a life worth living.

In all, I loved reading the email exchanges, Liz's and those of her fellow students.[15] The students' selection of respondents—family members, friends, co-workers, bosses—was fascinating. The writing was fresh, moving. The questions asked were

intriguing and productive; there was nothing off-limits, and even the more reticent students wrote extensively to their partners. Thankfully, students selected their recipients wisely, as most students received timely and thoughtful feedback throughout the process. Many acknowledged that they engaged in discussions on topics that they had not discussed with their recipient in the past, another important byproduct of the assignment. Many students also acknowledged that they profited just as much if not more from their exchanges than the original text they were discussing.[16]

For example, note the engagement of this exchange between Ellen and her mother, both residents of Long Island, NY. In particular, note how Ellen begins to her writing as an act of resistance against the vacant culture slammed by Lasn:

> [. . .] This book has definitely changed me. I am definitely more culturally aware and am apt to try to jam the system. Whether it's not wearing labels, or not partaking in the feasting of fast food, I try to be more aware of the world around me, and of how I am participating in it. Trying to not be so mundane, or regular. Do you feel that you are trying to be more spontaneous now after hearing about this book?
>
> I feel in a way, I am passing the 'culture jamming' torch through these email exchanges. I liked hearing from you two about how you felt about social issues, I like to hear what people think about the same things I think about, get a different perspective, always interests me. And in a way, I am putting ideas into your head and maybe I am sparking a little change in you.
>
> What were your feelings toward this email exchange? From what I explained about the book, did it spark any ideas in your head? Make you think? Make you change? Let me know!

Goodnight! - Ellen

[From Ellen's mother]

I have to say that after these two emails I am much more aware of what this author is trying to tell us. For instance, as the Mom I am doing most of the food shopping for the family. I used to go up and down the isles and purchase different types of groceries by familiarity. Ex. Cleaning detergents....I purchased the ones that I saw on TV. There would be something in each commercial that I remembered. I know now that if I loved the way the kitchen looked, how it was laid out, the colors, decorations etc. I would buy this product solely on the commercial. I probably would love to have this TV kitchen and bought the product thinking w/o realizing that my kitchen would look the same way. Now that I am more aware, on my last trip I actually read the bottles and bought ones that did the job better for half the price. WOW!

[. . .] As far as shopping for clothes, I'm going to have to work on this one. I like to buy labels, I like to buy good things. I don't necessarily have to have a screaming label showing but.. Why? Am I keeping up with the "Jones's" or do I really like it. Who am I? What am I thinking? How do these clothes make me feel? Does a label make you more successful, no... Does a label make you smarter? No. Does a $1000 suit make you a nicer person? NO. We need to not loose our individuality...And not be so critical of others.

This whole concept has reminded me of the movie "Pay it Forward" ....So if you tell three friends and I tell three friends maybe we won't turn into such a monotonous

society....

PS Ellen, keep me on your email list. I loved this exercise... Love ya

Babe!

Both interlocutors here note how their thinking has changed because of this exchange, and they believe themselves ready to tackle a culture sometimes harmful to the making of meaning. If Lasn attempts to persuade readers to pry themselves out of pre-ordained patterns of existence, perhaps this exercise complements his purposes. Perhaps, that is, asking students to write to concerned others about their perspectives on classroom materials (using a mixture of Primary and Secondary Discourses that is bound to arise during such discussions) offers students the opportunity to present themselves in new ways—both in their writing and in the daily lives. Writing becomes not an empty exercise but a chance to try on new identities and ways of being, new formulations of how to see and to be in the worlds they inhabit.

The assignment was not without its problems, however. First, asking students to write using their primary Discourse may itself be problematic. In this sense, the assignment is limited, in that it serves one particular function: offering students a chance to engage the text. That is, I am inviting them to use their most intimate Discourses for the purposes of preparing for class—to sort out questions and issues, to make tentative statements that may or may not change on the basis of further discussions. Inviting students to use their primary Discourse, a Discourse they need no schooling in, may limit them by not challenging them to think and to write in other ways. The assignment could potentially backfire, with students assuming that their primary Discourses can be used for all assignments. I try to make it pretty clear, however, through the assignments and through writing

conferences as students draft and revise, that such an approach to writing is neither appropriate nor effective. Primary and Secondary Discourses both have their place in and out of the classroom—and the tensions between these spheres should continue to occupy the concerns of composition students, teachers, and scholars.

Second, Primary Discourses may seem, to some students and their respondents alike, inappropriate for the writing classroom, even when invited. While those close to our students—whether parents, friends, kin, lovers—have some conception of a writing classroom, not all conceptions are contemporary or appropriate. The reputation of the writing classroom for hyper-correctness is often problematic, causing people to believe that they have to act and to speak and to write in ways different from their norm. This reputation can skewer the process and final outcome of such an assignment—stiff, formulaic writing may result.[17] The assignment can cause initial problems of self-presentation. This tension can prove beneficial in the end, as there is an immediate necessity to confront the presentation of self through Discourse: the how and why of expression against the panoply of available and desirable Discourses.

Other limitations of the assignment include its focus on dialogue, an equal give-and-take across interlocutors, some of whom are, by design, outside of the class and beyond my authority as teacher. Sometimes, a lively exchange did not happen.[18] Some recipients did not cooperate, leaving students with a lack of material to work with. Other exchanges seemed to peter out, perhaps because of flagging interest. These sorts of snags are bound to occur when we begin to break down the barriers between our classrooms and the worlds beyond the classroom. Still, enlisting primary Discourses in the service of the acquisition of secondary Discourses seems a battle worth fighting. Our students' writing is a powerful way to connect them with a collective of others. Compiling a rich array of different kinds of writing, building their senses of self through their writing and the responses their writing receives, all are compelling reminders of

the potency our classrooms can possess when we take full advantage of the work our students compose—and putting it to proper use in the service of creating (more) meaning.

One final consideration involves the ethics of the assignment. Clearly, when we ask students to go outside of the classroom and invite people in, ethical considerations are important. They are always important in a writing classroom and have been addressed by the likes of James Porter and Sheryl I. Fountaine and Susan M. Hunter. Point blank, our students' writings belong to them; we should not use student writing without their permission. Any sort of ethical consideration or prohibition pertaining to student writing extends to writing we receive from anyone else as well. This dictate includes the kinds of questions that we ask students—and the kinds of questions we ask students to extend to others. A good bottom line here would be our own level of comfort: we should not ask nor seek answers to questions that we ourselves would not answer in writing.

In terms of grading (an extension of ethics), I evaluated the email exchange as a participation grade—students received credit for timely, thoughtful work. If they wrote an engaged email and sent it out on time, I gave them full credit. In no way did I evaluate them on the nature of their respondents' work. Their eventual analysis of their email exchange required them to examine their respondents' work, but it was not required that their respondents send their emails directly to me (although many did). Further, these exchanges occurred outside of the classroom environment, and students were welcome to reference them during class discussion, but I did not bring them up so as to avoid divulging information potentially deemed private.

The efficacy of the assignment, ultimately, should be weighed against my desires and the writing that it produced. Foremost, I wanted students to reach out to those they trusted, people whose ideas they valued. Students would use their own familiar relationships with friends, family, and lovers to complement and, hopefully, to complicate the academic. I wanted their writing to awaken human encounters.[19] They would use the Discourses of

their familiars to generate ideas, to clarify issues, to connect intellectually, and to consider the utility of various Secondary Discourses according to their specific purposes. Furthermore, I wanted action and energy, not just writing for the sake of writing, as decontextualized from their lives as embedded in the academy. And, for the most part, these desires were met. While not every exchange (and its analysis) was productive, I believe the potential for such assignments—breaking boundaries between the academic and everyday life, co-mingling familiar and academic literacies—provide outlets for student expression and offer contexts for productive engagement.[20] In the end, then, the assignment did as I intended. It offered students a venue for discussing Lasn and the issues that he addressed. It provided a connection to individuals already known, bolstering social relations with valued others, and perhaps helped them to consider reaching out other audiences or communities. It offered students a chance to use Discourses they deemed most important and productive.

And for me, as a teacher and a scholar, it generated a useful framework to explore the ways in which Discourse works. Our students bring wide Discursive histories to our classrooms. We can put these histories to greater use, not by ditching one Discourse in favor of another, but by identifying each as a part of a wider spectrum, all potentially available according to desired purpose. To separate Primary from Secondary Discourses, to say that one is off-limits in the service of the other, ignores the ways in which social relationships give way to what Discourses are used. "It is in and through Discourses," Gee reminds us, "that we make clear to ourselves and others who we are and what we are doing at a given time and place" (129). Offering greater opportunity to build from primary Discourses, students put into practice their understanding of the ways in which they negotiate various rhetorical challenges and situations, key components to learning to write more effectively.

I romantically hope each semester that conversations from class spill out all over the lives of my students, spiritedly. That they call up friends and family and classmates to pick over the

material, make it their own. That they partake in long, hopeful discussions with those that they love in order to live the sort of engaged life we educators think desirable. What the email exchange provides, then, is a venue for these discussions.

Setting the stage wherein students use both Primary and Secondary Discourses, the email exchange provides a useful tool for their development as critical readers, writers, and citizens. As Colin Lanksear explains, "We become givers and receivers of meaning in virtue of our discursive histories—our accumulated experience of discourses" (45). Juxtaposing Discourse, asking students to translate their uses of language against a bevy of others, allows students to experiment with their discursive histories in the service of making meaning. It cultivates the Secondary Discourses of the academy; this cultivation helps students identify and use multiple Discourses; it helps generate new speaking positions and identities and new forms of expression. Simply put, students begin to write themselves.

Notes

[1] See their website: www.adbusters.org for an abundance of resistant messages.

[2] I don't make this statement to shortchange the good work that has been done on electronic writing. See, for example, Michael Spooner and Kathleen Yancey's "Postings on a Genre of Email" for an excellent overview. See also Hawisher and Moran, Russell and Cohen, and Baron. This list is by no means exhaustive.

[3] Ira Shor writes, "In large part, how we learn and make ourselves in the world depends on how we speak and how we are spoken to. Our speech indicates our position in school and society, as does the speech others use in addressing us" (254).

[4] I am drawing from Thomas Kent here. See, in particular, Chapters Three and Four on his use of Donald Davidson's "passing theory." Kent writes, "[I]n order to communicate, you must be somewhere, and being somewhere—being positioned in relation to other language users—

means that you always come with baggage, with beliefs, desires, hopes, and fears about the world. What matters is how we employ these beliefs, desire, hopes, and fears to formulate passing theories in our attempts to interpret one another's utterances and to make sense of the world" (4).

[5] See Mary Soliday and Amy Lee on the importance of examining language and Discourse in the composition classroom.

[6] Although Gee informs the assignment, I did not drone on about his ideas with students. I did not assign them sections of his text, either. Rather, I paraphrased Gee in pedagogical ways, translating and enacting his ideas throughout the syllabus, hoping to maximize the presence of multiple Discourses and minimize any formal discussion of theory.

[7] See the "Appendix" for the actual assignment to which students responded.

[8] Used with permission from all concerned parties, the exchanges are condensed simply because of spatial constraints. Besides cutting sections of text, I have done nothing to the original text.

[9] According to Gee, primary Discourses compose our most intimate settings. They "constitute our first social identity, and something of a base within which we acquire or resist later Discourses. They form our initial taken-for-granted understandings of who we are and who people 'like us' are, as well as what sorts of things we (people like us) do, value, and believe when we are not 'in public.'" (137).

[10] As Gee explains, "Secondary Discourses are those to which people are apprenticed as part of their socializations within various local, state, and national groups and institutions outside early home and peer-group socialization—for example, churches, gangs, schools, offices. They constitute the recognizability and meaningfulness of our 'public' (more formal) acts" (137).

[11] As Gee explains, "Discourses create 'social positions' (perspectives) from which people are 'invited' (summoned) to speak, listen, act, read and write, think, feel, believe and value in certain characteristic, historically recognizable ways, combined with their own individual styles and creativity" (128). Through their analyses, I hoped that students could document their uses of specific Discourses.

[12] See Robert P. Yaleski on the need to help students understand "how we experience ourselves and others in the world through literate activity."

[13] Mary Soliday sees such insight as an important component of the development of competent writers (74). Gee explains that any explicit attention to the functioning of Discourse is done by "observing and reflecting on the social practices of ourselves and other people" and not by staying within our own heads (77).

[14] I used a very similar assignment with other texts and found similar results. Using Barbara Ehrenerich's *Nickel and Dimed*, students explored life on minimum wage, and they questioned with their friends ethical dimensions of Ehrenreich's project. Using Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, students discussed their ideas on living the (un)conventional life.

[15] I am aware that I focus much of my attention in this essay on one exchange, the one between Liz and her brother. I use this focus to show how the assignment sequence plays out. Using one exchange offers me the opportunity for the extended analysis I provide; such an analysis outweighs the limitations of using one primary example, limitations that include how other email exchanges, because of their mixture of primary and secondary Discourses, take a different trajectory from Liz and Ed's exchange. Writing teachers should be aware that students bring various Discourses to our classrooms—some Discourses more in line with the secondary Discourses of the academy than others. See Finn for a good discussion of recognizing how certain primary and secondary Discourses interfere with the acquisition of academic Discourse.

[16] See Christian R. Weisser for a good discussion of how composition teachers are increasingly searching for ways to transcend the limits of academic discourse.

[17] Whether it be power relations, familiar relations, or their memory of how a writing class functions and the expectations of the teacher, parents could be particularly formal in their exchanges.

[18] Perhaps the curtest exchange is the following one between Jeremy and his girlfriend Lisa both from New Jersey. Lisa's response to Jeremy is in italics; the rest is from Jeremy's initial email to Lisa:

> Lasn raises an interesting point: he argues that if corporations are seen, under the Supreme Court's 1886 ruling as "individuals" and therefore due the same rights as any singular person, then if

a company commits a wrongdoing, "each shareholder [should be] deemed personally responsible and liable for collateral damage to bystanders or harms to the environment...Why shouldn't it be so? If [the shareholder] reaps the rewards when the going is good, why shouldn't [they] be held responsible for that company when it becomes criminally liable?" Do you agree with this? Do you think when Exxon is found criminally responsible for dumping oil into one of our oceans, the shareholders should be held responsible? Or Enron?

Most definitely not. I'm taking shareholders to mean people like you and me. We own a miniscule amount of the company and don't really have any say as to what goes on.

One argument behind this is that corporations, as an entity, cannot feel remorse for their actions. In Lasn's words: "When a corporation hurts people or damages the environment, it will feel no sorrow or remorse because it is intrinsically unable to do so. (It may sometimes apologize, but that's not remorse—that's public relations.) Does that sway your opinion either way?

No.

[19] Both Linda Miller Cleary and Deborah Brandt acknowledge the power of writing to create a link between home and school. Perhaps it is time to rekindle these connections.

[20] Liz's email exchange prompted a longer and more wide-ranging exchange than most students. But I wouldn't say that there is one typical exchange, which is something that I valued about the results. Whether it was the diversity of students, of respondents, of student-respondent relationships, or whether it was the open-ness of the assignment or the multiplicity of primary and secondary Discourses, whatever, the results do not suggest a representative example should be sought. In a class where I was looking for multiple forms of expression to develop, I thought this divergent anti-standardization to be a success and a place from which to work.

Culture Jam Exchange Assignment

Choose, say, 2-3 people you think would be good candidates for an email exchange in regard to the issues discussed in *Culture Jam*. If you know one

person will pull through for you, focus on that person. Tell them what's up—that this is an assignment—but keep your language "natural" or "organic" to the relationship you have. Give them enough context for the question/discussion at hand, and include your ideas in your email. Keep your discussion going with your interlocutors; and keep a record of all exchanges. Tie in any cultural references—bands, movies, movements—you think appropriate to any and all of these discussions. Use my questions as guides; build from them as needed.

Introduction

1) Focus on the language: what strikes you? What do you expect from the book? Relay your reactions to your email recipients. Read over "About the Author" and "The Culture Jammers Network," too, and include this information in your reponse. Check out <www. adbusters.org> and ask your interlocutors to do the same. In all, set up a context for the book and your discussion.

Autumn

2) The chapters in this section are about identity and the meaning of "self." Engage a discussion about this concept of self: use the following questions as a guide. Don't get all "new-agey" and don't hesitate to include parts of Lasn's book you find important here.

- Who Are You? List, for those who know you, your interests, convictions, etc., whatever you feel appropriate. What defines you?
- On page 22, Lasn uses the phrase "reality index." Based on his definition, what is your reality index? What does this index mean to you (i.e., does it say anything about you, the world, etc.)?
- Do you think there is such a thing as an authentic self (see page 45). Explain.

Winter

3) This is, arguably, the most critical section of the book. Toy with these questions in your email exchange:

- On page 63, Lasn says we Americans are all "Elvis." Lasn identifies Elvis as the cultural icon most representative of the U.S. Who/what would you choose as the iconic representation of America? Why?
- On page 57, Lasn concludes the chapter with this question: "What does it mean when a whole culture dreams the same dream?" Why does he ask this question? How would you answer it?
- Go to www.earthday.net and follow the instructions to calculate your ecological footprint. What is it? What does this mean to you? What do you think about the information found at this website?

Spring

4) Lasn is getting hopeful here, and he provides useful examples, ways in which we can "jam" our culture. Chew on the following:

- Outline what you see to be the main ideas behind detournement and cultural jamming. What do these concepts refer to? What do you think? Can you think of examples Lasn does not refer to?
- On page 121, Lasn argues for a "ruthless criticism of all that exists." Why? Of what value would such criticism be? Where would you start? Toward what ends? What is your most vital criticism at this point in time? Why?
- What is a free marketplace of ideas (125)? Does one exist? Can one exist?
- Answer Lasn's opening question on page 129. Be specific—what sort of project would interest you?

Summer

5) Lasn is winding down his argument here, providing nuance and (more) hope. Engage him and your interlocutors:

- What social issue/cultural condition makes you most angry? Be specific.
- On page 150 Lasn uses the phrase "demarketing your life." What does this phrase mean? What value does it have for you?
- What does the word "freedom" mean to you? Do you think we are free? Why or why not?
- Do you think we as a society are progressing? Why or why not?

Epilogue

6) In the end, what have you learned from the book? Describe something of value you take away from the book. Without being "sappy," describe what you have gotten out of your email exchanges—prompt your fellow emailers to do the same.

Email Exchange Analysis

The directions at the start of this email exchange asked you to choose candidates for an email exchange in regard to the issues discussed in *Culture Jam*. You were asked to do the following:

- Keep your language "natural" or "organic" to the relationship you have
- Give respondents enough context for the discussion at hand
- Include your ideas in your email

- Keep your discussion going with your interlocutors
- Keep a record of all exchanges

Now, what I will ask you do is compare the issues addressed by Lasn—along with the language he uses in his address—with the issues and the language used within your exchange with your respondents. The goal of this comparison is to explore these two presentations alongside one another (i.e., Lasn's and those of you and your partner) to get a sense of the different ways in which we talk about similar issues.

I don't envision a set organizational pattern for this paper, but here are some categories that should be identified and discussed:

Lasn's main argument(s)

Lasn's language: how does he represent his issues and why does he use the language that he does

You/your respondent's main argument(s)

You/your respondent's language: how do you/your respondent represent your issues and why do you use the language that you do

Conclusions reached based on this comparison: what does it look like, and what does it mean?

Focus on key words and ideas. Identify and discuss key rhetorical terms: audience, purpose, tone, etc. Identify the assumptions and presuppositions informing the language used: how does language shape the nature of the issues addressed? What qualities does it lend to each discussion? How does it make certain answers more appealing than others? How does it preclude the omission of certain discussions and answers?

Refer to specific sections of your exchange—relate them to specific pages in Lasn and discuss what it different and what matters about these differences. Highlight key reasons for the ways in which language shapes both sets of arguments (i.e., yours and Lasn's). You are not arguing one way of speaking is better than another; instead, you are simply discussing the nature of the similarities and differences between Lasn's presentations and the presentation laid out in your email exchange.

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