

# Critical Literacy and Institutional Language

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*Based on more than three years of activist ethnographic fieldwork in an upstate New York inner city, this article explores institutional language skills among area residents who faced eviction from their homes. Through vignettes and literacy artifacts, this report reveals how two adult women learned, transferred, and evaluated their own language practices in light of their interactions with institutional gatekeepers. Analysis not only reveals the cycle of development of institutional language strategies among community members, but also shows residents' critical awareness and political acumen when faced with the asymmetrical relations between themselves and the institutions designed to assist them. Grounded in the micro politics of day-to-day linguistic struggles, this research shows how individuals' language use both complied with and resisted the structuring ideology of institutional agents. In light of these findings, I raise questions about the methods of key critical pedagogues and the appropriateness of their assumption of false consciousness among disenfranchised people.*

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False consciousness—the naive beliefs of the disenfranchised that keep them oppressed—is the Achilles heel of critical literacy theory and pedagogy. What happens when community members come to English classrooms already having critical literacy practices and awareness? What if at least some of those taught in English classrooms already know, up close and personal, how “to read the World in the Word” (Freire & Macedo, 1987)? How do critical pedagogues (researchers, scholars, and teachers) serve marginalized individuals who already have critical consciousness? The purpose of this study is to

demonstrate that these questions are worth the asking. To do so, I focus on a small set of urban residents from a class of people typically assumed to lack critical consciousness. I explore one main question: How did residents' language practices reveal their critical awareness? Drawing on more than three years of activist ethnographic fieldwork, I examine the literate practices the residents employed in the process of finding housing after receiving eviction notices. I argue that careful attention to the lived experiences of individuals in an underserved community challenges the assumption of false

consciousness and suggests new directions for critical theory and practice.

Their linguistic patterns of behavior not only offer broader understandings of institutional literacy, but also ask critical pedagogues to reconsider what critical pedagogy would be like if scholars assume that individuals have critical rather than naive consciousness. Doing so, I will raise more questions than space permits me to answer here, questions about the validity of false consciousness and the intended audience of critical pedagogy. I focus on elite critical pedagogues, the kind who research hegemonic relations from a distance, the kind who assume that false consciousness exists everywhere that critical pedagogy has not reached, the kind who carve for themselves patronizing roles toward the oppressed they claim to liberate. I recognize that some critical pedagogues work at the front lines of education where very real social issues, questions of ideology, and linguistic strategies inform their research and teaching (Blitz & Hurlbert, 1998; Luke & Gore, 1992). These critical pedagogues close social distances as they engage in crucial acts of teaching reading and writing for liberation, and they are not the ones I critique. My hope remains that critical literacy scholars will eventually justify their intellectual pursuits against the daily lives and literate practices of inner-city residents such as those I describe from an upstate New York city.

## Theoretical Framework

The teaching of English has been considerably influenced by the work of

critical pedagogy and literacy studies. Basing their work on the philosophy of Freire (1971), critical pedagogues retain many of the central tenets of Freire's original thinking: "This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation" (Freire, p. 33). The critical pedagogue works with the oppressed to help them name the taken-for-granted nature of conditions and relations that perpetuate their marginalization. Specifically, critical pedagogues help the oppressed see the world in the word through literate activities that engage them in "the process of becoming self-critical about the historically constructed nature of one's experience. To be able to name one's experience is part of what it meant to 'read' the world and to begin to understand the political nature of the limits and possibilities that make up the larger society" (Giroux, 1987, p. 7). Because the oppressed are understood to have "adapted to the structure of domination" and to have "become resigned to it" (Freire, 1971, p. 32), critical pedagogues' main duty is to demystify the causes and consequences of domination.

As McLaren (1992) points out, "Critical literacy has grown out of an awareness that the ability to read and write in no way ensures that literate persons will achieve an accurate or 'deep' political understanding of the world and their place within it" (p. 319). He stresses the importance of literacy practices that unveil discursive "conventions [that] are normative and derive

their meaning from power relations" (p. 320). When normative language conventions are situated through the critical literacy process, an understanding of the historical and structural forces of domination comes into focus. This deeper political awareness, then, moves the disenfranchised from a naive consciousness to a critical consciousness. Naive consciousness embodies the "distorted perceptions which hold marginalized groups in oppression and passivity, or which send them down false trails" (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993, p. 42). When marginalized individuals identify themselves as somehow deserving of, or resigned to, or inextricably bound up in, their own lots in life, they perpetuate their own marginalization by subscribing to the ideology of their oppressors.

With the guidance of critical pedagogues, the oppressed move into a critical consciousness. They become able to critique the word by bringing "*depth* to analysis," by getting "beneath the surface of prejudices and mystifying ideologies and go[ing] to the deeper level of structured relations and practices within which humans live their lives and their lives are shaped" (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993, p. 30; emphasis in original). Critical consciousness heightens the abilities of the disenfranchised to pinpoint the systematic, historical causes of their oppression. In the end, once the oppressed engage in critical reflection, they have begun not only to "transform consciousness of the world," but also to alter "social relations and practices in the world in the knowledge process" (Lankshear & McLaren, p. 38).

Although these goals, practices, and intended results of critical literacy are noble, they rest on a number of problematic assumptions. First, they describe the oppressed as all suffering from naive or false consciousness. This assumption is often based on observations of the public transpiring of events in classrooms (McLaren, 1989), electronic discourse (McLaren & Hammer, 1996), and mass media (Giroux, 1996; McLaren, 1996). Unless anti-hegemonic ideologies manifest themselves in collective action that attracts media attention, these critical scholars are hard pressed to find evidence of these ideologies. If scholars are to validate the existence of false consciousness, they must take into account both the public and hidden transcripts found in daily politics. Scott (1990), for instance, argues that public transcripts can mask the presence of more critical and resistant discourse:

The theatrical imperatives that normally prevail in situations of domination produce a public transcript in close conformity with how the dominant group would wish to have things appear. . . . In ideological terms, the public transcript will typically, by its accommodationist tone, provide convincing evidence for the hegemony of dominant values. (p. 4)

When interacting with wider society's gatekeepers, inner-city inhabitants often have few choices but to appear to comply fully with prevailing norms, using convincing performances of deference and adhering closely to the literate conventions prescribed by the institution.

Indeed, this article, when read only in terms of the public transcript, will offer compelling exchanges that could suggest individuals' false consciousness—at least they could if one ignores the many examples showing residents' hidden transcripts. Scott (1990), however, points out the need to look beyond the public transcript: "If subordinate discourse in the presence of the dominant is a public transcript,... the term hidden transcript characterize[s] discourse that takes place 'off stage,' beyond direct observation of power holders" (p. 4). The hidden transcript indicates precisely those places where individuals critique dominant values that they seem to uphold publicly. The hidden transcript shows where counter-hegemonic ideologies foster the discursive tactics that allow individuals to question, undermine, placate, challenge, and push at predominant values present in the public transcript. While the examples I relate in this report point to systematic forms of domination, I also want to draw attention to the linguistic strategies community members used to negotiate the asymmetries of encounters with institutional gatekeepers. By doing so I hope to reveal the agency and critical awareness inner-city residents display in their own orality and literacy, even as they seemingly acquiesce to gatekeepers.

With the primary supposition of false consciousness as a tenet of critical theory and practice, a number of other arguments fall neatly into place: The oppressed suffer, so the thinking goes, because they do not deeply understand their complicity in the terms and rela-

tions that continue their subordination; the disenfranchised need to be more critical by naming the historical and structural influences affecting what appear to be status quo daily interactions; they need to stop identifying with their oppressors; they need to question normative language; they need to stop internalizing the symbolic codes and emic systems of dominant groups; they need to move beyond the surface of the word to name, question, and undermine the prevailing ideologies lurking there.

Yet, as I will show in the remainder of this article, inner-city residents can and do indeed cultivate critical literacy skills such as these. To illustrate, I will describe the ways their institutional language skills developed in a cyclical process over time and across numerous contexts. As this description broadens understandings of counter-hegemonic ideologies and linguistic practices, it also helps to resolve a lacuna in literacy scholarship identified by Heath (1988):

In large complex societies, such as the United States, the... extent of intrusion of government agencies in the daily lives of citizens may have combined to set up conditions in which literacy no longer has many of the traditional uses associated with it.... These shifts in large societal contexts for literacy are easily and frequently talked about, but their specific effects on communities... though occasionally inferred, are very rarely examined. (pp. 370-371)

Little research has been done on institutional language, as Heath notes, leaving language scholars with a number of unanswered questions: What oral and literate skills does institutional language include? How does institutional lan-

guage manifest itself in everyday power struggles between community members and institutional agents? In what ways do these skills indicate community members' critical awareness and literacy practices? In this article I provide initial answers to these questions through an analysis of rhetorical tactics developed by residents of Quayville's inner city community in upstate New York (here and throughout, pseudonyms used).

More specifically, I explore the cyclical process by which a small set of inner-city residents learned, deployed, and evaluated their linguistic strategies as they moved across institutional contexts in order to find housing after being evicted. In comparing with each other their opinions of encounters with institutional representatives, community residents often spoke not only of their material struggles to obtain housing, food, clothing, and resources, but also of their ideological struggles to gain respect, to complicate stereotypes, and to challenge demeaning attitudes. Thus, the most salient examples of their agency and anti-hegemonic ideologies rested in their cyclical development of linguistic strategies used to resist, crack, obviate, and manipulate the structuring ideology of institutional workers.

The counter-hegemonic values imbued in community residents' ever-developing communicative skills provide a cornerstone for critical theory and pedagogy: Critical pedagogues can begin to appreciate the strategies and attitudes of individuals who never wholly comply or wholly resist in their daily dialogic power relations with in-

stitutional agents. This article honors the critical consciousness of individuals in this community as well as depicts the multifaceted means by which they both consent to and challenge structuring ideologies. In the end, the results of this study ask critical pedagogues to recast their theories and practices. I propose that central facets of critical theory and pedagogy stand in need of re-examination and offer suggestions for where to begin.

## Method

In order to confirm their claims that individuals suffer under ideological domination, a number of prominent critical education scholars attempt to research hegemonic relationships from a distance. For example, Giroux (1996) examined the cultural logic of border youths by analyzing films such as *Slacker*, *My Own Private Idaho*, and *A River's Edge*. Lankshear, Peters, and Knobel (1996) review scholarship on the applicability of critical pedagogy to cyberspace. In studying politics from the social distance that film and other artifacts provide, these critical pedagogues find abundant evidence of ideological domination. That is, their methodology supports their claims about false consciousness because their methods do not give them access to evidence that would suggest otherwise. Scott (1985) describes how social scientists have fallen short in their research on hegemony because they too study the topic from a distance, saying that "History and social science, because they are written by an intelligentsia using written records that are also cre-

ated largely by literate officials, is simply not well equipped to uncover the silent and anonymous forms of class [and race] struggle" (p. 36). Since my goal in this research is to portray the anti-hegemonic emic systems that underpin everyday language use, I needed a method that would unveil the often hidden cultural logic of area residents. How, finally, "can we understand everyday forms of resistance without reference to the intentions, ideas, and language of those human beings who practice it?" (Scott, 1985, p. 38). In short, critical literacy scholars can, and should, diversify their methods in order to better describe daily political struggles and language use present in places (e.g., inner cities) where they have not typically looked.

### ***Research Setting and Participants***

After White flight and urban renewal in the inner city of Quayville, the row-houses that were originally single family homes at the turn of the century were remodeled to house three or four apartments for each building. The four-story brick houses lined the streets, all built close together, all with front steps connecting the first floor to the sidewalk. The two-block radius around the neighborhood where I researched had twelve Rehabilitation and Improvement Project (RIP)-owned buildings, all built before 1919 and all renewed during the 1970s with Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funding. While two Vietnamese and three White families lived near this inner-city area, I conducted fieldwork primarily with

adult women and the children in the thirteen African American families living close to a neighborhood center. These families had kin in another eight households in nearby sections of the inner city. A small number of the women in the immediate area held jobs as nurse's aides, daycare providers, and beauticians. The teens and young adults held jobs at gas stations or restaurants that paid minimum wage with no benefits and offered unsteady hours that fluctuated anywhere between five to 25 hours a week. Of the roughly two dozen young adults aged 17 to 21, four women and three men held high school diplomas. They were too old to be at home but did not earn enough to get their own apartments. Few adult males lived in this neighborhood continuously. One was a janitor in a hospital and was married to a nurse's aide, and one was retired. Another half dozen adult males passed in and out of the women's lives. They found temporary employment in restaurants, shipping, or gas stations: poverty wages, no benefits, few hours.

### ***Researcher's Role and Data Collection***

Over the course of more than three years of participant observation in Quayville's inner city, I gradually gained access to the private ideologies that inform residents' language use. Their values about language and the ways they interpret the outcomes of gatekeeping interactions could only be brought to light through ethnographic fieldwork, which entailed in the broadest sense

immersion in their social and symbolic systems and cultural practices. As community members revealed to me the process by which they honed and refined their oral and literate language skills, I began to understand the baselines for their judgments about the success or failure of these interactions. In short, participant observation was the best way for me to study how their daily language use was imbued with their social and cultural attitudes.

Since the traditional method of participant observation emphasizes more observation than participation, it soon proved problematic on two fronts. First, the aim of my research was to understand the critical ideologies residents brought to bear in their everyday linguistic struggles with wider society. Yet without more participation in their daily routines, I soon found my access was limited to fairly public events: card playing on front stoops, chatting together in the neighborhood center, or strolling together to the corner store. Second, because they knew I was a composition teacher at a local university, community members recognized the value of my position and began to ask for assistance in their literate attempts to achieve.

Because my research question required more access to residents' daily lives and because community residents increasingly sought and invited my intervention, I altered the traditional method of participant observation. In line with civically minded scholarship by education scholars (Gitlin, 1994; Lather 1992), feminist thinkers (Fine, 1994; Luke & Gore, 1992; Sullivan &

Porter, 1997), and applied anthropologists (Johannsen, 1992; Warry, 1992), I reinterpreted the strict anthropological method of participant observation to create a reciprocal relationship with community members. In exchange for the data collected, often residents asked for a ride to the doctor's, Department of Social Services, or court; they asked for letters of recommendation for college and housing applications; one resident asked me to be the godmother of her son, creating a kin relationship that we still maintain.

Eventually, this enhanced reciprocity opened up greater opportunities to engage with residents as they discussed their attitudes toward wider society's representatives and weighed their language strategies used in the presence of gatekeepers (Cushman, 1998). Because we entered into a number of reciprocal exchanges and carefully negotiated the terms of our relations, my rapport with them and their confidence in my research agenda increased. As a result, I at times became privy to their hidden oral and literate events in which they candidly discussed and considered larger society and its privileged discourses. I also was invited to view their oral and literate interactions taking place in many institutional contexts, such as doctors' and welfare offices, philanthropic agencies, and universities. They let me record a number of their interactions with gatekeepers and usually let me quote them directly on a notepad I carried with me. They also permitted me to copy or keep many of the literate artifacts generated during their daily routines.

Along with reciprocity, solidarity in the form of mutual identification also facilitated the development of our relations. Although we had similar experiences due to our gender and race (I'm White Cherokee with family from Oklahoma; many residents were Black Cherokee with family from the Carolinas), we talked about class issues the most. My family has been evicted three times and was homeless for a summer in 1984, and I was evicted once during the course of this study. Since our class backgrounds overlapped, we talked about our experiences in ways that fostered a mutual trust for and identification with each other. If our similarities worked to an advantage in building a relation, so too did our differences. Community members often used the status markers of my university position and White looks as another means to their own ends as I will report. They believed that by associating with me, they increased their acceptability in the view of wider society's institutional representatives. In like fashion, by associating with me, they legitimized my presence in neighborhoods, churches, and institutions not ordinarily frequented by scholars. These forms of enhanced reciprocity, mutual identification, and marked difference gradually increased our rapport with each other, leading us all to find ways to make this study beneficial to everyone involved.

Perhaps it is not surprising that the researcher's positioning can positively affect the data collection process. Rosenthal (1966) argued that the researchers' and participants' respective races shaped both the content and form

of their utterances with each other in behavioral research. Labov (1972) also revealed how the research context could elicit silence from participants if the participants felt threatened by the situation. When studying linguistic behavior, this silence was often mistaken for a lack of verbal and literate aptitude, but when Labov shifted the locale of the research setting, participants' perceived freedom to express themselves and their subsequent linguistic performance increased. When self-reflexivity is accounted for, the researcher's positioning and research context can provide greater access to data that impacts the validity of results (Cushman & Guinsatao Monberg, 1998). Yet, when critical literacy scholars study hegemony from a social distance, they rarely take such methodological and social issues into consideration (Cushman, 1996).

### ***Data Selection and Analysis***

Everyday politics provide abundant evidence of power at the point where it is applied. Many situations in the lives of inner-city residents reveal the forces of hegemony at work including, but not limited to, rampant unemployment, uninvited housing inspections, and frequent questionings by police for no apparent reason. Among these experiences, though, the process of finding housing after receiving an eviction notice emerged at the forefront of community members' concerns. Eviction provides a salient example of counter-hegemonic ideology and language use over time and many contexts. My own experiences with the process of evic-

tion cued me to the social and personal pressure of finding housing after the marshal serves notice. Such pressure compels individuals to reflect together on the reasons for and ways around forced removal. Because “the experience [was] widely shared, the symbols that embody class relations [came] to have an extraordinary evocative power. One can imagine, in this context, how individual grievances become collective grievances and how collective grievances may take on the character of class-based myth tied, as always, to local experience” (Scott, 1985, p. 44). The sheer number of evictions in this area impelled residents to describe eviction as one of their struggles, a struggle that spurred their collective development of an anti-hegemonic cultural logic. Of the thirteen families living in this section of the inner city, six families were evicted over the course of this study. Each of these thirteen families had dealt with at least two evictions before, to make a collective history of more than twenty-six evictions for this group of families before this study began. All said, these families incurred more than thirty evictions, presenting a recurring pattern of material and linguistic struggles for this group of individuals.

Of the six families evicted during the course of the study, three families (the Washingtons, Cadenses, and Johnsons) allowed me to participate closely with them throughout the duration of their move. In exchange for their invitations to accompany them to meetings with landlords and case workers, I wrote letters of recommendation and

drove them to appointments with landlords, the Department of Social Services (DSS), and Housing and Urban Development (HUD). They permitted me to photocopy every application, letter, and verification form; they also allowed me to observe them complete their applications with other family members. With the other three families who were evicted, I occasionally provided rides, heard stories about their good and poor interactions with gatekeepers, and copied a number of their literacy artifacts. I specifically selected data from the Washingtons’ and Cadenses’ evictions because their experiences represent not only the typical duration of finding housing (six months for the Washingtons and eighteen months for the Cadenses) but also show the variety of language activities experienced by each family.

Evictions exemplify the cyclical process in which linguistic activity and critical awareness become mutually sustaining. The vignettes, narratives, and literacy artifacts chosen for this article all reveal different aspects of area residents’ language skills and their anti-hegemonic beliefs. With the permission of Mirena Washington and Lucy Cadens, I chose a number of specific oral and literate interactions from numerous literacy artifacts and observations. Mirena and Lucy agreed to my request provided that I share with them my findings and include in the final drafts any caveats they wanted to add to my interpretation.

I analyzed data using the frameworks sociolinguists have developed to

describe the social construction of literacy (Cook-Gumperz, 1993; Gee, 1990; Street, 1984), interethnic communication (Erickson & Shultz, 1982; Gumperz, 1983a, 1983b), and language, power, and ideology (Fairclough, 1989; Kress & Hodge, 1979; Roberts, Davies, & Jupp, 1992). Critical discourse analysis situates texts and utterances in the immediate and larger political contexts of their use. As such, it offers a method for systematically categorizing data in order to uncover the cultural and political influences shaping the language skills deployed in a given situational context. I used critical discourse analysis because it enabled me to examine, first, the minute characteristics of user's linguistic choices; second, the social context in which the language use unfolded; and third, the larger political and ideological assumptions that informed each particular language use. As an analytical tool, then, discourse analysis describes the process by which the social exchange of meaning and the social construction of the context unfold in a historical moment. Critical discourse analysis worked like a camera lens that moved smoothly from a tight focus on a particular linguistic choice, to an intermediate focus on the social context, to a wider focus on the larger political arena in which the events occurred.

Since my goal was to characterize community members' linguistic activities and the critical consciousness imbued therein, critical discourse analysis provided a central set of questions that when answered led to an initial interpretation: How are these specific lin-

guistic features indicative of local beliefs? What forms of critical awareness manifest themselves before, during, and after encounters with gatekeepers? In what ways did their apparent compliance with gatekeepers mask their resistance, if at all? In asking these questions, my goal was to gain a rich understanding of anti-hegemonic ideologies as they developed in daily language uses, both public and private. To generate this analysis, I followed the assumptions of an interpretative anthropology that is dedicated "to a semiotic concept of culture" (Geertz, 1973, p. 29). Each artifact and event was analyzed in much the same way that a literary scholar might read a text. Coupled with critical discourse analysis, interpretive anthropology provided a means for me to represent the participants' political "webs of significance" (Geertz, p. 5).

I triangulated initial observations and interpretations in three ways. First, I justified my initial analysis against observed patterns of behavior across time and numerous encounters with various gatekeepers. Then, I asked key informants, three adult women who had been through evictions themselves, if my interpretation seemed valid from their perspectives. Finally, I asked Mirena and Lucy if my representation of their situations did justice to their perspectives. The informants' additions to my interpretations have been duly noted in the results and discussion sections. What follows, then, is an account of everyday linguistic acts of both accommodation and appropriation, results that shed new light on the fundamentals of critical pedagogy.

## **Results**

### *Eviction and the Cyclical Development of Language Skills*

Through narratives, vignettes, and literacy artifacts I follow the stories of two women, Mirena Washington and Lucy Cadens, as they looked for a place to live. Mirena's household of six included herself, her children, and her boyfriend; Lucy's household of thirteen included herself, her boyfriend, sister, foster child, five children, three grandchildren, and a newborn nephew. Mirena's and Lucy's situations were remarkably similar. They were evicted by the same landlord for a number of the same reasons within eighteen months of each other. Yet their situations had notable differences too. Mirena drew resources solely from public assistance in the form of welfare and food stamps; Lucy drew resources from social security, Section 8, and the public assistance she received to care for her custodial child, Leanna. Mirena had no kin in the area and had moved from North Carolina in the late 1970s; Lucy had a large extended family that had lived in Quayville for generations. In fact, four generations were living at the time of this study: Lucy's father (age 78), his 9 children (ages 34–53), his 58 grandchildren (ages 13–28), and his 14 great-grandchildren (ages 18 months–5 years old), for a total of 82 members. These demographics contribute to how Mirena and Lucy's stories unfold. Centered on their struggle with eviction, the following examples offer insight into the ways in which individuals learned, deployed, and evaluated their oral and literate language skills in order to obviate material and ideological

struggles. Institutional language does indeed include both resistance and accommodation, and as a result, community residents' language neither entirely subverted nor wholly reproduced the structuring ideology of institutions.

### **Events Leading to Mirena's Eviction**

In February of 1993, I first met Mirena in the neighborhood center, where I tutored her two sons, Richard and Samson, among other neighborhood children. Richard and I were reading a book together on the couch when she walked in to ask him to run to the store for her when he was done reading with me. She told me "to stop up when I was through with that one," pointing with her chin to Richard. Community members called her apartment the "center across from the center," where the adults gathered around her kitchen table in the evening to drink, smoke, and play cards. No one knocked on her door, or if they did it was merely a gesture to announce their presence. Everyone was welcome. The mothers brought their kids to play with Mirena's youngest daughter, Kateesha, and Mirena's two youngest sons. The teens went in the back bedroom and listened to music with Upstate, Mirena's oldest son. Mirena's gatherings brought as many as twenty-eight people into her apartment at a time. Mostly people talked about their day's activities, ate Mirena's fried chicken and garbage bread (bread dough stuffed with cheese, meat, and vegetables), told stories, gossiped about people in the neighborhood, and sang along with their favorite songs.

Besides Mirena's welcoming attitude, her apartment created a safe space for neighbors to "chill." Although the neighborhood center originally provided that space for the adults, most people felt invaded by the social workers' probing questions about their daily lives. "They too nosy over there," I was told time and again. A pamphlet distributed by The Neighborhood Center describes their mission this way: "to combine human services with housing to make lasting improvements in the physical and social fabric which make up a neighborhood block" and thus maintain "a responsible presence in the neighborhoods [they] helped to revitalize." The social workers, then, served in the roles of policing agents who helped maintain the "social fabric" of the block, and as a result the adult community members removed themselves from the watchful eyes of the Center's staff. To socialize, they went to Mirena's.

These gatherings concerned the social workers, and they reported them to the RIP landlords as unruly parties. The lady above Mirena, a Jehovah's Witness who never attended any of Mirena's get-togethers, also reported Mirena to RIP. Added to these complaints, Mirena's eldest was under surveillance by the Quayville police, and the police colluded with RIP to use one of the empty apartments across the street from Mirena's to watch the traffic coming into and out of her house (the social workers told me this, fearing for my safety). Relations between Mirena and RIP were further strained when RIP inspected her apartment and found holes in the walls. In early March

RIP told Mirena her lease would not be renewed but that she could continue to live there under a month-to-month tenancy. Mirena told me "they looking for reasons to get rid of me, and when Upstate brought that damn puppy home for Kateesha, I knew that was all she wrote." The social workers found out about the puppy and told RIP.

I finished tutoring in the center in the early afternoon of May 10, 1993, and it being spring, many community residents gathered together on Lucy Cadens' front stoop. Mirena motioned for me to follow her. We walked across the street to her front stoop where she sat on the third step and I sat on the second: "I been put out," she said as she took a folded paper from her front jacket pocket. I read the eviction notice that she had been served earlier that morning by the county marshal. When she went to court three days later on the 13th of May, she found out that she was evicted because of the "traffic" in and out of her house, the young men continually on her front stoop, the neighbors' complaints, and the dog. Since she occupied the apartment on a month-to-month basis, she had thirty days to find a new place to live.

### Events Leading to Lucy's Eviction

Not long after Mirena left the community, Lucy Cadens signed a new lease with RIP for a year. Community members considered Lucy to be "the mother of the neighborhood" because, as her downstairs neighbor said, "she gave to everyone, and never took no shit from no one. No one in their right mind would fuck with her." Neighbors and

the social workers respected her temper and discipline. Lucy's apartment was next door to the center on the third floor. She decorated her living room with dried flower arrangements, ceramics, plants, candles, and pictures. Her youngest's asthma prevented her from having a carpeted living room, but she mopped her floor religiously, a fact that prompted kids and visitors to leave their shoes on the landing outside the door.

Lucy had been living in that apartment for two years before she and I were introduced through her daughter, Afriganzia. On June 26, 1993, just a month and one-half after Mirena had been served an eviction notice, Lucy began having problems with RIP. We sat together around her kitchen table with afternoon sun streaming through the open windows. Her ferns, spider plants, and ivy flourished in this light and threatened to outgrow their coffee can pots. I stomped on a cockroach and Lucy laughed loudly at me: "Killing one ain't gonna make a bit of difference. They everywhere. RIP come in here to spray in this corner and that corner. It be better for a day, but they always come back worser. You hear that?" I winced at the faint scratching of claws on wood, maybe coming from behind the walls, or maybe the ceiling, "Rats?" "Motherfucking pigeons. Gary [the apartment manager at RIP] tried to tell me that the ceiling was insulated. Nothing can get in them [the ceilings] and that I must be imagining pigeons inside the apartment. They think they're smarter than us, like they can get away with telling us something and we'll just believe it. Those pigeons get all the way

into the bedrooms and everything." The roaches, the pigeons, and the ways her living conditions were too quickly dismissed comprised only a small part of her daily material struggles, though.

Megan, one of the social workers, "told RIP that Tony be living with me [Lucy]. But he ain't on the lease." Lucy explained that the center staff and landlords didn't "realize I had to ask him to move in. I was afraid of being jumped by the drug dealers I'm fightin' to keep my son away from." Disco along with Upstate had been hanging out on the corner and on Lucy's front stoop since Mirena was gone. Lucy continued, Disco "young so he not into the shit deep. Still getting his ass to school. And plus, he ain't got no money or clothes to speak of." Regardless, the center staff spoke about him in hushed tones and noted his daily activities. Lucy recognized the risk she took in fighting with the drug dealers who were "up from the city so they got no kin" in the area. Despite the problems she was having with RIP, she convinced them that she was doing the best she could to keep her son in line and out of trouble.

She continued to be "the mother of the neighborhood" and helped organize cook-outs, a neighborhood watch program, and residential meetings. Of course, her family had the largest claim over her resources and time. She obtained custody of a one-month-old baby girl who was left with Afriganzia but never picked up. Her youngest sister, Jolinda (33), moved into her apartment because she was pregnant, and as Jolinda said: "All her sisters lived with [Lucy] when they had babies. She knows how

to take care of newborns better than anyone." In February of 1994, Lucy's second eldest daughter, Raejone, and her two children were evicted from their apartment and moved in with Lucy. Afriganzia announced her pregnancy in the same month, a pregnancy she had managed to keep hidden for six months; her baby was born in May. So in June of 1994, when Lucy's lease came due for renewal, RIP refused to offer her another lease and put her on a month-to-month tenancy. Lucy had an overcrowded apartment, and Disco had dropped out of school and had completely immersed himself in the street culture. In all, nine adults, two children, and three babies lived in that four-bedroom, one-bath apartment. The teens slept on sofas and on a mattress that had been moved into the living room; mothers and their newborns had their own rooms, as did Raejone and her two kids. Foreseeing her eviction, Lucy told everyone to find places of their own. The marshal served Lucy her eviction notice in October, 1994.

Once the marshal served their eviction notices, Mirena and Lucy had to find new housing, which demanded that they practice language strategies, deploy them in countless gatekeeping interactions, and assess and revamp their linguistic skills. After receiving these notices, residents practiced, engaged, and assessed the oral and literate conventions of institutions in order to find housing.

### *Learning Institutional Language*

Mirena and Lucy both had to brush up on the language necessary to find new

housing. They practiced the language skills needed to work within numerous institutions; a short list included DSS, HUD, RIP, apartment complexes, courts, and utility companies. Yet Mirena and Lucy both already had knowledge of the language skills needed for negotiating these institutions. Mirena had been evicted at least twice before in this area, and Lucy had been evicted five times before this.

In the upcoming sketches of interactions drawn from my fieldnotes, Mirena and Lucy both acquired and learned institutional literacy tools in order to appear fluent in a privileged discourse. Gee (1989) differentiates between primary discourses, the first discourse individuals acquire through socialization, and secondary discourses, those discourses that individuals acquire through their interactions with institutions. In the following instances Mirena and Jolinda were becoming versed in a dominant discourse: "Dominant Discourses are secondary Discourses the mastery of which . . . brings with it the (potential) acquisition of social 'goods' (money, prestige, status, etc.)" (Gee, p. 8). The institutional language skills they practiced eventually contributed to Mirena's finding an apartment and Jolinda's securing food stamps and welfare from DSS. Both interactions reveal ways in which community members acquire and learn privileged discourses as part of their critical awareness.

### **5/15/93—Accessing the Privileged Discourses of Landlords**

Mirena and I sat at her kitchen table. The morning sun filtered into her living room.

Kateesha played with her brothers in their room. Mirena opened the newspaper onto the kitchen table and leaned over it, scanning the “Apartments for Rent” section according to her primary needs: a three or four bedroom apartment. “None of these landlords will let me rent when they hear me on the phone. They probably won’t even show me the place or tell me where it is.”

“Why’s that?”

“The way I talk. They’ll know I’m Black. You want to help me practice what I’m gonna say on the phone?” I agreed. She said my talking with her would “help [her] sound more respectable, you know White.” She asked me for more information about these apartments, and as I modeled some lines for her, she wrote down what I said on the back of Chinese take-out menu.

#### 2/17/94—Practicing the Language Needed for a DSS Application

Jolinda, in her early thirties and pregnant, her older sister Lucy, and their eldest sister, Vivian, sat around Vivian’s dining room table to fill out Jolinda’s applications for welfare together. Jolinda read each line of the form aloud to her older sisters, and they collectively decided what information was needed to fill the blanks. Jolinda read: “they want my name. Should I use Johnson?” [her married name].

Vivian answered: “Well, you don’t want them checking on Sam’s income, right?” Sam and Jolinda were separated, but Sam still occasionally sent her money for their two kids. Lucy thought it would be best if Jolinda used her maiden name as well. “If you still married, even if you separated, they gonna use his income to decide how much you gonna get.” Jolinda agreed and wrote down her maiden name. She came to the line for address. At that time, Jolinda had been living with Lucy, even though Lucy had too many people living with her and risked being evicted because of it. Lucy said: “I don’t want them running over to RIP [landlords] and telling them you staying with me. I’m already pushing it with Tony there.” Tony, Lucy’s boyfriend, lived with her, even though he wasn’t on her lease. If

Jolinda filled this blank with Lucy’s address, the caseworker likely would have told the landlords at RIP that Lucy was breaking her lease. The town was small enough that an extended information network existed between social service agencies, so that they all tried to keep track of who was awarded what kinds of assistance from which agencies. Vivian spoke up: “Just say you live with me. We’ll say I’m charging you rent while you look for a place on your own.” Lucy added, “You might get more money too.” Jolinda wrote Vivian’s address.

And so the application process went—each blank filled only after considerable discussion.

Mirena and Jolinda both acquired and learned institutional language. Gee (1989) defines acquisition as a “process of acquiring something subconsciously by exposure to models and a process of trial and error;” he defines learning as a “process that involves conscious knowledge gained through teaching. . . . This teaching involves explanations and analysis” (p. 20). In the above examples acquisition and learning of dominant discourses overlapped. Mirena’s analysis of the political context led her to conclude that landlords would be unlikely to rent to her unless she spoke in a “respectable” discourse, “you know, White.” When she asked me to give her a few examples of how she might speak to a landlord, she gathered samples of a prestige discourse in order to acquire it. Jolinda, Lucy, and Vivian all asked questions that helped them analyze the DSS application part by part. As they explained the application to their younger sister, they taught her. Jolinda, conscious of their teaching, learned to select particular pieces of information to complete each blank. Jolinda also acquired

the privileged discourse of DSS though her own trial and error process as she tested out each answer with her sisters. The three of them not only attended to the ways in which institutions constructed their need, but they also explored ways to work these constructions to their advantage. Thus, Mirena and Jolinda acquired and learned institutional language in the hope of securing resources for themselves.

Part of their learning involved them in selectively reading the literate artifacts for information that would help them achieve their goals. They constructed the newspaper and application as containing material problems to be solved. For Mirena the problem was finding suitable housing. For Jolinda the problem was twofold: contributing resources to Lucy's household and establishing a case for herself in the welfare system. They solved these problems together because bureaucratic literacy required knowledge of what institutional agents might assume when reviewing these applications. Lucy and Mirena sought out people whom they perceived as conversant in language used in these situations: Mirena asked me to help her talk White, and Jolinda asked Lucy and Vivian to help her fill out the application. For Mirena the experience was educational. As she wrote down her White-sounding responses, she practiced her linguistic skills given the mock conversation we generated together. For Jolinda the experience was also educational because her older sisters had applied before. They contributed their knowledge and

strategies for gaining more resources from the DSS. When Lucy and her sisters read the last few paragraphs of text, they asked me to explain their actions lest readers think they were being unscrupulous.

The amount of cash welfare recipients were granted depends on what DSS and policy makers perceived to be their basic needs. They calculated this need based on outdated and overly optimistic indexes for what average families pay for heat, rent, and personal needs. Because these costs were underestimated, welfare recipients typically ended up with little cash after rent and bills are paid. Lucy Cadens described the situation this way:

I don't know what they're calling my basic needs because the money they give you don't cover the things most people take for granted. Soap. Washing powder. Towels. Sheets. Shampoo. Deodorant. Toilet paper. Dish soap. Brooms. Garbage bags. You can't walk around nasty, and you want your house clean, but they don't consider any of these things as part of your basic need. What they take for granted, we can't, because we don't have it. I wanna tell them, "You wash your ass every morning, I'd like to wash mine too." But they don't think about that. So you try to get as much money as possible, without lying, because the system isn't helping you the way it supposed to. We're not trying to steal. We're trying to make the system work for us.

In essence, community members massaged institutional structures in an attempt to maintain what *the residents* defined as their basic needs. They manipulated the symbolic system of public service agencies even as they complied with the demands of these agencies.

Keep in mind that these two interactions were not isolated events of language socialization. Rather, these vignettes were part of intricately connected interactions occurring numerous times in various contexts that were out of earshot of institutional representatives. Without the pressure of having to perform the dominant discourse publicly, community members could refine their language skills as they exposed and critiqued the institutional structures. These sketches represent the types and kinds of acquisition and learning of privileged discourses necessary for survival when evicted.

While these interactions may reveal, at first blush, functional literacy skills, they're imbued with a critical sensibility of how public service institutions can work to limit the possibilities of individuals. Mirena presented her ability to troubleshoot forms of bias against her language use. In this way she named her oppression and its causes ("The way I talk. They'll know I'm Black"). She remained attentive to the ways racism would likely hinder her chances of even being shown an apartment. She socialized herself into the prestige dialect in an effort to affect her liberation from landlords' potential prejudices. In Jolinda's case she and her sisters troubleshooted potential biases that Jolinda could have encountered when social workers determined her basic need. They selected information in order to work toward a redefinition of her situation and needs and in doing so co-opted the symbolic system of public service agencies to their own ends. The data suggest that inner-city residents

have critical consciousness that they exercise in hidden interactions, interactions to which scholars often have not had access.

### ***Deploying Institutional Language***

As the upcoming sketch drawn from my fieldnotes and literacy artifact suggests, during gatekeeping encounters with prospective landlords, the level of discursive formality in the community members' language increased because the situation left precious little room for them to take risks with their language; even when they understood the situation to be dismissing, they realized that a bald-faced challenge to housing gatekeepers would impede their chances of finding a place. Linguistic transfer in these cases boiled down to a ruthless axiom: Use the language tools of the gatekeeping landlords or else risk homelessness.

#### **5/15/93—Deploying a Privileged Discourse with a Landlord**

Mirena and I sat together at her kitchen table looking through the classifieds of the local newspaper. We had been practicing talking White because she thought this might sound "respectable" to landlords. Mirena read to me what she had written on the back of the Chinese menu: "Yes, I'm calling about the apartment?" she read in a low voice. "How that sound?"

"Sounds just like you think you need to sound." She picked up the phone and dialed a number from one of the ads and waited for an answer.

"Yes, I'm calling in regard to the four-bedroom you have listed? Can you tell me where it's located?" She wrote the information next to the ad. "May I make an appointment with you to see the place? . . . Four will be just fine. Thank you." She hung up the phone and smiled a little at me,

"Well, there's one." When she had two more on her itinerary, we left for a quick bite of lunch, then hurried on to view the apartments.

We pulled up to an apartment house on 35th Ave., just two blocks down and one over from where she was being evicted. We got out of the car, and the landlord asked if I was Mirena. Mirena smiled, held out her hand and said, "That would be me. This is my friend, Ellen." The landlord told her about the place as we walked two flights of stairs to see it. We entered into a clean, freshly painted apartment. It had a kitchen far in the back, a bathroom just off of it, a dining room, and a large front room that overlooked parked cars and the street. "When will the place be available?" she asked the landlord after seeing the entire apartment. He told her two weeks. She asked about the utilities and verified the amount of rent and security deposit she would need. Then, hesitating, "Here's the question." Mirena took a deep breath and spoke softly: "Do you accept social assistance?"

"Certainly. I've had very good tenants on public assistance and, besides, I look at it as guaranteed money." She smiled and asked if she could apply for the place.

### **11/15/94—Defying Stereotypes with a Letter of Recommendation**

Ellen Cushman  
Ph.D. Candidate  
Nov. 15, 1994

To whom it may concern:

Please take this letter of recommendation for Ms. Cadens into consideration when deciding on her housing application. I've known Ms. Cadens for almost two years now and have found her to be just the type of conscientious and diligent homemaker who landlords seek.

I first met Ms. Cadens through a community center where I was a literacy volunteer. She was introduced to me as one of the most respected people in the neighborhood—a pillar of her community. She's lived in this neighborhood for over four years. In fact, Ms. Cadens is the only com-

munity member to have keys to the neighborhood center. She volunteers many hours to the development of improvement programs for the center including: craft-making classes, cook outs, and neighborhood watch to name a few. I'm sure her conscientious community involvement will be an asset to your area.

I'm also continually impressed by the pride Ms. Cadens takes in the maintenance and appearance of her home. Her priorities seemingly always center on the upkeep of her home—I can't count how many times I've seen her with a mop or broom in her hands. And I've often asked her to make me some of the crafts which decorate the walls. She's invested in her home much more than people in my generation (I'm a number of years younger than she). I admire and respect her abilities to provide a comfortable, clean, safe home for her children.

Unfortunately, her investment in this community and her dedication to her home has offered only diminishing returns which is why she's moving. I sincerely hope you will consider her application favorably and that this letter will help you do so. Please call me if you would like further information.

Thank you,

Ellen Cushman

Some noteworthy patterns of linguistic behavior weave through this interaction and literacy artifact. Both Mirena and Lucy crafted linguistic representations of themselves in order to sound over the phone and look on paper like the type of person they believed landlords would rent to: Mirena practiced sounding White; Lucy included letters of recommendation in addition to the other forms of verification the landlords requested. Even though both women said that using White English sounded respectable, they were not conferring a lower status to their vernacular. Instead, they

showed their recognition of the common prejudices some have against Black English. After this interaction and others, I asked them why White English was valuable to them. Mirena told me that “That’s what landlords want to hear. They want to rent to someone they recognize.” Lucy said that “It ain’t that *I* think White is more respectable than Black. But *I* think they gonna think that way.” Both women were aware that the high value they placed on their vernacular would likely conflict with the cultural assumptions of landlords. So they selected discursive and literate tools that indexed the cultural assumptions they believed the landlords had in order to present themselves in such a way that catered to landlords’ belief systems.

Part of Mirena and Lucy’s critical consciousness manifested itself in their outright refusal to internalize landlords’ value systems related to language varieties. That is, they masked their own high value of Black English in a conscious effort to obviate landlords’ partialities. Rather than internalizing the landlords’ low esteem of their linguistic heritage—as the naively conscious would do—Mirena and Lucy chose to separate their values from the landlords’. They appealed to the property owners’ predilection for recognizable tenants by going beneath the prejudices and working to make them more enabling.

Both Mirena and Lucy knew and addressed what they believed to be their linguistic needs. Mirena practiced her lines by literally reading them off a script she wrote for herself before delivering them in the interaction; and

Lucy knew that landlords would need to see other sides of her as a renter, so she asked other people to represent her in letters to the landlords. Recommendations served as one means for legitimizing oneself to gatekeepers. Housing applications and all of the verifications they required left little room for the applicant to create a status for herself. Verifications from DSS certified the type and amount of social service benefit or public assistance they received. And these verifications earmarked a class status that often stigmatized the applicant; housing ads in newspapers frequently stated “AFDC [Aid to Families with Dependent Children, or welfare] and Section 8 need not apply.” Their rental history, if the landlord checked, usually turned up pasts besmirched with evictions. Letters of recommendation, though, augmented and offset the other representations of the self that housing applications required. Because these literate artifacts *had to* accompany their applications, they are interesting: Someone with a different class standing typically fills out one application alone for an apartment. Letters of recommendation helped residents construct and present their varied subjective positions.

Lucy gathered letters of recommendation to complicate the reductive assessments of her applications. When she asked for the letter of recommendation, she said, “Just so they can’t blow me off as a welfare queen.” Here Lucy challenged landlords’ construction of her position by representing herself through the use of other literacy artifacts. While she adapted herself to struc-

tures of domination that required her to verify the legitimacy of her application, she complicated this process by presenting multiple aspects of her identity that defied landlords' easy categorization of her as a welfare queen.

In short, community residents practiced the art of subterfuge when facing gatekeepers, an art that attempted to conceal their liabilities and evade negative assessments. Some readers will want to read these examples as watered-down versions of real resistance. However, "Any argument which assumes that disguised ideological dissent or aggression operates as a safety valve to weaken 'real' resistance ignores the paramount fact that such ideological dissent is virtually always expressed in practices that aim at an unobtrusive renegotiation of power relations" (Scott, 1990, p. 190). Linguistic transfer, then, had to be shaped in order to appear to landlords as familiar and unobtrusive. Both Mirena and Lucy renegotiated the terms of their power relations with landlords without drawing attention to the fact that they were doing so. The mask of compliance they wore may lead some critical theorists to believe they suffered from ideological domination, but such an assessment would be viewing only the mask and not the face behind it. Once again, the data cast doubt on critical pedagogues' central assumption of false consciousness.

### ***Evaluating Language Skills***

Despite their linguistic efforts to find a place, Mirena and Lucy often met with unyielding institutional representatives,

foot-dragging, and prejudice, even from people within the community. The more gatekeeping interactions went awry, the more they assessed and weighed their language skills. Gatekeeping interactions rarely went as planned, no matter how much thought community members put into their language use. This inability to meet gatekeepers' expectations led them to assess the usefulness of their strategies and also to assess the larger social and political context that confounded their attempts to get up and out of the ghetto.

As the upcoming sketches drawn from my fieldnotes suggest, in their metadiscursive assessments evidence of critical awareness and resistance manifested itself as they critiqued specific features of institutional language. Their hidden discourses show what Gee (1989) might call metaknowledge, seeing how the "discourses you have already relate to those you are attempting to acquire, and how the ones you are trying to acquire relate to self and society" (p. 13). In the private oral and literate activities of area residents, critical consciousness became apparent and enacted their agency, for as Gee argued, "Metaknowledge is liberation and power, because it leads to the ability to manipulate, to analyze, to resist while advancing" (p. 13). Area residents' metadiscursive critiques revealed their understanding of the political maneuverings that they were both implicated in and challenging. Thus, residents' counter-hegemonic ideologies appeared throughout their daily linguistic activities.

### **6/24/93—Evaluating Linguistic Strategies**

Mirena happened into the neighborhood center, almost three weeks after she had been evicted from her apartment. Talking to me about her most recent interactions with landlords, she said, “You gotta be slick cause telling them the truth won’t get you no place. Sometimes you have to lie to get around shit. . . .”

“So are you still telling them that you wanted to move off of 34th Ave. because of the stray bullet through your window?” Not five weeks before I had stuck my finger in the hole, small, maybe the work of a .22.

“I was for a while. Telling them that and that I wanted to go back to school.”

“But there’s still a certain amount of truth to that, right? I mean you were talking about going back to school way back in February when everything was still OK.”

“But see, it weren’t getting me nowhere and I gotta’ get a place soon. So now I say: ‘Hello, I’m in a bind. I’m separated from my family and without a place to live, can you tell what my chances are of getting into your apartment?’”

### **7/17/93—Weighing the Power of Language**

Mirena, Kasha (16), and I were sitting on the front stoop of Kasha’s mom’s apartment building. Mirena and Kasha had just come from visiting an apartment in South Quayville (the Irish and Italian working-class neighborhood).

“That looked pretty good, I thought,” Kasha said to Mirena.

“I ain’t gonna get that place. And it was nice too.”

“Why not?” Kasha furrowed her brow.

“Didn’t you see? Them four people sitting on the stoop? Every one, all of them, White?”

“Yeah, but you sounded just as good as them.”

“Don’t make a bit of difference to them how I sound. I still Black, and they ain’t even gonna call me back. You wait. You’ll see.” Two days later I found out from Mirena that she had called the landlord back and was told he already rented the place.

### **11/25/94—Demystifying the Power of Regulations**

The entire five-month period that Lucy spent looking for housing, she carried with her all of the important documents she would need to complete applications, all tucked into an accordion file folder that she clutched when we went into rental offices. In this folder, she kept: birth certificates, previous rental agreements, verifications of funding, references, blank forms to be filled out by the new landlords for HUD benefits, her current applications for places, a few “move-in special” coupons from the newspaper, previous utility bills, and budget statements from the utility companies. Anything related to a source of income, housing arrangement, and vital identification documents she kept in her file. This was her literacy tool chest to unlock bureaucracies’ doors. “What gets me is that HUD, DSS and all them could fax each other these things instead of making me run around like a damn fool.”

She brought her file into one apartment complex’s rental office. We sat in front of the manager of the office, who said, “So, you have your application, verification forms, good. References, oh, nice. About your HUD, do you have a voucher or certificate?” Lucy looked at him like a deer frozen in an oncoming car’s headlights.

“I have the verification of benefits. Isn’t it there? Did I forget it?”

“Well, I’m looking for your voucher or certificate.”

“I’m not sure what the difference is. But I’ll call HUD and see what I have. I can get that to you in two days.”

“Well, I’ll hold the place for you.” As Lucy and I walked to the car she said, “Couldn’t he just pick up the fucking phone and call over there?”

We called the HUD office and found out, first, that Lucy had a voucher to receive HUD funding, not a certificate, an important difference. The voucher guarantees that Section 8 will be paid in the county in which the recipient currently resides. The certificate, though, is the E ticket of HUD funding. It allows the recipient to move across county and state lines, and still be

guaranteed his/her Section 8 funding. On the phone Lucy asked, "Can I just get you to fax these forms? It's really hard for me to get around without a car." They said they couldn't do this because the place she wanted to move into was outside of their county, so she would have to go to the HUD office in another county and ask them to fax it to the apartment complex, even though her case was still in the her local county office. Since Lucy only had a voucher for Section 8, she had to live in a new county for one month before she could get a voucher in that county. Lucy explained this all to me after she hung up the phone. "Don't they get you? How I gonna move in the first place without my voucher? They all got me coming and going."

Mirena and Lucy used their metacommunicative tools to judge the utility of certain language strategies: Mirena understood that her first tries at finding housing were meeting with failure, so she changed her approach; Lucy assessed the ways other people used their language to uphold regulations. Their assessments reveal their understandings of the politics of language — what words can or cannot do, how they are valued, by whom, and in what contexts. Mirena said, "Don't make a bit of difference to them how I sound. I still Black, and they ain't even gonna call me back. You wait. You'll see." She recognized the ways certain landlords looked for certain types of tenants—she knew that apartment would go to someone else. Lucy commented on her lack of linguistic knowledge. When the landlord asked, "About your HUD, do you have a voucher or certificate?" Lucy replied, "I'm not sure what the difference is." With this attention to what she did not know, Lucy settled on a way to

find out the information she needed. "But I'll call HUD and see what I have." When she researched the meaning and differences between vouchers and certificates, Lucy encountered an obstacle that temporarily prohibited her from moving to another county; the voucher did not transfer. Her metacommunicative assessment of the language she needed to know led her to research and uncover a policy of which she was not aware, a policy that left her temporarily blocked from moving out of the ghetto. Mirena and Lucy both used metacommunicative assessments of the language in gatekeeping interactions to name the political aspects of their gatekeeping encounters.

In these instances metacommunicative commentaries on their interactions revealed their understandings of the politics present in gatekeepers' language and policies. Mirena uncovered the prejudices that reinforced segregated housing practices in Quayville. She also conceptualized her place within this prejudicial system in ways that helped a teen see a larger unjust social order in which sounding White did not necessarily compensate for racism. Mirena did find a place to live but in another section of Quayville's predominantly Black neighborhood. Lucy questioned the normative discourse of HUD that differentiated between vouchers and certificates, asking, "How am I going to move in the first place?" For Lucy the question sought opportunity in the apparently constraining discourse of the institutional policy. She spent the next two months researching ways out of and around this

discourse and eventually found a way to transfer her voucher to another county.

## Discussion

### *Institutional Language*

What do these results reveal about institutional language skills and their implication for critical theory and practice? First and foremost, literacy was central to area residents' daily lives, especially when they were faced with the hardships of eviction. The applications, letters, and verifications represented these women's agency: their continued fight to work within the public institutions to find opportunity when confronted with constraints. Every turn of phrase, every blank filled in, every letter, represented a carefully weighed appeal. Community members honed and refined their vernacular language tools in a cyclical process. The development of institutional language skills came about in three ways:

1. Community members learned institutional language skills, deployed them in gatekeeping interactions and revamped them according to the outcomes;
2. Community members deployed their language skills in institutional exchanges, assessed these, and then socialized themselves into institutional language skills;
3. When community members assessed and revamped their institutional language skills, they socialized those around them in the oral and literate tools that could then be deployed in future gatekeeping encounters.

Each phase in the process (acquiring, transferring, and evaluating) was informed by the other two. Further, institutional language was found in both oral and literate forms in a variety of contexts. Each of these phases of the development of institutional language skills revealed numerous linguistic abilities, abilities that have been "easily and frequently talked about" rather than examined (Heath, 1988, p. 370).

One is struck by the sheer tenacity of the women in this neighborhood to use institutional language in order to do right by themselves and their children, even under, or especially because of, the tremendous odds they faced. Mirena was homeless for three months. She and Kateesha stayed in Mirena's boyfriend's studio apartment; Richard and Samson stayed with Mirena's friend; and Upstate was arrested in late June and went to prison for eighteen months. Lucy spent five months looking for housing once she received her eviction notice. Still, these women managed to get up in the morning, call landlords and caseworkers, wait in line, and talk to people they thought might help them out. They practiced daily what to say and write in order to find opportunity despite the ideological presumptions of gatekeepers. To negotiate institutional influences, residents developed meaning-making techniques that included the ability to question the language used in documents, to read selectively for information necessary in order to circumvent a problem, and to determine the power structure of situations and institutions from contextualization cues and texts.

## ***Critical Literacy and Institutional Language***

By locating these institutional literacy events in the often unseen symbolic systems of community residents, I have tried to show how these individuals constructed the power relations between themselves and wider society's organizations and how through these constructions they developed politically strategic plans and skills to move through daily institutional influences in both accommodating and resistant ways. Residents used institutional language skills to counter the taken-for-granted nature of their daily material and ideological struggles with public service agents. Broadly speaking, institutional language includes the oral, literate, and analytical tactics that community members learned, deployed, and revised over long periods of time and across numerous institutional contexts. The domination of language emerges in the written and oral communication gatekeepers used, such as interviews, applications, verification forms, letters, or phone calls. When area residents engaged the language of domination, they teased out the underlying values, critiqued these beliefs, and chose ways to complicate them linguistically. They rehearsed their lines in order to perform the public transcript, even though their hidden transcripts revealed their anti-hegemonic beliefs. Mirena and Lucy may appear to conform uncritically to landlords' values, but they actually shaped their language in order to make this appearance. In their attempts to obviate the attitudes they saw in

gatekeeping exchanges, they honed their linguistic performances to create the illusion of consent to authority.

These language events also offer an understanding of just how politically strategic institutional language can be. To be well-versed in the politics of institutional language, in short, means that a person must use a variety of abilities:

- Constructing power relations between oneself and others, particularly institutional representatives;
- Determining how institutional agents will receive information and selecting information accordingly;
- Developing plans and skills to obviate unwelcome institutional influences;
- Naming the assumptions underpinning the actions of public servants;
- Using language persuasively in trans-institutional contexts;
- Forming questions needed to uncover the reasons behind institutional procedures;
- Locating oneself within larger social and historical forces;
- Evaluating language strategies and refining them accordingly;
- Uncovering tensions and paradoxes within institutional procedures.

The institutional language skills that area residents learned, deployed, and revamped represented the cultural logic of their hidden ideologies. Not only did they apply a variety of their language skills across multiple sites, but also they translated institutional language for

other community members. For instance, Mirena discussed with a teen the reason why using a privileged discourse may not be enough to overcome a history of racism; and Jolinda's sisters, both of whom were familiar with institutional language, helped her with her welfare application. Individuals appreciated the oral and literate devices needed to access public services. They esteemed these linguistic tools, not because they believed in the ideologies of institutions but because they believed that strong individuals provide for their families. They negotiated institutions with the critical awareness of when to use institutional language and for what purposes. In these instances they deployed oral and literate devices that both placated and resisted gatekeepers' demands.

Interestingly, the institutional language skills residents cultivated were based on their understandings of how institutional policies did and did not work. Residents believed these policies could be both enabling and constraining depending upon how they and gatekeepers negotiated these structures. In this way their thinking resonates with Giddens's (1979) idea of structuration, which "rejects any differentiation of synchrony and diachrony or static and dynamics. The identification of structure with constraint is also rejected: structure is both enabling and constraining" (p. 69). Residents believed that power inheres in structures because these structures could provide opportunity depending upon how gatekeepers chose to uphold policies. When

Lucy became snared in a seemingly unyielding HUD policy for transferring vouchers, she understood herself to be in a Catch-22. The Section 8 voucher should have enabled her to move, but the policy for transferring the voucher from one county to another constrained her opportunity. In that instance Lucy recognized that "They all got me coming and going." But in the instance where she and her sisters reflected on their process of completing the DSS application, Lucy recognized that the structures could be made more enabling through language. She and her sisters pushed at the definition of basic needs in order to make the system work for them. Trucking in the privileged discourse of institutions, as residents did, became one tool for negotiating with gatekeepers in ways that made these institutional policies more enabling, less constraining. In complicating and replicating social structures with their language, residents played a deep and subtle political game, one that too often goes unnoticed in the work of prominent critical pedagogues (e.g., Giroux, 1996; McLaren, 1989, 1996; McLaren & Hammer, 1996).

## **Implications**

In revealing the tension between the public and hidden transcripts of literacy events in this inner city, some readers will want to praise one form of politics over the other as indicative of their brand of resistance. Some may also read these transcripts as mutually exclusive texts. Both positions would have to overlook the dialogic nature of daily

political interactions. The public and hidden transcripts intertwine and coexist in mutual dependence. The critical awareness that imbues individuals' daily activities allows them to problematize persistently oral and literate language uses that some would view as rudimentary or pedestrian. Knowing the hidden ideologies attendant upon the public linguistic skills of community members, outsiders should be much less likely to label individuals as having false consciousness. Critical awareness rests under the surface of seemingly complacent behavior. With this assumption, researchers can investigate oppressive conditions in ways that respectfully seek and describe community residents' oppositional ideologies.

As this research suggests, the disadvantage that community members faced had more to do with the ideologies and language use of gatekeepers than it did with lack of literate or critical ability on their parts. Some readers may find little surprise in these results but may instead see them as typical of the kinds of long-standing rhetorical sophistication in African American culture. One would think that with the linguistic traditions of African Americans as well documented as they are (Baugh, 1983; Heath, 1983, 1988; Kernan, 1972; Labov, 1969, 1972; Smitherman, 1977), critical pedagogues would hesitate in referring to the oppressed in wholesale terms as the falsely conscious. But their lack of appreciation for the critical agency of disadvantaged people is the problem: Many critical pedagogues globally apply their post-

Marxist machinery in ways that erase the particulars of a population's linguistic and social heritage. Critical theorists should be held accountable for identifying exactly whom they refer to when they say "the oppressed."

This work should give pause to the numerous critical pedagogues who adopt the notion of false consciousness. While space does not permit an exploration of the following, serious questions manifest themselves in light of these findings.

*How can critical scholars more accurately characterize "the oppressed"?*

If it is no longer safe to assume that all (or any) of the oppressed are naively conscious, then researchers need to create more accurate portrayals of specific groups' anti-hegemonic emic systems and linguistic practices. The need for these portrayals might mean that critical pedagogues need access to those they seek to serve.

*What types of social action does critical awareness lead to?*

Individuals in this inner city had critical awareness that led to strategic language use before, during, and after interactions in asymmetrical contexts. This work suggests, then, that collective action and sweeping social change do not necessarily result from critical awareness. Rather, it appears that critical awareness leads to practice with, careful deployment of, and reflection on privileged discourses in an effort to effect local changes in particular lived conditions. If these changes seem to be

small, then perhaps critical theory needs to balance its end goals with daily lived means of resistance.

### ***To which populations is critical theory and practice best aimed?***

Since individuals in marginalized social groups may have critical literacy practices that remain hidden, then critical literacy theories and practices may need to be redirected toward those who have the luxury to forget or isolate themselves from social injustices and to those who could be future gatekeepers.

### ***What curriculum would be suited for underserved individuals who have critical consciousness?***

Community members like Mirena and Lucy would benefit little from a curriculum that would help them read the world in the word. A curriculum designed to meet their needs might consider teaching them how to write grants in order to operate the Neighborhood Center on their own or might help them prepare for and succeed in law school so that they can fight evictions, slum lords, and segregation in court. These types of curricula may respond more directly to ameliorating social issues that inner-city residents deem important.

### ***What methods allow critical scholars to characterize more accurately the ideology of oppressed groups?***

If anti-hegemonic belief systems manifest themselves in the hidden transcripts of daily politics, it behooves critical scholars to develop methods that gain them access to these language practices

and beliefs. With the advent of activist research, critical scholars have one means to better align their theories with their methods.

### ***What does a critical theory and practice look like when it is based on the assumption that the oppressed have critical consciousness?***

If indeed the oppressed have anti-hegemonic ideologies and language practices as these findings suggest, then fundamental assumptions of critical pedagogy stand in need of recalibration. If critical pedagogues begin their work with the belief that those they seek to serve have critical awareness, then critical pedagogues might find ways to use their status to forward the goals of individuals. They could find ways to justify their theoretical frameworks against everyday lived experiences, creating more accurate portrayals of hegemony.

These questions should not be viewed as a dismantling of the work of critical pedagogues. Instead, they should help redirect and embellish critical theories and practices so that they can be even more relevant to the particular needs and issues marginalized individuals face. This report focuses on a particular kind of critical theory and pedagogy in the United States that is associated with researchers who have updated Freire's (1971) original model while relying on the assertion that oppressed people are naively conscious. The goal of this work has been to present the oral, literate, and analytical strategies inner-city residents developed in light of their oppositional ideologies. The greatest strength of this work, then,

rests in the variety of stories, accounts, vignettes, and case analyses gathered from the perspective of inner-city residents. The scope of this research, however, did not include an accounting of macro-scale changes in institutional ideology, nor can it exemplify social change resulting from micro interactions with institutional gatekeepers. While the topic of social change deserves further study, this article centers on the oral, literate, and analytical skills residents brought to bear in their daily

lives. The nuances of everyday literacy and political life in this inner city show that residents both complied with and resisted a system that did not always recognize and thus serve their interests. The goal-directed, strategic processes of both their compliance and resistance illustrate their sophisticated use of critical literacy and suggest the need for researchers to come into more direct contact with those whose lives they seek to report and uplift.

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