

Judges' Commentary on "Navigating Discourses"

by

Suci Madjidji

**"Navigating Discourses" received an Honorable Mention
in the University of Pittsburgh's
2009/10 Composition Program Writing Contest**

One of the longstanding binaries of composition pedagogy implies that "personal" and "academic" writing are founded in contrary, even mutually exclusive, discourses: the former natural, static and private; the latter learned, flexible and public. One of the ambitions of the Pitt approach to teaching composition is to complicate that equation in provocative and productive ways, in part by suggesting that personal experiences constitute a reservoir of "textual" material that lends itself to interrogation in much the same way that published textual material does; and by suggesting further that a writer can use published material, the currency of the academy, as an instrument to renegotiate her understanding of what previously appeared to be a static matter of autobiographical fact.

Suci Madjidji's project in this essay is a good example of such a process of reflexive interrogation. The essay was written in response to a "literacy autobiography" assignment that asked her to "re-view" a personal narrative, written earlier in the term, "as a text;" that is, to consider it "not just as a record of your personal experiences but as the history of an individual learner moving through a *system*; to treat it not just as your own story but also as *a story of your culture*. . . to see your literacy education not just from the distance of adulthood but also from the distance of a 'meta-knowledge' (or 'consciousness') gained from a secondary discourse."

She begins with specific reference to her own silence in the classroom, one that, prior to this writing, she had seen as rooted in a set of failures residing entirely in the context of autobiography and identity. It is through her intellectual engagement with the assigned authors, James Gee and Lisa Delpit, that she can "reflect on [her] experiences" and begin to understand the role discourses, as

cultural vehicles, play in shaping both autobiography and identity. Madjidji uses these texts to help her grapple with a series of troubling questions about her high school classmates, her family and herself, building an interrogative method into the fabric of her argument. As a result of this work, this intellectual work, Madjidji is, in the end, able not just to discuss and contend with Gee and Delpit, but also to recast for herself the meaning of her mother's advice to her, in the eighth grade, about speaking up in school and, as a consequence of that, to strive to alter her current behavior in the classroom in order to "make [her] presence known." Her willingness to explore her experience fully, to ask and attempt to answer challenging questions, made her essay stand out as a provocative and valuable piece of writing.

To read the full text of Suci Madjidji's essay, [click here](#)