Constructive texts: Theory, practice, and the "self" in composition

Deborah Lynne Hodgkins

University of New Hampshire, Durham

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.unh.edu/dissertation

Recommended Citation

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Doctoral Dissertations by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact nicole.hentz@unh.edu.
INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

UMI
A Bell & Howell Information Company
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor MI 48106-1346 USA
313/761-4700 800/521-0600

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
This dissertation has been examined and approved.

Patricia A. Sullivan
Dissertation Director, Patricia A. Sullivan
Associate Professor of English

Elizabeth J. Bellamy, Associate Professor of English

Diane P. Freedman, Associate Professor of English

Thomas R. Newkirk, Professor of English

Paula M. Salvio, Associate Professor of Education

August 5, 1991
Date
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, especially my parents and sister, for whose love, confidence, and unquestioning support I am especially grateful, and to my husband, Ron LeVasseur, whose patience has proven he is in this for the long haul.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank the department of English at the University of New Hampshire, particularly my dissertation committee members Jane Bellamy, Diane Freedman, Tom Newkirk, and Paula Salvio of the Education department. Special thanks go to my committee director, Pat Sullivan, for her belief in the merit of my project and for her long term support and encouragement. I would also like to thank past and present members of the English department’s dissertation workshop, particularly Susan Schibanoff, whose gift of her time makes this community possible.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .......................................................................................................... iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .................................................................................... iv

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................... viii

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. READING AND WRITING THE &quot;SELF&quot; IN COMPOSITION AND AMERICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmodernism</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmodern Theory and Composition Scholarship</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Context</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Context</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmodern Theory and Autobiography</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. THEORY AND PRACTICE: SECRET (AND NOT SO SECRET) AGENTS IN THE TEXT/CULTURE</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autobiographical Criticism and Scholarship</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Personal and the Political, or, Rhetoric, Poetics, and Experience</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Personal and the Academic</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

Constructive Texts: Theory, Practice and the "Self" in Composition

by

Deborah L. Hodgkins
University of New Hampshire, September, 1998

The influence of postmodern theory on studies in composition and rhetoric has led to important questions for the teaching of writing: In light of after postmodernism, what role does/should theory play in classroom practice and how can it best inform pedagogy? In writing and in the world at large, how do we define and where do we locate agency?

I argue that the goal of composition courses should be to help students learn to use discourse to represent the interests of themselves and others and effect change in a postmodern world—to become active citizens by becoming better rhetoricians. In order to achieve such goals teachers of writing need to develop practices that give more productive attention to the issue of subjective agency in college writing and beyond. Agency—the capacity to recognize and negotiate existing power relations and use discourse
to act in the world on behalf of oneself and others—is not possible without attention to our understanding of the "self" or the "identity" of the writer.

All writing, however academic or transactional, has an autobiographical component. In an effort to characterize and extend our understanding of the connection between a writerly self and public agency in both theory and practice, this dissertation explores autobiography as both a genre and a methodology in the composition classroom. Through the results of my experience teaching a second-year composition course focused on the relation between academic and personal writing, I argue for the importance of narrative in critical pedagogy.

Our most pressing task is that of reenvisioning the relationship between theory and practice in a way that acknowledges how we both write and are written. While critical theory has created a crisis of agency, it also provides us with tools for understanding how our selves, as well as culture, are constructs always in process. Rhetoric can help us and our students productively negotiate an ethical relationship between discourse and lived experience, and use writing to take action in the world.
Chapter One

Reading and Writing the "Self"
in Composition and American Autobiography

Nothing goes by luck in composition. It allows no tricks. The best you can write will be the best you are. Every sentence is the result of a long probation. The author's character is read from title page to end.

Henry David Thoreau, Selected Journals

... writing is the destruction of every voice, every origin. Writing is that neuter, that composite, that obliquity into which our writing subject flees, the black-and-white where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes.

Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author"

Contemporary critical theory has devoted much attention to the relationship between discourse and conventional notions of the "self," or subject. In contrast to the traditional liberal humanist notion of the autonomous, essential self, "postmodern" theory regards the self (or subject in discourse) as a social construct, a product of language and ideology. The differences which separate these two perspectives (generalizations which subsume many views, to be sure, but useful ones for looking at work in composition) have far reaching consequences for notions of agency and the subject who both reads and writes. In the manner of such American traditions as the free-thinking intellectual and the rugged individualist, liberal
humanism and literary modernism have posited the self, as Thoreau does above, as a unique individual capable of autonomously generating ideas or representing that self in writing. By contrast postmodernism, as Barthes demonstrates, declares this notion of the author to be a myth; a "subject in discourse" can only be a "function" of language which does not refer to any identity, any author outside the text.¹

In this dissertation I examine the significant implications this conflict has for the teaching of composition, the site at which theory about discourse directly encounters practice, the act of writing. Confronting postmodern and poststructuralist challenges to our assumptions about what we do when we read and write has led to valuable growth in knowledge for the field of composition. But as such theory exerted more and more influence in the 1980s and early 1990s, a dichotomous, either/or type of thinking, which treats the above perspectives as irreconcilable opposites, also developed and posed serious problems for both teachers and students of writing, particularly through the way such thinking challenged the very possibility of subjective agency. Through an analysis of the most recent efforts to negotiate an appropriate relationship between critical theory and the teaching of composition, I will

¹ See Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," and Michel Foucault, "What is an Author" in Power/Knowledge.
demonstrate that an "both/and" approach to these notions of the self is not only possible, but necessary. I will argue that postmodern theory, rather than creating the problem, actually offers a partial solution when applied to the act of writing--and the experience of writers--in a postmodern historical situation. Such theory is about both/and--about opening up rather than limiting possibilities for meaning--and offers ways of addressing issues of difference and agency in the writing classroom and community beyond as we approach the 21st Century.

Another, and I would argue related, dichotomy must also be addressed, however, if such promise is to be realized. Efforts to defend the important role of composition within English studies and "legitimize" composition as it has emerged as a scholarly field within the university have led to an ironic conflict between scholarship and teaching. It is both in spite of and because of composition's status as the area of English studies that is most devoted to pedagogy that there remains a persistent, awkward opposition between theory and practice in composition scholarship. Some in the field, such as Maxine Hairston and Kurt Spellmeyer, argue that the influence of postmodernism, post-structuralism, and cultural studies in composition scholarship simply represents the need of some scholars to be seen doing work that is as theoretical
and rigorous as their colleagues in literature (a move in a different direction than the earlier trend toward empirical scientific research to be sure, but with similar hopes of gains in academic regard). And to a degree, such criticisms have merit. Others, such as Marshall Gregory, contend that "Literature's power to inform life, and even to help correct it, is incalculably greater" (50) than "the many-headed hydra of theory" (44). But I would argue that there is much to be learned from studies of discourse and culture that can help inform the theory behind our teaching. All teaching is informed by theory, and the better articulated that theory is, the clearer the purposes of our work in the classroom will be to our students.

More than a decade ago Robert Scholes dedicated his book *Textual Power* to articulating how "theory can help us solve curricular and pedagogical problems" and "how teaching can help theory pose and elaborate those problems" in all areas of English studies" (ix). He argued that "Post-structuralist theory offers us an extremely sophisticated and powerful set of procedures" for bringing the assumptions underlying our teaching "out in the open for scrutiny" (xi). And many scholars have answered Scholes' call to shift "from a curriculum oriented toward a literary canon toward a curriculum in textual studies" (ix-x). But applications of such theory to the concerns of the classroom have led to few
demonstrations of resulting pedagogy and classroom experience, a fact that is perhaps not surprising given the persistence, as Scholes notes, of the attitude within English departments that composition is "pseudo-non-literature," "stuff" which is "produced in an appalling volume" (Scholes 6). A pervasive sense of opposition between theory and practice remains to be fully acknowledged and productively negotiated.

Postmodernism

At present, we live and work in the historical situation of postmodernity. Modernism, as a historical era and philosophy of being has drawn to a close and lost its explanatory force. Albert Borgmann describes how "Toward the end of this century, realism, universalism, and individualism have become the subjects of withering critiques. Although the modern project still drifts ahead as a political and economic movement, it has lost its theoretical confidence and credibility" (5). In Borgmann's terms we have reached, and are negotiating the crossing of, "the postmodern divide" (4). How best to negotiate this crossing remains in question, but any successful efforts will require understanding the forces at work in the present moment. These forces, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson point out, are ones which defy traditional enlightenment and
liberal humanist world views:

This historical situation is characterized by the global reach of late commodity capitalism, the widespread bureaucratization of all aspects of corporate life, the shift to electronic communications networks that are altering notions of time and space, the condition of "cultural asymmetries," and the interrogation of received concepts of a universal, rational, and autonomous humanist self. (3)

The discourse of modernity, which Borgmann characterizes as "prediction and control"—persists, but "fails to inspire conviction or yield insight" (2). Among the results of the crisis of modernity are what Borgmann characterizes as "sullenness," and "hyperactivity." Attempts to find comfort and stability in prediction and control have led to a kind of "hypermodernism," which "is devoted to the design of a technologically sophisticated and glamorously unreal universe, distinguished by its hyperreality, hyperactivity, and hyper-intelligence." According to Borgmann, "Hypermodernism derives much of its energy from its supposed alternative, a sullen resignation to the decline of the modern era, a sullenness that is palpable, particularly in this country" (6).

Modernism's dismantling of communal sensibility, coupled with the development of consumer economy, has also resulted in what Philip Cushman, in his history of psychotherapy and the self in America, has called "the empty self . . . which is characterized by a
pervasive sense of personal emptiness and is committed to the values of self-liberation through consumption" (6). Hence the postmodern condition, at least in the U.S., can be described (in necessarily oversimplified terms) as the paradoxical and ironic situation of a self-obsessed culture composed of alienated, empty selves.

I use the term *postmodern theory* to refer to critical theory that attends to the description and analysis of postmodern culture; the work of poststructuralist philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva, who have influenced literary and cultural theory in English departments and other disciplines; and the scholarship of others such as Bakhtin (discourse theory) and Althusser (Marxist/cultural theory, ideology) whose work, although "prior" to postmodernism, is routinely invoked in discussions of postmodern culture and discourse labeled diversely as critical, postmodern, or just "theory." The most definable character of postmodernism is its elusiveness to definition. Indeed, one of the most simultaneously unsettling and liberating features of postmodernism is its rejection of the simple dichotomies and categorical thinking necessary to definition. As Lester Faigley points out, "When it can be defined, the

---

2 See, for example, Steven Conner, *Postmodernist Culture* and Andrew Ross, *Universal Abandon: The Politics of Postmodernism.*
provocativeness of postmodernism will have long since ended" (4).

Like compositionists John Clifford and John Schilb, I invoke the broader term critical theory "to indicate various strands of contemporary thinking that have influenced literary studies, including deconstruction, hermeneutics, postmodernism, feminism, neo-Marxism, neopragmatism, psychoanalysis, reader-response, and cultural studies" (Clifford and Schilb 1). Critical theory "has the virtue of signaling a preoccupation of all these schools: critique of current discursive practices and social structures" (1-2). My primary interest lies in what the intersections between these theoretical approaches can offer practice. If postmodernism, as Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon note, "has problematized the very notion of representation" (193), how do we address the problem of representing the "self" or "subject"--the site where theory and practice must come together--in discourse in contemporary times?

If our goal is to help our students learn to use discourse actively to represent the interests of themselves and others and effect change in a postmodern world--to become better rhetoricians--I argue that developing pedagogical practices in the writing classroom that give more productive attention to the issue of subjective agency in college writing and beyond must be part of this process. Agency--the capacity to recognize and negotiate
existing power relations and use discourse to act in the world on behalf of oneself and others—is not a possibility without some attention to our understanding of the "self" or the "identity" of the writer.

In *Writing and Sense of Self: Identity Negotiation in Writing Workshops*, Robert Brooke states:

Learning to write meaningfully in our culture requires developing an understanding of the self as writer, as someone who uses writing to further personal thinking and to help solve public problems. The development of such a role, such a self-understanding, is more important than developing any set of procedural competencies. Developing such a role, however, depends crucially on connecting the role of self as writer with other roles in the culture at large—including roles for the self as reflective thinker and community influencer. (5)

Such self-reflexive connections between roles mark the origins of rhetorical agency, of using language in a self-conscious way in order to achieve effects. Such agency could be said to have a number of levels, beginning with making such connections between roles for the self in culture, moving into the development of a reflexive consciousness of history, culture, and discourse as well as the determining force of each, and ending with writing that intervenes in public and political matters.

Contrary to the beliefs of many in the field of composition, pedagogy influenced by critical theory--including
postmodern/poststructuralist theory, and the "counterdisciplinary domain" of cultural studies for which postmodernity opened the way (Natoli and Hutcheon viii)—does not preclude such attention to the "self" of the writer. By the same token, however, pedagogy that encourages the writing of personal narratives does not necessarily minimize attention to the social, cultural, and historical situatedness of all writing and the writing self, nor must it eschew influence by postmodern theories of discourse and culture. In an effort to characterize and perhaps extend our understanding of the connection between the writerly self and public agency in both theory and practice, this dissertation explores autobiography as both a genre and a methodology in the composition classroom.

Postmodern Theory and Composition Scholarship

Much work over the last ten years has attended to the implications that postmodern and poststructuralist theory has for composition. For example, Susan Miller's book *Rescuing the Subject: A Critical Introduction to Rhetoric and the Writer* (1989) takes a historical look at how "specifically written discourse originates" in an effort to suggest how we might "rescue a concept of the 'subject' or 'author' of writing from its currently precarious theoretical and philosophical place" (3). Her 1991 publication *Textual Carnivals:*
The Politics of Composition, more specifically, offers a ground breaking analysis of the "subject" of composition—in all meanings of the word "subject," from the history of the field to its students and teachers--within the university. Drawing from Foucault's studies of power, and the work of other cultural theorists, Miller uses Bakhtin's notion of "carnival" as the site of the "low," and that which is outside of discipline where cultural conventions may be resisted, to describe the marginalized position of composition in the academy and to argue for its potential as site for change because of this same marginal status. She indicts composition as a field for serving the maintenance and reproduction of culture rather than providing students with the possibility of achieving agency through language:

Beyond excellent descriptions of actions taken by writers, the emerging discipline of composition has not given direct attention to assuring that student writers will be empowered by writing. Few studies either address the multiple identities that successful students must assume or test instruction against its results. Although a great deal of research now in progress examines the cultural and social influences that constrain and enable any writer's writing, it is clear that the pedagogical urgency that reorganized composition studies in the 1970's has been replaced by other results of this reorganization. Much "research" explains writing as a field, but not as an action by student writers. (200)
Miller concludes that developing composition courses that teach the relation of discourse to power, "the politics of writing," marks the route for changing the "intransitive" subjective status of both the student of composition and the field itself (201). While I do not agree with all of the failings she finds in the teaching of composition, I share her sense of urgency for teaching writing as an action. Pedagogy which does not address writing as production, as the deliberate generation of a text intended to do something, to have effects, runs the risk of leaving students in a naive and/or passive position. At worst, such an approach gives students the message that the purpose of writing is the correct completion of academic tasks, tasks which require attentive acquiescence to prescribed forms without demonstrating any use for these forms in the student's life beyond the classroom.

A number of scholars have offered provocative critiques of current work in composition theory and pedagogy in light of questions and concerns about the nature of the subject and discourse raised by critical theory, and the questions of politics raised by the situation of teaching writing in a postmodern age. *Contending With Words: Composition and Rhetoric in a Postmodern Age* (1991), edited by Patricia Harkin and John Schilb, is one of several collection of essays that apply postmodern thought, including feminism, neo-
Marxist theories, the historiography of Michel Foucault, and cultural criticism, to the concerns of composition theorists and teachers. John Clifford, in an essay which directly addresses "The Subject in Discourse," foregrounds the way that poststructuralism "decenters writing as well as the self" and positions the subject through language (40). As Clifford persuasively argues, however, a pedagogy informed by such theory can actually confuse students less and empower them more than traditional methods which, in their emphasis on policing texts for correctness, leave "the status of the 'I' that 'writes' . . . so decentered, so alienated from actual experience that many students have as much emotional identification with their school writing as they do with geometry" (48). Caught between the conflicting cultural messages that writing in school is about imitation and correctness while "real writers" freely create original texts, students are left with little opportunity to position themselves within discourse. My experience as a teacher that confirms that "Without the awareness of ideological struggle that comes from trying to intervene into academic conversations, students remain confused about the purpose of composition studies" (Clifford 47).

In his essay, "Michel Foucault's Rhetorical Theory," Bruce Herzberg also proposes that "Foucault's theory of discourse
contributes much needed elaboration to the idea of rhetoric as a function of discourse communities" (77). Noting that "Composition has long been dominated by a view of language which Foucault rejects," Herzberg argues that if we see discourse in its relation to power, agency lies in rhetoric, in developing "critical consciousness (which) means combining critical reflection with writing practices" (81). *Contending With Words* ends with its own move toward critical reflection on itself as a text—a move that is occurring more and frequently in scholarly collections—by including two essays that respond to the others in book. As the editors observe, the points of "contention" that both Sharon Crowley and James Sosnoski explore reveal that the biggest challenge for composition scholars is "to see what they can learn not only from 'contending with words' but also from examining the ways theory and practice often contend with each other" (10). Practice is no less political than theory, and demonstrating how theory can inform practice, as well as how practice can inform theory, will always be a "contentious" and ongoing activity.

Political critiques of writing instruction take many forms. The essays in *The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary* (1991, edited by Richard Bullock and John Trimbur), for example, address a variety of concerns in the field from the history of
composition teaching to the politics of research and the impact of feminist theory. Yet each of these essays, in one way or another, is engaged in unmasking the ideology and values that are always present in teaching, even--or especially--when instructors claim objectivity. Two essays, in particular, address the question of the subject or self in writing and research by defining a place for narrative in a field increasingly influenced by theory which would appear to deconstruct and deny the presence of a narrating "I."

Richard Bullock demonstrates that theory can help us understand how "We create our selves through writing" and posits that "if our selves are webs of contingencies, stretching backward and forward in time, we create our selves through narratives" (197). Such an understanding of the self, far from being unifying and totalizing, emphasizes the historical and social construction of that self that is always in process. And Thomas Newkirk warns teachers and researchers of the danger of responding to critiques of experimental research by giving in to "The Conspiracy Against Experience" (119). Qualitative research values firsthand knowledge--or the "local" and "particular" of postmodernism--and allows us to utilize the knowledge making capacity of stories. As Newkirk reminds us, "Narratives are embedded in all academic discourse--even the most austere" (132).
Writing Theory and Critical Theory (1994, edited by John Clifford and John Schilb), takes "theory" as its subject, addressing the healthy debates in the field over the relationship between critical theory and the teaching of writing that I address in Chapter Two. James Slevin, for example, constructs a persuasive argument for mutually beneficial link between such theory and composition:

I would locate the study and teaching of writing within poststructuralist cultural theory's historicizing and problematizing of texts and textual studies. On the level of both theory and academic politics, writing teachers have much to gain by forming connections with scholars and teachers operating from within these new theoretical perspectives. But to do so, rhetoric and composition must be understood as a branch of the theory of culture and the history of cultural production. (71)

Rhetoric and composition has much to contribute to this work because "Our concern with the production of texts, production occurring within institutional constraints and engaging in the construction of social relations, constitutes an important supplement to the analysis of textual reception and signifying practices that current literary and cultural theory undertakes" (71). Hence the larger issue at stake in present composition scholarship is not just how composition can benefit from critical theory, but how a more balanced, more mutually beneficial relationship might be established that encourages theorists to attend more directly to
the process, experience, and real world results of textual production.

The final two sections of *Writing Theory and Critical Theory* consist, respectively, of brief intellectual autobiographies or personal histories by a variety of scholars describing their thinking, work, and experience in composition as it has developed as a field, and two essays in response to these accounts by women who joined the profession more recently. These essays provide not only accounts of individual scholars involvement in the changes that have occurred in scholarship and the role of theory in those changes, but reflections--at times somewhat bitter reflections--on the historically marginal status of work in composition within English departments due to its association with practice. The presence of such essays in a text published by the Modern Language Association of America (MLA), traditionally dominated by literature scholarship, is a hopeful sign of changes in institutional power relations. Such essays also reflect the increasing interest in including the autobiographical in English studies, and suggests the importance of narrative to understanding and productively developing the relation between theory and practice.

Such scholarship is just beginning to address, however, the need for a re-theorized concept of the self in composition studies
which can productively inform practice. Lester Faigley's *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition* marks the first book-length effort to attend to "the question of the subject" (22), and the relation of that subject to the issue of agency. Faigley's study explains the relatively slow rate at which composition, as a discipline, began to reflect the influence of Postmodernity and postmodern theory, and examines how the networked computer classroom enacts a simultaneously "utopian" yet disturbing postmodern decentering of the subject. Yet while Faigley concludes that "The multiplicity of subjectivity is not necessarily a thing to fear because in classrooms it fosters discursive richness and creativity," he also cautions that "it does require theorizing and, if teaching practices are to be involved, new metaphors for the subject" (230). It is this kind of theorizing and involvement with practice that characterizes the work of this dissertation.

I begin where Faigley leaves off, with a discussion of efforts "to explore the relations between rhetoric and ethics" as means toward solving the problem of "where to locate agency in a postmodern subjectivity" (227). I consider both what theory has had to offer our thinking about composition and rhetoric, and arguments that the critical pedagogies of teachers who insist that students
attend to discourse over experience succeed only in substituting another "regime of truth," in Foucault's terms, for the one they would criticize. In light of developments in English studies such as the recent surge in interest in autobiography and autobiographic criticism and scholarship, I look at recent efforts to bring theory to bear on the persistent binary between theory and practice in composition. Some in English studies claim that current scholarship has moved beyond the interests of postmodernism/poststructuralism—or that at least it should be moving on--because such theory has little left to offer (see Spellmeyer, Gregory), especially to teaching. This move, according to those who share this belief, has in fact become necessary because of the nihilistic paradox theory has left us in with regard to subjectivity and agency. Here I will investigate the basis for such claims, and analyze what such theory does and does not have to offer the teaching of writing in a postmodern age. My goal here is to develop and articulate a viable--and ethical--notion of agency by exploring "new metaphors for the subject" through the application of scholarship and theory to the authorial "I" of the reading and writing that goes on in the classroom.
Historical Context

The question of what is or should be the proper work of college writing classes has been the fundamental question underlying composition scholarship and pedagogy since the turn of the century. What do students of writing need to know/know how to do? How can introductory writing courses best help students acquire such knowledge and skills? What ethical obligations does writing instruction have to its students, to the University, and to the world beyond school for which postsecondary education is meant to help prepare students?

A great deal of work has challenged the perception of composition as a service course charged with the remediation and preparation of students for the "real" fields of study they will encounter in their college educations. The writing process movement, for example, effectively challenged emphasis on sentence correctness over the development of content. Yet debates over the nature of that content continue. Indeed, I would argue that it is in the best interest of students of writing that this sense of the "subject" of composition remain in contention. But one result of

---

3 For studies of the history of composition, see James Berlin, Rhetoric and Reality; Robert Connors, "Rhetoric in the Modern University: The Creation of an Underclass"; Joseph Harris, A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966; Stephen North, The Making of Knowledge in Composition; and Susan Miller, Textual Carnivals.
such debates is an ongoing opposition between the personal and the academic that rests on differing assumptions about the nature of the self of the student as a "subject" in composition, and how the needs of that "subject" can best be served in the classroom.

By the early 1980's compositionists were beginning to identify and characterize different--sometimes radically different--approaches to teaching composition, most within the writing process movement. Paul Kameen (1982) identified "three foci around which most composition textbooks constellate, with each group depending on a different epistemic base for initiating discourse," and each inscribed within a different dichotomy. The first ("current-traditional" rhetoric, the only one not a process approach) focused on "the realm of forms, with particular emphasis on the abstract modes of thought that organize knowledge and discourse" (73), and emphasizing form over content. The second (what would come to be known as expressivism) focused on "the inner precincts of the self, with particular emphasis on experiential writing and authentic voices" (73)--self and experience over audience. This approach "illustrates a rhetoric that the 'new rhetoricians' characterize pejoratively as 'vitalistic,' or in Ross Winterowd's terse expression, 'the looky-feely-smelly' approach to composition" (76). And the third approach (Linda Flower's "protocol
analysis" and "problem solving strategies") concerned itself with the domain of audience, with particular emphasis on writing as a heuristically-enabled, information-processing behavior" (73). Kameen finds fault with each, viewing the last as the most problematic due to its view of "information as bits of data": "That we would conceive of language and writing as a behavior utterly freed from the moral and ethical imperatives upon which we so obviously depend for the motives and the consequences of our discourse is a great sacrifice to make for a few heuristics, most of which are already available in the vocabularies of other, less formulaic, approaches for teaching writing" (81). Nevertheless, for all the radical and contradictory differences between each of the approaches, each are flawed, Kameen argues, because they reach the same end: "the subordination of language to the service of something that supersedes it, whether that be our own thoughts, our own feelings, or the thoughts and feelings of our readers" (81).

James Berlin (1982) reaches substantially different conclusions but with a similar emphasis on the role of language in shaping reality. Berlin argues against categorizing different pedagogical approaches according to which element of the composing process one emphasizes over the others. Since pedagogical theories are grounded in rhetorical theories, he argues,
"The differences in these teaching approaches should instead be located in diverging definitions of the composing process itself—that is, in the way the elements that make up the process—writer, reality, audience, and language—are envisioned" (765). Outlining the current four dominant groups of approaches as "Neo-Aristotelians or Classicists, the Positivists or Current Traditionalists, the Neo-Platonists or Expressionists, and the New Rhetoricians," Berlin argues that "the pedagogical approach of the New Rhetoricians is the most intelligent and most practical alternative available, serving in every way the best interests of our students." He argues that it is most important that "teachers become more aware of the full significance of their pedagogical strategies" because "in teaching writing we are tacitly teaching a version of reality and the student's place and mode of operation in it" (766). Berlin's choice of approach is superior, he argues, because it "sees the writer as a creator of meaning, a shaper of reality" (776).

By the time Lester Faigley took a look at the field in 1986, it was possible for him to identify three "major perspectives on composing, an expressive view including the work of 'authentic voice' proponents . . . , a cognitive view including the research of those who analyze composing processes" (527) and a third, more recently emerging view, the "social view," which "contends
processes of writing are social in character instead of originating within individual writers" (528). This third view, he notes, can be found in four overlapping lines of research which emerge from four traditions: "poststructuralist theories of language, the sociology of science, ethnography, and Marxism" (535). Berlin (1988) similarly identifies three rhetorics, expressionistic rhetoric, cognitive rhetoric and social-epistemic rhetoric, each of which, he argues, "occupies a distinct position in its relation to ideology" (478). Here Berlin makes it clear that for him writers "create meaning" only in a social context. Since "Every pedagogy is imbricated in ideology, in a set of tacit assumptions about what is real, what is good, what is possible, and how power ought to be distributed," social-epistemic rhetoric offers the most promise, as it "attempts to place the question of ideology at the center of the teaching of writing" (492). Faigley ends his essay with an effort "Toward a Synthesis" of views (537), but his call for a "conception of process broader than any of the three views" (528) demonstrates a concern for the relationship between the writer and culture that he would come to explore in *Fragments of Rationality*.

These theories of composing/approaches to teaching are certainly not mutually exclusive, nor are the terms by which they are labeled mutually agreed upon. Expressivism has been defended
from critiques such as Berlin's from positions which deny its "romantic" emphasis on the writer as a solitary individual writing for self discovery--"expressing" the "authentic voice" of the self--as well as those which defend it. And cognitive research and applications to teaching have taken a social turn. These three terms have remained dominant ones in conversations in the field, however, and a dualism between the definitions of the "self" implied by expressivism and social constructionism, in particular, persists. By those favoring social theories, expressivism continues to be characterized as working from differing notions of the self as an essentialized agent with unique experiences autonomously generating ideas into discourse. Composition theorists such as James Berlin see "expressionistic rhetoric as extending the modernist dualism between the transcendent individual and the dehumanizing and fragmenting forces of modern society" (Fragments 17). As characterized by Faigley, "Proponents of expressionistic rhetoric hold out that the main goal of writing is to probe one's sense of selfhood and that it is possible to convey authentic selfhood through original language" (17). The emphasis such pedagogy places on personal writing is perceived as less likely to involve writing which requires the writer to engage the ideas of others or to investigate the social and historical forces which shape...
his or her point of view, and therefore likely to suggest that a writer can transcend social politics. Conversely, social constructivism favors postmodern ways of describing the subject in discourse that some members of the field find equally reductive in its emphasis on the determining power of discourses and/or potentially harmful to students of writing in its dismissiveness of individual emotions and experience.

One of the primary sites at which such different views confront one another is the discussion on the place of academic discourse in our pedagogy. David Bartholomae, for example, has stated that as academic writing is the real work of the academy, it is more honest to acknowledge this out in the open than it is to pretend that the writing classroom can be an institutional space free from the institution. Peter Elbow, on the other hand, has argued in defense of expressivism that allowing students to write for themselves, even if it means they take themselves too seriously, is a necessary step in the development of confident writing voices. Social constructivist pedagogy stresses writing assignments that require students to engage in critical thinking, often in a self-reflexive way which challenges them to examine their own assumptions about themselves and their relation to others and the culture in which they live. The main argument against such pedagogy is that can
become risky if it leads to deconstructing the beliefs upon which students depend in order to have a sense of authorship, especially in the case of students whose confidence and sense of their own authority is tenuous to begin with.

This "debate" between Bartholomae and Elbow (as it was characterized, although both argued against this term) which began at the 1989 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), was continued at CCCC in 1991, and remained such a matter of ongoing interest in the field that the two were compelled to publish the texts of their 1991 talks with updated responses in the journal of the organization in 1995. In fact, the "caricature status" that this debate attained, which as Jennifer Welsh notes, "motivated the re-presentation of this conversation" in the organization's journal, CCC (99), and the fact that such debate continues nonetheless, in various guises in the journals and conferences of the discipline, is testimony to the importance of the questions they addressed. Are pedagogies which allow students to feel they are creating original material from their unique and authentic selves simply irresponsible? Or is it more irresponsible to insist that young men and women in the process of becoming in an already decentering and fragmented postmodern culture give up their desire to assert a coherent and unified self? For myself, sitting in the
audience in Boston in 1990, and reading the published essays in 1995, the fundamental questions have remained the same: How do we create opportunities for agency in the writing classroom? How might we honor the individual and the personal while remaining mindful of the ways in which we are all socially and historically situated? How can we most productively negotiate the relationship between theory and practice?

Personal Context

The connection that exists between the "subject" of this dissertation and my "self" lies not only in my intellectual interest in the connections between postmodern theory and the teaching of writing, but in my experiences as a student, a writer, and a teacher. I attended Bartholomae and Elbow's "conversation" at the 1991 CCCC at a time when the issues they addressed were foremost in my thoughts and in my work. In fact in many ways, witnessing this event was like watching the two different programs of my graduate education (the University of Pittsburgh and the University of New Hampshire) duke it out (politely, of course). Kurt Spellmeyer characterized the "debate" prior to this one at the 1989 CCCC as "more like a Renaissance masque, brilliantly choreographed, thoroughly entertaining, but utterly unlike a real dialogical
exchange. . . . Peter was Self, David was Society. Peter spoke for the Individual, David for the Academy" (261-2). For all the differences between my experience at Pitt and my ongoing experience at UNH, they, too, could not be resolved by a masque. But while the approaches of social constructionism and expressivism are not mutually exclusive, as I have noted, they are often portrayed as such; the same applies to graduate programs and other affiliations in the field.³ I left that crosscurrent session needing to find a way beyond such simple dichotomies, beyond the masque and caricature to a theory of self and/in/of society, a way of characterizing the always already interrelated nature of the personal and the academic, identity and discourse, that I could work with, that would work for my students in practice as well as theory.

As scholarship in composition theory and pedagogy became critical of writing courses that focus on writing personal narratives, I myself was one of these critical voices as a beginning graduate student at the University of Pittsburgh in the late eighties. I feared, with scholars like Susan Miller, that such pedagogies risked placing students in "an infantile and solipsistic relation to the results of writing" (Miller 100). Personal writing was all well

³Upon learning of my plans to enter the doctoral program at UNH one of my colleagues at Pitt expressed surprise that I had suddenly developed an interest in ethnography, which she oddly seemed to associate with "the looky-feely-smelly" approach to composition (Kameen 76).
and good—indeed I admired those who could do this well, as writing personal narratives was not one of my own strengths as a writer—but I suspected that the work of many students would not move beyond cliched, conventional descriptions of events and feelings. Students could be as self absorbed as they wanted to be without being challenged to think critically, to connect the self with the world and the ideas of others. Such writing certainly would not prepare them to work critically and analytically with the various academic discourses they would encounter in the university.

Ever since I began teaching, as a Master's student at the University of Pittsburgh, my own courses have centered around assignments which ask students to engage the ideas of the various authors we read in the course. I have asked them to work from their own experience, of course, but mainly as a basis from which to make sense of difficult texts and ideas. As a doctoral student at the University of New Hampshire, I continued to use the text *Ways of Reading*, edited by David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky, in the freshman English courses that I taught. Comparing what I was doing to my understanding at that time of what other UNH composition teachers were doing in classes that focused primarily on personal writing (and the thinking behind such pedagogy) I remained more comfortable with my approach. I agreed with the composition
program's philosophy that the student's text should be the primary text of the course, but was unfamiliar with the approach that many of my colleagues took with the readings they used in the course, which was to focus on craft. Fearing that such an approach did not sufficiently complicate the writer's relationship to discourse and culture, I felt my students could be more "empowered"--the buzzword in composition when I arrived at Pittsburgh but which has since been called into question--by critically oriented pedagogy.

In the introduction to *Ways of Reading*, Bartholomae and Petrosky ask students to think of reading as "making a mark:"

Reading involves a fair measure of push and shove. You make your mark on a book and it makes its mark on you. Reading is not simply a matter of hanging back and waiting for a piece, or its author, to tell you what the writing has to say. In fact, one of the difficult things about reading is that the pages before you will begin to speak only when the authors are silent and you begin to speak in their place, sometimes for them, doing their work, continuing their projects, and sometimes for yourself, following your own agenda. (1)

Such readers then "learn to put things together by writing" (4). I have become uncomfortable with agonistic and aggressive words like "push and shove." Such language reveals a traditional masculine bias that is particularly alienating to women students. Yet I still believe in effectiveness of the pedagogical principles at work in this text and the level of difficulty from which this anthology...
works. The essays and short stories that are included, such as Paulo Friere's "The Banking Concept of Education" and Adrienne Rich's "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision," are challenging for freshmen—daunting, perhaps, at first. But the questions and assignments which accompany these readings ask the students to respond to such complexity from their own experiences, and give students specific contexts in which to situate those experiences—focused places to jump off from, so to speak, so they can consider their own stories in relation to the ideas of others. Many of these readings require students to navigate scholarly discourses with which they are unfamiliar and consider the relation of such writing to their own work at the university. The assignments often ask students to locate both the readings and their own experience in a broader social and cultural context as well. I continue to believe in the value of this pedagogy as preparation for other academic work students will do. We have a responsibility to prepare them to confront difficulty and negotiate a variety of academic discourses, to help them enter into dialogue with "expert" voices and speak with authority. But this is not our only responsibility.

The authors of *Ways of Reading* end their introduction with the sentence, "This is the closest approximation we can give you of the rhythm and texture of academic life, and we offer our book as an
introduction to its characteristic ways of reading, thinking, and writing" (19). Critics of Ways of Reading have argued that its focus on academic discourse presumed that students need to learn to write like their professors and ignored other purposes for writing.\footnote{The line my students are most fond of quoting from Peter Elbow's "Reflections on Academic Discourse" is "life is long and college is short" (136).}

If, as David Bartholomae has argued, many students have difficulty moving beyond just "mimicking" or being "appropriated by" the language of the university to appropriating that language and "inventing the university" for themselves, how are such students to develop confident, authoritative writing voices that they can take into their academic work and their lives in the world outside the university?

The problematic (and I would argue falsely) dichotomous terms with which the field came to discuss the "proper" work of the writing classroom led us to an impasse: the self is either a unique individual capable of autonomous authorship or is itself a construct of language; the writing classroom should nurture and foster the expression of these individual voices or attempt to make visible the ways in which "reality" and the ways that we write about our experience--indeed, our selves--are social constructs, shaped by conventions of discourse. This impasse, rooted in "the

subject/object, internal/external Cartesian split that so dominates
the Western epistemological tradition," made expressivism and social constructionism—however much the totalizing and polarizing nature of these terms was contested—"household names in composition studies" (Bawarshi 69). And this impasse is implicated in and perpetuated by an additional dichotomy between theory and practice—between what we say about discourse and how we teach writing. I found postmodern theory compelling, but the notion that the author is dead—indeed, never really did exist—certainly complicated pedagogical practice with student writers. I found myself needing a theory of agency, a way of talking about the purposes of writing in one's life as well as in school and addressing the student voices that I heard.

My students at UNH exhibited resistance to the writing assignments in *Ways of Reading*, mainly by complaining that their friends were "just telling stories from their own experience," which, as they saw it, was a whole lot easier than what I was asking them to do. At the same time there were few basic writers at UNH (UNH has no basic writing program), and most were to some

*And with "household name" status came an amnesia to shared goals and practices. Joseph Harris states that "while expressivists like Macrorie and Elbow have often been criticized since for the supposed navel-gazing tendencies, there seems no doubt that at (one) point their aims were aggressively and self-consciously political" (28). Mary Ann Cain also claims that "Social constructivist classroom practices . . . at first resembled the methods, if not the principles, of expressivists such as Peter Elbow (*Writing Without Teachers*, 1973) in their emphasis on collaborative learning" (24-25).*
degree already "initiated" into the conventions of academic discourse. Paradoxically, however, those able to employ certain conventions of academic discourse frequently wrote with as little sense of "empowerment," or agency, as some of the basic writers I taught in Pittsburgh. By this I mean that at best their concerns and interests remained secondary to form, to what had been modeled for them as a "good" paper in the past; at worst they seemed to have little investment in what they had to say. Such resistance has many sources, to be sure. But we cannot discount the degree to which student responses to the work of the writing classroom are also "always already" part of a more complex process of "development and negotiation of individual identity in a complex social environment" (Brooke 5), and the patterns of resistance and compliance involved in the negotiation of a student's role as both student and writer. The lesson I learned is similar to a realization that Patricia Bizzell made early in her career:

My glib assurance that students could adapt academic writing to their own purposes, that they could be "in it but not of it," could master it well enough to graduate without having their native values threatened or altered in any way, was repeatedly shaken by what seemed to be unreasoning resistance to academic ways of arguing and organizing, even from students who seemed to have the most to gain from learning them. (Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness 5)
I am concerned about those students who may need time to develop confidence in their own voices and may not be able to do so if they feel that what they have to say, even about their own lives, has always already been written. When I speak of a student's "own voice" I do not refer to some essential property, but that which a writer constructs "out of the languages and materials offered her" (Harris 35). The "self" is not an essence but "a set of perspectives . . . that can only be seen in relation to something else" (36). And yet the student needs to feel that she at least has some ownership of this perspective--that it is hers to explore and change. As Kurt Spellmeyer has argued, Freshman English, "with its tolerance for essayistic introspection and digression, is probably the only opportunity most students will ever have to discover the relationship of mutual implication, a relationship fundamental to all writing, between the self and the cultural heritage with which selfhood has meaning" (Common Ground 110). Inviting students to write from their own experience does not deny "the socially constituted nature of either learning or identity." It is, however, "both dishonest and disabling to pretend that writing, no matter how formal or abstract, is not created by persons, from within the contexts--historical, social intellectual, institutional--of their lived experience (110)."
Learning through writing does not only occur when students write about traditionally academic topics, but also when students engage in personal writing. The "self" cannot be separated from the social, historical, or even the political elements of the culture in which it exists; indeed, these elements partake in the process of writing that self. But this process is not one of passive cultural inscription. According to theories of developmental psychology that regard the "human being as an activity" (Keegan 8), that activity is meaning, or meaning making, which is also the purpose of writing. The activity of making meaning is physical (we use our senses), social (it requires an other), and necessary to our survival as physical and emotional beings (see Keegan 18-19). But we do need to state how making meaning in writing can be defined as "self discovery," or "self expression," and how we can talk about such seemingly individual processes in a social context--from the classroom to the university to the (as our students would have it) "real world" beyond. For our students do not "'discover' meaning within themselves so much as they [construct] meaning through their transactions with others within complex social and cultural and political contexts" (Yagelski 210). Our scholarship and teaching needs to address ways of recognizing the determining power of cultural forces while also allowing for the possibility of a non-
essentialized subjective agency. In order to have a stake in their writing, to find an exigency beyond "I must write to get a grade in this class," our students must feel that not only can they communicate something about themselves to their peers but that their writing can have consequences beyond the composition classroom.

Finally, I need to acknowledge the most ironic part of this project, the fact that my own experiences as a student and a writer have left me uncomfortable engaging in autobiographical writing myself. My efforts to engage in the writing of personal narratives have often left me with the feeling that it was somehow inappropriate and unprofessional, naive and perhaps even narcissistic. In this discomfort with autobiographical writing lies an important reason for this project; my training in writing "rigorous" academic prose has left me feeling that my "voice," while present in my writing, has existed there (at any given time) by virtue of camouflage--a secret agent, if you will. And while there is nothing wrong with this, per se--this is how much of public discourse works, and I believe that I appropriated the discourse more than I was appropriated by it (however much it is possible for women to do this) and was proud to be told I had "mastered" it--I do not think that it is necessary or healthy to feel that the self as
agent of a text, even as a construct in the most poststructural terms, must always be a hidden, covert presence.

Postmodern Theory and Autobiography

Many published writers share James Baldwin's belief that "One writes out of one thing only--one's own experience " (448). But attending to an individual's experience leaves us with the problem of how to imagine and theorize the self in discourse and speak about the "voice" in a text in light of postmodern claims that writing is not concerned with "the exalted emotions related to the act of composition or the insertion of a subject into language. Rather it is primarily concerned with creating an opening where the writing subject disappears" (Foucault 116). Postmodern theory, especially in its most "ludic" or playful forms, has been rightly criticized for its self-referentiality and blindness to the lived experience of those not white, male, and privileged. The "otherness" and "difference" claimed to be so central in such work ultimately becomes meaningless in its solipsism and can, ironically, amount to a kind of political conservatism when the privileging of language over experience results in perpetuation of the status quo. For writers who must find language that allows them to give voice to matters of experience not represented by dominant discursive practices, it does
matter who is speaking. Not only do the "life stories" that these writers produce enter into a larger social and historical conversation, they often do so in spite of the fact that telling their stories means finding a way to communicate an experience that is difficult to put into words to a public audience whose experiences may be quite different. As Nancy K. Miller points out, Roland Barthes' contention that writing is "neuter," that "writing is the destruction of every voice, every origin, . . . the black-and-white where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes" (Barthes 49), makes it difficult to imagine how that which is "other" can be recognized:

the postmodern decision that the Author is dead, and subjective agency along with him, does not necessarily work for women and prematurely forecloses the question of identity for them. Because women have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production, that men have had, women have not, I think, (collectively) felt burdened by too much Self, Ego, Cogito, etc. Because the female subject has juridically been excluded from the polis, and hence decentered, "disoriginated," reinstitutionalized, etc., her relation to integrity and textuality, desire and authority, is structurally different. (106)

For this reason, applications of the work of Bakhtin to postmodern theory, especially by feminists, has much to offer our thinking about autobiography and reauthorizing the "self" or
"subject." For example, if, in the spirit of "human being" as an activity (Keegan), gender is also "not only a noun but a verb--a thing we do to and with ourselves and have done to us and with us every living moment of our lives--it would seem important to capture what we can of the traces of this process, if only to better understand what has happened, and to decide if we wish to continue in just this way" (Dixon 255). In an effort to use theory to address the problems involved in the articulation of women's experiences, feminists such as Dale Bauer and Susan Jaret McKinstry have turned "to Bakhtin's notion of the word and dialogue in order to break down" the traditional patriarchal "separation of public rationality and private intersubjectivity" (1). The resulting feminist dialogics "takes into account both recent critical work on standpoint theory and dialogic criticism" (2) and what both have to offer efforts to redefine subjective agency:

Standpoint theory argues that we must acknowledge our positionality--our identity politics--as the beginning of critical agency and action. . . . Dialogism--like standpoint theory--has as its base the understanding that people's responses are conditional, human circumstances are irreducible and contingent. (2)

Rather than a fixed, essentialist concept of identity, a feminist dialogics "suggests an identity in dialectic response, always open and ongoing" and allows us "to consider agency and resistance in the
process of cultural formation and critique" (3).

In *Autobiographies: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*, Leigh Gilmore demonstrates that both feminist and poststructuralist theory can enrich our understanding of autobiographical theory in general:

... autobiographies perform powerful ideological work: they have been assimilated to political agendas, have fostered the doctrine of individualism, and have participated in the construction and codification of gendered personhood. Myths of American self-sufficiency, for example, of crafty capitalist know-how, and of gender, race, and class have been deployed throughout the history of American autobiography. Yet this has been a contested history, for the complex social authority autobiography comes to have at any particular moment in history or the value some autobiographies retain within literary and cultural traditions depends on a range of factors. In order to analyze that authority, interpretation must attend to the cultural and discursive histories of self-representation, rather than to some overarching explanation for the gendered differences between men's and women's autobiography. (10)

Gilmore uses poststructuralist theory to deconstruct "the formalistic logic" of gender, according to which "the sex one can see becomes the gender one must be" and "the binary of sex (of which there are only two: male and female) is the 'natural' ground onto which gender as a cultural construction is layered" (11) noting that "the notion of what an autobiography is . . . is historically bound up with what we understand to be identity itself. Insofar as any notion
of autobiography is necessarily enmeshed with the politically charged and historically varying notions of what a person is, we can focus on autobiography as a way to understand how (self) representation and authority get linked up with projects that encode gender and genre" (17). Using terms that bring to mind the moves one makes in dialogue, or dialectic, Gilmore argues that "the ways in which an autobiographer variously acknowledges, resists, embraces, rejects objectification, the way s/he learns, that is, to interpret objectification as something less than subjectivity itself marks a place of agency." Gilmore enlists the aid of both feminism and poststructuralist theory in her analysis of "how women use self-representation and its constitutive possibilities for agency and subjectivity to become no longer primarily subject to exchange but subjects who exchange the position of object for the subjectivity of self-representational agency" (12).

As developmental psychologists have studied how the notion of the "self" we have inherited from western patriarchal tradition does not appear to fit women's experience, they have come to argue that models that tend to see development as a process of separation from others not only fail to account for women's experience, but inaccurately reflect men's lives as well.5 The resulting theories of

---

5 See Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice, and Mary Belenky et al, Women's Ways of Knowing.
agency focus not on independent individuals, but understand agency
as within community, as actions taken as beings in relationship to
others and cognizant of basic human needs from which the dominant
culture has become unnecessarily removed. Poststructuralist
theories of the self as necessarily fragmented and decentered may
be regarded as less threatening, and make more sense, when applied
to autobiographical writing in light of such developmental and
feminist theory which regards the self as always evolving, in
process, and in relation to others.

African-American critics of postmodernism have correctly
pointed out that "until the complex relations between race, class,
and gender are more adequately theorized, more fully delineated in
specific historiographical studies, and more fused in our concrete
ideological and political practices, the postmodernism debate,
though at times illuminating, will remain rather blind to the plight
and predicament of black America " (West 394). As bell hooks and
others, such as Henry Louis Gates, acknowledge, some form of
identity politics is necessary; we should be "suspicious of
postmodern critiques of the subject when they surface at a
historical moment when many subjugated people feel themselves
coming to voice for the first time" (hooks 515). But hooks also
argues that "An adequate response to this concern is to critique
essentialism while emphasizing the significance of 'the authority of experience'" (516). Such assertion of "the authority of experience" is the work of autobiography, especially when the recitation of life stories are enlisted in the interest of resistance, education, and change. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue, "Narratives afford a means of intervention into postmodern life" (15).

Through autobiography, scholars and teachers such as Mike Rose address "the real needs of children and adults working to make written language their own" (Rose 8). Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*, and Lorene Cary's *Black Ice* reveal that while autobiographical writers do write in what composition scholars would call an expressivist mode, the "life stories" that they produce are socially and historically situated constructions. The narrative strategies such writers employ present a self that is textual, that is a linguistic construct. And yet such "texts" would not have the appeal that they do for readers if they did not speak to experience, if they did not elicit emotional as well as intellectual responses. Rhetoric can help us theorize such writerly "presence" in a text without essentializing or appearing to commit dreaded intentional and affective fallacies.

In the writing course I discuss in Chapter Three, I began each semester's reading with published reflections on childhood, which,
while engaging readers by rendering some of the most minute
details of a recollected child's perception, as Annie Dillard does as
she recounts her fascination with the loose skin on her mothers
hands, also connect such details to a process of coming to a less
egocentric consciousness. Dillard comments, "'Figuring things out,'
as a child, involves a "long and forced ascent to the very rim of
being, to the membrane of skin that both separates and connects the
inner life and the outer world" (20-1). In one way or another, all of
the narratives we discussed as a class addressed the process of
reflecting on the relationship of the self to others, the ways in
which writing requires positioning personal experience in relation
to larger issues of history and culture. They render individual
experiences while at the same time addressing what Patricia Hampl
(who, coincidentally, also writes about such memories of specific
sensory experience as her four year old perception of her
grandmother's skin) describes as "the feeling that private memory is
not just private and not just memory" (402):

Looking repeatedly into the past, you do not necessarily
become fascinated with your own life, but rather with
the phenomenon of memory. The act of remembering
becomes less autobiographical; it begins to feel
tentative, aloof. It becomes blessedly impersonal. The
self-absorption that seems to be the impetus and
embarrassment of autobiography turns into (or perhaps
always was) a hunger for the world. . . . [I]n the act of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
remembering, the personal environment expands, resonates beyond itself, beyond its "subject," into the endless and tragic recollection that is history. (399)

Acts of autobiography can be understood as proactive, so to speak; they offer students models of writer's roles which emphasize "writing as a reflective activity for making sense of experience, writing as a communicative activity for influencing those in one's community, and writing as an aid for tolerance, for learning about and understanding opinions, values, and experiences different from one's own" (Robert Brooke 150). For example, James Baldwin's work asks us to consider the problem of a writing subject the dominant culture does not know how to see or hear:

It is only in his music, which Americans are able to admire because a protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story. It is a story which otherwise has yet to be told and which no American is prepared to hear. (24)

Although many African-Americans have told their "stories" since the writing of Notes of a Native Son (1955), it is instructive that the difficulties Baldwin describes remain all too real. Mike Rose and Lorene Cary, educators themselves, both reflect on their own experiences as minorities in educational settings which, while helping them achieve "success" over time, did little to acknowledge the realities of their lives. Both texts demonstrate how it is both
possible and necessary to "rescue" the self in a text, so to speak, while being ever mindful of the determining forces present in language and culture. These autobiographies also demonstrate that while traditional humanist notions of the self as an autonomous individual might initially appear to be most supportive to the project of encouraging student writers to find their own voices, this is not, in fact, the case. Demystifying author-ity helps students understand "the culturally constituted status" of their authorship as "agents in history, speaking to historical readers inscribed by a historical occasion" (Natoli and Hutcheon 196).

In Chapter Two I take a critical look at the most recent work in composition that addresses "the subject as the site where ethics enters postmodern theory" (Faigley 21). The work on which I focus my attention shows us thinkers and teachers in the field who are passionate about both what they feel postmodern theory does and does not have to offer writing pedagogy and the need to bridge the gap between theory and practice. That they disagree about the proper relationship between work in critical theory and productive classroom practices is not surprising. Lester Faigley observes that sharp exchanges even between "scholars who share much in common" are a "perhaps unfortunate, but not unexpected" part of "attempting
to find space for political agency in light of postmodern theory. This effort is extremely difficult because of postmodern theory's strong resistance to 'grand narratives'" (19-20). Yet these scholars' different responses to the problem of the subject in light of postmodern theory offers much to the task of conceiving of a non-essentialized subjective agency and reimagining the relationship between theory and pedagogy. The mutual concern with ethics these writers share returns the issue of subjectivity and agency in discourse to the domain of rhetoric, and demonstrates "that the concept of the author is never more alive than when pronounced dead" (Sean Burke 7). A close look at the lessons that postmodern theory has to offer writing practice, I argue, reveals the degree to which all writing can be said to be autobiographical.

Chapter Three presents a detailed analysis of a course in which my students read a variety of autobiographical writing along with theoretical essays that asked them to reflect on the relationship between academic and personal writing, and wrote their own narrative pieces from a critically informed perspective. By having students read and write autobiography in a critical social context, I sought to bring theory into practice by engaging the students themselves in discussions of the very dichotomies I seek to deconstruct in this dissertation. Through discussing the
readings and sharing their own writing with one another, the students in this course confronted not only what is involved in presenting the personal and individual to a public audience, but also how the writing self which feels private and autonomous is also socially constructed and shaped by matters of class, race, and gender. The information I collected as a result of my experience with teaching this class over three semesters demonstrates that the pedagogy which works most productively from the experiences that students bring to the classroom does not bracket out "the larger social reality in favor of a search for the humanistic 'self.' On the contrary, it is a pedagogical practice in which the issue of ethics and politics becomes central to the process of learning" (Giroux 95). As in the case of women and minority writers who must try to find a language that allows them to give voice to experiences not represented by dominant discursive practices, it matters who is speaking for writing students as well, especially if teachers hope to help these students develop the skills and confidence necessary to participate and effect change in a democracy. Pedagogies which elide "the social production of consciousness . . . ironically neglect the capacity of students to engage as social agents in not only the reproduction but the transformation of social relations" (Bruce Horner 509).
In Chapter Four I return to the problem of constructing new metaphors for the self and argue that pedagogy intended to address social justice ignores the role of narrative at its peril. Using the example of an autobiographical text by a well known scholar in English, I discuss what such work on the subject of teaching can, but does not always, offer our work in practice. Looking at a more recent experience with a student in a freshman English class, I address the role that narrative can play in achieving critical or moral agency, in using writing as a means to action. Finally, prompted in part by recent, highly publicized events in our culture, I stress the urgency of negotiating the relationship between theory and practice, the personal and the academic, and self and society, in the interest of future as well as present students.

Our dilemma as writers and teachers lies in negotiating the issues of self, authority, voice, and agency as we define and redefine the needs of our students--and our culture--as we enter a new millennium:

. . . we are a postmodern society in which the disappearance of an unproblematic belief in the idea of true selves is everywhere compensated for and camouflaged by the multiplication of recitations of autobiographical stories. . . . this telling and consuming of autobiographical stories, this announcing,
performing, composing of identity becomes a defining condition of Postmodernity in America. (Smith and Watson 7, italics in original)

Rather than demonstrating that either of the passages from Thoreau and Barthes with which I begin are inaccurate in relation to the work of composition, I hope that I demonstrate here the merits of both. If writing cannot be said to represent the essential self of an author--if, in the end, all that can be said to be present in any text is language and that meaning is only the result of culturally defined practices--then it is indeed true for any writer who would communicate something of his or her self to a reader, or seek to use writing as a means to action or persuasion, that "Nothing goes by luck in composition." The "author's character," so to speak, may not be read from title page to end, but with much work and critical reflection, what may occur from beginning to end is the construction of a writing subject that can be heard and have agency beyond the page.
Chapter Two

Theory and Practice:
Secret (and not so secret) Agents in the Text/Culture

We are beginning to understand, I think . . . that reenvisioning the nature of and relationship between theory and practice represents one of our most pressing tasks.

Lisa Ede, “Reading the Writing Process”

To engage actively in the process of constructing a self is to replace a sense of destiny with the vision of an uncertain future. Similarly, to think of culture as not only present in a series of intellectual debates carried out in the academy but also as the varying registers of taste and distaste physically experienced in the body is to take down the cordon separating the public and the private and to recognize that all intellectual projects are always, inevitably, also autobiographies.

Richard E. Miller, “The Nervous System”

Recent statements about the importance--indeed the necessity--of bringing composition theory and practice together in productive ways carry with them the recognition that the theory invoked has (always already) come to include postmodern and poststructuralist, critical and cultural theory. However much some may argue that the present influence of such theory in composition scholarship has become excessive and has distracted too many
writers in the field away from what these scholars and teachers believe to be the "proper" and/or "useful" work of composition, there is no "pure" pedagogy uninfluenced by current discussions of theory for such critics to stick with or return to.

Postmodern critical theory has contributed to our thinking about the nature of discourse and the work of the writing classroom in invaluable ways. The influence of such theory has also, however and perhaps inevitably, brought with it new problems—most importantly, the problem of how we are to speak of the subject or author of a text. Whatever the positions of those involved, currently ongoing and passionate disagreements about the proper work of the composition classroom, or "mission" of the field (composition in particular and English studies as a whole) implicitly and explicitly turn around the issue of agency.¹ And in one way or another, most current discussions concerning the relationship between theory and pedagogy--whether crediting or disparaging theory--lead to the same questions: After postmodernism, toward the twenty first century, what role does/should theory play in classroom practice and how can it best inform pedagogy? In writing and in the world at large, how do we define and where do we locate agency?

¹ The May 1997 issue of *College Composition and Communication*, for example, demonstrates just how central the problem of agency is to compositionists addressing a wide variety of issues in the field.
I contend that our most pressing task, to amend the statement from Lisa Ede quoted above, is that of reenvisioning the nature of and relationship between theory and practice in a way which acknowledges and works with the ways we both write and are written. It is perhaps paradoxically appropriate that while such theory has created a crisis of agency, it also provides us with tools for understanding how our selves, as well as culture, are constructs always in process. Deconstructing the contradictions and sites of contention in discourse and our discursively constituted selves need not degenerate into nihilism. On the contrary, just as the empowerment of the reader need not entail the death of the author, as Sean Burke has argued, theory which attends to the ways in which writers and writing are constructed by dominant discursive practices does not eliminate subjective agency in the text or the world. Identifying the ways in which putting words together results in provisional meaning making because of culturally created codes is one of the ways in which rhetoric can help us and our students productively negotiate an ethical relationship between discourse/theory and lived experience, and construct selves that can be heard.

Following Lester Faigley's *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition* (1992), Richard Miller's essay, "The Nervous System" (1996), represents one of the
more innovative explorations to date of the relationship between writing theory and practice, of the subject as someone who both writes and is written, and of what it means “to be seen” and “to be heard.” In this essay Miller dialogically invokes, interrogates, deconstructs and attempts to re-see the binary oppositions involved (at play?) in discussions of agency, particularly the personal and the academic (private/public). His writing enacts the paradoxes of the postmodern in discourse, academia, and life.

Miller explores his conflicting responses to the recent increase in scholarly essays and conference talks which include the writer/speaker’s autobiographical voice and “argue for a return to ‘personal’ or ‘non-academic’ writing as a way to reclaim a form of expression that really matters” (267). He opens the essay in a way which, according to this newly popular convention, sets him up to make a similar move himself. Beginning with the personal--a brief account of his father’s second suicide attempt--Miller segues to an academic view of the cultural interest in disasters and misfortunes: “That the media feast on the misfortunes of others is a point we in the academy never seem to tire of making.” This point he demonstrates by recounting how a colleague’s academic analysis of “how the popular television show Rescue 911 satisfies its viewers' need to witness disasters week after week” (265) reaches a
predictable conclusion: that what the viewers need "is us, the
bearers and producers of cultural critique, the ones who can expose
the hegemonic function of the show and reveal its drive to convince
viewers that their relative sense of powerlessness is inevitable,
necessary, even desirable" (266). Noting that he has now set himself
up to reject such academic exercises and argue for a return to the
personal, Miller expresses his reservations about traveling down
this "increasingly well-worn path":

This is important work, both in itself and for the
discussions it has started. And yet, as moving as are the
personal narratives that it has showcased, I must
confess that my own reading in this area has of late
offered me neither solace about the rift between the
personal and the academic, nor guidance about how one
might, if not heal the rift, then at least begin to build a
bridge across its seemingly expansive divide. Indeed, far
from finding in such work a resource for hope about the
possibilities of re-imagining what it means to write in
the academy, I am left with the sense that much of this
work ultimately recommends abandoning such a project.
(267)

Yet Miller's point here is not that one must therefore be rejected for
the other. His project is, in fact, much the same as that of this
chapter and the dissertation as a whole--to explore the possibilities
of re-imagining that might lead to a both/and rather than an
either/or perspective:
For these reasons, in what follows I want to explore the extent to which it is possible to escape the confines of this debate in order to see if its polarized positions can, perhaps, be reworked to produce an idea with which we can think anew about writing as a place where the personal and the academic, the private and the public, the individual and the institutional, are always inextricably interwoven. (267)

In what follows here I will explore the different ways in which English studies has turned its attention to the problem of the personal and academic and the very possibility of agency itself. I will conclude by returning to my reading of Miller and the way in which current work in the field of composition, however ostensibly different in approach, is ultimately linked through a common concern with ethics. Such scholar/teacher/writers have found themselves compelled, finally, to address the relation of postmodern subject positions to the work of the writing classroom and find in rhetoric a means of attending to what in academia and life, theory and practice, is always inextricably interwoven.

**Autobiographical Criticism and Scholarship**

The recent growth in interest in autobiographical literary criticism and theory reflects the ways in which “Poststructuralists of all stripes are increasingly being pressed to engage the question of ethical agency ‘after’ the subject” (Nealon 129). English studies
as a field has become increasing receptive to genre crossing, both-and moves which blur the literary, poetic and autobiographical with literary scholarship. "Autobiographical literary criticism," for example, "occurs in the intersections of feminism, post-structuralism, black and ethnic literary theories, composition theory, reader response theory, and poetry" (Freedman and Frey 10). Attention to the personal in scholarship has its share of detractors, to be sure, but protests have only increased the number of voices involved in scholarly debate. That a recent issue of the journal of the Modern Language Association devoted its guest column(s) and forum pages to the issue of the personal in scholarship is evidence that the "self" in the text has become of significant importance in the field. Like Miller above, literary critic Cathy N. Davidson challenges the dichotomy involved:

the phrase "the place of the personal in scholarship" . . . seems to conceal an imputation that it is the impersonal that really makes scholarship go round and that personal and scholarship are dichotomous terms, I don’t buy that dichotomy. . . . The decision to use or not to use a personal voice is generic and strategic; the silencing of the writerly I does not make the personal motivations for writing any less insistent. We write from our convictions, passions, ideas, tastes, fancies, interests, knowledge, and strengths. Whether we put ourselves in or think we are leaving ourselves out, we are always in what we write. (1072)
A writer may decide to include or not to include personal reflection or narrative, but the autobiographical component is not a matter of choice.

The increasing publication of autobiographical writing by academics, particularly in literature and composition, has been matched by the proliferation of terms used to describe it. As Mariolina Salvatori observes, "practices of the personal go by many different names, often used as if they were interchangeable: personal criticism, autobiographical criticism, narrative criticism, personal narrative, self-writing, life-writing, auto-graphy (Perrault), confessional criticism (Veeser), rhapsodic criticism (Lentricchia)" (567). By whatever name, scholars who engage in such "alchemies"\(^2\) of the personal and academic, literature and criticism, engage in the kind of genre crossing and binary deconstruction—or at least bridging—that I argue should be a part of the work of composition classes.

Engaging in such border crossings and amalgams of genre has proven to be especially important to women seeking to render experiences and subjectivities that patriarchal discourse—particularly that of the academy—excludes. Seeking to include

rather than exclude, “Such writers refuse to deny their many voices; they speak of as well as from the self, thus demonstrating the power engendered by feminist discourse(s) while rejecting “male” versions of powerful discourse” (Freedman, Alchemy 5).

Such writing can be risky business, especially for those making their careers in the academy:

> We must write out of that psychically unrestful juncture—a juncture dangerous for publication, tenure, and promotion—of the personal and theoretical, in the realm where knowledge is not separated from poetry, where borders of self and other and one genre or language and another collide. (Freedman, Intimate Critique 21)

A part of what has been called by some “The New Belletrism,” most autobiographical criticism, states Diane Freedman, “is personal in tone (though it needn’t be), self-disclosing (though it needn’t be), emotional, full of concrete particulars, but it is also theoretically and historically engaged, confronting many of the reigning academic and social debates and problems” (“New Belletrism” 7). Seeking to avoid self-indulgence and solipsism “In their present forms, writings on and from the autobiographical are inflected by social constructionist views of identity, by feminist and poststructuralist cautionary tales about ‘essentializing’ and binary thinking” (8).

Such writing is about memory and meaning making, about visceral and the intellectual responses to experience and to texts; it
is about "the nervous system" and its role in the choices that we make in our writing and our lives, as well as the difficulties of representation:

At its best, the personal forges a writing that stages, recites, and exposes through vigilant reflexivity the irreducible difficulties of telling the story of one's life-physical, intellectual, and emotional--of the desire or the need to make communicable, to share and bring to public attention, what is personal, without reducing or commodifying it. And at its best, even if indirectly, this genre functions as a powerful critique of theories of teaching that construct the personal narrative assignment as a means for students to produce and to communicate kernels of immediate, authentic, and easily accessible knowledge--whether this knowledge be deemed to be all that students can produce or a step in their critical growth. (Salvatori 567)

But of course just as not all academic personal narratives will have the cultural capital to reach a public audience, not all work that is deemed to tell the stories that really count will be able to address the personal without "reducing or commodifying it." Some may be said to demonstrate Salvatori's contention that "Although such a varied nomenclature may be taken to indicate the richness of the genre as a 'category in process' (Perrault 4), or its need and right to self definition, I suggest it might also be taken as a sign of a certain anxiety about its functions and possibilities" (Salvatori 567). Indeed, the variety of writing in a collection such as
"Confessions of the Critics" explores such anxiety along with enthusiasm for the liberating qualities and as yet untapped potential of "confessional" academic work. As Freedman concludes in her essay in this collection:

What I do know is that despite its dangers for teaching and scholarship—hypersubjectivity in the assessment of literary and student writing and hypersensitivity to criticism, writing that veers towards the boring and trivial, teaching that turns psychotherapeutic or merely confessional, leaving students and teachers at loose ends and avoiding the rigors of social, academic, or publishing reality—autobiographical criticism is a moving and effective intellectual and literary practice. Joining the personal and professional, analysis and emotion, "self" and other, it powerfully connects readers to texts, to their own writing, to our own (if previously unacknowledged) critical process, and to one another. (12)

Making such powerful connections is the work of academic memoirs as well as autobiographical criticism. In a recent review essay in the journal *Signs*, Nancy K. Miller writes of "the proliferation of auto/biographical writing by women" in the 1990s. Much of this work, she says is being carried out by "cultural critics, poets, and, most of all, women academics, writing in and out of school, feminists with enough institutional prestige and security, of course, to run the risk of self-exposure" (982). Men, too, including many academics, have also joined "the memoir craze" (981).
The Personal and the Political, or Rhetoric, Poetics, and Experience

After years of tending to relegate personal narratives to the domain of expressivism (as the story goes), more and more social constructivists have been rethinking the personal and autobiographical both in their own work and in their writing classrooms. Composition, given its concern with the “story” of the writing process and accounts of classroom practices, has traditionally conducted more “narrative” forms of inquiry than other elements of English studies, and has demonstrated less of a sense of denial of our autobiographical presence in what we write. But scholarship that emphasizes the personal has not been received without controversy, as Richard Miller’s response above demonstrates. As we struggle, as teachers and scholars, to negotiate the relationship between research, theory, and the personal narrative, we are left, inevitably, with “the question of ethical agency ‘after’ the subject.”

Kurt Spellmeyer and James Berlin offer two very different arguments for the necessity of reexamining agency in both scholarship and teaching as well as two very different sets of ideas about the ways in which—and to what end--this work should be pursued. My purpose here is to explore the ways in which the at
times seemingly polarized positions of these two scholars can "be reworked to produce an idea with which we can think anew" (Miller 267)--negotiated toward a "common ground" (Spellmeyer)--if read dialogically and in light of the recent work of such scholars as Judith Goleman.

In his most recent essay on the subject (in all senses of the word), "After Theory: From Textuality to Attunement with the World," Spellmeyer begins from the position that while "people somehow sense that theory is passe', and they know . . . that it has been displaced by a number of successors," it "is anything but dead" (which he thinks it should be) because "the movements that claim to have left it behind" (New Historicism, cultural studies, "the eclectic mix referred to as 'post-theory'") have actually remained trapped in it (893). He unapologetically indicts the "knowledge class" for using theory "not to make intellectual life more open and democratic," but to create a culture of expertise that promotes estrangement and allows the public "to dismiss our achievements and concerns out of hand" (897), and argues for a "different kind of knowledge" and "teaching designed to instill a felt sense of being at home in the world" (905):

At a moment in our history when many observers have commented on the accelerating breakdown of communities and the spreading mood of cynicism, we
need to ask if learning as we now imagine it helps to strengthen our students' sense of agency and self-worth while replenishing the fragile sources of compassion and mutual aid. (904)

According to Spellmeyer, we cannot hope to accomplish such goals until we escape the fate of being “perpetually ‘post-’” by exploring “an alternative so mundane that we have passed it over time after time in our scramble for sophistication and prestige. That alternative is ordinary sensuous life, which is not an ‘effect’ of how we think, but the ground of thought itself” (894). He concludes:

We will need to become ethnographers of experience: I do not mean armchair readers of the “social text,” but scholar/teachers who find out how people actually feel. And far from bringing English studies to a dismal close, the search for basic grammars of emotional life may give us the future that we have never had, a future beyond the university. (911)

Spellmeyer's argument for the importance of experience is a strong one, one which the article directly following Spellmeyer's in the same issue of College English would appear to support. In “Images, Words, and Narrative Epistemology” Kristie Fleckenstein also takes issue with the “current social constructionist orientation” which, “fostered by postmodern influences, reinforces our single-minded attention to language as the preeminent force in constituting all that we are” (914). Citing evidence from a number of fields of study, particularly work in feminist theory, Fleckenstein
argues that “Conceiving thought, reality, and self predominantly in linguistic terms oppresses certain members of a society, then functions to ensure their continued marginalization” (919). Seeing/hearing such members of society depends on recognizing the ways in which “imagery and language function in tandem to constitute our sense of being” (915). “Imagery compensates for the limitations of language . . . by its connections to kinesthetic and emotional reactions” (921).

Mary Ann Cain similarly argues that “linguistic determinism,” which she believes to be a defining feature of social constructivist approaches to composition theory and practice “perpetuates the subordination of practice and practitioners” and overlooks “the metalinguistic dimensions of language use and meaning making” (10). The research methodology of Cain’s Revisioning Writers’ Talk: Gender and Culture in Acts of Composing is phenomenological, the very sort of experience-based inquiry for which Spellmeyer argues there is a need, and Cain claims the work “as research despite its nontraditional generic form, which blurs narration, self-reflection, analysis, and fiction” (2). Examining her experience observing and participating in fiction writing workshops, her goal is to bring into dialogue her sometimes conflicting identities as a writer, teacher, and scholar, all of which are informed by her identity as a woman.
Narrative, she argues, “is the appropriate mode for representing and interpreting experiential knowledge” (10).

Many others, citing the work of Paulo Freire, would also agree that any pedagogy which attempts to separate students’ writing from their lived reality treads on dangerous ethical ground. Yet this is not to say that the answer lies in inverting the binaries and privileging practice over theory, experience over discourse. Spellmeyer’s championing of experience and “feeling” over academic literacy and theory (which he comes close to villainizing in this particular essay) carries with it the troubling suggestion that experience can be separated from discourse, and despite his efforts throughout to reveal and work against the elitism he perceives in the academy that interferes with learning, his call for a return to “the arts” raises important questions about what, exactly, this might mean, given the elitism also involved when “the arts” means liberal humanism and the unproblematized autonomous subject it assumes.

One of the fundamental questions to which Goleman responds in her study, *Working Theory: Critical Composition Studies for Students and Teachers*, is Spellmeyer’s question “what should teachers of writing teach?” (*Common Ground* 71). As she states in her introduction, an answer to this question depends, in part, on
how we answer Foucault’s question (*Power/Knowledge*): “What position is the intellectual to assume?” (Goleman 3). Goleman goes on to argue that efforts to reduce pedagogy to method—to “how to write” as separate from “what to write”—are unlikely to produce student writers who are able to recognize and negotiate competing discourses. I do not believe that Spellmeyer could be said to be guilty of such a reduction; on the contrary, I read his calls for a “democratic counter-knowledge” (“After Theory” 905) and “living words that foster a ‘felt’ resonance between ourselves and the world” (906) as recognition of the integral relation of “what” and “how.” In fact my sense is that Spellmeyer’s pedagogy goes a long way toward enacting Goleman’s suggestion that “the instructor who wants to go beyond the traditional premises contained in the notion ‘how to write’ must slowly and seriously rebuild her own subjectivity as a classroom instructor.” The emphasis on the importance of dialogue and dialectic in discourse and teaching throughout Spellmeyer’s work suggests a teacher who has learned “to receive student writing transitivity,” which Goleman argues is a means toward her above stated end (114). Yet in spite of Spellmeyer’s own heavy work with Foucault and other critical theorists in his earlier arguments for recognizing the importance of experience and attending to the “selves” of student writers in
Common Ground (1993), his stance in “After Theory” (1997) could be said to have the ring of theory-phobia.

While Goleman recognizes the wisdom of some scholar's warnings against “mawkish” applications of theory, referring, for example, to Victor Vitanza's contention that “‘Theory, for the field of composition, has become a will to unified theory’” (qtd. in Goleman, 113), she argues that,

Calling for a ‘moratorium’ or a month of Sundays to get it right before going into the classroom, however, completely misses the point of theory's presence in its effects. James Berlin is particularly helpful on this matter, arguing that teaching does not follow theory as its pale imitator. “Instead,” he writes, “the classroom becomes the point at which theory and practice engage in a dialectical interaction, working out a rhetoric more accurate to the historical moment and the actual conditions of students and teachers.” (Goleman 114)

Like Spellmeyer, James Berlin is also concerned with—and equally passionate about—the role of the academy, and English in particular, in preparing students to be active, compassionate, and effective participants in a democracy. Political agency, then, plays a crucial role in Berlin's pedagogical goals, and therefore rescuing the subject from the fate of endless decentering and disintegration—what some theorists suggest is the only option in a postmodern world—is a necessary part of Berlin's work. But for Berlin theory is not the problem, but part of the solution. The source
of the problem, as he addresses it in *Rhetorics, Poetics and Cultures: Refiguring College English Studies* (1996), is the binary opposition between poetic and rhetoric, in which the poetic is the privileged (read also elite) term, that came to characterize English studies in the twentieth century. According to Berlin, “From one perspective the postmodern theoretical turn is an attempt to recover the services of rhetoric, the study of the effects of language in the conduct of human affairs” (68). His concern here is with discourse, but not at the expense of experience and individual agency. Citing Paul Smith's instructive work in *Discerning the Subject*, Berlin outlines a viable and pedagogically useful concept of postmodern subjective agency in a social context:

This concept of the subject as a dialectical process of subject positions within a specific social history as well as within a broader shared social history accounts for the possibilities of agents actively changing the conditions of historical experience . . . Of course this does not lead to the complete autonomy of the humanist subject, so that anything is possible. But neither does it lead to a subject for which nothing is possible. (70)

From a rhetorical point of view, “the loss of liberal humanism’s autonomous subject” need not mean “the death of democratic politics” (69). For Berlin, rhetoric offers a way of attending to experience and giving voice to a particularly situated set of concerns or point of view. He turns to “social-epistemic
rhetoric" as a promising response to the challenges of postmodernism:

From this perspective, the subject is the point of intersection and influence of various conflicted discourses—discourses about class, race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, religion, and the like. Of equal importance, the subject in turn acts upon these discourses. The individual is the location of a variety of significations, but is also an agent of change, not simply an unwitting product of external discursive and material forces. The subject negotiates and resists codes rather than simply accommodating them. (78-9)

By asking students to read and write in a variety of genres, from essays to fiction and poetry, and to interpret and even engage in the production of various forms of popular media, Berlin seeks to help make accessible to them "the inevitable commitment of all of these textual forms" to the ideological codes referred to above. "In learning to gain at least some control over these forms, students become active agents of social and political change, learning that the world has been made and can thus be remade to serve more justly the interest of a democratic society" (112).

_Rhetorics, Poetics and Cultures_ marks an important moment in the development of composition studies for two main reasons. The first is the way Berlin could be said to respond to Lester Faigley's _Fragments of Rationality_ by moving from detailed historically and theoretically based scholarly argument to suggesting and
demonstrating a critical pedagogy which does “explore the relations between rhetoric and ethics” as means to locating agency in a postmodern subjectivity (Faigley 227). The second lies in Berlin’s enthusiasm for the social implications--or, indeed, obligations--of teaching, his passionate conviction that social change is not only possible, but that English studies has an instrumental role to play in creating such change.

In his discussion of two specific courses, “a lower division offering entitled ‘Codes and Critiques’ and an upper division class called ‘The Discourse of Revolution’” (115), Berlin works from the connection he develops between the term “critical literacy”--as “used by Ira Shor, Henry Giroux, and Peter McLaren, among others” (97)--and the promising role he sees for social-epistemic rhetoric in creating his vision of a truly democratic classroom. His discussion emphasizes the ways in which both courses challenge old disciplinary binaries and resist “the hierarchy of specialization that has separated the teaching of writing from the teaching of reading.” Stating that “the center of each course is the response of students to the materials and methods” used, whether his own or those of other instructors (115), Berlin does attend to student resistance and the importance of the role of the instructor as mediator, “ensuring that no code”--or position, or reading--“including his or her own,
goes unchallenged” (131). A specific example of such mediation would be helpful, however, and examples of student work and moments of resistance are needed to show readers the kind of learning he claims did occur. Without such direct work with particular class discussion and the student writing produced in these courses, we have no opportunity to see social epistemic rhetoric put to work by students and therefore must take his word for the ethical agency it promises. Berlin does provide a detailed overview of texts (in a variety of mediums) and assignments which foreground “the student’s position as a political agent in a democratic society” (112). But especially in light of the fact that much of the data for his conclusions comes from sections of the courses that he did not himself teach, there is much more work to be done here with examples of students responding to such pedagogy in order to enact the move from theory to practice. Such is the kind of more close analysis of student texts that is central to Goleman’s work, as I will discuss later.

And yet I am inspired by Berlin’s hopefulness for the future and conviction that English studies and the teaching of writing not only can be, but have an obligation to be, instruments for social justice. Berlin--like Goleman--finds in postmodern theory and rhetoric a means challenging the complicity of composition and
literature in the Ideological State Apparatus that other progressive scholars have identified. Such confidence in the transformative power of education is indeed refreshing to find in a such a historically, theoretically and rhetorically based look at English as a discipline. Berlin carefully identifies the disciplinary forces which resist any attempts to challenge the rhetoric-poetic binary, and realistically assesses the dramatic degree of change for which he argues: "Changing English studies along the lines recommended here will thus require a reformulation of the very figuration of cultural capital on which our discipline is based (15)" But he is, nevertheless, optimistic about the potential of the English classroom as a site for productive change—in both education and society:

Just as successive rhetorics for centuries furnished the terms to name the elements involved in text production and interpretation of the past . . . social-epistemic rhetoric will offer English studies terminologies to discuss these activities for contemporary conditions and conceptual formations. Workers in structuralism, poststructuralism, semiotics, rhetoric, and literary theory have all begun this effort. Members of the English department must take up this work with a special concern for its place in the classroom. It is here that theory, practice, and politics will intersect in an enlightened conception of the role English studies plays in preparing students for their lives as citizens, workers, and sites of desire. (93-4)
That much of the theory influencing Berlin's pedagogy and thoughts on the role of English studies comes from cultural studies does, of course, reveal the fundamental source of disagreement between Berlin and Spellmeyer. Disagreement, in fact, is putting it mildly, as a look at some of Spellmeyer's recent comments on the work of others in the field reveals that the term is anathema to him. To the advancement of English in general cultural studies offers little, according to Spellmeyer, as it is just the latest fashion, part of a “sad parade of styles”:

Even the defenders of cultural studies understand that it looks today very much the way French theory did thirty years ago. . . . The French crowd wrote like Levi-Strauss on LSD while the prose shipped out from Birmingham is soggy fish and chips, but the new British knowledge, like its counterpart from France, still offers the chance for membership in a distinctly elite community, notwithstanding the mandatory references to Marx. ("Out of the Fashion Industry" 425)

The work of this movement becomes especially odious to him when touted as helpful to composition pedagogy. While stating that theory has indeed aided composition scholarship ("Who hasn't benefitted from reading Iser, for example, or Foucault's 'Order of Discourse'?"), he finds that there is much more for writing teachers to learn from "the work on pedagogy done here in the U.S., after three decades of developmental college-level teaching and inquiry" than there is to
learn from “the Birmingham Centre”:

. . . cultural studies brings in tow a great mass of tightly packed baggage whose weight discourages rather than enables inquiry. And if you don’t believe me, then sit down once again with Shirley Brice Heath’s *Ways with Words*. . . Heath’s work strikes me as smarter and richer than most of the work coming out of Britain these days, and the moral of this story is not that Americans do it better, but that Heath had a deep respect for her ethnographic subjects and tried to learn from them rather than presuppose that she had come to save them from themselves. (430)

In his thoughts on those who do bring such “baggage” to bear on their work in composition, Spellmeyer does not mince any words. About an essay by Henry Giroux which opens one of the books he reviews in “Out of the Fashion Industry” he says, “Like so much of Giroux’s work, this one is a vast, sloshing ocean of sloganeering channeled into the narrow sluices of banality” and that “Paragraph after paragraph is awash in mini-manifestos” (426). His words regarding James Berlin, although less biting, are nearly as negative:

It is no accident, however, that Berlin was composition’s leading exponent of the turn to cultural studies; in its willingness to substitute schematic neatness for the messiness of careful observation, his *Rhetoric and Reality* taught a whole profession how to see itself one-dimensionally--without a sense of history, that is, and without attention to they (sic) ways in which real people have made real history. (433)

While I appreciate Spellmeyer’s spirited prose, I think that he doth
protest too much regarding the evils of cultural studies.

Where Berlin's enthusiasm gets him into trouble is the way in which his advice for the construction of a democratic classroom leads him into issuing a notable quantity of "musts" and "shoulds"—what our business as teachers must be (93, 112, 113), what English studies must do and become (105, 110, 111), and most importantly what students "must learn" (130) and "should come to see" (145). Spellmeyer would be justified in taking issue with such seemingly absolute pronouncements, as Virginia Anderson does in her critique, "Confrontational Teaching and Rhetorical Practice":

Berlin's faith in his own reading method and the interpretations of reality it necessarily renders leaks through as readers are told that students . . . "must realize" (93), . . . "learn to see" and "recognize" (120), . . . become "aware" (116), are "made aware" (130), and "begin to understand" (131) that the world they live in is the one Berlin sees. Any student who holds out for a worldview that does not contain the contradictions and demand the questions Berlin fore-grounds is "deny[ing] the obvious" (102). (Anderson 205)

Such prescriptive prose does merit a cautious and critical reading, and reveals a certain level of irony. For all the ways in which Foucault is present in this text, Berlin does run the risk of "reproducing the very 'regime of truth' [he] would criticize" (Goleman 5). But it is also worth noting that any teacher committed to doing her best for her students faces this same dilemma on a
daily basis. As I encourage students to look at course readings, issues under discussion, and their own experiences with a more critical and informed eye, I regularly find myself questioning my own agenda and worrying that I am imposing a certain worldview, especially when students are resistant or too eager to comply with any perception of “what the teacher wants.” And of course my teaching is, inevitably, always informed by my own subject position. What is important is being vigilantly aware of this dilemma, regularly questioning and revising one's pedagogical practices, and allowing our students to hear us acknowledge this dilemma and deal with it honestly in the classroom. Frankly, I would be wary of any teacher who claimed not to have any strong feelings about the kind of critical thinking and information/discourse negotiating abilities she seeks to help develop in her students. Thus whatever specific opinions of Berlin and Spellmeyer with which I may disagree, both authors' willingness to put strong feelings in print, dedicated as they are to serving students' needs, is part of what encourages me to trust them as teachers.

Anderson is quick to recognize what postmodern theorists would say about her criticism of such “markers of Berlin's struggles with his own contradictions, most obviously his desire to honor democratic values of free speech while also directing the students
toward what he wants them to learn.” These theorists “would predict these contradictions and argue that Berlin cannot avoid them” (205). Mindful of the validity of Anderson’s critique, I nevertheless agree with the latter point of view; such contradictions are, indeed, unavoidable, and recognition of the inevitable presence of contradictions in our discourse and experience is precisely what Berlin feels his students “must learn,” as Anderson herself points out (207)—yet another contradiction. Helping students to examine the contradictions in their lives and the historical nature of who they are/are becoming is, I believe, part of the project of teaching for rhetorical agency. Anderson is right about what is most important here:

A major step in this persuasive project is admitting that the pictures we paint of postmodern reality are truth claims and recognizing, that like all truth claims, they cannot be merely asserted as starting points. As activist teachers insist about everyone else’s theories, they must be argued for. (207)

And yet such persuasion is the very domain of rhetoric. As Berlin notes in his closing thoughts, “no rhetoric is free of this effort to construct consciousness, although some are obviously more aware of the workings of the process than others” (179).

In his discussion of the role of rhetoric, however, Berlin would do well to attend more to the matter of experience, for it is the
experience of a given subject/agent—however discursively constituted and historically situated—that rhetoric can be employed to articulate. Berlin recovers agency in social epistemic rhetoric, but his emphasis on the political at the expense the personal still leaves the writing subject in peril.

Berlin's critical pedagogy would appear not to allow any space for autobiographical essays in the composition classroom. His past categorization of pedagogies that value personal narratives as necessarily espousing "expressivist" as opposed to "social epistemic" rhetoric is disappointingly reductive. Berlin notes that the expressivist rhetoric of Don Murray and Peter Elbow, especially in the early years of the writing process movement, was dedicated to resisting dominant social, political, and cultural practices ("Rhetoric and Ideology" 485). But he goes on to argue that the emphasis on the individual espoused by such compositionists renders writers "ineffective through their isolation" (492) and effectively cancels out any power such critiques of ideology might have to effect change.

And although *Rhetorics, Poetics and Cultures* does not directly address the issue of personal narratives, Berlin's discussion of pedagogy appears to allow personal reflections in student essays only as part of the process of deconstructing ideology and relating
the self to history and culture in academic discourse. As Patricia Bizzell points out in reference to Berlin's pedagogy in another experimental first year writing course, deconstructing "ideologies the students hold as foundational" is "a very painful process that students often oppose." Like Spellmeyer, I see little to gain from pedagogies that result in alienation. As Bizzell cautions, "We exercise authority over them in asking them to give up their foundational beliefs, but we give them nothing to put in the place of those foundational beliefs because we deny the validity of all authority, including, presumably, our own" (269). And I feel strongly that the promise of social epistemic rhetoric depends on not focusing on the social in a way that suggests that the personal is bracketed off in yet another false dichotomy. The same applies to genre; Berlin would seem to deny the function of narrative as a form of knowing (see Cain, Fleckenstein). Yet insisting that students write about "social" and "political" topics, as Bruce Horner points out, "accepts dominant monolithic conceptions of what constitutes the social and personal, thus preventing exploration of the social constitution of the personal . . . Both the 'social' and the 'personal' are reified into fixed wholes" (524). Attending directly and respectfully to the students' experience, however, and being up front about our own ideological commitments as we initiate ideological
critique can help our students engage in the kind of thinking and writing Berlin seeks to encourage.

Spellmeyer would concede, I believe, that "Self . . . is a written construct. It is a rhetorical act (Cornell), a product of discursive formations (Foucault), inextricably bound in language (Lacan)" (Fleckenstein, 914). But focusing on language "as the dominant agent in constituting thought, self, and reality," is "unnecessarily limiting" and fragments "thought, self, and reality without providing a means of unification" (915). Attending to experience is essential to countering the decentering character of language--the endless delaying and dispersing effects of Derrida's differance--with some such means to unification, however temporary and contingent. Citing the findings of paleo-archaeologists and language origin theorists, Spellmeyer proposes that our language and culture began as responses to suffering brought about by "irrevocable change--by humankind's collective waking into a world that seemed confusing and dangerous" ("After Theory" 907). Signification, according to this view, "cannot occur without an experiential anchoring, since we know and remember only what has changed our immediate relations to the world" (907).

According to Spellmeyer:

Our conviction that the self is enduring and real--is
more than an ensemble of random events—depends on our ability to move past suffering, not once but again and again. It can scarcely be an accident that psychotics are often the childhood victims of a violence that fragments the self so completely there will never be a lasting synthesis. Nor is it merely coincidence that people who endure prolonged physical pain are often at a loss to describe their personal history, not because they have repressed it but because meaning follows from our connections with things—connections that intense pain erodes and erases. . . . It is only through our journeys out of suffering into pleasure that each of us can become a self. And it is only through these journeys toward coherence in ourselves that we can move beyond the self. (907-8)

Hence Spellmeyer's call for a "new phenomenology," the study of experience itself (see "After Theory" 434-5), as a way to attend critically to this relationship between experience and language, and develop a truly "democratic pedagogy." He acknowledges the institutional forces at work against such a development in English studies. Stating that "phenomenology in its Continental forms, much like cultural studies today, has remained a prisoner of philosophy, committed to the world-as-lived but afraid to renounce the bogus certainties of a 'pure reflection.'" he also notes all of the structuralist and poststructuralist theorists who have vigorously rejected this form of inquiry, particularly Derrida, who "single-handedly created a kind of anti-phenomenology, an idealist’s heaven (or possibly, hell) where people and things have both disappeared and
only words remain" (434). And yet, in very much the same way Berlin argues for the possibility for change within English studies against equally strong opposing forces, Spellmeyer remains hopeful that "phenomenology may come of age as democracy's thought and language, precisely because it privileges the uniqueness of my experience and yours, which are never altogether the same and, therefore, never reducible to those descriptions of us that depend on our silence and passivity" (434-5).

So while I take issue with the degree of hyperbole in his protests, Spellmeyer's accounts of the elitism of scholars of high theory do have merit, and he is justified in asking "if English studies has a vested interest in the current disconnected status quo" (908). His contention that "the point of learning, of language--the point of social life itself--is the surmounting of alienation" (Common Ground 38) is a powerful and convincing one. The degree to which work in cultural studies is more dedicated to identifying alienation (and, some would argue, perpetuating it) than surmounting it does lead to a "split" in the work of Giroux and others who advocate critical pedagogy, although I do not believe that it is as deep a split as Spellmeyer claims:

Giroux wants to play with the big boys in Critical Inquiry and Cultural Studies: he wants to sound like Lawrence Grossberg or Judith Butler. On the other hand, he
recognizes that these eminent figures haven’t the slightest interest in pedagogy, critical or otherwise, or in any other kind of worldly engagement, since the work they do is actually only theory by another, more trendy name. And knowing this, Giroux also wants to talk shop with regular classroom teachers, but he cannot quite bring himself to take the step down from theory’s arid heights. (426-7)

In an essay included in the collection Cultural Studies, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Giroux both presents a powerful argument for radical pedagogy informed by cultural studies and, at the same time, demonstrates this split that Spellmeyer identifies. “Resisting Difference: Cultural Studies and the Discourse of Critical Pedagogy” argues persuasively for a pedagogy that recognizes and challenges the ways in which language, when united with power and knowledge, has been/is used to preserve the status quo, to control access to learning and cultural capital. The essay is theoretical, however, not pedagogical. Giroux must present his case to two different audiences, which he often does admirably:

Language, therefore, cannot be abstracted from the forces and conflicts of social history. In other words, the historicity of the relationship between dominant and subordinate forms of language offers insights into countering the assumption that the dominant language at any given time is simply the result of a naturally given process rather than the result of specific historical struggles and conflicts. (203)

The “abstraction” he cautions against here moves in two directions;
he addresses both the danger of theorizing language as if it is separate from human history and social relations as well as the naivete of treating language as something that "just is," that has developed naturally and inevitably. And yet Giroux's argument for an alliance between cultural studies and pedagogy reaches more for one audience than the other. While he enumerates specific and admirable goals for what he terms "border pedagogy," he refers more to the work of "radical educational theorists" than "teachers," leaving to others the work of translating theory into practice. Giroux's prose is dense with jargon that legitimizes his writing as "cultural work," and leaves him open to the criticism made by Julia Ferganchick-Neufang, citing the work of Jennifer Gore, "that current discussions of critical pedagogy create what Foucault has called 'regimes of truth,' which defeat their liberatory intentions" (21).

And yet, this split in Giroux's work actually has much in common with an important contradictory feature of Spellmeyer's. While Spellmeyer does nod to the benefits of reading theory ("After Theory" 430), the strong tone of his critique of cultural studies suggests that such theory is only of peripheral importance. The introduction to his 1993 text Common Ground, however, tells a different story. Here it is Spellmeyer who berates prominent figures in composition who disparage theory "as a symptom of
professional decadence, an escapist retreat into abstraction” (4):

The work of theorists like Iser and Foucault, Bakhtin and Gadamer, Habermas and Turner—theorists who will play a central role in this book--gradually transformed my classroom practice from a gesture of impotent good will into a deliberate, self-critical project. (2)

Spellmeyer’s descriptions of what he learned from theory that aided his thinking and pedagogy at crucial moments in his career (see both Common Ground and “After Theory”) belie his claim for the necessity of “descending from textuality” in order to attend to “the particulars of everyday life” (“After Theory” 893). Spellmeyer’s knowledge of theory informs, in fact, his argument against self erasure and for “a dialogic pedagogy that recognizes individuals as real players in the social game, conscious agents who are never altogether powerless, unaware, or passive in their relations with others” (Common Ground 32). Close reading of his subsequent works, including those critical of efforts to bring theory to bear on composition pedagogy, reveals the continuing influence of such theory on his thinking. What is crucial to the kind of dialogic pedagogy for which he argues, as Spellmeyer and Fleckenstein both point out, is that text not be the only metaphor for being.

Such an apparent split in the work of Spellmeyer, as well as in that of Giroux, can be linked, I would argue, to the persistent problematic binary between theory and practice, as Spellmeyer,
ironically, has pointed out himself. Seeing this opposition as a result of "a deeply entrenched occupational confusion, first of all about theory itself, but also about language and our lives as social beings" (2) he notes that "theory and practice were once thought of as complimentary" (3). Our efforts to improve pedagogy depend upon restoring or re-creating such a complimentary relationship:

   to engage in a "practice," a deliberate, self-reflective activity as distinguished from an unreflecting routine, I must already recognize its meaning within an encompassing cultural framework. . . . when past practice is no longer consistent with the cultural framework in its current form--when a practice has begun to appear ill defined or counterintuitive--theory must come to its aid, not by lifting us above the real world, but by grounding us more firmly upon it. (3)

The work of Spellmeyer, Berlin, and Giroux, emphasizes that "The field's ideal is praxis: theory-based, self-reflexive practice in teaching, and research methodologies sensitive to the contexts of classroom life" (Cain 4). Yet such an ideal cannot be approached as long as a hierarchical, dichotomous relationship remains between theory and practice, with practice as the feminized, non-scholarly portion of the equation. Moving from an oppositional to a cooperative and mutually enhancing relationship between theory and practice is perhaps the most difficult but most important component of developing democratic pedagogy.
For all the differences between them, both Spellmeyer and Berlin call for renewed attention to public discourse. And for both, critically understanding and participating in this public discourse is the means to personal and collective agency. For Spellmeyer, "the only alternative to mutual incomprehension and distrust—or, at any rate, the only democratic alternative—would seem to be a revitalized public discourse, a conversation open to every person, and to every discipline, dialect, and tradition" (Common Ground 15).

While emphasisizing the importance of attending to human experience and the development of the "whole student," Spellmeyer's discussion of the place of public discourse in democratic pedagogy sounds very much like Berlin's argument for social epistemic rhetoric:

In the absence of any visible public dimension, our students correctly surmise that their primary task is accommodation to the established forms of specialized practice. But the bitter irony of a social order which demands accommodation, an irony most undergraduates will not appreciate until later, is that such an order typically accommodates no one in return. By regarding institutions--the government, the academy, the corporate world--as monolithic collective Agents, and by granting them the power to define unilaterally the roles available to their individual "constituents," we have failed, teachers and students alike, to envision strategies for constructive resistance, devised and undertaken from inside the institutions themselves. (Common Ground 16)
The interests of creating a democratic pedagogy can best be served, I would argue, by constructing a bridge over the apparent divide created by the differences between the two scholars. Combining Spellmeyer’s “ethnographers of experience” ("After Theory" 911) (which is not solipsistic or essentialist, as Berlin would likely claim) with Berlin's critical pedagogy (which is not reductive and ahistorical, as Spellmeyer claims) holds promise for the creation of a democratic critical pedagogy which allows a space for autobiographical writing and narrative—a pedagogically productive both/and that encourages an ethical exploration of the self in society as a discursive subject and agent of change. For what binds the work of these individuals is their concern with ethics. Indeed, ethics is the key term that unites the majority of the work being done on agency³ and, I would argue, much of the work that looks toward the next century in composition, however one might categorize that work (critical literacy, multicultural or ethnic studies, feminism, and so on).

Goleman's analysis of how theory can inform practice in the writing classroom demonstrates, in effect, the ways in which the work of Berlin and Spellmeyer complements, or completes, one another. Goleman seconds the concern of Spellmeyer, and others,

³ See Jeffrey Nealon, "The Ethics of Dialogue."
that “poststructuralist pedagogies, based as they are on a critique of Western idealism, are nevertheless reverting, under institutional pressure, to traditional relations with their materials and their students” (63). She applauds Spellmeyer, in fact, for his efforts to achieve the teacher-student relationship advocated by Paulo Freire that she sees in the way that he “redefines the ‘common ground’ between teachers and students not as their identical perspectives but as their joint capacity for dialogue” (64). And yet she is also careful to point out that Spellmeyer’s definition of his role as “the maieutic dialectician, the midwife,” does not go far enough (64).

On the other hand, Goleman also cautions that teachers who employ postmodern pedagogies that problematize “students’ investments in their discourses, ideologies, and constructions of self. . . . not mistake a person in the process of ideological becoming with a cultural artifact in the process of deconstruction” (88-9). Working with the full text of a student essay from an advanced composition course as an example, Goleman demonstrates how under certain circumstances “students of border pedagogies,” as advocated by Giroux and endorsed by Berlin, may be less in the process of establishing a critical relationship of nonidentity with their subject positions and more in the process of prematurely disidentifying with subject positions deemed out of favor” (89).
Here Goleman finds Spellmeyer's reading of Hans Georg Gadamer instructive: “Gadamer believes that the learner's presuppositions are the ground from which he or she views the world and that the achievement of understanding requires not the suspension of these presuppositions in some pretended neutrality but a reaffirmation of the self, at first against the question and then with it” (Spellmeyer 112, qtd in Goleman 89).

Working from Foucault's notion of the specific (as opposed to universal) intellectual, and from Althusser's discussion of materialist (as opposed to idealist) epistemologies that he develops from his reading of Marx, Goleman outlines a "material theory of human agency" (18)—critical effectivity—for the student of composition. As with Berlin and Spellmeyer, ethical pedagogy is, for Goleman, about teaching for change. As "ideology is a material force that naturalizes the unequal relations of production . . . The pedagogical function of historical materialism, then, is that it can teach us to 'see' ideology in our representations; it can teach us to 'read' ideology as a specific organization of reality and therefore to create the possibility of changing that reality" (17).

As much as Goleman's thinking is tacitly influenced by the works of Foucault--she realized only toward the end of the project how she often used them "'without saying so'" (1)—it is explicitly
influenced by Bakhtin’s theory of language. It is through the chapter
that she devotes to Bakhtin’s notions of heteroglossia, dialogism,
and particularly his concept of internally persuasive discourse, that
Goleman is able to move from explaining her theory of agency to
applying it to classroom practice and reading student texts. Her
notion of agency--critical effectivity--depends upon understanding
the dialogic nature of language, and the relation between internally
persuasive discourse and Bakhtin’s less studied notion of
“answerability.” And “Like Paulo Freire after him, Bakhtin links
the ability to look relatively at one’s movement among languages
with the possibility for political action and awareness” (45).

While turning to “a dialogic, intersubjective understanding of
ethics” (Nealon130) is not an easy answer to the problem of agency,
Goleman complicates her reading of Bakhtin (much in the same way
Nealon does by complimenting Bakhtin’s thinking with that of
Levinas) by emphasizing the importance of response and “the other.”
Goleman argues that the power of internally persuasive discourse
derives as much from being shared with others as from being “our
own.” Citing Don Bialostosky’s statement that “the internally
persuasive word differs from the authoritative word ‘not so much as
inner to outer’ but as ‘answerable to unanswerable” (46), she
maintains that “the purpose of developing internally persuasive
relations is to stimulate answer-ability” (46). For Goleman, “It is the double activities of discourse with others and discourse with ourselves that constitute the dynamics for a dialogical pedagogy” (49).

Goleman's recommendation that writing teachers construct a dialogic course sequence aimed at broadening a student's “range of responses to his history along with his understanding of their implications for his developing subjectivity” (62) acknowledges the important role that autobiographical writing can play in a critically informed pedagogy. Through her analysis of several drafts of a student essay in response to a reading from Bartholomae and Petrosky's *Ways of Reading*, Goleman shows us a student struggling with the words and points of view of others as he presents an account of an event from his past. What is instructive here is the “response-ability” at work, no matter how limited the extent to which the student is able to develop it; the student is in the process of actively responding to the social situatedness of his personal experience and understanding of that experience, and begins to take "responsibility" for his actions and words. Such autobiographical writing moves beyond unquestioning recitation of convention or culturally available narratives toward a more dialogic look at the relation of such narratives to the writer's experience.
Such “response-ability” also has rhetorical roots in the work of Kenneth Burke. According to Michael Hassett, the “Burkean writer” allows “a conception of writer as agent, as acting upon language, while still understanding the writer as being acted upon by language” (180). Hassett argues, with the help of the work of Cary Nelson, that “Burke, particularly in his later works, anticipates Foucault (Nelson 162) in believing that ‘our work, then, is already written for us. In writing it anew, we make it our own but always as agents of a rhetorical situation of no one’s choosing’ (Nelson 169)” (Hassett 180). Prefiguring the postmodern dilemma which leads to Berlin’s social-epistemic rhetoric, Spellmeyer’s new phenomenology, and Goleman’s notion of critical effectivity, Burke’s rhetorical theory nevertheless recognizes a common exigency, in a sense, for each of these ideas: “the centrality of the nervous system.”

The Personal and the Academic

It is because of this independent central nervous system that “always beneath the dance of words there will be the dance of bodies” (R of R 288). And it is in the combining of the dance of words with the dance of bodies that the individual agent is formed. (Hassett 181)

It is this dance of bodies that demands a reimagining of the
relationship between theory and practice. To return to Richard Miller’s essay, “The Nervous System” is both his title and the subject (object?) of his inquiry. Reading and writing both with and against the grain of Foucault, he seeks to enact the imagining of alternatives to the binary oppositions at work within disciplinary disagreements over personal and academic discourse. Through self-conscious work with a variety of examples, including the personal and academic scenarios with which he begins and to which he returns throughout the essay, Miller demonstrates how the working of “the nervous system” in our disagreements over what constitutes “writing that matters” and/or “really useful knowledge” has much to do with our ability or willingness to conceive of alternatives.

Miller argues that the “discomfort some feel at the panels and articles they derisively refer to as ‘the weepies’ and the sense of mortification others experience at panels with titles such as ‘Parsifal’s Penis: A History’ or articles on ‘the critique(al) subject-effect in (post)-capitalist systems of disciplinarity’” are “complementary movements of revulsion.” But recognition that “‘taste’ is a socially constructed set of likes and dislikes” does not change the way that we experience it: “(Pierre) Bourdieu’s argument is that, regardless of the amount of cultural capital one inherits as a birthright or acquires through education, the end result is an
overwhelming sense that one's tastes are natural, rather than the product of one's social class or one's schooling" (271). And yet Miller argues that an awareness of this situation actually offers an opportunity for "excavating bodily responses for material evidence of the ways culture is present in the writer's very act of experiencing the composing process and in the reader's responses to the writer's text" (272-3). The visceral response of the writer, in the act of composing:

might be a site at which to explore the relationship between modes of writing legitimated by the academy and the circulation of cultural capital in our society. Pursuing such an investigation, I believe, serves both a lexical and pedagogical function: it allows us to widen the definition of what it means to write self-reflexively and it provides a way to index those places in the text where a true revision not only of the writer's argument but also of the writer's circumstances can occur. (273)

And, as Miller strives to demonstrate, such re-vision offers a means with which to "think anew about writing as a place where the personal and the academic, the private and the public, the individual and the institutional, are always inextricably interwoven" (267). It means "redefining the project of rhetoric" (282) in such a way as to learn how use language to get others not only to "see" us, whatever response that might trigger, but to "hear" us as well--and to learn how to teach that to others. Goleman articulates a similar goal:
a pedagogy of knowing based on revised Althusserian principles makes possible a new way of reading and writing—a way in which one reads texts closely as part of a social process in contradiction. This would include one's own critical reading practices and the writing that emerges from them. All writing thus becomes rewriting in that it entails re-presenting a cultural artifact's form in terms of the specific social dialogue it is part of. Seeing the not-seen, hearing the not-heard, constitutes the Marxian dialectic as an act of dialogical restoration, one that cannot be accomplished without an understanding of the historical problematic that has structured (and to a certain extent continues to structure) these visions as nonvisions, these voices as silences. (21)

Goleman and Miller both advocate "critical" pedagogies in that they involve reading ideology and understanding the workings of cultural capital. But as Goleman struggles to read her student's writing transitively (114), and Miller sees the work of his classroom "as an ongoing project where I learn to hear what my students are saying" (283), we can see that the "success" of such pedagogies depends not on the exclusion of the personal, but, on the contrary, on paying attention to the students' lived experience. The kind of revision such thinking about writing, and the teaching of writing, requires, as Miller states, is that of which Adrienne Rich writes in "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision:" "there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive... Moreover, if the imagination is to transcend and
transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at that moment”

(471, qtd. in Miller 284):

Believing in revision of this kind is not an intellectual feat of denial--the kind of necessary fiction that gets one to work every day; it is, rather, the very matter of a pedagogical practice that conceives of writing . . . as a place to see and re-see the components and possible trajectories of one's lived experience and to situate and re-situate that experience within a world of other thoughts and other embodied reactions. Writing of this kind can, I believe, generate material for constructing a more humane and hospitable life-world by providing the very thing the academy is currently most in need of: a technology for producing and sustaining the hope that tomorrow will be better than today and that it is worth the effort to see that such hopes aren't unfounded. (Miller 285)

Such revision, I believe, is of the very nature of that which both Spellmeyer and Berlin call for--and believe to be possible in spite of the obstacles against wide reaching change--within the field of English studies. Ultimately what Spellmeyer, Berlin, Goleman and Miller all have in common as they relate postmodern theory to composition practice is, contrary to nihilism, a positive, forward looking confidence that the world actually can be a better, more just place. None of these writers have any desire to return to humanism, essentialism, foundationalism, or current traditional rhetoric. And they are anything but uncritical optimists. But each
recognizes that, along with discursive practices and ideology, attending to material circumstances and lived experience is also a necessary to the process of educating ethical thinkers and communicators, active and critical citizens capable of making themselves heard and effecting change.

The accomplishment of such goals depends upon the development of pedagogies which foster answerability, which emphasize “response-ability” in all possible meanings of the word. Our students must be encouraged to develop their understanding of the relation of history and discourse to their evolving sense of self as a being in the world—to respond to the voices of others, to the interrelation of the personal, social, and academic in their experience and their writing. And we, in turn, must attend critically to our own responses to the same, and how such responses affect our “responsibility” as teachers, as we “see” and “hear” our students and respond to our students’ texts. Agency in academic discourse need not come at the expense of the personal. What is necessary is that our pedagogies attend to the always already autobiographical nature of all academic projects, to the role of the nervous system in all acts of reading and writing.
Chapter Three

Autobiography as a Dialogic Act:
Entering Unruly Conversation

I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood in art, so that everything I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life.

Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability*

Reading my essays, I hope you pay attention to what I am not saying as much as what I do say. There, in the folds of truth and perception, you may see who I really am.

Rick, English 501 student

Part I: Theory and Pedagogical Goals of English 501, "Constructions of the Self: Reading and Writing Autobiography"

Don Murray has long claimed that "all writing, in many different ways, is autobiographical" (67), from "academic writing, writing to instruct, textbook writing" to "the research and scholarship that instructs our profession" (73). Richard Miller, whose work approaches the issue of the "self" or "subject" of the writer from a position highly influenced by postmodern/post-structuralist theory and cultural studies, also expresses his belief in the autobiographical nature of all acts of writing, as I discuss in
the previous chapter. If Murray, Miller, and others (see Chapter Two) are correct, then even the most abstract or transactional writing that an individual does (for example, the physician who writes a paper on a certain type of drug therapy one day, then writes a prescription for that drug for a patient the next) has an autobiographical component. Conversely, "'self-expression' isn't only an expression of 'self' but of whole systems of human interaction" (Dixon 256).

In this chapter I will suggest that a bridge between the personal narrative and the critical essay may be constructed from the very critical theory which led to the postmodern impasse with regard to subjective agency. To this end I will analyze my own experience teaching a second-year writing course, English 501, in which I sought to bring theory into practice by engaging students themselves in a semester-long discussion of the dichotomies I address in the previous chapters, by teaching these conflicts in the field. In this course I sought to encourage a rhetoric that would engage questions about discourse both within and without the academy, within and across disciplines, and that would prompt students to examine their own assumptions regarding authority and the purposes and contexts for writing.

Such a rhetoric (complementary, not contradictory to Berlin's
social epistemic rhetoric) opens up a space for the personal and autobiographical as well as the academic, a space, in fact, for exploring the role of "the nervous system" in writing. Through the students' responses to the questions we posed regarding the relationship(s) between personal and academic writing, I will analyze how, while conflict between these seemingly distinct genres is not something we can simply make go away (nor, perhaps, should we want to, as a bridge creates a connection, not a fusion, where there once was a gap), postmodern theory actually can show us how these genres might work best together (from either/or to both/and) in the interest of fostering critical effectivity. Rather than fearing for the human subject and human agency, I consider ways in which "autobiography gives postmodernism a text and a discourse through which to theorize human agency" (Gilmore, "The Mark of Autobiography" 8). Our students already live in a postmodern age defined by ruptures and contradictions:

Postmodern culture with its decentered subject can be the space where ties are severed or it can provide the occasion for new and varied forms of bonding. To some extent, ruptures, surfaces, contextuality, and a host of other happenings create gaps that make space for oppositional practices which no longer require intellectuals to be confined by narrow separate spheres with no meaningful connection to the world of the everyday. Much postmodern engagement with culture emerges from the yearning to do intellectual work that
connects with habits of being, forms of artistic expression, and aesthetics that inform the daily lives of writers and scholars as well as the mass population. (hooks 518)

My goal in this chapter is to suggest, through a discussion of my pedagogy, an analysis of student writing, and the observations that I—and my students and I—have made about the writing they did, how critical theory might inform, rather than further confuse, our understanding of agency in both theory and practice.

Judith Goleman's "material theory of human agency," critical effectivity (18), discussed in Chapter Two, requires situating student writing as material social practice. In "Students, Authorship, and the Work of Composition," Bruce Horner indicts composition courses for the ways in which they perpetuate "the institutional distinction maintained between Authors and student writers which rests on a bankrupt concept of the Author's 'self' as the unitary autonomous origin of writing"--a binary which "has maintained the institutionally marginal position of Composition in relation to literary study in particular as well as to the academy in general" (505). While I disagree with Horner's claim that only pedagogies such as that advocated by David Bartholomae preserve "a space, however marginal, for student writers (and their teachers) in the academy," I do agree with his main premise:
what appear to be needed are strategies which acknowledge the institutional operation of the Author/student binary while combating its effects. Such strategies, however, will require first that both teachers and students learn to recognize the cultural work--for good or ill--performed by student writing, which itself requires situating that writing firmly in the social historical process. (505)

Pedagogy which attempts to situate students in the social by insisting that students write only about "'social'--usually, 'political'--topics accepts dominant monolithic conceptions of what constitutes the social and the personal, thus preventing exploration of the social constitution of the personal and the ongoing reproduction of revision of the social in individual, personal practices" (524). Goleman's detailed discussion of student texts, however, demonstrates that writing about the personal is a necessary part of learning to "'see' ideology in representations of the world--their own and others'" (33)--and part of learning to "see" their understanding of the self, and the relation of that self to ideology, in a historical context.

Autobiography is about representations. Narrative is not simply a form for the presentation of fact or fiction, but "a mode of knowing; the relational web of many texts complicates and enriches what we know of our experience" (Cain 21). Narrative, then, may become a means for articulating particularly situated experiences
and points of view, even for negotiating a space for the telling of stories that have been culturally unspeakable. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson propose that this mode of knowing can have powerful results:

*the everyday uses of autobiography can produce changes in the subject, for narratives are generatively excessive as well as reconstitutive.* That is, narratives afford a means of intervention into postmodern life. Autobiographical subjects can facilitate changes in the mapping of knowledge and ignorance, of what is speakable or unspeakable, disclosed or masked, alienating or communally bonding. (15)

And like bell hooks, Betty Bergland suggests that postmodernism's challenge to the notion of the humanist and essentialist self make ethnic autobiographies, in particular, meaningful sites "for exploring multiple subjectivities with implications for the larger culture." Such "exploration" would mean questioning "any easy relationship between discourse and the speaking subject, particularly the assumption that experience produces a voice--that, for example, being woman means speaking *in a woman's voice*" (134)--in order to "unmask cultural ideologies embedded" (135) in autobiographical subjectivities. In this way "autobiographies might also provide a site for challenging prevailing social relations" (135).

Reading and writing autobiographical narratives, then, can mean

1 See, for example, Audre Lourde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name,* and Nathan McCall, *Makes Me Wanna Holler.*
exploring/resisting/transforming the cultural and discursive forces which shape the subjectivities that it is possible to present in writing:

autobiographical storytelling, and by this we mean broadly the practices through which people assemble narratives out of their own experiential histories, cannot escape being dialogical, although its central myths resist that recognition. Autobiography is contextually marked, collaboratively mediated, provisional. Acknowledging the dialogical nature of autobiographical telling, we confront the ways in which autobiographical telling is implicated in the microbial operations of power in contemporary everyday life. (Smith and Watson 9)

Stressing the dialogic nature of autobiographical writing can help our students connect the personal to the social in a way that encourages entering conversations in academic discourse and the negotiation of operations of power that such moves involve.

For the composition course that is the "subject" of this chapter, I chose readings that addressed writing—both academic and personal—as conversation. In Lives on the Boundary (1989), Mike Rose uses an autobiographical account of his own education to address the problems he sees in American education and literacy instruction, particularly in relation to the nation's underclass. He writes of the college professors who encouraged him "to make connections and enter into conversations--present and past--to see
what talking a particular kind of talk would enable me to do with a thorny philosophical problem or a difficult literary text" (58). The kind of learning he discovered was not a matter of static, transferable knowledge--"it was all alive." The ways in which his mentors "lived their knowledge" encouraged a growth of knowledge within himself "that led back out to the world (58).

We read and discussed Rose's way of connecting the personal and academic after reading and writing in response to Lorene Cary's narrative *Black Ice* (1991), which introduces the notion of using autobiographical writing itself as a means of entering conversations. In *Black Ice* Cary recounts her experience leaving a public high school in Philadelphia in the early 1970s to become one of the first black women at St. Paul's School, a prestigious preparatory high school in Concord, New Hampshire. In the introductory section of the text Cary writes:

> The narratives that helped me, that kept me company, along with the living, breathing people in my life, were those that talked honestly about growing up black in America. They burst into my silence, and in my head, they shouted and chattered and whispered and sang together. I am writing this book to become part of that unruly conversation, and to bring my experience back to the community of minds that made it possible. (6)

Cary's account demonstrates that autobiography is, indeed, about joining conversations--often unruly ones, both past and present--in
order to make a space for one's stories in a much larger narrative, and "replace a sense of destiny with the vision of an uncertain future" (Richard Miller 285). It's about being seen, and learning how to make oneself heard.

The conversation may be unruly, but we can deconstruct--and reconstruct--the "structures" through which certain voices have entered the fray, because of and in spite of biases of class, race, and gender, and bring the resulting "architectonic" theories to bear on local needs--both practical and aesthetic. Such constructive/deconstructive agency is not possible without dialectic and reciprocity--or in Bakhtin's terms, answerability--on the part of both writing students and teachers. And such agency depends, ironically, on recognizing that "Our students--and we ourselves--are overdetermined subjects. To study our 'selves' and our relations to one another will require patient attention to the processes of enculturation that have formed us" (Dixon 256). Such a task is not an easy one, by any means, and it also requires an acknowledgement that the simultaneity and situatedness of perception "is not a private either/or, but an inclusive also/and" (Michael Holquist, in Bakhtin xxiii). Discourse constructs our experience, and our experience constructs discourse. The development of "internally

---

2 See Bakhtin, Art and Anwerability.
persuasive language relations" does "not represent the 'finding of one's own voice,' but rather the finding of a method for understanding and acting on the conjunctural effects of one's many voices" (Goleman 7). In those many voices lies the material for constructing "new metaphors for the subject" (Faigley 230).

Constructions of the Self

For three semesters I taught a second level writing course, English 501, "Introduction to Prose Writing," at The University of New Hampshire. English 501 (the next level composition course that students can take following 401, Freshman English) is a requirement for English majors in journalism and creative writing and for majors in several other departments at the University, including Nursing and Outdoor Education. It is not a requirement for English literature majors, but many take it as an elective, as do a number of students in other fields who have an interest in writing or who enjoyed Freshman English and want to try a more advanced writing course. 501 is one of the department's most popular courses. The mixture of students who elect to take the course and those who are required to do so makes for a classroom community (of 20) of diverse interests and stages of course work at the University. (While some students enroll immediately after Freshman English,
some must wait to take the course because they have difficulty getting into a section, and others, for whom the course is a requirement they are not eager to fulfill, deliberately put off taking the course until their senior year). While certain elements are common to each section (e.g., students generate an average of five pages of writing a week and have weekly or biweekly conferences with the instructor), individual instructors design the "content" of their own courses, which may or may not entail an organizing theme or focus.

I subtitled my course "Constructions of the Self: Reading and Writing Autobiography," and focused the three semesters of 501 that I taught on autobiography and the relationship between personal and academic writing. Each of the published autobiographical narratives or excerpts that I assigned in the course addresses the experience of growing up as a student of American schools and culture and the relation between writing and constructing an identity, and as each semester progressed I introduced scholarly essays on the relationship between autobiographical writing and academic discourse. I asked the students to question how the writing of personal narratives relates to other writing they do at the university and in the world. The course description that I included on the syllabus and used as the basis for our discussion on the first
day of class foregrounds the kind of questions that they were asked to consider as they responded to the assigned readings and wrote their own autobiographical essays. My goal was to complicate their thinking from the very beginning—to reassure them that they would begin by writing about "what they knew best" (an assumption about personal writing that I hoped to problematize) but also encourage them to see the act of writing about their experience as multidimensional and part of larger ongoing conversations:

I will invite you to participate in a scholarly conversation that usually goes on outside the classroom, and ask you, as students, to formulate your own answers to the following questions: If a composition course should help prepare you for working in other academic discourse communities at the university, what role should the writing of personal narratives have in the composition classroom? Is there a place for a personal "voice" in academic writing? (For the full text of the course description and reading list, see Appendix A).

Writing assignments consisted of three autobiographical essays and final connective/reflective writing that helped them to assemble this autobiographical work in their portfolios and comment on what they could see as they looked back over their writing, and four essays in response to specific readings: Cary, Rose, Bartholomae and Elbow, and Baldwin. Their final portfolio, which they turned in at the end of the semester, included their final revisions of three autobiographical essays, three of the four essays

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
in response to the readings, and their final reflective writing. For
the latter writing, some students wrote separate, introductory
essays, some also placed connective writing between each essay and
added a conclusion or epilogue as well, and some found common
themes or developed a metaphor or other narrative strategy which
allowed them to revise the initially separate autobiographical
pieces into a unified whole. I encouraged them to comment on the
process of writing and revising the essays in response to the
readings, which we came to refer to as their "critical essays," in
their final connective writing, but this was not a requirement.

I also asked them to keep a notebook with two parts. The first
part, the "learning log," was for taking reading notes and responding
to each of the readings, writing on the process of writing,
workshopping (in small groups of 3-5 which remained consistent for
the whole of the term) and revising their papers, and for in-class
freewriting. In the second part they kept a journal, writing on
anything at all two to three times a week to keep the writing and
thinking going and to experiment with topics for their
autobiographical essays.

The tough questions included in the course description were
designed to initiate the process of looking critically not only at the
ways that they write, but the ways in which they are also "written."
My aim was to encourage the students to develop an awareness/self-reflexiveness that would prevent solipsism, and take them beyond essentialism—to complicate but not unduly compromise their sense of authorial subjectivity. The objective behind the sequence of reading and writing assignments was to encourage the students to question conventional and easy ways of categorizing what is autobiographical and what is academic, and to examine and question their own notions of the "self" that can be represented or said to be "present" in writing. While the students entered the course with a variety of attitudes toward writing—both personal and academic—and levels of confidence in their own abilities, my objectives were the same for all: that they might develop a consciousness of language, audience, context (historical, social) that would help them make their voices heard. Long term, my hope was that such a pedagogy could help students develop a useful, if tacit, understanding of the relationship of the self to rhetoric, and culture. Like Goleman, I sought to develop a pedagogy that "replaces the authoritative language of recitation with an approach that allows students to speak from their own histories, collective memories, and voices while simultaneously challenging the grounds on which knowledge and power are constructed and legitimated" (Giroux, quoted in Goleman 41). To be successful, such a pedagogy
had to encourage a kind of student-teacher as well as student-student collaboration (with a mind, always, to issues of authority and the unequal power dynamic of the student-teacher). The students would challenge me, but most of these challenges would reveal how collaboration is not "just a working-with, it is also to some extent always a working-against" (Spellmeyer, "On Conventions" 90). As teacher seeking an "actively rhetorical" student-teacher relation, I must be "not a master of situation, but a student of it" (Goleman 9).

My students knew throughout the course that they were participating in a study—that our discussions and classroom activities, as well as their writing, would become part of the research for my dissertation. The students in the third section that I taught were reminded of this regularly by the presence of my tape recorder in the classroom on days when we had full class discussions. All of the students from whom I quote here in the dissertation gave me permission to do so, and some chose their own pseudonyms. Only one or two students each semester did not decide to participate or simply did not return the permission forms that I distributed toward the end of the term.
Crazy Quilts and Life Lines

... you cannot put together a life willy-nilly from odds and ends. Even in a crazy quilt, the various pieces, wherever they come from, have to be trimmed and shaped and arranged so they fit together, then firmly sewn to last through time and keep out the cold. Most quilts are more ambitious: they involve the imposition of a new pattern. But even crazy quilts are sewn against a backing; the basic sense of continuity allows improvisation. Composing a life involves an openness to possibilities and the capacity to put them together in a way that is structurally sound.

Mary Catherine Bateson, *Composing a Life*

On the days that we discussed an assigned reading, I began class by writing a quotation on the chalk board for the students to copy into their learning logs (or if the passage was a lengthy one, as in the case of the one above, I would distribute it on a handout). These epigrams, chosen both from the readings up for discussion and from sources outside the course materials, helped me to introduce topics that I hoped to get to in discussion or raise issues for the students to reflect on in their learning logs. I began, on day one of the course, with the epigram from Emily Dickinson on the syllabus ("Tell all the Truth but tell it slant--") as a way of initiating discussion of some of the complex issues we would be considering over the course of the term. Each of the readings were chosen, in turn, for the ways in which they helped to make visible the perils,
purposes, and rewards involved in autobiographical writing. My main criteria for selection lay in the ways each text connected the personal to the social and historical, and how they could help us investigate the relationship between personal and academic writing.

The selections from Patricia Hampl and Annie Dillard helped the class begin from a place both familiar and problematized. Recollections of childhood provide students with a form and a subject matter with which they are already familiar and may have experience engaging in themselves. And pairing Hampl's and Dillard's writing raised issues of prose style as well as questions about the nature of memory in our earliest discussions. What is immediately striking about the selections from each of these two authors is the use of detail. Curiously, each semester there would be a handful of students who expressed particularly strong admiration for Dillard's prose, and expressed a wish to "capture a child's perspective" in the way that she does. Others were not so impressed and found her attention to what they viewed as minutia to be tedious. Such responses facilitated discussion of prose style as well as choices writers make regarding content and structure, and emphasis on the fact that no matter how much Dillard's descriptions, for example of a moment of fascination with the difference between the skin on her own young hands and the looser
skin on her mother's, appear to take us back to the child's vision, the writer's perspective is always that of an adult looking back.

Hampl's self-reflexive writing on the process of writing autobiography while she is engaged in it helped to demonstrate how attention to seemingly small detail is less about the faithful rendering of exactly what happened as it is about examining why some memories stand out as so much more important that others. The excerpt from Hampl became a touchstone, in fact, each semester as in our discussions of subsequent readings, and the students' own writing, we attended to the "imprecision of memory" and the inevitable fictional element of autobiography. Our memory of details need not capture the factual truth to be "accurate." "The imagination, triggered by memory, is satisfied that this is so" (Hampl 400). What is critical is interpreting the reasons for the selection and importance of such memories in relation to the present moment, one's present self. Beginning the semester with the reading from Hampl also helped to disabuse the students of any assumptions, or reassure them against any fears, that autobiography is only self-referential: "The self-absorbtion that seems to be the impetus and embarrassment of autobiography turns into (or perhaps always was) a hunger for the world." While it may begin "as hunger for a world, one gone or lost, . . . in the act of remembering, the
personal environment expands, resonates beyond itself, beyond its 'subject,'" (399) into history.

Such attention to history also helped open up our discussions to the importance of investigating the ways in which the stories we tell and the selves we construct in writing are at least in part determined by larger cultural narratives and discursive practices. And yet all is not a matter of words; our experience is grounded in the world. The dilemma lies in how to negotiate the relation between the two. Exploring the interrelation of the personal and history, Hampl points out that in the question "What is it possible to know?" there lies "the lingering nerve of an ethical culture: if we know, then we are responsible" (403). This contention that with knowledge comes responsibility is a sobering one for students, indeed, for all readers of Hampl's text; it is difficult to deny, and yet one wants to resist, wondering what the limits to such responsibility might be.

With the subsequent readings I sought to help students see the important role such self-reflexive narrative work plays in developing rhetorical agency. In retrospect it could be said that I hoped our work with these readings would demonstrate the claim I have since found supported by Mark Freeman's work on narrative psychology. Freeman argues that by becoming "more attuned to the
social construction of narrative . . . the self may be transformed from an object, prey to the potentially constrictive power of culture, to a willful agent: a creator, able to cast into question those stories thought to be 'given' and write new ones, thereby transforming in turn precisely that social landscape which is often deemed responsible for who we become" (185-86). Agency, impossible with an either/or perspective or a naive desire to have it both ways, depends upon an intelligent negotiation of both/and.

After readings from Frederick Douglass, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Richard Rodriguez demonstrated for students some of the complexities of language, literacy, and growing up in America, reading the full text of Lorene Cary's *Black Ice* gave my classes of all white students the opportunity to read a narrative with which they could potentially connect at the same time that they would also have to address issues of difference. Having all been high school students, they could connect with the period in her life that she describes, but more importantly as the subject of the narrative is her experience going away to a preparatory a long way from home—in New Hampshire, if fact—they identified with the similarities between her experience and that of going away to college in the same state. And yet at the same time Cary's situation as an African American young woman at a newly coeducational and integrated
school required students to attend to the issue of difference as they interpreted her narrative.

   Students felt invited in to her story because they, too, had understood Cary's hope "that it might be possible to come to this school and be free of my past, free to re-create myself" (23) and were at different stages in the process of discovering how such recreation both is and is not possible. It is not possible to "free" oneself from one's past--even in the most literal terms, amnesia creates an ever present and haunting lack where a past once was accessible. But writing autobiography is a "rewriting of the self," an act of creation which cites, so to speak, knowledge of the ways in which that self has also always already been written by language and culture, that our education, formal and otherwise, is also socialization. The difficulty my students had understanding Cary's description of her sense of mission, her need not only to succeed at St. Paul's but "to turn it out" (59) can be attributed, I believe, to their generational lack of political interest and to ethnocentrism. Many students' questions about what she meant by this phrase demonstrated that their previous experience did not prepare most of them to understand "the desperate mandate, the uncompromising demands, and the wild, perfect, greedy hope of it," Cary's sense that if "we could succeed here--earn high marks, respect, awards; learn
these people, study them, be in their world but not of it--we would fulfill the prayers of our ancestors" (58-9). At first only a few students understood the subversive element of "turning it out" and viewed that element in a positive way. But most students did come to understand the anger and confusion Cary describes, especially as it involved issues of class and gender as well as race. They also seemed to appreciate the difficulty of writing a narrative that speaks in instructive ways to a white middle class or even elite audience at the same time that it seeks to join the ranks of the narratives that kept her going by speaking to young African Americans. This very literary narrative, which includes stories from folklore which have played a role in shaping Cary's own story, and carefully crafted metaphors and symbols for students to unpack which address the meaning Cary makes of her past through narrative, became many student's favorite text of the term.

Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* provided us with a different kind of narrative of education, one that helped me set up a transition into discussing the relationship between personal narrative and academic writing. I introduced this text to the students as a work of scholarship in the field of composition, one considered groundbreaking by some in its use of personal narrative in academic scholarship. Reading only Chapters Two and Three, we
focused on Rose's personal experience of the role that education plays in the "writing" of a student's sense of self when a student falls through the cracks in the system, and the way he uses the story of his own engagement with language to reflect what needs to be done to address the ways in which the system fails the underclass. Following our reading of Cary, Rose's story helps further expose the negative effects of some of the master narratives of our culture. Rose's statement that "We live, in America, with so many platitudes about motivation and self-reliance and individualism--and myths spun from them, like those of Horatio Alger--that we find it hard to accept the fact that they are serious nonsense" (47) made a useful frame for discussing student's responses to the text and what thoughts it evokes about their own educational experiences.

Rose has been criticized for romanticizing, in Horatio Alger style himself, his rise from the underclass to professor of English, and to a degree such criticisms have merit. Rose attends to class and ethnicity, gender is a non-issue in this very patriarchal tale. A student who is first saved from the vocational track by a teacher who discovers the clerical error that put him there years before, he is then fortunate enough to be mentored by a series of father figures from high school to graduate school. But my experience is that my
students are so attached to the bootstraps narrative, so indoctrinated in the myth of the American Dream, that Rose's efforts to debunk these myths lead to productive discussions of how such cultural narratives do not fit with experience, but powerfully serve other purposes.

I included the selections from Bartholomae and Elbow as the penultimate material in the course, having built up to this moment by asking students to reflect on the relation between "personal" and "academic" writing, the kind of autobiographical writing they were doing in this course and the more critical, analytical essays they were writing in response to the readings, and the relation between writing in composition courses and writing in their other course, particularly their major if that was not English. With these readings, I told them, I was inviting them into an ongoing conflict in the field not usually shared with students but which affects them directly. Students need, and deserve, to be informed of why the curriculum is what it is, and should be encouraged to examine the principles behind these decisions. If they are to have any agency in their writing, and not merely go through the motions--naively or knowingly; they need to be able to reflect on and take some responsibility what they are doing and for what purpose. What, I asked them, is the proper work of a composition course? How should
it relate to the writing they are/will be doing in other academic fields? How should it relate to the writing they will be doing after they leave the university?

The stories that Cary and Rose tell both testify to the power of learning academic discourse—in fact the success both authors achieve depends upon their exceptional abilities to talk the talk and walk the walk. And yet both writers, especially Cary, seek to open up a space in academia for something more, something that would have allowed them to connect learning to their lives, their histories, rather than seeming to demand estrangement from them as a dues for joining the club. And, of course, the texts are narratives, "expressivist," as it were, in genre. With the Bartholomae and Elbow essays I sought to bring these contradictions into the foreground of our discussion, and into the foreground of students thoughts about writing. We discussed genre, the autobiographical component of all writing, their assumptions that personal writing is 'easier" than academic, the ways in which the academy supports disciplinary fragmentation and own either/or thinking, and the challenges to and possible gains to be made from exploring both/and. If, indeed, "academic writing is the real work of the academy" (Bartholomae 1995, 63) and "life is long and college is short" (Elbow 1991, 136), what is/should be the relationship between writing in school and
writing in the world?

I concluded the course with excerpts from James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* because this text brought us full circle, back to all of the questions I raised in the course description, and throughout the semester, that the students were now better prepared to handle. For this assignment, I asked students to write a memo to the members of their small group which would begin the work of the essay they would go on to write. For this memo, and subsequent essay, I asked the students to look carefully at several specific passages in Baldwin's text as well as a brief passage from W. E. B DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk* and a quotation from Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*. I asked them to consider the following questions "as students and writers seeking a way to have a voice in writing," and "in our culture":

How does Baldwin work with the complexities of the relationship between self and society (especially for those on the margins of American culture)? What does he have to say about the problem of identity and its relation to writing? (For the complete text of the assignment see Appendix B)

Weighty questions, yes. But such questions are crucial to the development of students' ability to read the texts of others in light of their reading of the larger culture, an ability which in turn plays a critical role in the students' own writing. With this sequence of
readings, as with the epigrams, I sought to set up a movement from questioning the familiar to personal writing as a political act:

Writing can be a lifeline . . . especially when your existence has been denied, especially when you have been left on the margins, especially when your life and process of growth have been subjected to attempts at strangulation.

Interview with Kenyan poet Micere Mugo

Such writing is political because it makes a space for experience and emotions that one is otherwise outlawed from expressing or acting on. The experience Mugo describes is far from that of my students, but that was, in a sense, the point. My hope was, paradoxically, that by discussing material that addressed some of the tremendous difficulty of telling a story which does not conform to available cultural narratives, which dominant discursive practices would seek to deny, students might begin to recognize the complicated issues involved in any act of textual self-representation. And with knowledge comes responsibility.

"Narratives which have already been written" provide a place for people to "flee from both their freedom and responsibility" (Freeman 220). Writing which refuses to do this willingly has a chance of challenging rather than reinforcing the status quo. Lorene Cary learned that she, too, "had something to give to St. Paul's. I had come not just with my hat in my hand, a poorly shod scholarship girl, but
as a sojourner bearing gifts, which were mine to give or withhold" (195). Her autobiographical account marks a continuation of her ongoing efforts to give, to the school through the time she spent as a teacher and board member, and to the world through her story. Ideally I hoped that at some point these students, however it was that they had arrived at the university, would realize that they, too, had gifts to offer the university and the world, and that they would choose to give rather than to withhold.

Narrative as a Form of Knowing

The students' responses to questions regarding what it means to construct a self in writing, and questions about the relationship between academic and personal writing, reflected, in part, the mix of students who elected and were required to take English 501. In the three semesters I taught the course I had few English majors—one semester I had none at all. Most of my students were pre-med, pre-vet, or majoring in disciplines more oriented toward the sciences that liberal arts. Many among this majority tended to see this course as a place where they could do the kind of writing (creative, personal) that they did not see a place for in their other courses, and because of this some resented writing in response to essays—especially when I assigned the Bartholomae and Elbow
essays and asked them to enter that conversation about the proper role of academic discourse in courses such as this one. Liberal arts majors, while not excited by this portion of the course, tended to be less resistant and have a better sense of why I was asking them to consider such questions.

I was pleased to discover, however, that most of the students did not have an oversimplified sense of what is involved in writing autobiographically, and their essays demonstrated the ways in which narrative can be a form of knowing, or coming to know. Most preferred writing these essays over responses to the readings, for predictable stated reasons—"it's easier to write about what you know." And some remained highly invested in the notion that it is possible to write only for oneself, that a broader audience—even in the form of one's future self—is not necessarily implied by the act of writing. But one of the most common features of their autobiographical writing was attention to the social—to relationships with others, often in order to better understand something about the nature of those relationships.

As the student quotation with which I begin this chapter demonstrates, the idea of being able to know and communicate "who one really is" is a seductive one. The desire to be understood is a necessary element of human nature, and certainly one of the
fundamental motivations or exigencies for writing. And our culture continually tells us that "getting in touch" with our essential "true selves" is the solution to what ails us, the key to finding inner peace and worldly happiness. The dominant master narrative of the self in the U.S. of the twentieth century is that of "the masterful, bounded, isolated individual who has what has been called 'a richly furnished interior',' a Western, patriarchal concept which is "translated into and expressed by smaller and more easily transmittable units such as psychological theories . . . ; architecture that emphasizes private, enclosed areas and ignores public spaces; pop culture that teaches the value of cosmetic beauty and individual competitiveness and acquisitiveness . . . ; current language usage ('the real you,' 'your inner life'); (and) psychotherapy practices" (Philip Cushman 20). And yet the notion of communicating an essence reflected in the statement "who I really am" is not one that I think most students really believe is a possibility that is just difficult to capture in writing, or even what they really want to be able to do when they invoke the phrase. On some level they know, or at least suspect, that the phrase, or cliche', is a convention of Western culture, a (too) readily available expression of the American cult of individualism. What they want, I will argue, is to be able to communicate something of their experience, to make meaning of
that experience in a way that allows them to connect with others or engage in dialogue with the experience of other, thereby working against "sullenness" (Borgmann) and "the empty self" (Cushman). My students' writing, and talk in the classroom, reflected a sense of fragmentation and paradox, a consciousness of living in postmodern times. Hopes that readers might see a "true self"--depending, as that does for Rick, on both what they don't say as well as what they do --represent a means of defense against alienation that for me as a teacher made my goal of helping them articulate their "many voices" all the more important.

While the range of topics was wide, a number of students did not discover what they "really needed" to write about (as one student put it) until late in the course, and what they wrote about in these essays was neither "easy" nor "what they knew best," but what they needed to come to understand better, question, or give some manageable shape to by working through it in writing. The essays of those who risked disclosure demonstrate the potential power of such writing: that sometimes the most difficult--and necessary--material to write about is the personal; that such disclosure is neither confessional nor solipsistic; and that it is impossible to talk about writing as self-discovery without also discussing the social context in which such discovery (or perhaps rhetorical
invention) is grounded.

Hence deconstructing the dichotomy between the personal and the academic ideally works two ways. My original emphasis was on writing autobiography in order to enter ongoing conversations in a variety of contexts in the academy and culture. I expected that for some students, particularly those already at ease in academic discourse, writing autobiography might feel, at least at first, as uncomfortable as academic discourse does to others. I did not expect, however, what the opportunity to explore this genre would come to mean to some of these students. So I begin with Allison, whose work showed me a student who found in autobiographical writing a way not to look inward at "who she really is," at least not to in the intransitive form of the verb to be, but to explore the collection of life experiences, historical and material circumstances, and circumstances of race and gender that shape both her sense of self in the activity of being at a given moment, and in the ongoing process of becoming.
A junior English major, Allison led me to the ironic discovery that a course such as this one can be especially important for someone who has been "rewarded" for her skill as a writer by placing out of Freshman English:

In all the papers I have written since I have been in college, not one of them has asked to see or hear my personal self until English 501. I had been relegated to proving a thesis in a manner that was clear and concise. Yet, this manner never allowed me to present who I was or how I felt. I was required to do close readings of texts and not myself. At the beginning of the semester we, as a class, were told that what the course involved was something of a self journey. A journey that would hopefully lead forward. What I experienced was a journey full of learning and self challenges. I am able to write this last personal essay now because of the previous personal and analytical essays assigned. I've learned to be both truthful and daring while sharing events relevant to me and who I am.

Seeing how the published authors we were reading negotiated sharing difficult topics with a public audience encouraged Allison and several other students to make similar moves themselves. In her last autobiographical essay this very outgoing young woman, who immediately became the leader of her small group, took the risk of writing something she said she had only been able to write about
indirectly before, through poetry: "You see, I wake up every morning and wonder if today is going to be the day I receive a phone call telling me that my mother has died of alcoholism." This paper Allison did not share with her group, but she did share with me the sense of relief she felt after she had written it. Not a confessional narrative offered up for the teacher's validation of its truth and sincerity, her essay is about being seen and being heard, about taking a subject that she had only been able to address in writing through private poetry into a more public context. Engaging narrative as form of knowing, Allison achieved agency by negotiating the discourse of substance abuse and the cultural narratives it has produced and making a space for her story. In a way that reminds me of Richard Miller's re-reading and re-examination of the process of writing a poem in graduate school that left him "overwhelmed with grief" (273), this student's reflections on the writing and reception of her essay provide "material evidence of the ways culture is present" (Miller 272) in both acts. Allison's writing self-reflexively explored her lived experience and the conflicting emotions--shame, fear, anger, love for her mother--that both the experience and the recounting of that experience elicit, and how these feelings affect her everyday life. In her final writing for her portfolio she wrote that one of the positive aspects of our
individual conferencing was "the safe environment it provided:"

With just Debbie to judge me, as compared to four or five in small group workshops, I was more willing to share personal information that made it easier for the reader of my paper to understand where I was coming from. The safe environment also was beneficial when it came time to challenge myself and take the risk of writing something that is difficult to express. Having an understanding pair of ears in conference gave me the strength and confidence I needed to grow as a writer.

While her literal audience was a limited one—for the time, at least, just myself—her essay, as an essay for an academic composition course, was composed for a wider public audience, and we discussed it as such. As teacher audiences—however sympathetically or even adversarially perceived—our role in the writing relationship is never "just" that of an individual reader, but as a representative of the academy, and a range of subject positions both within and without the academy. Understanding, respect, transitivity (Goleman), and answerability are each important to pedagogy that provides a space for disclosure as well as cultural critique.

In her final critical essay in response to James Baldwin, which we workshopped as a class, Allison made references to her own experience that she said she had never been able to do in a critical analysis. This examination of her own situatedness as a reader (and writer) played an important role in enabling her to enter a larger
cultural conversation, and to argue ultimately for another kind of "safe environment." Her essay, "Notes of a Privileged Daughter," reveals what Baldwin's narrative has helped her come to know:

James Baldwin, in his book *Notes of a Native Son*, addresses the issue of history and its influence on the future. He stresses the fact that society is doomed to repeat itself if we do not learn from past differences and accomplishments. His passage about the future and its direct relation to the past made me think about my place in society; not only my place in society but how it is affected by what I have experienced and learned in my twenty-one years. Recently, the most prominent struggle I have had to deal with is the fact that I have been born "white" and a woman. The woman aspect is easier to deal with, I have found, than this idea of being "white" at a school where the African-American minority is so low. I've realized that being born "white" has automatically opened quite a few doors for me that would have remained closed if I was of a different ethnicity; and that is where the problem lies. This problem also creates the issue of private and public rage. Who feels it and what impact it may have individually and publically (sic).

From here Allison goes on to use her reading of Baldwin to discuss the dangers of "political correctness." She argues that "the desire not to offend" results in the use of "safe phrases and words to keep people happy and content" which ironically "skirt around" the difficult issues of race and ethnicity. Her conclusion that "By avoiding the issues at hand we, as a society, are dodging the responsibility of the rage many people feel and should express"
makes the sophisticated move of recognizing powerful co-opting force of hegemony. She concludes that her knowledge of what she has been granted as "a privileged daughter" should be used to make a difference:

[Baldwin's] story has helped me come to the conclusion that my place in society is one of responsibility. I am responsible for educating myself, first and foremost, and others secondly. Along with education is the responsibility of creating as safe an environment as possible for others to express themselves. These two elements should make for a more understanding present and a better future.

While some might argue that her idealistic conclusion echoes familiar American platitudes, I see a student who exhibits an awareness of the degree to which we are overdetermined and yet sees the potential that specific intellectuals have to be agents of change.

My efforts to encourage students to experiment with form as well as content--when they trusted that I was serious about this--also helped some students work with difficult topics or find a way to personalize a narrative in a conscious effort to avoid the inevitable paper on this topic "that we've all read before" (Bartholomae 1985). Some students exhibited a striking awareness of the postmodern tenet that "The conventions and details of many of the stories we tell are, in a sense, already written and read by
the culture" (Lee Ann Carroll 922). Their concern with avoiding such "conventional" or "cliched" writing from the very beginning, clearly also a result of previous writing instruction, demonstrated less a belief that originality was a possibility than a desire to demonstrate a knowledge of and ability to manipulate convention for one's own purposes. Such students were pleased to know that they had permission to experiment. Cherie, for example, indulged her imagistic, literary tendency in her very first piece, which rendered, in a manner very different from an essay such as Allison's, her relationship with her grandmother, now deceased, whom she had come to learn was an alcoholic. While she was always concerned about sounding trite (especially after a group member with a very different writing style suggested that one of her papers reminded him of the prose in a romance novel), consistently expressed concern about her grammar, and was very careful about being sure she understood what I was expecting, it was her willingness to engage in play with language, memory, and perspective that made her personal narratives distinctive and compelling.

In her analytical essays she also learned that it was possible to be in dialogue with the authors or ideas she was discussing, especially as she made personal connections. In her paper in response to Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, she wrote of the way
in which under quite different circumstances, she too had become lost in the system. When test scores placed her on an average level "math track" in eighth grade, she and her family had no idea the serious impact that this assessment and her trouble in science courses would cause her in the future. Thinking herself on the college track due to the praise she was given for her superior work in English and humanities, her rude awakening came when she met with a high school guidance counselor to discuss where she would be applying to college:

(the counselor) sighed and looked at me with a mixture of pity and loathing on her long gray face, and said that none of these schools were a "realistic" option. Her only suggestion was that perhaps I could get into a small, mediocre private college if I applied without filling out the financial aid form. For the next three years my life was ripped and complicated and my sense of self all but evaporated.

. . . . Ultimately, upon my intervening moment with the wan faced guidance counselor, I felt that my ability to excel in English and humanities was only because it was "easy," whereas math and science were the true tests of intelligence, the "real" classes.

While Cherie attends to the important differences between her situation and Rose's, she also recognizes the similarity of their ways of defending themselves. Living in a University community with high educational expectations for its high school students, "Like Rose I let the mark I was assigned penetrate my identity . . . it
contributed to my tensions with school." In light of the "evidence" of her tracked history with math and science, she had no means of defending herself against the "authority" of the counselor's assessment, however sharply it conflicted with her own sense of self. However unjust and damaging it felt, she could not avoid internalizing this "other's" voice, and what she felt it had to say about her own authority and agency.

**Self-Disclosure as a Means to Agency,**

**Not Confession or Therapy**

Encouraging writing about the personal is not without its perils. Among my other reasons for avoiding an "expressive" pedagogy lay very serious ethical concerns. As teachers of composition are neither qualified psychotherapists nor counselors or any kind, I have long been suspicious of pedagogical situations which risk casting student-teacher relations as therapeutic. And composition is not about confession. Since some students jump to the conclusion that autobiographical writing necessarily means disclosing personal "secrets" or writing only about the most dramatic events in their lives, there is always the danger that a student may choose a writing topic not because it is one she wants to explore, but because she believes writing autobiography requires confession. Another
difficulty is determining our proper response when students do feel they want to write about something that is very difficult for them, or perhaps for us, since it can be difficult for some students to understand that our comments on their writing are not criticisms of their experience. And finally, Dan Morgan writes of the problem of response in such extreme cases as paper he received in which the student confessed to murder (and when asked insisted it was fact, not fiction), and others in which writers discussed their histories of physical or sexual abuse in disturbing ways.

Several of my colleagues contend that particularly in freshman composition these stories will have out whether we invite them or not. Morgan, whose above examples of disclosure were all unsolicited, would appear to agree. And while he understands how such sticky ethical situations lead some teachers to eliminate personal narratives from their curriculum altogether, he cannot support this practice. In the examples he presents he sees a "deeper truth:" that "these students' topics and concerns, and their life experiences and points of view, reflect what has been occurring in our society at large" (324), from the experience of violence to the messages that students receive from proliferation of tell-all talk shows. "Rather than eliminating personal narratives, we--and the anthologies that we use--should rely on models that enable students
to reflect upon and understand their experiences in a larger social context" (323). Although in my years of working with *Ways of Reading* I received only a few examples of unsolicited disclosures, I do agree that students’ lived experience needs to be acknowledged and dealt with within the work of the writing class, and my concern with what might be excluded by some critical pedagogies led to the subject of this dissertation and the research I present here. The problem of response remains a difficult one, however, and one that I fear may have been somewhat complicated by my own "dis-ease" with engaging in autobiographical writing.

As with Allison, above, I was impressed by the "journey" that another student was able to make by the time that we reached her third personal essay. Brenda, returning to finish her degree in order to pursue a career in journalism, was an extraordinary writer from the beginning. The voice in her prose was striking for its humor and irony, and she often used her wit to diffuse her self-consciousness about being the only fifty year old in a class of students aged 18-25. Unlike other members of the class, she had no objections to writing critical essays in response to the readings; in fact it was the autobiographical writing she was apprehensive about (she feared getting into what she called "navel picking"). She had trouble concluding her personal narratives--however good the writing, they
ended abruptly without any kind of closure, however provisional, always leaving the sense of something missing, something she had not quite gotten to yet. So I was somewhat surprised when in her third autobiographical piece, titled "Revision," she made an "archeological" move that she described as risky but necessary, one that reminds me of Baldwin's statement that "the past is all that makes the present coherent, and further, . . . the past will remain horrible for exactly as long as we refuse to assess it honestly" (8). Her essay begins:

I am telling you some of those stories, to give you some sense of the charm, the beguiling charm of some of my ancestors. I don't know for sure if all these stories are literally true, but that doesn't matter much any more; their impact has been just as great whether or not they are "true". Now that I know more truth, I am also trying to find a place for these stories. They deserve some honor; the women especially deserve great honor. The women may not have always behaved with honor, but they were doing the best they could to survive, to survive with humor, hard work, and love for their children. Now, I know I am part of a long line of abused women, and that I, too, was both abused and was unable to see when my daughter was, in turn, abused.

Her style and tone, particularly her sense of wry humor about the "charm, the beguiling charm" of her ancestors, demonstrates an impressive understanding of the complexities of representations in both lived experience and writing. Her account also instructively
demonstrates the importance of seeing or re-seeing the history behind/of our stories, and the necessity of the telling of those stories, however difficult, to the prevention of unfortunate repetition. She self-reflexively addresses the force that cultural narratives which make unspeakable or would deny the existence of experiences such as abuse and the act of will it takes to break out of such contraints and find the words for one's own story; while culturally available narratives of abuse now help to make this possible for her, she negotiates the forms and terms such other narratives provide in order to construct her own.

Yet I was often haunted by the feeling that my pedagogy was also failing Brenda in some way. Much was clearly not my fault (her schedule interfered with getting her work in and making it to conferences). But my experience with students such as Brenda kept me mindful of problems my former emphasis on critical essays had helped me to avoid. I stressed throughout the course that successful, compelling autobiographical writing need not involve disclosing "secrets," and that some of the most interesting personal narratives are those which do not address the ostensibly most dramatic moments in one's life; what was important was using the autobiographical essays to explore questions and render experiences that were important to them, and to communicate to others.
something of the persons they were in the process of becoming. Brenda's writing clearly met such criteria. But I often felt uneasy encouraging Brenda to keep working on the essay I quote from above when she was having difficulty, for fear that she might feel I was pushing her to move into memories and issues that she did not want to address. I suspect now that my own discomfort engaging in such writing made me feel that it was somehow disingenuous of me to encourage her to move forward with her own project, and that Brenda may have picked up on these feelings in the conferences that we did have. I also suspect, however, that the conferences she missed were caused not only by her work schedule but perhaps also by some discomfort on her part with an instructor twenty years her junior. And yet Brenda assured me that this essay was one that she needed to write, that at this point she was ready, and that she would know when to stop and put some things on hold until later. Her final draft (which was the last draft I had returned to her, not the final revision that the portfolio instructions called for) became increasingly general as she moved from her ancestors into events in her own life, but worked powerfully with "revision" as a trope. And this time, her conclusion, necessarily provisional, gives the essay structural closure:

I am beginning to understand that I may never
recover lost pieces of my own past. I am beginning to understand that the myths and tattered photos may be valid and important. But I will never forget that what is hidden behind that curtain of wit and charm is just as much part of the reconstruction I do. When I rebuild that past, I am beginning the process of inventing or maybe transforming my future. No amount of revision is going to influence that future if I cannot summon the courage to look behind that curtain.

Given the power of the narrative she had begun, I could only hope that after the semester had come to a close she might continue with this "revision." Her final set of reflections, while rather formal in some parts which responded directly to questions from the course description that I had asked the class to consider, suggested that she might, although she never returned to pick up her portfolio:

After re-reading my personal essays, I see that I did a lot of circling around some very central issues, but that gradually, I began to gather my courage and speak of the formerly unspeakable more directly. For each of us, this inward looking, this removal of the protective mist swirling around memories of the past, is the process of a life self-examined. But this, I do not mean an obsession with the past or the self, but a constant reference to one's history. We need to look back often, as unflinchingly as our strength at the moment will allow us to do. How could this work ever be done? The most interesting people I know are involved in this reflexive process every day and living/working/loving more successfully because they had not fled their rage, guilt, and grief; but rather, have located themselves in reference to their pasts and moved forward.

Brenda's work demonstrates that however much we fear treading
into the realm of therapy, examining one's history means dealing with the emotions attached to it, that it evokes in the present. Part of the challenge of such personal acheology lies in finding a language for such emotion.

I have some reservations about my experience with another student in the same section of the course, a woman of twenty five who had also returned to school and, unlike Brenda, made it clear from the beginning that she lacked confidence in her writing. Much of the semester was over, however, before I knew anything about Jill's unique situation in relation to the autobiographical writing that we were doing in the course--that one of her goals in therapy was to stop disclosing so much about herself to other people, to put up some walls. She wrote in her journal that although at the beginning she thought this would be a good class for her because she loves to share herself with others, thinking and writing about the past had caused her some "emotional turmoil." Nothing could have been further from my intention, and this late revelation of her feelings about the focus of the course led me to do much rethinking. And yet, while many of Jill's thoughts about the course are discouraging ones and I continue wonder if her needs might have been better served by a different section of 501, I see her experience as one of mixed success. While the readings helped the
class to see that autobiography takes many forms and need not entail revealing secrets or reliving the past in present prose, Jill found that her early essays weren't meaningful to her precisely because they so scrupulously avoided anything of importance. Her third personal essay, in which she described taking responsibility, in a moment of family crisis, for her own responses to the behavior of other members of her family and refusing to let others script her behavior for her, was difficult for her to write and she did not share this paper with her group. Yet this paper became the one she was most pleased with, and she wrote at the end of the course that she was happy with the writing she had done. She remarked that as she looked back over her work she was pleasantly surprised to see her years of work in therapy "shining through." The writing she saw in these pages reflected a self of which she could be proud. She had taken control in her writing in the same way that she had taken control in the actions she describes. Her prose is this essay also demonstrated an improvement over the often tortured text of the writing she submitted earlier that signifies, I would argue, movement into internally persuasive, answerable discourse.

My goal was to practice a "pedagogy of disclosure," which, as David Bleich points out, is less allied with an "expressivist" pedagogy than it is with "changing the ideology of teaching from
individualism to combined individual, subjective, intersubjective, and collective perspectives:

Disclosure should be distinguished from confession and revelation, which take place respectively in either completely private or completely public contexts. . . . Disclosure in teaching presupposes readiness of the context, which includes a certain level of trust of peers and authority figures, as well as the sense that the disclosed information could be germane to the ongoing work of the class. (47-8)

A pedagogy of disclosure can help to teach students to demand non-alienated work, to make their work more a part of their identities, their identities more connected to others, and their vocations more palpably implicated in society and in other people's needs (49). As such, I would argue that a pedagogy of disclosure also implies the "disclosure" of the teacher's thoughts in scholarship about the efficacy of practice, in an effort to be answerable to pedagogical doubts and to explore alternatives in both theory and practice, as I seek to do here. With the benefit of hindsight, there is probably much that I would do differently with students such as Brenda and Jill. But I also know that squaring one's pedagogical goals with each individual students' needs is a difficult, if not ultimately impossible task.
The majority of the students reported that they enjoyed most of the readings that I assigned (although some thought there were too many). They did not feel the same about writing in response to these readings, however, especially given my request that they not just respond affectively, or just by writing about whatever story of their own the reading may have triggered, but that they engage in the work of critical analysis as well. One sophomore pre-med student was particularly anxious on the first day of class. Worried, once we had gone over the course description and the syllabus, that this might not be the section for him, that while he could write personal narratives he was not "good enough at English" to do the critical essays in response to the readings, he was clearly looking for me to confirm his suspicion and suggest another section. I understood his concern—whether we like it or not, grades have to be a priority to students seeking entrance to medical school—but I encouraged him to stay and at least write something before he decided to bail out. Greg's fears proved to be unfounded, and he volunteered his first personal essay for our first full class workshop (they also workshopped their papers in small groups). In his final portfolio—which he titled "Discovery Through Education"—
he included a lab report to illustrate his sense of being an insider in
the discourse of biology, while still feeling like an outsider in
English critical writing (something I believe he exaggerates):

Critical analysis did, however, allow me to become more
self reflexive in my personal writing. I see that as the
course progressed I began to express my feelings more
and more. . . . I began to explain myself and my
understanding of the world. . . As the semester
progressed and my self questioning began to effect my
writing I discover that I am already within an academic
discourse. . .

. . . My scientific endevor (sic) has lead me to this
goal and English writing has allowed me to realize its
importance in my life.

While Greg still preferred writing the personal narratives, he also
did some fine work in his critical essays. The concern with grades
mentioned above might be taken to indicate an unwillingness to take
any risks and simply try to write what he perceives the teacher
wants, but statements he makes in several of his papers suggests to
me that this was not the case. For example, discussing his own
first semester in college in response to Mike Rose's Lives on the
Boundary, he describes his disgust with himself when he found
himself getting A's in Moral Philosophy for "mental reflux" of what
the professor said in class while the junior and senior majors who
took stands on the issues were getting C's and D's:

I want to be allowed to question beliefs and so called
facts of nature. I want explanations for things we are
taught to take for granted. I need someone to "nudge me into the chatter" (58) of academic discourse and to enter the "conversation that seems foreign and threatening" (48). If I am never allowed to do this because an educator feels that it is their duty to explain everything through their eyes I will never be satisfied. Never again will I let a class such as Moral Philosophy confine my learning, my intelligence. I am on the border of entering "conversation", and I will not regress.

His angry response to Bartholomae's essay "Inventing the University" also expresses his frustration with the suggestion that students should think and write like the professors of English who teach them. Ironically he does in this essay precisely what Bartholomae calls for in his--Greg "invents" and seeks to define his place within the work of the university:

The burden of teaching discourse or even giving the students the "privilege" to speak using this higher language does not weigh down on the shoulders of the English Department. This weight belongs on the University as a whole. . . (S)tudents coming out of high school . . . are not English professors' little chickadees which can be nurtured from birth. Most already have a firm grasp on expression and freshman English should provide the adjustments needed to prepare the student for an academic discourse that lies ahead. Freshman English is in no way capable of thrusting a student from high school literacy into an academic discourse. This takes time. It has taken me three years to tell a professor that he was wrong and that he should listen to me. This originated from a good background in my studies and confident understanding of the subjects at hand accumulated through experience in my field.
Of course Greg's use of the language of the readings and our discussions in all three of these excerpts indicates more than a student who has a handle on these issues and is finding ways to use this language for his own purposes. He has worked a long time to be a "good student," and this is what good students do. The phrase "self reflexive" is one that I used throughout the semester, and describes a characteristic I set up as a goal for their connective writing in their final portfolios, so there is also strong likelihood that at least on some level he is mimicking me as well as Bartholomae, and wondering if I will notice—a positive move, I believe, given the questions that I have asked the class to consider. He does not demonstrate an awareness of the contradictions and ironies present in this writing, particularly that the conversational model he argues for is contradicted by the mastery model he appears to endorse in the final excerpt, but such contradictions are inevitable, especially as the language of the mastery model is the one most available to students for talking about authority in education. What impresses me about his work, however, is the way he takes on the conflict he has been asked to address. He engages the readings and our discussions in both a critical and personalized way, applying the author's ideas to his experience and harnessing his dislike for the project in a productive manner. Others, however, did not channel
their frustrations with my efforts to teach the conflicts in such encouraging ways.

**There's too Much Composition in this Conversation**
(or, Thanks for the Invitation, but...)

The subheading above comes from a student misquote of a line from Cary's *Black Ice*. What Cary really says is, "Too much *exposition* weighed down our conversation" (99, my emphasis). But this *misrepresentation* of another's words ironically provides me with an appropriate way of characterizing why one element of this course, the section of the course which asked students to engage themselves in an academic conversation and think critically about what academic and personal writing have to do with one another, met with particularly strong student resistance. I worked with the Bartholomae and Elbow essays in a course focusing on autobiography because I agree with Bartholomae that students should be invited to participate in real academic projects, and not be required instead to endlessly "practice" for an event in which they will never be invited to participate. Students should be encouraged to understand how discursive systems develop over time, and be able to recognize the purposes and interests that they serve, how they are connected to "what we do, who we are, and what we make of ourselves in our
constructed lives" (Charles Bazerman 44).

Characteristically direct, Brenda's essay in response to the Bartholomae and Elbow essays told me that I had not made the purpose behind this part of the course clear enough. While I used our discussion of Chapters two and three of Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* to introduce questions of how the academic connects with the autobiographical and thereby lead into the Bartholomae and Elbow essays on the role of academic discourse in the writing classroom, the transition into this segment of the course still felt very abrupt for some students. I fear too many students remained unsure of my reasons for asking them to take on such difficult stuff in a course that, according to the title on the syllabus, is about autobiography. I had asked them to question their assumptions about personal and academic writing throughout the semester, yet the students apparently felt that a need for more exposition weighed down our move into discussing scholarly work in composition. By the third time that I taught the course I did a better job of providing this exposition, using every opportunity to make the point of this element of the course as clear as possible from day one. But understanding my reasons for inviting them into the discussion of the role of composition courses in teaching academic discourse did not prevent resistance.
Many students struggled with these readings and had trouble writing their essays in response to what they had read. Some engaged in this work with as much success as Greg, using their experience to develop a persuasive position. Others simply discussed the issues dutifully, grumbling to themselves, while a few were more direct about their objections. An extreme example of such a resistance occurred with Jim, who objected to all of the papers assigned in response to the readings—he just wanted to read the stories these authors had to tell—and objected even to having to read the Bartholomae and Elbow talks and responses from CCC.

For Jim, a junior outdoor education major, the autobiographical focus of this writing class was just what he needed, at just the right time. In the past year his sister had passed away suddenly, and in a rock climbing accident for which he felt partly responsible, his brother had fallen and "shattered" his leg. He had already started writing about these events before he enrolled in the class, and when he discovered the focus of the course on the first day, he came to my office to ask me if he could work on one long piece of autobiographical writing instead of writing three personal essays. I told him that was fine. I was thrilled to have a student who already had a special project, something very important to making sense of the past year in the present moment so that he
could move on with his life, that he wanted to work on in the course. And my feelings on that first day proved to be justified. A student who already considered himself a writer, a teller of stories, Joe scheduled many extra conferences with me to work on this piece. The final product was a twenty-eight page "story" that blurred genres (he said he wanted it to read like fiction) and related the events of the day of the fated climb and treated the death of his sister through flashbacks, images that flash through Jim's mind with increasing frequency throughout the day and reach a climax at the time of his brother's fall. His reluctance to include any outright reflecting notwithstanding--he wanted the reader to infer what he was thinking and feeling from the details rendered--his final draft was a well written and fairly polished narrative that was really about the process of healing.

Without this project I would have missed seeing a very important side of Jim as a student and a writer. For this student who, to my surprise, wrote in his journal that so much was going through his mind on the first day of class when he learned that much of the course would be about autobiography that he didn't remember what he said in discussion and feared that he had made a fool out of himself, the same student who wrote that he was almost feeling ill he was so nervous about talking to me about what he wanted to do,
was also the student who appeared in my office with another request a couple months later--to argue that he shouldn't have to deal with Bartholomae and Elbow at all. He was clearly outraged when I made it clear that while their were many ways he could approach writing this essay, and that trying to find where he fit into this conversation would be a requirement for him just as it was for the rest of the class. Finally he came to me to ask if it would be O.K. for him to respond to this assignment by writing a fable. I said that was fine as long as he found a way, however metaphorical, to treat the issues in question and not just use this as a way of avoiding engaging Bartholomae's and Elbow's ideas. His first two drafts demonstrated the strength of his resistance; he could not get beyond avoidance, and his fable was only a rather undeveloped story about a knight (Jim) and two dukes (Bartholomae and Elbow). But in his third draft he did manage to give his fable another level of meaning which parodied some of the issues in question (my own appearance here as the wicked queen not withstanding).

Jim was proud of his fable, but remained resistant to engaging the ideas of others. As strong a writer as he was, he seemed to fixate on the idea of an autonomous author telling stories and to resist the conversational model of writing. While the quality of writing he produced was generally high in each of his critical
essays, he continued to characterize the process of writing them negatively, and it became increasingly difficult to work with him. His response to the Baldwin essay, in class discussion as well as his writing, was to insist that, not being black himself, he could not walk in Baldwin's shoes "so what was the point." Although his comment received so many outraged responses from class members that it proved an excellent way to begin our discussion--in fact it served to inspire several papers written in direct response--his classmates were unable to alter his opinion. I have had other white students, usually male and in all white classes, respond in such a way to material about people of color. Such resistance is perhaps "the most ubiquitous--and most obvious--rhetorical strategy that students use to contain the political implications of their findings: the positing of an autonomous self capable of being insulated from the corruptions of social life" (Fitts and France, "Advocacy" 21). In retrospect, however, I also sense that much of what appeared to be stubborn stance of self absorption came from a need for agency in the face of contradictions he was having difficulty dealing with in his life; to him, being asked to see his life as part of a larger social

3 Particularly if the writer or characters are women. Several young men in an honors freshman English course once nearly left me dumbfounded by the strength of their response to Toni Morrison's novel Beloved. They said that as they were not black, not women, and had never been slaves, they didn't have any way to relate to the situation of Morrison's character Sethe.
picture—filled with more contradictions—felt more threatening than comforting. A young man who had clearly internalized a traditional white, middle class ethic of individualism, his autobiographical project is characterized by fragments and ruptures; it is about having parts of his life "shattered" for no apparent reason and the instability of things taken for granted revealed. He writes in order to "recover," in the way that the last paragraph of his autobiographical piece says he must:

> When I looked at Dave for the last time that night he smiled back. Yes, he was going to recover. It was a sign, I guess, of what I should do. Stop hiding and face the pain. Then I, too, could heal.

In part, I suspect it was his need to make order out of disorder that made him ill disposed to "unruly conversation." His objection to producing "renditions" of others' thoughts reflected his need to make an affirmative statement about what defines him and take some control, or as he put it in the final line of his connective writing: "I have a need to write and tell my story, hoping that by doing so, I can somehow smooth the pothole ridden road called life."

As the example from Greg that I cite earlier demonstrates, however, this assignment did result in some very well written papers, whatever the feelings the writers had about the task. These papers may indeed benefit more from revision than either of the
other critical essays, and the final drafts reinforce my conviction that engaging them in this complex conversation is an important part of the course. I am struck by the dialogic consciousness I see in the opening of Carrie's paper, where she describes the questions these readings raise for her:

I can read a story or an essay and while I am reading and absorbing it I can speak the thoughts of the piece in my head. My brain translates the author's words into my own, and I have to struggle to turn my words into their's (sic) on paper. Their words are not mine, and as I try to enter the academic conversation I keep this in mind. As David Bartholomae says, in "Inventing the University," "The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community" (134). In my attempt to do this, I wonder how much of myself I can retain in a paper while I am trying on another voice. I ask the question, where does my voice belong in academic discourse? Will it hide behind the complexity of language, or will it be a part of my writing?

Carrie's portfolio showed me that her voice--indeed her multiple voices--need not be lost, or hidden, but can find a place to be heard, however unruly the conversation. Carrie, like the other students whose voices I have included in this chapter, has entered into what Don Bialostosky describes as "Bakhtin's open forum"(20). While, as I noted early in this chapter, students must first hear their own voices in "smaller" public spaces if they are to be heard above the
din in other situations, entrance into this forum can be facilitated but not avoided: "Classrooms protect the young from (the forum's) full cacophony to cultivate students' capacities to speak up and be heard in it, but they offer no permanent refuge from it; indeed they cannot do without some samples of its voices, selected to provoke students without overwhelming them" (Bialostosky 21). In this forum other voices "give our voices their occasions and provocations, their reasons for saying one thing rather than another, their differences that make them distinguishable and audible among the many voices in the forum" (20). For Bakhtin, "self-conscious participation" in the struggle among diverse knowledge communities "marks the free and educated consciousness--the dialogic self. The writing course, like the novel and the public square, may be one of the forums in which that consciousness comes into being" (Bialostosky 22).

Having brought Bakhtin into this discussion, however, I also need to note that much of the language that the students invoke is also the language of the course, so to speak. It is the language of my course description, the reading material, the things I say in class discussion, and my comments on their papers. Such authoritative language can be found the following lines from a paper in response James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*:
It is true to say that "One writes out of one thing only--one's own experience" (Baldwin 7). But our experiences are made up of our pasts and our culture. To be able to understand that past helps us understand who we are today. We must then seek to find our identity from our roots in history.

A skeptical reader might regard these opening lines as a "mimicking" of Baldwin or class discussion, for Nancy clearly has appropriated the language of both. And yet her essay as a whole represents a working through of these ideas on the part of a student who is beginning to feel that she can write with authority. The combined attention given to academic discourse and narrative in the course initially posed problems for Nancy. She came into the class expecting to be taught the mechanics of writing, perhaps through assignments whose content might also be directed. But the essay from which the above lives where taken demonstrated a noticeable change in the ease with which she worked with the ideas of others in relation to her own. Through the personal narratives and analytical essays she had written and shared with classmates throughout the semester, Nancy had successfully begun to "enter the conversation." To what extent this authoritative discourse has become internally persuasive for her is impossible to know. The same problem applies to students' work with textbooks in writing courses or in other disciplines. But in the classroom we can at least...
make it a goal to encourage students to regularly ask such questions of themselves, as Carrie does above.

**Answerability**

Ironically, as I informed my students, my reasons for focusing on the relationship between personal narrative and academic discourse stemmed partially from my own discomfort with writing autobiographically. However strongly I felt about the importance of autobiographical writing I was, throughout the three semesters that I taught this course, still having trouble engaging in it myself, and I felt that such feelings of inappropriateness need not be a by-product of academic training. My disclosure of the the ways in which my own academic training had left me uncomfortable with writing autobiography myself did help open up class discussion of the kinds of writing each of the students felt most comfortable with and of the relationship between personal writing and academic discourse. But I have also worried that given my own emphasis on working against simple dichotomies and celebrating the potential richness of paradoxes, that my difficulty enacting a both/and perspective in my own writing, and the minimal space I allowed for sharing my own writing with the students may have worked against my efforts to create a dialogic classroom in which one of my roles was that of a
fellow writer.

I agree with Lester Faigley that the subject is "the site where ethics enters postmodern theory" (Faigley 21). Bakhtin's theory of dialogics has provided many in composition with a way to negotiate some of the problems postmodern theory poses for the subject, a way to break down binary oppositions and yet still have a place to stand, so to speak. Indeed, compositionists such as Helen Rothschild Ewald point out that "Bakhtin is handy . . . perhaps too handy" (337), and has been invoked in support of wide variety of contradictory positions. But one of the key elements of Bakhtin's theory of dialogics that is present in his earliest writings is one that rarely enters applications of dialogics--answerability:

To answer is not only to be (ethically) responsible, but also to respond. This "double-voicedness" of answerability as a concept recalls Bakhtin's general approach to traditional binary oppositions. When looking at oppositions such as author/hero or self/other, Bakhtin sees not a disjunctive either/or but a conjunctive both/and (Art and Answerability, xxvii). (qtd. in Ewald 340)

As Michael Holquist states in his introduction to Art and Answerability, Bakhtin emphasized that the dialogic self "is one that can change places with another--that must, in fact, change places to see where it is" (xxvi). And while much about answerability is about simultaneity, being answerable as teachers
means reflecting on the ethical implications of our pedagogy, reading our classrooms as text (Nelson). One of the challenges facing those of us working in composition is that, while we have come to see writing as socially constructed, we have failed to understand the teacher's role in the construction of that meaning. We need to develop a theory of reading student texts that takes into account our reading of the students themselves, of our own unconscious motivations and associations, and finally, of the interactive and dialectical nature of the teacher-student relationship. (Tobin 26)

Just as teachers come to the first day of a writing class with a syllabus, a set of pedagogical practices, and certain plans and hopes for how the semester will progress, so, too, do students begin their classes with certain expectations concerning the work they will be doing over the course of the semester, albeit less formal ones that are often also shaped by the first class meeting. What I would like to examine more closely in the final section of this chapter is the reciprocal nature of the learning that occurred during the last semester that I taught this course by focusing on my experience with two students who came into the class with quite different expectations and goals for their writing. What follows is my understanding of how our respective expectations entered into dialogue with one another:
Gabrielle

My own difficulties with writing personal narratives helped me relate to students like Gabrielle, a senior pre-veterinary major (animal sciences). In our first conference and early journal writing Gabrielle stated that as a person oriented to the sciences and most accustomed to doing the kind of academic writing required in sciences, she was concerned about her ability to do the autobiographical writing that we would be doing in the course. This did not make her self-conscious with her peers, however, and she volunteered to share her first personal essay with the class. Her narratives are characterized by an engaging, humorous voice—even this first paper which uses the occasion of her grandfather's death when she was fifteen as a means of moving into the few memories she has of her grandparents and how she learned that her grandfather was an alcoholic:

My Grandmother was a blueberry muffin. She was short and round with yellowish-white, short hair, drawn into little curls on the top of her head. She had these purple markings on the side of her face and neck that looked like blueberries. It seemed to me she was always cooking, everything was made from scratch, no Hamburger Helpers or Rice-a-Roni like my mom cooked. She was a true Italian chef.

She enjoyed attending to descriptive detail and much of her writing
in the course demonstrated a desire to stick to the lighter side of things, avoiding introspection and analysis. But as I read her paper now, it strikes me as less "frivolous" or evasive of the serious nature of her topic than I viewed it at the time. Given the potential of the issues she had begun to address, and the potential I could see in her skills as a writer, I wasn't sure what to do with passages such as the one above (which was a favorite of the class), and I encouraged her to think about her present perspective on her memories in the hope that she might complicate her thinking a bit. And her revision (which included the above passage) did have a more consistent tone, one that strikes me now as largely ironic:

When I look back at my relationship with my Grandfather, how I feared him and felt so distant from him, now it all makes sense. I didn't know him for who he was, I knew him though his alcoholism. When I was younger, I thought he was just a "mean old man" who didn't really care for me or my sister. Even after the Bubble-up incident, I didn't know he was a alcoholic. I don't even remember finding out about his alcoholism, I guess I just pieced it together later on in life. Now I realize that I didn't really know my Grandfather.

As I perceived that what I was encouraging her to do clashed with her interests and priorities (not that there is anything wrong with encouraging students to do things that they may not want to do--indeed that is part of our job as teachers) I backed off. While she stops short of going beyond the conventional ways of writing about
such a topic when she does discuss her feelings, this was as far as she wanted to take this essay and I think she was happy with her final draft.

But I never did know quite what to do with Gabrielle's second autobiographical piece, her "travel tips" paper. I was glad to see her experimenting with her writing--and truly having fun with it--but I was a bit perplexed about where this essay came from, given the readings we were doing and the nature of the papers that the class and her group had workshopped. In this essay she shares the knowledge she had gained as a result of what she describes as her family's curse, "the fact that nothing can ever go perfectly right" on one of their vacations or outings:

My family has always been the traveling type (the curse has never swayed our desire for adventure) and if anything can go wrong, it will. Sometimes there's only a minor problem, like a forgotten toothbrush or we get lost for a while along the way. But most of the time the incidents are much more eventful. Through all this misery, though, I've learned much about traveling, and so I'm here to share this knowledge with you as I've learned it.

The essay is funny; her voice here is distinctive and she handles the genre well. And her lead (above) does not exaggerate:

Another incident on the boat occurred when my dad decided he didn't need to tie up the boat on the dock to get out. Just as in the cartoons the boat drifted away when my dad had one foot on the boat and one on the dock.
He didn't fall in the water, but he broke his leg trying to throw himself on the dock.

But for all the strengths of her writing here I could not shake the sense that something was missing; not because of the light nature of the topic--I encouraged the students to experiment with form, etc.--but because the essay seemed to lack an occasion or exigency, as well as a point beyond 'don't be like her family.'

Such examples of Gabrielle's writing both support and contradict her thoughts about "Personal vs. Academic Writing:"

The way I understood Elbow's arguments was that he supported the idea of personal writing because it would give his students confidence to speak their minds and raise their voices. Personal writing would make his students "feel like writers" (72). I never experienced such a feeling when writing about my personal life. I am a very mathematical (sic) person. I've always done better in Calculus and Chemistry than Humanities or Sociology and so for me, nothing was harder than personal writing. There are no rules or guidelines to follow. I feel like I am in a dense forest without a compass on a cloudy day. I don't know which direction to take. Don't get me wrong, I love telling stories about myself, but personal writing goes beyond that. I have to analyze my own actions and thoughts and relate them to the larger aspect of my life. I have trouble interpreting my feelings and so I never did very well . . .

Overall, I must say that academic writing gave me more confidence, not only in my writing, but in my skills as a scientist as well. I can write fairly good research papers, which is important for me if I'm ever to become published. And so feel that academic writing is more important in society and in helping students prepare for
the "outside" world. Yet Elbow made some good points about the need for personal writing at the college level. Students need the freedom to express their ideas and to explore themselves in their writing, with the teacher just helping to refine the papers and help the students develop their own writing style. However difficult and trivial (since I won't be using personal writing in my future career) this style may seem to me, it has helped me face some of my own problems in writing and to learn how to cope with them.

But Gabrielle did take a surprising risk, in form as well as content, in the final paper she wrote to replace an earlier essay that we both felt still wasn't working. Her final narrative, written as a series of rather dreamlike scenes or vignettes, is really about an unplanned first sexual experience that leads her to be tested for HIV:

"I'm not supposed to be doing this, only addicts, prostitutes, gays or derelicts. Not me, I'm smart, know where I'm going, I have a supportive family, a boyfriend that loves me . . . .what am I doing here? But everything will work out. It won't happen to me. It can't."

I greeted the nurse and sat down. I sucked up some air and the slight whiff of antibiotics (sic) and alcohol made my stomach tighten. She placed the tourniquet around my arm and felt for the vein. Blood pounded through it as I saw her turn around.

"Oh God, what if . . . . no, don't even think about it. Relax, your life won't end like that, there's nothing to worry about. This is me your (sic) talking about. It won't be positive."
The needle punctured my skin and the red fluid was sucked out of me.

Right?

Impressed by the move she made here, I was nonetheless concerned that my encouragement to take risks, to explore something of vital importance in her life may have caused her, ironically, to feel that it might be in her best interest academically to write something "confessional." And while I am still far too wary of the complexities of student teacher relationships to view this final essay naively as evidence of pedagogical success with this student, my sense is that Gabrielle was not responding to such pressure. Grades are unlikely to have been an issue as she had already been accepted to at least two well known veterinary schools and was in the process of making her choice. From the frankness with which she discussed her writing of this essay in conference, my sense is that this was a meaningful project for her, and that she found the writing worth the risk. And certainly, there is nothing "trivial" about her writing here.

The way she assembled her final portfolio emphasized the importance of relationships with others and the teaching/learning that comes with such relationships. She set up her portfolio as a letter addressed to her niece, and the writing she inserts between
each of her personal essays address links them with the themes of death, life, and love. She also makes a point, on her cover page, of giving special thanks to each of her group members by name.

Rick

But my experience with Rick, whom I quote in my epigraph to this chapter, was another story. A junior Resource Economics major, Rick's talent for writing was evident in his one page response to the first reading assigned in the course, an excerpt from Patricia Hampl's *A Romantic Education*:

This type of insight into past memories is not easy. I feel the need to utilize this method in my own style of writing. To me it is soft to read and flows with purpose and direction. This unfortunately is unlike my own obscure "fart in an elevator" style of writing where, the message is disgustingly obvious and you hold your nose till the end. Patricia Hampl has the skill of experience to temper her work. Hopefully, I too will be able to write about seemingly tiny instances in my life and show my own personal meaning.

His analogy here is not an elegant one, but it is direct, and it is here that his voice comes through amid more standard descriptive reading response moves. I, in turn, responded enthusiastically. His initial writing in the course showed evidence of a close, careful reader, and a student who had goals for himself as a writer. I sensed that he might also be testing me by deliberately juxtaposing
an informal, self-deprecating remark that might be considered crass with "good student" appreciation for the assigned writing, just to see how I would respond, but figured this was a healthy sign. It is exciting to see students test the waters in the first writing that they submit in a course (and at other points during the semester) and not just play it safe; our responses at such moments are crucial to encouraging the risk taking and investment that makes for good writing. With Rick, however, testing turned into ongoing tension.

I had difficulty being able to read both what he did and did not say in the classroom (where we heard from him a lot) and in conference, as well as in his work. For a student who claimed in his final portfolio to be a writer who worked by indirection and did not reveal what he was really thinking and feeling, the autobiographical pieces that I received from him (with one exception) dealt with some of the most personal and difficult issues of any that I read that semester. His first essay described an event that occurred in his childhood that had a long term effect on his family and complicated his perception of his father. While the occasion for the paper was the revelation that his brother had been hospitalized for manic-depressive schizophrenia, the paper, as his opening paragraph reveals, is really about a turning point in his relationship with his father:
Looking at my father through eyes barely eight years old, he was everything I wanted to be. He was big and strong and when he picked me up in his hairy arms I felt like I was on top of the world. When I fell down and skinned my knee or came to him in tears after being manhandled by my older unmerciful brothers, he would take me in his arms and comfort me. He was the funniest person I knew and he knew just how to make me laugh, laugh so hard I couldn’t even move. I never even thought about him in any other way than just a Dad. I learned, on one could Thanksgiving day, that fathers are not just Dads but people too.

After two pages of details depicting the typical (and stereotypical) elements of "one of those crazy family gatherings" at his family’s home, with just enough foreshadowing to suggest that this time something was wrong, he describes overhearing his parents discussing his brother’s condition, and seeing his father in tears, hugging his uncle as his body shook with sobs. He learns days later, from his mother, the specific nature of his brother’s mental illness, and that his father was crying because his father, Rick’s grandfather, also had the disease and had been absent from the family "for long periods of time returning quiet and numb from the series of shock treatments he had received." He describes himself as an "eight year old boy who's world was crashing down around him. Never again would I look at my father through the eyes of a child."

He concludes by revealing that he never told his father what he saw that night, and that it took him "a couple of years to understand" the
relationship between his brother and his dad.

The risk he had taken moved me to take a risk in kind in my response on his first draft. As part of my comments I shared a moment from my own life which demonstrated that I knew what it can feel like, as a young person, to see a parent at a vulnerable moment. This is not a move I generally make in my responses, for my job is to focus on the student's work; occasions when relating the ways in which my personal experiences affect my reading of a student’s essay can be relevant or helpful to the student are relatively rare. When our students trust us enough to share writing about such personal matters, we should, however, respond in ways that demonstrate that such trust is warranted and appreciated. With Rick I felt that responding in kind, so to speak, with a reference to my own experience as part of my written comments, would be the best way to reassure and encourage a student who in manner struck me as flip and arrogant but who could write so movingly about relationships.

And yet our relationship remained a strained one throughout the semester. I continued to feel that he was often testing--or even goading me--and this made it difficult to know when to take him seriously. The trouble that I had distinguishing between his earnest questions and challenges and simple disrespect made me self-
conscious of my responses to him in both class and in conference, and often lead me to take extra care in my written responses to his work in an effort to be both clear and foster mutual trust and respect. This "difficult" student was not one who simply refused to become engaged in the class and was just biding his time until the semester was over. On the contrary, Rick looked to this class for a chance to work on writing the kind of first-person narratives that his other course work did not allow, and he clearly wanted helpful responses from his classmates and myself. Hence the unproductive tension of our student/teacher relationship left me concerned. In *Writing Relationships*, Lad Tobin's work on the importance of studying the role that student/teacher relationships play in our students' writing processes, Tobin presents a useful definition of a productive classroom relationship:

> any relationship that fosters the writing and reading processes is productive; any relationship that inhibits them is not. My own sense is that a teacher and a student can relate productively only if a certain amount of tension exists between them, only if—to borrow a model from psychologist Mikali Csikszentmihalyi—they are both somewhere between boredom and anxiety. (16)

Students like Rick make me painfully aware that unproductive tension is one of the greatest difficulties writing teachers face. My experiences with both Rick and Gabrielle left me self-conscious of
an issue that most of us face in our teaching:

there is the simple problem that I respond more favorably to students--male or female--who make me feel secure than those who threaten me. And that is what I need to monitor: as soon as I find myself giving up on a student or, on the other hand, feeling tremendous personal pride in a student's work, I need to question my own motives. I need to discover in what ways my biases and assumptions--both conscious and unconscious--are shaping my teaching. (Tobin 38-9)

But even when we are conscious of such biases, our awareness does not guarantee that we work from them/compensate for them in the most productive way. On at least one occasion my concern that my negative feelings about Rick's behavior in the classroom, and my perception that he was challenging my authority both in and out of the classroom were causing me to fail him as a teacher lead me to overcompensate. During our conference on his second essay, which was intended to be a humorous piece on the difficulty men and women have understanding one another, I found myself going to great lengths to explain my response to his draft. He wanted to know if I found it funny, and if any of the situations and theories he described rang true in my experience. I explained that while I appreciated his efforts to be humorous, saw lots of potential in the structure he was experimenting with, and heard a voice in the piece that was trying very hard to draw in his readers, much of what he had to say
never went beyond at cliches and cultural stereotypes. When he explained that his goal was to write like Dave Barry, his intentions became much clearer and we had a basis for discussion. I asked him what he admired most about Barry's writing and we talked about what makes such humor columns work. He said that knew his writing was "no where near" that of Barry, but thought he was clearly on the right track. I agreed, and suggested that we give more attention to his understanding of the conventions of such writing and the importance of audience awareness as we considered what he might do in revision. We discussed how the humor generated by writers like Barry comes from working with everyday experience, stereotypes, and assumptions in a clever way that makes us recognize ourselves or others we know; what we recognize is both exaggerated and yet true, and it is amusing because of the author's point of view. I stressed how much practice it takes to learn to such a style of writing, and how his present lack of awareness of audience could lead did not invite his readers to "identify" or at least be amused by his point of view. I explained that in spite of his good intentions, his premise that "Women are aliens" read, at best, as an reiteration of familiar sentiments from popular culture (Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus was on the bestseller list), and that at worst, it could be more offensive than amusing to his
readers. I explained to him that while he really was working well with the style of the genre, his perspective mainly invoked a cliche without adding to his readers' understanding; he would need to work a bit harder order for readers to see something of themselves in the situations he described and to accept his conclusions, but we could work on this together. As our discussion progressed, however, Rick only became defensive.

By this time we had long passed the end of our scheduled conference, but since on this particular day I had no more scheduled obligations until much later I let the conference go on, hoping that my willingness to give him my time would help him feel less defensive and help us work together better. No such luck. He changed the subject to his thoughts on teaching, based on his teaching expertise as a skiing instructor. While explaining that I have pedagogical reasons for the way that I structured the course and the things that I do in class, I told him that I was also always working on my teaching and receptive to hearing others' ideas, hoping he would see me as open and concerned first and foremost with helping him with his writing. He said he learned to work from his students' "comfort zones" and that while he knew that the classroom was different from the ski slope, he felt this approach could apply to any situation. I explained that my approach was to
work from "where the students are" both as a class and individually, but that learning comes from facing challenges that it was my duty to provide, challenges that students might not want to face at the time. We went back and forth for some time, but in the spirit of the topic of his paper (to which I often returned), we were not communicating successfully in spite of my best efforts. The conference lasted nearly two hours.

In retrospect I know now that I should have ended the conference within the first hour, explained that I had other obligations, and would be glad to schedule an extra conference at another time. Over-compensation may indeed be as unhelpful as not being maintaining awareness of the importance of our relationships with our students. There are some students with whom we are not going to connect despite our best efforts. I want my students to construct arguments for what they believe in and to resist authority--to a point--but respect cannot be gained by time and effort of the instructor if the student is resistant to the process of working together.

At Rick's request I did share some of my own writing with the class, and he responded in his journal that this helped him. For him, having some access to my own writing was a necessary condition for trust and respect, and my sharing did seem to make some
difference. He continued to seem wary of me, however, and his contributions to our discussion of the Bartholomae and Elbow essays demonstrated that he was not as interested in discussing pedagogy--or at least the theory behind it--as our earlier conference conversation indicated. His own essay in response to the issues that Bartholomae and Elbow raise was for the most part perfunctory (his opening sentence: "The debate between academic and non-academic writing is an interesting one"). In a different academic world he would favor Elbow's point of view because it appeals to his desire for creative freedom. But ultimately he finds Bartholomae more realistic, for "in the real world of deadlines, teachers, and bosses, we must write with a purpose and for an audience." It is not clear whether he sees the irony in his suggestion that creative and "free" writing, the kind of writing he prefers, is not for a purpose or an audience.

After his response this assignment, I was both surprised and encouraged when Rick volunteered to share his third autobiographical essay in a full class workshop, given the sensitive nature of his subject matter. In this piece he described finding out from a young woman he had begun seeing that she had been date raped, and how the painful process she was going through as she sought to deal with what had happened to her affected and ultimately lead to the
end of their relationship—a difficult topic to write about let alone share in such a public setting. Yet Rick wrote eloquently and sensitively about his sense of her pain and his feelings of frustration as he felt powerless to help. His concluding paragraph describes their parting after he calls her on avoiding him and shutting him out:

Standing on the corner next to her house I felt useless and small. I didn't know how to take away the pain. Hers or mine. Her problem was bigger than anything I have ever experienced, and I was not equipped to make it my own. Giving each other a superficial hug and a dry, "I'll call you," she drifted back into her house. Walking away, I watched her open the door and through the large bay windows, saw her stop in the arms of her roommate and run in sadness up to the safety of her own room.

The class responded in very positive and helpful ways. They admired both the risk he took and praised him for the clarity with which they felt he expressed feelings that they feared they would not be able to express without being misunderstood.

His final reflective writing on his work in the course does begin to accurately characterize, I think, the kind of writing present in the above essay. In his paradoxical "The Meat and Potatoes," Rick employs a rugby play as a metaphor for his writing:

I like to think of my writing style as a Meat and Potatoes play. I don't write to confuse or mystify the reader, I get to the point. I write about real, my life. When I run the "Meat and Potato" play I go to the weak side of the
defense, hoping to elude some players and increase my chances of, not only scoring, but survival. This "elusion," to increase my chances, is particularly like my style of writing because I show who I am and what I am feeling by the "elusion" in my essays.

Direction by indirection, as I would summarize what he says here, is one of the ways in which he communicates meaning in his writing. As he revised his third autobiographical essay, for example, his response to my question about whether or not he might write more after his present conclusion, quoted above, that would give us a sense of what happened after this moment was a resounding "no." I can see now that to him any move to address readers' questions about what happened next would have derailed both the style he hoped to achieve and the meaning he hoped to communicate. The piece was not about what happened next. But I do not agree with all that he claims the "meat and potatoes" metaphor helps him characterize about his writing:

A friend told me that I deal with things from a removed point of view. I talk about other people (sic) feelings and problems and not my own. I think she is right and can see it in some of my essays. The (third autobiographical essay) is descriptive of her situation and I don't get into my feelings directly. This is also true about the essay on my Dad. I tell about his feelings and struggles with his sons disease but remove my self, not talking directly about how I was effected at the time. It is uncomfortable for me to write about how I feel especially if those feelings and situations are not
good ones. It is how I protect myself from getting too involved, or too hurt. I try to incorporate this fact about myself into my essays. The essay about Valentine's Day is a classic example of how I am insecure about myself and my ability to be in a relationship with a woman. I don't come out and say that, but that is what I am really writing about.

In reference to his writing what he has to say here is only half true. In all three of the essays to which he refers he does attend to and describe his own feelings in some detail. And his Valentine's Day essay does reveal his insecurities about close relationships with women—these insecurities are, I would argue, what this humorous essay is about. The indirection involved in this last brief writing did suggest to me, however, that he felt misunderstood and was still not happy with the student/teacher relationship we had developed (or not developed) over the course of the semester—that, to paraphrase the final sentence of this piece (see the epigraph at the beginning of the chapter), "in the folds of truth and perception," I had not seen who he really was.

While sharing some of my own writing was a necessity for Rick, I learned this was not the case with most members of the class—that indeed it need not be the case, even in a class which focuses on autobiography. I shared examples from my own experiences with writing in both academic and personal contexts,
but only read from my own writing twice. In general, this is a practice that has never really worked for me as it has for some of my colleagues, and I did not want to take away from the class time we needed for peer response to student drafts in their small groups as well as full class workshops. There are, of course, also certain dangers that can accompany making one's own writing a part of classroom work. However informal the classroom atmosphere, the teacher is not a peer; she remains an authority, an expert of sorts, and ultimately an evaluator. As Ward notes,

Sometimes the instructor only needs to act as an encouraging other—that is, a facilitator or good listener—thereby validating students' experiences and aiding them in identifying the strategies that are working efficiently for them. This role is closest to Murray's notion of training the writer's "other self." (181)

And yet I have also learned that as a teacher of writing, I cannot discuss my teaching as if it is apart from my own autobiography, and not directly informed by my own history and experiences.

As we write in order to join conversations—often unruly ones—it does matter who is speaking. As Baldwin notes, as he attends to the problem of voices which, in order to be heard, must find a way around the discourse conventions of a master narrative that would deny expression of their experiences, "I am what time,
circumstance, history have made of me, certainly, but I am, also, so much more than that. So are we all" (xii). All writing and teaching--is autobiographical in one way or another. But making oneself heard means negotiating the minefield of cultural capital, of what "counts" in any given culture at any given time. And writing when writing autobiographically in an academic setting, having "the right kind of personal experience is what matters, for this is what allows one to accrue cultural capital within a given institutional setting" (Richard Miller 280). One must have the right stories to tell in order to enter the conversation, and perhaps, then, change its direction.

Meta-Reflection

Beginning the semester with the excerpt from Patricia Hampl's A Romantic Education both relieved some of the student's own anxieties about writing autobiography and also helped them to think of autobiography as history in a way that several students said that they had never thought of before. Over the course of the semester both of the above students demonstrated a fine working understanding of Hampl's notion that autobiography always has a gaze beyond the individual self, that it is about one's relation to other stories, to history. As for myself, I still have not spent
enough time "Looking repeatedly into the past" for the act of writing autobiography to become "blessedly impersonal," as Hampl claims it does. But by reflecting repeatedly on my teaching, and by writing about these reflections, I have learned that, 

We do "live again" in memory, but differently: in history as well as in biography. And when these two come together, forming a narrative, they approach fiction. The imprecision of memory causes us to create, to extend remembrance into narrative. It sometimes seems, therefore, that what we remember is not--could not be--true. And yet it is accurate. The imagination, triggered by memory, is satisfied that this is so. (5)

And so, too, is the imagination triggered by memory, history and (in this case) desire, in our thoughts about the future. One of the strongest writers in the last section of the course that I taught, a young woman who wrote and performed her own songs, addressed her past, present, and future selves in her final connective writing by fictionalizing herself as an elderly woman preparing to write her memoirs:

My story is a collage of episodes, each one contributing to a larger pool of knowledge, self-understanding and peace. I have spent the greater part of my life roaming this world with my guitar and a head full of ideas. I have been fueled by the injustices of the world and the occasional but striking examples of beauty. I have driven through back roads and major highways, spent nights alone and with a myriad of friends. The things I have done have been out of inspiration, impulses, education, improvement and contribution. Mostly I have lived for
the moment, and now I am sorting through my story to hold on to the subtle underlying meanings that I missed the first time around.

I observed students personal narratives and analytical essays (in response to the readings) come to influence one another in particularly rich ways as they became more conscious of the process of "constructing a self" in writing and questioned the relationship between autobiography and academic discourse. While many students stated that they preferred writing the personal narratives over the critical essays, many of these same students came to observe, as they looked back over their work, that their critical writing helped them become more self reflexive and mindful of audience in their personal narratives, at the same time that they discovered that academic writing need not exclude personal voice, as they had previously thought.

As I have noted, I do not have success stories to tell about all of the students that have taken this course. I also believe that there are some students that will come into our courses with attitudes which prevent us from helping them (i.e., "I am only here because this is a requirement and you can’t make me like it) and that there is little we can do about this. The best we can do is attempt to create positive learning situations out of resistance, and encourage the class to see themselves as a community of thinkers.
and writers. I do feel that each section of this class that I taught did become a community; as such, much of what "worked" in the classroom did so because of those students who were able to demonstrate to others their understanding of what we were doing, or were willing to challenge (in a productive way) ideas that did not work for them:

Working the specific language relations that are working them, students educate their teachers regarding their limits and possibilities for dialogic becoming. Actually historical, these dynamic student-teacher relations are also actively rhetorical. The teacher is not a master of situation, but a student of it. Indeed, by accepting and working with situation, history, politics, and convention dynamically, such teachers and students, I would argue, challenge the current regime of truth and its claims of universal knowledge without obstructing anyone's access to this situation, these conventions (Goleman 9).

I am particularly impressed by the meta-reflective quality of connective/reflective writing of one such student in the final section. A student who was conscious of the many layers of complexity involved in expressing one's "self," Micheala played an invaluable role in her small group as a facilitator for understanding the readings, and workshopping papers. I was often grateful for her way of explaining her understanding of why we were doing what we were doing to her group members, and I continue to be grateful for the thoughts that she inspires in me when I read her work:
My computer hums as I probe through my papers, seeking a way to connect many random, miscellaneous parts of my life. Its (sic) difficult to find a place where they meet, where they become something that can say one thing about me. In some ways, the things I do, or at least write about, attempt to do what I am doing right here: communicate. As my computer hums away in the darkness of my room, I am engaged in an effort to communicate ways in which I communicate.

As my computer hums again and again as I work on this chapter and the dissertation as a whole, I seek to learn from my experiences with all of these students--those who made teaching a joy and those who challenged me in ways which, at times, were less than joyful, those I have perceived successes and others that I have feared to be failures--so that "everything I have experienced and understood (will) not remain ineffectual in my life," and my teaching.
Chapter Four

Critical Narratives:
Agency, Ethics, and Rhetoric into the 21st Century

Inarticulateness is the painful condition of not being able to find words for the sense persons have made of their experiences.

James Sosnoski, “Postmodern Teachers in Their Postmodern Classrooms”

Power is the ability to take one’s place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one’s part matter.

Carolyn Heilbrun, Writing a Woman’s Life

Much of this dissertation is about “the dilemma of the postmodern skeptic who wants to promote social justice” (Bizzell 288). What this skeptic has learned is that any pedagogy which seeks to fulfill such a goal cannot do so without, to return to a popular phrase of 1970’s feminism, attending to the ways in which the personal is political. Part of encouraging students to be civically and politically active is helping them relate their work, in school and out, to their individual lives, as well as the larger culture in which they are situated. As I have sought to construct new metaphors for the “self” or “subject” of the writer in postmodern times, I have come to understand the self as narrative.
as story, or rather a collection of stories joined by a “web of contingencies, stretching backwards and forwards in time” (Bullock 197). Productively addressing the issue of agency in theory and practice depends upon the intervention of these local social and historical stories in both specialized discourses and larger cultural narratives.

The growth in personal writing among academics, discussed in Chapter Two, is providing valuable material for looking at how established scholars address their own subjectivities as academics and individuals. As they render their experiences and seek to construct a space in which their stories have knowledge making potential, readers have the opportunity to analyze how such writers present their stories and deal with the problem of representing the “self” in discourse, and relate these findings to the theory and practice of teaching. My interest here is in the critically effective potential of such academic autobiographic work to explore and comment on the experience of being a scholar and a teacher in ways we can learn from in our work and our lives, and in our efforts to connect the two.

In “Writing Academic Autobiographies: Finding a Common Language Across the Curriculum,” Rhonda Grego argues that the survival and success of writing-across the curriculum programs
may depend on autobiographical writing as a means of bridging the ever widening gaps between disciplines due to the increasing specialization within as well as among disciplines. Noting that "Writing-across-the-curriculum programs can focus not only on developing student skills but on helping faculty develop their awareness of the very human 'beginnings' they share with their students and with their colleagues in the academic setting," Grego argues for the importance of faculty investigation of "the experiences (and emotions) that emerge as significant events in 'the history and geography of our lives' in academia (218). Narratives of our own writing experiences offer learning opportunities and a means of bridging of differences:

In the social and interpersonal relationships that contextualize our academic learning/writing experiences lie the institutionally forgotten ties and responsibilities of academic professionals to the work which will be done by the individuals whom we educate at the undergraduate level (and not beyond). The difference between "I know" and "I remember" often marks the part played by the personal (the subjective, the past, the extraneous, untethered understanding of the social and interpersonal contexts of our academic knowledge) in the professional. (220)

What is needed, according to Grego, is teacher research, a "sociology of student writers/learners of the present" that is informed by "a sociology of academic knowledge from the standpoint of our
colleagues across the curriculum” (222). “Indeed, we compositionists have barely skimmed the surface of our own past experiences; we have only begun to ask questions about the influences of other life roles on the learning we do in our research and teaching.” But “When we do,” Grego asserts, working with the example of Nancy Sommers’ “Between the Drafts,” “the experience is often powerful” (223). Such work then becomes not just a self-referential exercise, but research that can help teachers in any field address the needs of students as they contend with the specialized discourses of the academy. Narrative research might then also come to inform disciplinary discursive and pedagogical practices.

The power of narrative and blurred genres, of scholarship which attends to experience and the shaping of that experience in writing, to contribute to the making of knowledge in the field of composition and literature is receiving increasing recognition. It is to some degree true that “when major journals and publishers do publish narratives, they are usually authored by established leaders in the field whose prestige consequently lends the appropriate ‘authority’ to their (otherwise ‘personal’) writing” (Cain 3). But with such work by “established” figures comes the opportunity to learn something of the “sociology” of their academic work, and build from that work in the field.
A Cautionary Tale

In her academic autobiography *A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned*, Jane Tompkins has the extraordinary opportunity to write “out of that psychically unrestful juncture” (Freedman, *Intimate Critique* 21) of the personal and academic without the professional dangers attendant there for others. She takes on the tremendously difficult task of “getting at the stuff that is so familiar and at the same time so unexamined in order to show the emotional underpinnings of academic life” (Nancy Miller 988). Disappointingly, however, she does not quite do so in a manner that develops the potential of blurred genres to “‘talk back’ (Bakhtin 1981), transforming the cultural, institutional, and historical processes that give dominant discourses their authority” (Cain 2). Instead the text mainly describes important periods throughout her “life in school” with a tone of resignation in regard to the events that have angered or hurt her, or that she wishes could have been different, without exploring alternatives to her story through ideas or discursive forms. Hence while the turn to autobiography is a positive one for English studies, especially for feminists, it is not, as Charles Altieri notes, unproblematic: “now that our specific teacherly and scholarly interests have become so diverse, we may be
turning to autobiographical ways of talking about differences because they provide the only common structure for organizing information that we can (almost) trust” (65). The danger here lies in the assumption that personal writing is more trustworthy and sincere than abstract and theoretical work. Are we less suspicious of truth claims that are presented as the personal? As with any other kind of discourse, there are important questions that we should ask of autobiographical academic texts:

problems begin when it seems as if all of us simply accept autobiography as an adequate means of serving our deepest concerns about value, without including the healthy suspiciousness we have cultivated about other textual performances. What might this turn to autobiography be evading that is deeply problematic within our current sociocultural situation? (Altieri 65-6)

In other words, is this turn to autobiography more reflective of the need to feel connections with others at a time when academic work is becoming increasingly specialized than an effort to explore the role of the personal in the academic? Is it easier to turn to the personal than to identify and attempt to address sociocultural forces that increase individuals' feelings of alienation?

Ironically, while so much of her work is about defying conventions, blurring genres, and making the personal part of academic work, Tompkins appears to buy into the binary oppositions
she rails against. We can see the beginnings of her autobiographical project in her earlier essay, “Me and My Shadow,” which, as Nancy K. Miller reports, is “now seen as a manifesto for personal criticism” (“Public Statements” 985). Here Tompkins declares, “I now tend to think that theory itself, at least as it is usually practiced, may be one of the patriarchal gestures that women and men ought to avoid” (24). She writes passionately about the damage that can be done by maintaining false dichotomies:

The public-private dichotomy, which is to say, the public-private hierarchy, is a founding condition of female oppression. I say to hell with it. The reason I feel embarrassed at my own attempts to speak personally in a professional context is that I have been conditioned to feel that way. That’s all there is to it. (25)

She asks questions that are crucial to our lives and our work: “How can we speak personally to one another and yet not be self-centered? How can we be a part of the great world and yet remain loyal to ourselves?” (31). And yet instead of addressing the potential of experimental/personal/ writerly criticism that her essay enacts for transforming the academy, she seems to despair of an almost hopeless state of affairs: “I am, on the one hand, demanding a connection between literary theory and my own life and asserting, on the other hand, that there is no connection” (31).
Tompkins correctly points out that emotion is largely taboo in academic discourse:

The disdain for popular psychology and for words like “love” and “giving” is part of the police action that academic intellectuals wage ceaselessly against feeling, against women, against what is personal. The ridiculing of the “touchy-feely,” of the “Micky Mouse,” of the sentimental (often associated with teaching that takes students’ concerns into account) belongs to the tradition Alison Jagger rightly characterized as founding knowledge in the denial of emotion. It is looking down on women, with whom feelings are associated, and on the activities with which women are identified: mother, nurse, teacher, social worker, volunteer.” (40)

But this need not be the case. Indeed, due in part to work like Tompkins’ this condition is changing. In her teaching she reexamined her practice, rejected the “master teacher” model, and sought a more dialogic, student centered approach. And yet A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned is a recitation that does not invite response, and concludes without a lesson, however implicit or in process, that I can take away from her thoughts about her experience. I often felt pushed away and excluded as I read, not invited in by a use of the personal as a gesture of intimacy, not invited to say “me too,” as Nancy K. Miller says she does (“Public Statements” 982), even where Tompkins' educational experiences bear some relation to my own:
Her realization that "there is no final source of knowledge or authority outside the self" (xix), for example, grants her the power to turn her back on theory. But the power she gains she then wields over others. She makes a move, one I have often seen performed in the name of the personal, that keeps me at a distance, since it seems designed to make me think of my desire to engage her argument critically as an imposition of authority. Such a move seems to discount that not just anybody is granted the power and authority to invoke and to impose one's life as a key to understanding; not just anybody, without repercussions, can shelve a powerful theorist (as several of my graduate students argued, angrily) on the basis of an emotional rather than theoretical argument. (Salvatori 572)

Her account does not invite readers to "talk back," to participate in an ongoing discussion about cultural values and pedagogical practices and goals, to suggest alternatives.

Tompkins' reflections, in her final chapter, on what her experiments in teaching have taught her are powerful ones; they speak to my own fundamental concern in this dissertation--agency:

This last point, the students' sense of not being agents on their own behalf, troubles me the most. I think it's the result of an educational process that infantalizes students, takes away their initiative, and teaches them to be sophisticated rule followers. Of course, as professors, we don't see the ways in which what we do as teachers narrows and limits our students: for we ourselves have been narrowed and limited by the same process. (209)

Her best option, she has discovered, is to remove herself from the
classroom, from this troubled educational process. There is nothing wrong with this move—in fact, that the book is about how, having been “in school” for all of her life since she entered it, she discovered as she was about to turn fifty that it does not provide what she needs for her life speaks powerfully to the lack of connections she has felt between academia and her life. As Tompkins searches for a different kind of agency for herself, *A Life in School* becomes an elegy of sorts, as Nancy K. Miller also observes:

What gives *A Life in School* its elegiac undertones is the cadence of a farewell, a long good-bye. Not going yet. Because, after all, we at least know what to do as long as we are in school. How to mourn a professional life that no longer works on your terms? By telling a story about leaving, about the transition to a *vita nuova* for which the curriculum is not set. (“Public Statements” 989)

But Tompkins does not address what appears to be one of the primary reasons for her dissatisfaction: “the cultural and institutional dismissal of teaching” (Salvatori 573).

Finally, in her rejection of theory Tompkins also could be said to work against student agency herself. The pedagogy she advocates as a result of her experimental teaching “may indeed be a way of walking out on students since it deprives them, *a priori*, of a chance to make the *choice* she has made between competing forms of
knowledge and teaching” (Salvatori 574). And as I look for her thoughts on how to go about bridging the gaps she finds between school and life, or at least what direction to set off in, I find such suggestions lacking. Her conclusion is a dark one. Asserting that what we need is a matter of both/and, not either/or—that we need both “Inside and outside, the cloister and the world,” she concludes that “higher education has evolved to a point where it offers neither. Neither contact with the world nor contact with ourselves” (222). What I find myself longing for as I read her conclusion is a sense of the “narrative epistemology” (Fleckenstein) that makes her story “useful, especially to those who work within the present educational system” (Tompkins xi-xii), something that connects her experience to current practice, to the needs of others in education—both teachers and students:

Autobiographical criticism . . . is intensely concerned with fostering community, often with the pedagogical goal of producing a society in which each individual has the resources and sense of self importance allowing them to offer autobiographical writings to others. But these public concerns need to be made more explicit, and they need to be better connected to other versions of empowerment through education that might also help justify society’s investment in us. (Altieri 66)

Dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs can provide a powerful exigency for writing and for sharing one’s own
experiences, but not if it results in sullen resignation. Concern with fostering community, with public concerns, does indeed need to be more explicit if texts like *A Life in School* are to demonstrate the power of writing in its effects and the potential of discourse about the personal to address and perhaps change the academic and/or the public.

**Writing as Action**

In the time following the semesters I spent teaching the writing course discussed in Chapter Three, I received a paper from a student in a freshman composition course who responded particularly strongly to Alice Walker’s essay “Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self” and Merge Pursues poem “Barbie Doll.” The result was a paper that used both of these pieces as a jumping off place to tell the story of her battle with an eating disorder. Mira relates to the preoccupation the young Alice Walker developed with her eye, sightless and scarred from being shot by a BB: “She has other qualities but she can’t see them because the focus was too much on her looks. She begins to do poorly in school because of her obsession with her looks; the looks have taken over her life and mind.” This connection functions as a transition into the details of her own story (I include her text here verbatim):
I became so dysfunctional because of my looks that I couldn’t think of anything else either. It made me so sick. I became diagnosed with bulimarexia, which is a combination of both eating disorders. All it took for me was one comment a boy said to me “your legs are fat”. I became so sick that I told my mother at 15 that I thought I had a serious problem. I was sent away 3 times to two different hospitals. It took me up to the third time to want the help and be strong enough to go through with it. Society pushed me back every time because of the models that are so called the ideal woman that every guy wants; or at least that’s what I thought. I also thought that every other girl was prettier and skinnier than me. My mind and thoughts of the way I really looked were so distorted.

Mira’s essay is part of her academic as well as personal autobiography, for her academic struggles were linked in many direct ways to her personal ones. As she describes in her next paragraph, she got behind in school, which increased her embarrassment and led her to drop out; she ended up going to night school to finish her high school education.

Enrolled in Freshman English as a continuing education student, Mira struggled with writing; she would likely have been placed in a basic writing course at another university. She especially had trouble with assignments she perceived as more academic than personal, and I worked with her on sentence-level problems in extra conferences. Given the writing she had done previously in the course, the essay I share here, titled “Self-Image,”
was exciting to receive for a number of reasons. This was the clearest, strongest prose I had seen from her all semester, composed with a sense of inspiration and urgency. This essay showed a young woman who was, indeed, writing with passion. She was on a mission of sorts, a mission with social as well as personal goals—or, perhaps more precisely, the writing was personally exciting to her because of the social nature of its mission.

Mira came to conference eager to share her excitement about this piece. Usually quite self conscious about her writing, she surprised me by volunteering her draft for a full class workshop, especially after she had written: "Kids can be so cruel, that's why I'm so hesitant in sharing this because I don’t want people to think negative things about me. I only share this with people I can trust." She stated that she suspected that there were quite a few young women on campus with eating disorders or that might be in danger of developing them and that she would like to use her story to reach any such students in the class and to raise the awareness of others to the cultural causes of such personal disorders. And the subsequent discussion in class went very well--she received supportive comments and suggestions for revision without anyone skipping content to point out errors and moments of awkward work with Walker's text (a move I feared a couple of students might
make). She reported in conference that she felt good about the workshop and that she looked forward to working on her revision.

Unfortunately, I never saw that revision. Within the next couple of weeks she reported to me that a former boyfriend had been stalking her for some time and was beginning to escalate his behavior. I gave her information about the people and services at S.H.A.R.P., UNH’s Sexual Harassment and Rape Prevention group on campus, and she did seek help from them. But by then this situation had complicated the struggle Mira was already having with balancing the two courses she was taking with her job, and she felt that she had to withdraw from class. And yet when I think of empowering writing I think of her. A student not at all comfortable yet with academic discourse, she was nonetheless working toward critical effectivity. Improving her own self image depended on connecting with others in healthy ways, about connecting the private and public, personal and social, and she had found a forum in which her story really mattered. As circumstances in her life conspired to make her feel powerless (she felt that the police were not taking her seriously, and that she was going to have trouble obtaining another restraining order) she found that language did hold possibilities for a certain kind of power. When she called to give me the bad news, and to thank me, she said that she intended to try 401
again the following semester and thought that starting over again would be good for her. She knew she needed more time to work on her writing, and I agreed that starting over after the work she had done this semester would put her at a better advantage. I can only hope that was able to enroll again, and that whether she did or not, she continued to see writing as an action, a means, so to speak, "to get things done."

Moral Agency

Critical pedagogies, such as those of James Berlin and Henry Giroux discussed in Chapter Two, are dedicated to promoting social justice, to helping students actively become "agents of change in a democratic society." In his efforts to achieve this goal Berlin focuses his pedagogy on enabling students to "become better writers and readers as citizens, workers, and critics of their cultures" (1996, 145). The classroom becomes a site "of political activity and struggle" in which the teacher's job "is to serve as a transformative intellectual . . . concerned with improving economic and social conditions in the larger society":

The teacher must realize that his or her students are the products of concrete histories that have brought them to their present political positions, positions that are often committed to denying the conflicts and contradictions in
the signifying practices they daily encounter. More appropriate responses can come only in acknowledging and confronting this denial and in examining its material and social sources. (113)

Berlin's use of social epistemic rhetoric offers teachers valuable ways of addressing the histories behind such commitments. But Berlin tends to treat these histories as cultural; he evades the personal dimensions of these "concrete histories" and the potential of narrative as one form for exploring the social and historical nature of experience that students understand as personal.

In their introduction to *Left Margins: Cultural Studies and Composition Pedagogy*, Karen Fitts and Alan W. France express their hope that this collection of essays "intended to make available compelling examples of writing instruction that facilitate political demystification and social change" can, at least in this instance, "reverse the polarity of the privileged theory/practice binary" (xi). The essays included in this collection do put writing pedagogy "forward as the social praxis of (too often empty or 'unrealized') rhetorical theory and cultural criticism" (xi). But as one reads this collection it quickly becomes clear that personal writing, or narrative of any kind, is not an acceptable genre in such critical classrooms, and furthermore that any reader who wonders why is naive. Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, in particular, presents a particularly
chilling disregard for the personal and conventional narrative forms in a parodic and sarcastic letter/essay which admonishes a student for turning in, instead of his or her final paper, a “narrative of a ‘crisis’ in (his or her) subject relations” (219) explaining why the project was not completed. The student, it appears, deserves admonishing. And yet, given the condescending tone of Zavarzadeh’s comments explaining why he does not comment on writing by students “more interested in protecting their right to ‘feel’ in-crisis . . . . than in pursuing a disciplined understanding of the historical conditions of such crises” (220) I find myself wishing he had been duped by a student who had deliberately constructed such a narrative and request for response in order to elicit an ironic demonstration of the teacher’s sense of self righteousness and superiority. I agree that “self knowledge must be historical” (editor’s note, 219). Yet I see no social justice of any kind in the denial and ridicule of an individual’s experience, in the deliberate perpetuation of alienation.

Mira’s story, above, illustrates why narrative and autobiographical work matters not just personally, but socially and culturally. As Gregory Clark argues:

there is much more at stake in our writing instruction than the academic or professional success of the students we teach. What is at stake is the ability of
people who must live and work together to establish and maintain the kinds of communicative relationships upon which a self-governing society is continually being founded. (427)

Such communicative relationships depend upon developing a working understanding of the personal as political, social, and historical. Attending to “affect” does not mean ignoring historical causes, and respect for individual selves and the expression of experience does not entail endorsement of an “expressivist rhetoric” that “is just the local manifestation of a global bourgeois humanism” (editors’ note 219), as Zavarzadeh and the editors of Left Margins maintain; in fact, bourgeois humanism, and the discourse of modernity, makes any such real respect impossible.

The ineffectiveness of bourgeois humanism is evident in the nation’s present social conditions. In Crossing the Postmodern Divide Albert Borgmann states that “Individualism has become cancerous. We live in an age of narcissism and pursue loneliness” (3). As I noted in Chapter One, Borgmann identifies “sullenness” and “hyperactivity” as the primary present responses to the decline of the modern era. In the United States, in particular, he claims that sullenness characterizes the general mood of the nation (6).

Sullenness, according to Borgmann, “is both passive and aggressive, both indolent and resentful:
Indolence is often thought to be simply laziness. But as the etymology of the work suggests, indolent passivity is at bottom the incapacity to be pained by things undone and challenges unmet. One might think of this inability to respond as a sort of paralyzed irresponsibility. (7)

Such paralysis may indeed be afflicting the student Zavarzadeh addresses above, who in spite of the class in theory he or she is taking still turns to the discourse of modernity for explanations. But a pedagogy which outlaws affect and emotion has little hope of reaching such a student; a pedagogy that attends to a student’s narrative, in a critical yet more thoughtful way than Zavarzadeh does, just might. The same principles may apply to the resentful side of sullenness, which is exhibited when “brooding displeasure and disability take on an aggressive and dismissive aspect” (8). Such sullen resentment denotes an unfulfilled sense of entitlement with roots in “the American dream” and the material orientation of our culture which students, and the culture at large, need to be taught how to see.

The other response to the crisis of modernity Borgmann describes is “hyperactivity.” While the “clinical syndrome is commonly judged alarming and in need of therapy, the cultural version,” as a way of responding to the decline in America’s global position, “is revered and recommended as the cure for the nations
ills (14). Like chasing good money with bad, the principle involved here is that of more of the same, increasing the amount of effort applied when it is the kind of effort that is no longer working. While perhaps less about entitlement than the response of sullenness, such focus on work ethic and national productivity looks to technological advancement above other nations and capital gains as a measure of success. Without positive direction, such incessant activity is more about acquisitiveness and status than community and is therefore no more socially engaged than sullenness.

The answer that Borgmann poses to this dilemma is “postmodern realism.” Claiming that “Postmodern criticism gets arrested prematurely . . . when, having considered the modern arrogation of reality, it accepts naively the legacy of that arrogance, namely the disappearance of reality” (117), he argues for a recognition of the link between moral decisions and material culture (110). Such a recognition requires not only a postmodern revision of reality, but a revision of our understanding of the self and the self/other relationship.

Philip Cushman’s Constructing the Self, Constructing America: A Cultural History of Psychotherapy is also concerned with recovering or reimagining possibilities for moral agency in a culture of acquisitive selves. Cushman notes that in addition to the
influences of “urbanization, industrialism, and secularism . . . the intellectual discourse of self-contained individualism: the ideal of the masterful bounded self and its antecedents, the Cartesian splits and oppositions between mind and body, reason and passion, subject and object, individual and community” is also to blame for “the brokenness of our time” (10). Such “splits,” accompanied by the organizational and lifestyle changes in society Cushman lists above, and the advent of Freud’s theory of the unconscious, led individuals to focus on the inner self and emotional relationships with other individuals. A look at the history of psychotherapy reveals the role this practice has played in unknowingly perpetuating “self-contained individualism, certain era specific moral frameworks, and the political status quo” (12). Both personally and culturally, identity was defined in relation to “the other,” which was what one was not; culturally this dynamic played itself out in the domination of the white middle class, which defined itself against all that it was not--African Americans, Native Americans, immigrants. In a 20th-century cultural terrain “now oriented to purchasing and consuming rather than to moral striving; to individual transcendence rather than to community salvation; to isolated relationships rather than to community activism; to an individualistic mysticism rather than to political change” (78) this self became “the empty self . . . a
self that experiences the above absences as a lack of personal conviction and worth . . . as undifferentiated emotional hunger” (79). Healing this empty self depends on an approach psychotherapy has yet to take—recognizing that our understanding of the self is a cultural and historical construction, that “there is no universal, transhistorical self, only local selves; there is no universal theory about the self, only local theories” (23). The self is a web of cultural contingencies, a historical text of social relationships positioned within existing yet always changing regimes of truth and power.

Pedagogy that is mindful of the constructed nature of our world and the autobiographical component of all writing, that emphasizes consciousness of the social and historical nature of the self and discourse and attention to experience, may also emphasize social responsibility and encourage what Cushman proposes could result from historically situating the discipline of psychotherapy:

we might be able to develop social practices that will shape a slightly new configuration of the self, one that will be composed of new moral understandings and be capable of developing new political and economic structures, structures that could lessen the country’s capacity to injure and destroy it’s own citizens and those of other nations. (Cushman 24)

Use of the word “moral” always makes me nervous, as perhaps it
should. “Morality” is a matter of values, values which can never be neutral. The central questions which follow any discussion of morality are: “Whose values apply here?” “Whose interests?” “Whose point of view?” Significantly, however, these are also questions which imply an agent, which request the identity of an interested subject. We can recover a functional notion of the subject or self, then, without resorting to the discourse of modernity by, as Calvin Schrag puts it, “Framing the discussion in terms of ‘who’ questions instead of ‘what’ questions” (4). The “who” in question here is not an essentialism or autonomous self, but a site at which history, discourse, and experience converge to create with specifically situated yet never fixed perspective. This “who of discourse,” according to Schrag, “understands itself in its hearing and transmitting of narratives” (24). Most importantly, this “who” has agentic potential.

As teaching, as well as scholarship, always involves the teacher’s or researcher’s interested and specifically situated perspective, it is better to be up front about what one’s “standpoint” or “position” is, to use terms invoked by many working in feminist theory, and what values that perspective entails, then to support a false pretense of objectivity. Barring a neoconservative, positivist insistence on the possibility of objectivism, the only
other option in these postmodern times is an unrelenting skepticism that gives up the world for the word and forecloses any possibility for meaningful action. And like Patricia Bizzell, "I'm just not willing to concede yet that the smirk of skepticism is all we academics, or we Americans, can achieve in the face of the present crisis in our communal life" (274).

Present Crises, Future Students

Within nine months seven incidents of shootings by students in American high schools and middle schools have left 19 people dead and approximately 42 wounded. Among these incidents, the following garnered the most headlines.

On February 19, 1997, Evan Ramsey began a shooting rampage at Bethel High School in Bethel, Alaska, that resulted in the deaths of the principle and one student. On October 1, 1997, in Pearl, Mississippi, Luke Woodham stabbed his mother to death before going to Pearl High School where he used a gun to kill three and injure seven. Michael Carneal, 14, allegedly killed three people and wounded five when he opened fire on a prayer circle gathered in the hallway of Heath High School in West Paducah, Kentucky, on December 1, 1997. In Jonesboro, Arkansas, on March 24, 1998, two young boys, Andrew Golden, 11, and Mitchell Johnson, 13, allegedly
came to Westside Middle School in a van containing a virtual arsenal of weapons and opened fire from a hiding position in the grass when students filed out of the building in response to a pulled fire alarm; four students and a teacher were killed and ten people were wounded. And most recently it was reported on May 21, 1998, that fifteen year old Kipland Kinkle of Springfield, Oregon, allegedly went on a shooting rampage in the cafeteria at Thurston High School where he killed two people and wounded twenty-two after apparently having gunned down his parents sometime during the night before.

These shocking and tragic events, occurring in such a short amount of time, hold a message about youth culture that the nation had best seek to unravel with all deliberate speed. Gun control is not the primary issue. Clearly the multiple injuries and deaths that resulted in the above incidents would not have occurred if the young men accused of these assaults had not had access to firearms (and in the case of the two boys in Arkansas, so many firearms), but the weapons used are not the source of the problem. These are not urban areas. Guns have long been present in homes in such towns all across the country. But only recently have so many young men seen in those guns an answer to their problems with their peers, their parents, and authority.
In a special report for the Sunday *New York Times*, June 14, 1998, Timothy Egan confirms that both the crimes of these students and reports of their behavior beforehand exhibit "a remarkable number of common traits." According to the mental health experts that he interviewed, "most of the assailants were suicidal, and of above-average intelligence" (1:1). And investigation into the boys' behavior prior to their shooting sprees reveals that they "gave ample warning signs, often in detailed writings at school, of dramatic, violent outbursts to come." Kip Kinkel, in fact, "read a journal entry aloud in English class about killing fellow students" (1:22).

According to one of the psychiatrists that Egan interviewed, Dr. Alan Unis, one of the trends that professionals are "seeing in the population at large is that all the mood disorders are happening earlier and earlier. The incidence of depression and suicide has gone way up among young people" (1:22). The killings committed by the youths in the recent examples "are now viewed by some criminologists and other experts as a way to end a tortured life with a blaze of terror" (1:1). That such seemingly senseless and inscrutable acts of violence take place in school settings should also give us pause, and lead us to investigate Lynn Worsham's notion of "a rhetoric of pedagogic violence" which focuses "specifically on
the way violence addresses and educates emotion and inculcates an affective relation to the world” (121). Is there a cultural rhetoric which does indeed teach violence? What are the above events teaching the young people who witness or hear about such violence, and what should they be teaching the public and those of us who work in education?

Of course the students who express their rage and frustration with bullets fired at fellow students and teachers are not students we are likely to see in our college composition classes. And the actions of the young men accused in the above examples are shockingly extreme. But that such incidents are increasing in frequency and no longer just isolated events indicates something tremendously complicated about our times that we ignore at the peril of our society, and at the peril of the lives (in all senses of the word) of both our students and ourselves. Many of the classmates of these young men will find their way into our classrooms.

These tragic events, all reportedly committed by boys ranging in age from 11 to 16, demonstrate that many boys tend to deal with pent up pain, confusion, by eventually acting out, manifesting it externally by, in these cases, seeking to injure or even eliminate others. Some may have been victims of violence and abuse themselves; others, by all accounts living in loving families, are
reported to have developed a fascination with violence in popular culture. Girls, studies have shown, tend to internalize pain and confusion that may have external sources, and may in a variety of ways inflict damage on the self (responding through eating disorders, depression, etc.).¹ When victims of abuse, girls have long been subject to a cultural “catechism of fear and shame that schools women to accept responsibility for their own brutalization” (Worsham 120) and keep it to themselves. Whatever the personal or cultural causes, problematic behavior in young women, while increasingly the subject of television movies of the week, does not make headlines.

I recently spoke to a teacher from a Catholic high school who told me that due to the tragic suicide of a student at another school in her state who had given indications of her intentions in a school journal that apparently had gone unread by the teacher, her own school had forbidden assigned personal writing. My knee jerk response was to see this reaction as absurd--and irresponsible--but as I thought about it I could see how such a liability reducing move is tempting,² and how some might convince themselves that it is

¹ See Mary Pipher, Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Lives of Adolescent Girls. That the book became a popular best seller may be a sign of both the severity of the problem and (I hope) and a national interest in addressing it.
² As it was to a colleague of Dan Morgan; see “Ethical Issues Raised by Students’ Personal Writing.”
even potentially preventative, hoping to force such a student to express self destructive thoughts in other, perhaps less easily missed ways. Journals, after all, can be “messy” texts, full of a variety of writing from the personal to the fictional. Teachers may not know what to take seriously, or when to intervene, and with so many students, certainly may not have time to read every page, or may not intend to do so, especially if the journal is intended primarily for the student’s use.

And yet instituting a policy against personal writing is hardly the solution. This dissertation is not about primary or secondary education, and I can claim no expertise or authority in those areas. But if the recent incidents of youth violence support Worsham’s contention that “Primary pedagogic work mystifies emotion as a personal and private matter and conceals the fact that emotions are prevailing forms of social life, that personal life always takes shape in social and cultural terms” (127), then the need to negotiate false dichotomies of private and public, personal and social (and, indeed, theory and practice) becomes particularly urgent. Emotion—the “affect” and “effect” so anathema to radical pedagogies—has everything to with the ways students react to and make sense of their experience. According to Worsham that emotion, which she defines as “the tight braid of affect and judgment, socially
constructed and lived bodily, through which the symbolic takes hold of and binds the individual . . . to the social order and its structure of meaning" (121), “is our primary education (primary in the sense of earliest and foundational)” (122). Perhaps the events described above provide evidence in support of Worsham’s contention that in light of the “‘waning’ of affect in the era of the postmodern,” “our most urgent political and pedagogical task remains the fundamental reeducation of emotion” (122).

When I began working on this dissertation I would never have expected that I would end by discussing emotion. After all I was a theory oriented scholar looking to define a place for the personal within critical pedagogy, a place that could be defended from charges of being solipsistic or “touchy-feely.” But acknowledgment of the role of emotion in the behavior, which includes writing, of socially and historically constituted subjects is an important missing link in our efforts to connect our study of the word—the reality constituting forces of discourse—to the world, which in turn influences that discourse. To skeptics I must respond, like Mark Freeman, that even if my “self” does not exist “apart from my own consciousness of it,” “even if the furniture of the world doesn’t really exist apart from the words I use to speak it, which on some level I am fully prepared to avow, I still bump into it all the time”
(13). To those who would argue that pedagogy devoted to social justice must discourage what they would regard as solipsistic, status quo preserving attention to emotion, I argue that some attention to the role of emotion in the social is crucial to any hope of justice. My theory must also do justice to the life I am living, and the lives of the students that I teach.

Cultural mystification of emotion as a personal and private matter masks the power relations that are involved in the cultural association of emotions with “the irrational, the physical, the particular, the private, and the feminine” (127). Ironically, according to this line of thinking, the bracketing off of emotion actually helps to discourage the development of an understanding of the systems of power at work within the culture necessary for productive political action:

In general, the dominant pedagogy of emotion refuses the expression of anger by subordinates, and it refuses to acknowledge that sometimes and in some contexts active bitterness might be a move away from self-deception and hence a moral achievement. It schools anger to turn inward and become silent rage or passive bitterness where the energy for political insight can be consumed in the pathology of the personal. (Worsham 129)

It is certainly worth considering how this cultural repression and stigmatization of emotion might be related to both the widely publicized acts of rage by young men who by some accounts seemed
emotionless, and the not so well known attempts at personal punishment or annihilation.

To return to words of Kurt Spellmeyer discussed in Chapter Two, at this "moment in our history when many observers have commented on the accelerating breakdown of communities and the spreading mood of cynicism, we need to ask if learning as we now imagine it helps to strengthen our students' sense of agency and self-worth while replenishing the fragile sources of compassion and mutual aid" (904). Spellmeyer, it seems, would agree with Worsham that "The pedagogical problem in the era of the postmodern is to place emotion, which has been severed from meaning, at the disposal of meaning once again and thereby to produce affective investments in forms of knowledge that will lead to empowerment and emancipation" (139). Critical attention to a "search for basic grammars of emotional life" may indeed be crucial to our students', and our own, "future beyond the university (Spellmeyer 911).

Helping students to examine the contradictions in their lives and the historical nature of who they are/are becoming is, I believe, part of the project of teaching for rhetorical agency. Writing can provide a space for addressing emotion (not dwelling in it), for addressing students' responses to alienation, and for conceiving of one's world as a changeable place. Such attention to emotion is not
about being self-absorbed, but more connected to others; it is about
developing an ethos and a sense of responsibility. In an effort to
address "the empty self" in a postmodern world (and as we come to
enter a post-postmodern age, whatever name we shall give it) our
task "is to shape a new configuration of the self, one that leads to a
citizenship based on realistic mutual regard and a moral
commitment to economic justice and the well-being of all citizens,
rather than a citizenship vulnerable to manufactured hatreds
(Cushman 356). Understanding the self as a narrative, a story that
is inseparable from multiple larger (more globally populated) and
longer (historically situated and always unfinished) stories and yet
always to some degree self authored, provides a means to avoid the
unproductive options of sullenness (which is inarticulate and
passive), hyperactivity, and at the extreme, violence, and instead
enter into unruly but generative conversation. Agency requires
personal and social responsibility (in all the meanings of that term).
Teaching writing means teaching ways to use language to express
emotions--to address "the nervous system," so to speak--and give
shape to private experiences in a social, historical context, and as a
productive activity, a means to action.
Appendix A

Course Description

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Emily Dickinson

In many ways this line from Dickinson quite accurately describes what we all do when we tell the stories of our lives. Given the imperfection of memory, and the images that we have of ourselves that we wish to communicate through what we reveal, the "Truth" that we tell is both carefully selected and constructed. Some of the most "honest" and well written autobiographies are those that acknowledge this "slant." They are conscious of what isn't being told as well as what is; they make an effort to identify the external forces that may have shaped the self they chose to present, and how this self is presented. It is the development of this kind of consciousness that I want to encourage over the course of the term--a self-reflexive vision and voice that looks both inward and outward at what makes you who you are at any given moment, and how you might best communicate something of this self to others.

I will also ask you to consider what relationship this kind of writing has to other writing that you do, particularly in your other academic work. I will invite you to participate in a scholarly conversation that usually goes on outside the classroom, and ask you, as students, to formulate your own answers to the following questions: If a composition course should help prepare you for working in other academic discourse communities at the university, what role should the writing of personal narratives have in the composition
classroom? Is there a place for a personal "voice" in academic writing?

Autobiography entails not only the notion of chronicling events from one's life and reflecting on those events, but also a sense of making public a private self. What is involved in presenting the personal and individual to a potentially diverse public audience? How does writing autobiography, and even autobiographical fiction, entail constructing a self with a view to how others might read that self? Even in journal writing we can be said to construct ourselves in the act of putting our reflections down on paper, and in this act we also have some kind of audience in mind, however tacitly defined. Such considerations necessarily become magnified by the decision to write for a wider audience. What is not always explicitly discussed is how that same writing self has also been socially constructed, shaped by considerations of class, race and gender, the various communities in which he or she participates, and cultural ideology in general. In this course we will consider how such factors figure into the selves we write, and the very act of writing the self.

Reading List

The texts that I assigned varied some from semester to semester, but the organizing structure remained the same:
Childhood (approximately weeks 1-3); Language, Literacy, and Growing Up in America (weeks 4-6 or 7); and Self and the University: Personal Writing and Academic Discourse / Self in American Culture (weeks 7 or 8-13), with the final week spent on their connective/reflective writing and revising for their final portfolios. The
readings that I assigned all three semesters included selections from: Patricia Hampl, from *A Romantic Education*; Annie Dillard, from *An American Childhood*; Frederick Douglass, "Learning to Read and Write" from his autobiography; Maxine Hong Kingston, from *The Woman Warrior*; Richard Rodriguez, "Aria: A Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood;" Lorene Cary, *Black Ice*; Mike Rose, *Lives on the Boundary* chapters 2 and 3; Sandra M. Brown, "Poetry and the Age: 'A Girl in the Library' to Randall Jarrell;" as well as David Bartholomae, "Inventing the University;" Peter Elbow, "Reflections on Academic Discourse;" and James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* pp. ix-xvi, 3-9, 24-34, 85-137, and 159-175. For the third semester, in the place of the Bartholomae and Elbow essays listed above I substituted Bartholomae's "Writing With Teachers: A Conversation with Peter Elbow" and Elbow's "Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic: A Conflict in Goals" respectively (the texts of the talks that David Bartholomae and Peter Elbow gave at the 1991 Conference on College Composition and Communication), and their responses to one another four years later, as they appeared in the February 1995 issue of *College Composition and Communication*. I supplemented these with the epilogue from Kurt Spellmeyer's *Common Ground.*
Appendix B

Assignment for James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*

Read *Notes of a Native Son* pp. ix-xvi, 3-9, 24-34, 85-137, and 159-175. Write a Memo to your group members which begins the work of the paper you will write for Thursday. Give some thought to the following: How does Baldwin work with the complexities of the relationship between self and society (especially for those on the margins of American culture)? What does he have to say about the problem of identity and its relation to writing? As students and writers seeking a way to have a voice in writing, in our culture (or so I would hope, as you are in this class), consider Baldwin's statement that,

One writes out of one thing only—one's own experience. Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give. This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art. The difficulty then, for me, of being a Negro writer was the fact that I was, in effect, prohibited from examining my own experience too closely by the tremendous demands and the very real dangers of my social situation. (7)

See, also, passages on pages xi, 131, and 136. Consider Baldwin's efforts to find a language with which to make himself heard in light
of Dubois' notion of double consciousness (see handout) or the following lines from Ralph Ellison's novel *The Invisible Man*:

Well, I was and yet I was invisible, that was the fundamental contradiction. I was and yet I was unseen (196).
Bibliography


