WRITING AND READING SELVES IN CONTEXT: RHETORICAL FUNCTIONS OF THE PERSONAL ESSAY IN COMPOSITION STUDIES

DISSERTATION

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By

Melissa A. Goldthwaite, B.A., M.F.A

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Dissertation Committee:

Professor Andrea Abernethy Lunsford, Adviser
Professor Jacqueline Jones Royster
Professor Brenda Brueggemann
Professor Bill Roobach

Approved by

Andrea Lunsford
Adviser
Department of English
ABSTRACT

This dissertation develops critical approaches for reading and teaching the form of the personal essay. Through an historical overview, I situate the personal essay, as used in the field of rhetoric and composition, within the larger context of literary scholarship on the essay form and the wide-ranging interest in the "personal" in many fields of study. I trace the rise of the essay in composition studies and show its connections to and divergences from creative writing, feminist studies, and "expressivist" pedagogies. Then, through case studies of the work of three influential practitioners—Nancy Sommers, Lynn Z. Bloom, and Wendy Bishop—I provide a focused view of specific essays and how they function rhetorically. Additionally, by demonstration, I argue for strategies of reading and response that take writer, form, style, audience, and context into account.

While many people have noted and debated the turn to the personal essay, few have undertaken careful, multi-layered studies of it within specific disciplinary contexts. As a result, while the personal essay is especially contested, we know little about the form and its functions. My dissertation investigates the question of why the nature and place of the personal has drawn so much attention, even controversy, during the latter half of the 20th century and works to define "personal" in careful rhetorical ways. As an alternative to recent characterizations of the personal essay as inherently self-indulgent or anti-
intellectual, I advocate and demonstrate readings informed by rhetorical, reader response, and feminist autobiographical theory and guided by the essay form itself, arguing that such readings can help teachers and scholars better imagine the role the form can play in future pedagogy and scholarship.
In memory of William L. Lane, 1931-1999
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“Our correspondences have wings—paper birds that fly from my house to yours—flocks of ideas crisscrossing the country. . . . We are not alone in the world.”

—Terry Tempest Williams, Refuge

If I know anything, it is this: the importance of correspondences, the value of keeping in touch. My deepest thanks goes to my adviser, Professor Andrea Abernethy Lunsford. Her presence in my life as teacher and mentor has shaped and enriched every aspect of this project, my graduate education, and who I am as a person. The value of her care and support is immeasurable. And though she lives 2,500 miles away and works harder than any person I’ve ever known, she’s never more than an email or phone call away. She has wings—and a beautiful collection of red shoes.

Professor Jacqueline Jones Royster’s course on the essay, its forms and functions, was the first elective choice class I took in graduate school back in 1995. I was in my first year of the M.F.A. program and knew then that I also wanted to work toward a Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition. I knew, as well, that I wanted to work with Professor Royster. I identify strongly with her passion for the form of the essay and admire the equally strong passion that fuels all of her work. She asks the very best questions.

Professor Brenda Brueggemann has generously read almost every essay, poem, and paper I’ve written over the past seven years. And she’s shared her work, her
friendship, and her family (and their beagle, Petey. Rub his ears and troubles disappear). I appreciate her willingness to read, respond, and write ever-needed encouraging notes.

Professor Bill Roorbach worked with me on my M.F.A., and I'm grateful that he agreed to continue on as a member of my exam committee and as a reader of the dissertation. He loves the essay, and writes so well.

My first correspondence with the three "subjects" of my research—Nancy Sommers, Lynn Z. Bloom, and Wendy Bishop—was through books and journal articles. At first, it was a one-way correspondence. They wrote; I read. Soon we exchanged emails, then hellos at conferences, then conversation through interviews. Writing this dissertation is, to me, a way of continuing and broadening our conversations—seeing the connections with discussions important to the field of rhetoric and composition and starting new exchanges. I want this dissertation to be both a tribute to the ways their work enables my own and a chance for my work to become, as Nancy Sommers would say, a source from which others can draw sustenance.

Nancy Sommers, in midst of a very busy December, gave me the gift of her time. Though I don’t know her well, I look forward to seeing her at conferences and to listening to her speak, hearing the ways the concerns of her personal essays and research on student writing intersect.

When I returned home from my December 1999 interview with Lynn Z. Bloom, I called a close friend and said, "Lynn Bloom lives an essay." She opened her home to me and generously shared her stories, recipes, clippings from her mother of thousands plant, and a love for the essay. I appreciate her graciousness and hospitality.
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I've dedicated this dissertation in memory of William L. Lane. Until a few years before his death, when circumstances beyond him prevented his correspondence, he kept in touch faithfully. A scholar, teacher, writer, and friend, he listened intently to both texts and people. Still, even though he's been gone for over two years, I find myself expecting a letter from Bill as I walk to the mailbox each day. I write letters to him in my head.

Bill's friendship, his attentive correspondence, was a much-valued gift. I am fortunate to have these people, gratefully acknowledged here, in my life—all gifts.
VITA

February 25, 1972 ......................... Born - Haverhill, Massachusetts

1994 ........................................ B.A., Messiah College, Grantham, Pennsylvania

1997 ........................................ M.F.A., Department of English The Ohio State University

1994 - Present .............................. Graduate Teaching/Research/ Administrative Associate, Department of English, The Ohio State University

PUBLICATIONS


**FIELDS OF STUDY**

**Major Field:** English

Rhetorical Theory
Composition Studies
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: ESSAY CHANGES

"Discourses, academic or otherwise, do not remain constant; figures (that is, conventions of discourse) change over time through an accumulation of nuance and inflection. People write. Boundaries blur. We shape language even as language shapes us" (226).


Long known as protean or shape-shifting, the form of the essay is particularly resistant to conclusive definition. Just as the form itself changes, so does its potential and effects. According to Graham Good, the “potential offered by the essay form is realized differently in different periods” (viii); indeed, the form is recreated in various times and contexts for differing purposes. Although the essay has shifted and changed to meet contemporary needs, few serious studies of this form exist within particular disciplinary contexts.1 As a result, while the essay is especially contested in rhetoric and composition, we know little about this form and its functions.

Four pieces in the Reader Response section of the 20.2 volume of JAC (2000) illustrate in a microcosmic way the complex and contested place the essay occupies in composition studies: Cynthia Selfe’s “To His Nibs, G. Douglas Atkins—Just in Case You're Serious about Your Not-So-Modest Proposal,” G. Douglas Atkins’s “Art and Anger—Upon Taking up the Pen Again: On Self(e)-Expression,” Tim Mayers’s “The
Struggle over Composition and the Question of Might: A Response to Gary Olson," and Gary Olson's "Struggling Over Composition." While these pieces are not all specifically about the form of the essay, they do bring up many of the important terms and issues that structure the debate over form. For me, these responses function as a kind of "parlor conversation," the kind Kenneth Burke writes about in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*: "When you arrive, others have long preceded you and they are engaged in a heated discussion... You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar" (110).

If you were to walk into this parlor (or in the case of response pieces, which are often relegated to the back of journals, into the back room) and ask me, "What's going on?", I would tell you there are two main conversations: the one between Atkins and Selfe about form, instrument, and whose work should be most valued, and the one between Mayers and Olson about the identity of composition studies and differing understandings of the relation between creative writing and composition; this conversation, too, concerns the politics and struggle over what kinds of work should be valued in rhetoric and composition. Atkins, Selfe, Mayers, and Olson are not necessarily the most prominent figures in the debates that have been going on for some time, but their responses are timely, and they demonstrate the fevered pitch the debates have reached. I have caught the tenor of the argument and, through this dissertation, am ready to put in my oar.

So if you happened in on this particular parlor conversation and asked me what was going on, I might say something like this: See that guy over there, the one fiddling
with his pen? That’s Doug Atkins. He’s been proclaiming the value and beauty of pens, declaring “the pen is the instrument by which writing is best made” (“On Writing Well” 77) and tying this love for pens to an admiration for the essay. I heard him say, “They share a line-age, essay-writing and pen-writing” (83). He says the typewriter and computer are the bane of good writing (80), that his secretary types his work for him (73, 77), and that composition books are “as unhelpful as they are unreadable” (74).

You should have seen the look on Cynthia Selfe’s face. I’ve never seen her so agitated. She just laid into him—went up one side, down the other. I nearly spilled my drink when she called him a “nib-licker” and “essay pimp” (408), but she made some really good points. She asked, “Why do we have to choose? Not one literacy, but many. Not one tool, but many. Who operates outside the field of your not-so-modest vision?” (409). Then she listed several of her colleagues, many who work primarily with computer technology, and praised the artful work they do (409-10). By the end of her tongue-lashing, she calmed down quite a bit, told Atkins not to take it personally, that she wasn’t responding as much to him as to others who have made her and her composition colleagues feel badly about their work (413).

Atkins didn’t buy her apology, though. He started out with one of those I-won’t-even-dignify-that-with-a-response attitudes, saying he found her words “uncivil, offensive, and unquotable” (414), but everyone was looking at him; he had to answer. He responded to Selfe’s angry tone, said (I swear, I thought he dropped out of a British novel from some other century), she “delivers frequent and vicious blows to head and heart”
(415). Then he started quoting Jeanette Winterson and Virginia Woolf to support his points about pens and essays and writing one’s character; that’s when I did spill my drink.

When I went to get a napkin to wipe the punch off my dress, I heard Gary Olson and Tim Mayers having it out over the September 1999 CCC issue devoted to connections between creative writing and composition. I heard Olson flinging about phrases like “the solipsism of the expressivists,” so I stopped to listen in and was relieved to hear Mayers ask Olson to define his terms. Mayers critiqued the “guilt-by-association strategy in which creative writing is made synonymous with expressivism, and perhaps even with expressivism of the ‘unthinking’ variety” (451). They talked about issues of power, struggle, and definition. I noted the struggle between the two speakers, the anxiety over disciplinary respectability.

The metaphorical and fictionalized account of my initial encounter with these response pieces is meant to provide a narrative context and an introduction to my more considered analysis of these pieces and the issues that emerge from them. I choose these responses for several reasons: first, they deal with some of the important terms and issues at play in struggles over the place of the personal essay in composition studies; second, the responses are themselves situated in an ongoing conversation/argument, directing readers’ attention to the past, even as the authors look forward, calling for various forms of change; third, these pieces, in both form and content, are ripe for analysis in terms of ethos, demonstrating a range of tones, constructed selves, and uses of sources. These pieces evidence the very personal nature of criticism and response as well as the high
stakes in what Olson terms the “hegemonic struggle over how the field of composition studies should be defined” (538 “Kinneavy”).

As a way of introducing some of the lines of inquiry I’ve followed throughout the research and writing of this dissertation, I’d like first to turn to each of these four JAC “responses” in more detail, to situate them within a larger conversation, and to separate out some of the issues pertinent to my own project. I will then set the parameters for this study, explain my choice of the term “personal essay” as its focus, provide an overview of the place of the personal essay in composition studies, examine some critiques of the form in the context of the discipline, discuss my choice of subjects for the case studies, and, finally, offer a framework for reading the essay, which I demonstrate in the remainder of the dissertation.

The Message, the Medium, and the Valuing of Work: Selfe’s Response to Atkins

“I am tired of essay writers who think that all the strength and vigor and pain of language could ever be contained in a single genre, in one holy form, in one blessed medium. That’s nuts” (404).

—Cynthia L. Selfe, “To His Nibs, G. Douglas Atkins—Just in Case You’re Serious about Your Not-So-Modest Proposal”

In “To His Nibs, G. Douglas Atkins—Just in Case You’re Serious about Your Not-So-Modest Proposal,” Cynthia Selfe responds to, or more accurately rails against, Atkins’ personal essay “On Writing Well; Or, Springing the Genie from the Inkpot: a Not-so-Modest Proposal” published in the 20.1 issue of JAC. In his essay, Atkins lays out five beliefs he holds strongly: “Writers know best how to write”; “writing workshops
are the best place to learn both how to write and how to teach”; “we write best about what we know firsthand and what we care about”; “writing students should be reading”; “rather than composition theory or textbooks,” they should “read Cynthia Ozick” (74, 75).

Simply put, Atkins wants students to read and write essays (a particular kind and class of essay, “mellow” and “beautiful” are his tastes), to be taught (if they should be taught at all, and on this point he’s ambivalent) by writers, and he wishes to argue the following points: “that with which you work, your tool, your implement, your writing instrument matters” (76), and “the pen is the instrument by which writing is best made” (77).

If Atkins were just a man fancying his pens, his essay might seem quaint but not necessarily offensive; however, in the course of penning his point, he does offend, pitting his understanding of “good writing” against the writing that he finds in composition theory and textbooks. In praising William Zinsser’s writing, Atkins states,

> Being so readable, it is quite unlike the weighty rhetorics, monstrous ‘readers,’ leaden ‘composition books,’ and arcane writings about writing, composition theory, culture and composition—what you have to slog through these days and somehow know about if you’re going to teach writing.... With some exceptions, these ponderous tomes are as unhelpful as they are unreadable, examples of how not to write in the guise of teaching how to write. (74)

This statement appears in *JAC*, a journal whose audience is largely comprised of composition teachers and theorists. I wonder what kind of response Atkins anticipated? He’s writing to an audience of people who teach and write the books he, without specific example, disparages. What puzzles me about Atkins’ critique (as well as his counsel, “rather than composition theory or textbooks, let them read Cynthia Ozick” [75]) is that composition readers and textbooks do contain the types of essays Atkins admires. And as
Lynn Z. Bloom’s research on the essay cannon indicates, composition classrooms are one of the few places in the academy where essays (particularly the kinds Atkins admires—though those are certainly not the only kinds of essays that have value) are actively taught and seen as model forms of writing.

In his essay, Atkins is not just pointing his pen at compositionists, but also at computers. He implies, through a quotation by Barry Hannah, that those who write with word processors write generic prose (76); he assumes that Cynthia Ozick could not have crafted the “glorious sentences” he quoted of hers “with anything but a pen” (78), and claims that “the computer breeds prose neither comely nor muscular” (81). Even in his litotic attempt not to “bash the computer,” Atkins makes his disdain quite clear:

Although I am computer-illiterate and blissfully so, I admit that the computer is not without value. On occasion I have encouraged offspring, friends, even students to expedite my quest for books through our labyrinthine library system or from Amazon.com. And although I have not (yet, at least) advanced to the point of dictaphone as intermediary for my hieroglyphics, I’ve certainly reaped the benefits of Lori Whitten’s [his secretary] skill in using WordPerfect. (77)

For Atkins, it seems, the value of the computer rests solely in its convenience as a tool for his offspring, friends, and students to use to secure books for him, or for his secretary to use to type for him. Consider Cynthia Selfe’s response.

She’s mad:

I am tired of pissing contests.
I am tired of literary scholars and nonfiction writers who scorn composition teachers.
I am tired of blusters who pronounce prose written with the pen to be purer, more finely crafted, more “comely” than the words and images created on a computer screen. (405)
Apparently, Selfe couldn’t care less about the “comeliness” of Atkins’s words:

You give good words, G. Doug.
But your heart is small and your mind is dark. (406).

Comeliness—with its connotations of beauty, delicacy, seemliness, and decorum—won’t allow Selfe to word process her response; she needs words like “cool,” “stink,” and “diss” to confront what she terms Atkins’s “terminal elitism” (408); “You must think you’re better, G. Doug. You must think you’re superior” (406). She turns the superiority around, confronts Atkins with his own implements: “you Levenger man, you nib licker, you essay pimp” (408).

To support her claims, Selfe draws attention to those teachers, writers, and students who are left out of Atkins’s constructed world of pen-loving privilege, those who operate “outside the field of [his] not-so-modest vision” (409). In using examples of her own colleagues, friends, and students—Randy Freisinger, Marilyn Cooper, Anne Wysocki, Vicki Crenshaw, Zhigang Wang, Nancy Barron, and others—Selfe advocates not one genre, but many; not one literacy, but many; not one tool, but many (408, 409). And in this cry for multiplicity, Selfe commands: “Keep your pens and your essays. Move the hell over” (412).

And then she apologizes.

No more G. Doug. Now “Professor Atkins.” And the claim that she is not writing to him but in response to his proposal and

the collective strains of established scholars—usually, but not always, men; usually, but not always, literary scholars—who imply that the work composition teachers do, with or without computer technology, is work to be dismissed, work
that is done better, done smarter, by literary scholars or nonfiction writers or just about anyone else. (413)

The coda, an apology and explanation, doesn’t take away the sting of words already written. But it does provide a broader context for the response: collective strains of dismissal, a devaluing of work. Selfe’s response brings up questions concerning what types of work are and should be valued in the academy. Her call for multiplicity encourages me to think about the ways the form of her response makes an implicit argument about the range of forms that can be used productively in differing settings. (What expressions of anger, beyond the veiled anger of condescension, are acceptable in academic settings?) And, for me, her response also brings up questions concerning the boundaries of the essay: who defines what it is and can be? Through railing against it, Selfe seems to accept Atkins’s somewhat narrow definition. But I see both Selfe’s response and Carole Maso’s “Rupture, Verge, and Precipice,” which serves as Selfe’s model, as forms of the essay.³

I don’t think Atkins would agree with me though. In fact, he states that Selfe’s “greatest indulgence” appears in her “embrace of, shall I say, free prose” (418-19). And while he marks Maso’s “Rupture” as more successful than Selfe’s piece, he does not know how to categorize it; he refers to Maso’s piece as a prose poem and then qualifies that categorization with the parenthetical “(I suppose that’s what it is)” (419). The qualifications—“shall I say” and “I suppose”—display a kind of disdain. Atkins will not entertain either Selfe’s or Maso’s pieces as essays because they do not fit his expectations for the form.
Atkins Pens "On Self(e)-Expression"

"What I object to is not experimentation per se . . . but indulgence, although experimentation with genre succeeds only when one is thoroughly familiar with, and sufficiently skilled at, the form being pushed to its boundaries." (419).

—G. Douglas Atkins, "Art and Anger—Upon Taking up the Pen Again: On Self(e)-Expression"


—Carole Maso, "Rupture, Verge, and Precipice"*

It seems only appropriate to begin my discussion of Atkins’s response to Selfe with a quotation from the essay that Selfe takes as her model and inspiration, for Maso’s words seem to foreshadow Atkins’s response. He appears shocked by Selfe’s response, "a piece full of phrases that [he finds] uncivil, offensive, and unquotable" (414). And disconcerted: "never before have I encountered such vituperation, replete with name-calling, as disfigures Selfe’s piece" (415). But due to the public, sometimes violent, nature of the comment/response format, he cannot put Selfe or her response in the "unreadable box." He can, however, mark both Selfe and her response as suspect:

Although tempted, I will not speculate on any personal problem, apart from the obvious anger, that prevails in the Selfe-expression—a Freudian might have a field day! The lack of control spilling out into the opening sentence deteriorates soon into gratuitous name-calling. But, of course, the greatest indulgence appears in Selfe’s embrace of, shall I say, free prose. (418-19)

In the "perennial struggle (or warfare)" of comment and response, Atkins declines pacifism (415). He, in an interesting rhetorical move, enlists—through his use of
sources—an army of feminist writers to support his points: Jeanette Winterson, Jane Tompkins, Virginia Woolf, and others. He writes, for instance, “Winterson’s fondness for signed first editions resonates with the passion for pens I share with writers and collectors” (417). And a paragraph later, Atkins quotes Winterson’s comments on T.S. Elliot’s work, observations about self and poetry, and he claims—without detailing the connections—these “asseverations apply directly to Selfe” (417). Seeking to contrast Selfe and Winterson, Atkins praises Winterson as a “careful and balanced reader as well as writer,” implying that Selfe is neither careful nor balanced (417). I share with Atkins an affinity for much of Winterson’s work, but his use of that work—both in an epigraph and two long quoted sections—surprises me, for the book he quotes from, Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery, contains words and arguments I suspect Atkins would find, as he found Selfe’s response, “uncivil and unquotable.” But I’ll quote some anyway:

No one asks Iris Murdoch about her sex life. Every interviewer I meet asks me about mine and what they do not ask they invent... What is it about? Prurience? Stupidity? And as Descartes didn’t say, “I fuck therefore I am.”? (104)

Forget the copycat girls who wouldn’t know the end of a dildo from a vacuum rod. They are only chintz dipped in mud and we are after real material. What is forbidden is scarier, sexier, unnighthared by the white-collar cataloguers of crap. (114)

I quote these sections not simply to shock, but to draw attention to the ways Atkins’s choice of quotations and his use of them—for example, his extending of Winterson’s professed love for books to his love for pens—tames Winterson’s work. I wonder how Atkins would respond to other sections of Winterson’s book, ones that seem more
applicable to Sefé’s argument and form. For example, how might Atkins incorporate Winterson’s discussion of Gertrude Stein, her contention that what Stein was critiqued for was trespassing “gender as well as social niceties and literary convention”? (53). What does he make of Winterson’s comment, “Most of what masquerades as literary criticism is a mixture of sexism and self-importance”? (53).

While I don’t wish to accuse Atkins of sexism and self-importance, those accusations are implicit in Sefé’s response, and they are criticisms that the many feminists Atkins quotes have made of others at other times. It seems, then, appropriate to acknowledge such critiques rather than to ignore them or to dismiss them by accusing Sefé of being “a wolf in sheep’s clothing, the Devil in the self(e), the soi-disant oppressed taking on the filthy mantle of the alleged oppressor” (420). Still, while I make this critique, I recognize the difficulty of having one’s work responded to in harsh ways, and I’d have difficulty not taking Sefé’s response personally if it were directed at my work, character, and so on. But I do want to take up one of Atkins’s main points: his contention that writers write their character (420).

In the genre Atkins and Sefé are scripting, they write caricatures of others in their attempts to compose themselves. Atkins is angered by Sefé’s anger, name-calls her name-calling: “So uptight is the Sefé we find on display” (420); “What we find in Professor Sefé’s response is not just anger spilling over and inciting carelessness and error but also the narrowness of which she (falsely) accuses me” (420); “the ways of the self(e) are wily and treacherous, determined and committed ultimately to its own interested ways” (420). The self Atkins seems to value, and at times in his essay
composes, is one that is controlled, poised, marked by equanimity. These are the values he attributes to the essay as well.

The essay, however, is not singular. And neither are the selves composed within it. In “A Weaponry of Choice,” an analysis of the essays of three Black American writers, Pamela Klass Mittlefehldt describes a kind of essay quite different from the one Atkins prefers. Mittlefehldt praises acts of “bodacious rebellion” and marks the essays of Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and June Jordan as “explosions of anger and statements of power” (*The Politics of the Essay* 197). The essays she writes about “rupture/resist,” disrupt, and express anger (199). Mittlefehldt understands the significance of the appropriation of a genre that “has emerged in white, Western privilege”; she sees the flexibility of the form, the ways it changes in the hands of women who have “fired it with the passion and particularity of their voices and experiences” (197, 196). It is anger that Atkins cannot reconcile with the essay form; it is anger that permeates the form for others. I’m sure Selfe is not the only one who might direct Atkins to take his pens and “move the hell over”—and use the essay to do it.

**What Might Equals: The Functions of Characterizations**

“... in attempting to draw connections (and highlight divergences) between composition and creative writing in a professional forum for compositionists, I was entering one of the fiercest debates in the field. That debate, of course, is between the so-called ‘expressivists’ and their opponents” (450).

—Tim Mayers, “The Struggle over Composition and the Question of Might: A Response to Gary Olson”
For someone who leans toward pacifism, I've used several war metaphors in my analysis of these response pieces—mostly, though, I've simply picked up on these metaphors in the texts. These metaphors of violence are also latent in Tim Mayers's "The Struggle over Composition and the Question of Might: A Response to Gary Olson," a piece that shares my concern over the functions of (most often negative) characterizations of others within scholarship. Mayers opens his response with an important question, "What are the most effective (and least effective) ways of critiquing scholars in composition studies?" (448). He asks readers to think about what obligations critics have to those whose scholarship they write about.

Mayers is responding to comments Olson made in a tribute piece to James Kinneavy. While some of Olson's "James Kinneavy and the Struggle over Composition" is devoted to remembrances of Kinneavy, much of the piece makes an argument concerning where Olson believes composition as a discipline is going—and where he thinks it should go, and what it will take to get there. Olson looks to the past: "the field would only be able to fulfill its immense potential if it became more theoretically sophisticated; it would need to abandon or at least orient away from the solipsism of the expressivists and the scientism of the so-called cognitivists" ("Kinneavy" 537). And he looks to the future:

Composition is witnessing a revitalized backlash against theoretical scholarship. . . . The attempt to drag composition back to its expressivist roots constitutes a direct assault not only on a two-decade long tradition of substantive theoretical scholarship but also on a particular kind of work: that which attempts to lead the field away from a debilitating preoccupation with individual psychology, "genius," "talent," and "creativity" and toward a recognition of how and why dominant discourse enacts a kind of violence on people. . . . (538)
Olson worries over “a powerful handful in composition . . . [who] are struggling desperately to set back our disciplinary clock” (538). Then he calls in the troops:

What is needed is resistance—resistance to unthinking expressivism, resistance to the growing anti-intellectualism in the field, and resistance to those boss compositionists who have a vested interest in the status quo and who dread theoretical challenges to it. (539)

As an example of the supposed “intent to drag composition back to its expressivist roots,” Olson cites the September 1999 issue of CCC, an issue devoted to connections between composition and creative writing, which he sees as “an opening salvo in what undoubtedly will come to be known as ‘the new theory wars’” (538).

Tim Mayers, a contributor to the CCC volume Olson critiques, objects to the “sweeping, vague” and inaccurate characterization of the work in that volume, specifically of his own; yet instead of defending his work, he makes the sophisticated and much needed move toward analyzing “some of the functions that Olson’s characterization might serve” (449). Mayers questions Olson’s sweeping generalization, his suggestion that “an entire issue of a scholarly journal may serve as an example of a trend in the scholarship of an entire academic discipline” (449). Mayers objects to the lumping together—and subsequent negative characterization—of all the pieces in the September 1999 issue of CCC. I wish to take this objection a step further, to question also Olson’s characterization of those who make connections between composition and creative writing as supporters of “unthinking” expressivism, as “anti-intellectual.” Such unfortunate pairings of terms and unsupported links to those who value the connections between composition and creative writing have become commonplace in composition
studies; they are terms and connections used to dismiss outright many thoughtful and reflective theories and practices—especially when such dismissals come from “an established scholar in composition studies, . . . [one who] has the might (the force, the power) to influence the thinking of many people in the profession” (Mayers 450).^6

I should acknowledge, too, that “might” goes in many directions, that, as Mayers observes, in “scholarly writing, the practice of exemplification always involves difficult and ethically charged choices” (449). It seems fitting to point to a case in which Olson’s work was used as a illustrative example: in Wendy Bishop’s “Places to Stand: The Reflective Writer-Teacher-Writer in Composition,” the lead article in the CCC volume Olson critiques. Bishop quotes one of Olson’s sentences, one full of theoretical abstractions, and critiques it as a sentence that has “no clothes, and no heart (no organs at all, no human substance) no place for the interested writer/reader/teacher in me to stand” (26). She feels passionately about issues of language and accessibility. The ethical choice for her was whether or not to use Olson’s name in the attribution. She writes, “I’m interested in vocabulary, register, and style[,] not in naming the writer” (26). In my July 2000 interview with Bishop, she explained further that in writing an argumentative piece she felt pushed into corners, that she didn’t want to name Olson—just to use a sentence to illustrate a point about language use, but that reviewers and the editor of CCC (Joe Harris) asked her to cite the quotation. She explains, “I wasn’t even happy about that move. . . . But I’d worked myself into a corner.” Such an example—and explanation—illustrates the ways conventions of discourse forms (and even just the
practice of writing itself) in many ways "write" people, put them in positions they’d rather not be in. And I wonder about the extent to which Olson’s response to the CCC issue as a whole was colored by Bishop’s exemplifying use of a quotation from his work.\(^7\)

Still Struggling

“No journal, journal editor, special issue, professional organization, organization chair, or CCC essay writer is ‘disinterested,’ ‘innocent,’ detached from the hegemonic struggle over composition’s identity—although some are more conscious of their role in the struggle than others” (455).

—Gary A. Olson, “Struggling over Composition”

In his short, four-paragraph response to Mayers’s response, Olson, in “Struggling Over Composition,” continues to focus on the September 1999 issue of CCC as implicated in a hegemonic struggle and affirms his “comment on the attempt of certain self-proclaimed expressivists to belittle theoretical scholarship and to swing the field back to an expressivist orientation” (455). Apparently, no editor asked him to name the person he was speaking of in particular, but his critique seems person-focused nonetheless, focused—whether he uses a name or not—on Bishop: “The lead essay in the issue in question was penned by the elected chair of that organization [CCCC]”; and “the use of the symbol from the lead article in that issue as a dingbat to decorate the recent CCCC program book is a political statement. It is important that such acts be noticed, commented on, analyzed—and, if necessary, criticized” (455).\(^8\) This position is, ironically or not, similar to the one Bishop takes in critiquing one of Olson’s sentences.
She writes, “So when I say such a sentence has no clothes, I am not being merely personal, nor am I on the attack. I am on the inquiry, asking, Who—what figure of the author—is speaking? To what figure of the reader? For what social purpose (in the society of CCC)?” (26). Olson ends his response to Tim Mayers in a rhetorically similar way, with the claim that he doesn’t wish Mayers, “or any other unwitting participant in the CCC issue” to feel that he was “attacking him or her personally” (455), yet it remains clear—in the instances of Bishop’s, Mayers’s and Olson’s, as well as Seife’s and Atkins’s, comments and responses that there are personal issues at stake, whether the genres they write in are marked as “personal” or not.

Looking for Elbow Room in the Parlor

The textual war didn’t end with Olson’s response to Mayers. Months after the JAC responses were published, Olson’s “The Death of Composition as an Intellectual Discipline”—a more pointed critique of Bishop’s “Places to Stand” (CCC 1999)—was published in Composition Studies. As I re-read Bishop’s and Olson’s articles, I got the sense of being back in a parlor, the parlor of the haunted mansion at Disney World. As crowds stand chatting, waiting for the ride, the walls appear to close in, leaving the guests claustrophobic, hearts beating, looking for elbow room or a way out.ª

I don’t mean to suggest that the discipline of composition is an amusement park ride. But the language and metaphors I find in published articles imply that the parlor is only so big, that the walls are closing in, and there are ghosts (“Current-Market-Forces,”
“social construction,” “expressivism”) everywhere. In the following quotations from “Places to Stand,” Bishop describes the process of trying to find a place to speak from as a writer-teacher writing in composition studies:

The easy culprit is Current-Market-Forces, an additional figure of fear that urges compositionists into rapid professionalization, creating the perceived (and often actual) need to appear ever-more scholarly, historical, and theoretical. A need that sweeps pedagogy under the skirts of long, black academic robes. Undoubtedly, the specter of Current-Market-Forces causes a space-to-speak competition in our journals. (Bishop, 12)

. . . I felt constrained, embattled even, as I struggled to make my intuitive-intellectual-emotional position clear while also respecting the “other.” I sensed I was arguing with a vast, complex, and certainly not unitary creation of the 1990s called social-construction. (Bishop 15)

The figures of teacher-writer and writer-who-teaches have been contained in CCC (and elsewhere) by relegating him/her to safe and marginalized places: the citation, the staffroom interchange essay, the poem about classrooms. And these spaces have waxed and waned, come and gone with the sea-changes of opinions. . . . (Bishop 24)

Bishop’s sense of the parlor seems to be that it’s difficult, even, to get in, and once in, the writer-teacher-writing is likely to be constrained and marginalized.

In contrast, Gary Olson—responding to Bishop’s “Places to Stand”—describes a different parlor. He considers the composition parlor of the early 1990s in which “a small but vocal group of compositionists decried the rise of theoretical scholarship in the field and the move away from an expressivist orientation” (33). He figures an irritated Maxine Hairston unable to read or value theoretical articles and Andrea Lunsford trying to read those pieces but finding herself with a “splintering headache” (33). Olson then figures himself as one invited into the parlor to make “a strong statement as to why composition should be defined in . . . broader, more inclusive ways” (34). His understanding of
“broader” and “more inclusive” is in contrast to what he sees as the “dangerously and unacceptably narrow” and “anti-intellectual” belief that scholarship in composition studies “exists for the sole purpose of furthering and refining the teaching of composition” (34). A decade later, Olson thought that “as a discipline we had come to terms with our intellectual diversity” (34). And then comes the exigency, the rat in the parlor: “But, clearly, I was mistaken” (34).

Olson marks “Places to Stand” as an “opening salvo” in the “new theory wars,” and he targets Bishop as the leader of a “backlash [that] threatens to undermine a two-decade long tradition of substantive theoretical scholarship” (35). Before responding to Bishop’s essay in detail, Olson makes a point of dismissing the importance of the piece itself: “It’s not that I consider this essay to be especially cogent or influential” (35). Instead, he points to the importance of position, worrying that the piece carries weight because it was written by an elected chair of CCCC, a point Olson also makes when he critiques Hairston and Lunsford, both former CCCC chairs. Olson echoes this concern over position when he questions Bishop’s claim that the work of teacher-writers is often relegated to marginalized sections of CCC. He asks, “Can someone who serves as chair of our major professional organization—a position of power, prestige, and privilege—really claim to be ‘marginalized’?” (35). Of course, it’s a rhetorical question; the audience is positioned against the one with “power,” expected to answer “hell, no.” In many ways, however, Olson does marginalize Bishop and others who have held the position of CCCC chair.
Olson sets the background by starting his article with a “small but vocal group of compositionists” led by Maxine Hairston; he then adds Lunsford, who, in writing an afterword to (Inter)views: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Rhetoric and Literacy, “complained that the ‘dizzying display of specialized vocabulary’” nearly gave her a headache (33). So, the background is populated by a small group of vocal, irritated people (women) in power. And then comes “Wendy.” Significantly, Olson uses her first name throughout. In his terms, Bishop is “complaining” or “echoing complaints,” ones that Olson questions: “does anyone really believe all this?” (35). Again, it’s a rhetorical question, followed by an us-against-her rebuke:

It’s not that few of us write anymore; it’s that we don’t write the kinds of prose that she wants to read. It’s not that we don’t read anymore; it’s that we read different kinds of texts from the ones she enjoys reading. It’s not that we don’t value teaching; it’s that we don’t value teaching to the exclusion of every other intellectual concern. . . . We all have written and perhaps published poetry; we all, I suspect, have written and perhaps published short stories; and I’m willing to bet that a good many of us, myself included, have written novels. . . . (35-6)

I understand Olson’s point: that theorists, writers, and teachers can share a love of good writing and may define “good” in differing ways. But I wonder, who is the “we all”? Not “Wendy”? Not a former chair of CCCC? Not irritated? Without headaches? I wonder, is it necessary to make the point by ridicule? (I read the italicizing of she as sarcastic.) Does this use of “we all” really serve the purpose of making composition more inclusive?

These, too, are rhetorical questions. (Feel free to respond, “Hell, no!”)

But even such a response won’t get us anywhere. The war metaphor simply isn’t productive. It divides figures into opposing camps, splits the room. Olson recognizes the problem from where he stands: “It’s unfortunate that in these so-called theory wars some
commentators stoop to attacks that border on the *ad hominem*—only that a ‘*homme*’ is never expressly named” (38). He recognizes the problem when he feels attacked:

“Accusing colleagues who do a particular kind of work of being careerist (or bad writers or bad teachers) simply because they do a different kind of work from what you do is not a productive way to further the debate over disciplinary identity” (38). But what about being on the attack? The sentence can be easily reversed: Accusing colleagues who do a particular kind of work of being anti-intellectual (or unthinking) simply because they do a different kind of work from what you do is not a productive way to further the debate over disciplinary identity.

The fear for both Bishop and Olson seems to be the fear of losing a place from which to speak and write. When Olson looks back on composition history, he sees a lack of space for the work he values: “the only compositionists who had a reasonable chance to get published, to be heard, were those doing cognitivist or expressivist work; the rest of us were muted” (39). I get that haunted mansion sense again; the walls are closing in. Is the parlor too small? Is a struggle for space inevitable?

Olson seems wed to the idea of struggle; he argues that it doesn’t have to be a bad thing, that “such struggle can be collegial and congenial or malevolent and mean spirited” (39). He makes a distinction between enemies and adversaries, but retains the notion of opponents. Us against them. He writes of mutual respect. But I can’t see the respect here: “I don’t begrudge Wendy’s attempt to swing the discipline in a certain direction, and she shouldn’t begrudge me the same” (40). It’s clear to me that there is some grudge, and how could there not be if the stakes are, indeed, as high as Olson suggests: “it’s the
potential death of composition as an intellectual discipline” (40). Why must the entire
discipline swing one way or the other? Please, I need some elbow room—and a new
metaphor. No more war.

**Setting up in a Corner of the Parlor, or The Parameters of this Project**

In a sense, I want to set up in a corner of the parlor, even as I push against the
walls that appear to be closing in. In the haunted mansion, the closing in walls are an
illusion, and just when the claustrophobia seems overwhelming, a door opens (and those
along for the ride climb into amusement-park-ride coffins). This dissertation project is
both broad and specific; it looks at “the parlor” as a whole and at particular people within
it: what they’re saying to whom—and where they stand in relation to each other. That is,
through synthesis, this project provides a general and expansive view of the place the
personal essay occupies in the parlor of composition studies; through case studies of the
work of three practitioners, it provides a focused view of specific essays and how they
function rhetorically within a disciplinary context; and by demonstration, it argues for
rhetorical strategies of reading that take writer, form, style, audience, and context into
account.

The project as a whole provides an alternative to more reductive characterizations
of the personal essay, which seem to be based more on anxiety over disciplinary
respectability than on careful readings of specific essays. The goal of this project is not
to control or marshal the essay’s uses, but to examine in both subject and method the
roles the personal essay plays in composition studies, to call into question dismissals of the form, and to illuminate the essay’s flexibility and the possibilities it offers for writing, scholarship, and pedagogy. In subject matter, form, and methodology, my dissertation supports Jacqueline Jones Royster’s claim that as a “useful literary form, essays operate as both invention (a tool in the process of making meaning) and intervention (a tool in achieving social and political goals)” (Traces of a Stream 59). For the purpose of this project, I add disciplinary and pedagogical goals to the social and political ones Royster identifies in the context of her study of literacy and social change among African American women essayists. Through a disciplinary study (of criticism, ethos, and uses of sources), I intervene in, sometimes interrupt, conversations about the personal essay and its place in composition studies. And through a study of literary, critical, and pedagogical form, I essay to interrogate the essay: to invent, to open up and test the potential of this form.

Why the “Personal Essay”?

Choosing terms is a difficult matter. In many ways, the term “personal” is not crucial to this project, for I am actually writing about the essay as form. However, as Robert Atwan observes,

So much writing today goes under the name essay—celebrity profiles, interviews, political commentary, reviews, reportage, scientific papers, scholarly articles, snippets of humor, and newspaper columns—that it is virtually impossible for readers to obtain any clear impression of the form. (1)
For this reason, and others, I have chosen the term “personal essay” to distinguish the form I am looking at from some of these other forms, but particularly from the thesis-driven, expository essay.

Additionally, the term “personal” foregrounds issues relating to the concept of “self.” I believe it is important to look closely at constructions of self in writing—to consider the ways the broad range of scholarly writing has personal and institutional stakes for writers and readers. Thus, I do not use the term “personal” to suggest self-absorption, narcissism, or solipsism. This project, instead, uses “personal” to explore the multiple ways selves are constructed in relation to others for particular rhetorical purposes.

Most importantly, I’ve chosen to focus my work on the essay, and, specifically, the personal essay, because it is known as an open, shape-shifting, and flexible form. In “What Happened to the Personal Essay?” Phillip Lopate points to the personal essay as “a wonderfully tolerant form, able to accommodate rumination, memoir, anecdote, diatribe, scholarship, fantasy, and moral philosophy,” and he continues, “It can follow a rigorously elegant design, or—held together by little more than the author’s voice—assume an amoebic shapelessness” (337). While the authors I study use various terms to describe the kind of writing they do (“alternate styles,” “factions,” “literary or creative nonfiction,” “blurred genres,” “autobiographical visions,” “hybrid works,” “personal criticism,” “meditations,” “stories,” “belletristic writing”), the term “personal essay” is most suggestive to me because of its openness and its history within both English studies and the academy at large.12

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Personal essays are increasingly being used for various purposes in a number of disciplines. My March 2001 ERIC search for “personal narratives” brought up 3,043 “hits” from various fields, including but not limited to education, science, psychology, sociology, library science, anthropology, art (especially art therapy), and composition studies. As I read through the titles and abstracts of these books and articles, I started listing the varying purposes the authors of these narratives claimed for their writing: to make classrooms more inclusive, to preserve the memories of children, to shape teacher identity, to discuss cultural difference, to tell success stories, to take account of one’s position as researcher, to confront biases (especially racism, homophobia, and sexism), to heal, to explain, to witness, to provide advice or “tips,” to empower (provide agency), to evaluate one’s own practice, to account for change, to discover, to contextualize, to theorize, to make connections (“build bridges”), to teach teachers, to reach a variety of audiences, to reflect, to celebrate, to encourage empathy, to reveal (motives, self), to inquire, and to stimulate imagination.

This list made me think about the ways rhetorical function is related to, though not determined by, purpose, and I started making another list—this time a partial list of rhetorical functions: personal narrative as oral history, as therapy, as method, as evidence, as “impression management,” as conversation, as art, as invention, as politics, as story, as critical inquiry, as pedagogy. I believe the personal essays published in rhetoric and composition journals function in many of these ways, ways that are worth exploring in more detail.
The Rise of the Essay: Its Place in Rhetoric and Composition

Andrea A. Lunsford, in "Creative Nonfiction: What's in a Name," points to four conditions leading to the rise of the essay in the late 20th century, particularly since the late 1980s. She argues that the "blurring of generic distinctions taken together with the focus on self-reflection, the realization of how experience is constructed and narrativized, and the recognition of the artifice of the everyday . . . contribute to a particularly propitious moment" for the essay (347). She explains that "the postmodern turn—and particularly the Derridean critique of presence and the feminist critique of foundationalist or universalist assumptions—has revealed the constructed nature of all experience, even that traditionally thought to be the most 'real' or 'true'" (345). An understanding of the constructed nature of experience then highlights "the power and importance of narrative as an element of all discourse," revealing the ways knowledge is shaped by the stories we tell (Lunsford 345).

In a review of fifteen years of College English and College Composition and Communication journals and CCCC programs, I noted increasing interest in and discussion of creative nonfiction and the form of the essay. Several names were prominent: Chris Anderson, Charles Schuster, Robert Di Yanni, Alexander Butrym, Kurt Spellmeyer, Laura Julier, Carl Klaus, Rebecca Blevins Faery, Don McQuade, Robert Atwan, Lynn Z. Bloom, and Nancy Sommers. Both the journals and conference sessions provided studies of the essay as well as examples of the form. Selected CCCC panel titles include "Creative Nonfiction: Is There Any Other Kind?" "Essaying the Essay,"

What I have discovered in my review of rhetoric and composition literature is paradoxical: the essay seems to be everywhere and nowhere at once. The form has no special or protected niche. Instead, it is connected to various strands of the discipline and related fields and sub-fields of study (creative writing, literature, autobiographical studies,
genre studies, philosophy, and feminist studies). In the following three sections—The Literary Connection: Creative Nonfiction in the Academy, The Feminist Connection: Cultural Implications, and The Pedagogical Connection: The Teacher/Writer/Scholar—I review some of the pertinent literature on the form of the essay, situate that literature and its accompanying approach to the essay within rhetoric and composition, and then describe its relation to this dissertation, focusing on the ways this project contributes to and in some cases revises particular approaches to and understandings of the essay and its rhetorical functions.

The Literary Connection: Creative Nonfiction in English Studies

In the past fifteen years, scholarship on the essay within English and related fields, while still limited, has clearly grown. Lopate’s The Art of the Personal Essay (1994) provides an anthology of essays that spans the time from the classical era to the present. His introduction defines the essay, giving readers conventions to recognize and analyze. Root and Steinberg’s The Fourth Genre (1999), also an anthology of essays, adds to Lopate’s contribution by including selections from different essayists and by providing much needed theoretical and critical responses to the form. Tropp and D’Angelo’s Essays in Context (2000) provides a chronological survey of twentieth century British and American essays, further broadening the scope of essayists represented. Atwan and Oates’ anthology The Best American Essays of the Century (2000) does the same, with an exclusive focus on American contributions. Like The Fourth Genre, Butrym’s collection Essays on the Essay: Redefining the Genre (1989) offers pieces by essayists and critics,
focusing sections on history, theory, and pedagogy. Claire de Obalida, in *The Essayistic Spirit: Literature, Modern Criticism, and the Essay* (1995), takes a more literary and philosophical approach, pointing to the essay as a marginal genre and situating it in relation to fiction and the novel.

Works more closely tied to the fields of creative writing and literary study often lack reference to the serious attention scholars in rhetoric and composition have paid to the form of the essay. In fact, when the field of rhetoric and composition is mentioned in relation to the essay, what’s said or written is usually negative. In “What Happened to the Personal Essay?” Lopate writes, “Essays are usually taught all wrong: they are harnessed to rhetoric and composition, in a two-birds-with-one-stone approach designed to sharpen freshman students’ skills at argumentation” (337). He points to the importance of “literary style,” something he seems to believe composition teachers overlook. Alexander J. Butrym shares Lopate’s concerns; Butrym too worries that “further obscuring the distinction between the literary and practical, composition teachers turned the essay into a source of exemplary materials” (4). Instead of seeing “exemplary materials” as a way of valuing essays, Butrym sees their use in composition classes as a devaluation, as a way of excluding essays from serious literary study (4). Of course, such a critique reveals as much about how composition is viewed as it does about the place of the essay in literary studies. In fact, many scholars and teachers in rhetoric and composition take the form of the essay quite seriously, giving it both literary and practical attention.

In “On the Neglect of Twentieth-Century Nonfiction: A Writing Teacher’s View,” published in *College English* in 1984, Rygiel notes the lack of rhetorical and stylistic
criticism of recent creative nonfiction and calls for "descriptions of whole genres, as well as of particular writers, works, and rhetorical and stylistic devices" (396). Chris Anderson answers this call by undertaking a serious study of contemporary American nonfiction writers Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, and Joan Didion—in it suggesting links with rhetoric and composition. I believe Anderson is right and that it's time to make those links more explicit by utilizing similar strategies of close reading and giving the same kind of scholarly attention to prominent essays by writers in the discipline of rhetoric and composition.

The Feminist Connection: Cultural Implications

I came to my focus on the essay in academic settings through an interest in and commitment to feminist methodology. However, as is clear from the literature review I have undertaken, most of the published critical attention given to the form of the essay within English studies—including composition studies—has come from men who do not explicitly link their research or concerns to feminist theory. (In Butrym's collection alone, for instance, only three of the twenty-two contributors are women.) I value this work and believe that much of it is informed by principles that many feminists share; however, I believe this work can and should be extended—even transformed—by the use of feminist methodology and a focus on women essayists. Within composition studies, Lynn Z. Bloom has been one of the most active writers and scholars of the essay. In her 1991 College English review of four books on creative nonfiction, Bloom critiques the male bias of these texts. She admits that her "enjoyment of these timely collections is
tempered by their inappropriate male bias; each contains only two articles by women, and
only three of the forty focus primarily on women, despite the conspicuous and enduring
contributions of women to this genre” (946). And in her study of the essay canon (1999),
Bloom points to a canon of essays—those reprinted in composition textbooks twenty or
more times over a period of fifty years—that has been remarkably stable and (white)
male-centered.

The work of women essayists, as well as people of color, has largely been ignored
or overlooked in more traditional studies of the personal essay, though newer collections
like The Fourth Genre and other very recent anthologies are far more balanced, at least in
terms of gender. Phillip Lopate acknowledges the “sparse representation of women in the
ranks of the personal essayists before this century” and writes that this is not “a sexist
oversight but a reflection of the facts of the situation” (liii). Of course “the facts” and
“the situation” can be interpreted differently. The work of selecting pieces for an
anthology is certainly difficult, and there will always be absences, yet the absences are
meaningful. Jacqueline Jones Royster, an essayist herself, writes compellingly of 19th and
early 20th century African American women writers such as Anna Julia Cooper, Gertrude
Mossell, and Maria Stewart. In Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among
African American Women, Royster shows the achievements of early generations of
African American women essayists. And Jenny Spinner, who is working on her
dissertation with Lynn Bloom at University of Connecticut, is doing historical research to
uncover a canon of women essayists throughout history. Additionally, in 1994 when
Lopate’s anthology was published, the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, Michelle Cliff, Audre
Lorde, Nancy Mairs, and Terry Tempest Williams—among countless others—was certainly available.

Several volumes that include women’s personal essays—and explore various paths women have followed or made in composition studies—have been published within the past ten years: Fontaine and Hunter’s *Writing Ourselves Into the Story: Unheard Voices from Composition Studies* (1993), Phelps and Emig’s *Feminine Principles and Women’s Experience in American Composition and Rhetoric* (1995), and Schmidt’s *Women/Writing/Teaching* (1998) to name just a few.

The focus of Joeres and Mittman’s collection *The Politics of the Essay: Feminist Perspectives* (1993) is most similar to my own; this volume “concentrates particularly on the cultural implications of the essay as genre, and how these have affected and continue to affect its production and use” (15). By studying the ways Nancy Sommers’, Lynn Z. Bloom’s, and Wendy Bishop’s essays function, I seek to value the kind of work begun by the Joeres and Mittman collection and to extend that sort of analysis to composition studies. Joeres and Mittman point to the essay as a “site for critical reflection” and subversive thought (12). In their introduction to the collection, they assert, “To choose deliberately the form of the essay is to step away from the path of obedient submission to the academic world” (20). In this dissertation, I explore what other paths—besides obedient submission—are available in the academic world.

While I do not think that personal forms of writing are essentially “women’s forms” (given the history of the personal essay and who has written it, that would be a
rather naive claim), I do believe the stakes are different for women essayists in composition studies than they are for men. Due to the feminization of this profession, it's particularly dangerous for women to be accused of being "confessional" or "anti-intellectual" because of the form they use or topics they choose to write about (including family, classroom experiences, feelings). Their important work can be devalued through easy dismissals (for instance, conflation of personal essays with talk show behavior) or over-identification (a condition where the public and academic significance of personal essays is all but lost in their ability to personally move the reader). I see the close attention that I give to the actual essays as a way of valuing a particular kind of work, work which has aesthetic, intellectual, and pedagogical significance.

**The Pedagogical Connection: The Teacher/Writer/Scholar**

If any one thing, historically, unifies the profession of rhetoric and composition it is a passion and concern for teaching writing. This is the element, too, that serves as a commonality between the three individuals I've chosen for the case studies: they are teachers, writing for other teachers and often students; their writing contains within it a pedagogy. Although these teachers write from a position of authority, the essayistic stances they tend to take toward their material make them students of the writing itself, open to exploration and discovery, trusting the process of writing, allowing some of the seams to show.
Essayistic or “personal” stances toward writing—and the texts and pedagogies produced by such stances—have often been linked to expressivism. Bishop accepts the term, for want of a better one, but questions the negative associations some have sought to link with expressivism, and she further critiques the ways expressivist positions and pedagogies have been dismissed. In “Places to Stand: The Reflective Writer-Teacher-Writer in Composition,” Bishop writes,

The expressivist “position” is often embodied by not-expressivists as constructions of Donald Murray and Peter Elbow. . . . These individuals, in their author-functions or rhetorical constructions, are raised and dismissed, treated as fatherly Macy’s New Year’s Day parade balloons, floated through critiques as unitary and non-representative figures whose simplified positions can be quickly—via synecdoche—argued against. (11)

She argues that such dismissals are based less on a cohesive body of work than they are on a fear-of-the-figure, and claims that what she calls “writer-teacher-writers” have not received a full hearing in disciplinary settings, that there is “a lot more learning to be done and versions and visions to be explored” (29).

Clearly, how readers respond to personal essays depends to a great extent on how the form is placed within larger disciplinary discussions—what it is linked to. Linked to process theory and expressivism, the essay sometimes has been praised for its “honesty” (usually in relation to self-disclosure), “authenticity,” and “individual voice.” Of course, through the lens of social constructionism, the personal essay can also be dismissed as “sentimental,” “self indulgent,” and “anti-intellectual.” Disturbingly, it’s not just the form that has been praised or critiqued in these terms; these terms are also extended to the
authors themselves. Instead of focusing on the textual features of the personal essay—how, in other words, the writing functions rhetorically within specific contexts—the author often becomes the focus. The writer of personal essays, because she or he writes about some aspect of identity or experience, becomes the subject of the reading and reception. This confusion of writer and text, as if they are interchangeable, and as if one can be known through access to the other, is limiting and not especially productive. It can lead to hero worship and over-identification on one hand and presumptuousness and easy dismissals on the other.

The categories and lenses that James Berlin offered composition studies in the mid- and late 1980s (divisions between expressionist and social epistemic rhetoric and sharp distinctions between objective, subjective, and transactional methods) were useful for a time, but they don’t fully account for the complexity of the ways forms and genres function in specific contexts. Personal essays depend on specifics that locate the self represented within a social context, and they allow for many voices and multiple perspectives. The selves constructed in such essays—particularly the ones showing up in disciplinary journals—hardly match the stereotypical romantic, unified, coherent self that expressivists have been said to promote. The personal essayists I study in particular—Nancy Sommers, Lynn Z. Bloom, and Wendy Bishop—are keenly aware of the social and disciplinary forces that shape them. And for readers, it is important to bring that same awareness to texts.
In *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*, Thomas Newkirk responds to postmodern critiques of autobiographical writing and expressivist pedagogies. He cites critics of personal writing in the field of composition and rhetoric (namely Alan England, James Berlin, Pat Bizzell, and John Trimbur) and shows their discomfort with expressivist epistemological assumptions that there is some fixed individual presence (a coherent self) that can be discovered, found, or exposed through writing. Newkirk answers concerns that expressivist pedagogies might lead to isolation and alienation by analyzing the effects of expressivist pedagogies, effects that—according to Newkirk—do not lead to the isolation some social constructionists fear. Newkirk's analysis focuses on the utility of various kinds of personal writing, demonstrating the potential "fruits" of autobiographical writing—a kind of writing that, he argues, can endorse narrative pleasure and serve the needs of particular writers and readers.

As Newkirk argues, "all forms of 'self-expression,' all our ways of 'being personal' are forms of performance" (3), and performance depends on social cues, social interaction. In response to the charge that expressivism leads to "the construction of self as isolated, solipsistic, focused on purely personal gratification and success, oblivious to . . . communal responsibility," Newkirk gestures toward a broader understanding of "self" than expressivists have been credited with when he quotes Jim Kinneavy's understanding of a "self that expresses" (92), a self as a "set of conscious relationships, each with
implicit moral responsibilities” (93). This understanding of self assumes a person in relation to others—not necessarily stable or unified, but in relation.

I value Newkirk’s move to defend the personal essay against critiques, but I wish to emphasize, as I have earlier in this chapter, that the link between the personal essay and some characterizations (most often caricatures) of expressivism is unnecessary. Expressivism and social constructionism are helpful terms, but they cannot be the only structuring terms for the debate over personal writing in composition studies, especially if and when expressivism is tied, often unfairly, to limiting notions of self. Other points of connection, especially feminist autobiographical theory and rhetorical approaches, provide other lenses through which to read personal essays.

Pedagogy shapes readers and writers, making implicit and explicit claims about what is of value. Despite critiques that the personal essay is an inherently individualistic form, Joel Haefner argues for integrating personal essays into collaborative writing pedagogies. In “Democracy, Pedagogy, and the Personal Essay,” he reminds readers, “What matters is what uses we make of the essay in our courses, the nature of our pedagogical assumptions” (131). He encourages teachers to discuss the kinds of ideology genre, and appropriations of genre, reinforce and, through dialogue, to consider multiple possibilities.

Wendy Bishop, too, focuses on the significance of community: “Writing autobiography is not an indulgence of the self if it is done together, seeking what can and
can’t be said for individuals, pushing the risks of writerly selves against and with the faith of the community” (276). The forms Bishop chooses and creates emphasize writing, teaching, and reading as communal acts, practices best done with others.

Confronting Critiques of the Personal Essay

Within the discipline of rhetoric and composition, a struggle over genre abounds, with some calling for the kind of generic flexibility the essay can provide and others critiquing the essay—especially the personal essay—as anti-intellectual, self-indulgent, and critically naive. As the boundaries between genres blur, the struggle to define becomes more prominent, and the essay changes. It changes readers, writers, disciplines. It shifts, moves, transforms.

Those who strongly critique the essay, though, don’t like to recognize its power to change, for it’s far easier to dismiss something that’s fixed, passé, and out of theoretical vogue. Ironically, the very postmodern theories of self and discourse that helped make a space for the essay are also used by some to critique it. Instead of recognizing the possibilities the essay offers for exploring multiple representations of self, some critics focus on the form’s potential to fix representations of a particular, individualistic self. And there have been abuses of the form: uses meant to forward one viewpoint to the exclusion of others, manipulations, reductions of the political to the personal, and some abuses of power in representations of others (often students). These potential abuses,
however, are not exclusive to the essay form, and to reduce the possibility of a form to its capacity for misuse significantly limits rhetorical options.

As the discussions I’ve detailed earlier in this chapter illustrate, the turn to the essay—and some turns the essay has taken—has not been without controversy. There have been additional voices in conversation as well. The October 1996 issue of PMLA offers “Four Views on the Place of the Personal in Scholarship,” including worries over “self-indulgence,” “navel-gazing,” and “intellectual solipsism” among critics who use autobiographical references in their scholarship (1064-5). And the October 1994 issue of College English contains pieces by G. Douglas Atkins and Gordon Harvey concerning the place of the personal within both scholarly and student writing. While Atkins praises essayistic criticism, Harvey points to “recent perpetrators” (instructors) who “in the anti-academic mood of current academe . . . have begun making autobiographical moves in books and articles and conference papers” (644). Harvey critiques such teachers and personal/textual writing assignments; he warns against having students “drag in their personal experiences” (653).

The attention that the personal essay has received more specifically in rhetoric and composition also has not always been positive. For example, Marguerite Helmers, in Writing Students, reduces all manner of personal discourse to “testimonials” and characterizes them as “convenient ways for young academics to enter the publishing world” and further argues that because “they are short narratives of personal experience
requiring little research or critical reading, testimonials are easier to write than sustained and cohesive analyses” (4). While there may very well be pieces resembling those Helmers describes in disciplinary journals, her characterization does not fit the vast majority of the personal essays appearing in the discipline’s most respected journals. Nor does her claim that these forms are “convenient ways for young academics to enter the publishing world” ring true for the writers I’ve studied, all of whom have carried out traditional research projects and have published the results of those projects in article form in most cases even before they attempted to publish personal essays. Her critique also wrongly assumes that personal narratives are not informed by research and critical reading.

Even those who value mixed-genre and essayistic forms of writing have concerns. Gesa Kirsch—just two years after calling for innovative writing—argues that “the rush to celebrate these new textual practices leaves little room for critical analysis of their potential effects on readers, writers, and public discourse” (“Multi-Vocal Texts” 191). Her article discusses the limitations of multi-vocal texts, arguing that such texts make new and difficult demands on readers. Kirsch places the onus of interpretive responsibility on writers, claiming that they need to examine their motivations for creating these forms of discourse, “anticipate their effects on different communities of readers, and . . . make conscious deliberate decisions about when to write (and when to avoid writing)” such texts (194).
I agree with Kirsch that writers need to take responsibility for their texts; however, the ways texts function within a discipline cannot be controlled or even anticipated by writers alone. In order to provide better reading strategies for audiences who encounter the kinds of essayistic writing now being published in professional journals, it is necessary to study the multi-dimensional ways those texts are produced and distributed, and the ways they circulate. This dissertation aims to meet that need, albeit partially, by focusing on the places where art, feminism, and rhetoric meet in the form of the essay—by analyzing the ways the personal essay functions within the disciplinary discourse of three prominent writers/teachers/researchers in composition studies: Nancy Sommers, Lynn Z. Bloom, and Wendy Bishop.

Choice of Subjects

I choose the three subjects of this study for the prominence of their work within rhetoric and composition, because they represent a range of uses of the form, because their essays suggest a variety of pedagogical possibilities, and because their writing is instrumental in my making a case for the specific reading strategies outlined at the end of this section.

While Sommers, unlike Bishop and Bloom, does not yet have a book-length collection of personal essays or mixed-genre pieces, her work has been consistently published in College English and College Composition and Communication, and it has
been widely anthologized and quoted by scholars referring to personal essays in scholarly journals. In 1993, she won the Richard Braddock Award for “Between the Drafts,” an award presented to the author of an outstanding article on writing or the teaching of writing in *College Composition and Communication*. “Between the Drafts,” “I Stand Here Writing,” and “The Language of Coats” are more recognizable as traditional personal essays than Bishop’s mixed-genre pieces, perhaps accounting for their success in mainstream academic journals. Together Sommers’s essays bring up important questions concerning what kinds of writing can count as scholarship. Analyses of responses to her work provide a fitting context in which to acknowledge and discuss the personal nature of all research, criticism, and pedagogy.

In her introduction to “Composition Studies as a Creative Art,” Bloom writes, “The institutions in which we work—colleges, universities, school systems—have a stake in keeping things as they are. . . . But these same systems have an even more important stake in accommodating creative change” (4). Bloom has been active in composition studies long enough not only to see that change but also to help effect it. In 1992, her essay “Teaching College English as a Woman” was published in *College English*. In the opening of that essay, she writes, “It has taken me thirty years to find the voice, the place in the profession, to tell the stories that follow” (79). Over the past ten years, Bloom has continued to tell stories in her essays, to experiment by mixing genres, and to expand the place of the essay—through both studies and examples of the form—within composition studies.
Bishop too is known for mixing genres. She advocates and practices “alternate styles,” experimenting with form in particularly innovative ways. For example, “The Shape of Fact,” published in Writing on the Edge—a journal devoted to experimental writing—was written in two parts: what Bishop calls a prose “foray” and “metafaction” interview. As a part of a graduate course she was teaching, Bishop wrote the first part of this essay in response to the literacy autobiography assignment she gave her students. She then workshopped her essay in class along with the others and used the questions her students asked to construct the second part of the essay. The facts of how she came to compose this essay illustrate the social processes involved in coming to represent experience in writing. Bishop opens her collection Teaching Lives: Essays and Stories with a question: “Why include autobiography with research, classroom stories with theories of genre and reading and writing, facts with fictionalized explorations?” (vii). Her answer is threefold: to learn more about teaching, to put herself in dialogue with others, and to grow professionally through publishing (viii). She crosses and questions lines between composition and creative writing and pushes the boundaries of what counts as scholarship and even what an essay can be.

A Rhetorical Framework for Reading

This project, focused mainly on three white women essayists, does not make any broad or essentialist claims on the basis of sex, race, or any other markers of identity. Instead, my analysis takes writer, form, audience, and context into account, bringing to
bear a framework for approaching personal essays. In particular, I advocate and demonstrate rhetorical readings, readings informed by reader-response, rhetorical, and feminist autobiographical theory and guided by the essay form itself. I propose readings that are attentive to context, to various voices, absences and gaps, complex and multiple identifications within a given text—readings that recognize the artifice of the essay and the writer's use of elements such as persona, theme, structure, embedded stories, tone, dialogue, repetition, and so on. Rhetorical readers can simultaneously validate the agency of the writer and understand the active role of reading in the process of interpretation. The rhetorical reading strategies I suggest encourage attention to the formal aspects of particular essays and necessitate attention to disciplinary context. The value of a rhetorical reading strategy is three-fold: first, it provides a sense of the ways particular essays function within the discipline; second, it encourages detailed readings of other essays in order to better understand the place the personal essay occupies; and third, such readings can help teachers and scholars better imagine the role the form can play in future pedagogy and scholarship.

Chapter Outline

Chapter two, "Research Stories," foregrounds the ways stories of the discipline are shaped through the selection and ordering necessitated by a choice of theoretical frameworks and research methodologies and acknowledges that the theories, methods, and forms researchers use shape what can be seen, what can be known. To provide a
background and context for my own methodological choices, I tell a narrative about how I came to this project and how it has developed over the years. I then merge the discourses of several areas, making a case for a mix of feminist criticism, rhetorical criticism, reader-response theory, autobiographical theory, and genre theory, and I explain my choice to augment my rhetorical analyses with a combination of historical research on the functioning of the essay and the qualitative method of interviewing contemporary essayists within the field of rhetoric and composition.

In chapter three, “Revising Selves and Voices: The Authority of Reflection in the Essays of Nancy Sommers,” I illustrate and carry out my argument concerning the importance of rhetorical reading strategies by offering differing readings of and responses to Sommers’s essays, as well as a reflecting on my own methods of reading, appropriate uses of sources, and the revisions necessitated by listening to the voices of others. One of those “other” voices belongs to Marguerite Helmers who argues, “The story of composition is a fabrication, something constructed by theorists, practitioners, and researchers in written texts and spoken exchanges” (145). While Helmers devotes a good deal of space in her book to analyzing the discourse of others and how their writing contributes to composition’s ethos, she is less reflective about the ways in which her own characterizations and use of texts contribute to the story of composition. I re-present Helmers’s reading of Sommers’s “Between the Drafts,” along with my critique of her argument, not simply as a defense of Sommers’s essay (though it may be that too) but as an example of the ways method (different ways of approaching reading) affects
interpretation in vastly different ways, shaping the ethos of individual scholars and the
discipline as a whole. In this chapter, I take the concerns of Sommers’s essays as my own
and transform them in order to explore some of the questions central to this dissertation:
What are appropriate uses of sources? Through what means do writers construct
authority and voice? What “selves” are available to writers in the disciplinary context of
composition studies?

In chapter four, “Reading Gaps: The Essay’s Double Voice and the Art of
Intimacy in the Essays of Lynn Z. Bloom,” I conduct rhetorical analyses of three of
Bloom’s essays. In my analysis of “Teaching College English as a Woman,” I continue
the investigation of “voice” that I began in chapter three, exploring the ways Bloom’s
essay, in its two published forms, speaks to the various and complex ways voices are
shaped and elicited within the context of institutions and disciplines, marking two
contexts in which Bloom’s essay was received through publication: on the margins and in
the center of disciplinary conversations. In my reading of “American Autobiography and
the Politics of Genre,” I point to the meaningful gaps and absences (between sections and
typefaces) that shape interpretation. I argue that the form Bloom uses helps guide the
reader—sometimes explicitly, other times implicitly—and show the significance of both
kinds of guidance. In doing so, I focus not only on what is written (content) but also, and
importantly, on how reading strategies can be encoded in forms. In my analysis of
“Writing Blue Berries: Once More to My Summer Vacation,” I continue my analysis of
Bloom's double-voiced pedagogy, examining the ways that her use of form (in this case the creative nonfiction essay) gives her a place to speak from as both writer and teacher.

In my fifth chapter, "A Pedagogy of Form: Constructed Selves, Readers, and Experience in the Essays of Wendy Bishop," I focus on Bishop's mixed-genre essays, arguing that an understanding of the strategies used in Bishop's work can help both professionals and students reconceptualize what the personal essay is, what it can do, and what readers, writers, and teachers can do with it. The most experimental of the writers I've studied, Bishop pushes readers to find ways into her texts. She even warns her readers: "Warning: More serious attempts at Grammar B follow. Reading farther should challenge your textual expectations" (Teaching Lives 50). These challenges sometimes come in the form of poems and sections of fiction integrated into her otherwise nonfiction essays, defying generic boundaries, demonstrating stylistic play.

In chapter five, I come full circle, returning to the parlor metaphor prominent in the introduction, by considering the ways form positions readers and the ways readers position themselves in relation to form. I claim, through readings of Bishop's essays, that her use of form functions as an argument for a particular kind of pedagogical reflection. My response to her essays—response that is playful, considered, and essayistic—demonstrates the kind of pedagogical reflection Bishop encourages, even as it is aware of its own rhetorical construction of self and readers. Through my essayistic response, I consider the ways reading strategies both reflect and shape the kinds of work valued and the identities available in disciplinary settings.
I conclude with chapter six, "Out of and Back Into the Box—Redefining Essays and Options: A Concluding Multi-genre Montage." As an answer to Wendy Bishop's call for teachers to write in school genres and report back, for scholars to "leave a richer composing audit trail" and show "our scholarly construction-work," I offer a personal essay—my own answer to an assignment I give my students ("Places to Stand" 29). It is a demonstration, a method, a "try"; in Bishop's terms, it functions as an "investment of attention to issues that concern me" (29). It is the place where my pedagogy, research, and writing meet. It is a conclusion that calls for and tests out options, inviting writers, readers, and teachers to do the same.
NOTES

1. As I was finishing this dissertation, however, two studies were published in 2001: Barbara Kamlr's *Relocating the Personal*, which develops a critical writing pedagogy for teaching “the personal” in a variety of academic settings, and Karen Surman Paley’s *I-Writing: The Politics and Practice of Teaching First-Person Writing*, which offers an ethnographic study of expressivist writing classrooms.

2. Recent writers who use the term “expressivist” (used interchangeably with “expressionist”) in a derogatory manner often don’t define what they mean. James Berlin offers a detailed definition in *Rhetoric and Reality*, showing expressionist rhetoric as coming out of the belief that “writing involves the self and is an art” (73). He writes, “It is from expressionistic rhetoric in the twenties, and just before, that we get the first extensive discussions emphasizing the ‘process’ of composing over the ‘product’” (75). Expressionist rhetoric blurs distinctions between rhetoric and poetics (77). Berlin also discusses the expressionist pedagogical approaches of the 1960s and 70s that valued prewriting, process, and self-revelation, and he links such pedagogies to beliefs that the solitary individual acts alone. Contemporary advocates of something similar to expressionist rhetoric tend, also, to value process and to blur distinctions between rhetoric and poetics but don’t always accept the individualistic focus often associated with the term “expressivist.” I discuss this term—and the way it is used—later in the chapter.

3. I give my creative nonfiction students an exercise from Bill Roorbach’s *Writing Life Stories*. The assignment, drawn from his chapter “Stage Presence,” is called “Get Pissed on Paper”: “write about something that makes you mad and . . . do your best to sound mad. Let it rip. No restraints” (104). I use this exercise, in part, because I—personally—find it difficult to sound angry, no matter how angry I am, in writing. As an academic (and woman), I’ve been trained not to sound angry in writing, but I’ve found that “letting it rip” on paper is a productive way to translate the anger that settles inside me into another form. It’s a way of letting go, of giving anger a new home. When writing about private issues, I generally end up shredding my tirades and flushing them down the toilet. When writing something I wish to share with others, I often revise the edge out of the angry pieces. But Selfe’s and Maso’s essays serve as models for getting angry on paper. These pieces can be analyzed productively for rhetorical effect.

4. Maso’s essay appears in Sven Birkerts’s edited collection *Tolstoy’s Dictaphone: Technology and the Muse* and is also reprinted online at http://www.msu.edu/user/hungerf2/maso.html

5. The language, especially the metaphors, Olson uses to describe the condition of composition studies leaves me with a cartoon-like picture in my mind: there’s a big tree
with rotting “expressivist roots” in the bottom left-hand corner, and in the top left-hand corner, an ancient clock with two “unthinking” expressivists hanging from it, trying with all their might to turn back time. In the middle, there are a few solipsistic, anti-intellectual “boss compositionists” (the thug-like and not too bright villains of children’s movies) attempting to drag composition studies (an abstraction I cannot get a picture of) toward the tree roots. On the other side of “composition studies,” stands a larger group of people, wearing helmets, dressed for war, weapons drawn, in a kind of tug-of-war. The god of theory is on their side. The picture is exaggerated, hard to take seriously, and the image of two sides at war with each other, rather than an image that allows one to value multiple literacies, seems especially narrow to me.

6. As is evidenced in later parts of the introduction and in the remainder of the dissertation, I object not only to the negative terms associated with “expressivism” but also to the term “expressivist” (along with its unnecessarily pejorative connotations) being applied to those who, like Mayers, do not see themselves as “expressivist.” As Wendy Bishop argues in “The Reflective Writer-Teacher-Writer,” criticisms of writer-teacher-writers are based less on a comprehensive or representative body of work than they are on a fear-of-the-figure (10).

7. In both “Struggling Over Composition” and “The Death of Composition as an Intellectual Discipline” (which I discuss in considerable detail later in this chapter), Olson is especially harsh in his response to Bishop’s work. In direct contrast, he responds quite generously to Lynn Bloom. In the Winter 2000 issue of Composition Forum, Olson refers to Bloom as “composition’s model citizen” (39). He seems forgiving of the criticism Bloom has leveled “at a theorist or two for ‘jargon-laden’ prose” (37), pointing instead to the fact that Bloom finds some of Foucault’s theories useful. He does not mention Bishop’s use of Foucault’s theories and is not at all forgiving of the critique she levels against his “jargon-laden” prose. While there are differences between Bloom’s and Bishop’s work, I interpret the stark difference in Olson’s responses, in part, to the fact that Bishop used one of his sentences as a negative example.

8. The “dingbat” Olson is referring to is a symbol, which appears as a circle with arrows pointing in opposite directions, Bishop uses to represent writers who teach and teachers who write.

9. This use of the term “elbow room” is not intentionally a pun on Peter Elbow, whose name has become almost synonymous with expressivism, but the trace (in the Derridean sense) is of course there.

10. Ironically, ten years before Olson’s piece appeared in Composition Studies, Steve North was invited to contribute a piece to the 1990 JAC volume (guest edited by Peter Elbow) devoted to expressivist writing. In situating his contribution, North claims that
the terms “personal” and “expressivist” give him a headache (106). Each time, while writing this dissertation, I swallow another Tylenol, I wonder if academics—in the work of reading, thinking, and trying to situate selves among others—are simply prone to headaches.

11. The use of first names was also significant in North’s “Personal Writing, Professional Ethos, and the Voice of ‘Common Sense,’” which I mention in the previous note. North’s essay was an angry response to David Bartholomae’s characterization of him in a published review of The Making of Knowledge in Composition. Throughout his essay, North refers to Bartholomae as “Dave.” In his response, Bartholomae takes issue with North’s use of his first name and writes, “I’m not going to call North, ‘Steve,’ at least not in the pages of a journal. I can’t work on a text without separating the author from an individual” (“A Reply to Stephen North” 122). Various uses of first names in published discourse invoke issues of authority. Some writers use first names to give themselves authority (I’m so familiar with this famous person I can use his or her first name); other writers, as is the case with Olson, I believe, use first names to strip another of authority. In the context of his article, Olson’s use of “Wendy” comes across as condescending.

12. Both Mariolina Salvatori (“The Personal as Recitation”) and Karen Surman Paley (J-Writing) attribute the variety of near-synonyms for the personal essay to an anxiety about “the personal” in academia. One of my difficulties in choosing terms for this dissertation is that there’s anxiety over nearly every term I could have chosen, especially “creative nonfiction” (since there’s a good deal of anxiety over what both “creative” and “nonfiction” imply.)

13. The lists of names, session titles, authors, books, and articles in this section are not comprehensive. These lists are meant, simply, to provide a sense of the variety of approaches to the essay and to suggest some of the various forums in which it can be found in the rhetoric and composition discipline.

14. I don’t wish to claim that the women essayists I study are necessarily “feminist.” (I’ll let them label or not label themselves as they choose.) Nor do I wish to suggest that volumes that focus on women are necessarily feminist. I do, however, consider this dissertation (in focus, methodology, and spirit) a feminist endeavor.

15. Jeanette Harris, in Expressive Discourse, argues that the term “expressive” is used indiscriminately for both an entire spectrum of work and a pedagogical orientation. Her study focuses mainly on the different kinds of writing subsumed under the term “expressive.” She argues that the writing categorized under this term can be more accurately and usefully “viewed as four different phenomena, . . . the interior text, the generative text, aesthetic discourse, and experienced-based discourse” (x). I find Harris’ work useful in that it provides an historical overview of the term “expressive” and
identifies the varying purposes and functions of different kinds of writing; however, the terms she offers in place of “expressive” seem to merge in many of the essays I study. That is, while Bloom’s essays might best be described as aesthetic and experience-based, Sommers’s and Bishop’s essays seem well described as interior, generative, aesthetic, and experience-based.


17. The writer-teacher-writer is “one who advocates that teachers write with and for their writing students as well as with and for their colleagues” (Places to Stand 9). Bishop points to Peter Elbow, Janet Emig, Toby Fulwiler, Ken Macrorie, James Moffett, Donald Murray, Mike Rose, Nancy Sommers and others as writers who teach or teachers who write.

18. Before Berlin, James Kinneavy, James Britton, and Richard Fulkerson use the terms “expressionist” and “expressive.”


20. Peter Elbow, one of the compositionists most often critiqued as expressivist, does not advocate the view of self that expressivists are said to promote. In “About Voice and Writing,” his introduction to *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing*, Elbow argues for “resonant voice” or “presence” and insists that this conception of voice does not assume any model of the self or theory of identity. He writes, “Writing with resonant voice needn’t be unified or coherent, it can be ironic, unaware, disjointed” (xxxv). And he acknowledges that people do not have unchanging selves: “Selves tend to evolve, change, take on new voices and assimilate them” (xxxvi).

21. Katha Pollitt makes this critique in “The Solopsisters.”
CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY: RESEARCH STORIES

“My research, like my life, is situated, contingent.”
—Lisa Ede, “ Methods, Methodologies, and the Politics of Knowledge”

“The stories here become not just celebration or confession, but method.”
—Kate Ronald, “How to Tell a True Teaching Story”

Within the field of composition and rhetoric, there is a particular attention to stories of the discipline and the ways those stories shape writing, research, and pedagogy. Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) chair addresses, personal essays detailing one’s place in the discipline, descriptions of research methodologies and the theoretical frameworks that structure thinking, the research reports themselves—all contain narrative elements, all offer (and sometimes critique) a story, all shape knowledge. In “Taking the Risk to Be Heard,” the introduction to Writing Ourselves into the Story: Unheard Voices from Composition Studies, Sheryl I. Fontaine and Susan Hunter, writing of CCCC chair addresses, explain the directive nature of such storytelling:
[E]ach conference chair tells what she or he believes to be the story of composition, the central narrative into which the members of the discipline are to enter. The audience’s attention is directed to a particular part of the composition world: an exclusive group of ancestors, allies, or enemies; a particular call to action; a singular moment in its history. (4)

Through a similar process of selection and ordering, stories of the discipline are also shaped by theoretical frameworks and research methodologies. The theories, methods, and forms researchers use shape what can be seen, what can be known. Articulations of research methodologies, particularly those informed by feminism, are growing increasingly self-reflexive, as is the writing resulting from such research.

In this chapter detailing my own methodology, I foreground the ways stories of the discipline are shaped through the selection and ordering necessitated by a choice of theoretical frameworks and research methodologies. In order to provide a background and context for my own methodological choices, I tell a narrative about how I came to this project and how it has developed over the years. I then make a case for the mix of feminist criticism, rhetorical criticism, reader response theory, autobiographical theory, and genre theory that I use, and I explain my choice to augment my rhetorical analyses with a combination of historical research on the functioning of the essay and the qualitative method of interviewing contemporary essayists within the field of rhetoric and composition.

**Research and Representation: Feminism and the Essay**

In terms of research and scholarship, postmodern and feminist critics in fields as various as science, philosophy, history, education, sociology, women’s studies, and
literary studies have called for forms of writing that acknowledge the rhetorical nature of truth, the partiality of knowledge, and the complexity of representing selves and others. They have advocated a move away from claims of objectivity and have encouraged recognition of positionality and multiple subjectivities. Within the field of rhetoric and composition, Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Gesa Kirsch, Elizabeth Flynn, Patricia Sullivan, and many others have been responsible for such calls and critiques. For example, in their essay “Beyond the Personal: Theorizing a Politics of Location in Composition Research,” Gesa Kirsch and Joy Ritchie discuss the need for innovative writing that “challenges scholars to find new ways of presenting research, challenges journal editors to develop a greater tolerance for ambiguity and unconventional forms of discourse, and challenges readers to learn new ways of reading and interpreting texts” (25). In answering these challenges and searching for forms that allow for open-endedness, multiple voices, and a synthesis of information from diverse sources, many scholars and writers have turned to essayistic forms of writing and have refused to separate disciplinary knowledge and personal experience into discrete categories. This is a choice Sommers, Bloom, and Bishop have made; it is a choice I have made as well.

Background Narrative

In the autumn of 1995, I took a graduate course on research methodologies in rhetoric and composition, a course grounded in feminist theories that offered a study of both traditional and more experimental methods. At the time, I was an MFA student in creative writing, an essayist and poet, beginning my second year of graduate school. In
reading for this course, I was drawn especially to research reports that included personal reflection, the ones that most resembled personal essays. I remember in particular the day we read Michelle Fine’s “Working the Hyphens: Reinventing Self and Other in Qualitative Research.” In this piece, Fine reflects on the ways researchers are “in relation with the contexts we study and with our informants, understanding that we are all multiple in those relations” (72). To illustrate her point about the ways researchers “participate in constructing Others” (71), Fine reflects on her own constructions of her niece, who was assaulted by a department store security officer. She represents her niece as a young Latina mother who “was adopted from Columbia into our middle-class Jewish family 12 years ago” (71) and then considers the way her niece’s life “has been punctuated by negotiations at the zippered borders of her gendered, raced, and classed Otherhood” (71). While Fine’s use of this personal example helped me understand her point about the difficulties of representation in writing, it made many of the other students in the class uncomfortable, even angry. Some dismissed the more narrative and essayistic writing as “manipulative.” I sat perplexed and silent during class discussion, feeling uncomfortable, trying to account for differences of reading and response.

In trying to account for such differences, I spent many hours after class and throughout the term looking for essays and books that made connections between what I knew from my training in creative writing and what I was desperately seeking to learn about rhetoric and composition—and about the teaching of both. Through that search, I
found the work of Nancy Sommers, Lynn Z. Bloom, and Wendy Bishop, the writers/teachers/scholars that would become the subjects of my dissertation study.

My term project for that research methodology course was the earliest proposal for my dissertation project. This research became a way of working out the tension that I seemed to encounter at every turn in my reading and classroom experience: how to represent self, others, experience, and research findings in ethical and responsible ways. And, just as importantly, how to read those representations. These questions of representation are central to studies in rhetoric and composition—to exploring the ways teacher-researchers represent selves and subjects and to understanding the ways readers respond to such representations both in the classroom and in their own writing.

At the end of that quarter in the research methodologies class, I presented my project idea to the class and fielded questions. One student—who was to become one of my most valued colleagues and collaborators—asked me to respond to the critique that personal essays are "seductive." We'd read Thomas Newkirk's "Seduction and Betrayal in Qualitative Research" and discussed his claim that an ethos of good will can be an act of seduction. Newkirk writes about the ethical dilemma of sharing "bad news" in a research report, and while Newkirk's point is not about form or genre, some students in the course had made the connection between seduction and the personal essay. In response to the question, I answered, "Everyone finds something seductive. Some people are seduced by claims to objectivity—charts, graphs, statistics, and the kind of authority that comes from not revealing a personal stake in an argument or issue. I resist seeing
‘seduction’ in purely negative terms. Seduction draws someone in, seeks to persuade through identification, but people respond to various kinds of writing in vastly different ways.” While it is possible to use examples or materials in unfair or manipulative ways, no form of writing is inherently more seductive than another. It is valuable, however, to explore what accounts for such differing responses to the same texts, specifically personal essays in the context of composition studies.

In some ways, the early articulations of this project were an attempt to find a place for myself in rhetoric and composition, to enter fully into the professional conversations of this field (as teacher, writer, and researcher) even as I valued the genres, particularly the personal essay, so important to my work in creative writing. I still hold the same commitments to rhetoric and composition and to creative writing, but now the tensions fuel my research and teaching instead of silencing and perplexing me, for I know that these issues are part of a larger disciplinary conversation, one concerned with ethics and representation in writing, teaching, and scholarship.

While this narrative is “personal,” this isn’t just story about myself. It’s a story that reflects a tension that plays itself out in the discipline—at conferences, in journals, in classrooms, in office conversations—every day. This tension plays itself out in teaching, curriculum development, publication, and a variety of other professional activities. Moments of discomfort, tension, and even embarrassment push scholars and writers to articulate and re-articulate and to read and discuss in the process. The narrative that this
dissertation presents can be read and interpreted in differing ways, but for now it provides provisional explanations and offers productive strategies for reading personal essays.

Strategies for reading play an important role in determining how one receives and responds to a given text. How one reads is largely influenced by experience and training. Personal assumptions and the culture of one’s discipline also play a role, as does the text in question. In that class on research methods, my own ways of reading, as someone trained mainly in creative writing, were most sharply contrasted by those in the class who were trained as literary critics. Yet the differences in reading—and thus response—among those in the same field are also stark. It is these differences within composition studies that are one focus of this dissertation.

**Theoretical Frameworks and Methodologies**

According to Nancy Sommers, “The civilizing influence of an essay is that it keeps the conversation going, chronicling an intellectual journey, reflecting conversations with sources” (“I Stand” 427). In my research and writing, I want very much to keep conversations going, to chronicle intellectual journeys, and to reflect conversations with sources. As a way of working toward these goals, I have undertaken a qualitative research project grounded in data gathered from:

1. Background reading in rhetorical, feminist, genre, reader response, and autobiographical theory;

2. Historical research on forms of the personal essay in rhetoric and composition studies;
3. Rhetorical analysis of particular essays and reviews; and

4. Interviews and correspondence with Wendy Bishop, Lynn Bloom, and Nancy Sommers.

*Theoretical Frameworks*

Rhetorical theory is at the very foundation of this study. At every turn, I attempt to take the various elements of rhetorical situations into account, giving equal attention to writer, reader, text, and context. The complexity of such a task necessitates a multifaceted and flexible methodology, one that draws on historical and social scientific research practices, even as it is guided by multiple theories. Rhetorical theory provides a strong foundation for this study because it allows for, indeed insists upon, complexity. I see rhetoric as epistemic, understanding that we gain knowledge through the process of acting, speaking, and writing; as historical in that it requires a consideration of context and an awareness of its own modes of social production, even as it attends to particular situations; as language-centered; and as hermeneutically aware, recognizing that relationships among readers, writers, and texts are contextual, complex, and that interpretive possibilities are many.

The diverse theoretical frameworks that I use in this dissertation are grounded in rhetorical theory and are connected by a feminist emphasis. In *Anglo-American Feminist Challenges to the Rhetorical Traditions*, Krista Ratcliffe suggests the need for feminist projects that find works by women to add to or replace those that have traditionally been
valorized, and she identifies the need to extrapolate new theories from noncanonical texts. I take these needs as part of the exigency for my project. In doing so, I draw from the feminist rhetorical theory of communications scholars, especially Karen Foss and Sonja Foss and Carole Blair, Julie R. Brown, and Leslie Baxter. In *Women Speak: The Eloquence of Women's Lives*, Foss and Foss offer a feminist rhetorical framework for analyzing texts, one that assumes gender as a critical component of human social life (a lens through which experience is filtered). I utilize their framework, which privileges creative, flexible, imaginative analysis; recognition that one's own experience informs analysis; and close attention to exigence, audience, communicator, the text itself, the functions of the text, and the nature of the world created by/in the text. In "Disciplining the Feminine," communication scholars Blair, Brown, and Baxter critique the masculinist paradigm—one characterized by impersonal abstraction, disciplinary territoriality, individuation, and hierarchy—that often defines disciplinary experience. The writers I am studying especially challenge the first two characteristics of this paradigm. In their essays, they emphasize contextual particulars, they write in a personal (rather than distanced or "objective") voice, and their work explicitly and implicitly blurs the boundaries between the fields of rhetoric and composition and creative writing. In this dissertation, I seek to do the same, and also to question hierarchies and the presumed autonomy of individual scholars by highlighting connections and by not positioning women against one other.
The genre theory I find most useful also has a rhetorical bent. I draw from the work of Heather Dubrow, who gives attention to the ways genres function and to the “complexity with which genres act and interact” (Genre 117). Another especially helpful source is Genre and the New Rhetoric whose editors, Freedman and Medway, distinguish the theories in their collection from traditional theories of genre:

Traditional definitions of genre focused on textual regularities. In traditional literary studies the genres... were defined by conventions of form and content. Current genre studies... probe further; without abandoning earlier conceptions of genres as ‘types’ or ‘kinds’ of discourse, characterized by similarities in content and form, recent analyses focus on tying these linguistic and substantive similarities to regularities in human spheres of activity. In other words, the new term ‘genre’ has been able to connect a recognition of regularities in discourse types with a broader social and cultural understanding of language in use. (1)

In her contribution to this volume, Carolyn Miller refers to genre as “social action.” And Freedman and Medway encourage the unpacking of “the complex social, cultural, institutional, and disciplinary factors at play in the production of specific kinds of writing” (2). My dissertation responds to this call. As well, Freedman and Medway ask some questions pertinent to reception theory; questions that guide my study: “How do some genres come to be valorized? In whose interest is such valorization? Who is excluded? What representations of the world are entailed?” (11). From the genre theory represented in Genre and the New Rhetoric, I take a view of genre as action and play rather than as simple fixed textual regularities; such a view is essential to my understanding and definition of the essay.

These concepts of action and play are also evident in both the reader response and autobiographical theories that inform my study. I draw especially from Wolfgang Iser,
who discusses the importance of gaps in the text-reader relationship (The Act of Reading). I am interested in the ways gaps and absences induce readers to perform active interpretive roles. In merging reader response and autobiographical theory, I am able to consider both writers and readers as performing subjects. Additionally, such theories allow me to analyze the ways genre and form shape the performance and reception of “self” in the disciplinary context of rhetoric and composition studies.

I am indebted to feminist autobiographical scholars (Susan Stanford Friedman, Rita Felski, Sidonie Smith, and others) who have revised traditional individualistic paradigms of the self in order to value collective and relational identities, the kinds of identities often recognizable in—but not limited to—personal essays by women. In “Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance,” Sidonie Smith figures autobiographical speakers as performing subjects, subjects who find themselves “on multiple stages simultaneously, called to heterogeneous recitations of identity” (110). And, she continues, “These multiple calls never align perfectly. Rather, they create spaces or gaps, ruptures, unstable boundaries, incursions, excursions, limits and their transgressions” (110). Because audiences are never homogenous, representations and readings of self are always complex. And the complexity of representation and reading is heightened when genres are mixed, as they often are in the personal yet theoretical essays of Sommers, Bloom, and Bishop.

In fashioning a framework for reading and analysis, I have drawn much from contemporary rhetorical, feminist, genre, reader response, and autobiographical theories;
in drawing from a variety of theories, I’ve sought a framework (perhaps it’s more of a design than framework) that is suggestive and flexible. It is meant to gesture toward the interpretive and rhetorical possibilities involved in reading and writing personal essays.

**Story as Method: Self, Gaps, Experience—An Eternity of Mirrors**

I was fourteen years old the first time I flew on an airplane. Somewhere between Boston and Monterey, probably in Chicago, we had a layover. I remember standing in an airport bathroom, washing my hands, and looking into the mirror above the sink. The effect was dizzying. The walls, both in front of and behind me, were lined with mirrors, and when I looked into the one in front of me, I saw an eternity of reflections, my own flight-weary face framed in mirror inside of mirror as far as I could see. This research and writing has involved similar moments of disorientation, times when the roles of writer, reader, teacher, researcher, critic merged and seemed to replicate themselves in an eternity of mirrors. This dissertation offers a narrative based on written and oral narratives. And often, essayists reflect as much on the writing of their narratives as they do on the stories themselves, demonstrating an attention to both method and theory. In Sommers’s, Bloom’s, and Bishop’s work, such theorizing is part of the fabric of the stories they tell. Likewise, stories are central to both the theory and methodology I choose.

Like the writers and editors of the books Kate Ronald reviews in “How to Tell a True Teaching Story,” I see narrative as “a legitimate method of research and source of
knowledge” (256). What makes my own methodology significant is that I practice the same reading strategies I argue for. Yet this practice also means that even as I seek to make an argument, I am confronted by questions about self, gaps/ruptures, and experience at every turn in this research and the writing of it.

In terms of “self,” I’ve wondered at various times how best to construct myself as qualitative researcher, especially one in the often humbling position of “studying up.” As a graduate student interviewing tenured faculty members who hold respected positions in the field I seek to enter, where do I locate my own authority? In what ways do the varying levels of rapport I share with each subject affect the selves we present to each other and, thus, what we say or don’t say in interview sessions? In what ways does interview setting (a kitchen, livingroom, university office—children or spouse present, colleagues in the hall) affect what is said and how? And what of the presence of the tape recorder? At one point in an interview, one subject half-jokingly threatened that if I repeated something she said, “I’ll swear you never met me.”

In terms of gaps/ruptures, there were times in the writing of this dissertation that I was very aware of what I was leaving out. The realities of writing, the privilege and necessity of selection and ordering, demand that some things be written, others not. Yet there are gaps that are less intentional. For instance, what does methodology make invisible? What was I able to learn, given the questions I asked of texts and individuals? What did I miss by not asking other questions? In what important ways do theoretical frameworks act as lenses that shape and color what can be seen, what can be known?
After the writing of this dissertation, I was keenly aware that even seemingly smooth narratives have spaces. At times, I draw attention to the gaps. Other times, I don’t even see the spaces and, thus, depend on readers to bring their own questions, expertise, and experiences to the text I have written.

Throughout this dissertation, and especially in chapter five, I explore the question of “experience”—the ways individuals write their experiences and readers interpret them. I examine the various ways experiences can be used in essays—how they can become solidified or questioned, the ways experiences are themselves interpretations and in need of interpretation. Recently, while reading Gesa E. Kirsch’s *Ethical Dilemmas in Feminist Research*, I was made particularly aware of the ways experiences become historicized. Kirsch writes about a session on “Ethical and Methodological Issues in Qualitative Research” she chaired at the March 1997 CCCC meeting in Phoenix. I was a presenter in that roundtable, talking about my dissertation research, and remember well the exchange Kirsch recounts:

... someone in the audience raised his hand and asked the panelists whether they thought qualitative research was still a worthwhile enterprise, given the difficulties that could grow out of such work. Wouldn’t it be more sensible, he mused, to stick to textual studies or to focus on historical artifacts. Many in the audience nodded in agreement. At that moment, Wendy Bishop spoke up to remind everyone that we cannot escape the ethical quandaries so easily. All decisions in life have ethical dimensions, she suggested, whether we are interacting professionally with students and colleagues or intimately with friends and partners. She hoped, then, to encourage those anxious about the complexity of qualitative research to embrace it with the enthusiasm they would bring to any other meaningful—but potentially troublesome—commitment in their lives. (101-2)
In memory, my own experience of this moment is marked by nervousness. I don’t remember the man who spoke raising his hand, but I do remember that he spoke directly after I answered a question from Roxanne Mountford concerning how I deal with the ethical issues involved in writing about others. The nervousness I felt, beyond the normal anxiety I feel in being on the spot during question/answer times at conferences, resulted from the fact that one of my “subjects” (Wendy Bishop) was sitting in the room. I was relieved when she spoke and thanked her later for saying what she did. She joked about being cranky.

There were five other presenters in the roundtable and dozens of other audience members who, undoubtedly, experienced the moment in other ways. Kirsch’s interpretation, though—written and published and used in the context of her own arguments concerning qualitative research—has historicized the moment, a particular version of the experience, for a larger audience, and in many ways, the optimistic interpretation she provides has replaced for me the earlier nervousness and anxiety that once marked my memory of this experience. I am interested in the ways writing becomes—and changes—experience.

Questions and Methods

In acknowledging the storied nature of research, it might be fitting to call the methodology I use “case narratives,” for I have assembled a methodology that can enable a narrative study of individual writers that is both factual and artistic. I’m drawn to narrative forms of research and writing—case studies, ethnographies, autobiographical
literacy stories—because they often disrupt broad generalizations. Such forms value what specific moments, essays, and people can tell audiences about themselves, the discipline of rhetoric and composition, and the potential for change. Assuming and valuing the interdependent nature of form, writer, reader, and context, my study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- What are the effects (for individuals, for the discipline, for teaching) of authoring the personal essay as disciplinary discourse?
- In what ways do working conditions, institutional apparatuses, and status affect what is written and how that writing is received?
- What kinds of selves do compositionists compose in their essays (and in response to essays)—and for what purpose?
- What possibilities does the form of the personal essay offer for creating alternative representations of self?
- In what ways do audiences compose themselves as readers of the personal essay?
- What are the formative histories behind particular essays?
- In what ways can rhetorical reading strategies inform our knowledge, teaching, and use of the personal essay?

The methods I use to get at these questions and the issues embedded within them predominantly include historical research, rhetorical analysis, and the qualitative method of interviewing. Throughout the dissertation, I practice the kinds of reading that I
advocate, giving attention to various voices, absences and gaps, complex and multiple identifications.

This study is historical in that I seek to identify the circumstances and influences in disciplinary history which have made various forms of the essay viable. My historical orientation has been influenced strongly by historiographers who make no claims to positivism, understanding that objectivity is not possible and that any reconstruction of the past has a purpose. Indeed, such reconstructions provide an interpretive framework for what is happening in the present. The historical research I have done has involved locating scholarship on the form of the essay in composition studies predominantly, but also in literary studies as a whole. I've been especially interested in who is talking/writing about essays, who is writing essays (particularly personal and mixed-genre pieces), how the form is talked about, and how it is read/responded to. I've read reviews (particularly those relating to the work of Sommers, Bloom, Bishop), pieces that cite their work (where these three are published and have been cited has also been an interesting aspect of this study), and essays on the essay as well as examples of personal essays.

While many historians and scholars privilege written over oral evidence (not to mention dead over living subjects), I believe textual sources and oral accounts can—and should—be considered together, for they support and question each other. For that reason, I have chosen to conduct interviews with Sommers, Bloom, and Bishop and to use the interview data to inform and complicate my analyses. Those who worry over
reliability, validity, and representativeness critique oral accounts on the basis that memory is selective and anecdotal evidence is not sufficient data on which to base an argument. Of course, these same critiques have been and continue to be made of the personal essay, so those who critique my methodology will also likely see my subject matter as suspect. In terms of reliability and validity, oral and textual forms of evidence are not fundamentally different. Indeed, memory, like historiography, is reconstructive. It is not free of bias, and both exist in a social context.

The third element of my method is rhetorical analysis. Rhetorical analysis first involves a close reading of primary texts. Bishop defines close reading as “reading that gets inside an author’s rhetorical moves” (Teaching Lives 32). A focus on rhetoric involves an attention to a variety of audience expectations (and how specific texts might meet, frustrate, or challenge those expectations); an understanding of the broader social contexts of all authoring; a consideration of style and purpose; and an interest in communication and persuasion. My rhetorical analyses of primary texts and reviews constitute the bulk of the dissertation and are informed and extended by interviews and correspondence with Sommers, Bloom, and Bishop.

As this methodology makes clear, my findings and the ways that I structure them in this dissertation are more narrative than scientific. I do not posit that these findings are generalizable to all women or all essayists in composition studies. Such a claim would be naive, essentialist, and not especially interesting. Rather than arguing that my subjects’ experiences are statistically representative, I am interested in responding to disciplinary
critiques of the personal essay, forwarding productive reading strategies of this form, and demonstrating the ways that the form has functioned (and continues to do so) in the work of Bloom, Sommers, and Bishop. My dissertation does what narratives do: places particular events within a larger context, and in doing so seeks to make meaning—provisional meaning. Indeed, I make the same claim for this methodology that I make for personal essays: the ways individuals interpret and make meaning from experience have effects on and for the future—future writing, teaching, and scholarship.

In concluding this chapter on methodology, I wish to note the collaborative nature of this research. The stories Sommers, Bloom, and Bishop tell, the way they write, and the way they act as professionals in composition studies make a tremendous difference in my own scholarship, writing, and feminism. The research and writing of this dissertation have led me to see the subjects of my study (both people and the rhetorical forms) and my methodology as intricately connected. I understand my work with my students, colleagues, professors, and research subjects as both mutually supportive and constructively critical, and I hope this dissertation demonstrates the kinds of support, constructive questioning, and responsiveness that I see as central to a feminist methodology and practice.
NOTES

1. See, for example, Michel de Certeau’s *The Writing of History*, Susan Jarratt’s *Rereading the Sophists* and “Toward a Sophistic Historiography,” and Carole Blair’s “Contested Histories of Rhetoric: The Politics of Preservation, Progress, and Change.”
CHAPTER 3

REVISING SELVES AND VOICES:
THE AUTHORITY OF REFLECTION IN THE ESSAYS OF NANCY SOMMERS

"Each of us is a composite of many voices, some more hushed than others, less encouraged by the louder voices around us" (10).

—Sheryl I. Fontaine and Susan Hunter, “Taking the Risk to Be Heard.”

In “The Genre Function,” Anis Bawarshi, building on Carolyn Miller’s notion of genre as social action, argues that genres can and should serve as sites for inquiry “because genres, ultimately, are the rhetorical environments within which we recognize, enact, and consequently reproduce various situations, practices, relations, and identities” (336). I share Bawarshi’s view of the importance of genre and the significance of studying it, and in this chapter I investigate genre and its implications through considering several different texts and the responses elicited by those texts. First, I consider Nancy Sommers’s “I Stand Here Writing,” “Between the Drafts,” and “The Language of Coats,” arguing that the form functions as an integral part of the argument of each essay; the form, in fact, allows Sommers to enact her claims, to reproduce the practices she advocates. I also investigate responses to Sommers’s essays: a critical reply from composition scholar Marguerite Helmers, enthusiastic feedback from audience members
who heard Sommers present her essays as talks, a caution from a reader who responded to an early draft of “The Language of Coats,” and my own readings of Sommers’s essays as well as the feedback I’ve received about Sommers’s writing and my own. I analyze these differing texts and responses in order to examine the relationship between form and context, including the identities of those writing and represented in texts and of those reading and responding. In this chapter, I take the concerns of Sommers’s essays as my own and transform them in order to explore some important questions related to genre: What are appropriate uses of sources? Through what means do writers construct authority and voice? What “selves” are available to writers in the disciplinary context of composition studies?

The rhetorical power of the personal essay—and readings of the form—depend upon a mix of idea and reflection, attention to the interplay between individual and social concerns, and consideration of contexts. In order to consider the ways form, context, and response (both before and after publishing) shape writing, revision, and presentation of self, my readings draw from a variety of texts. In addition to reading Sommers’s published essays, I also include correspondence and interviews in my analysis. These additional texts provide another layer of evidence. To illustrate my argument, the readings of Sommers’s essays I offer in this chapter are themselves essayistic, privileging process, tentativeness, and ongoing conversation. That is, I take the form of the essay not only as my subject matter but also as my method.

Several themes and issues recur in Sommers’s published personal essays: revision, transformation of authority, use of sources. Through the conventions of the
personal essay—a recursive use of narration and exposition—Sommers selects, orders, and renders scenes, forwarding various interpretations of experience to suit her purposes. The use of personal narrative is central to Sommers’s arguments: these stories are not ornamental anecdotes used solely to forward claims that could be demonstrated just as well or better through more traditional academic argument. Through her use of the personal, exploratory essay, Sommers carries out her dual purpose: to apply the theories she advocates to both her personal life as a daughter and mother and to her work as a teacher, administrator, scholar, and writer. As writer, she brings together her varied, and sometimes conflicting, roles, articulating and enacting a pedagogy that, first, values personal experience as a source that requires interpretation and, second, sees revision as essential.

**I Sit Here Reading “I Stand Here Writing”: Position, Source, Response**

Like the speaker in “I Stand Here Writing,” I think about writing all the time—in the kitchen, the shower, the car, at the gym, or in bed those minutes or hours before sleep comes. Like the speaker, my “head is abuzz with words” (420). The voices that accompany and inhabit me on any given day depend on what I’ve been reading, on how that reading summons what I’ve read or heard in the past. Having spent a good deal of time with “I Stand Here Writing,” I’ve been thinking recently a lot about Tillie Olsen. I think about her story “I Stand Here Ironing,” about mothers and daughters, about class, about housework, and especially about that haunting line, “I will never total it all” (20). I
think too about Olsen’s *Silences*, that collection of essays that doesn’t come close to totaling it all. It’s a collection of commonplaces, of quotations; it reads like the voices in Olsen’s head set out on the page. It makes me think of the voices I could set out on the page, the ones abuzz inside my head today:

“Stories beget stories. Writing emerges from writing” (420).

—Nancy Sommers, “I Stand Here Writing”

“We are told a story and then we tell our own” (8).

—Terry Tempest Williams, *Pieces of White Shell*

“When reading . . . essays, I find my thinking spurred; my desire to write back (or write at all) and to join the conversation begins” (6).

—Wendy Bishop, “Preaching What We Practice”

“Reading and writing are complementary acts that remain unfinished until completed by their reciprocals. . . . [M]y writing is unfinished until it is read by others as well, whose responses may become known to me, engendering new textualities” (20-21).

—Robert Scholes, *Textual Power*

These are the voices I carry with me much of the time. Today, though, there is another voice, one that comes from two recent emails sent to me by the chair of the English Department of which I am a member. We’ve been conversing about one of Sommers’s essays for months. He writes, “I’ve re-read Sommers’s essay and still find it unimpressive,” and, “Once one gets past the flashy interweaving of the personal narrative with the academic concerns, its contribution to our understanding of authority and
revision is of the ho-hum sort” (email 6/7/2000). In the same email, he calls her points “banal” and “cliched.” I respond. He’s not persuaded. He responds. He writes that Sommers tells us virtually nothing we didn’t already know: “same old same old” (email 6/8/00). I wonder how it is that the very texts that prompt me to write prompt him to yawn. Ho-hum, same old same old. Yesterday, I gave up on writing this chapter to respond to my department chair. I appreciate his willingness to respond. In our exchange, however, we end up repeating ourselves a lot. He writes about wanting to read something profound; I write about method and form. Today, I’ve come back to writing the chapter; it’s another kind of response, another use of sources. I repeat Nancy Sommers’s words in my head to drown out the yawns, “The civilizing influence of an essay is that it keeps the conversation going, chronicling an intellectual journey, reflecting conversations with sources” (427).

Sommers sometimes names her sources in “I Stand Here Writing”; other times, though, she depends on allusions. Clearly, the title is an allusion to Tillie Olsen’s “I Stand Here Ironing,” and some similarities of subject position are evident as well: in both Olsen’s and Sommers’s pieces, the speaker is a mother, reflecting while involved in a domestic activity, looking back, structuring her story through her present sense of self, trying to make sense of fragments of voices and experience.

One of the early fragments in Sommers’s essay is the half-remembered phrase “‘a radical loss of certainty,’” one she spends the first paragraph trying to reconstruct: “‘Writing is a radical loss of certainty.’ (Or is it uncertainty?)” (420). Though she doesn’t name her source, Sommers is alluding to Kurt Spellmeyer’s essay “A Common
Ground: The Essay in the Academy,” published in College English five years before her essay was. In the section where he makes a distinction between writing as a demonstration of understanding and writing as a means of achieving understanding, Spellmeyer observes, “No matter how adept a writer becomes, the activity of writing always entails a radical loss of certainty” (270). Unlike Spellmeyer, Sommers quotes no discourse theorists, yet “I Stand Here Writing” seems to support Spellmeyer’s point about what writers can do through the form of the essay: “use writing as a way of thinking dialogically [and] achieve in the process a heightened awareness of their situation, an awareness which allows them to overcome past misunderstandings without at the same time disowning the past” (271). Although Spellmeyer writes specifically about student writers, his theory can be applied more broadly, for his argument pertains more to form than it does to whether the writer is a student or professional.

“I Stand Here Writing” is marked by the uncertainty and tentativeness Spellmeyer sees as central to the essay form. He contends that “the essay foregrounds the speaker’s movement from presentation to representation, from experience as ‘fact’ to experience invested more fully with personal, and with social, meaning” (265). Sommers makes that movement from “fact” to a demonstration of personal investment clearly in the second paragraph of her essay: “The truth. Has truth anything to do with the facts? All I know is that no matter how many facts I might clutter my life with, I am as bound to the primordial drama of my family as the earth is to the sun” (420). The speaker’s family both provides and confounds the “facts” that structure the essay.¹
After devoting the first paragraph of her essay to setting (the speaker is in the kitchen, cooking chicken, reflecting), she spends the next two paragraphs selecting facts about her parents: her father is “the son of a severe Prussian matriarch” and wishes his daughter was his mother (420); her mother—“whose own mother died when she was five, whose grandparents were killed by the Nazis, who fled Germany at the age of thirteen” (421)—finds four-leaf clovers and sends them and good luck notes to the speaker. While the speaker’s mother, despite the facts of her life, remains optimistic, the speaker, “her daughter, was left, for a long time, seeing only the ironies,” a defense against the facts of her own life (421).

Sommers then devotes a few paragraphs to considering some of the other facts of her life: her position as mother to daughters who see her as out of touch with their reality. The daughters laugh at the rhymes their mother’s friends wrote in her yearbook. One daughter writes her mother notes in Urdu; the other writes her mother lists of items—neon nail polish and adult makeup—she thinks she needs. While Sommers doesn’t comment on it, it may be significant that all of these women who are important to her are writing, though the language they choose—the language of luck, rhymes, Urdu, and makeup—seems at times foreign to her.

In paragraph six, Sommers makes the essayistic turn, a turn from narrative to exposition, a moment of uncertainty where she reflects on the “facts” she’s given the reader so far. She writes: “How do I look at these facts? How do I embrace these experiences, these texts of my life, and translate them into ideas? How do I make sense of them and the conversations they engender in my head?” (421). Contained within these
questions and this seeming moment of uncertainty is an implicit argument: that experiences are primary sources, that facts require interpretation, that the sense that can be made of these sources depends on who is looking at them and what that person brings to the sources, and that although the sources are varied, they are also related.

The desire to find and make connections is, for the writer, both an academic and personal one. She implies that books and other authoritative sources cannot provide whole answers to the questions that engage her at any given time: “what it is like to be the child of survivors. . . . [or] how the granddaughter of a severe Prussian matriarch and the daughter of a collector of amulets ought to raise feminist daughters” (422). But if books cannot give the answers the speaker needs, the form of the personal essay does provide a method for making connections, and it is through dealing with the tensions, ambiguities, and disjunctions of trying to make sense of seemingly unrelated fragments that meaning emerges or is made.

The fragmented voices and memories Sommers selects for “I Stand Here Writing” all work in service of her argument about the use of sources. Early in the essay, Sommers’s argument seems to emerge from a laying out of “facts” and reflection on how to look at those facts. In the second quarter of the essay, however, Sommers uses a different technique for making her point: she provides an interpretation first and then moves into the narrative. In a one-sentence paragraph, she writes, “Once I learned a lesson about borrowing someone else’s words and losing my own” (422). She then moves into a story of borrowing quote cards from her high school debate teammates and using a quotation she did not understand to bolster her position. Upon cross-examination,
she was embarrassed by her opponent who revealed how much she didn’t know about the source she quoted.

That Sommers follows this “lesson” and the next with an image of herself as a college student in the library, wearing her Question Authority t-shirt seems fitting to me. As I sit here in my Habitat for Humanity t-shirt, surrounded by my own amulets—a Turkish good luck charm, a porcelain guardian angel, rocks and feathers from around the country—alternately reading and writing, I think of Sommers’s authority and wonder why, for the first time in my reading of this essay, I am irritated. At first I wonder if my discomfort has to do with the fact that Sommers is writing about authority. I think it’s ironic that I am most likely to question this point. But it’s not the subject matter that bothers me. What bothers me is that she puts the interpretation of the story first, contradicting the opening premise of the essay: writing emerges from writing. I am irritated because for the first time in my reading of this piece, I am suspicious that the writer knows exactly where she’s going and that she’s leading me there. I’m stubborn and won’t go that easily. I’m not persuaded by the interpretation, “Borrowing words from authorities had left me without any words of my own” (423).

I want to question the authority of the writer’s interpretation, want to speak back, want to say, “In this case, the problem was not with the authority or with borrowing someone else’s words. The problem was that you didn’t do your homework. You didn’t understand your sources. Sometimes authorities know more on certain topics than we do. We can use the knowledge they have, as long as we understand what they’re saying and how we’re using it. Had you done your homework, you wouldn’t have been silenced by
Bobby Rosenfeld. You would have figured out who Rostow was and what ‘exacerbate endemic rivalries’ meant; better yet, you would have found your own authorities to support your points rather than depending on someone else’s research. No words of your own can save you in a debate if you don’t know what you’re talking about.” These are the words I want to say, and this is the way I want to say it. I don’t want to refer to Sommers as “speaker” or “character” or “she” as I have in other places, critically distancing myself from the writer. I want pronouns of confrontation and connection: you (Sommers) and we (Sommers and I).

That the technique of putting the interpretation first rather than allowing it to emerge from the narrative irritates me says more about my expectations for the personal essay than it does about Sommers or this essay in particular. Many readers crave such direction, the guidance of thesis statements and clear interpretations of evidence; the thesis/proof model encourages readers to evaluate the validity of claims. Set up in that way, though, I push against the authority of the writer, question her interpretation of evidence—perhaps learning more about the authority of my own interpretations. Sommers probably wouldn’t mind. But I learn better in relation to rather than in opposition to my sources, and one of the elements I value most about the essay form is the appearance of a mind in the process of thinking, of working something out, of making connections, and allowing the reader in on the process.

The technique that works better for me, one that Sommers also uses, is the repetition of key images. Early in the essay, Sommers associates her mother with amulets and four-leaf clovers. She writes of irony and inheritance. In describing the helplessness
she felt in being without words as Bobby Rosenfeld cross-examined her, she writes, "Millions of four-leaf clovers couldn’t have helped me" (423). The line, unglossed by the writer, holds many possible interpretations for me as reader. The obvious interpretation is that no symbol of luck could give her words, but I am also left pondering the ways mothers—despite their best wishes—cannot always be present for their children.

The influence of family is evident in Sommers’s next "lesson" about sources, as well. This lesson, drawn from her college experience of writing about Emerson’s essay "Eloquence," reinforces an earlier point that books don’t necessarily provide once and for all answers; rather, coming back to the same source at a different time yields different insights, for readers bring much to the sources they consult. Sommers supports her argument by recollecting her differing readings of Emerson over time, but she also illustrates the point by her use of repetition and another view of her high school debate team experience. In the context of discussing Emerson’s performance of "Eloquence," Sommers writes:

I had joined the debate team not to argue the U.S. Military Aid Policy, but to learn how to be an orator who could stun audiences, to learn a personal eloquence I could never learn at home. Perhaps only children of immigrant parents can understand the embarrassing moments of inarticulateness, the missed connections that come from learning to speak a language from parents who claim a different mother tongue. (424)

While this explanation does little to change my interpretation of the debate team example (she didn’t do her homework), it does help me understand the speaker’s inheritance, the sources that inform her life and writing.
In transitioning to an explanation of her undergraduate self, Sommers writes, "As an undergraduate, I wanted to free myself from that mother tongue. Four-leaf clovers and amulets of oppression weighed heavy on my mind, and I could see no connection whatsoever between those facts of my life and the untranslatable side of myself that set me in opposition to authority" (424). The clovers and amulets, here, find another interpretation; they come to stand for oppression to a daughter, while for her mother, represented earlier in the essay, they stand for optimism and hope. As reader, this time through at least, I long to hear more about that family inheritance—about the "mother tongue," about why the undergraduate seems to identify more with Emerson than she does with her family. The lyrical repetition is lovely, but not entirely satisfying.

Instead of reflecting on her undergraduate reading, Sommers moves quite quickly to her present (in essay time) reading of Emerson: "Today" she underlines the sentence, ""One must be an inventor to read well"" (424) and identifies with both Emerson and her mother: "Like my mother, I find myself sometimes surrounded by a field of four-leaf clovers, there for the picking, waiting to see what I can make of them" (424). Another lovely metaphor, another place I desire more explanation. This move from feelings of oppression to a delight in possibility jars me, for while the move may have taken twenty years for the speaker, it warrants only one paragraph for the writer, and the paragraph is devoted almost exclusively to Emerson. What accounts for the speaker's differing approach to sources, the changes in her reading of Emerson and especially her reading of family? The only answer Sommers provides to my question is that she brings more to her
sources in later readings. If I'm to be guided by the message of the essay, I won't be looking for answers, though; I'll make connections that lead to insight.

About half-way through the essay, Sommers circles back to where she began, reminding the reader of the setting. Back in the kitchen, she is listening to the voices that "come by way of a lifetime of reading"; they come, the speaker says, "on the waves of life, and they seem to be helping me translate the untranslatable" (425). At this mid-way point, Sommers provides a three-sentence transition paragraph, one in which the speaker reflects on the importance of being open to various voices. The stories in the first half of "I Stand Here Writing" mostly show Sommers in relation to authority—the authority of parents, heritage, books, teachers. In the second half of the essay, though, it is the speaker who is the authority. She is teacher and parent, the authority to be questioned.

Immediately after the transition paragraph, Sommers lists some of the lessons she would like to teach her students about authority and sources—to see themselves as sources, to know that the writer's vision creates other sources anew, to realize that no source "reveals itself straight out" (425)—the very lessons she has learned through her own experience. She critiques those who allow "sources to speak through them unquestioned, unexamined" (425) and advocates, instead, bringing one's own interpretations and judgments to reading and writing.

Ever since I read "I Stand Here Writing" for the first time over six years ago, I've admired Sommers's reflection on personal and academic writing, as represented in this section of the essay:
Being personal, I want to show my students, does not mean being autobiographical. Being academic does not mean being remote, distant, imponderable. Being personal means bringing their judgments and interpretation to bear on what they read and write, learning that they never leave themselves behind even when they write academic essays. (425)

Because I share with Sommers an interest in demonstrating the connections between academic and personal concerns, I’ve underlined this section in every copy of the essay I own. But today, I keep reading these two sentences over and over. I’m not sure what they mean. Is Sommers suggesting that there is no distinction between academic and personal, so long as writers recognize they never leave themselves behind? Put another way, is it possible to be academic without being personal? Is it possible to be personal without being academic? Without an example, the words “personal” and “academic” lose meaning for me.

I search Sommers’s essay for some insight. She critiques those who “accumulate enough authorities so that there is no doubt about the ‘truth’ of their thesis” (425). Is it this kind of scholarship that makes one academic without being personal? I lean toward answering my own question “yes,” when more questions arise. Isn’t the very act of selecting and ordering quotations and evidence an act of interpretation and judgment? If so, would the collector of facts Sommers critiques not also be “personal”? I think again of Tillie Olsen’s Silences; in her lists of quotations, she lets so many others speak through her, categorizing more than she comments, allowing readers to bring their interpretations to bear on her list of sources.

Although I understand and agree with Sommers’s argument about speaking back to sources, I wonder if there are not also other times when it is appropriate and
advantageous for a writer to allow the words of others to speak through her so that she can speak through them. Are there times when an authority allows a writer to say something she wants to say? That is, instead of the words of others leaving the writer without any words of her own, might borrowed words at times help writers gain authority to speak? All words are inherited, made anew in varying contexts through differing purposes, and sources can be used—and interacted with—in multiple ways.

I'm thinking now of the ways Sommers uses her sources. After her reflection on what it means to be personal, Sommers includes an example involving one of her former students, David Gray. That she devotes a quarter of the essay—ten paragraphs—to this narrative and quotes extensively from one of David's essays interests me, especially since in the initial two paragraphs of the example David is represented as someone who is dissatisfied with the class Sommers is teaching and consistently questions her: "He didn't like the time of the class, didn't like the reading list, didn't seem to like me" (425). David didn't care for Annie Dillard's "Living Like Weasels" either. The speaker's response to David's questioning was to keep equanimity in class but at home to tell her "family about this kid who kept testing me, seizing me like Dillard's weasel, and not letting go" (425). The comparison to Dillard's weasel is fitting in the sense that Sommers had just mentioned "Living Like Weasels," but for those who have read Dillard's essay, the simile may seem a bit extreme: "Obedient to instinct, [a weasel] bites his prey at the neck, either splitting the jugular vein at the throat or crunching the brain at the base of the skull, and he does not let go" (Dillard 11).
Despite the initial representation of David, in the next eight paragraphs he doesn’t come across as a brain-crunching, jugular vein-splitting weasel. He seems, in fact, to seize the assignment Sommers gives to write an exploratory essay and to carry out the assignment in a way that reinforces nearly all of Sommers’s points about using sources. That is, although he questions her for several weeks, David seems to come around to Sommers’s point of view. She uses his essay as an example of the kind of learning she desires for her students. In his essay, David does exactly what Sommers hopes her students will do, “taking his readers along with him on his journey, questioning sources, reflecting, expanding, and enriching his growing sense that learning should stress ideas rather than merely accumulating facts and information” (426). In Sommers’s representation, David, as questioner of authority, seems to have learned something from his sources: not only from the texts he chooses as sources but also from Sommers, the class she taught, and the assignment she gave. She, in fact, ends the example about David by reflecting on the lessons he has learned.

I find myself wondering, though, what Sommers learned from her source in this case. Is there any lesson David, or students like him, can teach? What are some strategies for working with those who consistently question their teacher’s authority? And how might teachers respond when particular students do not seize the assignment with the same vigor David did? I get a clearer sense of the speaker when she is the one questioning authority. When her own authority is questioned, she on the one hand wants the student out of her class and on the other recognizes him as a kindred spirit, but I see little of the interaction between teacher and student. Since “I Stand Here Writing” was
published in *College English*, it's fair to assume that teachers of English are its primary audience. What "lesson" do those teachers learn from this example? What do readers learn from David? What do readers learn from Sommers's use of David as source?

Sommers draws from sources aplenty in writing this essay, and she brings those sources together in the last five paragraphs. Somewhere between the beginning of the essay and the end, her position has been revised: instead of the image of the speaker as daughter who only sees ironies, by the end, Sommers is mother offering her daughter a rabbit's foot for luck. Rachel, though, is "alert to life's ironies" and refuses the "furry little claw" (427). Through Rachel, Sommers alludes again to Dillard, writing that Rachel had been seized by a perplexing question on an achievement test, a question that "wouldn't let go" (427). Reflection on the question concerning the truth of various statements, leads Sommers to thoughts of Emerson, who leads to thoughts of "basic units, the words themselves, words like cardamom, coriander," and with those words, readers are back in the kitchen with the speaker and her chicken.

Toward the end of the essay, the speaker urges readers to embrace complexities: "amulets and autograph books, fathers who want their daughters to be their mothers, and daughters who write notes in Urdu" (428). The complexities are the speaker's inheritance, her "whole primordial family drama," full of gaps and uncertainties, but most of all possibilities. In the last sentence of the essay, Sommers makes a gesture that fits well with her characterization of the essay as a form that "keeps the conversation going, chronicling an intellectual journey, reflecting conversations with sources" (427). She ends the essay calling for inventors who will give freely to sources, "imagining even as
we write that we too will be a source from which other readers can draw sustenance” (428). It’s interesting that Sommers ends with the idea of drawing sustenance from sources when much of her focus in the essay has been on questioning sources. I wonder what Sommers desires from her readers—that they question, draw sustenance, or perhaps do some mix of both.

The essay form allows me, as reader and “critic,” to both question and draw sustenance from my sources—and to converse with and use those sources in a variety of ways: making connections between Sommers’s essay and Tillie Olsen’s and Kurt Spellmeyer’s work and my own expectations for the form; explicating Sommers’s use of conventions; questioning the writer’s use of sources and her interpretation of experience; pointing to places where I desire more explanation or examples; appreciating; joining an ongoing conversation; recognizing, as Jacqueline Jones Royster writes in her afterword for *Living Rhetoric and Composition: Stories of the Discipline*, “We begin with our stories. We rise to the challenges of sense-making. We move on, not always forward, but surely on” (208-9).

**Reading Between the Lines “Between the Drafts”**

As I move on to write about “Between the Drafts,” I have two editions of *Struwwelpeter,* a book of German moral rhymes, before me. I’ve secured these books—one in German, the other translated into English—because images from this text occupy a central role in Sommers’s “Between the Drafts.” Having never heard of *Struwwelpeter* before reading her essay (my own childhood marked instead by equally
gruesome Bible stories: John the Baptist’s head on a serving platter, Jael driving a tent stake through a Canaanite general’s head, and Jezebel eaten by dogs), I want to have some reference, some point of identification. Sommers opens her essay with a one-sentence paragraph, “I cannot think of my childhood without hearing voices, deep, heavily accented, instructive German voices” (23). And she moves next into recounting some of those voices: her father reading Struwpeter, her mother reading from guidebooks, and the unfamiliar voices from German foreign language records instructing her.

While references to guidebooks and foreign language records also reappear in the essay, I’m most drawn in by the descriptions of Struwpeter and the lessons it contains, especially Sommers’s description of Conrad, “an incorrigible thumb-sucker, who couldn’t stop sucking his thumb and whose mother warned him that a great, long, red-legged scissor-man would—and, yes, did—snip both his thumbs off” (23). Perhaps my fascination is due to Sommers’s explanation of this story as the worst of the Struwpeter tales, by far, for her. Or perhaps it’s because I sucked my thumb for far longer than dear Conrad and heard warnings from dentists and well-meaning others about how my front teeth—buck teeth—would stick straight out or how I might need foul-tasting medicine on my thumb if I couldn’t rid myself of that nasty habit. Believing those with the authority to know, I tied my left wrist to the headboard of my bed more than one night to cure myself. That didn’t work. Though age finally corrected the habit, I still occasionally look at my teeth in the mirror to see if the dentist was right. They aren’t perfectly straight, but
they certainly don’t stick out straight either. Perhaps it’s the fear I identify with in Sommers’s telling—or that she links generations of German children reading *Struelpater* to deference to the “parental authority of the state, and the Nazis’ easy rise to power” (23). Either way, the stakes seem high.

In the initial scenes of Sommers’s essay, parents, books, and records are authoritative. As a character in her childhood stories, Sommers holds little or no authority. As the writer, however, Sommers demonstrates a great deal of authority, presenting and interpreting those stories for her own purposes, and within the context of the essay revising those experiences that shaped her. The heavily accented German voices don’t dominate this piece. Shortly after the instructive voices of others have had their say through the scenes Sommers recounts, she moves into reflective exposition: “I am beginning to get a better sense of my legacy, beginning to see just how complicated and how far-reaching is this business of authority. It extends into my life and touches my student’s lives, reminding me again and again of the delicate relationship between language and authority” (25). That delicate relationship—descriptions of times she subordinated her voice to others and contemplation of her own authority, especially in relation to her children—provides, both in terms of structure and content, the back-and-forth pull of this essay.

In demonstrating that pull, Sommers moves to a scene of herself as parent, as an authority in her own daughter’s life. After making the statement about her legacy and the complicated business of authority, Sommers provides a line of white space and
fastforwards thirty years from the childhood scenes with which she opens the essay. Now Sommers is mother, buying Italian language learning tapes for her own daughter. As an adult, Sommers is presumably in the position of authority (though unlike her father who spoke German, she does not know Italian), but the scene is not simply a replay of her own childhood language lessons. Her daughter, Rachel, speaks back, revising the scene:

"This isn't the way to learn a language. This isn't language at all. These are just words and sentences; this isn't about us..." (25). Unlike the children in Struvelpater, Rachel speaks without anything bad happening; she isn't starved or suffocated; her thumbs remain intact. This short scene provides readers three ways of identifying (with the) authority in this essay: first, it shows Sommers as an authority, albeit an authority that can be questioned; second, it introduces Rachel as a character who reappears at the end of the piece to question her mother's authority again; and third, it reinforces the connections Sommers posits among language and authority and the possibility for revision.

The scenes representing Sommers as child and mother provide a context for reading her later reflection on the professional self she's created in the past and the one in the making, as represented in "Between the Drafts." After her daughter's critique, Sommers is thrown back to her childhood home in Indiana, "hearing the disembodied voices of my family, teaching a language out of the context of life" (26). She provides another bit of white space to signal a time and subject shift and then reflects on her 1987 CCC talk "New Directions for Researching Revision," the talk that provided the impetus for writing "Between the Drafts." Within the context of a discussion of revision
as it relates to student writing—students searching for errors and changing words around—Sommers observes that “revision does not always guarantee improvement; successive drafts do not always lead to a clear vision” (26). Within the paragraph, the observation applies to student writers, but within the context of the stories that precede this comment and those presented later in the essay, it’s clear that this idea of revision applies to Sommers as well. What will it take, as parent, to revise the stories that have shaped her? What will it take, as scholar, to negotiate all the voices she embodies? The implicit answer to these questions is that it will require a new understanding of revision—not just searching for errors or changing words around, but actually seeing her own life and other sources differently.

Discussing the importance of revision to her professional work and to her personal life, Sommers writes,

By treating revision as an academic subject, by suggesting that I could learn something only by studying the drafts of other experienced writers, I kept myself clean and distant from any kind of scrutiny. No Struvelpater was I; no birds could nest in my hair; I kept my thumbs intact. (26)

Instead of valuing the neat and clean researcher/self she had once posited, Sommers critiques that persona: “I have been the bloodless academic creating taxonomies, creating a hierarchy of student writers and experienced writers, and never asking myself how I was being displaced from my own work. I never asked, ‘What does my absence signify?’” (26-7).
Seeking to answer that question, Sommers returns to the text of her 1987 conference paper, pointing to Wayne Booth as the authoritative replacement for her father. She quotes directly from the paper:

By studying writers' revisions we can learn how writers locate themselves within a discourse tradition by developing a persona—a fictionalized self. Creating a persona involves placing the self in a textual community, seeing oneself within a discourse, and positing a self that shares or antagonizes the beliefs that a community of readers shares. As Wayne Booth has written, "Every speaker makes a self with every word uttered. Even the most sincere statement implies a self that is at best a radical selection from many possible roles." (27)

Directly after quoting from her conference paper, Sommers comments on the fictionalized self she invented, "that anemic researcher, who set herself apart from her most passionate convictions" (27). She describes that self as "a distant, imponderable, impersonal voice—inaccessible, humorless, and disguised" and comments, "I speak in an inherited academic voice; it isn't mine" (27). It's at this moment in my reading of "Between the Drafts" that I want more from the writer—more reflection on the notion of "voice" and how it develops, more reflection on what it is that makes a voice one's own. Could it be that all voices, to some extent, are inherited? Sommers implies that her more personal voice is shaped by experience, but what counts as experience? Surely, reading Foucault and Booth also counts as experience.

As reader, I can appreciate the interpretation Sommers supplies of her earlier draft and academic self, yet—at the same time—I'm equally interested in the fictionalized self, the persona, of "Between the Drafts." I can't help but go back to that conference paper she quotes because—instead of simply signifying a self she wants to revise—it provides
guidance for my reading and interpretation of her later draft. Thus, the quotations within quotations have a dual function, supporting Sommers’s interpretation of her earlier persona and shaping my reading of the self created in her later draft. Although Sommers may want to critique her use of sources, Booth’s quotation still supports her point. She writes, “‘By studying writers’ revisions we can learn how writers locate themselves within a discourse tradition by developing a persona—a fictionalized self’” (27). By including this quotation in “Between the Drafts” and commenting on it, Sommers applies what she says about student writing to her own revision process, reflecting on and ultimately rejecting the persona of the anemic researcher. But her purpose is not simply critique or rejection; rather, she seeks to revise the anemic researcher self and to provide in its place a more personal self, one who gazes inward, trusting her own authority. What she doesn’t write, though, is that this personal self, too, and the authority she holds is—of course—equally constructed, also a persona. While it may not have been her purpose, through her self-quoting, Sommers gives guidance concerning how personas (whether “anemic” or “personal”) can be read: “‘Creating a persona involves placing the self in a textual community, seeing oneself within a discourse, and positing a self that shares or antagonizes the beliefs that a community of readers shares’” (27). She has me questioning: what are the communities and discourses that shape these various personas?

An understanding of Sommers’s initial conference audience provides one answer to this question. The researcher persona Sommers created for/in her 1987 CCCC paper was one situated within a discourse community, a community likely to value such a
persona. That same year, a group of cognitive researchers—Linda Flower, John Hayes, Linda Carey, Karen Schriver, and James Stratman—won the Braddock award for their essay “Detection, Diagnosis, and the Strategies of Revision,” an almost clinical study presented with an outline, figures representing a model of cognitive processes in composing and revising, and testable hypotheses. Although Sommers doesn’t mention the Flower et. al article in “Between the Drafts,” she does use a medical metaphor to explain the growing interest in revision in 1987: “revision, once a subject as interesting to our profession as an autopsy, had received new body and soul . . . in our time” (26). This time was also one of “writing labs,” places also devoted to revision, a time when medical/scientific metaphors abounded. To extend Sommers’s metaphor: though interest in revision may indicate body and soul, the ways researchers had of talking about their interests in 1987 may appear bloodless several years later. (Though, few, if any, would question Linda Flower’s passion for her work.) The self Sommers posited in 1987 was one that shared beliefs with her community about how best to present research.

When looking at that 1987 persona, Sommers asks, “What does my absence signify?” (27), I feel compelled to read between the lines of her draft to find some answer, however provisional. Her absence may signify both something about the rhetoric and composition profession in the late 1980s and something about Sommers’s place in that profession, her own sense of authority. When I interviewed Sommers, I asked about her construction of self in her early articles on revision and responding to student writing. She replied, “That was a point in my life when I was trying to sound like a grown up, and
trying to sound like someone who wasn’t in her twenties, and who was trying to take on some kind of mantle or cloak of respectability” (interview 12/99). Clearly, the state of the profession itself and Sommers’s perception of her place in it affects what she writes, what self she posits.

However, as Sommers argues, a lot happens between the drafts—both personally and in the profession. As I read Sommers’s reflection on what her absence signifies in an earlier draft, I find myself questioning, “What does her presence signify?” in this later draft. In interviews and her own reflection on “Between the Drafts,” Sommers points to some of the personal forces that shaped the writing: the time in her life, her teaching, the desire to bridge professional and personal aspects of her life. She wanted to write about her children, as she writes about other people’s children when she writes about students. And she was teaching a course on the form of the essay and writing an exploratory essay, as she asked her students to do. She also attributes the impulse to write this piece to “coming into middle age,” and reflecting on her past; she explains, “I don’t think that . . . ‘Between the Drafts’ is something I would have written in my late twenties or early thirties” (interview, 12/99). “Between the Drafts” is not only an essay about revising essays, it’s also about revising the stories and experiences that shape her—both the personal and professional. By the early 1990s, Sommers no longer needed to take on a cloak of respectability. She’d already published two important articles in CCC, both of which had been reprinted in other forums. She had respect from her field, and there was a growing acceptance for personal writing in the field as well.
"Between the Drafts" was published in CCC in February 1992 in an issue dedicated to "Personal and Innovative Writing." In his editor's column for this issue, Richard Gebhardt comments on "the field's growing interest in [the] personal essay and literary nonfiction," which was mirrored by the increasing number of submissions that "stress personal content and formal innovation" (9). To support his claim that CCC is open to diverse forms and discourses, Gebhardt lists and characterizes several of the less traditional pieces (whether they be humorous, personal, or multi-vocal) CCC has published and offers this collection of "personal and innovative writing" as further proof of the journal's flexibility and openness. What I wish to emphasize here is that in giving attention to both writer and context, it is possible to see more fully the ways that personal desires and experiences converge with disciplinary norms, making certain representations of self more likely than others.

The form of the personal essay allows Sommers to revise not only the selves she's formerly posited but also to revise the stories and experiences that have shaped her. Slovenly Peter—with his long fingernails and wild hair—is no longer a character to be despised, for at least he's not "bloodless." And by the end of the essay neither the heavily accented German voices nor their theoretical counterparts hold the same authority they once did. Instead, these other voices, other stories, come to enable the speaker and her present persona. As writer, Sommers partially determines how readers "hear" and interpret the other voices, but she does not hold all the authority. The inclusion of stories about Sommers's children, who serve the function of continuously questioning her
interpretations and authority, encourage the reader to consider his or her own place in this process of revision. As I read, I’m at once accepting and questioning Sommers’s interpretations, considering my own legacy as child, student, and scholar and the role revision must play in the selves I posit, trying to resist the urge to be either exclusively critical or accepting.

Sommers compares her dependence on other voices to listening to language records and depending on tour books—hiding behind Booth, as her father hid behind records, allowing her way of seeing to be determined by Foucault, Barthes, and Bartholomae, as her mother’s way of seeing was dependent on tour books. She writes, “I was stuck in a way of seeing: reproducing the thoughts of others, using them as my guides, letting the post-structuralist vocabulary give authority to my text” (28). The problem here, as I see it, is not with theory or guide books or language records, for as tools they can aid in learning, provide a new way of seeing. The problem is with being stuck in only one way of seeing, a position which makes “revision” impossible. Likewise, the problem is with “being drowned out by a chorus of authorial voices” (28); the solution to this problem is not digging deep inside and finding one’s authentic voice, a voice uninfluenced by others, as Sommers first seems to suggest, but rather learning to stop seeing the choice between personal and academic as an either/or proposition, learning instead, as Sommers writes, “to have a conversation with all the voices I embody” (28).
The power of this essay, to me, is Sommers's engagement with a variety of voices, and through that conversation a move toward revision, toward seeing differently. Between the drafts of the unrevised talk and the published essay, she revises her notion of what counts as sources, and re-sees the ways in which those sources can be used. Instead of using others to speak for her, Sommers hears "Bob Scholes' and David Bartholomae's voices telling [her] to answer them, to speak back to them, to use them and make them anew," to revise them (29). Such revision relies on an understanding that other voices enable her own, but she need not be subordinate to those voices. It's in that pull between submission and independence—for both writers and readers—that selves and authority are defined and created.

That pull continues in the essay when Sommers recounts a scene in which various selves are in tension. She writes,

I was so much under their [critical theorists'] influence that I remember standing in a parking lot of a supermarket, holding two heavy bags of groceries, talking with a colleague who was telling me about his teaching. Without any reference, except to locate my own authority somewhere else, I felt compelled to suggest to him that he read Foucault. My daughter Alexandra, waiting impatiently for me, eating chocolate while pounding on the hood of the car with her new black patent-leather party shoes, spoke with her own authority. (27)

The setting matters here, allowing readers to see the speaker in the essay as simultaneously both mother and colleague. Had the setting been Sommers's office at Harvard or Rutgers instead of the grocery store parking lot, Foucault might not seem out of place. That is, what is authoritative in one setting seems less so in another. In this scene, the reader doesn't get enough of the conversation between Sommers and her
colleague to know whether or not the Foucault recommendation is appropriate. Instead, the setting and the speaker's identification with the child lead to the interpretation that the reference was unnecessary. The presence of the child reminds the speaker that she, too, "had bumped on cars, eaten Hershey Bars, worn party shoes without straps, never read Foucault, and knew, nevertheless, what to say on most occasions" (27). Of course, Alexandra probably could not have offered the colleague anything more than the speaker does (save a bite of her chocolate bar); she simply serves as a reminder that authority can be located in more than one place. The question, for me, is: where does the speaker wish to locate her authority in this essay? She worries over not having enough confidence in her own ideas (28). But where do those ideas come from? They seem to come, for Sommers, from moments of discontinuity, from some place between "home and work, between being personal and being authoritative" (29). Between, perhaps, Foucault and Alexandra.

Sommers writes from this space between and observes, "What happens between drafts seems to be one of the great secrets of our profession" (28). Something has to happen, she argues, "or else we are stuck doing mop and broom work, the janitorial work of polishing, cleaning, and fixing what is and always has been" (28). And simply cleaning up is not revision. In the case of "Between the Drafts," revision, for Sommers, takes place in the shower, a personal space free from colleagues, children, or books. But, even in this space, the speaker is not free from the voices of others. It is in the shower that the speaker revises, through an imagined conversation, the grocery store parking lot
experience with her colleague. Sommers recalls her colleague’s disdain when she “began to pay homage to Foucault” and interprets, “He had his own sources a-plenty that nourished him,” and among those sources were his own teaching stories (28). In this revised, imagined conversation, the speaker refrains from interjecting the names of theorists and simply listens. And then she tells stories of her own—her father not trusting his native voice, her mother reading from guidebooks, her own difficulty revising—the same stories rendered in “Between the Drafts.” Within the scene, the telling of these stories in the imagined conversation helps Sommers realize that she can use these stories as evidence in saying what she must about revision.

It is this imagined conversation that gives the speaker the authority to converse with the many voices she embodies and to attempt to avoid the either/or choice of being academic or personal—to allow instead for ambiguity and uncertainty. This move to seeing a variety of experiences as sources helps the speaker bring her life and writing together. As reader, using only the context of the essay, I cannot pinpoint what it is that allows Sommers to make this choice, to find within herself the authority to do so. I don’t know where that authority comes from. Sommers writes, “The voices I embody encourage me to show up as a writer and to bring the courage of my own authority into my classroom” (29). Is there something about the particular voices she embodies that allows for such a choice? Are the voices the speaker embodies more encouraging than the ones other people embody? (From the stories she tells, that seems not to be the case.) The answer seems to lie, instead, in the way the speaker views and uses her sources.
Through her own authoritative renderings, she transforms another’s authority into her own and seeks to provide students with the resources to do the same. Although Sommers doesn’t say so, I would argue that these resources are those of the essayist: the ability to select and order and render scenes in such a way that one’s own interpretation of experience is foremost; facility in both exposition and narration; and the capacity to recognize the ways tone shapes ethos and the ways ethos can lead to identification.

Sommers devotes several paragraphs to discussions of teaching academic and personal writing in ways that help students “find new ways to write scholarly essays that are exploratory, thoughtful, and reflective” (30). She discusses, too, the resistance of some colleagues who “fear that if we don’t control what students learn, don’t teach them to write as scholars write, we aren’t doing our job and some great red-legged scissor-man will cut off our thumbs” (30). This statement is not only a criticism of the either/or propositions that lead to authoritarian control over the genres that get taught to students, but also an acknowledgment of the ways fear of the ambiguous, uncertain, and uncontrollable can lead to such authoritarian control. This reference to the “great red-legged scissor-man” serves at least two functions. First, it recalls Sommers’s childhood fear as expressed in the beginning of the essay, a fear seemingly lessened through the writing of “Between the Drafts.” More interestingly, though, it places critics of exploratory, thoughtful, and reflective writing (i.e. the personal essay) in the position of the fearful, childish, thumb-sucker. In contrast, for Sommers, teaching students to bring their life and their writing together is one way of allowing students to take some control.
After these observations on teaching, Sommers concludes her essay by providing another line of white space and returning to a story from her own family, one that highlights her point that stories used as evidence are also open to revision, to new ways of seeing. She tells of her children scuffling over a wishbone and her attempt to re-interpret the tearful outcome: “On whose authority is it that the short end can’t get her wish? Why can’t both of you, the long and the short ends, get your wishes?” (30). Sommers acknowledges that her interpretation serves her own needs, but it’s an interpretation—an imposed way of seeing—her children will not accept:

They will have to revise my self-serving story about compromise, just as they will have to revise the other stories I tell them. Between the drafts, as they get outside my authority, they too will have to question, and begin to see for themselves their own complicated legacy, their own trail of authority. (31).

As reader, I’m put in the position of the child, rethinking the stories I’ve been told on Sommers’s authority, wondering about the others in these stories, what purposes they might have had. Why, for instance, might a father read Struwwelpeter to his child? Only to induce obedience? What other temporary needs might Sommers’s father have been serving? I look back to the two copies of Struwwelpeter before me, one in German, the other translated by Mark Twain. The edition translated by Twain includes an introduction written in 1934 by his daughter, Clara Clemens. Clemens recounts her father’s own identification with some of the characters and the “impious spirit of contrariness in the verses” (np). She writes, “He could sympathize with Kaspar, who wouldn’t take his soup, because Father did not care for German soup, either” (np), and she recounts her own childhood responses to the rhymes: near tears and laughter.
These two responses—near tears and laughter—make me think of Sommers, who has a *Struwwelpeter* figure in her office at Harvard, slovenly Peter with his messy hair and long fingernails. In our interview, Sommers tells me that after delivering “Between the Drafts” at CCCC, a group of women came up to tell her that they too had *Struwwelpeter* read to them as children. She smiles when she tells this story, pleased by the response. *Struwwelpeter*, once a frightening lesson in the consequences of disobedience, is now a point of identification between Sommers and her readers, and in the course of the essay, the lesson of *Struwwelpeter* has been revised too: blind obedience to conventions has its own dangers; the stories we are told, and those we tell, can be reinterpreted.

Any act of reading, including the close reading I present in this chapter, involves reinterpretation, for—as “I Stand Here Writing” illustrates—the sense that can be made out of sources depends on who is interacting with those sources and what experiences, purposes, and expectations she brings to the text.

**Reading Helmers/Reading Sommers**

There are, of course, interpretations of “Between the Drafts” that differ markedly from my own. Because of its award-winning status, “Between the Drafts” has gained currency in composition studies and occupies a central place in discussions of the place of the personal essay in this field. One reading, illustrative of one way the form has been critiqued and dismissed, comes from Marguerite Helmers’s *Writing Students*:
Composition Testimonials and Representations of Students. The overall argument of Writing Students is that efforts within composition studies “to characterize an Other have relied on the unreflective acceptance of topoi which serve to advance the wish fulfillment plot of testimonials” in the interest of practitioners and at the expense of students (148).

The purpose of her final chapter, “Angels in the Architecture,” is to “look at the master narratives that define the field, its goals, and its ethos” (119). In her final chapter, Helmers discusses composition’s relation to feminism and cultural criticism and argues, “Compositionists have recently returned to writing personal articles, which read like confessional discourses; thus compositionists find themselves riding in the wake of a nationwide urge to confess addictions and inadequacies” (119). I’ll admit (confess?) at the outset that the implicit link between personal writing and confessional discourse is, for me, not persuasive. In fact, it is reminiscent of gendered critiques leveled against Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton in the 1960s, the kinds of critiques that are based on personal response but not supported by detailed readings of the texts to which they claim to respond.3 Such critiques serve the purpose of questioning the literary and academic value of a work, but they do little to help readers understand the work itself.

Helmers makes the link between confessional discourse and personal writing most explicitly in her section “The Rhetoric of Recovery,” the section in which she uses “Between the Drafts” as an example. Helmers first defines Sommers’s essay and then places it within the context of the discipline. She writes:

“Between the Drafts” is [Sommers’s] attempt to return to an originary experience, a self-expressive reflection on the nature and practice of scholarship. This
originary experience eludes her, however, and the article reflects the dichotomy evident in the profession: the conflict between personal and academic writing, the conflict between androcentrism and feminism. That Sommers was rewarded for her return to the personal suggests that the profession wishes to validate this personalized, autobiographical ethos. (144)

What Helmers doesn’t say in this definition of Sommers’s essay is that Sommers is trying to move beyond the dichotomy between personal and academic, seeking instead to argue—through both form and content—that personal and academic stances inform each other. Interestingly, Sommers deals with the same subjects and issues in her more traditionally academic articles that she does in her personal essays. Both “Between the Drafts” and “Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers” deal with revision. In both of these pieces, as well as in “I Stand Here Writing,” Sommers is concerned with the recursive shaping of thought by language. Both “The Language of Coats” and “Responding to Student Writing” (the latter published sixteen years before the former) deal with both revision and teacher response to student texts. And just as Sommers was interested in ways of approaching sources in “I Stand Here Writing,” the same concern was a focus of her 2000 CCCC presentation, “Something More, Something Deeper: The Undergraduate Writing Experience,” and her 2001 presentation, “Learning to Write within a Discipline,” both based on her longitudinal study of undergraduate writing at Harvard. Sommers, in fact, has been “rewarded” not only for her “personalized, autobiographical” work but also for her more traditionally academic research. That is, perhaps it is not simply an autobiographical ethos that the profession
“wishes to validate” but rather the kind of work that speaks to pressing concerns of the profession: revision, use of sources, establishing authority.

While Sommers does use personal experience as evidence, she does not eschew argument; in fact, part of the argument of “Between the Drafts” is that one should not have to make a choice between the two. Helmers, in contrast, implies that an either/or choice is necessary, questioning whether composition studies can recognize alternate forms of narrative and professional discourse, asking, “In a field that derives much of its disciplinary self-definition from classical theories of argument, is the denial of argument possible?” (143). This question assumes that alternate forms of professional discourse (like Sommers’s use of the personal essay) deny argument when, in fact, they don’t. They simply make their arguments in different ways. Helmers’s language, her use of terms such as “originary experience” and “self-expressive,” indicates her identification of Sommers’s writing with a stereotypical version of expressivism, an identification she affirms when she concludes, “Sommers’s article is a natural outgrowth of the feminist and expressionist movements” (144). While Sommers’s essay may, indeed, be an outgrowth of feminism, the version of feminism Helmers portrays in this chapter—a feminism whose “theories rely on an essentialized—and sentimentalized—conception of what it means to be a woman and woman writer” (141)—does not account for the complexity and multiplicity of feminist theory.

The more damning identification, however, comes later in the same paragraph when Helmers links Sommers’s writing to talk shows: “. . . her writing is representative
of her age, a time in which television programs like ‘Geraldo’ and ‘Oprah’ encourage public confession and an open airing of troubled relationships” (144). Helmers dismisses the academic significance of “Between the Drafts” and worries what it means for the profession “that the CCCC applauded Sommers for being confessional” (145). What Helmers means by “confessional” remains unclear (although she does mention that “in an era when we have learned to trace our shortcomings and neuroses backward, she discusses her relationship with her parents” [144]). Instead of clarifying her terms of dismissal and discussing their relationship to Sommers’s essay in detail, Helmers goes on to link feminism, expressivism, talkshows, self-help books, and personal writing:

This new urge to be personal is the result of an infusion of feminist philosophy into academia, which revived the latent claim to expressive writing that had long been a favored mode in instruction. Yet the resurgence of interest in personal writing comes at a time when self-help books proliferate on the mass market, when daytime talk shows devote hours to stories of marital infidelity, alcohol and drug abuse, obsessive shopping, and marriages to Elvis, the testimony of average people (practitioners of everyday existence) who feel they have experienced something worth sharing. Spouting maxims of survival like the guests on “Oprah,” composition has become codependent. The story told about composition is a story of victimization, of powerless practitioners struggling in a hierarchy over which they have no control. Like the victims of the various ‘diseases’ that create codependency, compositionists revel in their victimization, in having survived. (145)

I’ve read and tried to write about this passage dozens of times, trying to quell my own name-calling impulse. In earlier drafts, I characterize this passage as “reductionistic,” “simplistic,” “offensive,” even “ridiculous,” criticizing Helmers’s use of the verb “spout” (in relation to the guests on Oprah and the implicit connection to those who write personal essays), her tone, and the cause/effect relationship she sets up: that feminist
philosophy leads to expressive/personal writing (which is then conflated with self-help books and talk shows devoted to “stories of marital infidelity, alcohol and drug abuse, obsessive shopping, and marriages to Elvis”), and that such writing indicates victimization and co-dependency.

Between the drafts, however, I’ve tried to reign myself in, for if Sommers can be compared to a guest on Oprah, Helmers might very well compare me to a guest on Jerry Springer. And what would that comparison say about the ethos of composition studies? Less welcome than supposed expressions of powerlessness are those of anger and frustration.

In some ways, Helmers is right. There are personal essays in which the writer appears to be victim. Like Helmers, I have read pieces in which the subjects appear as “powerless practitioners struggling in a hierarchy over which they have no control” (145). Autobiography and personal writing, however, do not necessitate a subject position of victimization. There is no necessary connection between feminist theory, self-help, powerlessness, and victimization. There are, in fact, a multitude of subject positions available to writers. Rhetorical positioning, even within established genres, is complex. I would argue that Helmers’s critique applies to a certain kind of positioning—not to an entire form or genre.

Regardless of what position one takes on the intellectual value of talk shows and self-help books, the foundation of Helmers’s argument concerning the place of personal writing in composition studies (weak links between personal essays and popular...
psychology) is at best shaky: "I would argue, then, that the return to personal discourse in composition is related to both the reliance on theory and to the tradition of self-help, a tradition not valued in intellectual circles. The personal, then, is at root an anti-intellectual gesture, unlikely to generate either renewed intellectualism or disciplinary respectability" (148). Unlikely, yes, to produce disciplinary respectability when portrayed in unrespectable ways. In this totalizing move—a suggestion that all personal writing is the same—Helmers seeks to persuade her audience of her position by identifying the personal narratives of compositionists with "a tradition not valued in intellectual circles" (148). She chooses to read personal discourse as related to the self-help tradition (and to see self-help as having no intellectual value); she makes the link in order to question its intellectual value—and to assert her own at the expense of Sommers and others. Helmers’s mode of argumentation demonstrates yet another kind of rhetorical positioning, one that is, at times, greatly valued in academic circles, but not, I would argue (from my own now uncomfortable rhetorical position), necessarily intellectually superior to Sommers’s positioning.

The discussion of the place of personal narrative in composition studies is undermined in "The Rhetoric of Recovery" by the lack of serious consideration given to actual texts from composition studies. The only text Helmers quotes more than one or two lines from in "The Rhetoric of Recovery" section is Wendy Kaminer’s I’m Dysfunctional, You’re Dysfunctional, a text from outside composition studies, one used exclusively to make metaphorical connections between personal narrative and popular
psychology. Helmers quotes from Kaminer’s text in order to link Dr. Joyce Brothers with Peter Elbow. She then links Nancy Sommers and M. Scott Peck: “Like Nancy Sommers’s complaint that she had ‘swallowed the whole [post-structuralist, Foucauldian] flake,’ recovery experts bemoan that authorities ‘do our thinking for us’” [M. Scott Peck quoted in Kaminer 131] (147). It’s not simply that Helmers links personal narratives with popular psychology that disturbs me. I’ve watched my share of Oprah and once read a book by Peck and generally find both interesting, though I don’t see a necessary or even compelling connection to most personal essays. What I do find troubling, however, is that Helmers makes these links in order to dismiss both personal writing and the self-help tradition; the verbs she uses to characterize the discourses she seeks to devalue are not accidental. Those individuals Helmers quotes supposedly “lament” and “bemoan”; they are bound together by their “position of weakness”; they use expressionist writing. Like the narratives she critiques, Helmers offers a rendering, an interpretation, and in that rendering privileges a particular kind of “academic” self to the exclusion of others.

Available Selves: Audience Response to “The Language of Coats”

Although I’ve been critical of the way Helmers attacks “Between the Drafts” and the way she represents personal writing in composition studies, I do value her attempt in the larger context of Writing Students to discuss form within a disciplinary setting, for the forms writers choose are certainly influenced by disciplinary position as well as a number of other factors. And that writing, in turn, affects the discipline. It’s worth asking: what
kinds of selves and voices does the field of composition and rhetoric sanction? If we can agree that selves are shaped by form and context, what selves are available to essayists in composition and rhetoric? Though I argue that the form of the essay allows for a broad range of selves, I don’t deny the shaping force of rhetorical constraints such as audience expectations, decorum, demands of the form, editors, purpose. Although it’s acceptable in academic forums to discuss revision, the ways representations of selves are revised between drafts and before publication are often invisible. Some representations of self may be read as more “authentic” than others, but all selves are constructed, shaped by form, context, and response.

The representation of self most evident in the form of the personal essay is reflective, conversational, appearing sincere. The personal essay allows for a range of selves (ironic, hopeful, cranky, melancholy, and so on), yet the self forwarded must reinforce the writer’s purpose and message, and also be appropriate to audience and context. Sommers wrote “The Language of Coats” initially as a talk for the 1997 CCCC meeting in Phoenix.

“The Language of Coats” deals with work—its definition and value—and how teachers and administrators determine success. The first third of the essay reads as a tribute to a father and his life’s work. Sommers is a character in the narrative, a child sitting at the dinner table with her father, sorting tickets from the coats sold that day. Her mother and brother are minor characters, present at the periphery, the mother baking apple kuchen or cleaning, the brother counting baseball cards. But her father is the
central character, given a history (survivor of Hitler, an immigrant from Europe, now living in Terre Haute, Indiana) and temperament (under control in front of his customers but prone to bewildering rage when he did not “make his day” by selling the appropriate number of coats). The first eight paragraphs highlight the importance of work to this father and to his daughter, who also worked in the family store, extending her “knowledge of the vocabulary of coats into a study of the store’s entire language—its diction and syntax, its style and structure—until [she] knew even idioms and metaphors” (422). Sommers concludes the first third of the essay by acknowledging “the intimacy of work, its romance and its danger, its myths and rituals, its pulsating pleasures and disappointments, the ways in which work can feed a family and color a life” (422). With this graceful sentence she makes a transition from memories of childhood to her present work as a teacher and administrator, from her father as central character to a focus on herself and her own life’s work.

The language of coats—size, label, texture, pattern—functions as an extended metaphor for the writer’s reflection on her own work and whether and how she (and by extension other writing teachers and administrators) “makes her day.” She defines her own work as exhilarating and exhausting, describing deadlines and meetings and conferences in a forty-nine word sentence so long that it would be difficult to read aloud in one breath:

Now, at age forty-five, I have defined my life’s work as a teacher and director of a writing program, work which is simultaneously exhilarating and exhausting, days folding one into the next, overlapping deadlines, breathless dashes from meeting to memo, from conference to classroom, each day an unfinished draft. (422)
Sommers’s use of lists and embedded clauses in this sentence highlights the length of the speaker’s work day. When she does return home, she sits at the kitchen table to work, but no one is baking kuchen, no one is counting tickets; the speaker has no way of knowing whether she’s made her day (423). Unlike her father’s day which can be evaluated by the ticket count, the speaker’s day is “an unfinished draft” (422).

At the center of this essay (quite literally—in paragraph eleven of a twenty paragraph essay) is an argument about the language of teaching, about revision, about how teachers can know whether they’ve been successful in teaching students to write. The speaker searches for a language that can “show students how to consider what is not on the page, a new frame for their ideas, a real revision—another way of being or creating a structure that may not—should not—already exist as a pattern for dozens of other essays” (423). She does not find this language in generic teacher comments, the vocabulary that sizes and labels students’ writing, only considering what they have written. Likewise, she has no language for determining her own success, or lack thereof, in teaching. “The Language of Coats” is itself an essay, a “try” at finding a language to discuss success in teaching writing.

In the second third of the essay, Sommers surveys the language teachers and universities use to define “success” in teaching writing. Teacher definitions are often shaped, Sommers argues, by the theories most current during their training; thus, some teachers might define success by a notion of student empowerment, or Sommers, trained in the 1970s, might point to teaching process over product (424). She does not devalue
such stories and their accompanying vocabularies but rather shows such theories as an alternative to the limited ways universities have of measuring success through student evaluations and numerical averages. The point Sommers is making, however, is that a dean’s measure of whether a teacher has made her day will be different than the teacher’s own measure. But the question remains: what is the personal, even subjective, measure of success in teaching students to write? At the end of exhausting days, months, and years, how does a teacher know whether the effort was worth it?

Sommers answers these questions at the end of her essay by utilizing the language of coats. The student’s ideas and capacities are fabric, and the teacher’s work—one definition of success—is “assisting in the very design and cutting and stitching” until the student’s essay “can go out into the world like a new coat, something useful, beautiful, made to last” (425). Sommers’s desire is to teach her students “how to design for themselves garments that fit” (425). In the final sentence of the essay—a ninety-word labyrinthine of lists, qualifications, and images—Sommers fashions her own design for making her day: showing “students how to be designers, not customers,” how to value and love their work, to have a personal stake in the language they use (425). Perhaps, too, writing “The Language of Coats” provides a way for the writer to make her day, to design a definition of success that fits, one that marks the difference between defining and measuring, between the process of designing and evaluating.

Toward the end of the essay, Sommers mentions her father again—retired, his family business bought by a corporation, he is now an ESL tutor. The colored tickets that
marked Sommers’s childhood are now printed codes on white, scanned by computer. The seven words the writer quotes from her father are telling, “The coat business has lost its soul” (425). She does not gloss the quotation, but in the context of a discussion of measures and evaluations, I get the sense that when the teaching of writing becomes a business focused more on assessment than change—when teachers, writers, and students forget what is personally at stake in the language they claim—the soul of the work will be lost.

I was in the audience in 1997 when Sommers presented “The Language of Coats” at CCCC. A large crowd gathered on a warm Phoenix afternoon in March to listen to the panel “Intimate Practices: Personal Dimensions of Writing Instruction.” Anne Ruggles Gere chaired. In a spacious ballroom at the Hyatt, the panelists on stage several feet above the audience, there was really nothing especially “intimate” about the setting. But I remember Sommers’s performance well: articulate, poised, lyrical. I remember the surge of hope I felt at the end of her reading. The essay was beautiful; the audience applauded. A year later, “The Language of Coats” was published in College English, and when I read it while sitting in a library in southeast Alaska, I felt that same hope, a desire to write, to teach writing, to care about language.

In November of 1997, when I asked Sommers what kinds of responses she’s received from readers and reviewers, she focused on positive responses rather than
critiques. In the following email excerpt, she explains one way audience has influenced her work:

I delivered “Between the Drafts,” “I Stand Here Writing,” and “The Language of Coats” as talks at CCCC. The audience reaction was wonderful, extended applause, tons of people requesting copies of the talk, and plenty of affirmation. It was the enthusiastic response of my audience which gave me the motivation to revise these talks into essays and submit them for publication. (email 11/25/97)

The response didn’t surprise me. I’d been an enthusiastic audience member, one who recognized the ways Sommers was shaping her discipline through sharing her personal essay as a speech at a major conference, and how her discipline was shaping her through the platform to speak and a positive response to her work.

Yet there are ways selves and voices are shaped even before presentation in a public forum. In telling the story of how she came to write “The Language of Coats,” Sommers recounts a time of utter exhaustion. On a late sabbatical, having taken over as director of the expository writing program at Harvard (after seven years as associate director), and exhausted by the demands of teaching and research, Sommers wrote a draft of her talk for the 1997 CCCC meeting. She showed the first draft to good friend, who responded, “You can’t get up there and say those words! You sound depressed! People are gonna commit you!” (Interview 12/99). Sommers’s own account of the self represented in that early draft of “The Language of Coats” reflects the negativity her friend couldn’t accept:

I was so exhausted, and I didn’t like the work anymore. I couldn’t imagine why anyone taught writing; I couldn’t see any value in the work. I didn’t articulate this professionally, but that’s what was inside me because I was exhausted, and when you’re exhausted you can’t understand why. (Interview 12/99)
Although I agree with Thomas Recchio’s claims that the essay “provides a means through which our personal sense of and commitment to our professional lives can find expression in a public space” and that “our texts can begin more openly to reflect our sense of self at the time of writing” (224), it’s also true that certain representations of self are not acceptable to particular audiences in certain contexts.

The CCCC audience for which Sommers was writing (though early drafts may be written more for oneself than they are for others), for instance, was made up of teachers and scholars of writing, many of whom have dedicated their lives and best energies to such work and come to the conference to find the strength to last another year. This audience, though not monolithic—and probably a good number of them exhausted themselves—would not likely appreciate having the value of their work questioned, especially by someone with the position, stature, and reputation of Nancy Sommers. (She’s already won two Braddock awards, and her work has been consistently published by the discipline’s most respected journals, CCC and College English.) That is, there are different expectations for the public figure Nancy Sommers than there might be for the tired mother, teacher, or administrator you’d share a conversation with over coffee. True, the essay is a conversational form, but even conversations are constrained by context and audience, as well as by the image of self one wants to present.

While there are traces of the exhausted self still evident in the early parts of “The Language of Coats,” by the end of the essay, that self—and the tone of the essay—appears hopeful. The description of the speaker’s work changes from “days
folding one into the next, overlapping deadlines, breathless dashes from meeting to memo, from conference to classroom, . . . [a]rriving home, always late, unburdening, deflating my body with long, ponderous sighs” to a focus on teaching students “how to value, maybe even love the work they do as writers” and to help them know “the beauty, elasticity, and power of language” (422, 425). The presentation of a hopeful self does not cancel out the exhaustion or the reality of long days, but ending with a focus on the beauty and power of language leaves the reader energized by the possibility and promise of writing and teaching rather than deflated by the ponderous sighs of fatigue.

Sommers argues that through revision she was able to purge the negativity, not only from the draft, but also from herself. She explains,

This piece had so many incarnations and different drafts and different directions it could have taken, but I think why I love the piece is because, through the writing, I came back to why I love to write, why I love to teach writing, and why I love directing the writing program. So I made myself authentic again by writing the piece. (Interview 12/99)

I would argue that the question of “authenticity” is not one of Sommers “finding her true self.” Rather, through writing, she was able to believe what she teaches. In our interview Sommers explained that because of exhaustion, she hadn’t been doing much writing, which disconnected her from her work. As she puts it, “The hardest part about teaching writing is when you don’t write yourself. You just feel bogus. You might as well be selling band-aids or something because there’s so little connection between that work you’re doing and the thing that it represents” (Interview 12/99). Through revising,
Sommers was able to come to a more acceptable version of self—more acceptable to others and to herself.

Critical Selves

No matter how they feel about the personal essay as form, scholars get personal all the time. The stances scholars take—the selves they posit—in relation to their material not only reveal much about identification, but those stances also affect the kinds of knowledge that can be produced. That is, the methods scholars use to deal with texts affect what can be seen, and if scholars are not reflexive about the methods they choose, little change can be made. Helmers can critique Sommers's work, and I can critique Helmers's work, but these forms of critique limit what can be known. So much depends on purpose.

In between the drafts of this chapter, I've had to consider my own readings and the selves I've posited, the pull to define my own authority. After reading my earliest draft, my department chair—who does not identify favorably with "Between the Drafts"—commented that I was doing exactly what Sommers critiques, over-quotating and depending on the voices of others (ironically, Sommers's voice in particular) to say what I wanted to say. He said I wasn't critical enough of Sommers's essay or the text of my interviews with her. When I went back to revise, I saw the ways I'd glossed over parts of "Between the Drafts" that made me uncomfortable, concentrating mostly on the parts with which I favorably identified. I realized the ways in which I can be a relentlessly
selective reader, borrowing what I like, ignoring or transforming what I don’t. What I didn’t tell my department chair is that I don’t see affirming quoting as a kind of negative dependence—and here’s where my position differs from both his and Sommers: I see an affirming use of quotations as a way of valuing the work of others and of demonstrating the ways that it informs, even encourages, my own. I see critical value in highlighting both connections and divergences. Even after revision, my reading of Sommers’s work remains more positive than my department chair’s reading; we identify differently with the same text.

A variety of factors might account for such difference: gender, age, field, training, interests, position, stage of career. He is a tenured department chair with a good deal of authority in the field of narrative theory, editor of a journal, professor of the dissertation seminar I was taking. It’s not, he tells me, that he necessarily disagrees with Sommers; it’s just that in the context of his own reading and experience, she says nothing new to him. I distrust the fetishization of the “new” and look for writers, scholars, and teachers who practice the theories they embrace. My own position as a relatively young, female graduate student, a long-time writer and teacher of the personal essay, someone interested in the ways writing can revise lives, and someone concerned on many levels with issues of authority, undoubtedly shapes my reading and identification. So focused on the work of teaching writing—and on writing every day myself, surrounded by sources and authorities, even things I’ve “heard before” can be newly applied in different contexts: in the classes I teach, the research and writing I undertake, and even my own understanding
of vocation. For example, in the term paper writing classroom where I asked my students to read "I Stand Here Writing," Sommers's essay opened up an animated conversation on multiple possibilities for using sources. "The Language of Coats" helps me think, at the end of inevitably exhausting days, about how I define success in my own work. Alternately, it reminds me of the work that shaped my own family: my father spends his days doing auto body; he is perhaps the hardest working person I know, and it was his body-breaking work that helped me through college, made it possible for me to "make my day" through words.

After reading my second draft, a different reader—one who appreciates Helmers's *Writing Students*—commented that I was too hard on Helmers. She said I didn't give enough time to Helmers's argument as a whole. My colleague, a graduate student who was writing a dissertation on the ways teacher identity shapes responses to student texts, identified with other aspects of Helmers's argument. So, I reread Helmers text, and in revising my draft attempted to pay attention to the tone of my own critique. My critique is still more harsh than my colleague reader would like. With each revision, I've attempted not only to negotiate my own authority with that of my readers, but also to allow the voices of others to help me re-see my own work and the selves I'd posited.

It is true that the selves I posit in relation to Helmers's and Sommers's texts differ. In part, that difference is a result of reader position, but it is also a response to the selves posited in Helmers's and Sommers's texts, and those selves, the voices identifiable in their texts, are to some extent generic, shaped by form. That is, it would be ironic for
Helmers to make her point that personal discourse is "an anti-intellectual gesture" (148) by using the personal essay. Her understanding of the requirements for renewed intellectualism and disciplinary respectability preclude her use of a form she seems to disdain within the context of composition studies. The self she posits is undeniably "critical," and that self affects the kind of response elicited by her text. I have little desire to be reflective or to tell a narrative in response to her text, for her argument makes such a response suspect, even if I strongly disagree with that argument. In the context of Helmers's identification of personal with anti-intellectual, as reader, I seek to meet her on her own rhetorical ground. That ground, however, is no less personal. I recognize in both Helmers's and my own critique traces of sarcasm and dismissal, a kind of one-up(wo)manship. This presentation of self does not strike me as any more "intellectual" than the self Sommers posits in her texts or the self I posit in my readings of Sommers's essays. "Personal" cannot simply be equated with autobiographical—or in Helmers's terms with "powerlessness"; "intellectual" need not be overly critical.

The voices that inhabit us—as readers, writers, and teachers—can be both enabling and disabling. Critical voices, such as Helmers's, often seem disabling to me because I often don't care for the ethos projected in such texts, and dislike even more the part of my self I project in response. At the same time, those are the voices that prompt me to read and think more carefully; they prompt me to answer back. And the voices I hear in Sommers's essays help enable the answers I give and revise. As reader, I identify more with selves I read as reflective, essayistic selves that appear open to revision. Such
representations of self make me work to understand, rather than to react. Tell me a story; I'll tell one in return. The ways readers identify with form shapes response, and what readers identify form with shapes response too.

Through reading and writing, I have learned that my voice is not separate from all those that surround and inhabit me. I identify with much of what I read and hope, to some extent, others will identify with what I write. Multiple identifications (both conscious and unconscious) shape all writing; through writing and reading personal essays, both writers and readers can explore the multiple axes of identification through which selves are constituted, knowledge is produced, and change can be made. The past, the present, parents, children, colleagues, reading, response—these are all sources that shape the selves writers, teachers, and scholars posit in texts and in classrooms and at home. I see nothing anti-intellectual or confessional about a process of reflection that enables further writing and reading and new understandings of selves and others.

Like Nancy Sommers, Lynn Z. Bloom draws from a variety of sources to reflect on and forward arguments regarding issues of interest to teachers of writing. In chapter four, “The Essay’s Double Voice: Reading Gaps and the Art of Intimacy in the Essays of Lynn Z. Bloom,” I continue my investigation of the ways selves and voices are shaped and elicited in and through texts and disciplinary contexts. I then move to a focus on form, structure, and style and how they can be used to guide readers—sometimes explicitly, other times implicitly. I show the significance of both kinds of guidance as I analyze the ways Bloom encodes reading strategies in form.
NOTES

1. I use the term “speaker” throughout to distinguish the main character in the essay (Sommers) from the writer (also Sommers). This choice, a convention used mainly by critics writing about poetry, is meant to highlight the distinction between writer and textual persona. When writing about autobiography, the relationship between writer and textual persona is complicated, but I still find it important to distinguish between the two. When I use “Sommers,” I am referring to her as writer.

2. Sommers consistently spells the title *Struwpeter* while both of the books I found spell it *Struwwelpeter*, hence the inconsistency in my spelling. Despite differences in names and spelling—in her version, it’s Augustus who doesn’t eat his soup, in mine Kasper; her thumb-sucker is Conrad, mine Konrad—it is the same text.

3. In her dissertation “Private Detail, Public Spectacle: Sylvia Plath’s and Anne Sexton’s Confessional Poetics and the Politics of Reception,” Janet Badia provides detailed readings of reviews of Plath’s and Sexton’s poetry. Charles Gullans’ 1966 review of Sexton’s *Live or Die* provides an illustration of the kind of dismissive moves such critics make. He writes, “The immediacy and terror of her problem are painful; the personal character of the confessional detail is embarrassing; and the tone of hysterical melodrama which pervades most of the writing is finally irritating. Either this is the poetry of a monstrous self-indulgence, in which case it is despicable; or it is documentation of neurosis, in which case to pretend to speak of it as literature is simply silly.”

4. Another connection: this practice of affirming quotation is similar to one Wendy Bishop explains in a reflection on her use of quotations in “Learning Our Own Ways to Situate Feminist and Composition Studies in the English Department.” She writes, “I use the voices of others to find my voice. . . . The many citations in this essay are part of my intentional collage and call to (self) action” (*Teaching Lives* 120). She writes about a practice of mindful reading, of “going out of my way to find thinkers and theorists who felt right, who welcomed me, who helped me look under the surface of things, beyond appearance” (120). Try this: make a collage of quotations that have influenced your thinking on a particular subject. Ask your students to do the same. I’m betting you’ll learn a lot about yourself and students by considering the variety of sources you/they draw from. Re-read Tillie Olsen’s *Silences*. Consider the process of selection and ordering.
CHAPTER 4

THE ESSAY’S DOUBLE VOICE: READING GAPS AND THE ART OF INTIMACY IN THE ESSAYS OF LYNN Z. BLOOM

“Once the germ of an essay hits the paper, or the screen, it becomes simultaneously both more intimate, that is, more revealing, and more detached—that is, more artistically controlled. The raw experience is refined in the telling for the double and very different audiences that Gertrude Stein acknowledged when she said, ‘I write for myself and strangers’” (110).

—Lynn Z. Bloom, Composition Studies as a Creative Art

I have beside my computer two yellowed three-by-five cards. Written on each is a quotation from Jeanette Winterson’s Art Objects. Nearly every time I write, I read Winterson’s words: “The best work speaks intimately to you even though it has been consciously made to speak intimately to thousands of others” (105). The quotation comes from “The Semiotics of Sex,” in which Winterson warns against writers who believe the sincerity of feeling is enough, those who depend on the supposed power of “raw” experience without an understanding of the ways feeling must give way to form. The quotation on my other three-by-five card follows: “It is through the form, not in spite of, or accidental to it, that the most powerful emotions are let loose over the greatest number of people” (106). The power of a piece of writing does not rest in whether or not it is autobiographical; the power of reading does not rest in the reader’s ability to trace a work
backwards autobiographically from finished text to “raw experience.” There is, after all, nothing especially “raw” about experience anyway. As Joan Scott has observed, “Experience is at once always already an interpretation and is in need of interpretation” (69). The writing of experience in the personal essay is an interpretation for and within a particular context; reading is an interpretation of an interpretation informed by all the reader brings to the text. And there are gaps everywhere.

Chris Anderson, in his analysis of Joan Didion’s essays, describes what he calls “the rhetoric of gaps, the withholding of interpretation and commentary at every level of language” (Style as Argument 136). Writers utilize gaps in a variety of ways: consciously leaving information out, deliberately omitting transitional words and phrases, using white space and sections, choosing not to elaborate on or interpret scenes and details, masking details, and mixing genres. I contend that Lynn Z. Bloom, through such formal and stylistic choices, creates gaps that function as a form of rhetorical invitation, heightening reader participation in the process of making meaning. In my readings of “Teaching College English as a Woman,” “American Autobiography and the Politics of Genre,” and “Writing Blue Berries: Once More to My Summer Vacation,” I analyze the meaningful gaps and absences that shape interpretation, argue that the form, structure, and style Bloom uses help guide the reader—sometimes explicitly, other times implicitly, and show the significance of both kinds of guidance. In doing so, I focus not only on what is written (content) but also, and importantly, on how reading strategies can be encoded in forms.
In my analysis of “Teaching College English as a Woman,” I consider the stylistic and formal means through which Bloom constructs authority and voice. Continuing the investigation of “voice” that I began in the previous chapter, I explore how Bloom’s essay speaks to the various and complex ways voices are shaped and elicited within the context of institutions and disciplines. For both “American Autobiography and the Politics of Genre” and “Writing Blue Berries: Once More to My Summer Vacation,” Bloom employs a mixed genre. In both essays, she makes use of sections and italics, writing in a double voice and alternating between narration and exposition. In my analysis of “American Autobiography and the Politics of Genre,” I take the reader through the process of my own reading as I negotiate the transitions between the separate narrative and expository sections of this essay. Through this reading, I demonstrate the ways meaning carries or is made by readers across gaps, in the presence of absence. In my analysis of “Writing Blue Berries: Once More to My Summer Vacation,” I consider another kind of gap: the writer’s choice not to elaborate on or interpret scenes and details. I explore the artistic conventions that can lead to a powerful rhetoric and aesthetics of reading, and I suggest an approach to reading the personal essay that takes style and form as its focus. I then turn to the pedagogical implications suggested by the reading approach I advocate and model, arguing for classroom uses of the personal essay that promote its analytic, intellectual, and aesthetic value.
Stories in Context: The Voice of Teaching College English as a Woman

In the prologue to "Teaching College English as a Woman," Bloom explains that it took her thirty years "to find the voice, the place in the profession, to tell the stories that follow" (818). She tells the same stories in an alternate version of this essay, "Hearing Our Own Voices: Life-saving Stories," published the same year as "Teaching College English as a Woman," which has been reprinted in at least three other books as well. The tone of the essay comes across as straightforward and sincere; the piece seems like a matter-of-fact telling of the story of Bloom's career, a chronological recounting with an even mix of example and interpretation. The stories themselves interest me for what they say about English departments in general and the places women have historically occupied within those departments, especially in relation to composition studies.

Bloom's essay illustrates through narrative the claims Sue Ellen Holbrook makes in her 1991 article "Women's Work: the Feminizing of Composition." Holbrook delineates a pattern in division of labor based on social concepts of gender and provides statistics that show the general outline of Bloom's early teaching experience as common to many women who teach writing.¹ From her own experience, Bloom observes, "Editing textbooks didn't count" (819); "Freshman composition didn't count"; "My work in nonfiction didn't count"; "Ultimately, I didn't count either" (820). Such stories are not rare.²

Readers of Bloom's essay, too, have commented on the common or generic nature of the experiences about which she writes. In "Collaboration and the Pedagogy of
Disclosure,” David Bleich writes, “Lynn Z. Bloom’s account of her professional struggles in the midst of rearing children and being responsive to her husband’s professional development is meant, in part, to teach and inform others that their comparable struggles are generic and thus susceptible of collective solution” (46). And Bloom herself has received letters from readers who identify strongly with her narrative; one reader, in fact, identified so strongly that she wanted to include parts of “Teaching College English as a Woman” in her own autobiography. Such responses exemplify Jeanette Winterson’s point that the “best work speaks intimately to you even though it has been consciously made to speak intimately to thousands of others” (105). That is, what readers respond to is not just the experience itself but to the way it is rendered through narrative conventions.

Though she doesn’t reflect on the process of making the work of life into a work of art within the essay, Bloom’s other writings and talks make it clear that she is very conscious of that process. In her 2000 CCCC talk “That Way Be Monsters: Myths and Bugaboos About Teaching Personal Writing,” Bloom opens with a personal narrative and then deconstructs it, observing, “What you know about my life from hearing this introduction will be—if I’ve kept control over the narrative—far less than you can tell about my art.” As a reader of “Teaching College English as a Woman,” I get that same sense of knowing more about Bloom’s art than her life by following the narrative clues she provides. In both versions of the essay, “Teaching College English as a Woman” and “Hearing Our Own Voices: Life-saving Stories,” Bloom sets “the stories that follow” in
the language of fairytale—"Once upon a time"—drawing attention to the generic
narrative form she's using, sometimes even addressing readers ("dear reader") in the
telling. Bloom is both narrator and character in her own essay. At the end of the
prologue to "Teaching College English as a Woman," she writes, "Call me Lynn" (818),
and her prologue to "Hearing Our Own Voices" hints at the familiarity even strangers
seem to feel when they ask her at conferences whether or not they should have children
(89).

Bloom is, perhaps, the only well-developed character in the essay, one of the few
with a name. There are other characters, who are often faceless, though not voiceless: "a
gang of four equal opportunity harassers, all men, all tenured faculty of long standing, all
eager to stifle my voice. Their voices, loud and long, dominated all department and
committee meetings" (822). The places, too, are generic; in the essay, Bloom teaches at
"Urban State University" and "Southern Ivy," places that make her feel invisible.
Through giving these places generic names, she renders them largely invisible as well,
giving only enough details to support her points. Bloom says she masked the details "not
to protect the guilty but because the experiences were so common" and, she adds, "alas,
they still are" (interview 12/99). She says she could only write the piece after the issues
had become an abstraction—"an issue more of principle than of my own life" (interview
12/99). Interestingly, despite the masked specifics, "Teaching College English as a
Woman" was the piece that prompted NCTE to take out libel insurance because, Bloom
explains, "they were afraid of getting sued" (interview 12/99).³ Before taking out the
policy, NCTE did not ask her to change anything—“not a word,” Bloom says—but their action may reveal something about the power of story.

The power of a story—and the voice that tells it—rests not only in the story itself but also in the context within which it is told. This essay, in its two published forms, speaks volumes on the various and complex ways voices are shaped and elicited within the context of institutions and disciplines. The two forums for the essay’s near simultaneous initial publication mark different contexts within which Bloom’s “voice” is heard: on the margins and in the center of disciplinary conversations. “Hearing Our Own Voices” was published in Sheryl Fontaine and Susan Hunter’s edited collection *Writing Ourselves Into the Story: Unheard Voices from Composition Studies*. In their introduction to the book, “Taking the Risk to Be Heard,” Fontaine and Hunter explain their purpose in editing the collection:

Our goal has been to create an occasion for teachers and researchers, like ourselves, who do not feel included in the story of our evolving discipline, to voice unheard perspectives—expressing views that are not represented in the prevailing central descriptions of the field, calling critical attention to issues that have been overlooked, writing in genres often deserted for the sake of academic discourse. (10)

The impetus for writing “Hearing Our Own Voices” came for Bloom from a session on academic storytelling she facilitated as director of a WPA summer institute at Portland State. Bloom explains that the initial session went on late into the night and that participants “were so charged up because they were telling stories about their experiences that they’d never dared to tell anybody” and that they wanted to do it again the next night (interview 12/99). “So we did,” Bloom recalls; “we sat around the old campfire telling
more academic stories. And then I decided: okay, I’ve got stories to tell. I didn’t say a whole lot because those people just had plenty of their own. But I said . . . this is a story that taps into, gets people where they live” (interview 12/99). It was Bloom’s authority, as director of the WPA summer institute, that allowed many “unheard voices” to be heard in the context of the conference and that opened the possibility for telling her own stories in writing.

Ironically, perhaps, the alternate, but hardly changed, version of “Hearing Our Own Voices” (“Teaching College English as a Woman”) was published in one of the field’s most respected academic journals, College English, a place where Bloom’s story was certainly heard. The only parts of “Hearing Our Own Voices” that differ from “Teaching College English as a Woman” are the prologue (focused in the former version on how having children might affect women’s careers and in the latter on Bloom’s dedication to and love for the field she’s chosen), two additional paragraphs in “Hearing Our Own Voices” on the concept of voice, and a five sentence coda in “Teaching College English as a Woman” in which Bloom reaffirms her life-long commitment to teaching English. While it is more developed in “Hearing Our Own Voices,” the theme of “voice,” is present in both versions of the essay.

The concept of voice has been of particular interest to those concerned with gender issues since the late 1970s and most notably in the 1980s (especially with the influence of the widely read In a Different Voice and Women’s Ways of Knowing), and interest in “voice” and its relation to gender and racial identity continues today. For
example, Gloria Anzaldúa powerfully claims her own sense of voice, a voice that is multiple and constitutive of identity:

I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent’s tongue—my woman’s voice, my sexual voice, my poet’s voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence. (*Borderlands / La Frontera* 59)

The concept of voice and its relation to language and tradition does not determine Anzaldúa’s identity (she also points to images, emotions, and “food and certain smells” that connect her to her homeland and her sense of self [61]), but her identity—national, racial, cultural, sexual, personal, and artistic—is deeply and synergistically connected to language in a refusal to “tame a wild tongue.”

Anzaldúa’s nuanced conception of voice needs to be better considered in composition studies where controversies over “voice” still abound. Peter Elbow’s 1994 edited collection *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing* deals with some of the debates surrounding voice and its relation to identity and writing. Elbow contends that whether one sees voice as constitutive of a real speaker or as created through language, “The experience of feeling that one’s habitual voice is considered illegitimate makes you want to insist that a piece of one’s identity is at stake in one’s textual voice” (xx). This claim seems to be true for Bloom and resonates with her use of “voice” within “Hearing Our Own Voices” and “Teaching College English as a Woman.”

One persistent criticism of claims to “voice” in writing is the contention that use of the term tends to reinforce a particular model of a coherent or unchanging self and an equally narrow theory of identity. Lester Faigley, for example, worries that teachers tend
to read students’ autobiographical writing as “honest,” as having “authentic voice,” and that such readings fail to take into account the ways selves are “discursively produced and discursively bound” (“Judging Writing, Judging Selves” 118). I understand Faigley’s concern, but as I’ve argued in both the introduction to this dissertation and in the previous chapter, instead of seeing autobiographical writing as suspect because of the ways it has sometimes been read, writers, readers, and teachers have the opportunity to use the personal essay and other forms of autobiographical writing to investigate the multiple ways selves and voices are discursively produced and bound. A closer look at the two versions of Bloom’s personal essay, which is largely about voice, provides one such opportunity.⁶

I understand the criticisms of “voice” as a concept and can recognize the dangers of an apolitical imperative to speak or “find your authentic voice.” By examining the concept of voice and how it functions in Bloom’s autobiographical writing, I am not asserting the *apriori* value of voice in and of itself. For neither writing nor speaking expresses a self already there. But I am interested in considering the political effects, what the metaphor of “voice” allows both speakers and writers to do (again, both for good and for ill—for while Bloom values what her own voice allows her to do, she is also aware of the negative ramifications of voice). In spite of its difficult history, I don’t want to discard the metaphor of voice in writing or in pedagogy, for to do so would require diminishing a whole body of work (much of it by women and people of color who find the concept both personally and politically valuable).⁷ Instead of abandoning the
metaphor altogether, teachers and scholars might benefit from asking questions of its use: for what purpose is it used? in what context? in whose interests? with what consequences?

As Toby Fulwiler observes, “our voices are determined largely outside ourselves, according to where we live and work, what we read, and with whom we interact” ("Looking and Listening for My Voice" 157). In “Hearing Our Own Voices” and “Teaching College English as a Woman,” Bloom primarily discusses voice in relation to institutions (in her case, mainly academic institutions) and her discipline. In the prologue to “Teaching College English as a Woman,” she writes, “It has taken me thirty years to find the voice, the place in the profession, to tell the stories that follow” (818). That the appositive, “the place in the profession,” occupies a central place in this early sentence is significant; this phrase modifies “voice,” showing the close relation between the speaker’s voice and her place within her profession.

The tie between voice and place within the profession continues throughout the essay, demonstrating the complicated ways environment, prestige, tradition, and sheer will both constrain and empower. Voice functions on a dual level in the essay, as a component of character development and a theme of the narrative, as well as an element of writing to be analyzed rhetorically. Richly metaphorical, an analysis of voice in Bloom’s essay allows readers to consider who is speaking and through what conventions, who is listening, and what is being heard. These are some of the questions I bring to Bloom’s text: what is the writer communicating (message) and how does she do so
through form and style? In what ways do her use of form and style create a recognizable or distinctive voice in writing? What inferences can readers draw from the writer's syntax, diction, structure, strategies, and stance? What relations of power are evident? And what is the relation between voice and authority in the text? Within the scope of this chapter, I can exhaust none of these questions fully; however, a rhetorical reading informed by these questions will provide a view of the ways voice functions as both term and concept within the essay and in the larger disciplinary context. Such a reading counters more reductive approaches to voice and autobiographical writing that conflate self and text in static ways and, in doing so, fail to recognize the rhetorical significance of the writer's use (and reader's apprehension) of form and style.

"Teaching College English as a Woman" and "Hearing Our Own Voices: Life-saving Stories" deal with some of the multiple ways voice can be shaped. In the first section "My Job as a Ventriloquist's Dummy," Bloom marks education as a powerful shaping factor when she writes, "In the course of my very fine education at one of our nation's very finest universities [...] I learned, among other things, that only real professors had the right to say what they thought" (819). She doesn't say conclusively what marks a "real" professor but does give an example of one who gave her a C on a paper in which she argued that Milton's Eve had redeeming virtues; he said to Bloom, "you simply can't say that" (819). And she abstracts from her own professors' examples that her "job as teacher was to present the material in a neutral manner, even-handedly citing a range of Prominent Male Critics"—to speak in her "ventriloquist's dummy
voice” (819). Largely, her education—and the voice shaped by it—was a product of the
time, the 1950s, when, Bloom writes, “there were no concepts, no language, to say what I,
as a nascent feminist critic wanted to say” (819). Over thirty years later, writing about
such experiences, “voice” becomes one of the concepts through which Bloom says what
she wants to say.

Section two, “On the Floor with the Kitty Litter,” shows voice as connected to
position. One of Bloom’s textbooks “so scorned during [her] first part-time job” got her
a full-time job; she comments, “This welcoming work enabled me to find my voice”
(820). As a full-time faculty member, she felt the freedom to express her opinions about
the reading and writing, to argue and joke with students, but such freedom was short-
lived when her husband accepted a job in another city and she “resigned to move” (821).
Bloom transitions into discussing her series of part-time jobs with no benefits, no
privileges, not even a library card by observing, “My voice was reduced to a whisper”
(821). She uses her one basement office, shared with a teaching assistant and that
woman’s cat, to symbolize her status at her three part-time jobs:

> It was in a building across campus from the English Department, where no one
could see us. It was under a stairwell, so we couldn’t stand up. It had no
windows, so we couldn’t see out, but it did have a Satanic poster on the
wall—shades of the underworld. The TA had the desk, so I got to sit on the floor
next to the kitty litter. I stayed there, in the redolent dark, for a full thirty seconds.
(821)

Although it took Bloom thirty years to find the voice and place in the profession to tell
this story and others, it took just thirty seconds for her to realize her “place” would not be
on the floor with the kitty litter. While voice, in Bloom’s terms, may be connected to
position—found or reduced to a whisper by situation and the treatment of others, it need not be fully constrained by circumstance. She writes, “Then my voice returned, inside my head this time. Its message was powerful and clear, ‘If I ever do this again, I deserve what I get’” (821). And she got out, choosing instead a two-thousand-mile-a-week commute to a “real” job that helped give her, she writes, “a grownup voice,” one recognized in the profession at large (822).

Recognition in one’s discipline, however, does not necessarily translate into acceptance within one’s department, as Bloom illustrates in her third section, “Poison in the Public Ivy.” In this section, she details the relation between her own voice and the voices of others in her department. She recounts her welcome on the first day of classes when a colleague blocked the door and sneered, “We expected to get a beginning Assistant Professor and wash him out after three years,” and, “Instead we got you, and you’ll probably get tenure” (822). She speaks back in a firm voice, “You bet” (822). But the firmness of that moment is less evident in much of this section, which outlines Bloom’s lack of voice in the departmental power structure. She tells of “equal opportunity harassers,” voices loud and long, eager to stifle her voice—and describes a review meant to get rid of her position, a review she was not consulted about and was forbidden to discuss. When a friendly colleague wanted to resign from the review committee, Bloom urged him to stay on, realizing that a “borrowed voice was better than none” (823). She received tenure and left immediately for a job as professor and
department chair of another university, this new position giving her “the authority to have an emphatic voice” (824).

Bloom further develops the theme of voice in “Hearing Our Own Voices: Life Saving Stories” by including two paragraphs that are not in “Teaching College English as a Woman.” These additional paragraphs come at the beginning of the final section, “Escaping the Rapist.” Unlike other parts of the essay that focus more exclusively on her experience and allow the reader to abstract a message, these two paragraphs more directly address advice to readers, using the plural pronoun “we”:

We learn as we listen. We find our own voices gradually; we can lose them in the twinkling of an eye. When laryngitis strikes, we need others to speak on our behalf. But when we do have a voice, we need also to speak for others. Even more important, we need to use our newfound voices to enable the marginal, the isolated, minorities and women, men too, to speak for themselves. As administrators and as teachers, we fulfill roles that require voices, powerful and emphatic. (“Hearing Our Own Voices” 98)

Bloom uses her experience to illustrate these claims, listing ways in which she was able to encourage others to “speak up for what they wanted, the very things for which I’d been silenced in the past” (99). Within this paragraph about voice, the declarative advice is presumably advice Bloom gave as department chair from her position of authority: “Of course you should write that article, that book. Don’t worry about whether the subject is in or out of fashion, do it for its own sake, for your sake, for the fun of it. Query publishers; apply for grant support; there’s nothing to lose” (99). And Bloom’s list of advice goes on, using the second person (“You want a full-time job? Better plan to finish your Ph.D.” [99]), seeming to address the reader as well. In this way, the voice of the
essay is speaking to and for nameless characters in the narrative but also to readers, many of whom need such advice and encouragement, demonstrating a kind of double-voicing.

The final personal story functions in this double-voiced way, as well, allowing Bloom to speak as both teacher and writer, to both students and readers. Bloom tells a story she told one of her classes in the context of teaching Joyce Carol Oates’s “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” The class debated whether the story is about love or violence. Bloom’s interpretation becomes clear as she tells a story of her own about being attacked in Stockholm:

“As I turned, naked, to step into the shower, a man wearing a bright-blue track suit and blue running shoes shoved aside the curtain of a shower stall across the aisle and headed toward me. I began to scream in impeccable English, ‘Get out! You’re in the women’s shower.’ He kept on coming. My voice had the wrong words, the wrong language.” (100)

Quotations within quotations; story within story. Differing contexts; differing roles.

Story as argument, as illustration. This story is about violence, about voice, about listening.

The “voices, all mine, took over. One voice could say nothing at all for terror. . . . Another voice reasoned ‘I need to get my clothes and get out.’ ‘But to get my clothes I’ll have to go past him twice.’ ‘I should just get out.’ . . . Then the angry message came, etched in adrenaline, ‘I didn’t ask for this, I don’t deserve it, and I’m not going to take it.’” (101)

As reader, I occupy differing positions in relation to this story. Part of me is simply drawn in by the narrative, heart beating for the character in the story, wanting her to escape. On another level, I read the story within the context of Bloom’s class, for what function the story served in that context. She tells the story to reinforce the students’
interpretation that Oates’s story is about violence. In Bloom’s telling, the bell rings, and she says, “‘You’re right. Oates’s story is about violence, not love’” (101). And the students, “whose effervescent conversation usually bubbled out into the corridor,” file out in silence (101). I think about stories used to forward a particular interpretation, stories that silence, for good or ill. The story gave the class closure. Who knows what the students were thinking. My mind fills with questions: What kind of silence was it? Were they thinking about Oates’s story? Did any go away believing the story was about love? What connection did the students see between their teacher’s story and Oates’s, between their teacher’s story and their own stories? These are questions the narrative doesn’t allow me to answer.

But Bloom’s purpose within the essay is not to forward a practice of telling stories in order to silence conversation or to give a class closure. She tells another story about the unforeseen effect of her classroom telling. Class was on a Thursday, and the following Tuesday a student came to Bloom’s office with a story of her own about an attempted attack:

“When I went into the kitchen, a man stepped out from behind the curtain, grabbed me from behind, and shoved a gasoline-soaked rag over my face. As he began to wrestle with me, he ripped my shirt trying to throw me down. Suddenly I heard your voice in my head, repeating the words you’d said in class, ‘I didn’t ask for this, I don’t deserve it, and I’m not going to take it.’ I ran, screaming, into the street and flagged a passing policeman. You saved my life.” (101-02).

The last line of “Hearing Our Own Voices,” is Bloom’s response to the student: “‘No,’ I said, ‘you saved your own life’” (102). In some ways, the ending of the essay puzzles me; I expect Bloom to circle back, to make some sense of this example within the context
of her career. She doesn’t. I make provisional sense of it on my own: the words of others can become one’s own, used in the context of one’s own story. A borrowed voice is better than none. Experience is generic. I think of some of the other contexts in which one might use the line, “I didn’t ask for this, I don’t deserve it, and I’m not going to take it” (101). On the floor with the kitty litter comes to mind first. The line—with all its negatives: didn’t, don’t, not—enables one to run away from violence, from a bad situation. But I don’t want the essay to end on that note, life-saving though it may be. I want, instead, to hear the speaker’s voice of affirmation, to know why she chooses, despite the difficulties, to embrace her profession anew.

In the prologue to “Teaching College English as a Woman,” Bloom focuses on love and commitment: “And so I tell you what it has been like to teach college English as a woman, to become a member of the profession I now and ever embrace anew” (818). What are the words, the voices, that allow one to stay, to embrace anew, to love? Often those voices come through stories, fairytale or otherwise. Despite the “once upon a time” opening to the stories told in “Teaching College English as a Woman” and “Hearing Our Own Voices: Life-saving Stories,” there’s no life-saving prince kiss or a simple “happily ever after.” Bloom as character is no Disney Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, or Cinderella. If she resembles any fairytale character, it might be Elizabeth in the children’s book The Paper Bag Princess by Robert N. Munsch. In the story, after a dragon smashes Elizabeth’s castle, burns off her clothes, and carries off her prince, Elizabeth puts on a paper bag and chases down the dragon, outsmarting him with intellect.
and wit (and downright good rhetoric). She rescues her prince, who looks at her with disdain, saying, "Elizabeth, you are a mess! You smell like ashes, your hair is all tangled and you are wearing a dirty old paper bag. Come back when you are dressed like a real princess" (np). Elizabeth snaps back, "Your clothes are really pretty and your hair is very neat. You look like a real prince, but you are a bum" (np), and she skips off into the sunset, arms outstretched, still in her paper bag and ash-coated hair, free. Bloom, like princess Elizabeth, will, no doubt, encounter other dragons and other bums, but perhaps the affirming part of "Teaching College English as a Woman" is the hope that she will have the experience and foresight to recognize them—and the voice to call for both personal and collective change.

**Ethos: The Aesthetics of Self and Voice**

The contemporary debate in composition studies over the relationship between a real speaker and words on the page, over whether voice is constitutive of self or whether it is role played and created through language, echoes a traditional debate in rhetoric over whether *ethos* is a real virtue in a real person or if it is simply the appearance of virtue. Throughout time, rhetoricians have been interested in whether we hear an actual author or speaker through his or her language—or just hear an adopted role. Plato and Aristotle held differing positions, Plato believing a speaker’s virtue was prerequisite to effective speaking and Aristotle seeing rhetoric as a strategic art with the appearance of goodness as sufficient. Years ago, when I was taking a course in the history of rhetoric and we
shared weekly response papers in class, one of my fellow students came up to me and said, “You come across sounding a lot nicer in your response papers than the rest of us, but I know it’s just your ethos.” I didn’t know then, and still don’t know today, exactly what my colleague meant by this comment or what her understanding of ethos was, but I answered, “I see ethos as a habitual way of being and believe that we become, eventually, the person we behave as.”

In terms of ethos and voice, I do not argue either for prerequisite virtue or strategic art, but simply that my response to much of Bloom’s writing—and to her as a person—has been to reflect on her consistently straightforward and friendly and gracious ethos. Like she does in “Teaching College English as a Woman,” Bloom is quick in other forums as well to affirm her dedication to and love for her work as teacher, writer, and scholar, and the way she tells stories makes me believe her. She offers her introduction to Composition Studies as a Creative Art as “an apologia, not an apology, full of delight at the opportunity to share with colleagues across the country—teachers, students, administrators—this labor of a lifetime, a labor of love” (9-10). When reading such statements, sentiments reflected in much of Bloom’s writing, I can’t help but think about ethos: the way she comes across as likeable, knowledgeable, fun, and smart. I can’t help but think of Aristotle’s common places—and about the ways age, position, tone, experience, and good will affect and effect persuasion.

My first interview with Bloom took place in her kitchen. She was making a basil and walnut pesto pasta salad in anticipation of the last class of the semester, which would
be meeting at her house that afternoon. With a tone similar to the one she takes in
“Teaching College English as a Woman,” Bloom tells me about the readers’ reports sent
to her from James Raymond, the editor of College English when she first sent the essay
in: “One reviewer said, ‘This looks totally innovative; College English has never
published anything like it; it’s really interesting and you should publish it.’ The other
reviewer said, ‘So the woman had some problems, big deal. Who cares?’” She’s not, I
can tell, looking for pity or praise. She shrugs, breaks off the tough part of the asparagus,
and says, “That’s the answer that any person writing can get: ‘So what? Who cares?’”

Reading Gaps: Assembling “American Autobiography and the Politics of Genre”

As Bloom argues in “American Autobiography and the Politics of Genre,”
political concerns strongly affect what stories get told, and how, who tells them, and who
listens. As I’ve emphasized in my analysis of “Teaching College English as a Woman,”
voice is not individual or solitary, never apolitical or disinterested. And the question
“Who cares?” is more than a rhetorical one that begs a negative (“not me”) answer. For
writers need readers to care, not necessarily about them as individuals (though some
probably desire this kind of care as well) but about the issues and concerns implicit in the
stories they tell. These issues and concerns are not separate from the form in which they
are embodied.

In “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach,” Wolfgang Iser
considers the two poles of a literary work—the artistic and aesthetic—and describes the

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activity of reading as a “kaleidoscope of perspectives, preintentions, recollections” (215), a process of selection and of filling in gaps. According to Iser, whenever readers bridge gaps, communication begins; he writes that “gaps function as a kind of pivot on which the whole text-reader relationship revolves” (The Act of Reading 169). These gaps and absences induce readers to perform an active interpretive role, and such reader participation involves acts of negotiation with the cues in the text and what the reader brings to the text. Both the subject matter of Bloom’s essay—the politics of autobiography—and her use of alternating narrative and expository sections make it an especially interesting piece for analysis in terms of gaps.

“American Autobiography and the Politics of Genre” was first published in Genre and Writing: Issues, Arguments, Alternatives (edited by Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom, 1997) and then re-printed in a revised and expanded form in Bloom’s collection of essays Composition Studies as a Creative Art. Uniting her form and content—that is, writing about the genre of autobiography, in part, autobiographically—Bloom opens several of the more traditionally academic sections of “American Autobiography and the Politics of Genre” with bits of personal information, marked by italics. The italic sections account for scarcely one quarter of the essay. I count thirty-seven italic sentences; nearly half of those are fragments. I wonder how and why it is that in the three years since I first read this piece, it is the italics that have stayed in the forefront of my memory. I would have thought they occupied a more substantial part of the essay in terms of space. No matter how much literal space they occupy, however, those fragments play a central role in
terms of effect, providing a narrative context for the argument of the essay. The separate
generic parts of this piece—the autobiographical fragments and the argument concerning
the political nature of autobiography—do not depend on each other for meaning. It is
possible to read the italic sections as a relatively complete narrative in and of itself and to
read the rest of the piece as a coherent argument. That Bloom chooses, however, to write
in a double voice—that she puts both parts together, even as she separates them in terms
of paragraph and type-face—makes a considerable difference in my reading. As I read, I
reflect on Bloom’s argument that political concerns strongly affect what stories get told,
and how, who tells them, and who listens; simultaneously, I seek to apply that argument
to her autobiographical fragments, even as my image of the “I” in this piece affects my
reading of the argument.

In the first italic section, Bloom establishes a scene: she and others are at the
university swimming pool. She is new to the campus, and all the bodies are “blurred,
streaked figures in or out of water” (151). In regular print, Bloom theorizes. Holding the
image of Bloom in a bathing suit in my mind, I move on to the section that follows: “That
the personal is political is never truer than in relation to autobiography” (151). And
Bloom continues, “Political concerns strongly influence who writes (or tells) their stories,
as well as the themes and masterplots of these stories” (151). Then, without commenting
directly on her own story or her own political concerns, she slides into the next italic: “I
try to avert my glance, but it is hard to ignore the presence of people who share the
shower day after day, naked” (151). While still considering the political implications of
autobiography, I find myself, with Bloom, back at the pool. There is a gap—both literal and figurative—between the regular type and italics, between the politics of autobiography and strangers sharing a shower.

In the absence of commentary on the relationship between these sections, the reader alone must make connections between autobiography, politics, and images of bodies and water. So early in the essay, I find it difficult to make those connections as a reader, but I still seek to fill the gap. I wonder if Bloom is implying that reading autobiography is akin to sharing a shower with strangers—that reading is analogous to seeing the intimate surface of another. This interpretation doesn’t fit, however, since in the shower, all the bodies are presumably naked and the seeing goes both ways. Unable to fill the gap satisfactorily, I puzzle instead over why Bloom tells this story and what its political implications might be, needing to read on to find an answer.

The next section, “Definitions,” contains no italic narrative. The absence surprises me, and I look ahead to the rest of the essay for a pattern. Before “Definitions,” Bloom sandwiches her theory between two short italic sections. In later parts of the essay, she opens sections with a paragraph in italics and devotes the rest to her argument. This latter pattern continues until the end where Bloom opens and closes the final section with italic paragraphs, mirroring the opening. In “Definitions,” Bloom makes a distinction between the ways autobiographies were defined before 1970 (“as the true story of a whole person’s life” [151]) and how they’ve been viewed and categorized—in all their multiplicity—since 1980. In her list of what constitutes autobiography since 1980,
Bloom includes "hybrid forms" and various "treatises in which the author's personal narrative is embedded" (152). While Bloom makes no comment on her own use of form, according to this latter definition, "Autobiography and the Politics of Genre" can be seen as autobiography as well.

The next italic bit—under the heading "Why Is Autobiography so Prominent Now?"—shows the speaker comparing her body to the bodies of others: "Fatter than me. Thinner. Breasts bigger than mine, they could scarcely be smaller" (152). The speaker seems to concentrate on difference, but the water in her rendering is "washing away makeup, hairdos, neutralizing skin color" (152), bringing back to mind the blurred and streaked figures with which Bloom opens the essay. Tattoos, scars, and body shape mark difference, but the women are made similar by and through the water. I wish to make some meaning of this section in the context of the argument of the essay. Again, I find myself viewing this narrative as a metaphor for reading autobiography—comparing one’s self and life to the subject of the writing, seeing differences and similarities, but Bloom’s focus still resists that reading and interpretation.

In this section, she does not focus on the politics of reading. Rather, the theoretical portion of the section is about "the current prominence of autobiography . . . [and] the legitimation of the genre by the impact of various contemporary political and social movements" (153). Bloom implies that certain autobiographies, certain stories, satisfy particular (and ever-changing) social needs, utilizing "masterplots that validate the movements that enabled [those writing autobiographies] to speak" (153). She comments
on the eclectic nature of present-day autobiography and how it has expanded beyond elitism; “common” people can now write about their lives. As I think about how her telling of the story of autobiography enables Bloom to speak as well, I am particularly aware of the gaps in Bloom’s text. She doesn’t reflect on what social needs her own story meets. That job is left to the reader, and surely different readers will fill in (or possibly ignore) this gap in differing ways. The absence is significant. The invitation to make connections between Bloom’s theory and her autobiographical fragments is implicit.

Because the fragments tell little early in the piece, I cannot ascertain what social needs Bloom’s autobiographical story meets, and I instead consider the politics of using a mixed genre. I focus less on the details of the narrative and think about the effects of including autobiographical details in an otherwise academic analysis. The juxtaposition of two distinct genres in the same essay (a double voice) functions as a dual reminder: autobiographical stories serve political purposes, and academic analyses are not separate from personal concerns. Even in the sections where she is not using the autobiographical “I,” I am aware of the speaker’s presence in the essay.

Under the next heading “Autobiography as a Genre of Political Empowerment,” Bloom writes of herself talking with the other women in the shower; they talk of planting tomatoes and sighting bluebirds, coyotes, a red fox. The rest of the section is about politics. She quotes Joan Didion: “listen to me, see it my way, change your mind.” Bloom’s interpretation: “Autobiography has remained a perennially popular genre among common readers, in part because it lets them look at life through others’ eyes, providing a
host of vicarious experiences, and models to marvel at, if not emulate. . .” (154-5). The reader becomes the woman in the shower. Through reading, it’s possible to see life partially through the writer’s eyes. Bloom claims, citing Elie Wiesel, “Every political autobiography is a form of witnessing” (155). Both Bloom and Wiesel refer to writing as witnessing, but within the context of listening and of seeing something in another way, reading can be seen as a form of witnessing as well. The word “witnessing” itself connotes dual meanings, allowing me to read in more than one way. Witnessing can be a form of evidence or testimony; it’s often a declaration of the survival of violence; it can be a first-hand account, but it can also simply be the act of observing, perhaps as a witness to another’s rendering.9 The politics of “witnessing” in either case are complex, mediated by language, editors, publishers, ethnographers, and the social conditions of production and reception. Bloom writes of the ways autobiography becomes not just one person’s story lived vicariously by another, but a form of social critique or a document of social protest—sometimes in the best interest of the subject, sometimes not. Reading as witnessing functions in a similar way, for social critique and protest require an audience, a witness. And there is always negotiation, interpretation, and mediation involved.

Bloom next moves to “The Politics of Teaching Autobiography.” The speaker’s relationship with the nameless people at the pool is growing. They talk now not just in the intimate space of the shower but between swimming laps. They talk about work, health care, “helping aged parents live, and die, with dignity” (156). She writes, “I tell people whose names I do not know things I have never told my own sister” (156). The
admission seems to go beyond her audience at the pool. I notice another gap, one that I fill with questions: Is she also telling her readers things she wouldn’t tell her sister? Where does that impulse, that desire, come from? What and whose needs does it serve? And, since this italic introduces a section on teaching, how does this admission play out in classrooms? I think about the classes I have taught and wonder how many of the autobiographies my students have read and written contain information the writer would not share with family members. I think of selves and strangers and the challenge of meeting the needs of various audiences. Writers and students are learning not only about themselves and others when they write and read autobiography but also about what it means to communicate with others as they receive and write and revise.

As I look back on Bloom’s essay, though—especially the autobiographical fragments, I’m struck by how little they really tell the reader about the speaker. The actual details she shares are not especially intimate, and while we know the topics the speaker converses about with her pool friends, ones that could be potentially intimate, we really don’t know what she thinks about work, health care, or dying. The admission itself—that the speaker tells nameless people things she has never told her sister—is more personal than anything she actually "tells" her reader. It’s not some form of "raw experience" that draws me in as reader; it’s that teetering balance Bloom sets up when she quotes Gertrude Stein on writing for self and strangers; it’s the tension of the mixed genres; it’s my own desire to read the commonplace Bloom opens with—"the personal is political" (151)—in a new way. As I read, I think about narrative control, about
persuasion, about what I want my writing students to consider when they write and read personal essays.

Bloom’s rendering of the reading experience in this section is strongly optimistic. She sees autobiography as having a great deal of power, as having the capacity to bring together readers and writers who share little political ground. Bloom writes:

- “Readers of all races must applaud Frederick Douglass’s declaration of freedom”;
- “Whether monocultural, bicultural, or multicultural, readers must share Maxine Hong Kingston’s painful introduction to American kindergarten”;
- “However patriotic, however sympathetic to federal policies, readers must sympathize with Sioux Zitkala-Sa’s critique”;
- “No matter what their health or linguistic preferences, readers must applaud Nancy Mairs’s feisty decision to label herself.” (156)

These proclamations come one right after another. As a reader of the texts Bloom refers to, I nod. I have applauded, shared, sympathized. As a teacher of these texts—and others like them, however, the “must” in Bloom’s proclamations strikes me as too strong. Many readers do not applaud, share, or sympathize. As teacher, I look to Bloom’s text for something more than the “musts”; I look for more reflection on the politics of reading and for some guidance on how to incorporate such texts into classrooms where politics conflict. Bloom writes of personal essays and chapters from autobiographies as “elegant, eloquent testaments of both personal witness and social reform” (157), but she does not deal with the complex ways they function in the often highly politicized classroom space.
I think of the time one of my students removed all copies of Richard Rodriguez’s “Late Victorians” from the reserve course packets because he was offended by the subject matter. I think of the time I taught Patricia Williams’ *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* to a large contingent of students who dismissed her as “crazy.” What happens in the classroom when the gaps between writer and reader experience are too large, when a difference of politics prevents readers from seeing such pieces as “elegant, eloquent testaments”? The “musts” in Bloom’s essay create a gap for me as reader, a gap between my own desire to identify with her interpretation of these autobiographies (for in my private reading, I share her interpretation) and my experience of teaching them. In teaching a diverse group of students, all of whom bring their own experiences and politics to their reading, the “musts” rarely hold.

Bloom’s piece does not directly answer the questions and concerns that I bring to her text, but she does imply that partial answers might lie in students writing their own autobiographical pieces in response to and as a way of analyzing other texts. She argues that autobiographical writing assignments enable students to learn what they themselves come to understand as they write and rewrite and rewrite: the innumerable versions in which a particular experience can be rendered; the relation of style to substance, style to self; the significance of emphasis, deemphasis, omissions, gaps, erasures; the difficulties, ethical, intellectual, and aesthetic, of dishonesty; the importance of each word, each syntactic structure, each punctuation mark, in every text; the critical rigor that undergirds writing well for an external audience; the necessity, aesthetic and personal, of rewriting. (158)
This list is not just for student writers. It can also be a guide for readers of personal essays, a reminder that there are many versions of the same story, that gaps are meaningful, and that style is significant in shaping response.

This list of what autobiographical assignments enable is a kind of mantra for Bloom; it shows up in several of her pieces. She writes in “Textual Terror, Textual Power: Teaching Literature Through Writing Literature” that this list (in a slightly different form) is what she tells her students every term; indeed, the list comes from her Advanced Composition syllabus and is woven into “Textual Terror.” The same list makes an appearance in “Writing Blue Berries: Once More to My Summer Vacation” and in her 2000 CCCC paper “That Way Be Monsters: Myths and Bugaboos About Teaching Personal Writing.” In the revision of “American Autobiography and the Politics of Genre,” however, the list drops out (perhaps because “Textual Terror, Textual Power” directly precedes “American Autobiography” in Bloom's collection). In place of the list, Bloom expands significantly, increasing the section on teaching autobiography in freshman composition from four paragraphs to eleven. In this expanded version, Bloom points to the problem of composition teachers asking students to discuss autobiography in complex and sophisticated ways but not translating what they know about autobiographical writing into expectations for student writing. Bloom writes: “Whatever knowledge of the genre these teachers have as critics of autobiography disappears in the composition classroom where, despite the many possibilities of autobiographical forms and subjects, such teachers equate student autobiographical writing with simplistic
personal narrative" (Composition Studies, 72). She draws attention to the gap between what teachers know about autobiography as a genre and how they sometimes apply—or do not apply—that knowledge to student texts.

Bloom closes her essay with an italic section describing the friendships that have grown between the women at the pool. They begin to share parts of themselves with each other; significantly, Bloom gives one of the swimmers copies of her books. Her writing is a part of herself, something that can be shared with friends at the pool, something being shared with readers through this essay. In the last line, Bloom merges theory and experience: "The community we have negotiated, interpreted, is the community we have become" (159). The "we" in this quotation is both a presence—the "we" of the pool community—and an absence, a gap, in that it implies the reader as well. Clearly, Bloom is writing here about her pool community, but this statement also applies to what has just taken place in reading her essay. The "we" can include both the once-strangers at the pool and the readers who remain strangers to the writer, for reading involves negotiations and interpretations and communities in the making too.

Getting a Feel for Form

As I've been arguing throughout this analysis, form and stylistic choices play an important role in shaping a reader's response to and interpretation of texts. Jeanette Winterson's words about the importance of form bear repeating: "It is through the form, not in spite of, or accidental to it, that the most powerful emotions are let loose over the
greatest number of people” (106). Although Winterson writes primarily about fiction, such reminders apply to other genres and forms, including scholarship. In October of 1996, *PMLA* published four views on the personal in scholarship. In his contribution to the discussion, “Against Subjectivity,” Michael Bérubé responds to those who level critiques of “self-indulgence,” “navel-gazing,” and “intellectual solipsism” against scholars who include autobiographical references in their work. Bérubé argues that “as long as the scholarship in question concerns humans and is written by humans, readers should at least entertain the possibility that nothing human should be alien to it” (1065). The problem comes, Bérubé argues, when readers “view the personal turn as license for reductive conflation of the scholar with the scholarship” (1066). Such conflation has taken place not only in literary criticism but also in composition studies.

David Bartholomae, in “Writing With Teachers”—his part of a frequently-quoted exchange with Peter Elbow on the place of personal writing in undergraduate writing courses—worries that creative nonfiction makes “an argument about what is real and what it means to inhabit the real” (68). He seems to believe that not only might *readers* come to conflate autobiographical writing with “the real” but that *writers* might too. Bartholomae writes, “I don’t want my students to celebrate what would then become the natural and inevitable details of their lives” (71). His solution, then, is not to teach creative nonfiction, which he sees as “a corrupt, if extraordinarily tempting genre” (71). My solution, though, is different: I advocate teaching creative nonfiction by giving attention to its stylistic and formal features, for in doing so, teachers can highlight the
process of selection and ordering, draw attention to the significance of gaps, and emphasize the value of reflexivity in both writing and response. In the following analysis of Bloom’s creative nonfiction essay “Writing Blue Berries: Once More to My Summer Vacation,” I provide such a reading and reflect, too, on its value for teaching.

The Structure of “Writing Blue Berries”

The first page of “Writing Blue Berries” is culled from Bloom’s other writings, offering a reminder of her theories of the essay. The list of what she wants students and writers to know, which will be familiar to those who have read “American Autobiography and the Politics of Genre” and some of Bloom’s other essays, provides a lens for reading “Writing Blue Berries” and for reading other autobiographical texts as well. The speaker is very much a teacher in the introduction, practicing her pedagogy by writing with students, reminding herself of the “truth and toughness” of the precepts she teaches, learning what to pass on to students and readers by the process of writing itself. In the rest of the opening, Bloom reflects specifically on the process of writing “Blue Berries,” explaining her purpose and the allusion to E. B. White’s “Once More to the Lake,” accounting for the central metaphors (blueberries and blackberries) that structure the essay, and acknowledging the difficult process of selection and ordering and of telling a story she did not fully understand even as she was writing (44-45).

Like “American Autobiography and the Politics of Genre,” “Writing Blue Berries: Once More to My Summer Vacation” is written in a double voice, indicated by type-face
shifts, but in the latter the italics signify exposition: Bloom’s direction to the readers, her reflection on her own writing, and what she culls from the experience of writing to pass on to others. She (or perhaps Writing on the Edge’s editor) reserves the standard typeface for her personal stories, reversing the pattern often recognizable in other texts where personal reflection is italicized.11

Bloom divides the narrative portion of this essay into three sections: she begins with Blue Berries, romantic reflections on her summers in Connecticut; then, in Blackberries, flashes back to painful childhood family memories of a summer in New Hampshire; she then returns to Blue Berries, cycling back to the romantic, the sweetness of canning berries with her husband and children. There is little overlap between the blueberry and blackberry sections. Although both sections are about family and summer in New England, the tone of the two sections is dramatically different, and the details provided shape contrasting perceptions.

Reading “Blue Berries,” A Summer Vacation

I first read “Writing Blue Berries” during the summer of 1999, just before traveling to New England to see my family. A few images stand out in my mind from that trip to New Hampshire: sitting with my nieces under the crab apple tree in my parents’ backyard, looking at a frog; riding on the back of my father’s motorcycle to the beach to watch fireworks; climbing Mt. Monadnock early on a Saturday morning and eating wild blueberries along the trail; jumping on a trampoline with two-year-old
Hannah. Hannah’s voice, young and lyrical, and her head of blonde curls are especially prominent in my memory. She came looking for me more than once on that visit and asked, “Auntie Melissa, do you want to trampoline with me?” These are the blueberry memories. Certainly, there are blackberries too: the stifling ninety-some degree heat, a broken down car, Hannah’s diaper rash, inevitable family tensions. Yet I hold onto the happy memories. A year after the visit, I talked with Hannah; when she came to the phone, she greeted me, “Well hello, my trampoline friend.”

Without the expository frame, “Writing Blue Berries” reads like many of the other creative nonfiction texts I read each week—full of concrete details, the presence of an observant speaker, a lyricism that shows careful attention to style. On summer mornings, the only time of the day cool enough for hot tea, I read for pleasure and for instruction, always attentive to the ways worlds and selves can be created through words. “Writing Blue Berries” is the kind of writing David Bartholomae calls “sentimental realism (the true story of what I think, feel, know and see)” (69); he says it’s “a way to celebrate individual vision, the detail of particular worlds” (“Writing With Teachers” 68). While I don’t much like the term “sentimental realism” or agree with his assessment of creative nonfiction as a “corrupt, if extraordinarily tempting genre” (71), I do see what he means about this writing providing a way to celebrate the detail of particular worlds. I see that capacity, though, as a benefit, not a liability, of the genre.

With thick detail, Bloom gives her readers a glimpse into two worlds in this essay: New England summers and family life, and she does so from more than one perspective.
Of course, as writer, the perspective is always the speaker's, but the speaker positions herself in differing ways in the piece. We see her as solitary blueberry picker, as neighbor, wife, mother, daughter, granddaughter, sister, grandmother, teacher, cook, and writer. The "true story of what I think, feel, know and see" that Bartholomae marks as central to creative nonfiction is not necessarily a monolithic "true" story that never changes; it's a story shaped by literary conventions for a particular purpose and effect. Bloom writes in her opening that she wanted "Writing Blue Berries" to be "a happy paper, the hardest kind to write because readers trust trauma and terror but can't look pleasure in the face" (44). She says she wanted to write like E. B. White and, in doing so, to teach her students strategies for writing as well. Likewise, through the act and process of writing, Bloom picks the best "berries" and preserves them, sharing with her favorite writer an understated nostalgia. E. B. White writes in "Once More to the Lake," "It seemed to me... that those times and those summers had been infinitely precious and worth saving. There had been jollity and peace and goodness" (536).

There is in both "Blue Berries" sections in Bloom's essay jollity, peace, and goodness. The details she selects and her renderings of them are soft, almost dream-like. Bloom opens the first Blue Berries section with an image of herself as solitary blueberry picker, wearing "a big-brimmed blue straw hat with a white ribbon" and heading to a place where "rows of shoulder-high bushes embrace a pond too small for waves; only the occasional frog splash disturbs its tranquil surface" (45). In this serene setting, the speaker tells time by the setting sun and relaxes "to the feel of the fruit, firm and smooth
like young human skin, spilling into my hands and the light-and-leaf patterns of the slowly setting sun glowing through the latticed twigs” (45). Alliteration, assonance, rhythm, simile. I’d be delighted if one of my poetry students came up with the line “the feel of the fruit, firm and smooth like young human skin”; it plays on so many senses: I can almost taste the sound. Is this what Bartholomae means by “corrupt” and “tempting”: that if an essay (my own or someone else’s) makes me want to run out to the blueberry patch or, worse yet, home to the idyllic family life I’m not sure I ever really had, then I haven’t learned enough about being a critical reader and writer?

In “Writing With Teachers,” Bartholomae doesn’t explain what he means by “tempting” and “corrupt,” but in an interview with John Boe (the editor who selected “Writing Blue Berries” for Writing on the Edge), Bartholomae says he wants to introduce students to doing a certain kind of intellectual work in the four years they’re in college that in a way has to do not with their priority but with their secondarity, that is, the way in which they are in relation to somebody else” (23). He seems to see this intellectual work as antithetical to the kind of work creative nonfiction allows. But in most of the creative nonfiction essays I read, the writer consistently reflects on her relation to others. Even when the speaker in “Writing Blue Berries” is out of sight under a blueberry bush, for example, she listens to the stories of others—sometimes talks with strangers, seeking to make connections. She listens to a mother whose son suffered from leukemia and thinks, without sharing, of her own son’s car accident and her husband’s scare with a diagnosed brain tumor that turned out to be a cyst. She simply listens, for,
she writes of the stranger, “This is her story” (46). Bloom’s stories do remain primary in
the essay, yet the work of writing personal essays well is no less intellectual, no less
concerned with the ways one is in relation to others, than any other kind of writing. In
fact, the work of writing personal essays always involves the “so what,” the push to make
what seems individual accessible, interesting, and thought-provoking to others.

Far from being a narrative only about herself, Bloom makes relationships—with
family, with place—central to “Writing Blue Berries.” And her narrative demonstrates,
too, an attention to audience. Whether she’s writing about essays, apples, or pie baking,
Bloom, as speaker, remains teacher. She embeds lessons in narrative: anticipating
sharing the experience of apple picking with her young grandson, she remembers to leave
fruit on lower branches—not just for her own grandson but for other children as well. In
a thick paragraph about baking pies with her husband, Bloom provides a narrative form of
her “Best Blueberry Pie” recipe, giving hints (“If the fruit is going to sit long enough for
the juice to run, I coat the inside of the baked pie shell with a mixture of four tablespoons
of cream cheese thinned to spreading consistency with a little milk.” [49]), even as she
tells a story. Others teach, as well, through Bloom’s narrative: one character, Vicki,
explains how to make low-sugar jam with Pemona’s Universal Pectin. In the expository
frame, Bloom abstracts “lessons” for her readers, providing lists of what she knows, what
she’s learning through writing, what she wants readers to understand. The narrative
portion is also pedagogical, but it requires a reader willing to listen and able to recognize
the ways even stories that celebrate the individual and local have implications beyond.
I'm not suggesting that one read Bloom's essay for the purpose of learning how to bake a blueberry pie or how to make low sugar jam (though I do have Bloom's "Best Blueberry Pie" recipe and look forward to trying it out this summer). I am advocating, however, as W. Ross Winterowd does in "Rediscovering the Essay," ways of reading the essay that value its stylistic and cohesive range—understanding the power of particulars, appreciating lyric effect, and investigating its potential for encouraging reflexive and thoughtful writing and response.

A writer's conscious selection of particulars and a reader's awareness of the inevitability of absences and gaps can make both writers and readers attentive to rhetorical choices and their effects. In the opening expository reflection, Bloom makes readers aware of her conscious selection. She asks herself, "What ordinary event could serve as a focal point for everything I wanted to say? What would work as a filter for everything I intended to leave out?" (44). By asking these questions, Bloom provides a view of experience as a lens that makes some things visible even as it obscures others, accenting again the significance of emphasis, deemphasis, omissions, gaps, and erasures. As writer, she's conscious of what she wants to leave out: her parents' hostility—"no cloud would mar the serene summer scene" (44). But she also reflects on times when writing sometimes takes over, leading the writer in ways she doesn't anticipate: "when blackberries finally inserted their thorny toughness into the blueberry patch, I knew I would have to plunge into the tangled thicket of another, much earlier, summer vacation" (44).
The details Bloom chooses function symbolically; they allow her to give emotional cues without elaborating on or interpreting scenes for readers. For example, the images and particulars Bloom selects for the Black Berries section are as tough and acrid as those in the Blue Berries sections are sweet and romantic. While the blueberries are large, lush, and abundant (45), the blackberries are scarce, “hard and small and sour, and the seeds got wedged in our teeth” (50-1). There is ease and beauty in the Blue Berries sections: the speaker dances “a barefoot ballet in the kitchen” accompanied by a loving family who makes jam, fresh tabouli, and grilled salmon together (57). The Black Berries section, though, shows the speaker “nine and fat,” trying to please her parents, making “diluted Campbell’s soup, vegetable beef or chicken noodle, and white bread sandwiches” (50, 54). Additionally, the images of small children in these sections contrast in startling ways. Bloom’s grandson, Paul, in the Blue Berries section is held by his father; the baby is “wobbly but eager” (57). Bloom’s baby sister, Linda, in the Black Berries section is left alone much of the morning, “rocking back and forth in her crib, banging her head” (54). Through not commenting on or interpreting these images, the writer leaves gaps, making no discursive judgment, no specific comparisons between the memories from childhood and her more recent family experiences. She allows the images to speak for themselves, to create the tone and effect.

Bloom’s writing displays qualities similar to those Chris Anderson sees in Joan Didion’s writing. In Style as Argument, Anderson writes, “The grammar of her writing is the grammar of radical particularity. The rhetoric of her prose is the rhetoric of
concreteness and implication, symbol and gap, process and struggle" (134). The "radical particularity" of Bloom's prose, her use of concrete sensory images, has an accumulative effect. In the Black Berries section, the speaker smears her face and arms with an oily mosquito repellent and still returns with bites, having pushed past a barbed wire fence and endured cow manure and briar scratches for maybe two cups of berries after an hour's picking. Just as the berry picking is more difficult and less satisfying in the Black Berries section so are the family relationships. The speaker's mother invades her bed, fills her room with the stench of cigarettes and orange peels. This mother has problems with her own family. Bloom devotes just one paragraph to the mother's shaky family relationships, rendering the difficulties through a series of images punctuated by fragments that repeat: "Grievances older than she was"; "Grievances she couldn't help"; "Grievances she provoked" (52). In eight sentences, Bloom provides quick brush-strokes that paint a family history, providing a context that a child couldn't fully understand but that helps readers interpret the mother's behavior.

Through this thick description and radical particularity, Bloom, as writer, provides the reader with a necessary context. As a character in the story, though, she does not understand that context. After the paragraph on the mother's family, there is a break and a new paragraph, beginning, "I was afraid my mother was mad at me" (52). The mother tries to run away, and later the family denies the event. Bloom, as daughter, cooks and cleans, thinking, "If I was perfect maybe my mother would stay" (53), but despite her best efforts, the speaker observes, "I would never be perfect; the house looked the same when
we’d finished lunch as it had before I tried to clean it up” (54). There’s a sense of futility in these paragraphs, as well as a desire for some kind of connection and order and something that’s “real.” In the last five words of the Black Berries section, Bloom characterizes the time as “the summer that never happened” (56). There is at once a denial—“it never happened”—and the affirmation of writing, of telling the story. In contrast to the parents’ claim that the events of that summer never happened (“You’ve been dreaming” 52), Bloom offers her rendering as a kind of witnessing, not unlike the kind she discusses in “American Autobiography and the Politics of Genre.”

If I figure this narrative as a form of “witnessing,” do the details become, as Bartholmae suggests, “natural and inevitable”? Do readers and the writer herself come to see Bloom’s story as “the real”? Will writers and readers of creative nonfiction become less critical readers, depending exclusively on the vision of the writer? Answers to these questions depend, at least in part, on the approach to reading and writing. If writers and readers are aware of the selection and ordering that goes into writing, cognizant of the gaps, and conscious of the multiple versions in which the same story can be told, they can begin to make the move from concentrating on “raw experience” to focusing on the rhetorical questions of how and what the writing communicates to whom and for what purpose. And they might consider too what role the reader plays in answering such questions.

In the second part of the expository frame that ends the essay, Bloom reflects on the writing, on the story she’s told, and states what she wants from readers: “As a writer I
want my readers to feel sympathetic toward that ten-year-old, and toward her mother, whose vulnerability the writing of this essay—making sense of things that don’t make sense—enabled me to understand in ways impossible before” (57). Bloom desires sympathy toward the characters, not for herself. She writes, “I want my readers to care not about my family as people, but about the way I have portrayed them” (58). When, in our interview, I asked Bloom about this implicit direction to readers, she stated matter-of-factly, “I didn’t want people saying, ‘Oh what a poor kid.’ Kids go through tough times, but you get lucky or have some strengths and you survive. Compared to a lot of bad things in the world, this was not horrible” (interview 12/99). In our interview she doesn’t linger on the memories from childhood. She turns instead to focus on the writing, telling me that she wants her students to be able to justify every word, every punctuation mark, everything that’s left in, and what’s left out of their essays. Her focus is not on “raw experience” but on caring enough about one’s subject to take the effort to transform “the work of life into a work of art” (59) and knowing that the reader owes the writer nothing. As she observes, “They can shut the book at any point they want, and you can’t do a thing about it” (interview 12/99).

**Writing and Teaching the Essay, the Art of Intimacy**

The ways—and contexts in which—personal essays are read, assigned, and responded to greatly affect the pedagogical, analytical, and aesthetic possibilities of the form. That is, if teachers view autobiographical writing in reductive ways, if they see the
personal essay as a simplistic warm-up to critical writing, rather than as having analytic, intellectual, and aesthetic value, then students will learn to see personal writing in the same way. But if teachers foreground—in both the reading and writing of personal essays—rhetorical concerns such as message, tone, style, gaps, syntax, audience, and context, students can come to understand the ways form and content communicate. And they can learn to choose and shape forms in order to communicate a variety of ideas.

The same is true for readers of the kinds of personal essays published in professional journals. If such texts are reduced to “mere lore” or “authentic voices” without reflection on the ways selves and messages are constructed and communicated in and through form, then the possibility of sophisticated critique and for using form to create change is truncated. What is needed, then, is a rhetorical approach to reading, writing, and teaching that values a range of formal and stylistic options and their effects.

The craft of writing for oneself and strangers—of being attentive to the needs of a dual audience—seems for Bloom both a personal and pedagogical goal. The form of the essay allows both writers and readers not to have to choose between their own priority or secondarity, but instead to consider who they are in relation to others—and to a text. The rhetorical reading strategies I advocate, too, allow for a consideration of a variety of relationships: the writer’s relation to form, the context in which she writes, her selection and ordering of material; the reader’s relation to the text and what she knows of context, her apprehension of form, her role in bridging gaps. Close attention to style and form can help lead to a better understanding of these varied relationships and their
interdependence, and I believe such attention can lead as well to more sophisticated and
informed readings, readings that tell us something about the art of intimacy between
writers and audiences.

In the following chapter, “A Pedagogy of Form: Constructed Selves, Readers, and
Experience in the Essays of Wendy Bishop,” I continue my exploration of the art of
intimacy between writers and audience by considering the kind of reader particular essays
construct and invite. Through rhetorical readings of Wendy Bishop’s personal essays, I
illustrate my own position in relation to her texts, arguing that her form encourages
pedagogical reflection. And I encourage readers of this dissertation to consider their own
relation to form—to Bishop’s essays and to the loosely structured form of my response.
NOTES

1. Also see Eileen Schell’s *Gypsy Academics and Mother Teachers: Gender, Contingent Labor, and Writing Instruction*.

2. See Theresa Enos’ 1996 *Gender Roles and Faculty Lives in Rhetoric and Composition*, which provides a mix of stories and statistics.

3. Bloom explains further about the libel insurance: “MLA has it; all professional societies have it. Why NCTE, with its vast network of publications, used my article to do this on, I don’t know” (Interview 12/99).

4. The version of this essay reprinted, quoted, and that has received critical response is “Teaching College English as a Woman.” “Hearing Our Own Voices” seems to have been “heard” by fewer people.


6. And an even better opportunity, perhaps, would be to consider more carefully (in both the writing classroom and composition scholarship) work that challenges traditional notions of voice. Jacqueline Jones Royster does so in “When the First Voice You Hear is Not Your Own,” and Ede and Lunsford do so in “Crimes of Writing: Refiguring ‘Proper’ Discursive Patterns” and “Border Crossings: Intersections of Rhetoric and Feminism” (with Cheryl Glenn). There’s plenty more work to be done in this area.
7. Barbara Kamler critiques the metaphor of voice for its connection to the body: “voice itself is a metaphor of the body—located in the throat and vocal cords—and therefore difficult to disconnect from the body of the person writing” (Relocating the Personal 43). Kamler is right, but the metaphor remains powerful. Consider Anzaldúa’s use of the metaphor: “I write in red. Ink. Intimately knowing the smooth touch of paper, its speechlessness before I spill myself on the insides of trees. Daily, I battle the silence and red. Daily, I take my throat in my hands and squeeze until the cries pour out, my larynx and soul sore from the constant struggle” (72). Refusing the metaphor does not erase the passionate, sometimes painful, connection many people feel to writing. And while text does not equal person, there are multiple corporeal effects of both words and silence.

8. My use of the term “double-voice” is meant to suggest all the possibilities Winston Weathers describes in his explanation in An Alternate Style: “Writers use double-voice many times when they feel that they could say this or that about a subject; when they feel that two attitudes toward a subject are equally valid; when they wish to suggest that there are two sides to the story (whatever the story may be); when they wish to distinguish between their roles as (a) provider of information and data, and (b) commentator upon information and data; or when they wish to effect a style corresponding to ambiguous realities” (24). Before Weathers, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote about “two-ness” and a kind of double self experienced by African Americans.

Another sense of double-voice comes from African-American oral and written tradition: through story-telling (and listening to stories) it is possible participate in history as a witness. My use of “double voice” later in the chapter (in discussing “American Autobiography and the Politics of Genre”) more closely resembles this second meaning. (See next footnote)

9. A description of Carrie Mae Weems’ 1998 installation of photographs, Ritual & Revolution, contains the following explanation of double voice and connects it to the idea of witness: “As we listen to the storyteller, we hear her voice move fluidly between a voice that participates in history along with us and a voice that describes history as a witness. This ‘double-voice’ is part of the African-American oral and written tradition. The layered meaning of a double voice offers a way for the storyteller to have a sense of self built on their own terms and, at the same time, place themselves in the context of something larger than the individual” (<http://web.syr.edu/~kbidappa/>, accessed 4/7/01). Autobiography as witness functions in the same double-voiced way.

10. In “Reading and Writing Differences: The Problematic of Experience,” Min-Zhan Lu offers both a theory and specific assignments for examining the political benefits and dangers of using personal experiences in reading and writing. Like Bloom, she advocates revision and rewriting but also gives more attention to issues of domination and offers specific strategies for using experiences analytically.
11. When I asked Bloom about her use of italics and the specific direction she gives to her readers in the expository frame of the essay, she acknowledged that she wished Writing on the Edge had published "Writing Blue Berries" without the frame but that the editor, John Boe, "said that they always had to embed [stories] in something pertaining to teaching writing" (Interview 12/99). Bloom said she hoped readers wouldn't "get too hung up on the advice to keep them away from the story" and that the expository frame was "mostly a way to get it into print" (Interview 12/99). Most often, readers do not have access to information concerning the ways texts are shaped by editors. It might be interesting to consider how one's reading of Bloom's essay would change in the absence of the expository frame.
CHAPTER 5

A PEDAGOGY OF FORM: CONSTRUCTED SELVES, READERS, AND EXPERIENCE IN THE ESSAYS OF WENDY BISHOP

"Is this an expressive author-centered essay or am I constructing myself coyly within my discipline, trying to enter the parlor by speaking with textual freedom?" (296).

—Wendy Bishop, "If Winston Weathers Would Just Write to Me on E-mail"

March 15, 2001. Denver. In the crowded Adam’s Mark Hotel Plaza Ballroom, Wendy Bishop stands to deliver her CCCC chair’s address. She’s flanked on both sides by a line of people wearing name badges: past and future chairs of CCCC, journal editors, award committee members, people whose names and faces most of the crowd will recognize. She wears pearls. The room is crowded by others who wear name badges, others who have rolled out of hotel beds early. They, we, want to hear what she has to say. Bishop begins her speech by acknowledging the ways teachers of writing and rhetoric “work against personal, pedagogical and institutional odds,” the ways they feel marginal. I wonder if Gary Olson is in the room and think back to his question, “Can someone who serves as chair of our major professional organization—a position of power, prestige, and privilege—really claim to be ‘marginalized’?” (“The Death of
Composition” 35). I think of the ways leaders speak for selves and others. I think of Sheryl I. Fontaine and Susan Hunter’s words:

[E]ach conference chair tells what she or he believes to be the story of composition, the central narrative into which the members of the discipline are to enter. The audience’s attention is directed to a particular part of the composition world: an exclusive group of ancestors, allies, or enemies; a particular call to action; a singular moment in its history. (*Writing Ourselves into the Story* 4)

I think of metaphors: center, margins, parlors. Moments in the center are fleeting. We write in the margins of student papers. We’re sitting in a ballroom, not standing in a parlor. Mirrors and chandeliers.

Bishop speaks of the ways composition studies is not “well represented as a cozy 19th century parlor,” and when she reads a section from Burke’s *Philosophy of Literary Form*, the same section that I quote in my introduction to this dissertation, I’m stunned, amazed by the ways—in my relentless selectivity—I’ve left so much out. My version of the quotation preserves the part about listening but cuts out the war-like imagery. I’ve used ellipses and then ended the quotation where the listener finally puts in his or her oar. But Bishop quotes further: “Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally’s assistance” (*Philosophy* 111).

I think of the ways listening and responding also often involve defense, aligning (and maligning), embarrassment, and gratification. Bishop goes on about the discussion being interminable, the hour growing late, departing. And I’m still in the parlor thinking about
oars. How is it that we have oars in the parlor? Why on earth (or water) am I paddling in circles here?

Bishop takes a sip of water and then offers another metaphor for life in composition studies—moments on a convention elevator:

Fumblingly, I press a handful of buttons as I enter and move faster or slower at the mechanical beast’s whim. Others get on and off at different floors, I disembark and re-enter, multiple times, over time, and arrive at some point at a new floor, then another: enough to keep me interested throughout a professional lifetime, if I so choose. But also much is seen partially, briefly, at a distance as often as close up. I’ve learned that after conversation, comes longer reflection. (Manuscript 5)

So now I think of elevators, how I keep getting lost in the ones at the Adam’s Mark, unable to remember the path and floor connecting Plaza to Tower. I go up and down and try not to look lost, then finally develop a strategy: follow someone with a name badge who looks like she knows where she’s going. If you see someone in the same elevator four times in six minutes, he’s probably lost too. The space is claustrophobic, stomach turning. And what does it mean that so few people make eye contact on elevators? Or that elevators move vertically, not horizontally?

As I play with the metaphor, Bishop goes on to talk about maturing into the field of rhetoric and composition. She talks about exhaustion, choice, work, love—about teachers who “discover what they can see, give what they can give, take back what they can find” (Manuscript 10). I listen and think. She talks about configuring new spaces, finding new metaphors. Another sip of water and she closes her talk with a poem, one that makes me grin: exhaustion turned energy turned dizzy delight, a turn of phrase, break, refrain. Extended applause and the crowd is released into a “compositional
maelstrom” (Manuscript 11). So many voices. After a day of panels, restroom lines, fits and starts of conversation and interruption, I negotiate my way through halls and elevators, brew a pot of hotel coffee, and write a response:

My Convention Poem

Is somewhat like yours—the dash across streets, to hell with crosswalks and walk lights. It’s crowds and coffee without enough cream. Mine is tired, trying to compensate for lack of sleep with too much caffeine. My poem is too poor to be alone and so shares generic hotel rooms city after city, year after year. It’s late-night talk, a lonely walk, I’m good, and how are you? It runs into some people over and over and others never, knowing they’re there or here or somewhere. Smiling, scrawling notes, hugging, wanting to write letters to those who offend: the one who claims her own version in the name of truth, ignoring a student’s request: Please don’t write about me. It wants to go on about power and to say, No, don’t tell me sentence length is the measure of good writing. Listen to the rhythm of one word or two. Listen to the break the pause
the white space in this sea
of color, of words.
My convention poem wears black,
strides long-legged through lobbies,
attends parties, buys too many books.
It stands in line. My convention poem
makes lists, collects calls
for papers, eats alone, drinks
in groups. It's crossed legs, a sneak
peek clock watcher, an eye to the door.

Three days, an overbooked flight, more hotel coffee, and an email or two later, I read the manuscript version of Bishop's talk and find these words in her final footnote:
"You've been, unwittingly, part of someone else's convention poem. Now you must write your own" (Manuscript 14). I smile because I already have, because I've come to anticipate these invitations from Bishop's published work, because my desire for composition studies—for students, for teaching, for scholarship—remains similar to my edited version of Burke's parlor conversations: "You listen for awhile, . . . and then you put in your oar." What does it mean that I do whatever I can to revise away war imagery, that I put a poem in my dissertation, that I historicize moments in scenes, that in less than five pages I've used the word "I" close to thirty times?

Bishop's question, the one I chose as a chapter epigraph, seems fitting to ask again: "Is this an expressive author-centered essay or am I constructing myself coyly within my discipline, trying to enter the parlor by speaking with textual freedom?" (296). This question is one of disciplinary history, writerly history, form, and audience. It's
about selves in the context of others; it’s about the theories people live; it’s about the ways formal expectations shape and confound both writing and response.

Neither the question nor the issues suggested by it are new. Consider this textual moment from more than a decade ago. In her contribution to the 1990 issue of PRE/TEXT devoted to expressive and personal writing, Mara Holt opens her letter to John Trimbur by reflecting on her multiple audiences: “I can’t get it out of my head that I have three audiences: there’s you, there’s Peter, there’s PRE/TEXT” (48). And the remainder of her letter reveals Holt’s negotiation of/with audience. Providing her audience some background and positioning her text, Holt writes about the ways her relationship with Trimbur (the person to whom she addresses her letter) differs from her relationship with Peter Elbow (the journal’s guest editor, the person who solicited the piece) and interrupts the letter to Trimbur by asking, “How am I doing, Peter?” (48). She worries not only about how Elbow might respond but also how her larger audience (those she imagines expect her to write more traditional scholarly articles) might receive this piece. She imagines “these people’s inevitable smirks” and worries over the potential consequence of giving Elbow the kind of piece he wants: “Peter, I’m not tenured yet” (48).

To some, Holt’s reflection might seem expressive. Others might see the theoretical issues embedded in her concerns. I include myself in the latter group. For me, Holt’s reflection illustrates concretely Sidonie Smith’s claim that autobiographical speakers are performing subjects “called to heterogeneous recitations of identity”
(Performativity 110). But, then, I see her writing as expressive too. Chicken and egg, expression and theory. It doesn’t really matter which comes first, just that they’re often related.

In his letter of response to Holt, Trimbur tells a story about his daughter and then admits his own worries about multiple audiences, “about how to sound on this shifting terrain” (55). He writes, “It’s hard enough to stabilize a ground to speak from when you imagine multiple audiences. But it’s even harder—and potentially embarrassing—to feel yourself sliding through a number of identities” (55). He reflects not only on the expectations of differing audiences but also on the disconcerting nature of multiple, shifting selves:

Both the voice and the conversation are impacted, overpopulated by a surplus of speaking that keeps the ground shifting and our many selves moving. Our subjectivities . . . are not just socially constructed through our relations with others. They are themselves episodic and nomadic, overdominated by the divergent multiplicity of voices we hear and aspire to speak. (55)

There’s an earthquake (ground shifting), and the parlor is full of vagabonds (nomadic subjectivities). There’s conversation, relations with others, the hour is growing late.

Five years after Holt and Trimbur’s exchange, with the disciplinary argument over expressive and academic writing still raging, Wendy Bishop was invited to write a response to Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae’s debate on the subject, which began as a CCCC conference session and then became historicized through publication (CCC 1995). Only about half of Bishop’s response (fourteen of her twenty-two numbered sections) was actually published in CCC, a fact that demonstrates another of the ways
writing is shaped even before it is received by a broader audience. In a PS to her response, Bishop directly addresses her audiences, hinting at the different relationships she shares with each of them:

Dave—I hope at the next 4Cs we’ll talk about our written wanderings. We’ll meet face to face, rather than just word to word. Peter—I’ve just begun to untangle the complicated genealogy of your word-work and how it affects my academic life. I look forward to understanding more about the differences now that I’ve lived so long with the similarities. This is a way, I think, of finding out more about my own voice(s). Joe—like my students, I’m not sure if this is what you wanted. Readers—you’re so hard to invent, really. (304)

In this PS, Bishop addresses her multiple audiences: Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae, whose work she’s responding to; Joseph Harris, then editor of CCC; and the readers, those she doesn’t know, whose first names she cannot use, those who are hard to invent. What makes response and the creation of textual selves so difficult is that it’s hard to tell exactly to whom we’re responding. (If writers have episodic and nomadic selves, so do readers. And readers, like Bishop says, are so hard to invent.) Writers and writing teachers know this difficulty. I puzzle over vastly different responses to my own work, wish I could revise differently for each reader. I puzzle equally over student peer response sheets, the ways their responses differ (from each other’s, from mine) to the same text. How, as teachers, do we talk about this surplus of writing and listening (or hardly listening) selves?

From my own teachers, I’ve learned two useful ways of talking about rhetorical stances and audiences. In my undergraduate advanced writing class, the professor, Bill Joliff, asked students to hand in a rhetorical analysis of their own work with each essay.
He asked us to look at our own texts (mine were nearly all personal essays) and to consider message, tone, style, purpose, and audience—and the ways these rhetorical elements are related. Part of the evaluation rested on how well students learned to articulate the rhetorical purpose and anticipated effect of their own work. For the first two papers, I remember defining myself as the audience—and learning throughout the semester to broaden out, to look further, to analyze and sometimes invent an audience for each piece. Of course, as an undergraduate, I didn’t know how theoretically complicated “audience” can be. As Mary Jo Reiff writes in her 1996 article, “Rereading ‘Invoked’ and ‘Addressed’ Readers Through a Social Lens: Toward a Recognition of Multiple Audiences,”

"Audience" is an unstable referent, a floating signifier. The term can refer to a construct in the writer's mind—the "imagined," "intended," or "invented" audience. Or it can refer to a textual presence—the audience "implied" by textual cues or "inscribed" in the text. Audiences can also refer to "real" people—the actual readers who exist either apart from and prior to the text (as "addressed" readers) or those who exist as part of the community in which the text is produced.

In my first graduate class, Andrea Lunsford helped me begin to understand this more complicated view of audience by asking her students to write stylistic analyses of their own work. I wrote an eight-page analysis of a twenty-five line poem, commenting on everything from periodic and cumulative sentences to summative modifiers to subordinating conjunctions to the significance of monosyllabic words at the ends of lines. But I didn’t know how to talk about audience. Andrea asked who my audience was; I asked in return, “Do you mean where it was published?” I said I didn’t have an audience
in mind when I wrote; she said, “There is an audience implied (or constructed) in the
poem.” She asked, “Who is the audience constructed, hailed, by the text?” I answered,
“Not my mother.” As a writer, reader, and teacher, I’ve spent years puzzling over these
questions of audience—and asking them of others.

The question of audience was an important part of my interviews with Sommers,
Bloom, and Bishop. When I asked, “Who do you see as the primary audience for your
personal essays?” they answered, “Teachers of writing” or “English professors.” But my
next question, “What kinds of readers do you think your work constructs, invites, or
hails?” proved more difficult to answer. Sommers seemed resistant to answering the
questions at all:

I don’t really know. I think that’s an abstract question. I think there’s an
assumption there that I think about that, and I don’t. I think you’re really damned
if you, as a writer, are thinking about who are constructed readers. I really don’t
think we construct readers when we write. (Interview 12/99)

She seemed more comfortable answering the question from the perspective of a reader,
recognizing that readers bring different values and expectations to texts:

There has to be a part of you as a writer that is also a reader, that taps into that.
Readers like to know details. . . . Readers like images; readers like concrete
details; readers like dialogue; readers like scenes because I too want those. So I
think in those ways that’s the kind of reader. But there are people who don’t like
at all what I write. They find it self-indulgent; they find it personal; they find it on
a level where they don’t want to know that about me, so I’d say that’s probably
not the reader I’ve constructed, as opposed to the reader who is willing to believe
that personal experience is a form of evidence. (Interview 12/99)
In response to the same question, Bloom discussed the ways in which the place of publication constructs the audience, and she mentioned the ways her literary allusions assume a literary reader.

Bishop seized the question, pointing to a reader who is interested in both style and content. She explains, “I know it has to invite a playful reader, a reader who’s not set in linear expectations” (Interview 7/2000). In the interview, I nod, and she reflects on being a reader of her own work, saying:

When I go back and read some of my stuff, I’m surprised by the person that’s there sometimes. I am embarrassed about gaps and leaps I’ve made. Some of them are when I’ve lost attention; some are because I’m trying stuff that I can’t quite pull off. And so I see those seams. And I’m pretty sure some of those seams show in my texts because I know those are the things that irritate certain reviewers.

Bishop discusses the constructed reader in her texts by both positioning herself as reader (one surprised by the constructed writer) and by drawing from the responses of actual readers (in this case reviewers), illustrating the connections among different audiences. She then reflects on her process of writing as a way of anticipating the kind of reader hailed by her texts: “It’s not like I get more fluency in a text and it gets more and more seamless. It seems like the more I write about sentences and structure, the more excited I am as a writer to try to push those things. So, the ride is bumpy. So, people have to be willing to have a certain kind of bumpy ride.” She expresses a desire to be in conversation with readers, saying, “if they’ll just hold on and go with me, we’ll hopefully get there by the end of the piece.” As she reflects on her writing, Bishop points to a constructed reader who is willing to give, but who also gains something in return: “And
what I hope they get back is a constructed voice that’s doing surprising but interesting things.”

Like Sommers, Bishop recognizes that readers bring differing expectations to texts, acknowledging that someone “who wants a kind of certainty in the text and an authority” might be irritated by her style: “Sometimes I think it looks intentionally sloppy. Sometimes I think it looks superficial.” As she teases these connections between production and reception, she looks away, as if trying to think things through, then talks more about her style and goals for writing, the textual features evident in her texts. She then circles back to my question: “So what would that reader be? Oxymoronically, really serious but not really serious. I’m deadly serious about what I’m doing, but I don’t want us all to feel serious.” She pauses and looks at me. “Does that make sense?” she asks, then laughs; “You have to say ‘yes.’”

As I listen, I think of the ways this conversation, this interview, mirrors my experience of reading Bishop’s essays. I get the sense she’s trying to figure something out, seizing a question, holding it up, looking at it from different directions. In response, I tell her stories of the ways others respond to my texts, the ways I’ve answered for myself the very question I’m asking her; I tell her what I see in her texts. She says at one point, “That’s interesting. Huh.” Pause. Bump. “It makes me want to try [to consider what reader is constructed textually] because I don’t think I’ve ever consulted my imaginings of the text . . . . It might be another way to see if I’ve achieved my aims. i
guess I do have aims.” Our conversation highlights connections among rhetorical elements, connections among audience, writer, context, style, and purpose.

She then takes the conversation in another direction, musing,

It would be equally interesting to see if I’ve constructed a reader I like. I’m not sure. I think I like to like my readers, and that may be why I’m uncomfortable with the CCC [“Place to Stand”] piece. I think I was constructing readers I didn’t like as much—or I was constructing unsympathetic readers. . . . I guess in the text I was warding off that unsympathetic reader, and that move is not normal for me.

In the introduction, “Essay Changes,” I discuss “Places to Stand” in more detail and analyze Gary Olson’s response, “The Death of Composition as an Intellectual Discipline.” Olson, an “actual reader,” stands as an unsympathetic reader, one quite different from the one Bishop expects/hopes for/usually constructs. To extend the metaphor I’ve been playing with, Olson refuses to ride with Bishop, won’t even get in the car, thinks she’s headed in the wrong direction, taking a busload of others with her, and is bound to crash.

Eight months after my interview with Bishop, I think about her comments regarding constructing and anticipating unsympathetic readers; I think about these words as I re-read “Places to Stand.” I think about her words as I revise my own. I think about the ways I rehearse and try to refute, ad nauseam, dismissals of the personal essay, trying to ward off unsympathetic readers. And I find myself asking another question: in what way do constructions of readers enable particular kinds of writing and response and inhibit other ways?

This question is a difficult one for me to answer satisfactorily, taking a number of perspectives into account, for I am, in a number of ways, Bishop’s ideal reader: willing to
go along on a textual ride without a map, willing to respond to the questions she asks and assignments she suggests.⁴ I delight in poems and will write one in response. We care about similar issues, have read (and value) many of the same texts. I’m interested in the ways that I become—in relation to her texts—the very reader Bishop constructs: playful, not set in linear expectations, willing to give and take. What I can’t fully account for, what has seized and puzzled me throughout the writing of this dissertation, is what truly accounts for vastly different readings, the ways I can so delight in a text that infuriates others, the ways others can accept what I so doggedly resist.⁵

In the remainder of this chapter, I offer readings of Bishop’s personal essays in order to reflect on the ways her use of form invokes and positions a particular kind of reader. I argue, through demonstration, that the form she uses encourages pedagogical reflection. Even as I make this argument, however, I recognize the ways reading experience is not fully determined by the text and encourage others to reflect on their own processes of reading personal essays in order to better understand the complicated ways form positions readers and readers position themselves in relation to form.

In introducing her essay “What We (Might) Write About When We Write (Autobiographical) Nonfiction,” Bishop writes of the form she’s chosen,

I think “how-to” or “how-we-did-what-we-did” essays are unfortunately undervalued these days, perhaps because they are often written in a conventional, predictable style. By changing the assumed shape of a how-to essay, I aim to recuperate and open up this genre for your consideration even while sharing what I hope are provocative glimpses of one classroom as it existed at one time. (265)
Bishop opens the essay with introductory context, explaining how she wrote the essay as a part of the creative nonfiction class she taught in 1995. Through providing context and explanation of the form, Bishop grounds readers, prepares them for the "postmodern, fragmentary, collage-like, 'bricolage-like'" text she has constructed (264). Throughout the essay, assignments in the second person interrupt, placing the reader in the position of student: "Try this: Write about your voice(s) . . ." (265). In response to the assignments, Bishop includes quotations from both students and published teachers and writers. Both Nancy Mairs and Ron (a student) respond to the following assignment: Write about architectures, houses you've loved or hated, places you've built, cities, human-made forms and figures, space within and without, materials, meanings" (267).

As I read, alternately wanting to answer the assignments myself and to read on, I pause over a line by Mairs: "'I invite you into the house of my past, and the threshold you cross leads you into your own'" (quoted in Bishop 267). The movement of Bishop's essay metaphorically does the same. The structure of Bishop's essay invites me into a classroom from her past, but as I cross the threshold, I find myself thinking about the classes I teach and my own writing.

When I read Bishop's work, I read as a teacher and writer. I type quotations and paragraphs from her work, allow them to take me to new places in my own writing. I jot down shorthand assignments on the back of used envelopes, assignments I'll try out in one class or another:
• Drive words for poetry (constructing poems with others’ drive words);\textsuperscript{6}

• Write a letter to someone who has taken an opposite position on a text (statement, letter defending your reading, letter back);

• Reading groups in class (have students read books that they discuss in small groups; write essays growing out of those discussions);

• For poetry class: copy pp. 111-15 re: reading response/how a poem does what it does.

In reading Bishop’s work, I notice certain textual features, certain uses of form, common to many of her essays. She almost always incorporates other voices—often those of students and other teachers, sometimes writers—into her essays. These other voices sometimes illustrate a point she wants to make, but just as often these voices take her to another place in the discussion. They seem less calls to authority or foils for her own argument and more temporary stops, places she visits on a journey, gas station fill-ups that fuel her thinking. Bishop offers another metaphor for the ways these other voices function for her as writer. In “Composing Ourselves as Readers,” she writes, “Meditating on others’ thoughts on a subject has for me become a dependable invention habit; like a dog gnaws happily on a bone—or a writer-to-learn edges bravely into new territory, word by word—when faced with or when ‘looking’ for a subject, I first collect ideas and let my own developing ideas rattle up against them” (58). She describes, in fact, a process of reading to write, reading to learn: “While I’m reading to write, I’m deeply engaged in the demonstrations—words, thoughts, rhetoric—of others as I try to shape my own learning” (87). Rather than using explicit transitions, the shift to another voice is often a typeface
shift or block quotation, most often both. The movement back and forth, from Bishop’s voice to another and back again, highlights the self in relation.

The quotations Bishop uses often prompt her to ask questions, ones she attempts to answer. For example, in “Learning Our Own Ways to Situate Composition and Feminist Studies in the English Department,” Bishop quotes Mary Savage’s example of “Pastoral workers in Latin America [who] are curing their own clericism by asking a central question: whose cry do I hear, toward whom do I move, whose interests do I serve?” (qtd. in Bishop 132). She includes other quotations from Savage as well and seeks to apply Savage’s ideas to another context: composition and feminism within English departments. Instead of explicating the quotations, Bishop utilizes a section break (another feature of much of her work) and asks the question, “Whose cry do I hear?” The question induces reflection and, nine paragraphs later, leads to additional questions and the refrain: “What does it mean to study literature, writing, critical theory, and/or rhetoric in today’s English department? Whose cry do we hear? Toward whom do we move? Whose interests do we serve? Questions promulgate dialog” (134). The shift in pronouns allows Bishop to transition from a reflection on whose cry she, as teacher and one-time administrator, hears—“I want to attend here to the cry of the novitiate” and “I look to the new graduate student in English” (132)—to a consideration of the ways curriculum can function within English departments: “By including works related to all areas of English, the redesigned historically aware, multicultural English studies seminar begins to offer graduate students important context(s) and a forum for
question-making” (134). The reformulated question allows her to negotiate the space between I and we.

Through the repeating question, Bishop is able to investigate both local and more global concerns, and toward the end of the essay, she turns the question on herself again, “In this essay, whose interests do I hope to serve?” (137); then later, “Whose interests do I serve?” In reflecting on whose interests she hopes to serve, Bishop writes as a teacher, saying she’s not interested in “finding the original genius but helping to give voice to those who want and need voices” (137). When she reflects on whose interests she does serve, she acknowledges serving her own needs and listening to graduate students. What Bishop is arguing for in the essay is maintaining a questioning stance as a teacher, and her form, which utilizes a refrain of questions, enacts that position. She, as writer-as-teacher, maintains a questioning stance—questioning self, English departments, and her disciplinary field at large.

What I am arguing is this: by enacting through form the pedagogy she values, Bishop encourages her readers to reflect on pedagogy as well, to consider their own values as teachers, writers, and readers. She embeds reflection on her processes of writing and reading into a text about writing and reading. In “Teaching Writing Teachers to Teach Reading for Writing,” Bishop reflects on her own process of composing the essay, on the books she re-read in order to begin, on running and reading to postpone beginning, on reading the world around her. In writing about her own writing and reading fits and starts, Bishop investigates ways of beginning, continuing, and finishing her own
essay. As a teacher, too, process consumes her. Bishop asks her students to write “process cover sheets” for each essay, and these are often the pieces from which she quotes in her own essays. Her use of form becomes an argument for the pedagogy she values, one that recognizes composing, teaching, and learning as process.

For me, as reader, the most striking example of the ways form can induce pedagogical reflection is my response to Bishop’s “Grammar Test: A Personal Look at the Problem(s).” Her essay, written as a test in a question/answer format, started as an invited talk for a TA training class at the University of Long Island. Bishop asked the organizers of the event what they would like her to talk about; she explains,

They told me that, because they have a lot of basic writers, one of their concerns was teaching grammar and basic writing ... And it kind of made me freak out because I didn’t really want to talk about grammar. And I didn’t in any way think of myself as a specialist to talk about grammar. (Interview, July 2000)

In reflecting on the form she chose for the essay, Bishop comments, “I think it came from panic over having to give a talk”; as well, she wanted her audience to write about the issues, so the question/answer format was useful. In preparing the talk, Bishop started with a basic principle she learned from one of her professors, Pat Hartwell: that it’s possible to make anybody a basic writer. She tells me that “any time you’re taking exams, you’re like a basic writer,” so in this sense, too, she used form—a test—to position her readers and to support her argument.

The reading of “Grammar Test” I offer here is one more attentive to the questions Bishop asks than to the answers she provides. In this reading, I take seriously the invitation Bishop presents toward the end of her piece: “I trust you will examine your
own grammatical and ungrammatical past in order to tell your stories, explore your test results, undertake your own teaching self-evaluations, on the way to helping your students become better writers, and grammatically fluent writers at that” (39). She ends with the questions that structure her essay.

*Please write down your exact response to the words “Grammar Test.” What physical response did you have? What memory response?*

I’m in junior high—taller, more developed than the other girls. We write with purple ink, circling the correct answers in our grammar workbooks. The wrong options amuse me, especially “et” instead of “ate.” Or “John learned/taught Suzie how to ride a bike.” I wonder who would confuse the two. Though I think the exercises are ridiculous, I’m good at them and take some pleasure in being right.

We diagram sentences on the chalkboard. The sentences have no context. We don’t pull them from stories, even paragraphs. They have nothing to do with us, but we dissect and label them. It’s a form of control: simple, compound, complex. My favorite: compound-complex.

As a writing teacher, I once arrived late for class because I lost time in my office while diagraming a sentence for fun.

As an administrator, I observed a college-level business writing class. The day I visited, the teacher handed out punctuation exercises: a sheet on commas and one on semicolons. The class went through the answers sentence by sentence. I thought I was
back in junior high, though now no taller than the other students. The exercises still
seemed ridiculous, but I still liked being "right."

_List the first five rules of grammar that you follow that come to mind._

1. A verb should agree with its subject in number and person.
2. When three or more items appear in a series, they should be separated by commas.
3. Use apostrophes to signal possessive case.
4. Use quotation marks around titles of poems.
5. Use a comma after an introductory clause.

_List the first five rules of grammar that you regularly break that come to mind._

1. Use _which_ and _that_ appropriately.
2. Use _who_ and _whom_ appropriately.
3. Do not place a modifier between _to_ and the verb of an infinitive.
4. No fragments.
5. And don’t begin a sentence with a conjunction.

_List three ways you’ve tried to teach grammar and the results of each._

1. A quiet blonde always sat in the second row of my forty-five person
introduction to poetry class. Her papers were mostly strong in terms of argument.
but they were riddled with grammatical errors. On her first paper, wanting to
encourage her, to draw her out, I wrote nearly all positive comments. I also
marked patterns of grammatical error (narrowed them to three concerns) and tried
to mention delicately in my end comment that she might want to be attentive to
these concerns on her next paper. Still wanting to encourage, I gave her an overly
generous A-, thinking she’d be relieved. The day I returned the papers, she stayed
after class, red-faced and livid. She wanted to discuss her grade: “You said all
good things! Why didn’t I get an A?” I agreed to read her paper again.
Defensive in my re-reading, I started counting errors: seventeen in a four-page essay. I wrote a long letter, explaining in considerable detail not only the patterns of error but each particular error she made. I copied pages from a grammar handbook. I invited her to come and talk with me, not about the grade (that would stand, though I secretly wished I could lower it) but about how to work on these issues. I gave her the phone number for the writing center.

And I lost her in my need to be right.

She sat through the remaining classes with lips pressed tightly together, eyes down. She handed in papers with the same exact errors. I continued to type long responses to her papers (while the other students received my handwritten comments), re-reading my own responses to make sure my tone was controlled and that there were no visible errors in my letter. I gave each subsequent essay a still-generous B+. I stopped writing directly on her papers and, instead, photocopied the originals and my responses. I kept the copies in a folder. She’s the one student (okay, maybe there are two or three) I hope never to run into on campus again. If she were the one grading, I have no doubt she’d give me less than a generous B+.

2. After reading and commenting on a stack of drafts, I make a list of the grammatical errors that show up again and again. At the start of the next class, before returning the drafts, I transfer my list to the white board. I then go through
the list casually, explaining each error and how to correct it. I give an example of each. Maybe half the students take notes, the others stare blankly. Some of the note-takers will hand in new drafts where they’ve made changes. I’ll stare blankly at many of the barely-revised drafts, marking the same sentences, transferring my white board list back to individual papers. I’ll think of Sisyphus.

3. After I proofread a paper for a friend, she asked me, “Did I make less mistakes this time?” “You made fewer,” I answered, laughing. The next day, I told her, “Ohio State won Penn State in football.” She answered, “They beat Penn State?” We go back and forth that way, teaching and learning.

When you’re at a party and someone asks what you do and you say “teach writing” and they say, “I never was good at English grammar,” what do you think and say?

I think “Oh lord” but say nothing. I smile politely, sometimes change the subject: “And what do you do?” I’d much rather hear about fencing or selling insurance. It happens more on airplanes than at parties. (This week, on a flight to CCCC, a surgeon asked, “What do you do?” When I answered, he didn’t mention his grammar. He said, “Wow, I wish my English professor in college looked like you.” I still changed the subject.)

But once I was at a party in Florida. Spring break from college, visiting a friend’s rich aunt. Everyone raved over the poached salmon. I hadn’t yet learned the art of small talk. When one of the aunt’s friends asked me what I liked to read, I answered truthfully:
“Annie Dillard and Sylvia Plath.” The aunt came up behind me and scolded, “Say someone he knows.” I searched for a more appropriate answer: Thomas Hardy?

What is the (socially, rhetorically) appropriate answer to “I never was good at English grammar”?

1. “Me neither.”
2. “How did your teachers teach it?”
3. “Too bad the grammar checker on my word processor isn’t any good either.”
4. “Your grammar sounds fine to me.”
5. “Huh. I was never any good at ________ (fencing, selling insurance, molecular biology, surgery). Guess we chose the right professions.”

*When was the last time you felt like a basic writer?*

Today. I keep writing and deleting sentences.

*Please write a sonnet. You have five minutes.*

You’ve got to be kidding. Immediately, I think: Shakespearian sonnet, three quatrains and a couplet (14 lines). I know the typical rhyme scheme (abab cdcd efef), but can’t recall whether the lines need to be in iambic pentameter. What on earth does this have to do with grammar? I get Bishop’s point: she wants me to feel like a basic writer. I know the rules but just can’t implement them to my satisfaction in five minutes. Give me five hours, and I’ll give you a sonnet. Is this what it means to be a basic writer? I doubt it. What does grammar have to do with it?

*When you read a large pile of student papers and realize that writers in this class, too, are producing writing that has many sentence-level errors, what do you most want to say to: the class, the teacher educator who trained you, the department or university administrator who suggests you/your program is not teaching grammar well enough?*
To the class, I want to say, “These are the patterns of error I’m seeing in your papers. What can we do to improve? Which of these issues are you most interested in discussing?” To the teacher educator who trained me: “I use your handbooks almost every day.” To the department or university administrator: “Give me the staff, time, and resources to do so, and I will.”

*What is a gerund?*

All I know is this: a gerund ends in *ing*.

Thinking about grammar makes some students crazy. “Thinking about grammar” is a gerund phrase, I think.

*What grade do you give yourself as a teacher of writing and why?*

B+ because it’s the grade I give for good work, significant effort, and room for improvement.

One of the reasons I claim that the form of “Grammar Test” encourages pedagogical reflection is that if asked what I focus on as a writer and teacher, grammar and punctuation would have been on the bottom of my list, for—trained as a writing tutor—I’ve internalized a hierarchy of concerns:

1. Subject, audience, purpose
2. Organization
3. Paragraphing
4. Sentences
5. Grammar and punctuation
My responses to Bishop’s grammar test, however, expose my grammatical concerns. When I respond to student papers, I do mark grammar and punctuation—not to “take off points” or to shame—but simply because the surface matters to me, because there are times I can’t get beyond the surface to consider subject, audience, and purpose until I make changes. I mark grammar on students’ texts for myself more than for them, so I can read on. I mark mistakes—in pencil—in published texts too. Just today, while reading Bishop’s published essays, I marked mistakes: “say Ron,” “I found that that I was viewed,” and others. I pencilled in missing quotation marks and missing letters, took out extra words.

As an undergraduate, while reading a book that exclusively used masculine pronouns, I pencilled in “she” next to every “he” and “her” next to every “him.” The author would never see my corrections, but I could then read on.

As a teacher, it’s useful for me to be aware of my own habits, habits so internalized that they were invisible to me until I compared my own answers to Bishop’s grammar test with hers. Though Bishop structures her text in a question/answer form, she does not answer her own questions directly, making for a far more interesting piece than the one I wrote in response.

Because of the form she chose and the questions with which Bishop ends the piece (the same questions that structure the essay), I focus more on my response than her answers to the same questions, and I am reminded:

1. There are productive and nonproductive writing rules, and depending on the setting/situation/piece, these change.
2. Think *grammars* instead of *grammar*.

3. Form is not simply a container for ideas; it’s a vehicle. The writer may start in the driver’s seat, but sometimes the reader takes the wheel.

* * *

As writer, I’m not yet ready to give over the wheel. Perhaps it’s time to look at the map, the red arrow, we are here.

I see form as argument, as a kind of reading and writing methodology. To further illustrate, I want to consider now a way of reading personal essays that is guided by the form itself but is also attentive to theoretical concerns, a way of taking the text on its own rhetorical terms and applying a theoretical framework, in this case one shaped by rhetorical theory, reader-response theory, and feminist autobiographical criticism. As a demonstration (and argument), I want to move now (please, come with me, reader; we’re going somewhere; we’ll get there) first to a description of Bishop’s essay “The Shape of Fact” and then a close, rhetorical reading of the essay itself.

**Reading as Writers, Writing as Readers**

My analysis of Bishop’s “The Shape of Fact” illustrates the ways the form and content of her essay complicate reading experience. As a response to critiques that the personal essay, in its use of experience, “resists or erases its own position within a discursive practice, within the academy and its meetings or journals and its traditions of inquiry and authority” (Bartholomae, “Reply” 126), I wish to analyze both the writing
and reading of experience as discursive practice, a practice that encourages both writer
and reader to be reflective about her position and [claims to] authority.

That is, I see experience as a kind of evidence, evidence shaped and used
rhetorically for particular purposes. In the prose foray section of “The Shape of Fact,” the
more traditional personal essay part, it is easy to read Bishop’s use of experience as “the
bedrock of evidence upon which explanation is built” (Scott 59), a use of experience that
historian Joan Scott would critique, for she believes that “making experience visible
precludes critical examination of the working of the ideological system” that makes
particular experiences intelligible (59). Scott makes the point that experience is not
transparent; it requires interpretation. In spite of her critique, however, Scott does not
dismiss experience—or all uses of experience. Rather, she seeks to question and redefine
experience—a complicated move, one that can be used when reading and writing
personal essays.

I believe it is possible to use experience (one’s own and other’s) and to analyze, to
carry out the kinds of analysis Scott values: “examining the relationships between
discourse, cognition, and reality, the relevance of the position or situatedness of subjects
to the knowledge they produce, and the effects of difference on knowledge” (61). The
trope of experience is rhetorical, and it can have social and political value. We can
approach personal essays by asking the following questions: What does this use of
experience obscure or mask? How can this experience be historicized? In what ways is
experience constructed and employed in a particular text? For what purpose? These are
questions of rhetoric, questions of interpretation, questions that—as readers, writers, and teachers of personal essays—it is important to ask.

Readings of experience and uses of experience are just as important, just as powerful, as writing one’s experiences. In its construction, Bishop’s “The Shape of Fact” reveals that what the reader does with the representation of experience is just as important as the representation itself. At the end of her first paragraph, Bishop asks a guiding two-part question: “And why go public with this life more than any other? For me or for my readers?” (55). Her essay acts as an implicit answer to that early question: this writing is for both her and her readers. It explores what it means to write, craft, and understand experience.

The form of the personal essay, with its loose generic conventions, also allows Bishop to do readings of her own writing. In the first part of the essay, Bishop includes and comments on short pieces of her fiction and poetry, providing interpretations of experiences she’s presented in other forms. The mixed-genre reflection allows her to layer experience and to show the complexity of interpretation. And the representations of reader response further show the complexity of interpretation by bringing Bishop’s crafting of experience into question and focus. The form of Bishop’s essay emphasizes that she is not the only one with interpretive responsibility.

By writing and including the second part—the interview portion—of the essay, Bishop reflects upon the gaps in her own telling. The readers’ questions help her re-tell the story in a different way. One reader responds, “I only wanted to know more” (61),
and Bishop answers that request by listing several other “facts” that were absent from the first part of the essay. The second part of this piece is no less “shaped,” no less rhetorical, than the first part, but it does, nonetheless, draw attention to the shaping of facts and the construction of experience that goes on in writing and reading personal essays. Let’s take a closer look.

**Shaping Facts, Shaping Experience: A Reading, Interpretation, Argument**

I’d like now to offer a close, rhetorical reading of Bishop’s “The Shape of Fact,” one that supports and illustrates my previous claims about interpreting experience. This reading also demonstrates the constructed process of a particular reading moment, taking you—the present reader—along on my sometimes bumpy ride through Bishop’s essay. I hope you’ll think about (rhetorically analyze) the ways I’ve constructed my own experience of reading, the arguments implicit in this use of form, even the reader I construct by using first and second person pronouns (please come, dear reader, on this ride—potholes, curves, hills, and turns).  

I can’t make any claims to one original moment of reading or provide a thick description of my first encounter with this text. I remember where I was (in the rhetoric & composition office at Ohio State) when I discovered it in *Writing On the Edge* in 1995, two years after its initial publication. I made a photocopy, read it at home, wanted to send it to an acquaintance from college whose life and experience seemed to be defined by her manic depressive mother. Two years later, in 1997, I asked my students in a literature and composition course called Composing Fictions and Factions to read and write
responses to Bishop’s essay. Two years after that reading, I wrote an analysis of the essay as part of my CCCC presentation. I have multiple photocopies of Bishop’s essay, each marked with handwritten notes in the margin, each reading reflecting a different purpose and response. Now, in 2001, I read and write about it again.

In the opening paragraph of “The Shape of Fact,” Bishop considers the authority of experience: “My only authority was that of having experienced and having written enough, so far, to want to push further now” (55). The construction of authority in this sentence includes both having experienced and having written, and neither the experience nor the writing is static; the writer’s purpose is to push further. In pushing further, she finds that the writing brings up questions for both her and her readers: “what sanctions our sharing and what drives our need for protective coloration, concealment, privacy, even when going public?” (55). The question alludes to the need for two kinds of authority: the authorization—the sanction—to share and the authority to conceal or color. I think of potential sources of both kinds of authority: the genre of autobiography itself, its history, the presence of interested readers, the writer’s own sense of self and need for the writing—both external and internal sources.

When I read Bishop’s claim that “most writers manufacture their fictions and fictions from the intimate dross of their past” (55), the use of the verb “manufacture” surprises me at first. I think “factory work” and then move away from the text to look up some of the verb’s synonyms: build, construct, forge, form, make, fabricate, invent, assemble, create, design, fashion, shape. I like them all—even fabricate—better than
manufacture. And what is the reader to make of the materials these writers have to work with: the intimate "dross" of their pasts? Dross, the scum that forms on molten metal, waste. Experience as waste. I remember two news stories I saw as a child and have never forgotten about artists, one who used dryer lint to create art, the other who somehow got birds (seagulls, I think) to walk through paint and then onto his canvas. Just the other night, a writer told me about an art junk-yard outside of Madison, Wisconsin. Then there's the cliché, one person's junk is another person's treasure. A lot depends on the shaping. Bishop describes both shaped parts of her essay—the prose foray and the metafiction interview—as "artful and naive" (55).

After the two opening paragraphs, Bishop separates the essay into the two parts. Part One consists of four numbered sections. In the first paragraph of the essay, Bishop writes that she wants to talk about mothers and daughters and women, and in the first section of Part One, she introduces the women characters in her family: herself, the youngest daughter; her mother, who is ill; her oldest sister—fifteen years older than Bishop; the sister who escaped to food; and the sister who seemed normal, the one Bishop wanted for a mother. The characters have no names, so I think of them as types: the sick mother (even her illness is not named until later), the distant sister, the fat sister, the normal sister. As reader, I feel distanced from the essay, not in a bad way, but it's hard to grow attached to characters who have no names. In the absence of details, I think of my own family—my mother's long, unnamed illnesses; I think of my sister, Laura, the youngest daughter; I wonder if she would cast me in the role of distant sister (twelve
years older than she) or normal sister. Probably neither; I'd guess "silent sister" or "sister who escaped to books." The first numbered section consists of just one paragraph, so my thinking of both Bishop's family and my own family as characters is interrupted by white space, the number two, and a shift in both tense and perspective.

In the first paragraph of the second section, Bishop shifts to present tense and uses the second person: "If you're the child of a manic depressive, you want several things" (56). While the use of "you" can sometimes bring immediacy to the text (the reader closely identifying with "you"), in this case it has the effect of distancing me further, for I know the writer is speaking of herself more than me. My students make this same shift, usually when working with material that makes them uneasy: "When you get dumped again, you think all guys are jerks." People on the six o'clock news recounting some tragic event will do the same: "When a man holds a gun to your head, you freeze." I wonder about the narrator's use of "you." Is it meant to draw in the reader or listener? Or to distance the narrator from her own experience? How would the effect of the sentence change if she wrote, "Later, I wanted my mother to remain ill" instead of "Later, you want your mother to remain ill"? (56). What happens in the text, in a reading, when the writer takes ownership of a desire or feeling through the use of the first person? Is the "you" less "confessional"? Or does the use of "you" allow the writer to "confess" more?

Truthfully, I don't want to get into the issue of confession. But I do want to consider the effects of tense and perspective, especially when they shift. After two paragraphs of using the second person, Bishop shifts to the third person: "Her need to
concentrate on her own problems—what seemed like a mental hypochondria—erased the daily ills of those around her” (56). The character who has been “your mother” throughout the section is now “her,” further distanced. When I think this woman cannot be any more distant from the writer or from me as reader, Bishop pushes her even further away, writing, “No words . . . can indicate the anguish of such a woman, lost within the boundaries of mind, trekking illegible trails each day and night, coming slam up short against blocked passages out of box canyons” (56). Even in this poetic-sounding passage, where the mother is figured as her own person, someone in pain, she is “such a woman,” a ghostly presence lost in her own mind.

In the next one-sentence paragraph, the mother all but disappears, eclipsed by what the illness can do to another: “the strain of understanding not-real-but-real illness can make a child ill, imagined ill, sympathetic ill, actual ill” (56). This child is, of course, the speaker in the essay; Bishop switches to first person and past tense. She writes, “Stomach aches were what I had” (56). Later in the same paragraph, reflecting as an adult, Bishop revises her self diagnosis, “The illness I had, I think today, was wanting to be a child; the medicines tasted of despair, rankly red and green like bile” (56). The child swallows despair. The description of her stomach as “knotted like a fist” supports the metaphorical connection to bile. In ancient physiology, black bile suggests melancholy; yellow bile—cholera—implies anger. In my reading, the adult’s anger replaces the child’s despair. The writer doesn’t dwell for long on either, though. Instead, she shifts back to the second person in a two-sentence paragraph: “Often, you want to end her
illness but can’t imagine an end. In truth, it doesn’t end” (56). Bishop moves back and forth between the general and specific, the abstraction (wanting, wishing, absence, need, despair) and the concrete (taking green and red medicine, lying on the metal cot in the nurse’s office, waiting for her father) to describe her own condition as daughter.

In the next paragraph, Bishop transitions through years, collapsing feelings of alarm, her mother’s eventual suicide, and continued worry into just two sentences: “Alarm over my mother continued years after I left home and didn’t ease until she took her own life. Even at such an ending, I’ve found, questions and worry don’t end” (57). She seems to take a writer’s eye to her mother’s life, interpreting what doesn’t always make sense. She writes, “Her life appears to me as a giant joke of patterns, tangled in their force, hard to salvage, vivid” (57). The second half of section two personifies moments from the mother’s life, “her Past and Marriage perched like vultures on the bed in the dark” (57). The mother is agoraphobic, unhelped by hospitals, drugs, shock treatments. And while the daughter knows some of the facts of her mother’s life, she can’t see into that life. She compares her mother’s mind to Dürer prints and Goya etchings and admits that neither she nor the others around her mother could do any more “than project our imaginings upon her” (57). I think of writing experience—especially experiences of others—as synonymous with projecting imaginings, shaping inherited facts, that intimate dross.

As I read section three, I’m reminded of the assignment that prompted Bishop to write this essay. She had asked her class of graduate teaching assistants to write a literacy
autobiography. Responding to her own assignment, Bishop wrote “The Shape of Fact.” In section three, she makes her position as writer, as fact-shaper, especially prominent. The theme of mothers and daughters and women remains, but here Bishop links the theme more explicitly to her role as writer. She talks about inheriting her mother and, as a writer, inheriting “such a mother as theme, for always she pushes, generates, lurks behind a story or a poem” (57). As a way of acknowledging this legacy, Bishop includes one of her poems and an excerpt from a short story, pieces that illustrate both the ways writers mold experience through form and the ways form shapes fact and selves.

In her poem, “Family History,” Bishop’s choice of form demonstrates control. She utilizes a rhyme scheme (abababcc) and, for the most part, a regular meter (iambic pentameter, with some variation). The central metaphor of the poem—war—suggests a kind of controlled chaos:

My jack-sprat parents, full of spite and bile,
Would measure out their words in stunning ways
And amplify each other’s torn-tongue style
In hard-barred, door-locked rooms of disarray.
They would defend each maneuver and slowly stockpile
An arsenal of faithless things to say. (57)

In the poem, the war is primarily between the parents, but in the last stanza, the children war with their own legacy; married unhappily, they “continue their [parents’] life, fearing their style” (58). And that inheritance seems to be the writer’s as well. Just as the parents in the poem “measure out their words,” defend, maneuver, and carefully stockpile their “faithless” words, the speaker in the poem expresses her own anger through a remarkably controlled form.
Commenting on her own use of family facts, Bishop writes, “when I had to, [I] turned the shape of the fact of my family into my own versions, stories that appalled or pleased or elicited the response I hoped for: solidarity, or comfort, or understanding” (58). This comment speaks to the writer’s agency, the ability to shape materials in such a way that a piece elicits a particular response. Yet Bishop also speaks to the shaping power of form, the ways writing creates a self: “By claiming a clean careful modified Yeatsian stanza form, I turned myself into a clean careful (in control) story” (58). In the essay, Bishop does not elaborate on this comment, but the admission is pedagogically useful. That is, I believe it is important to bring such issues up in writing class discussions. In discussing readings (poems, personal essays, editorials, academic arguments, and so on), it’s useful to discuss the ways particular uses of form and grammar create and communicate particular selves and ideas. Here, I emphasize particular uses because I believe it’s less useful to make broad generalizations: never use fragments; personal essays reinforce a solitary, unified self; always have a thesis statement. With the practice of reading various forms through the lens of rhetorical effect (how they do what they do), students can begin to bring that awareness, that vocabulary, that sensitivity to their own writing and to their responses to each other’s writing.

Introducing her fiction excerpt—a daughter speaking with her hospitalized mother on the phone—Bishop writes, “I tried to recapture my mother through her voice” (58). Though the reader will have no frame of reference by which to compare the textual voice with the mother’s real voice, Bishop’s purpose meshes well with the form she’s chosen:
dialogue. The daughter, Gina, speaks little. The mother talks about her own doctors, her condition, and how she’s perceived by others, even as she insists that her daughter speak:

‘Would you believe it? No one here can ever believe I have problems. They all think I’m so strong but inside I hurt Gina and I have to demand my share of reinforcement. Gina, you’re so quiet. But now I want to hear about you. You talk.’ (59)

After the story excerpt, Bishop comments, “I’ve captured my mother. I’ve erased myself. At a safe distance on the phone, I have no weight and no body” (59). Bishop’s interpretation rings true in some ways. The character that represents her speaks rarely in the story. However, in many other textual ways, she has not erased herself at all. Gina, even in relative silence, remains the center of the text. For example, the mother has no name. She is referred to by the narrator as “her [Gina’s] mother” seven times and a couple more times as “the voice.” In contrast, Gina’s name—spoken either by the mother or referred to by the narrator—appears fifteen times. And the mother addresses Gina as “you” over twenty times, the same number of times she refers to herself (as “I”). As well, the excerpt ends with Gina: “Gina sighed. ‘I’m fine. I bought vitamins today’” (59).

Gina’s character is created, not erased, in relation to and through her response to the mother. Just as readers can recognize the ways the writer’s interpretation is reinforced by the text, they/we can also see the ways the text and differing readings of the text complicate the writer’s interpretation—the ways facts are shaped not only in the writing but change shape through additional readings.

In the fourth numbered section, Bishop continues the theme of inheritance, now as it relates to her body, her writing, and her parenting. She considers her positions and

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development in relation to her writing. For example, while—before the death of her mother—Bishop would not consider having children, her writing was populated by women “with transparently ticking biological clocks” and children (59). As well, the characters that seemed to represent Bishop in the writing were asking, Why not have children? In this way, the writing, instead of functioning exclusively as a vehicle for expressing an already held position, pushes the writer (potentially, at least) to consider a different position.

The ever-developing facts of the writer’s life do the same. Bishop discusses the inheritance of aging, living through her mother’s ages, seeing her mother’s body (the backs of her arms, the cellulite, the lines around her mouth) in her own (60). The facts of her own bodily development cause both apprehension and sympathy. The corporeal facts she lives give the writer cause to look back and to question, “Did anyone then, I wonder, worry enough about the female body she was living through before slapping on cold gel at the temples?” (60). In an earlier allusion to her mother’s shock treatments, Bishop mentions only that the treatments don’t work, that nothing seemed to make her mother “better.” Earlier, she seems to write for and from the perspective of a child, wanting the mother to be better, wanting to rescue her own childhood. The more adult perspective, though, gives a more sympathetic view.

In this section, Bishop writes as a daughter, an adult woman, and then as a mother. Her position as mother gives her the perspective to look forward. She writes, “Of course, my daughter and son will have to shape the facts themselves, and their views will never
follow the same angle or strike the same timbre as mine” (60). This perspective is similar to the one Nancy Sommers takes in both “Between the Drafts” and “I Stand Here Writing” (see Chapter 3). Both writers shape moments from the past for present purposes and understand that their children will do the same, most likely with differing results. Perhaps, too, by investing their own children with the authority to re-shape facts and revise, these writers authorize their own interpretations of childhood moments, interpretations that—also most likely—differ from those of their parents.

In her poem “Touching Liliana” Bishop writes about a mother and child, about the complexity of inheritance: “She plays in the shadow of / My days—her forward / Is my past.” And the poem continues:

Raising children, you see,  
Is the kind of archeology  
Most of us do best—  
Trace family skeletons  
And our biology (61).

For Bishop, and many writers before and after her, the legacy of daughterhood and motherhood is not only an inheritance of “actual, tangible effects” but also a need to dig back, to make sense, to sort imaginings and facts, to make something of fragments. Bishop writes of her mother,

Her papers and my memories are married together in file cabinet and bookcase, inscribed deeply on computer disk and brain cells. I trace her body in my body, make stray sightings of us both in my daughter, and see her as a warning—and a need to witness. (61)
Lynn Z. Bloom ties this “need to witness” to form, arguing that autobiography is a form of witnessing (see Chapter 4). This idea of witnessing merges the physical and textual, seeing and telling, experiencing and relating, biology and expression.

Giving tentative closure to Part One and transitioning to Part Two of the essay, Bishop writes, “Facts, I’m learning, take their shape this way: I etch a new outline and slowly, slowly, find the encouragement to fill it in” (61). Although Bishop doesn’t mention specifically where this encouragement comes from, her choice of form (the four numbered sections a kind of outline: family, childhood, writing the inheritance, inheriting the body/passing on the legacy) seems generative. When I asked Bishop about her use of form—both in “The Shape of Fact” and her other essays—she explained the process of her writing,

I’ll often actually block out an essay. . . . I’ll throw the quote in, and then I’ll find the structure around it, so the directions for the reader are often as much directions for me, helping me find a way through the text. And I figure if they help me, I’d probably better leave them for the reader to find out where we meet. (Interview, July 2000)

In the same way, Bishop encodes directions in Part Two of her essay, creating a different kind of outline and filling it in, again, allowing the form to help her generate new material.

Bishop chooses a question/answer format for Part Two, what she terms a “metafaction interview.” Taking student questions and comments from a graduate workshop, Bishop uses reader responses as a way to rethink and revise her initial rendering of facts and experience, as represented in the “prose foray” section.
Interestingly, through the use of separate sections, she preserves the initial renderings, allowing the later questions to expose the gaps. And Bishop's reconstruction does what every creative writing workshop I've been in forbids: answers back instead of changing the initial text. But her answers, even separate from the earlier rendering, do change the text. These answers not only add information and highlight absences, but they also, potentially, create more gaps and questions.

One of the reasons why I (and many other writing teachers) ask writers whose pieces are being workshopped in a classroom setting not to respond within the workshop is that response sometimes turns to defense and inhibits listening, especially when done on the spot. As well, a writer's defense—and defensiveness—can also reify a specific rendering (a concretizing of a moment or "experience" once and for all), rather than helping writers to consider the ways they've selected and ordered and to recognize the literal and literary effects of those choices on readers. I can see the ways Bishop's form (the two distinct parts), though, can be pedagogically useful in a number of ways.

I've brought "The Shape of Fact" into a composition course and students have responded favorably to seeing a representation of a professional writer's process. I use it to model the kinds of questions readers might ask of a text in peer response. And I use it to demonstrate the ways experience is constructed and in need of interpretation.

But the form might also have another use: recording a workshop (either through audio tape or writing down the questions asked/comments made) and asking writers to create their own metafiction interview might also have pedagogical value. The form
might be generative for other writers, as it is for Bishop. That is, the form might help writers better consider their relation to readers and to their own texts, to think through some of the choices they've made by responding to readers' concerns without the often awkward pressure of having to revise those concerns into a form where they may or may not fit. Through considered response, writers may discover new material to integrate into the text, or they may find a new form, a new section, another perspective of and on writing experience—recognizing with each try that each subsequent attempt can be as artful and naive as the previous one.

The metafiction interview form foregrounds writing choices and interpretive issues, ones that are often glossed over in or revised out of "finished" texts. One reader asks how the mother committed suicide, and Bishop admits that she slipped the fact in ("she took her own life") without elaboration, not knowing how to announce suicide. With the reader's straightforward question, though, Bishop gives a direct answer: "My mother took too much of her medication on purpose and went swimming in her trailer park estate's clubhouse pool. She drowned" (63). In giving this answer to the reader, she need not dramatize as she's done in fictional pieces or in her imagination; nor does she need to interpret the fact, though she does reflect on the difficulty of explaining her mother's death to her daughter: "how did her grandmother die? By drugs, by drowning, by decision, by self, due to loss, due to depression" (64). In this case, the composing issue is not so much the fact of the mother's death ("she took her own life") but how to contextualize this fact within the piece—and for what audience.
When another reader asks for additional scenes, Bishop questions herself: “That is a central issue—how many vignettes should I share?” (61). In response, Bishop offers seven fragments, facts she left out of the initial piece, including the “fact that [her] mother, raised in a Minnesotan Norwegian farm family of many brothers and sisters, might have been abused as a child but died before [they] talked about it” and the “fact that [Bishop’s] Army family moved eighteen times in the fifteen years before [she] was born” (61). She reflects briefly on these absences, wondering which might “hold the key” and then considers why she included the scenes she did: “Did I share only already fictionalized ‘scenes’ like the one between Gina and Gina’s mother because they are safe, fully filtered through my memory’s censor?” (61). Without answering her own questions, Bishop offers other possible explanations for the choices she made: the problem of authority (“Did these things happen, and if they happened, did they happen as I remember them?”) and the fear of telling too much (“I worry that to tell too much, too clearly is to sensationalize, to admit feelings, to wallow, to sentimentalize, to feel sorry”) (61). These explanations suggest that Bishop, as writer, has internalized the critiques often leveled against memoir and the personal essay. Yet, the interview form allows her to tell the kinds of stories and make admissions she did not include in her prose foray. The readers’ questions, also selected by Bishop, authorize a kind of disclosure that internalized critiques often prevent.” In response to the questions of others, she provides the kinds of specific scenes all but absent from her initial rendering.
However, the questions do not fully determine the shape of her answers or the scenes she chooses. In answer to the question of whether she felt her mother was taking her life, Bishop answers the question directly ("Sure. Yes.") but then changes the question through a scene, reinforcing her earlier reflection on inheritance. She tells the story of making her daughter rewrite a spelling word and her daughter, in defiance, purposefully misspelling the word again:

I laughed. Forgive me, but the angry small letters jumped off the paper, proclaiming her personhood. I laughed at how hard it is to grow up with a mother. She felt I laughed at her. So last night, I took part of her life. She told me she'll never forgive me for that loud spontaneous belly laugh, and I believe her. (62)

And in response to a question about inheritance—whether she fears she's inherited her mother's illness and might pass it on to her own daughter—Bishop makes a similar rhetorical move, answering the question outright ("Of course") but then recounting a scene that fleshes out her earlier comment about not wanting to have children until after her mother had died. She alludes to having the fear of illness on down days or during stressful times, but she provides no scene as elaboration, choosing instead a story of her mother holding Bishop's infant niece "too tightly to her bosom graced by a large piece of sharp costume jewelry" (63). This scene emphasizes the distance Bishop desired ("no granddaughter—no claims") rather than the uncomfortable and too close possibility of mental illness as inheritance. Thus, Bishop appears to use the questions to tell the stories she wishes to tell, not necessarily the ones the questioner seeks. Her use of the questions demonstrates a method of concealment or protective coloration. Avoidance or rhetorical
sophistication, it’s an adeptness I, as teacher, want my students to develop—and to recognize in the work of others.

I want my students to know that readers have questions, interpretations, and desires. And that writers do too. I want them to understand that writers have reasons—some good, some cop-outs, some not yet apparent to themselves or others—for the choices they make. And I want them to realize that their approach to and experimentation with form can help develop rhetorical awareness. And all of these elements are intimately connected to audience.

*Who Is Your Audience?*
(a found poem)

questions
the writing
has always
mind

about audience
writer’s drive to
art
accessible audience
that we can’t

touch
make
art
never
define
good

everyone is my
i’d suggest and be
wrong

These are Bishop’s words, written originally in prose. I separate them with columns and breaks because I think she’d like it. Read from left to right and down, conventionally, and her sentences are there: “Questions about audience touch the writer’s drive to make ‘art.’ Art has a never explicit but always accessible audience. . . . (never mind that we can’t define good). . . . Everyone is my audience, I’d suggest, and be wrong” (63). Read the left-hand column for a different interpretation: “Questions the writing has always
mind audience.” Or the right-hand column for the imperative: “Touch. Make art explicit. Never define good.” The middle column is that always messy, fragmented space between.10

In attempting to define her audience for this piece, Bishop starts large (“everyone”), knowing she’ll be wrong, and then narrows: not her sisters; maybe her daughter and those who make a study of mothers and daughters. Her reflection suggests, too, that she is the audience for her work, that writing this piece will free her “to say other things at other times” (63). As an additional layer, Bishop represents readers who consider their own positions as audience members. Later in the question/answer section, a reader suggests that he’s not part of Bishop’s audience: “This piece tilts in favor of a female audience, so I’m not into it as much as many of the other readers are” (65). And another reader suggests that Bishop’s piece might be therapeutic for the writer but “possibly run the risk of being dull to readers” (65). Bishop allows these implicit critiques and responds: “I want you to read on, to care. Why don’t you care the cares of a female audience? Why are they female?” (65). While she gives space to these critiques, she does not give them the final word. She also includes favorably engaged reader-responses, questions and comments from interested readers, including one who, after reading Bishop’s essay, wants to write about her own mother.

The audience that Bishop does not mention explicitly but that is suggested by the form she chooses and the place of publication is an audience of writing teachers and perhaps students as well. The readers represented in the interview portion give Bishop
advice for revision, treating the prose foray as a draft. One suggests a more effective beginning, reasoning, “I didn’t think the sisters were developed enough to warrant beginning with them” (64). Another asks for more information: “Maybe you could explain more about manic depression” (64). Another gives a warning: “Watch out for your writer voice messing up your storyteller voice” (66). Still others reach for something to say, trying to pinpoint moments of ambivalence: “Your style is secretive in a way” (63); “I felt that there was something you were holding back” (65); “You’re hovering still” (66).

The form allows Bishop’s reading audience—the ones reading both parts of the essay, not just the prose foray—to see a range of reader responses and, perhaps, to consider their own relation to the text, where they fit in. When I teach “The Shape of Fact,” I ask students to write their own response to Bishop’s piece, to imagine themselves as part of the workshop. What questions would they ask? What places in the text work especially well? What suggestions do they have for change? In a way, Bishop invites such consideration, a reading of one’s self as audience. In response to the final comment about her “hovering,” Bishop responds, “Exactly, Dear Reader, exactly. We have shared this much, until now. What do you think? If we have come this far, I think we’re hovering together” (66). This turn to the generic “Dear Reader” places the actual reader in a community of other respondents.11 Interestingly, she ends “hovering,” leaving the reader with uncertainty, a lack of resolution.
I’m resisting the urge to do the same. My tentative, hovering self, the self that resists closure, is an essayistic creation. Generic and real all at once. But I promised you, reader, we’d get some place. Here’s what I wanted to show you (and myself):

1. Form is active. It can reinforce, or sometimes undermine, argument. It can encourage pedagogical reflection.

2. Form can be self and other authorizing. It can sanction expression, provide a place from which to speak within a disciplinary context, and invite response. If form finds the reader it has constructed, it can shape a particular kind of response too.

3. Writing and reading can be processes of learning for both writers and readers.

4. Disciplinary history, writerly history, and audience intersect in the theories writers enact through particular uses of form.

In the conclusion of “Places to Stand: The Reflective Writer-Teacher-Writer in Composition,” Wendy Bishop calls for “more writing about writing,” for writing teachers to “compose in student and school genres (and report back),” and for scholars to show their “construction-work” and let the “seams seem” (29). I’ve attempted to respond to these calls in this chapter and in the next one. In my conclusion to this dissertation, I open up Winston Weathers’s metaphor of the box and its relation to form. I write a personal essay in response to an assignment I give students as a way of demonstrating and reflecting on options in composition.
NOTES

1. I have a purpose in asking these questions, in calling attention to my position as narrator, in reflecting on the relations among subject, subject matter, and subject position. I think of Linda Brodkey’s discussion of critical ethnographies that draw attention to the ideological position of the narrator. See Brodkey’s “Writing Critical Ethnographic Narratives” (1987).

2. Bishop includes the longer version in Teaching Lives. In introducing the full version, she writes, “I drafted the response in the summer of 1994 and it was cut by about fifty percent when editor Joe Harris picked it up again to fit into a February 1995 issue. While the published version may be tauter and more to the point, the longer version . . . more fully represents my evolving writing style” (293-4). Bishop’s purpose, in part, was “to show how deeply writing and thinking about writing allow me to feel both social and individual” (294). Her use of form helps demonstrate that purpose.

3. Reiff’s article is a response to Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford’s 1984 article “Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked: The Role of Audience in Composition Theory and Pedagogy.”

4. And, yes, in this chapter, I ask my readers to do the same (to go on a textual ride without a map). This movement in my own writing (in the earlier chapters, I would write and then go back to put in maps, fearful of losing readers—sympathetic or unsympathetic—along the way) comes, in part, from listening to Bishop’s texts and feeling authorized to respond in kind. I suspect unsympathetic readers will not have gotten this far (and probably won’t be all that interested in my narrative, oh-by-the-way footnotes). Although in my good-girl moments, I don’t want to lose any reader, I also delight in the sense of freedom and confidence that comes from constructing and expecting a sympathetic reader (and ignoring the others).

5. I attempt to deal with this question in Chapter 3 by considering different readings of Sommers’s essays, my readings of both Sommers’s work and responses to her work, and the ways others have responded to my readings. At times I think I’m getting somewhere, understanding, but other times, it seems like I’m on a road going nowhere, going in circles, or hitting dead ends.

6. “Drive words” consist of a list of images a writer finds especially evocative. Mine, which I share with students when we do collaborative exercises in class, include Christmas bulbs, a childhood plate with Peter Rabbit on it, pink foam curlers, apples, and crayons. One of my students chose “canned Cheez Whiz.” We wrote our selected images on the white board and each composed poems that included ten of the thirty drive
words. This exercise tends to produce rich, sensory poems, and it emphasizes the social nature of composing. Despite the personal significance particular words hold for individuals, no one owns an image, and these images are powerful in their ability to elicit responses and memories from a variety of people.

7. A consideration of reader position also makes me reflect on my own writerly purpose. What do I want from my readers? I want my readers (you) to read my reflections on reading and form, to be convinced of the intellectual issues at play in writing experience, but more than that, I want you to read Bishop’s text yourself with a fresh awareness of your own position—and the ways you are positioned by both Bishop’s use of form and by the experiences (and other sources) you bring to the text. I want to find a reader who will offer a close, rhetorical reading that differs radically from mine because I believe—perhaps naively, perhaps falsely—that such a reading will help me understand a position that I alternately kick against and really desire to comprehend.

8. The adjective “jack-sprat” is an allusion to the nursery rhyme:

Jack Sprat
Could eat no fat,
His wife could eat no lean;
And so, betwixt them both,
They licked the platter clean.

According to “A Visual Goose,” the rhyme alludes to another war, originally poking fun “at Charles I and his greedy wife, Henrietta Maria. When Parliament refused to finance Charles’ war with Spain and left him ‘lean,’ he turned the tables and dissolved Parliament.” Charles and Henrietta then “imposed an illegal war tax and forced the common people to house their troops” <from http://www.mother.com/~prdesign/JackSprat.html>. Though the rhyme speaks of a couple working together, rather than warring each other as the parents do in Bishop’s poem, it also suggests spite and bile, as well as power and control.

9. Here, with some hesitance (hence the decision to put this connection in a footnote rather than to explore it further within the body of the text), I feel it is appropriate to note the similarity between the interview form and talk shows. Both formats, written or spoken, require the presence of another, someone to ask questions and elicit information. The presence of an interested other authorizes the answers, the stories. I make this connection not as a reason for dismissal (as it is in Marguerite Helmers’ work, see Chapter 3) but to suggest another way authority is constructed through rhetorical form.

10. Anticipated audience responses:
   a. What’s she been drinking/smoking?
   b. This girl has way too much time on her hands.
c. Huh?
d. Cool.
e. I’d have made different breaks.
f. Other

11. Lynn Z. Bloom also makes this rhetorical move in some of her essays, invoking the reader. Bishop’s “I think we’re hovering together” is similar to Bloom’s “The community we’ve negotiated is the community we’ve become.” See Chapter 4.
CHAPTER 6

OUT OF AND BACK INTO THE BOX—REDEFINING ESSAYS AND OPTIONS:

A CONCLUDING MULTI-GENRE MONTAGE

“If we come to composition with options, open-mindedness, adaptability, we not only fulfill ourselves the more but we obviously are capable of giving more to others” (55).

—Winston Weathers, An Alternate Style: Options in Composition

In the opening of his 1980 book An Alternate Style: Options in Composition, Winston Weathers uses the metaphor of a box to insinuate how what he wants to say often fails to fit into the forms he’s been taught to construct. He writes,

What I’ve been taught to construct is: the well-made box. I have been taught to put “what I have to say” into a container that is always remarkably the same, that—in spite of varying decorations—keeps to a basically conventional form: a solid bottom, four upright sides, a fine-fitting lid. . . . And I begin to wonder if there isn’t somewhere a round or oval box or tubular box, if somewhere there isn’t some sort of container (1) that will allow me to package “what I have to say” without trimming my “content” to fit into a particular compositional mode, (2) that will actually encourage me to discover new things to say because of the very opportunity a newly-shaped container gives me (even though I can never escape containers—e.g., syntax—altogether), (3) that will be more suitable perhaps to my own mental processes, and (4) that will provide me with a greater rhetorical flexibility, allowing me to package what I have to say in more ways than one and thus reach more audiences than one. (2)

It’s Weathers’s second point that I focus on most often as a teacher and writer, that form can help writers discover new things to say. As a composition teacher, I focus on this
point out of necessity: please, don’t make me read another paper with the thesis, “Playing soccer influenced me in three ways; it gave me friends I will keep for a lifetime, taught me responsibility, and helped me believe in myself.” Please, don’t make me read three drafts each of twenty-four of these themes. No wonder so many composition teachers refuse to teach this form of the essay.

For most of their educational lives, students have been taught to see the form of the essay as a traditional five-paragraph theme, as a sturdy, box-like form of school writing that they must master for the sake of clarity. They know this box, its neat compartments: simple, exact, direct. I tell them this box is useful for essay exams, for those times they need to parcel out bits of knowledge, especially when working under time constraints. I tell them I’m not looking for five-paragraph themes, asking them instead to see the essay as a shape-shifting form that can help them explore multiple ways of representing selves and others within a cultural context. Rather than being constrained by the belief that they must somehow fit their experience into a few body paragraphs that support an over-simplified thesis, summed up neatly in the conclusion, I want them to learn to see the rhetorical possibilities of the form and its functions.

*   *   *
When teaching the form of the personal essay, I give my students the following assignment early in the term:

Perspectives Piece: Writers of the personal essay consult a variety of sources and often look at an issue, idea, topic, or experience from more than one perspective. For this assignment—which is due early on in the term, so we can discuss (hands on!) the process of research and writing even before we begin workshopping—you will choose a topic and attempt to look at and write about that topic in several different ways. You should do some research (consult books—the Oxford English Dictionary, novels, medical journals; search the Internet; interview friends and experts) and draw from observation and personal experience (read through old letters and journals or write from memory). Then work to put much of the material you’ve gathered together. Attempt different styles: labyrinthine sentences, fragments, lists, sections, reflective writing, high exposition—even weave in a poem, section from a letter, or quotations. This assignment will give you focused practice in drawing from a variety of sources and expanding your stylistic repertoire. Have fun with it!

I encourage range and variety in the choice of topics. Yes, students can write about love or death; they can, following Montaigne, choose abstractions: “On Cruelty,” “On Repenting,” “On Experience.” But they can also chose the mundane: Montaigne wrote “On Coaches.” They can write about oatmeal, lips, or lilies. Students could, for example, in writing about oatmeal, discuss its medical benefits, include recipes, write about a memory of feeding oatmeal to a baby; they could explore oatmeal’s texture, scent, history.

The assignment requires research, association, and range. In responding to this assignment, students have the opportunity to explore the historical, personal, scientific, poetic, ethnographic, and rhetorical aspects of any chosen subject. And through stylistic play, they expand their rhetorical repertoire and learn to see “personal experience” less as a linear, plot-driven story that can be told only in one way. They create mosaics and
collages, examining their own stories, memories, and ideas in the context of what others
have said and written about the same topic.

In this concluding chapter, I attempt to do the same. Through writing my own
perspectives piece, I open up Winston Weathers’s box metaphor in order to consider and
test some of the options and possibilities of the personal essay for writing, teaching, and
scholarship.

* * *

On Defining Boxes

Box: A case or receptacle usually having a lid; a. orig. applied to a small receptacle of
any material for drugs, ointments, or valuables; b. gradually extended (since 1700) to
include cases of larger size, made to hold merchandise and personal property; but (unless
otherwise specified) understood to be four-sided and of wood.

—Oxford English Dictionary

I wonder how many student essays I’ve read that begin with a dictionary
definition. I wonder how many, including this one, I’ve written. In order not to revise the
epigraph definition out of my next draft, I’ll tell myself there’s something more
respectable about the OED than the opening phrase I’ve read (and probably written)
dozens of times, “According to Webster’s New World Dictionary. . . .” There’s
something oddly satisfying about definitions, working with them and against them.
Defining and redefining.

* * *
When it comes to composition and creative nonfiction, and especially the form of the personal essay, there’s a lot of defining going on: What composition is—what it’s not. What forms composition teachers teach—what forms they leave to the creative writing teachers. While both teachers of composition and creative nonfiction often claim the essay as their domain, there’s little consensus about what exactly an essay is—or how to teach it. And there are some who tire of the defining all together.

In “The Essay Canon,” Lynn Z. Bloom writes that “we will know the essay has truly come of age when writers—essayists and critics alike—can discuss it without defining it; we should know it when we see it.” On the second day of class, after my intermediate writing students had read Bloom’s piece, I asked, “Do we know the essay when we see it?” I asked them to define the essay and to provide examples of essayists they knew. All but two of the students defined the essay as a short piece of writing containing an introduction with a thesis, several body paragraphs supporting that thesis, and a conclusion reinstating the main point. In fact, here’s one of those student definitions—one that could have come straight out of a textbook:

The form of the essay can simply be defined as introduction paragraph, body, and conclusion. This skeleton is a good beginning to build off of while writing. The elementary rules apply in these main parts. The introductory paragraph should include the main points of the essay, the body should elaborate upon these main points, and the conclusion should bring the essay to a close, making an impact on the reader. This basic form can lead to great writing if the points of the essay are well thought out and tied together in an organized fashion.

I could provide other student definitions, ones that sound remarkably the same. But the essayists these students pointed to as examples (Emerson, Thoreau, Baldwin, Mairs) didn’t seem to fit those tidy definitions. It was almost as if the word “essay” had two
completely separate meanings: one for students, one for published writers. We spent the remainder of the term considering the gap between definitions we'd been taught and the examples we admired. We spent a lot of time redefining—redefining not only what we mean when we say "essay" but also considering the many shapes "organization" can take and the multiple choices any writer has for beginning and concluding an essay. Defining has a way of closing down possibilities when as a teacher, writer, and essayist, my goal is to open them up—to advocate for options.

* * *

Block quotations and paragraphs look strikingly like boxes. So do many stanzas in poetry. I like order: on rectangular shelves in my closet, I line shoe boxes; in rectangular kitchen cabinets, I line cereal boxes in descending order by height; under my bed, I line rectangular plastic boxes filled with neatly folded sweaters from another season. I write in lines on rectangular pages, read from left to right and down. Even when I look for options, my computer offers tables and columns, more boxes. I don't want to give up boxes altogether; they're useful. But I want other options too.

* * *

My first poetry teacher gave this option: conceive of the page as a field. He encouraged me to move beyond my box-like stanzas, so even and uniform.

* * *
The page as an open field, not a box to fill with other box-like structures. There are few, if any, right angles in nature. I can think of no natural squares—just hills and uneven slopes, rounded flower petals, curved riverbanks, beautifully twisted trees. There's still order. The design of fractals, perfectly formed irregular lines and surfaces fashioned by an infinite number of similarly irregular sections.

* * *

Box, another definition from the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

A genus (Buxus) of small evergreen trees or shrubs of the family Euphorbiaceae; specially B. sempervirens, the Common or Evergreen Box-tree, a native of Europe and Asia; a shrub with deep-green leaves of a thick leathery texture. It is much used in ornamental gardening, esp. in a dwarfed variety (dwarf or ground box) for the edgings of flower-beds.

* * *

The Ash-leaved Maple is a box elder (*acer negundo*)—deciduous, ornamental. It differs from all other maples in that it has compound leaves (three to five leaflets), while other maples have simple leaves. It grows quickly in a range of places—from Canada, south to Florida and then west to the Rockies. Seeds of thought, ideas branching out, not confined.

* * *

The argument has been made before that the personal essay is organic, somehow more "natural" than other forms. That's not what I'm trying to suggest. Even trees need to be pruned. Have you ever touched a flower arrangement only to find out it was silk?

* * *
The essay is not “free,” not beyond form. It is, in fact, an historical form, one with a lineage. Situated, contextual. The personal essay—despite some seemingly unconventional shapes it can take—is conventional, gaining power from the use of recognizable literary tropes: symbol, metaphor, juxtaposition, allusion, image. Like other forms, it likes acceptance and has to strike a balance between the submission to and the confounding of expectation and tradition.

* * *

When my brother was small, he loved his Pampers; he called them his “babies” because there was a picture of a baby on the box. For his second birthday, my parents bought him a motorcycle helmet and wrapped it in a Pampers box. When Shawn unwrapped the present, he was delighted and excitedly chanted, “Babies! Babies!” When he opened the box, he threw the helmet, looked inside the empty box, and cried, “Babies. . . Babies. . .”

Sometimes boxes create an expectation their contents do not fulfill.

* * *

Box: To confine as in a box, or in uncomfortably narrow limits; often with up, in.

—Oxford English Dictionary

Confined in this room, I see branches outside the window but face this box-like computer screen. Even the font I use is strikingly square. (I hate it when people change their fonts mid-sentence. I like order.) But, really, there wasn’t another option: I’ve read
the guidelines for preparing doctoral theses: “Fonts and font size must be acceptable to the Graduate School (see under format and appearance above)” (107) and “the font and size should be consistent throughout the document” (91).

I must submit
a draft
to the Graduate School
rulers, measures
of margins and form.

I’ve checked
each box
on the manuscript
preparation checklist.

Even the final draft,
the approved,
must be submitted
unbound, in a box.

I actually like the idea of “unbound and in a box”; perhaps that will be my new metaphor for essaying. Of course, soon, these pages will be bound and on a shelf.

*   *   *

There are times when I think that even the forms of the essay I defend, assign, advocate, and write are too conservative, too traditional, too boxed in. But they have a function, maybe many functions. These forms might function as a transition and counterpart to other forms. I think about hypertext a lot these days, how this dissertation is suited to hypertext (I’ve ended up, in places, using footnotes like I might use hotlinks). But then I think about audience, about how many people (myself included) don’t, even
claim that they can’t, comprehend much while reading online. And hypertext isn’t even that radical.

Today I was reading about a student who, for a class project, handed in a story written on a pair of tennis shoes. In addition to the tennis shoes, the student, Vicki Davis, included instructions and a printed version of the story. She wrote, “You’ll notice that there is a story written on the sneakers that are enclosed. Please put the sneakers on before reading them. Wear them for a day” (Haake, 58). The story itself addresses the wearer of the shoes, opening, “Here you are walking down the street in a pair of new shoes” (59); it directs the reader’s steps. The writer walks the reader through a day—what the reader will do, what she’ll think, when she’ll go home. And the story ends with possibility, “You think about the story on your shoes and wonder what it would have been like if someone else had been wearing them” (59).

The story and its tactile, rubber-soled form suggest both a theory and a practice of reading (putting yourself into someone else’s storied shoes). It does what I’ve claimed for the form of the personal essay (the form embeds a pedagogy), perhaps more effectively, more directly. But how would you publish a pair of sneakers, or, when the audience is not one teacher but a multitude of them, how would you anticipate the range of shoe sizes?

So, maybe the personal essay is still a box? For now, this minute, I’ll conceive of it as a delicate origami box—not wood or sturdy corrugated cardboard.

* * *

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“The personal essay is the reverse of that set of Chinese boxes that you keep opening, only to find a smaller one within. Here you start with the small . . . and suddenly find a slightly larger container, insinuated by the essay’s successful articulation and the writer’s self-knowledge” (xxviii).

—Phillip Lopate, The Art of the Personal Essay

*   *   *

Box—Paper, Wood, Hope

In the first century A.D., the wealthy in China fold paper. By the sixth, paper more common, Japan makes an art of it—ori (to fold), kami (paper): crane, flower, box. In northern Africa, the Moors make math of it. They invade eighth-century Spain with paperfolding, geometric elegance. By the end of the first millennium A.D. in southern Poland, farmers and shepherds in the Carpathian mountains spend winters working wood. As snow rests on Podhalan fields, they carve and decorate boxes, then ornament dowry chests for love, prosperity, future. In 1960, my mother fills her hope chest with plastic banana boats from Dairy Queen. Two decades later, I laugh when she tells the story. But as a child I, too, know the love of boxes: wax paper folded around a tuna sandwich, school lunch boxes lined in wooden cubbies, treasures saved in music boxes (open the lid, a ballerina dances). To some, hope is a thing with paper wings, a crane. For others, a flower, exact geometric folds, or a wooden box to fill with plastic wishes for what we cannot yet imagine.
The concept of hope in a box reminds me of Pandora, the first woman on earth in Greek mythology. Her name means “all-gifted.” With a multitude of gifts, the gods also gave her a beautiful box and warned her never to open it. According to the myth, her curiosity overcame her, and she opened the box, releasing plagues and sorrows into the world. Hope, which remained in the box, was the only good among all the evil.

In a re-telling of the myth, Robert Hoffman has the gods give Pandora opposites: love and jealousy, weakness and strength, beauty and the insecurity that leads to vanity. Athena’s gift to Pandora is an intelligent mind and an overwhelming curiosity. In Hoffman’s version, Athena explains that “as much as curiosity can lead to knowledge, curiosity eventually leads to the loss of that same knowledge,” that the need to know too much is a weakness.¹ I know the same story in another form: Eve’s hunger for knowledge leads her to eat the forbidden fruit, and so sin enters the world. Like the forbidden fruit, Pandora’s box has become a cautionary tale against the hunger for knowledge.

Of course both Eve and Pandora are women, in Western traditions the first women on earth, cause of pain and pestilence. Poet Madison Julius Cawein’s version of the story highlights the gendered nature of Pandora’s curiosity. In his poem “Pandora’s Box,” he writes:

Now it was thus: Pandora, with the curiosity Native to women, wondering what could be Hidden within, and opening her Box to see, Without intending, set the Evils free.
And thus it came that, crowned with blood and tears,
War entered on our planet; Hate and Greed;
Distrust and Envy, with their numerous breed;
Famine and Pestilence; and all man fears
For those he loves. (Lines 24-32, The Poet and Nature and the Morning Road)

And Cawein closes his poem with an explanation of how Hope was caught: “Being a
woman ... She changed her mind / And so was caught, by making some delay, /
Admiring Pandora and the way / Her gown was cut, or just her eyebrows, say” (lines 47-
50). In Cawein’s version, Hope is a indecisive fairy, caught by her flighty admiration of
Pandora’s superficial beauty. I can’t decide whether this personification should make me
laugh or cringe. Or maybe I even like it. Maybe, like Hope, I’m distracted by beautiful
surfaces, get caught up in them. Or maybe, like Pandora, my curiosity—this need to open
the box—is a curse.

* * *

Pandora’s Box: A List

get off your soap box, soap box derby, box office, box elder, Chinese box, boom box,
music box, box turtle, lunch box, in box, out box, mail box, confessional box, jewelry
box, boxcar, boxed lunches, box of chocolates, Boxing day, boxing gloves, boxed in,
boxed out, PO box, litter box, toolbox, cigar box, tissue box, toy box, squeeze box, salt
box, Jack-in-the-box, voice box, pencil box, box of crayons, matchbox, cereal box,
sandbox, lockbox, breadbox, gift box, pillbox hat, boxer, boxing ring, box canyon,
pillbox, window box, tackle box, boxed cards, tack box, the Boxer Rebellion, shoe box,
icebox, boxberry, box kite, box camera, hatbox, tinderbox, chatterbox, juice box, voting
box, press box, ballot box, recipe box, jukebox, boxfish, box coat, boxer shorts, boxthorn,
box stall, boxtop, box step, box pleat, boxwood, box seat, boxy, box spring, think outside
the box

* * *

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The first story I ever really wanted to put in a box was one I wrote in fourth grade. It was a semi-autobiographical story and conventional by fourth-grade standards: it had characters (ten-year-old me and my then six-month-old cousin Jessica), setting (the bathroom), dialogue (well, the kind of dialogue you have with a six month old while changing her diaper: the baby was cooing; the main character was singing). What it didn’t have in plot, conflict, and point of view, the story made up for with the most important elements of fourth-grade fiction: poop and a toilet. Here’s the summary: a ten year old does her best to change a very stinky diaper, a messy one. When she reaches into the cabinet above the toilet to grab a washcloth, a box full of Band-aids falls into the toilet. All at once, she must keep the baby calm and on the counter and rescue the Band-Aids. Of course, our hero succeeds and, much to her relief, finds that the Band-Aid box was “New and improved! Now waterproof.” This last part was another element of fourth-grade fiction—wish fulfillment, for this story took place in the days of metal Band-Aid boxes, and, unlike their later plastic counterparts, they were not waterproof. (Mine now, cardboard, are even less so, but I don’t keep them in a cabinet over the toilet.)

Anyway, the story isn’t the point here. For parents’ night, we put our stories on display in the gymnasium, and I wanted more than anything to put my story in a Band-Aid box. I’d written the story on horizontal strips of paper that I’d cut to resemble the shape of a Band-Aid, complete with penciled-in air holes and a sterile pad center where the words went. And, while the other books were pasted between rectangular ten-by-thirteen pieces of cardboard covered by wallpaper samples, I held my book together with Band-Aids. I was convinced then, and now, that the form of presentation made a
difference. Of course, my “creativity” also needed to be reigned in by concerns for audience. My teacher worried that parents wouldn’t know to open the box and, thus, might never read the story. Her solution was to tape the Band-Aid shaped story to a rectangular piece of cardboard. In that form, it did get read (by far more parents than read my other more conventionally shaped book), and I probably learned something about the interdependence of conventionality and innovation. But I still think the Band-Aid box and the possibility of opening it to find a story was a good idea (for a fourth-grader, at least.)

*   *   *

An Internet company boasts 1,048 box sizes for sale: cardboard, mailing, moving, storage, shipping, gift boxes. So many sizes, kinds, and uses.

*   *   *

POOR JACK-IN-THE-BOX

By Mary Mapes Dodge (Nineteenth-century poet)

Frighten the children, do I? Pop with too sudden a jump?  
Well, how do you think I felt, all shut in there in a lump?  
And didn't I get a shock when the lid came down on my head?  
And if you were squeezed up and locked in, wouldn't you get ugly and red?  
If you think I'm so dreadful, my friend, suppose you just try it yourself;  
Let someone shut you in a box, and set you away on a shelf--  
And then, when the lid is unhooked, if you don't leap out with a whack,  
And look like a fright when you spring, I'll give in, or my name isn't Jack.

*   *   *

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I see boxes everywhere these days, boxes to contain events ("Birthday in a Box," "Shower in a Box"), even people. One website offers Personality in a Box:

$19.95 for each Personality in a Box (plus shipping) includes:

- Colorful box illustrating the 12 personality types: Geek, Control Freak, Talkative, Partier, Happy-Go-Lucky, Comedian, Romantic, Ditz, Schizo, Rebel, Sensitive, and Snob.

- Certificate of Personality which will entitle the bearer to the romance, the wealth, the power and the recognition due to a person with a personality.

- Guide book with pictures and personality snippets that help you determine a personality type. And last but not least, A 100% cotton, one 4-color silk screened T-shirt with your chosen personality.

<http://www.lolofun.com/personality.html>

* * *

"...the practice of letting meaning grow out of the act of its own making and remaining responsive to the complex threads of language, any one of which may unfold like a Chinese puzzle box if we listen closely or let it, is not a practice that is confined to women or, for that matter, to the inhabitants of any other cultural margin. But how women and others speak from the margins is complicated largely...by relative positions to dominant discourses of power, mastery, and privilege" (90).

—Katharine Haake, *What Our Speech Disrupts*

* * *

Box: A blow; a buffet.

Box: trans. orig. To beat, thrash; later, to strike with the fist, to cuff, to buffet: now usually, to strike (the cheek, ear, etc.) with the hand.

—*Oxford English Dictionary*
In both its noun and verb forms, “box” has violent connotations. And I see it everywhere—“hegemonic struggle,” I contend, assert, argue, refute, challenge. I say I want a new metaphor, no more war. But war is complicated. Pamela Kluss Mittlefehldt calls the essay a weaponry of choice, pewter, explosions of anger. So much for my white box essays as invitations. (Are there times, too, when invitations are violent? Invitations to whom? For what? Who’s invited? Who’s left off the list?)

For Gloria Anzaldúa, war is, in part, internal: mestiza consciousness, a struggle of borders. She writes about “the clash of voices,” internal strife, attacks, cultural collision—and the need for tolerance of ambiguity: “She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned” (Borderlands / La Frontera 79). That’s not true exactly; there are things Anzaldúa wants to end: rape, violence, war (80). She discusses the conscious rupture of oppressive traditions (82); there is violence everywhere:

In the Borderlands
you are the battleground
where enemies are kin to each other;
you are at home, a stranger,
the border disputes have settled
the volley of shots have shattered the truce
you are wounded, lest in action
dead, fighting back; (“To live in the Borderlands means you” 194)

* * *

I wrote this once (not today): Through essaying, I want students to reflect in new ways on their own experiences and those represented by others. And I want them to see
the ways the form might allow for more complex ways of situating oneself among others in scholarship as well. That is, there are scholarly options beyond either correcting someone else’s work or using it squarely to authorize one’s own opinion; there are ways of valuing and extending, allowing someone’s work to take them in a new direction, allowing someone’s work to complicate their own. I want them to see that not only can form help writers discover new things to say and new ways to position themselves among others, but form can do the same for readers.

Okay. I still believe it. But what do I do with it? What do I do on the battleground? Or in the classroom? Tell me, is there violence in trying always to make connections? In what ways do connections exclude necessary differences?

*   *   *

I know there are still tensions. But I’m trying to find the space where tensions are productive, where they open up possibilities rather than shutting them down. (For what purpose? What possibilities do you wish to exclude?)

*   *   *

A friend edited my work one day and changed every “I wonder if” to “I contend” or “I argue.” She made my questions into statements. I cringed at the new tone, but passively accepted her corrections. She said it gave my work more power and authority. There’s a kind of power (and use of power) too in wondering and questioning, in avoiding strong claims.
It's kind of like shadowboxing, this use of form. Making a statement, supporting it, undercutting it, going back and forth both with myself and with this world of others whose words and names I use and confuse.

* * *

Last night I took out a photograph that my mother gave me nearly seven years ago when I started graduate school. I put it just below my computer monitor. In the picture, I am two years old, wearing a bright yellow, flower-print bonnet with lace around the edges. Think Little House on the Prairie. You get the picture. My mother made that bonnet and a matching dress (one for both me and my doll). I'm wearing the bonnet but no dress in the picture, and there is no doll in sight. I'm wearing boxing gloves, holding my tiny fistl ed hands up (the gloves are nearly as big as my head), staring straight at the camera. I can't tell if I'm on the offensive or defensive (and the beauty of boxing is that it's both), whether that's a smile or look of concentration, whether I'm posing or fighting or playing.

* * *

So, what is my hope in and for this use of form? My hope is that the form of the personal essay—broadly conceived and practiced—might give writers (teachers/scholars/students) a way of approaching and interacting with the multiple sources, texts, voices, memories, and images they're confronted by daily. My hope is that the personal essay will provide a method for selecting, ordering, evaluating, analyzing, closing down some possibilities, and opening up others, finding new shapes and metaphors for what we know and don't know, for what we can imagine and have yet
to imagine. A box is more than a solid bottom, four upright sides, a fine-fitting lid; it is a
tree, a glove, a fish, a fist, a container, an alternative, a poem, a story, and question. Hope
and lack, healing and violence. And, yes, more.

When I was in the early stages of writing this dissertation, a reader told me that he
thought my project should be on the powers and limits of the personal essay. I said in
response that we need to explore the powers more fully before we know the limits. So, in
conclusion, I offer what I see as some of the powers of the personal essay. Think of them
as a collection of boxes to open up in your writing, teaching, and scholarship. As writers,
teachers, scholars, and students explore the powers, we’ll certainly also find limits.
Beware: at some point, an ugly red Jack is bound to pop out and scare you; that Jack
might be you, a student, a critic, or your department chair; or it might be a memory you
didn’t know you had. Whatever you find, report back.

- For writing: the personal essay is generative; it accommodates a range of styles,
  subjects, and positions. It allows for connection-making and complicating, for
  considering what you know and finding out some of what you don’t. Like Bloom
  and Bishop, I advocate teachers writing the forms they teach. Write a perspectives
  piece on a topic, issue, or word about which you know something but are curious
to learn more.  

- For teaching: the personal essay can reinforce both a process pedagogy and one
  that values collaboration. Give students the perspectives piece assignment, asking
  them to explore a concept or issue central to the course (for example: revision,
  feminism, form, race, self, argument, ethos, delivery, invention). Have them write
  one section each week for the duration of the term. (You should do it too.)
  Toward the end of the term, have students choose their favorite section to
  contribute to a class perspectives piece. Put the pieces together collaboratively.
  (What an opportunity to discuss organization and its effects!) On the last day of
  class, have a public reading, each student reading her or his section.

- For scholarship: the personal essay provides a method for both responding to and
  situating yourself among others. I like to think of the personal essay as a way of
valuing and then extending the work of others. By “valuing,” I don’t mean 100% agreement or simply restating what someone else has already said or written. I mean reading and writing for both connections and disjunctions—to consider what is present and what is absent, what you can learn and add; to take an idea in another direction; to test an assignment in a different context (and report back); to recognize the ways your own work is informed and informs. Start with a quotation collage. Include the sources that excite, confuse, nourish, delight, and anger you. Write back to those sources. (Think of where you’d be if you didn’t have those sources, all the thoughts you might not have had—good and bad.) Write in a memory of where you were (physically, theoretically, emotionally) when you read or otherwise experienced one of those sources; describe where you are now (physically, theoretically, emotionally); imagine the places you could be. Write yourself and your audience there. Better yet, let the writing take you someplace you couldn’t at first imagine.5

Boxes remain useful for a number of purposes: to keep treasures safe, to transport books,6 to play inside. They often contain gifts. But to discover the gifts inside, boxes need to be opened. There are times, too, when boxes have served their purpose and need to be discarded. Carry a box as far as your strength allows, then sit down, open it up, and tell me what you find inside.
NOTES

1. See http://www.pantheon.org/mythica/articles/0/pandora.html Accessed 4/03/01

2. Weathers's *An Alternate Style: Options in Composition* includes the following exchange:

   *Dear Sir: I see no place whatsoever for such a stupid device as a 'list' in serious academic writing.*

   Dear Madame: I admit that few academic audiences today are prepared to accept the full range of devices available in the alternate grammar of style. But the day may come. (52)

3. My students rarely go to the library card catalogue and find fourteen books on a given subject. They, more often, type a word into an Internet search engine and find 1,048 hits (from the mundane to the pornographic to the informative).

4. I think my next perspectives piece will be on footnotes and endnotes.

5. As I come to a conclusion, I realize that I’ve written myself to the place I needed to go by learning to construct a reader (and maybe a self?) I like—someone who will believe enough in these powers of the personal essay to test my claims, to discover the limits and exceed them. When I began this project, I imagined that I’d end by telling my readers something, not asking them to tell me something.

6. Here are two stories about transporting books, both from helping academic friends pack their offices in anticipation of moves across the country. As I stood in one friend’s office, surrounded by boxes of books, we decided to number the boxes we would mail. As a joke on those who would carry the books to his new office, my friend started numbering at 68, laughing at the thought of the “poor saps” who would be expecting 67 additional boxes.

   Another friend tells me about a previous move, when his father silently carried box after box of books to the moving van. His father said one sentence to him that afternoon: “Boy, next time I see you, you better be reading.”
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