As if by Magic: Unleashing Critical and Expressive Voices Through a Rhetoric of "This/And" in First-Year Composition

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by

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation engages academic, creative, and student genres in conversation in order to challenge the strict discursive and stylistic boundaries placed around college writing, particularly in first-year composition. Because this project aims to thrust first-year writing pedagogy beyond the confines of fixed genre forms, its inquiry is multimodal, intermingling writing styles and research modes so that, in scholar-teacher Wendy Bishop’s words, “I can think in and through them all” (“Places to Stand” 17). The particulars—or “data”—informing this study are primarily archival, textual (often a combination of the two), experimental, and experiential. Broadly speaking, this inquiry consists of seven chapters, which collectively serve to historicize the development of standardized student genres, analyze the emergence of experimental academic forms, and theorize a multimodal/multi-genre writing pedagogy that recognizes the reflexive relationship between uniqueness of form and expression.
Acknowledgments

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Chapter One: The Paradox of “Creative” Composition

I. A Dog-Walking Poet Enters the Academy

Still I take the leash, feel
the tug. Sleeves whipping
light into smoke, blow
my only hands to birds.

Most lines I wrote between client visits—a few scraps of music, or imagery, or both—scratched into a Moleskine notebook the size of a passport and continuously on the verge of riding right out of my back pocket as I bounded across crowded city streets or groaned up subway station stairs.

stone ponies cracked and reared
an almost daily beat of boredom

In 2009, having completed an M.F.A. in Poetry at Washington University in St. Louis, I moved to New York with the naïve dream of following in the footsteps of my mentors—inimitably generous and inspiring poets/teachers by the likes of Arielle Greenberg, Carl Phillips, and Mary Jo Bang. They held envied, tenured positions as purveyors of culture and experimental thought and expression, and, for them, teaching and writing seemed entwined in blissful symbiosis. I wanted to plug myself into this pursuit of creative, intellectual play, and I wanted the stable employment to boot.

Instead, I began my postgraduate career in the unenviable—perhaps predictable—position of a dog walker in Lower Manhattan, keys jangling at my hip, and my newly minted M.F.A. slipping further and further into my ratty Jansport backpack. I continued to write
(between walks and while sitting on dog park benches), and, in time, the near-constant tug of the leash pulled me slowly, and inevitably, back to teaching.

We are without words
sullen plums pocked and marred, vulnerable
to each other, to any thing's tiny teeth.

That fall, I followed the historical paths of poets/teachers Adrienne Rich and June Jordan (and more recently Noelle Kocot and Robert Ostrom among many others) and began teaching, not poetry workshops, but first-year composition courses at the City University of New York (CUNY). I was excited to be back in the classroom again, working with students and language. But something was different. Having only taught creative writing workshops, the stakes seemed somehow higher in first-year composition. These were required, prerequisite courses: gateways to higher education. In my role as first-year composition instructor, I was tasked with the enormous—and incredibly fraught—responsibility of introducing new college students (many of them first-generation) to a discourse community that would reshape how they thought, how they expressed themselves. And so, because of the enormity of this responsibility, and in spite of the inherent universality of these courses, I felt reluctant to forfeit my training as a poet and creative writing teacher as I began to develop a pedagogy for academic writing.

Of course, a creative approach to teaching composition came with a unique set of challenges. At CUNY—as with many colleges and universities—my students would face a high-stakes writing exam at the end of the semester that would determine their future in higher education (or absence thereof). The writing proficiency test dates back to 1874 when Harvard University introduced a writing exam as a means for blocking admission to applicants who were as-of-yet unfamiliar with the language of the academy (i.e., the less desirable sons of the industrial proletariat). Such testing sent a clear, albeit unrealistic, message that writing was a
skill to be mastered (ideally *before* setting foot onto the gilded campuses of an American university), and the message was heard loud and clear. Since the expectations were set that writing was a thing to be mastered, college composition has struggled to shake free from the so-called “current traditional” approach to instruction, an approach that values superficial correctness and clarity over complexity and creativity of thought and expression (Berlin 35). Educators who promoted this kind of writing and teaching “looked upon the college as the training ground for a middle-class, professionally certified meritocracy,” writes James Berlin in his historical account of writing instruction in American colleges (71).

On my first day as “English comp” instructor, I looked around—a little sheepishly—at the twenty-five faces peering quizzically back at me. These were not the sons and daughters of any ruling class, and neither was I. We were first-, second-, and third-generation immigrants; we were multilingual speakers; we were single mothers and up-all-night fathers; we were part-time workers and three-job toilers. We were fully formed, fully functional beings who wanted something more from life and from ourselves. And so we went to college.

We had not come to college with aspirations to become “superficially correct,” and thus our introduction to higher education could not be a lowly skills-and-drills course in which we learned how to “write well”—unless, that is, we expanded our understanding of what it meant to *write well*.

Teaching and writing in the 1990s, Wendy Bishop resisted Composition’s professionalization of the field and its students. As a self-proclaimed “writer-teacher-writer,” she is interested in *style*, “in how I figure out what to say, and how I say it better—in writing” (“Places” 21). For Bishop, writing is a mode of thinking; thus, to restrict one’s writing to a particular form or genre (the “theme paper,” for example, or the “five-paragraph essay”) is to
restrict one’s capacity for thought. The push to quantify and standardize “excellence” in higher education has given rise to a pedagogical anxiety and desperation to find contained, “teachable” forms of writing. This move, argues Bishop, “has resulted in an eviscerated type of essay, not personal writing (too easy, too dangerous), not professional writing (too challenging), but school writing and research papers” (“Suddenly Sexy” 266). Ironically, the impoverished forms of writing Bishop bemoans are the very sort used to evaluate writing proficiency in our universities and colleges today.

The thought of “teaching to the test”—which I would have to do if my multilingual, culturally diverse student writers of so-called “non-standard English” were to successfully pass the high-stakes writing exam that would grant them access to postsecondary university courses—filled me with dread. To make matters even more complicated, I was continuously reminded of my responsibility to prepare my students to meet, not only the demands of a final writing exam, but also expectations for college-level writing and thinking. Sure, I thought, but how? How to reconcile the formal and stylistic restrictions of college writing with the rigorous intellectual and creative culture of academic life? In time, I would discover the origins of my new position as doorman to higher learning, which, from time to time, felt like gatekeeping.

“Gatekeeping” has been a fixture in higher education from the beginning: For Sharon Crowley, the gatekeeper manifests in the form of Arnolidian humanist values, which serve to denigrate the study of rhetoric in favor of “tasteful,” “character-building” literature (43); for David Bartholomae, the gatekeeper consists of the “languages of power and knowledge that circulate inside and outside the university” (1); for Wendy Bishop it’s monoformalism; for Mike Rose it’s the institutionalized rhetoric of deficiency and inadequacy that serves to characterize—and stultify—inexperienced writers. For my basic writing students at CUNY, gatekeeping reared
its head in the form of English Only monolingualism that has installed itself in the college composition curriculum.

We do not acquire language
until we learn to lie. Dear _____,
made me dumb, make me

holy in the ground, a store
of nuts against the future bears
ahead.

In “English Only and U.S. College Composition,” John Trimbur and Bruce Horner explore the unacknowledged influences that the U.S.’s tacit English Only language policy has had on teaching and learning in college writing courses. They suggest that the modernization of higher-ed curricula, which led to the institutionalization of a required writing course, replaced the "bilingualism of the classical curriculum with a unidirectional monolingualism" (595). And while French, German, Spanish, and Italian were installed in the curriculum for studying world literature and culture, "English alone was assigned the task of writing instruction (596). These policies have most damagingly served to punish and exclude immigrant and multilingual students, but they have also indirectly—and perhaps unintentionally—contributed to an institutional preference for a singular writing aesthetic: linear, thesis-driven “papers” instead of spiraling, voice-driven works of detection and discovery.

This dissertation, while sadly the product of an English Only American education, will nonetheless attempt a nonlinear approach to discovering hybrid ways of teaching, learning, and writing in the university. In practice, this will entail employing a variety of rhetorical forms and genres (the poetic as well as the academic) so that, as Wendy Bishop writes, “I can think in and through them all” (“Places” 17). Taken as a whole, my hope is that this project demonstrates how
writing’s value as a way of knowing comes from its slipperiness, its strangeness, and, most of all, its beautiful—and all-too-often suppressed—indeterminancy.

What follows is an abridged overview of how writing in the academy came to be perceived as a finite tool to be mastered as opposed to a complex system of thought and expression. For expediency’s sake, I begin this overview at Harvard, with the dawn of the writing proficiency exam, and I follow a narrow path of conservative writing practices and instruction to the somewhat larger, though not fully understood or theorized, clearing we find ourselves in today.

II. Ways of Knowing in the University: a Brief History

The difficulty I have experienced trying to trace these sometimes overlapping, sometimes widely diverging historical strands suggests that more of us should be examining the ways our institutional pasts inform our teaching presents.

—Wendy Bishop, Released into Language

The English composition sequence emerged at Harvard University in 1874 as a reaction to one of many so-called literacy crises. From here, the United States would experience such crises almost every generation: Johnny can’t read, Johnny can’t write, texting is killing language, and so on (Gold 84 - 85). But Harvard’s panic manifested itself in the unique form of an entrance exam, which tested students’ abilities to write in English, thereby banishing the study of rhetoric from the university and relegating it to primary and secondary schooling (Berlin 23). Prior to this, writes historian James Berlin, “instruction in rhetoric was in no way considered remedial, designed only for those who should have mastered it in the lower schools. It was instead regarded as a necessary concern of the college curriculum” (2). To make matters worse for college writing, many universities at this time were beginning to abandon liberal arts ideals of
education altogether, ideals that emphasized the “essential unity of knowledge,” and turning, instead, to the German model, which stressed specialization over breadth (Brereton 5 - 8).

In the German model, rhetoric was considered an art—an almost derogatory classification from a system that viewed only the sciences as tried-and-true ways of knowing. We encounter this sort of “othering” in all aspects of society, but it is a particularly unavoidable eyesore in the annals of academia wherein the arts, humanities, and “soft” sciences are continuously sloughed off as inferior modes of knowledge construction. In recent years this shift of educational values has revealed itself in the focus and funding on STEM courses and the crisis in the humanities within Academia. In this dissertation, I wish to argue that student writers can benefit from the classification of college writing as an art, but also that art, especially in the media of language, can serve as a critical tool for discovery and for knowledge production, and it is a tool that should be utilized at all stages of formal—and informal—education.

And yet, with the enduring emphasis on thesis-based writing and the recent popularity of handbooks such as They Say/I Say pushing ready-made rhetorical “templates,” mainstream writing pedagogy has failed to shake its insecurities surrounding its reputation for being “non-scientific.” Admittedly, compositionists who promote the abolishment of the required first-year composition course, such as Sharon Crowley, feel that Composition’s institutional subservience can be attributed to its relative “softness” as a discipline; however, the introduction of pseudo-scientific tools such as hardlined rhetorical “methods” furthers the problematic notion that writing is a thing to be mastered. Crowley, in Composition in the University, suggests that Writing Studies has suffered at the hands of a curriculum that favors the study of literary texts over the study of rhetoric. For Crowley, the near disappearance of rhetoric from the writing classroom has further entangled Composition with Literary Studies, and this entanglement, she
rightly maintains, only tightens the hold that literature-focused English departments have on the discipline of Composition (17, 43). But without literature (that is, simply, “a highly valued kind of writing” (Eagleton 9)), why continue toiling in this neverending war with words at all? Why even bother?

In her 2003 essay “When All Writing is Creative and Student Writing is Literature,” Wendy Bishop posits the notion that, when we raise “school writing” to the level of “literature”—broadly defined—we encourage the sorts of important risk-taking needed to transcend the safety (i.e., doldrums) of the student genre. “For most of us,” Bishop acknowledges, “writing is never easy, but it is made worthwhile when we 'publish' in the writing classroom and when we are 'read by even a few people and enjoyed by at least one'” (235). And yet, most college composition courses yield writing scarily reminiscent of this sentence, penned by a student of Ken Macrorie’s at Western Michigan University:

I consider experience to be an important part in the process of learning. For example, in the case of an athlete, experience plays an important role…. (16)

“Such language could only have been learned in school,” Macrorie insists; “no one anywhere else would hear it in the bones of his ear. Key university words are there: process, experience, role, tend, knowledge, proficiency, participate, and important twice. But nothing is said worth listening to” (16). Even the most student-centered of writing teachers (such as Wendy Bishop) would be hard-pressed to designate the athlete’s writing as literature (again, in Terry Eagleton’s words, writing that is “highly valued”). Macrorie characterizes the student’s writing as “acceptable—medium rotten,” and, finally, “all I could expect” (16). In other words, he cannot blame the student for his uninspired writing. So who can we blame?
For James Berlin, the restriction of writing instruction to first-year composition represents a crippling “devalorizing of the writing course in the curriculum” because it ignores the far-reaching epistemological values of writing and reduces it to a mere skills course (20). In Released into Language, Wendy Bishop pinpoints the remediation of writing education as the genesis of theme-based writing: “The newly designated 'freshman composition' teacher became the overworked, undervalued member of the developing English department, correcting untold number of themes for a newly visible body of seemingly underprepared students” (xi - xii). It is from this kind of writing—standardized, predetermined—that student writing took on associations of dry, unoriginal, and unambitious writing, and it is from these unfair and unnecessary associations that I hope to rescue student writing. Remarkably, the nineteenth-century view of student writing and writing education has endured well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, though not without valiant resistance from process-minded scholar-teachers such as Janet Emig, Donald Murray, and Peter Elbow (to name only a few).

In his 1968 book A Writer Teaches Writing, Donald Murray meditates on writing and teaching as unending apprenticeships. He introduces the notion of writing as a process and encourages teachers to “invite writing, keep the game of writing alive” in the classroom. He is, perhaps, the first compositionist to describe first-year writing as a craft or an artform as complex and nuanced as music:

To learn a craft you have to observe the oboist shaving a dozen reeds to get one that may be right, to hear the soloist practicing three crucial notes over and over and over again, changing the inflection and rhythm time after time.

Or painting:
You have to see the messy palate with all the wrong colors mixed with such false confidence, to observe the failed sketches and inappropriate lines hidden layer after layer underneath the final oil.

Or acting:

You have to go to rehearsal night after night to see actors stiffly speaking lines, moving awkwardly, filling the air with unnecessary gestures to comprehend the 'naturalness' achieved by opening night. (188)

Murray’s analogies echo Berlin’s contention that writing is not a prerequisite to simply fulfill and “get out of the way”; rather, it is a lifelong, unmasterable pursuit, meaningfully entangled with all other pursuits of the mind.

Murray’s views on teaching and writing (largely practitioner- rather than research-based) opened the door for experimental inquiries into writing as a process, introduced by Janet Emig and Sondra Perl. Emig’s 1971 study, “The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders,” finds that young writers compose in two modes: reflexive (which she describes as writing done for oneself and/or one’s peers) and extensive (writing to satisfy the demands of a teacher or an authority). In observing twelfth-graders’ writing habits, Emig learn that reflexive—or private—writing often takes the form of free verse poetry—that is, it is structurally and stylistically exploratory in nature, unrestricted by conventions of grammar and academic genres. This kind of writing, she discovers, entails longer periods of prewriting than seen in extensive writing; it involves frequent stops and reformulations of phrasing and word choice, as though the writer’s concerns are of a higher order than mere sense-making. In reflexive writing situations, the writer appears, perhaps, to be feeling her way toward meaning through sound, image, and association rather than through simple signs and denotations. To put it simply, reflexive writing is writing that is “highly valued”
by the author. Personal writing—writing done for one’s self or one’s peers—is ineluctably highly valued writing because its worth is internally generated rather than externally (by a teacher, an institution, an authority).

Extensive writing manifests primarily as prose, and “the attitude toward the field of discourse,” writes Emig, “is often detached and reportorial (89). In extensive writing situations, then, writing is perceived as a job to get done rather than as an opportunity for conceptual and creative exploration. The clear takeaway from Emig’s study is that school-sponsored writing “is a limited, and limiting, experience” (93). In this dissertation, however, I would like to reformulate Emig’s definitive “is” statement as an exploratory—and hopeful—“can be” statement: School-sponsored writing can be a limited, and limiting experience, unless we find ways to make college writing personally relevant and creatively enriching.

A scholarly commitment to reflexive (internally valued) writing may have inspired the kind of idiosyncratic, formal and stylistic exploration needed to transcend the confines of the student genre in first-year composition; however, perhaps due to a lack of critical theory on the subject, reflexive writing in academia soon took on associations with navel-gazing, egocentrism, and naiveté. Thus, by the 1980s, expressive rhetorics championed by Emig, Murray, Elbow, and others came under fire for allegedly dismissing the social aspects of the writing process. Empowered by the important work of Lev Vygotsky, whose theories stress the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition, these scholar-teachers, known as social constructivists, denounce the very existence of “individual” expression, claiming instead that all verbal utterances are the result of one’s social context.

At the center of the expressivist/constructivist debate is the essayistic “conversation” between Elbow and David Bartholomae, published in a 1995 issue of College Composition and
Communication. Here, Elbow posits the notion that the figure of the academic and that of the
writer are in irresolvable conflict; and yet, he wishes for his students to cultivate and maintain
both identities at the same time:

..[I]t's a reasonable goal for my students to end up saying, “I feel like I am a
writer: I get deep satisfaction from discovering meanings by writing—figuring out
what I think and feel through putting down words; I naturally turn to writing when
I am perplexed—even when I am just sad or happy; I love to explore and
communicate with others through writing; writing is an important part of my life.”
Similarly, I would insist that it's a reasonable goal for my students to end up
saying, “I feel like I am an academic: reading knowledgeable books, wrestling my
way through important issues with fellows, figuring out hard questions—these
activities give me deep satisfaction and they are central to my sense of who I am.”
(72)

At the heart of the conflict between being an academic and being a writer is the issue of trust: “If
my goal is to get them to take on the role of academic,” writes Elbow, “I should get them to
distrust language.” After all, a questioning, suspicious mind is essential to all academic inquiry,
Elbow admits. “But,” he explains, “in my desire to help my students experience themselves as
writers I find myself in fact trying to help them trust language—not to question it—or at least not
to question it for long stretches of the writing process: to hold off distrust till they revise” (78).
The assumption here is that, for writing to be a tool for expression and exploration (a tool for
“figuring out what I think”), it should be free from the burden of doubt (liberation being an
essential tenet of Elbow’s classroom practice of “freewriting,” which involves writing without
pause for several minutes at a time).
Bartholomae, on the other hand, celebrates doubt as a central characteristic of what he calls *criticism*. Academic writing is a form of critical writing, explains Bartholomae, and this is the kind of writing he believes should be taught and performed in first-year writing courses. Critical writing, Bartholomae argues, cannot happen *without* teachers: “Since the point of criticism is to ask questions of the things that seem beyond question, to ask students to see the natural as artificial, it cannot come from within. It will not happen on its own, but only when prompted” (“Interchanges” 87). What concerns Bartholomae about expressivist approaches to writing and teaching is that such approaches tend to hide (intentionally or otherwise) the traces of tradition and authority surrounding every writing task and situation, traces that are, in Bartholomae’s words, present in “allusions to previous work, in necessary work with sources, in collaboration with powerful theories and figures, in footnotes and quotations and the messy business of doing your work in the shadow of others” (“Writing with Teachers” 63). Elbow himself does not deny that human beings are socially constructed; however, he nevertheless chooses to celebrate “independent, self-creative, self-expressive subjectivity” (“Interchanges” 88). These aspects of humanity are not at odds, he maintains.

Still, Bartholomae wishes to acclimatize his students to the so-called *language of the academy*: “pure, muscular, lean, taut, the language of truth and reason […] language stripped of the false dressings of style and fashion, a tool for inquiry and critique” (“Writing on the Margins” 62). Admittedly, this is important, necessary work, but not at the cost of turning our students off to writing. Before our students can ascertain the identity of *academic*, they first need to become *writers*. What Bartholomae describes is the language of extensive writing tasks, writing that Emig characterizes as other-directed and other-centered (93). In other words, when we strip language of style, we strip away authorial presence, we strip away voice. Such
language—language devoid of an authorial thumbprint—is “a language in which fresh truth is almost impossible to express,” suggests Ken Macrorie in *Uptauty*, in which he calls for the liberation of student writing in the academy. Students will "write live" (instead of what he calls dull, academic “Engfish”) if we allow them to "write freely," for more organic audiences such as themselves and their peers rather than to meet the expectations of a teacher or a test, let alone a faceless—yet immensely powerful—academic institution.

Macrorie, writing in 1970, was reacting to a culture of writing pedagogy that valued the writing *product* over the writing *process*—a “tried-and-true” approach to teaching known as “current-traditionalism” that, despite the field of composition’s official embrace of process pedagogy, continues to influence the writing genres prescribed in university writing programs today. So-called “student genres,” writes Ursula Wingate in *Academic Literacy and Student Diversity: the Case for Inclusive Practice*, “serve the purpose of ‘knowledge-telling’ … while expert genres aim to expand knowledge in the field” (117). The former pedagogical approach demands regurgitation of knowledge and “skills” while the latter fosters an intellectual and creative approach to language usage. Educators who subscribe to the current traditional approach fail to acknowledge that students enter the university with a wealth of experience, knowledge, and creativity as yet untapped.

Understandably, expressivists such as Elbow associate the practice of academic writing—perhaps too simplistically—with “knowledge-telling” and “regurgitation” rather than with the creative act it certainly can be. Bartholomae himself insists he is not advocating for “stuffy, lifeless prose or for mechanical (or dutiful) imitations of standard thoughts and forms” (“Writing with Teachers” 63); however, he is resolute in his criticism of what he terms “sentimental realism” in the first-year writing course—i.e., personal writing produced in an historical and
cultural vacuum. Like Elbow, I too identify as both a writer and an academic, and, as such, I want to reconcile these seemingly competing identities. I’ve noticed, though, that on good writing and teaching days—when the lines trot out easily, without the usual cajole and tug of the reigns, when pitter begets patter, and so on—the tension between these identities is useful, productive, even necessary.

Monday morning I enter the classroom with the same giddy nervousness that plagues and propels me through every first day of a new semester. I live and thrive on these competing emotions; I am grounded and yet forever on the brink of floating up into the buzzing luminescence of the classroom’s fluorescent rafters. And—despite the gentle offerings of beta blockers and other mood-stabilizing aids from well-meaning friends and former professors—I wouldn’t want to live any other way. I am of two emotions in the way that I am of two minds: an Elbowian sentimental realist and a Bartholomaean critical constructivist.

My students are similarly varied. In this way, we are indelibly human.

This being the first day of class, I want to appeal to the humanness of my students—these twenty-odd faces, minds, and “souls” (for lack of a better term to denote and to celebrate their individuality). I have Elbow in mind when I ask them to tell us (the class) about something that is extremely important to them, and to tell us via whatever form feels most appropriate—a poem, a drawing, a song, a paragraph. I also have Elbow’s freewriting activity in mind when I ask them to compose for ten minutes without stopping, to scribble or doodle nonsense if and when their minds go suddenly blank. And yet, Bartholomae perches on my other shoulder when I invite my students to share some of what they have composed, so that they recognize how, while their utterances may be unique to their individual identities, they are, in fact, not alone in their passion for family, for animal welfare, for video games, for Korean pop music. Their thoughts and
feelings are in concert with (and in contrast to) the thoughts and feelings of others in their community—and what better place to explore these overlapping and contrasting thoughts and feelings than in the classroom community?

The semester continues on in this fashion, winding a path between solipsistic expressivism and selfless social constructivism. At times, we veer dangerously—i.e., meaningfully—close to bipartisanship when, for instance, I ask my students to vividly recreate a scene from their own lives that puts them into relation with a text they have chosen to spend time with: Brent Staples’ “Just Walk on By” or Maxine Hong Kingston’s “No Name Woman” (to name a couple). Inevitably, many of my students will dilute the intensity of Staples and Kingston’s socially and culturally significant portrayals of race and gender inequities (respectively) with depictions of objectively less harrowing experiences of their own. This matters very little. The important work for the student writer happens in the reflection that the vivid description generates. “Reflection,” writes Dennis Young in “A Poetics of Student Writing, “is a poetic vehicle for soul-making” (34). “Soul,” he explains, is “what takes place when students grapple with perspective, subjectivity, and interpretation” (33). Perhaps this “soul-making” triad—perspective, subjectivity, and interpretation—can serve to emphasize the potentially productive tensions that exist between expressivist and constructivist approaches to teaching writing. I’ve created the following diagram to represent the intersecting attributes that comprise what some composition scholars have come to think of as “critical expressivism”: 

In their 2015 anthology *Critical Expressivism: Theory and Practice in the Composition Classroom*, editors Tara Roeder and Roseanne Gatto seek to reclaim (actually, claim for the first time) the term expressivism, which was once derogatorily pinned to scholar-teachers who fostered individual expression in first-year composition. Roeder and Gatto begin, in their introduction, by rejecting an “overly simplified 'social epistemic'/'expressivist' binary” and calling for a new conversation, one that critically examines expressivist values and their potential contributions to writing theory, pedagogy, and practice (7). With a belief that “the best expressivist practices have always been about complex negotiations between self and other, and the dismantling of the 'public'/'private' binary,” Roeder and Gatto outline expressivist values and concerns in this way:

We know we don't believe in prescriptions or generalities; we believe in a localized, context-specific pedagogy where one size never fits all. And we fiercely value our students and the complex embodied knowledge they bring to our classrooms. We think that when their experiences are at the forefront of our classrooms, exciting thoughts, relevant research, and meaningful connections can
take place via a variety of platforms, from handbound books to conversations to YouTube videos. (8)

The term *critical expressivism* breathes new life into a stale, partisan debate in which the two sides (social constructivists and expressivists) have only managed to become further entrenched in value systems that, upon further examination, are not entirely opposed and, in fact, even mirror one another: While constructivists believe that every so-called “individual” utterance is socially constructed, expressivists see collective culture as being the result of individual histories, languages, and feelings. In a sense, both camps are saying the same thing; however, expressivism has been charged with failing to acknowledge the social aspects of language and writing. Recently engendered discussions under the umbrella of “critical expressivism” seek to resolve this failure.

And yet, these no less crucial, revitalizing conversations neglect to seriously examine the value of poetic writing (imaginative, idiosyncratic, resisting of convention) as a mode of critical thought and expression. In her 1983 collection of essays, *The Web of Meaning*, Janet Emig contemplates the conscious and unconscious processes (and “rituals”) of creative writers—particularly poets. “[W]henever and wherever we consult the professional writer on writing”—which, Emig points out, we so rarely do—“we find it is the rare writer who admits to writing a wholly conscious and contrived piece” (48). That is to say, much of the verbal “fruit” of writing is the result of countless factors: from intentional and unintentional formal constraints to the musical cadences carried in the writer’s ear and body, from the odors present in one’s physical surroundings to one’s social situatedness. As writers, we all engage in certain conscious habits to help manage the unimaginably immense endeavor that writing can be and is. Hemingway, for instance, set daily page requirements. Henry Miller constructed strict boundaries between his
writing life and his social life, always quitting his writing at an appointed time each day. In the age of social media and the incessant distractions it can provide, I have taken up the habit of unplugging the Internet modem whenever I sit down to write. These habits are necessary for tricking our brains into intense, if fleeting, focus, but Emig and I are more interested in the oft-ignored rituals writers employ in order to tap into a singular sensibility, voice, or presence.

“Ritual, as its conventional connotations suggest, is more elevated, less secular,” explains Emig. “Where habit is suppressive, ritual is evocative; where habit is eliminative, ritual is initiatory” (50). Some rituals are physical, relatable to anyone devoted to the cerebral arts (Haruki Murakami runs six miles after each daily writing session) while others are sensory, seemingly strange (Friedrich Schiller enjoyed the smell of rotten apples, which he kept under the lid of his desk while composing his poems (Emig 49)).

I’m not suggesting that rituals should be taught in first-year composition; in fact, I don’t believe they can be taught, rather only discovered through encouragement and an openness of mind. As writing teachers, however, we are able to provide this encouragement, to facilitate the openness needed for students to locate evocative rituals that will allow them to find their presence, their voice as writers. By acknowledging and celebrating the unconscious and ritualistic aspects of the writing process, we remind students that writing is not an entirely controllable skill and that, in fact, exercising too much control can get us into trouble: We limit our capacity to think, feel, and express ourselves. As a critical writer, Marianna Torgovnick found herself using "a style that censored my own experiences and visceral responses and that hid my writing's source of energy" (26). Her writing group advised, "When you start to get dull, pretend you are La—because you are La." For Torgovnick,
“writing like La” became a metaphor for getting to a place where I was not afraid to write in a voice that had passion as well as information, a voice that wanted to be heard. "Writing like La" meant letting myself out of the protective cage of the style I had mastered—a style I now call the thus-and-therefore style because it naturally tends to include distancing words like those. (26)

I suspect our promotion of “thus-and-therefore” language in our first-year writing courses has to do with our tendency (intentional or not) to serve larger institutional expectations and standards for “college-level writing.” Such formal, grammatical, and syntactical writing standards, James Berlin reminds us, developed alongside current-traditional rhetoric in order to distinguish a minute, wealthy and educated class from an expanding—and increasingly educated—middle class. “This rhetoric, positivistic and practical in spirit,” explains Berlin, “was designed to provide the new middle-class professionals with the tools to avoid embarrassing themselves in print. In short, this was the rhetoric of the meritocracy” (35).

And yet, it is also the rhetoric of conformity, complacency, and superficiality—three characteristics we should be actively resisting in the college writing classroom and in the university at large. In her 1998 essay “Teaching Experimental Critical Writing,” Eve Sedgwick describes her efforts to unshackle students from the constraints of practical and positivistic forms of writing. She uses "frequent, short, tightly framed assignments" in order to "overcome students' (especially graduate students') inhibitions about experimentation" (104 - 05). And she facilitates workshop sessions with questions that direct the class's focus on form: “What is the ambition of this piece?” she asks. "What does the form of this piece know ... that the reader or even writer may not already know?” "So what's this piece up to?” (105). Through these activities, Sedgwick cultivates an understanding of form as a living, breathing, amorphous structure—but a structure,
nonetheless, and a structure that not only houses meaning, but makes meaning as well. In essence, Sedgwick’s workshops serve to foster the crucial notion that writing, an extension of the self, necessarily *transcends* the self to become a divining rod for discovery and knowledge production.

More recently, Geoffrey Sirc has explored the intellectual and academic potential that experimental, idiosyncratic forms of writing might have in first-year composition. Fed up with an academic discipline that has adapted too comfortably to the trappings of traditional academia—“canonicity, scientism, empiricism, formalism, high theory, axioms, arrogance, and acceptance of the standard university department-divisions”—Sirc seeks to blur the boundaries between art and life (7, 9). His 2002 book *English Composition as a Happening* (part history, part memoir, part pedagogy handbook) enacts this blurring, suggesting that, in order to prevent ideas from stagnating, the forms and structures that convey them must be in constant flux. Indeterminacy, Sirc acknowledges, was the basic tenet of the Happenings art movement of the 1960s whose primary objective was to utilize multi-disciplinary, multi-media, and improvisatory modes of expression to engage in meaningful interactions with an audience Sirc calls on the discipline of Composition to take a Happenings-inspired approach to writing pedagogy: nothing is previously determined, neither form nor material content; everything is under erasure” (10). The only assumed universal goal, he maintains, is to facilitate change. This, Composition’s “only given,” Sirc borrows from early pop artist Robert Rauschenberg, “who cared not at all about control or intention, only change: ‘What’s exciting is that we don’t know. There is no anticipated result; but we will be changed’” (qtd. in Sirc 10). By challenging fixed genre forms in first-year composition, writing teachers can help facilitate productive fissures through which students’ unique expertise and imaginations can be found and expressed. The kind of change for which
Sirc advocates will not be achieved through voiceless—“pure”—academic prose. And it will not be found in so-called egocentric “expressivism.” More likely, change will be facilitated through the invaluable dialectical tensions produced by a rigorous attempt to reconcile the competing identities of the writer and the academic in college composition.

This project, thus, puts academic, creative, and student genres in conversation to challenge the strict discursive and stylistic boundaries placed around college writing, particularly in first-year composition. What might be the function of lyrical—“live”—writing in the composition classroom? In valuing rhythm, voice, imagination, and idiosyncrasy, can writing teachers implode the creative and intellectual inhibition that comes from valuing standardization, fixed genre forms, and canonization? How might such a shift toward multi-genre/modal writing and fragmentation productively challenge the field’s intended learning outcomes, objectives, and best practices? And, finally, with the recent surge in M.F.A. graduates finding their way into the field of composition, how might the pluralistic identities of poet- and writer-teachers transform first-year writing pedagogy in strange and productive ways? Finally, and perhaps more pointedly, how might the creativity that compels all writing genres inform the teaching of writing?

III. A Route to More Imaginative Ways of Writing, Teaching, and Knowing

Our texts are conventional in every sense of the word; they write themselves.
—Geoffrey Sirc, *English Composition as a Happening*

Because my dissertation aims to thrust first-year writing pedagogy beyond the confines of fixed genre forms, my inquiry will necessarily be multimodal. While it is widely accepted that different styles and genres of writing serve as different vehicles of thought and expression, research methods and methodologies also inspire and convey thought in crucially different ways.
This project, thus, intermingles writing styles and research modes so that, as Wendy Bishop puts it, “I can think in and through them all” (“Places to Stand” 17). The particulars—or “data”—informing this study are primarily archival, textual (often a combination of the two), and experiential/experimental (what Beatriz Preciado refers to as “autotheory”). This mixed methodological approach underscores the prominent role of my, the researcher's, own subjectivity in the research process. In this way, the project will manifest as what Gesa Kirsch and Liz Rohan describe as a "lived process" in their book-length exploration of archival research endeavors (ix).

Following in the wake of this chapter’s disruption of the constructivist/expressivist binary, chapter two will examine the archived teaching materials of the poet Adrienne Rich in an effort to discover/recover a poetics of writing pedagogy that values idiosyncratic, individual expression over uniformity and standardization. At the same time, it traces the figure of the creative writer-cum-teacher in the field of composition, beginning with CUNY poet-teachers Rich, June Jordan, and Marie Ponsot and following the line to the countless number of creative writing graduates entering the field today, writers such as Tim Mayers who, “dissatisfied with some aspects of the available academic identity of 'creative writer' but unwilling to cast it aside completely ... came to composition studies" (xi). This section seeks to discover how scholar-teachers coming from a study of craft rather than a study of rhetoric influence student genres in productive ways and in ways that perhaps challenge existing learning outcomes and goals for first-year composition. Ignited by the question of what composition can learn from the pedagogical practices of a poet-teacher working during a pivotal time in the field’s history (i.e., City College of New York, 1968, the dawn of open admissions), I examine teaching materials and professional correspondence found in the papers of the poet Adrienne Rich. To formulate an
accurate and substantial narrative of Rich’s work at CUNY, this chapter will focus on Rich’s teaching materials and correspondence from 1967 - 1975. How might a poet’s perspective—that of one who experiments with language and form as a vocation—inform the university’s understanding and treatment of “unskilled” writers? What might Rich’s correspondence with basic writing guru Mina Shaughnessy reveal about the significance of collaborations between scholars, artists, teachers, and administrators? And finally, how might Rich’s creative teaching methods inspire teachers today to resist the temptations of worksheets, grammar drills, and the other trappings of current-traditionalism when working with basic or developmental writers?

This historical inquiry into the figure of the poet/writer-teacher in composition will serve as the foundation for my critical analyses of student writing found in long-standing college publications such as *John Jay’s Finest* (from CUNY’s John Jay College) and *Mercer Street* (from New York University’s Expository Writing Program).

Chapter three presents an in-depth textual analysis of student writing at the City University of New York’s John Jay College of Criminal Justice to discover how one institution nurtures, guides, and celebrates the development of student writing over the span of twenty-five years. Much of the historical research conducted on academic institutions is primarily gleaned from the perspectives of faculty and administration through curricula, published handbooks, teaching journals, departmental meeting minutes, and so on. Yet, how can we fully understand a particular institution’s academic culture if we do not acknowledge the voices of its students as fundamental threads in the fabric of its past, present, and future?

To facilitate this inquiry, I analyze seven issues of *John Jay’s Finest*, an annual publication of the best student writing from across the school’s varied disciplines. In looking at one complete issue every five years beginning with 1985 and ending with 2015, I show how a
college publication can serve as an important evolutionary indicator of the ways in which students and faculty shape academic genres and styles within a particular institution. In this way, publications can serve as valuable tools for assessing whether an institution is cultivating writing within what David Starkey, in his book *Teaching Writing Creatively*, describes as a monoculture (canned, formula-driven writing) or a polyculture (writing that is uniquely situated from class to class and person to person and is thus subject to continual transmutation). Additionally—and potentially crucial to university assessment processes—analyses of college publications provide telling portraits of shifting institutional values, learning objectives, and expectations over a period of time.

These primary, student writer-based sources will be used to theorize the role that students, administrators, and teachers have in forming what we come to value in student writing and accept as “student genres,” as well as how that power is shared and to what effect. To arrive at an understanding of these issues, I will apply methods of textual analysis from Edward P.J. Corbett and Robert J. Connors’ “Study of Style,” which argues that a writer’s style can be located and developed in minute, sentence-level mechanics. Additionally, Elizabeth Wardle’s “‘Mutt Genres’ and the Goal of FYC” will inform my own analysis of student genres found in *John Jay’s Finest*. Is the array of rhetorical forms and purposes found in *JJF* indicative of college-readiness? Can we see evidence of self-awareness in “writing about writing” tasks, which Wardle deems essential (784-85)?

Chapter four presents a case study of New York University’s Expository Writing Program and its accompanying annual publication of student writing, *Mercer Street*, to show how pragmatic (or academic) discourse can collide with aesthetic (or expressive) discourse to reinstate the important characteristics of mutability and fluidity in student writing genres. The
Expository Writing Program at New York University is distinguished by a large full-time faculty comprised primarily of writer-teachers holding MFA degrees in Poetry, Fiction, Playwriting, and Performance Studies. The program’s overarching pedagogy was formed by essayist Pat C. Hoy II and has been influenced over the last twenty-odd years by faculty during program-wide “workshops” (never described as “meetings”) and breakout sessions between senior lecturer mentors and newer faculty as well as between directors and senior lecturer mentors. The program’s rigidly configured developmental structure among faculty has produced similarly rigid curricula across its expository writing courses; and yet, the creative backgrounds of the faculty have had a clear impact on the kind of writing being produced by its students.

To facilitate this inquiry, I draw on a 1975 study performed by James Britton, et al., which found that transactional (or pragmatic) writing tasks far outnumbered expressive writing tasks in British and American schools. This favoring of transactional rhetorics, Britton and his colleagues theorize, ignores the important learning and exploratory functions of expressive, imaginative rhetorics.

Chapter five examines cross-boundary discourse (specifically the blurring of pragmatic and aesthetic discourses) in the work of lyric essayists Matthew Goulish, Annie Dillard, Maggie Nelson, Beatriz Preciado, and Albert Goldbarth to gain a deeper understanding of the collaborative relationship between poetic and rhetoric in the production of knowledge through writing. Using Jeanette Harris’ *Expressive Discourse* (1990) and Robert Scholes’ *Textual Power* (1985) as critical lenses, this chapter will present models for discursive blurring in first-year composition and discuss how an intermingling of style, syntax, and genre can serve to expand the cognitive processes of college writers (Bishop, “Places to Stand” 17). Additionally, this
Chapter will draw on the writing pedagogies of Eve Sedgwick and Marianna Torgovnick, both of whom have practiced and taught experimental modes of academic writing in their careers.

Chapter six performs a critical analysis of subject positioning in the lyric essay that envisions the genre’s place in the composition classroom. The decentering of the subject seen in works such as *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes, “The Body: An Essay” by Jenny Boull, *Humiliation* by Wayne Koestenbaum, and *Letters to Wendy’s* by Joe Wenderoth, among others, calls attention to the multiple selves inhabited by an individual and the paradox of expressing one’s “true self” in writing. In this section, I argue that, in exposing students to subject positioning, teachers of writing can demonstrate the important relationship between expressive and social-epistemic rhetorics in the writing process while, at the same time, address and affirm the variety of “Englishes” that comprise our pluralistic identities.

Finally, in chapter seven, my investigation of student writing genres and how they function as agents of thought and expression concludes with practitioner/teacher research that studies how the incorporation of new media informs (amplifies, unsettles, implodes) certain characteristics we associate with traditional college writing and renews possibilities for creative composing. In *A Rhetoric of Pleasure: Prose Style in Today’s Composition*, T.R. Johnson calls on teachers of writing to embrace a “renegade rhetoric” in the classroom: "That highly pleasurable practice in which selves, texts, and worlds are experienced as dynamic, interanimating processes" (25). This, Johnson suggests, is an approach to writing that celebrates the five senses; and yet, as others before me have argued (Bishop, Wysocki, Shipka, et al.), we cannot fully represent our senses through a singular mode of expression—academic writing, say, or even through strictly alphabetic texts. This final chapter, drawing on current research surrounding multimodal composition, case studies of specific classrooms, as well as practitioner
research derived from my own teaching, foresees the ever-increasing adoption of new media (i.e., digital technologies) in the writing classroom as a catalyst for the dissolution of traditional student genres (i.e., dry, thesis-driven prose).

This dissertation, as a whole, will be informed (shaped, colored, carved) by an autotheoretical framework of inquiry that embraces my own subjectivity as someone who writes—and is written by—the world (Deleuze and Guatarri 339). Given that "...each use of theory is constructed through the autobiography of the researcher and interpreted and rewritten through the autobiography of the reader" (Kaufman 577), my aim is to attempt, whenever and as often as possible, to reveal how my interpretive work as a writer and a researcher reflect my experiences as a thinking, feeling, human being. Furthermore, in acknowledging that “every text I read is interpreted and rewritten through my own biography and my autobiography is rewritten as I read it through alternate texts,” I will enact the very tension dividing social constructivists and expressivists. Autotheoretical writing, on the one hand, usefully mines subjective experience in order to construct new meaning (expressivism) while, on the other hand, accepts that our subjectivities are socially constructed, reciprocally written and rewritten (Kaufman 577).

My hope, ultimately, is for this project to serve as a wise, leashed animal, leading me somewhat spasmodically, yet inevitably, toward valuable teaching and writing practices long covered over by scholarly neglect, the march of progress, or, in some cases, dormant practices lying in wait for the necessary tools and alchemical catalysts. I will follow the tug of this leash, just as I have in all creative and intellectual endeavors, with the belief that meaningful discovery is dependent upon generous amounts of risk, a wayfaring spirit, and, in Geoffrey Sirc’s words, “failures that really aren’t” (35).
I. An Activist-Poet Enters the Academy

In her 1990 address to the graduates of the City College of the City University of New York, poet, activist, and teacher Adrienne Rich offered fierce praise for “the grandsons and grand-daughters of African-American slaves, the children of Puerto Rican and West Indian Immigrants … leading a movement for Open Admissions, at great personal risk, and with great personal and collective courage.” Many of the courageous students Rich spoke of found their way into her classroom during her tenure at City College—1968 to 1975, in the tumultuous era of Open Admissions—where she taught basic writing in Mina Shaughnessy’s SEEK program to minority and otherwise underserved and silenced inner-city youths. In these classes, Rich employed a brand of pedagogy that emphasized idiosyncrasy over conformity and creative expression over rote formalization. By fostering a strong sense of individualism among the disenfranchised students at City College, Rich saw hope for social and educational equality and prosperity. “Democracy,” she intoned at the close of her commencement speech, “requires the greatest possible number of literate, educated, informed citizens who, whatever their work in this world, have the sense that they can be makers, not victims, of history, that they can shape—each in her or his own way—the conditions of their society.”

Since the era of Open Admissions and Mina Shaughnessy’s SEEK program, however, writing pedagogy (developmental as well as college-level) has been particularly susceptible to institutional standards and expectations of so-called “excellence”—standards in the form of high-stakes exams that seriously undermine efforts to celebrate and develop the diverse student voices
of the college writing community (see Molloy 2012; Cheng and Curtis 2004; Hillocks 2002; Sirc 2002). As a result, writing teachers everywhere face the difficult challenge of having to reconcile carefully considered teaching philosophies and practices designed to ignite student thinking and writing with institutional and societal desires to standardize learning outcomes and thereby suppress innovative, individualistic expression. Teachers who write and writers who teach (i.e., the “writer-teacher-writer” [Bishop, 1999]) are perhaps best equipped to support and celebrate critical-creative thinking and writing in the composition classroom; however far too little attention has been paid to the poet Adrienne Rich (1929 - 2012), whose 1973 poetry collection *Diving into the Wreck* received the National Book Award during her crucial tenure as a basic writing teacher at the City University of New York (CUNY).

Ignited by the question of what composition could learn from the pedagogical practices of a poet-teacher working in the primordial days of the field (i.e., City College of New York, 1968, the dawn of Open Admissions), I sought out the Papers of Adrienne Rich, housed at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies at Harvard University. There, I found typed and handwritten assignment prompts, course syllabi, reading lists, memoranda, official correspondence between Rich and university administration, and, perhaps most illuminating, professional yet intimate letters exchanged between Rich and basic writing guru, Mina Shaughnessy. Examined as a whole, these historical artifacts reveal a portrait of Rich as yet unseen: that of a tireless advocate for the education rights of ignored, underserved students; a reflective and insightful writer-teacher-writer; and an active promoter of poetic, expressive writing as a means for social- and self-discovery. Perhaps most importantly, the spirit of hybridity that Rich brought into the classroom—and into her conversations and essays about student writing—shows us how first-year composition students (particularly those students
whom have been historically excluded as *other*) can benefit from a rhetoric of *this/and* (poetry and prose, critical activism *and* expressivism, the wealthy *alongside* the poverty-stricken) in college writing.

II. Tracing the Path of the Writer-Teacher-Writer in the Papers of Adrienne Rich

In the winter of 1999 I started a punk band with some friends from my suburban Detroit high school. I was a shy fifteen-year-old who filled journal after journal with angsty, Bukowski-inspired poems, and I suppose putting them to music was my foolhardy way of “publishing” them. As embarrassed as I am today of those songs (way too angry, sentimental, lacking restraint of any kind), I am grateful for the way they have informed my writing aesthetic and my teaching philosophy today. I have learned to embrace and utilize all three identities: writer, teacher, punk-rocker (albeit an aging one).

After completing an M.F.A. in Poetry, I began teaching first-year writing—including basic writing—courses at the City University of New York. Admittedly, having participated in and taught dozens of creative writing workshops prior to my time at CUNY, I was dismayed by the prospect of “teaching to the test” (which, again, I would have to do for my students to satisfy the course’s culminating writing exam). My mentor at LaGuardia Community College in Queens reminded me of my responsibility to prepare my students to meet, not only the demands of the final writing exam, but also expectations for college-level writing and thinking. Reading Rich’s letters to Shaughnessy, I sense her own anxieties surrounding this conflict. Both she and I recognize that to teach well, one has to master the art of simultaneity. We cannot do just one—or even just two, three, or twenty—things. To do right by our students, we have to create a classroom bazaar in which many goods are bought and sold at the same time. But how?
The question, “What shall we do?” is one that catalyzes historical research, writes Robert J. Connors in “Dreams and Play: Historical Methods and Methodology.” But in order to realize a plan of action, we must first discover what people did in the past and how things came to be the way that they are. For these reasons I found myself boarding a Chinatown bus from New York City to Boston in hopes of discovering how Rich, a basic writing pioneer, reconciled her own competing identities as a poet, mother, activist, and teacher.

At Radcliffe (where she attended college), the Papers of Adrienne Rich are maintained by the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America. Donated to the library by Rich herself in 1984, the archive is comprised of childhood poems, stories, and plays; graded papers written by Rich as a high school student; led-smudged diaries filled with reading lists and hand-transcribed poems by Keats, Coleridge, and other Romantics; drafts of speeches (such as her CUNY commencement address); as well as a carton of teaching materials from her time at CUNY as well as Swarthmore, Brandeis, and Rutgers. In analyzing Rich’s archive, my approach was to, as Gesa E. Kirsch and Liz Rohan suggest in Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process, “read absolutely everything and try to make sense of what happened” (18). My aim here is to piece together the jigsaw puzzle of Rich’s impact on the field of basic writing—a straightforward enough task, “except that you don’t have a picture on the box for reference, there’s more than one puzzle in the box, the picture keeps changing depending on how you fit the pieces together, and the pieces themselves change shape when your back is turned” (Kirsch and Rohan 15). While her archivists maintain a tidy and orderly chronology of her work, Rich herself wore many hats, and her archive is categorized to reflect this. As a result, her work as a poet, teacher, essayist, and activist, while overlapping in time, is nevertheless compiled into separate
cartons that resist my ultimate objective: to piece together a narrative of Rich’s writing, teaching, and activism lives as one coherent life, or lives pursued simultaneously.

III. Silence on the Hill: Adrienne Rich Comes to CUNY

In the fall of 1968, Rich arrived at the college on the hill overlooking Harlem, six months before the Open Admissions protests were to begin. Already an accomplished poet, she turned down an offer to serve as poet-in-residence at City College in favor of teaching basic writing in Shaughnessy’s SEEK program (Volpe, Edmond L. Letter to Adrienne Rich. 23 April 1968). By the 1960s, City College, once a beacon of opportunity for working class and immigrant students, had developed a largely white student body, along with the overarching City University of New York with which it became associated in 1961. “I can still vividly see, in my mind's eye, hundreds of students rushing to classes after exiting from the 145th Street subway stop,” recalls psychologist Lawrence Rushing, who lived in Harlem in the 1950s. “What I do not recollect—and didn't comprehend at the time—is seeing black faces in the crowd. I didn't know then that only an average of thirty-three African Americans graduated from City College each year” (Crain 46). This historical and geographical inconsistency would reach a breaking point after Rich’s arrival when, in 1969, black and Puerto Rican students shut down and occupied South Campus with the demand that City College take measures to increase access to members of Harlem’s ethnically diverse community. The board of education agreed and guaranteed any high school graduate of New York City admission to one of the CUNY colleges. Soon after, the predominantly white institution became largely comprised of black and Latino students.

In “Teaching Language in Open Admissions: A Look at the Context,” Rich describes her motivations for teaching in the inner-city SEEK program at City College as catalyzed, in part, by
white liberal guilt, a desire to work with underprivileged minority students, and “a need to involve myself with the real life of the city, which had arrested me from the first weeks I began living here” (258). Her job, as she describes it, was to “turn students on” to writing, which she did by disavowing traditional forms of academic writing, forms that, as Shaughnessy makes clear in *Errors and Expectations*, had been withheld from poor, minority students, and, in effect, served only to silence them. Rich, however, sought to break these institutionalized silences by introducing more expressive and intuitive forms of writing such as “poetry, free association, politics, drama, and fiction” (Rich, “Open Admissions” 320).

As a young teacher, I too was confronted by the paradox of needing to “turn students on to writing” while, at the same time, prepare them for a high-stakes writing exam. Rich encountered this challenge at the outset, when the new constituency of incoming students faced often hostile scrutiny about their presence and value in the university. In November of 1969, City College implemented its Proficiency Exam, which required students to write two 300-word essays in response to departmentally devised prompts. As Sean Molloy writes in “Diving in or Guarding the Tower: Mina Shaughnessy’s Resistance and Capitulation to High-Stakes Writing Tests at City College,” these exams were not designed with the students’ educational experience in mind, but rather as a way of upholding a departmental “standard of correctness while simultaneously abdicating responsibility to teach it” (113). Shaughnessy, writes Molloy, while initially opposed to essay examinations, ultimately “reshaped her basic writing program to become more and more focused on the mere mechanics of sentences and paragraphs—aligning her courses with the demands of the new high-stakes writing test and pressuring basic writing teachers to become the very converters and tower guards that Shaughnessy later mocked in ‘Diving In’” (106). Rich, on the other hand, came to City College to show students that “poets
are not just dead men [and women], marble busts on the library shelf; that poetry is not a secret
dialect or a deal language, or a code to be broken, but an intense experience, like love, like
religious experience, like the experience of birth or death” (“Lecture to High School Teachers”).
Thus, as a necessary contrast to Shaughnessy’s mechanics-driven writing curriculum, Rich
brought into the basic writing classroom a sense of wonder and aliveness. For Rich, then, the
standardization of writing and education constituted a dead silence in need of breaking. Writing
was not a formula or a set of standards that students needed to adhere to, but rather an “intense
experience” they needed to have for themselves.

IV. Forging Live Silence, Breaking Dead Silence: Adrienne Rich in the Basic Writing Classroom

“The study of silence has long engrossed me,” muses Rich in a 1997 essay entitled “The
Arts of the Possible.” For her, silence represents the “invisible holes in reality” through which
writing “makes its way” (322). Silence, thus, is not inherently oppressive: “It can be fertilizing, it
can bathe the imagination, it can, as in great open spaces—I think of those plains stretching far
below the Hopi mesas in Arizona—be the nimbus of a way of life, a condition of vision” (322).
In other words, silence is capable of opening up imaginative spaces in which language can take
meaningful shape, in which our unique subjectivities can be imposed upon experience, in which
thinking occurs and ideas are formed. Since Rich’s time, rhetoricians within and around
composition studies have been fascinated by the affective charge residing in silence. In her 2004
Unspoken: The Rhetoric of Silence, for example, Cheryl Glenn surveys the many “delivery
systems” of silence, systems that involve protecting authority and keeping secrets, as well as
systems of expression and empowerment in the context of religion, music, and deaf culture. John
Edgar Wideman, meanwhile, lyricizes silence in his 1999 Callaloo essay “In Praise of Silence”:
“Silences structure our music,” he writes, “fill the spaces—point, counterpoint—of rhythm, cadence, phrasing” (549). In other words, silence marks time.

All too often, however, we encounter silence in the form of oppression, what Rich calls dead silence—“like a dead spot in an auditorium, a dead telephone, silence where language needed to be and was prevented” (322-23). Such silence has a tendency to exclude or disavow certain kinds of languages and vocabularies; it has the power to suppress questions beginning with Why? or, What if? Rich bore witness to the complicated nature of silence perhaps most acutely in her time at City College of New York, where she taught writing to inexperienced, first-generation college students from the Harlem community. Like critical pedagogue Ira Shor—who joined CUNY’s College of Staten Island in the early 70s—Rich embraced a pedagogy that sought to break these dead silences, one that employed

[h]abits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse. (Shor 129)

A decade before Shor would write the Paulo Freire-inspired Critical Teaching and Everyday Life (1980), Rich was constructing her own brand of critical democratic pedagogy in her basic writing classes at City College. There, Rich would work alongside Mina Shaughnessy, director of the college’s SEEK program, an initiative that served to support the city’s non-traditional students. SEEK would take on an expanded role during open admissions, which took root in the fall of 1970.
In the summer months leading up to her first semester at City College, Rich exchanged several letters with Shaughnessy in which they discussed not writing pedagogy so much as issues of language learning. It is through these letters, however, that Rich began to develop a pedagogy and teaching philosophy of possibility—one that surfaced in the wake of Open Admissions, an initiative that provided opportunity and access where there had been none. In one of these letters, Rich wonders if “an active energetic vocabulary is as important—more so—than the grammar. Has anyone tried doing a little with etymology?” she asks (18 June 1968). In response, Shaughnessy echoes Rich’s interest in vocabulary development, adding that “students seem to ignore the things that they cannot deal with in words” (26 June 1968). Rich might categorize this phenomenon—when ideas become trapped beneath linguistic codes inaccessible to the basic writer—under dead silences. In order to break such oppressive silences, she would need to lead her students into new kinds of silences, those that open up a space in which a certain level of awareness can be attained—one that “involves some kind of change that is difficult to bring about by any of the vocabulary-building methods I have encountered,” admits Shaughnessy.

Instead, she advises Rich to “trust the method that keeps the word in its setting, that gives it the special meaning that it gathers from its context (this by discussion, dictionary, etc.), and trust that the student, following the same impulse for analogy that has produced his present vocabulary, will know where to take it from there.” Ultimately, Shaughnessy advises Rich to take a more intuitive approach to teaching, one that exerts an “effort to remain responsive to the students’ thinking and feeling” in order to “create a situation in which something can happen” (my emphasis). Always wary of endowing the teacher with too much power at the expense of students’ discovery through language, Shaughnessy assured Rich that “we often discover that our students have learned what we weren’t aware we were teaching” (26 June 1968).
Of course, the slowness inherent in such a developmental process facilitates the productive silences that Rich deems so essential to imaginative processes (i.e., creativity; i.e., learning). Unfortunately, many basic writing students are not afforded the luxury of entertaining such productive silence, let alone possess the time or energy needed to explore the open spaces such silence creates. In “Teaching Language in Open Admissions: A Look at the Context” (1973), Rich outlines the daily routine of a typical City College student:

The student who leaves the campus at three or four o’clock after a day of classes, goes to work as a waitress, or clerk, or hash slinger, or guard, comes home at ten or eleven o’clock to a crowded apartment with TV audible in every corner—what does it feel like to this student to be reading, say, Byron’s ‘Don Juan’ or Jane Austen for a class the next day? Our students may spend two or three hours in the subway going to and from college and jobs, longer if the subway system is more deplorable than usual. To read in the New York subway at rush hour is impossible; it is virtually impossible to think (265).

Adding to her category of dead silences here, Rich depicts the effects of poverty on intellectual development as pervasive and detrimental (what we might call “deafening circumstances”): “Do ‘motivation’ and ‘intellectual competency’ mean the same for [Columbia University] students as for the City College undergraduate...?” she wonders (266).

The Papers of Adrienne Rich go on to paint a vivid picture of Rich’s devotion to her students at City College. In an undated letter to Shaughnessy (likely written during the summer of 1969, immediately following Rich’s first year teaching at CCNY, not to mention the Spring semester protests), Rich goes to bat for some of her struggling students, showing a great sensitivity to the social and personal conditions affecting their college experiences:
I’m particularly concerned about [D.W.] who started late because of illness, was making up back assignments beautifully and participating actively in class. Also, [A.B.] who when last seen was extremely discouraged about having lost a lot of ground due to domestic problems (she has a husband and a small child) and was thinking of quitting.

Rich’s view of her students as thinking, feeling, complex human beings is refreshing, particularly since basic writing, writes Mina Shaughnessy in “Diving In: an Introduction to Basic Writing,” “is commonly thought of as a writing course for young men and women who have many things wrong with them” (234). Rife with medical metaphors such as “remedial, clinic, lab, diagnosis” (234), and bullying anatomical labels such as “bonehead English”, basic writing students are often treated as patients plagued by some kind of deficiency. The compassionate, individual attention that teachers such as Rich and Shaughnessy provided their students would be considered an anomaly in most “pre-baccalaureate” programs. Shaughnessy and Rich, however, were well aware of the delicate nature of such a program, as well as its role in the social revolution in which they were about to insert themselves. In the summer of 1969, soon after the first moon landing and not long after the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., Rich writes the following reflections to Shaughnessy:

The SEEK program seems to me as fragile and incalculable as Columbus’ vessels, or the Mayflower—in contrast with that massively endowed flight of superhardware—in other words, I think the heroic explorations of our time are not in the physical universe at all. (8 August 1969)

Albeit rather cryptically, Rich is likely appending the phrase “heroic exploration” to the board of education’s decision to establish an Open Admissions policy, allowing any New York
City high school graduate the opportunity to matriculate in one of CUNY’s senior or community colleges. For Mina Shaughnessy and committed teachers such as Adrienne Rich, Open Admissions would bring about an opportunity to effect great social change; however, as Rich notes in the above letter to Shaughnessy, Open Admissions would place SEEK (a program designed to facilitate remediation) in a “fragile” and “incalculable place.” What benefits for students came from a compact, meticulously planned, well-funded program such as SEEK would be subsumed by the massive, chaotically implemented, under-financed experiment of Open Admissions. If CUNY administration had planned for the incoming Open Admission students as well as Shaughnessy had for her SEEK students, the social experiment may have garnered a much more enthusiastic tenor and opinion from both inside and outside the institution.

In their longitudinal study of Open Admissions done in insightful hindsight in 1990, sociologists David Lavin and David Crook frame the fragile policy as a “no-win policy”: “If many of the new students graduated,” they write, “it would show that standards had gone down the drain. If they flunked out, this would be evidence that Open Admissions had failed because it could not eradicate the effects of prior disadvantage” (394). Such a conundrum weighed heavily on Shaughnessy, influencing a spectacular academic career devoted to studying the tension between academic standards and educational equity (see Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing). In 1976, a year after the open admissions experiment came to a halt as New York City teetered at the edge of bankruptcy, Shaughnessy would condemn the sacrifice of equality for excellence in the pages of College Composition and Communication:

The student, already conditioned to the idea that there is something wrong with his English and that writing is a device for magnifying and exposing this deficiency, risks as little as possible on the page, often straining with what he does
write to approximate the academic style and producing in the process what might better be called “written Anguish” rather than English. (“Diving In” 235)

According to Roderick Ferguson, the dubious standard of “Excellence” (another inhibitive, dead silence) against which Shaughnessy and Rich’s students suffered emerged in the late 1960s “as a discourse that would try to reconcile the disqualifications of liberal democracy with the pressures of antiracism” (76). And while the Open Admissions movement, in part, arose from a “critical suspicion of excellence” (Ferguson 76), basic writing students nonetheless faced intense opposition as observed by the Caribbean-American writer, activist, and City College faculty member June Jordan:

City College was split between faculty and Third World students who wanted to inaugurate an Open Admissions policy, on one side, and faculty and students who viewed the Open Admissions concept as an intrinsic atrocity which, if implemented, would catapult the University into a trough of mediocrity, at best. Those opposed to Open Admissions argued, in effect, that the people, as in a democratic state, preclude excellence: excellence of standards and of achievement. (20 - 21)

Writer-teachers and activists such as Jordan, Rich, and Shaughnessy made it their life’s work to aid their students in breaking such silences as those brought on by racist, exclusionary standards of academic excellence. They also labored to assuage the “angst-written” statements about education on both the sides of the students as well as the faculty and administrators who would disparage the educational efforts of Open Admissions.

At the same time, however, Rich was always musing on the paradoxical nature of silence (silence as the liberator of the imagination vs. silence as intellectual oppressor). In another letter
to Shaughnessy written after her first year at CCNY, Rich writes, “Vermont seems disconnected from nearly everything this summer, but the silence gives me time to think” (20 July 1969). For Rich, “The impulse to create begins—often terribly and fearfully—in a tunnel of silence. Every real poem is the breaking of an existing silence, and the first question we ask any poem is, *What kind of voice is breaking silence, and what kind of silence is being broken?*” (“Arts of the Possible” 322 [Rich’s emphasis]). We can imagine, then, that Rich integrated such essential lines of questioning into her basic writing classroom, questions designed to emphasize how “[w]e’re not simply entrapped in the present. We are not caged within a narrowing corridor at ‘the end of history.’ Nor do any of us have to windsurf on the currents of a system that depends on the betrayal of so many others. We do have choices. We’re living through a certain part of history that needs us to live it and make it and write it” (“Arts of the Possible” 336).

Writing and teaching twenty years later, David Bartholomae and Tony Petrosky find similar value in imposing meaningful silences in their first-year writing classrooms. “This silence is, we believe, the only proper beginning,” they offer in their 1986 book *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts*. “A course in reading and writing whose goal is to empower students must begin with silence, a silence students must fill,” they insist. “It cannot begin by telling students what to say” (7). And yet, the culture of excellence propagated by higher education tends to resist such productive silences, instead filling the air around students with standards of decorum, language, and even ways of thinking.

V. Standardizing Dullness: The Academy’s Quest for “Excellence”

In “Teaching Language in Open Admissions: A Look at the Context,” Rich characterizes herself as a “teacher of language”:
that is, as someone for whom language implied freedom, who is trying to aid others to free themselves through the written word, and above all through learning to write it for themselves. I cannot know for them what it is they need to free, or what words they need to write; I can only try with them to get an approximation of the story they want to tell. (269)

Of course, Rich’s drive to empower her students to realize their identities through language was complicated by departmental standards of excellence—standards that became increasingly narrowed and vehemently enforced in the aftermath of Open Admissions. Rich wished to turn her students on to writing; however, she found herself teaching in an institution that systematically used language against them: “to keep them in their place, to mystify, to bully, to make them feel powerless” (269).

In his 2002 English Composition as a Happening, Geoffrey Sirc mourns the standardized dullness of first-year writing, calling for a return to the senses and everyday human truths. Essentially, Sirc aims to break the dead silences imposed on the writing classroom in the face of what June Jordan describes as academia’s preoccupation with a constructed notion of excellence. Although written at the turn of the twenty-first century, Sirc’s book takes us back to the era of Open Admissions, back to the era when radical teachers such as Adrienne Rich, June Jordan, and Mina Shaughnessy were attempting to enact a “happening” in higher education that would have lasting impact on efforts toward social equality.

Sirc takes his inspiration from the Happenings art movement of the late sixties, a philosophy of creativity that valued art’s ability to create change rather than uphold tired traditions. Composition, Sirc argues, has fallen victim to pressures brought on by the academy’s obsession with upholding a universal standard. “To establish composition as a respectable
discipline,” he explains, “we took on all the trappings of traditional academia—canonicity, scientism, empiricism, formalism, high theory, axioms, arrogance, and acceptance of the standard university department-divisions” (7). The academy’s “fantasies of excellence” have been particularly injurious to the basic writing students taught by Sirc, Rich, Shaughnessy, and Jordan. Perhaps this is why basic writing teachers such as Sirc and Rich adopted avant-garde teaching practices in order to turn their students on to writing. In encouraging student writers to express themselves creatively, unbridled by academic expectations of excellence, Sirc and Rich afforded their students an opportunity that had long been withheld from them: to break an oppressive silence, a “silence where language needed to be and was prevented” (Rich, Arts of the Possible 322-23).

In the fall of 1971, with open admissions in full effect, Rich taught a basic writing class that met three days a week for two-hour periods. Like Sirc, who believed that Composition should “penetrate to the core of human emotion” (288), Rich placed the student (the thinking, feeling, human student) at the center of her teaching. In the introductory remarks to her syllabus for English 1-H, Rich explains,

This class will start from the idea that language—the way we put words together—is a way of acting on reality and eventually gaining more control of one’s life.

The people in the class and their experiences will be the basic material of the course, about which we will be talking and writing. In writing, we will be trying to define the actual experiences we ourselves are having, and to make others more aware of our reality as we perceive it.
Not unlike Paulo Freire, Rich believed that education—particularly English language education—had the potential to further alienate or else liberate multiple-language speakers. “Education,” writes Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, “either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world” (62). Such potential for transformation informed the work of the Happenings artists and later gave rise to Happenings-inspired teaching practices such as those coined by Rich (perhaps unknowingly) and historically valorized by Sirc. Happenings artist Robert Rauschenberg, famous for his mixed-media sculpture-paintings of the 1950s, rejected determinacy, control, or even intention in his work. *Change*, however, was paramount—the kind of change brought about in the creator: “What’s exciting is that we don’t know. There is no anticipated result; but we will be changed” (qtd. in Sirc 10).

“Happenings were all about blurring the lines between life and art,” explains Sirc (9); yet Rich sought to blur the lines, not just between life and art (i.e., writing) in her classroom, but also the lines between life and education. “We’re living through a certain part of history that needs us to live it and make it and write it,” insists Rich (*Arts of the Possible* 336). Such a task requires a more complete integration of vocabularies within the academy’s lexicon—languages that went unuttered (or were simply ignored) before the Open Admissions policy of 1970.

In order to facilitate this integration of voices, Rich designed her classes as critical and expressive dialogues between the student writers and herself as a participatory teacher figure, as well as between the varieties of peoples and cultures existing in spiritual and ideological tension
with one another. In her “Course report for City College SEEK English course 1.8 G,” dated April 1969, Rich lists the following texts as central to course curriculum:

- *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*
- Julius Lester, *Look out, Whitey*
- *Autobiography of Malcolm X*
- Plato’s *Republic*
- Sartre, *No Exit*
- Camus, *the Plague*
- Cleaver, *Souls on Ice*

The philosophy behind these text selections is simple, claims Rich in this report: “The only unifying device for the course is that each book studied is one which has strongly affected the instructor.” In other words, Rich was unconcerned with canonicity—or what Sirc later refers to as the “trappings of traditional academia (Sirc 7); rather, she chose to expose her students to texts that have rattled her bones, texts that break dead silences rather than maintain them.

Furthermore, Rich’s reading list reflects her attempts to “strike a balance between Western European and white American writers and black writers; and to maintain where possible a dialogue between the works of those writers. (E.g., between Eldridge Cleaver and Plato)” (“Course report for City College SEEK English course 1.8 G”). It is in this way that Rich worked to bridge the gap between the SEEK students at CCNY and the expectations of excellence—and correctness—that the academy tried desperately to uphold.

Adrienne Rich sought to instill in her students a mode of expression—messy, complex writing that facilitated *thinking* rather than *knowing*. “Ah, the search for a serviceable, non-
discipline-specific compositional technique in order to record hopes, fears, fantasies,” Geoffrey Sirc pines more than thirty years later, “a kind of transmodal, multi-representational, plainspeak lyrical line for autoarchiving human experience—this is my wildest dream as a writing teacher” (76). Rich, too, was primarily interested in her students as human beings in need of expressive techniques for better understanding their lives rather than for use as future scholars or professionals:

I am concerned with the student’s response to literature as a part of his life, rather than as a preparation for scholarship in an English Ph.D. program; and with his discovery that one writes because one needs to say things to others, that he himself has much to say, and that when writing effectively one is addressing a potential reader, not simply fulfilling an academic requirement. (“Course report for City College SEEK English course 1.8 G”)

Both Sirc and Rich argue that there can be no prescriptive set of methods or guidelines for how to achieve these goals in the classroom: Happenings are spontaneous, and thus cannot be repeated, suggests Sirc. Rich ponders the question more earnestly; yet ultimately cannot, in good faith, articulate a one-size-fits-all course of action: “How to do it?” she asks, we all ask.

How to develop a working situation in the classroom where trust becomes a reality, where the student is writing with belief in his own validity, and reading with belief that what he reads has validity for him. The question is legitimate—How to do it?—but I am not sure that a description of strategies and exercises, readings, and writing topics can be, however successful they have proven for one teacher” (“Teaching Language in Open Admissions” 270).
While Rich’s rejection of a prescribed curriculum for legitimizing the work of basic writers makes good sense (no one class is the same after all), her writing assignments can perhaps provide a meaningful glimpse into how her critical-expressivist teaching philosophies were put into practice. In an informal writing assignment given in the spring of 1969, for example, Rich can be found inviting her students to engage in some of the socio-political issues pervading City College and its Harlem environs leading up to the protests that would bring about the Open Admissions policy in 1970:

**Writing assignment for Monday, March 2 [1969] for English 1.8**

All of us have at some time found ourselves, willingly or not, involved in some kind of mass human scene—whether an Army induction center, the emergency admissions of a hospital, a political protest, a confrontation of demonstrators with police, or even registration at City College. In Ann Petry’s “In Darkness and Confusion” you are carried into the midst of a Harlem uprising, in which mass action is described but details are also keenly observed, and the entire scene is given through the eyes of one individual.

The introduction to Rich’s early March assignment can be read as either prophecy or instigation knowing that, just one month hence, “two hundred or so African American and Puerto Rican students would lock the South Campus gates of City College and threaten to keep them so unless the college admitted more minority students” (Ferguson 76). The assignment ends with a prompt, asking students to

[d]escribe a scene, actual or imaginary, in which one person—you or some other—is involved with a large crowd. Remember that you will need to describe
both the overall scene and some of the individual participants. Also try to make
the reader feel your own emotional reaction to the situation.

Here, Rich invites her students to perform a fundamental—yet no less complex—literacy task:
They are encouraged to utilize writing as a life activity rather than an academic mode of
transmission. Like the compositionists who followed her (e.g., Peter Elbow and Geoffrey Sirc),
Rich sees her students as people in the world rather than as someday academics or future
grammarians. “Just because the rest of the curriculum has banned enchantment in favor of a
narrow conception of life-as-careerism that doesn’t mean we have to go along, does it?” wonders
Sirc. “Can’t we be a last outpost? A way station for poetry, ecophilia, spiritual intensity, basic
human (not disciplined) style” (28)?

In a 1971 memorandum addressed to Mina Shaughnessy, Rich calls into questions some
of the assumptions informing basic writing pedagogy at City College: “Many of us (and I
certainly include you in that ‘us’) have been questioning these assumptions all along, and often
discarding them; however, to some extent they have influenced all of us in the program.” What
follows, then, is a list of the assumptions Rich identifies as central to basic writing instruction,
assumptions she finds problematic:

a) That students learn to write as they learn math or carpentry: by a systematic
progression from one skill or unit to the next, e.g. from the sentence to the
paragraph to the short essay to the long research paper.
b) That the ability to write a long research paper is an end itself for a program of
this kind.
c) That competent writing is a technique which one person can transfer to another
without much or any reciprocal activity.
d) That an expanded vocabulary will expand the student’s control of language regardless of his present relationship to the words he is already using.

e) That the basic skills of Standard English can be taught before the student has any fundamental awareness of his existing relationship to language.

Moving away from such tired assumptions (assumptions that continue to pervade writing instruction today), Rich raises a number of possibilities for the future of basic writing instruction.

What Rich finds particularly senseless is the value of rote grammar drills and quizzes, exercises that isolate language from purpose, from feeling. “A person’s relationship to language has to do with his relationship to his world, to his identity, to his sense of time and space, his trust in and suspicion of others, his ways of identifying others,” she writes to Shaughnessy. Here, Rich refers to the blurring of art, education, and life that was so central to avant-garde art movements (such as the Happenings movement), yet nonetheless gets wrenched apart, segmented, in the professionalization of First-Year Composition. Such professionalization of college writing has led, inevitably, to the mechanization and standardization of writing, the notion that there is a universal standard of excellence that can be attained through rhetorical imitation devoid of any emotional desire to write. Consequently, writes Rich, “Because of the pressure of short-term goals—(the passing of grammar tests, the proficiency exam) we fail to give enough time and energy to reflecting with our students on the nature of language, how and why they are using the words they use” (Memo to Mina Shaughnessy).

VI. A Poet’s Departure and the End of an Era

CUNY’s Open Admissions experiment struggled in the face of New York’s economic unrest in 1975, forcing the institution to reinstate tuition fees in all of its senior and community
colleges. Perhaps in response, Adrienne Rich would leave City College in the same year, tendering her resignation to the Chair of the English department at the time, Edward Quinn:

“What I hope will be clear to you, and [former Chair] Ted Gross, and to anyone else to whom it could matter, is that my decision to leave City and teach elsewhere is not a gesture of despair about Open Admissions.” In fact, Rich demonstrated her commitment to Open Admissions time and time again, not just through her devotion to her students (which we can verify in the syllabi and letters found in her archive), but through her tireless evaluation and reevaluation of best teaching practices in basic writing as evidenced by her letters and memoranda to Mina Shaughnessy and the scholarship she published. In 1973, nearing the end of Open Admissions, Rich contributed her article “Teaching Language in Open Admissions” in Monroe Engel’s anthology *Uses of Literature*. This essay would catch the attention of CCNY Chairman Edward Quinn, who was already beginning to feel the demise of Open Admissions in the winter of 1973:

I wonder if you would mind if I sent copies of it to people in the administration. Their backs need a little strengthening right now; the inclination as I see it is to invest everything in “getting the good students back.” Your article would help us with the fainthearted and the lukewarm, if not with the adversaries. (Letter to Adrienne Rich, 10 December 1973)

Rich never stopped breaking dead silences, not in her teaching and not in her writing. In “Cartographies of Silence,” a poem written in 1975 (the year that fractured the foundations of open admissions) Rich explores language’s immense power to both liberate and oppress——a power that often lies “beneath the unsaid word,” which is not the absence of language, Rich reminds us, but *silence*:

Silence can be a plan rigorously executed
the blueprint to a life

It is a presence
it has a history    a form

Do not confuse it
with any kind of absence
Like many first-year composition students, Curtis Johnson acted on a compulsion to confess when he wrote “Peccatum Tacituritatis (Sin of Silence)” for his English 201 class at CUNY’s John Jay College in 1985:

If in fact human decency exists, then I would say that I am somewhat of a decent human being. I believe myself to be polite and to some degree I adhere to the manner of a chivalrous gentleman. Yet for some reason unfathomable to me I acted unlike myself one night. (28)

What follows this cryptic, Poe-ian introduction is an account of how, when stumbling upon a sexual assault taking place against a young woman one night, the author did nothing to intervene, call for help, or aid the victim in any way:

I watched this young woman while her assailants began to tear viciously at her clothes. The young men were taunting her with snorts of glee. Her screams began to rise in volume until one of the young men struck her in the mouth. I watched as she began to bleed and whimper quietly. After seeing this I could take no more and I turned around and started back down another way out of the park. (29)

The vivid anecdote arose from an assignment that asked students to “write about an experience that marked a turning point in their lives”—explains the student’s professor, Lee Jenkins—“one that caused them to see themselves, and others of importance to them, in a new light.” In other words, Johnson was not explicitly asked to confess his deepest, most shameful secret—he chose to. And, in doing so, he succeeded in crafting an authentic piece of writing that, in his professor’s words, “explores the way taken-for-granted gender stereotypes can be
confronted and deconstructed as a result of encounters that compel a clear-eyed examination of one’s own biases and conventional attitudes.”

Such clear-eyed examinations of the self, as well as one’s community (both local and global), fill the pages of John Jay’s Finest, an annual publication of exemplary student writing produced in courses across the disciplines at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Now in its 31st year, the journal was founded in 1985 by English professors Patricia Licklider and Shirley Schnitzer to (1) celebrate outstanding student writing, (2) provide other student writers with successful models of composition, and (3) inspire faculty outside of the English department to implement writing-to-learn strategies in their classrooms (ii). The magazine fosters equal opportunity, publishing material from the college’s most basic-level composition courses as well as from its graduate-level criminal justice courses. In fact, the journal doubles as an unofficial literary magazine, publishing fiction, poetry, and drama, too—much of which is produced outside the classroom walls.

My aim, here, is to explore the evolution of John Jay’s Finest (one of CUNY’s most long-standing records of student writing from across the curriculum) in order to gain a deeper, more precise understanding of the changing attitudes toward student writing at John Jay College between 1985 and 2010. My hope is that a detailed examination of the genre and rhetorical characteristics of these publications will yield insights into writing faculty’s fundamental notions of what constitutes exemplary student writing, and how these notions have shifted over the last 25 years. Peripherally, this study may also reflect the genre and rhetorical characteristics valued at the student level since a portion of JJF’s contents are comprised of self-submitted entries. It may also uncover discoveries regarding the function(s) of a publication such as John Jay’s Finest and, to a larger extent, determine their potential pedagogical and administrative uses, particularly
as models of how critical and expressive rhetorics can come together in academia to inspire inexperienced and incoming students to write with feeling and with purpose.

Edith Wells provides some historical context surrounding anthologies of student work in “College Publications of Freshman Writing,” which appeared in *College Composition and Communication* in 1950. In this article, she profiles four noteworthy journals of first-year writing, detailing their editorial processes, funding methods, publicity campaigns, curricular functions, challenges, successes, etc. Ultimately, Wells concludes, “by giving prestige to freshman writing, the magazine can brighten the often dull composition classes” (11). In doing so, suggests Robert Scholes in *Textual Power*, we afford student writing the same respect garnered by literature and print journalism (7). The cognitive benefits of distinguishing student writing as literature have been thoroughly discussed in Wendy Bishop’s 2003 essay, “When All Writing Is Creative and Student Writing Is Literature”: “When you view your writing as literature,” she explains, using Eagleton’s definition of literature as “highly valued writing” (9), “you allow yourself to share a supremely satisfying human activity.” This experience, Bishop points out, is heightened by the activity of publishing: “For most of us, writing is never easy, but it is made worthwhile when we ‘publish’ in the writing classroom and when we are ‘read by even a few people and enjoyed by at least one’” (235).

The glow of “prestige” and “respect” furnished by publications can, in part, be attributed to the feeling of *purpose* with which it supplies its writers. But purpose, of course, is an affective charge contingent upon its surroundings (just as everything else). What purpose relies on is *audience*—a willing ear, an eager eye. After implementing an e-publication of student work in her writing classroom, Dawn Putnam discovered the awesome effect that audience could have on her students’ level of engagement with and enthusiasm for writing. Before employing e-
publications, writing for Putnam’s students was “just something to get done so you don’t have to do it” (102). But when Putnam announced that the class’s writing would be published and disseminated among the community, they suddenly cared a great deal about the quality of their work. Workshops exhibited a newfound fervency, with students endlessly deliberating over which ideas they wanted to express to their community, and how (Putnam 104). Student publications, such as those that Putnam and Bishop describe, return formal and stylistic choices to their rightful owners: the students. They provide spaces in which student writing can break out of the narrow confines of assignment rubrics and course expectations. More importantly, they provide a record of how writers impact genres, how the student “inscribes herself/himself on literary history” (Bishop Genre and Writing, 9).

With this enhanced control over one’s writing (the form(s) it takes, the language it yields) we often see an increased level of accountability in student motivation, thereby enhancing the overall quality and authenticity of the work itself. But what does “quality,” “authentic” writing look like? Can we measure it in terms of rhetorical style or mode of genre? Perhaps, but it is certainly more complicated and nuanced than a near-sighted process as such could account for. Thus, in an attempt to find answers to these and other questions surrounding the publication of student writing (from selection to production), I have applied methods of textual analysis from Edward P.J. Corbett and Robert J. Connors’ “Study of Style” as outlined in their Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student. My methodology, which entails a detailed, sentence-level examination of six works from issues of John Jay’s Finest dating between 1985 and 2010, will provide a technical lens through which I will chart changes in writing styles valued by students and English faculty over 25 years. Additionally, I have categorized and tallied the presence of specific genre types found in these six issues of JJF in order to note changes in
the magazine’s perceived preferences as editorial positions shift (about every five years). Using both a distance reading technique that quantifies genres and close reading techniques that analyze the linguistic style and techne of student writing, this study will be a preliminary gesture toward answering questions about the function of student publications in- and outside the writing classroom and how they might productively contribute to a hybrid rhetoric in first-year composition that allows for the amalgamation of critical analysis and imaginative expression.

When leafing through any given issue of *JJF*, it is easy to become absorbed in the stories of these students (their failures and achievements, their secrets and sorrows). And this is the point, explained former co-editor Patricia Licklider to me in her office inside John Jay’s new building at 10th Avenue and 59th Street. In her view, English composition was the only course that afforded students the opportunity to explore themselves personally through writing. Thus, she and co-founder Shirley Schnitzer sought to applaud these efforts of personal writing by amplifying their presence in *JJF*. As indicated by Table 1, *John Jay’s Finest* was, and continues to be, committed to showcasing a variety of genre types in its pages; however, as editorial roles and curricular frameworks shifted within the English department, so did the overall tone and style of the magazine’s contents.

In the magazine’s first ten years of publication, we can see a growing appreciation for the personal narrative in its pages, reaching their apex in 1995, at which point they comprised the majority of the magazine’s contents at 28.6%. Contrastively, textual analyses came in at a close second place at 23.8%, an exponential increase from 1990 (when analyses comprised only 9.7% of the issue), and an even more dramatic increase from 1985 (which contained no analyses, spotlighting poetry, fiction, and short editorial essays instead). In dramatic fashion, however, the personal
Table 1: Genre Types in *John Jay’s Finest*, 1985 – 2010

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1985</strong>&lt;br&gt;(Eds. Licklider &amp; Schnitzer)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>1 (5.6%)</td>
<td>1 (5.6%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>3 (16.7%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>4 (22.2%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>2 (11.1%)</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1990</strong>&lt;br&gt;(Eds. Licklider &amp; Schnitzer)</td>
<td>8 (25.8%)</td>
<td>2 (6.5%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>2 (4.8%)</td>
<td>2 (4.8%)</td>
<td>10 (23.8%)</td>
<td>5 (11.9%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>3 (9.7%)</td>
<td>2 (6.5%)</td>
<td>3 (9.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1995</strong>&lt;br&gt;(Ed. Rusch)</td>
<td>12 (28.6%)</td>
<td>3 (7.1%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>2 (4.8%)</td>
<td>2 (4.8%)</td>
<td>10 (23.8%)</td>
<td>5 (11.9%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>7 (16.7%)</td>
<td>1 (2.4%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2000</strong>&lt;br&gt;(Ed. Mushabac)</td>
<td>9 (29.0%)</td>
<td>3 (9.7%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>2 (6.5%)</td>
<td>3 (9.7%)</td>
<td>11 (35.5%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>1 (3.2%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>2 (6.5%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2005</strong>&lt;br&gt;(Ed. Pease)</td>
<td>7 (22.6%)</td>
<td>2 (6.5%)</td>
<td>1 (3.2%)</td>
<td>1 (3.2%)</td>
<td>4 (12.9%)</td>
<td>9 (29.0%)</td>
<td>1 (3.2%)</td>
<td>2 (6.5%)</td>
<td>1 (3.2%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>3 (9.7%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2010</strong>&lt;br&gt;(Eds. Heiman &amp; Berlin)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>8 (25.8%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>1 (3.2%)</td>
<td>4 (12.9%)</td>
<td>14 (45.2%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>2 (6.5%)</td>
<td>2 (6.5%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Licklider and Schnitzer’s 1985 issue contained six poems and four short stories; yet, from there, the inclusion of creative writing is much more erratic. A few poems appear in most issues over the years, but they function primarily as interludes between works of essayistic prose. By 2010, analyses of literature take the place of poetic and expressive forms, which, combined with the absence of personal narratives, detracts from the magazine’s former polyvocal demeanor.

Such a dramatic evolution would imply that John Jay College, as an institution (or at the very least its English department), sought to shift its students’ attention to academic writing, what David Bartholomae describes as “pure, muscular, lean, taut, the language of truth and reason […] language stripped of the false dressings of style and fashion, a tool for inquiry and critique (62). Bartholomae intoned this definition of academic writing somewhat sardonically in a conversation with Peter Elbow at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, but despite its admittedly “stuffy” and “pedantic” (62) traits, it serves as a practical vector for the conveyance of ideas in the university environment. If, ultimately, the objective of John Jay’s Finest is to celebrate and model exemplary academic writing, it is worth examining what such exemplary writing consists of and, alternatively, what it might stand to gain by bringing poetic and expressive modes of writing back into its academic discourse.

To carry out this research, I will look at individual samples of student writing from six issues of John Jay’s Finest—1985, 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005, and 2010. Methods from Corbett and Connors’ “Study of Style,” will inform my own analyses of student writing, focusing specifically on sentence types (simple, complex, compound, compound-complex, etc.) and sentence length. General analyses will also be made of rhetorical structures found in these samples, such as paragraph organization and transitions. Graphic representations of these data can be found in Table 3 and Table 4.
In hopes of achieving objective, impartial results, I blindly selected the fifth essay from each of my six sources. In cases where the fifth piece of writing was a poem or a short story, I chose the essay immediately following. For the purpose of this study, I considered short stories and poems to be outliers since these genres utilized a decidedly “nonacademic” mode to create a desired effect not found in the other genre types present in JIF. A full breakdown of the selected student works, their thematic concerns, and genre modes can be viewed in Table 2.

In the 1985 sample, English 101 student Anthony Gonzalez seeks to answer the question posed in his title: “Women—Fragile Flowers?” The topic arose, he explains in his introduction, from a “hot discussion on ‘women’s lib’” that took place in his Puerto Rican Sociology Class. He goes on to credit a classmate (“Chris”) for inciting the argument when, “with an air of authority,” he outlined innate, biological differences distinguishing the female character from that of the male. Like many of the essays in this study, Gonzalez’s is situated locally, in the community of the university or New York City (or, in this essay’s case, the confines of the classroom).

Gonzalez goes on to defend his position that “women are not the weaker sex but are the ostracized sex” in a four-paragraph, bisymmetrical, bipartite essay that utilizes logic and reason (rather than facts and statistics) to support its central claim. The essay is strikingly similar to English 101 student Kevin Unick’s “Is This Progress?” which appears in the 1990 issue. Unick, too, presents an argument relying on logos as its primary mode of persuasion, making use of a similar bisymmetrical structure (except he employs three support paragraphs (a tripartite) rather than two). He eschews the inclusion of credible evidence, it seems, to instead appeal to his readers’ sense of personal ethics by presenting them with a smattering of rhetorical questions: “Have we allowed the quality of our lives and environment to be sacrificed for the sake of
driving a faster car or building a larger building?” In fact, 23.5% of the sentence types found in Unick’s essay are questions. By contrast, Gonzalez’s essay contains only one question, also rhetorical, and, like Unick’s use of questions, it functions as a substitution for a more direct statement or claim. Why does Unick work so ardently to deflect authorial claims in his essay, instead asking readers to formulate them for him? In part, we can perhaps view this deflection as a gesture toward an academic tone of sophistication. We can view Unick’s polite prodding as a sign of consideration for his audience (he does not wish to push his readers away). At the same time, however, we might view this tactic as evasive—used as a way to mask the essay’s lack of substantive evidence. Unick at least acknowledges—and attempts to compensate for—this point of weakness, whereas Gonzalez peppers his essay freely with unsubstantiated claims, such as this one: “Few brilliant women have tried to develop their talents simply because there has been a small market for brilliant women in this country.”

Table 2: Focus of Selected Essays

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Genre</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Gonzalez</td>
<td>gender stereotyping</td>
<td>relationship between societal prejudice and gender roles</td>
<td>position paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Unick</td>
<td>consequences of industrial development</td>
<td>material desires and environmental degradation</td>
<td>position paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Newhart</td>
<td>cab drivers in New York City</td>
<td>the knowingly dangerous situation we put ourselves when entering an NYC cab</td>
<td>personal narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Zvezdanova</td>
<td>childhood memories</td>
<td>realizations about the human condition brought on by childhood experiences</td>
<td>personal narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Daleus</td>
<td>sexual assault</td>
<td>psychological and emotional effects in the aftermath of sexual assault</td>
<td>personal narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Wynns</td>
<td>global warming</td>
<td>irrational associations with nuclear energy inhibit a viable solution to global warming</td>
<td>position paper</td>
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Table 3: Analysis of Sentence Length

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total No. of Words</td>
<td>643</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>809</td>
<td>624</td>
<td>869</td>
<td>792</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total No. of Paragraphs</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total No. of Sentences</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Words/ Sentence</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum Words/ Sentence</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum Words/ Sentence</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Analysis of Sentence Types

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total No. of Sentences</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple</td>
<td>14 (43.8%)</td>
<td>10 (29.4%)</td>
<td>23 (45.1%)</td>
<td>20 (41.7%)</td>
<td>30 (38.5%)</td>
<td>2 (6.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compound</td>
<td>5 (15.6%)</td>
<td>1 (2.9%)</td>
<td>3 (5.9%)</td>
<td>4 (8.3%)</td>
<td>13 (16.7%)</td>
<td>4 (13.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex</td>
<td>7 (21.9%)</td>
<td>9 (26.5%)</td>
<td>13 (25.5%)</td>
<td>19 (39.6%)</td>
<td>18 (23.1%)</td>
<td>14 (48.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compound-Complex</td>
<td>5 (15.6%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>5 (9.8%)</td>
<td>4 (8.3%)</td>
<td>5 (6.4%)</td>
<td>8 (27.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>1 (3.1%)</td>
<td>8 (23.5%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>6 (7.7%)</td>
<td>1 (3.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incomplete</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>3 (8.8%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>1 (2.1%)</td>
<td>6 (7.7%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imperative</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>3 (8.8%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialog/Quotation</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>7 (13.7%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>0 (0.0%)</td>
<td>(0.0%)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The personal narratives examined in issues 1995 and 2000 bear similar syntactical features. Both utilize relatively short, simple sentences to portray memories of past events.

English 101 student Cynthia Newhart opens “Cab Drivers in New York” in conventional, five-paragraph-essay form:

> Cab drivers in New York have a driving style all their own. They act as if the standard rules of the road do not apply to them. Among their various dangerous habits are driving too fast, cutting off other drivers, and not using turn signals.

Here, Newhart plainly sets up another bisymmetrical tripartite structure. She begins with an uncomplicated “hook” to draw the reader in and transitions into a three-prong thesis statement. Strangely, however, only one of these “prongs” receives explicit treatment in the essay (“driving too fast”), which makes sense, seeing as how Newhart is clearly working in the personal narrative genre and not in that of the more formulaic position paper. What follow this student’s rather humdrum introduction are vivid depictions of nightmarish run-ins (some literal) with New York City cabs. It is in these passages that Newhart discovers an appropriate voice, incorporating dialogue and active diction to evoke a real sense of panic:

> “Stop. Let me out,” I pleaded. I pounded on the bullet-proof divider between us.
> “Yes, Miss?” he asked. “Please pull over, I want to get out,” I said. He turned his head to face me, completely taking his eyes off the road while he kept his foot firmly on the gas peddle [sic]. “Where do you want to get out, Miss?” he asked, still facing me. “Anywhere, just pull over!” In one jerk of the wheel I was curb-side. I paid my fare and quickly got out, relieved to be on terra firma again.
English 201 student Polina Zvezdanova opens her personal narrative, “A Sudden Summer Storm,” with a similar academic trope—that of the vague generalization. Meant to draw the reader in, such generalizations risk coming across as pandering; yet, at the same time, they communicate the writer’s desire to connect to her reader, as Zvezdanova attempts in her introduction when she writes, “Everyone has a collection of childhood memories.” The obvious statement is useful, however, for the way in which it allows Zvezdanova to craft an opening to her personal narrative that transitions from an empty generalization to meaningful reflections on the significance of memory:

Everyone has a collection of childhood memories. Memories are our way of connecting with the past, with ourselves. They are like a magic box that we can always open, or close. Some last, some do not. They constantly remind us of who we really are, of how we became what we are. When I remember, it’s like watching an old movie, a favorite old movie that I can watch over and over again. No one else can see what I see, only me…

Here, after somewhat of a false start, Zvezdanova effectively relates her topic to the reader while simultaneously exploring how memory is significant to her personally—the ultimate objective of the genre.

The third personal narrative of these six samples was found in the 2005 edition of *John Jay’s Finest*. Written by Beverly K. Daleus in Professor Alisse Waterston’s Culture and Crime class, “Abduction of a Soul” narrates Daleus’ experience being raped in an empty parking garage as she attempted to enter her car. Daleus opens her traumatic account (eerily echoing Curtis Johnson’s narrative excerpted at the beginning of this chapter) on a note of uncertainty, unable to adequately verbalize her experience. In fact, she begins by asking the reader, ostensibly, for
advice in this regard: “How do you describe what it feels like to be violated sexually by force? Is
there a way to put into words the empty feeling you have when a man lays his heavy body on
yours, and pounds away inside you?” In contrast to Newhart and Zvezdanova’s personal
narratives, Daleus utilizes a variety of sentence types, positioning complex structures against
direct, simple arrangements: “He laid the machete on my chest with the tip towards my neck and
told me, ‘Don’t move unless I tell you to.’ So I didn’t. I lay there. I didn’t fight back.” The
details from Daleus’ horrific encounter are conveyed with an immediacy appropriate to the
rhetorical situation. She does not, as Newhart and Zvezdanova’s sometimes do, enlist an
academic voice or structure to infuse a misguided sense of logic and credibility into the piece.
Instead, she trusts the accuracy of her memory and the authenticity of her voice to conjure up a
persuasive helping of pathos that elicits empathy from her readers.

Among the five essays discussed so far, only small differences can be detected between
them in regard to sentence type and length. Excluding Zvezdanova’s essay on childhood
memories, the samples exhibit an overwhelming preference for simple sentences over
compound, complex, or compound-complex sentences. Even Zvezdanova’s piece, which, of the
five, contains the most complex structures, still favors simple sentences. While most of these
samples contain several complex sentences, very few compound-complex sentences, or even
simple compound sentences, were found. The sixth and most recent sample, however, shows a
drastic increase in the usage of complex and compound-complex sentences. In fact, only two
simple sentences (out of 29 total sentences) can be found in English 201 student Mark Wynns’
“Do the Smart Thing: Thoughtful Action against Global Warming.”

Wynns’ 2010 essay can most meaningfully be compared to the two earliest samples by
Gonzalez and Unick, as all three can be categorized as position papers. As I noted earlier in my
analysis, Gonzalez and Unick’s essays relied on logic and reasoning to demonstrate their claims, omitting outside texts and thereby sacrificing authority and credibility. Conversely, Wynns cites academic studies to disparage society’s resistance toward nuclear energy as a viable alternative to fossil fuels. Perhaps the most prominent difference between Wynns’ work and that of Gonzalez and Unick’s, however, is in the writing style. Only 6.9 percent of Wynns’ essay is comprised of simple sentences, as opposed to 43.8 percent of Gonzalez’s and 29.4% of Unick’s. But where we see the largest difference is in the presence of complex and compound-complex sentences. 48.3% of Wynns’ sentences can be described as complex, whereas only 21.9% and 26.5% of Gonzalez and Unick’s, respectively. Lastly, and most dramatically, Wynns’ essay contains eight, rather lengthy, compound-complex sentences, whereas Gonzalez’s essay contains five, and Unick’s contains none.

In examining Wynns’ introductory paragraph, we can see a marked difference between the language featured, not only in Gonzalez and Unick’s essays, but in Newhart, Zvezdanova, and Daleus’ as well:

Though climate change is a proven phenomenon and arguably the most important issue of our time, it remains misunderstood by many. For decades, industrial interests that benefit from activity that pollutes the atmosphere have waged all-out war on the global warming theory in the public arena, simultaneously stalling solutions and making the problem worse. They insist (correctly to some extent) that solving the problem will be uncomfortable and cause a lot of upheaval in the current economic system, but certainly environment catastrophe (such as G. Tyler Miller’s forecast of potential wildfires in 90% of North American forests [p. 301]) would be much more uncomfortable.
Here, Wynns utilizes a passive, objective voice and yet manages to firmly and effectively present his argument—that disregarding evidence of global warming is exacerbating the problem. The introduction is comprised exclusively of complex and compound-complex sentences, which contribute to the writer’s credibility and reliability, as does the citation of G. Tyler Miller in line seven. And yet, while Wynns’ fluency in the discourse of the academy serves to bolster his authorial credibility and authority, there is something lacking. He has not contributed to the conversation of climate change in a way that is idiosyncratic to him. He has not expressed a view that is his uniquely.

The inclusion of Wynns’ advanced-level academic essay paired with the exclusion of personal narratives in the 2010 issue of *John Jay’s Finest* suggests a significant shift in, not only the type of writing valued by English faculty at John Jay, but also in the intended (and potential) uses of a publication like *JJF*. From 1985 to 1995, the magazine devoted most of its pages to personal narratives and creative writing, allotting approximately 12 to 16% of the magazine to academic writing in the form of non-researched position papers (such as Gonzalez and Unick’s essays). By 1995, personal narratives continued to dominate the pages of *JJF*, but textual analyses emerged in a close second place. By 2000, personal narratives were on the decline, and more academic writing took their place in the form of exploratory research essays, researched arguments (like Wynns’), and, of course, textual analyses (which, by 2010, constitute the majority of the magazine).

Much of the shift from personal narratives to academic analysis came about during a significant shift in curricular goals within John Jay’s first-year writing program, a shift that awarded them a CCCC Writing Program Certificate of Excellence in 2012. The new framework for first-year composition involves a coherent structure of prescribed writing projects that
emphasize poetic/expressive modes of writing in the early stages of the semester, proceeds toward research that is inspired by the material generated in the expressive stage, and culminates in a final research essay that investigates key questions that emerge throughout the personal expression and research stages of the course.

So what can be gleaned—pedagogically, curricularly, administratively—from John Jay’s Finest dramatic and dynamic journey observed over a 25-year span? In many ways, the journal’s evolution enacts the kind of transformation that a movement like critical expressivism is calling for. JJF’s early emphasis on expressivist forms mirrors the process movement’s interest in authorial subjectivity. Subsequently, the journal’s about-face to third-person, tonally clinical forms is in line with social constructivism’s skepticism of the singular “I.” John Jay Finest’s third shift, however, holds the promise of a new era, ignited by important curricular shifts in English composition, that encourages a rhetoric of combination—that is, a fusing of personally and factually based truths, and expressive and analytic modes of discourse.

A resource such as John Jay’s Finest has tremendous pedagogical potential in that it can provide rhetorical mentorship to incoming and inexperienced students struggling to acclimate to the culture of higher education. Unfortunately, since JJF’s inception in 1985, its production and distribution process has been severely underfunded, rendering the project essentially useless as a pedagogical tool in the writing classroom. (How can an undergraduate population of 14,000 benefit from a magazine if it can only be found in the recesses of the library’s special collections, or in the seldom-opened drawers of faculty?) To ameliorate the financial burden of producing a publication of student writing, Vassar College requires students enrolled in all composition courses to purchase copies of The Sampler (published tri-annually). Compulsory sales allow faculty to make significant use of the journal as a tool for modeling successful writing.
approaches. “The compositions in our magazine,” wrote The Sampler’s editors in response to Edith Wells’ survey, “are examined closely and discussed in detail as part of the class work” (4). By the end of their freshman year, Vassar students have been exposed to a variety of exemplary student essays, and, in doing so, “build up a set of critical standards which are meaningful because the students have had a part in formulating them” (4).

Lacking the level of classroom presence enjoyed by publications such as The Sampler, John Jay’s Finest serves only to congratulate the distinguished writing of a handful of students each year. It also functions—importantly—as an institutional archive, documenting shifts in the writing culture at John Jay, but it could be so much more. Adopting the compulsory sales strategy of publications such as Vassar’s The Sampler would convert John Jay’s Finest into a sustainable enterprise—plus it would bring about the added benefit of ensuring every John Jay student’s exposure to an evolved conception of what academic writing can be when we refrain from placing strict discursive and stylistic boundaries around student writing and allow the students to impact the genre of college writing as they see fit.

In the following chapter I explore a journal of college writing that, like John Jay’s Finest, is attempting to showcase a new, student-impacted category of academic writing that encourages rhetorical fusions. From New York University, Mercer Street: a Collection of Essays from the Expository Writing Program, is required reading for all first-year students at New York University. In this way, it serves as an introduction not only to English composition, but to very culture of the university. Additionally, I will examine an alternative to the compulsory purchases of student publications as mentor texts in first-year writing in the form of Web journals—that is, open-access online magazines updated and edited annually by individual composition classes. My hope, ultimately, is to come to an informed understanding of how publications of student
writing can be productively utilized to wrestle the formation—and standardization—of student genres from the hands of academic instructors and administrators and return this control to the student writers themselves. Only then can a rhetoric of this/and, a rhetoric that embraces stylistic plurality and polyvocalism begin to garner a reputation of legitimacy in academia.
Chapter Four: Blurring Pragmatic and Aesthetic Discourses in College Writing: A Case Study of New York University’s Expository Writing Program and Publication of Student Writing

I. Reconciling Expressivism and Constructivism through Images

Essay work, almost all good writing, is grounded in the images, the picture that is the story.
—Pat C. Hoy II, “The Art of Essaying”

In the spring of 2012, I was invited to join the ranks of the Expository Writing Program (EWP) at New York University. That summer, I participated in a weeklong orientation, which the program’s director at the time, Pat Hoy, referred to as “bootcamp.” I soon discovered that the military turn-of-phrase was used only semi-ironically as Hoy is, in fact, a graduate of West Point and a veteran of the Vietnam War. I can still picture Professor Hoy, a solid, straight-backed seventy-four-year-old, standing before the classroom’s whiteboard, a tidy grin on his face that said both welcome and beware.

Four years later, what I remember most vividly about the EWP orientation sessions was the tense intellectual and emotional atmosphere that Professor Hoy cultivated in the tiny, windowless classroom that the new lecturers and I found ourselves in. More often than not, these sessions began in a darkened room and, without pretense, the screening of some portentous, yet nuanced scene from Criterion Collection cinema: Gray Gardens, Seven Samurai, The Royal Tenenbaums. Afterward, Professor Hoy would instruct us to “fill the room” with the “minute particulars” comprising whichever obscure, contextless scene we had just viewed. What Hoy was doing, we soon realized, was modeling a process for interpretive thinking, a process he deemed critical to academic writing—that is, his vision of what academic writing could and should be.
For Hoy, writing and reading (the reading of both verbal and visual texts) are inextricably linked. He detests formulaic, reductionist, thesis-driven prose and therefore champions expressivism’s wandering spirit, its appetite for complication. And yet, like Bartholomae, Hoy is wary of personal experience-driven essays, as they tend to narrow a writer’s field of vision, leading to biased conclusions. In a nutshell, Hoy’s writing program emphasized an inductive approach to writing in contrast to the conventional emphasis on fact-based, prescribed structural responses that take the shape of thesis, proposition, examples. “In your work with us in the Expository Writing Program,” writes Hoy in a 2012 letter to incoming NYU freshmen, “you will learn to reverse the emphasis, setting in motion a progression from evidence to idea to essay” (2012-13 iv).

In working with first-year writers at NYU, Hoy began to discover that his students had learned to take shortcuts, “to intuit a thesis, to intuit propositions to support it, and to find examples to support the thesis, moving habitually from thesis to evidence—leaving out contradictions, challenges, complications” (2012-13 iv). These shortcuts (pressed upon students by overworked teachers burdened by reductive, current-traditionalist expectations enforced by standardized testing) may provide students with a quicker route to completing what Janet Emig has characterized as “extensive” writing tasks (writing exclusively done for an instructor, essentially), but they also significantly undermine writing-to-learn objectives which developed in conjunction with the process movement and have been embraced by composition studies ever since (see Zinsser, “Writing to Learn”).

Hoy’s inductive approach to teaching writing is not only aligned with the writing-to-learn movement; it also reflects the writing process of creative (or reflexive) writers at large. Hoy (now retired from NYU) never defined himself as a compositionist but, rather, as a writer who strived
to improve his craft by constantly reflecting on the act of writing. As a “writer-teacher-writer” (Wendy Bishop’s term for the writer whose teaching is informed by her craft and vice-versa), Hoy has published work in academic journals (such as UC Davis’s *Writing on the Edge*) as well as in literary journals (*Agni*, the *Sewanee Review*). His faculty in the Expository Writing Program reflected this duality of identities. Most of the program’s nearly 100 full-time lecturers held Masters of Fine Arts degrees in Fiction, Poetry, Playwriting, Film, or Performance Studies—and the handful of English Literature PhD’s were secret poets or novelists themselves.

It would be natural to wonder whether a writing program faculty comprised almost entirely of creative writers might undermine the discipline’s objectives for what students should be able “to do” by the end of their first year of college (objectives outlined in the "WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition"); and yet, for reasons this chapter will explore, the Expository Writing Program at NYU under Hoy’s direction produced writing from students that was both critically conscious and aesthetically charged. What does such writing (i.e., writing that is socially and intellectually engaged, yet imaginative, poetic, expressive) look like? And what might the Expository Writing Program have to teach us (“us” being teachers of writing and/or WPAs) about the value—and potential costs—of weighing aesthetic concerns in our first-year-writing curricula?

II. Now You Seem Them: Actualizing Audience in the Genres and Discourses of the Academy

The issue isn’t either/or (master one genre/discourse/community or the other: affiliate, dedicate), the issue is both/and (learn about both simultaneously because that’s how we gauge and understand limits, boundaries, centers, edges, entry, and exit).

—Wendy Bishop, “Preaching What We Practice As Professionals in Writing”
James Britton’s taxonomy of discourse provides a useful framework for understanding the value inherent in varying our modes of communication in academic writing. In a study published in 1975, Britton and his fellow researchers found that most of the writing done in British and American schools was of a transactional nature—meaning, writing done for the express purpose of transmitting a writer’s pre-formed thoughts to a reader (again, Emig would call this type of writing “extensive” writing—writing performed for a teacher or an authority). This kind of writing typically manifests in the form of short essays, lab reports, book reports (reporting of any kind). It is entirely pragmatic and purpose-oriented. Rarely seen in primary and secondary schooling was poetic (or imaginative/creative) writing of any kind, although expressive writing (an exploratory medium closest to speech) was occasionally employed in the early stages of the writing process.

In his analysis of the findings, Britton identified transactional, poetic, and expressive discourse as the three primary discursive modes employed in primary and secondary education. Transactional writing was by far the most prominent, and it often involved writing to a distant, hypothetical audience, a teacher figure, or no discernible audience whatsoever. Britton and his research team theorized that expressive writing formed the foundation from which poetic and transactional writing developed, and they found that a stronger emphasis on the expressive mode of discourse had a heuristic effect, allowing students to more clearly conceptualize notions of audience and purpose in a given writing situation. Britton’s findings suggest that the actualness of audience that expressive writing emanates and thrives on could be usefully harnessed by more conventional—more “transactional”—forms of academic writing.

And yet, Britton’s conclusions fail to find a place for expressive discourse in the so-called “product” of academic writing. In his view, expressive writing is relegated to the early,
semi-private stages of the writing process. It may significantly influence how a student situates herself in relation to her audience and rhetorical purpose, but its stylistic features are hidden beneath a veneer of anaesthetized academic discourse. While I appreciate the value with which Britton has imbued expressive discourse, I can’t help but feel dissatisfied with its outmoded reputation as the “inferior discourse”—inferior, that is, to the stoicism we have for too long unquestioningly celebrated in college writing.

In their anthology of essays, *Genre and Writing: Issues, Arguments, Alternatives*, editors Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom advocate for cross-genre, multimodal writing in academia. In the introduction, Bishop maintains that genres are in flux, constantly impacted by writers—including student writers—who work within them. “Everyone who writes is a writer,” she reminds us, “a writer working in, on, and around at least one genre; a writer being worked on (worked over?) by genre” (x). And yet, this mutual malleability is not often found in the composition classroom, where rigid forms are demanded in the name of "professionalization."

Meanwhile, we—the torch-bearers of formal academic convention—have embraced multi-modal/cross-genre styles in our own writing, as evidenced by the work being published in our discipline’s scholarly journals. In these publications, "thesis- and data-driven work now thrives side by side with narrative and metaphor-rich investigations,” but, Bishop argues, “we're still too often failing to share these options and alternate styles with our own students: graduates and undergraduates" (“Preaching What We Practice” 4).

Like myself—and the expository writing faculty at NYU—Bishop’s work with students, with developing writing pedagogy and curricula, is informed by her grounding in creative writing, a grounding that has helped her to understand that “writing a poem about a classroom or a student was a profitable type of research, a form of scholarly meditation, as valuable as was
writing the teaching essay” (11 - 12). Bishop boasts of being a “sneak-thief at the boundaries between prose and poetry, fiction, and nonfiction” (4). Here’s how she describes the productive tensions at play when one composes in multiple genres:

I find that sometimes telling teaching stories isn't enough, and I need to return to the class context, collecting more data. At other times, describing curricula sends me back to nonfiction for a different kind of grounding, as I explore my writing past and include poetry—and students' voices and writing—on the academic page. (4)

In the blurring of poetic, expressive, and transactional discourses modelled by Bishop lies a framework for reconciling the key differences between the social constructivism and expressivism camps. On the one hand, Bishop recognizes the value of her inimitable perspective as a thinking, feeling individual; and yet, at the same time, she understands the limitations of her individual perspective, an understanding that sends her probing for data and external perspectives.

In the Expository Writing Program at NYU, first-year students are similarly charged with the difficult—yet rewarding—task of developing ideas through the interpretation and analysis of evidence both experiential (internal) and academic (external). Through a series of exercises in which they explore experiential and academic sources via expressive, poetic, and transactional discourses, students arrive at three finished essays that contain traces of all three discursive modes. In doing so, these essays meaningfully betray the intellectual and human processes that the writers underwent in creating them. Part of this chapter’s objective, then, will be to deconstruct several student essays representative of NYU’s expository writing courses and, in doing so, begin to construct a framework for multi-discursive writing in first-year composition.
III. The Poetics of Play in First-Year College Writing

You can’t force it, but new truths emerge if you are open to imaginative play.
—Sondra Perl and Mimi Schwartz, *Writing True: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction*

My job interview with Pat Hoy and the other directors of the Expository Writing Program fell on a Wednesday afternoon in March. I stepped into the elevator at 411 Lafayette Street with a shiver; I had just wrapped up a dismal, waterlogged day of dog-walking, and my shoulders ached from the weight of my backpack jammed full with the following: a notebook, several dozen keys to strangers’ high-rise apartments, Joseph Mitchell’s *Up in the Old Hotel*, a cheap gray suit (by then excessively wrinkled), a diminishing pair of black oxfords, and, most importantly, a printout of an essay called “Envisioning Vision” by first-year NYU student Stephanie Chen (see appendix A). In preparing for my interview, Hoy’s only instructions were to read this essay. And so I read it, hungrily, again and again, hoping to discover in its DNA some secret understanding that would grant me membership among NYU’s writing program faculty.

As the title might suggest, Chen’s essay is a meditation on the concept of vision. The author, a pre-med student, orbits the word, examining it from multiple vantage points—some personal, some more distant, academic. The authorial voice is that of a person trained in the cold culture of the hard sciences trying out her personhood. And she accomplishes this through a compelling discursive melee of expressive, poetic, and transactional rhetorics.

“We believe sight to be a mere replica of the external world,” ponders Chen in her opening paragraph. “It is the fixed, unalterable image that arises from physics—a penetration of reality into our ethereal minds” (107). This philosophical observation comes to Chen while reflecting on her work as a research assistant: “Every week I ask my experiment participants to sit in a chair, stare at color squares on a computer screen, and rate their perception of the
changing color saturation” (107). This is the relationship—the relationship between evidence and idea, between the personal and the philosophical—that Hoy and his faculty sought to nurture in the Expository Writing Program.

Moreover, in her intertwining of experiential evidence and philosophical interpretation, Chen’s writing enacts the multi-discursive composition that Britton calls for in the conclusion of his study. Specifically, Chen’s description of her work with patients in the neurology clinic is primarily transactional, pragmatic. And yet, at the same time, the sharpness of her narrative description, particularly her incorporation of the ophthalmology chart—“T, Z, V, E, C”—demonstrates the important impact that a poetic device such as imagery can have in academic genres. Additionally, while Chen’s move to generalization and reflection—“We believe sight to be a mere replica of the external world … a penetration of reality into our ethereal minds”—reflects the timbre of academic speak, it also waxes lyrical with the metaphorical and hyperbolic gestures of reality “penetrating” our “ethereal” minds. Thus, in its very first paragraph, the student orchestrates a complete Brittonesque movement of poetic-transactional-expressivist writing.

In Third Mind: Creative Writing through Visual Art, editors Tonya Foster and Kristin Prevallet lament the externalization and standardization of thinking that occurs in increasing intervals throughout one’s schooling. This push toward maturity, they write, “means that greater attention is paid to external forms that evidence ‘adulthood’ than to the students’ particular visions” (xv - xvi). In their contribution to Third Mind, EWP faculty Scott Herndon and Kristin Dombek lay out a three-step process for facilitating creative interpretations in first-year student writing. While Herndon and Dombek teach expository writing through the lens of visual art, their strategies can be applied to any writing situation that requires interaction with evidence of any
kind. When unpacked, this interaction relies on a complex process that, like most aspects of the writing process, is often overlooked by many student writers and their instructors. "If we do not pay enough attention to the process they need to go through to arrive at engaged, provocative ideas,” caution Herndon and Dombek, “we inadvertently encourage them to write before they've entered into a conversation with the artwork itself” (144).

Their three-step process, thus, is designed (1) to slow students down, affording them time to observe the object or piece of evidence “free of surveillance” (145); (2) to question the object, make connections, and “speculate playfully” about these connections (146); and (3) to come to a creative interpretation that describes “the multiple, complex, and even contradictory experiences that one artwork can generate” (149). The goal of this process, conclude Herndon and Dombek is to stave off the moment of interpretation until students have written something that is at once resolutely their own and product of a conversation with a work of art. As a result, students have made a deep and rewarding inquiry into how the artwork came to affect their imaginations. They are much, much closer to more engaged, pleasurable, and challenging experiences in galleries and museums, on the one hand, and to more rigorous and imaginative writing, on the other.” (153)

While not expressly the “product of a conversation with a work of art,” NYU student Stephanie Chen’s essay, “Envisioning Vision,” appears nonetheless to have resulted from a multi-step process of interpretation such as that described by Herndon and Dombek. Chen’s essay emerges from her work on vision, perception, and the human brain. She includes detailed observations of her work with patients as well as her observations of medical procedures (Herndon and Dombek’s Step 1). In one particular vivid scene from the operating theater, she describes how she
watched as [the neurosurgeon] sliced through the scalp, and with only a moment’s hesitation, the blood began to spill down into a plastic bag…. He extended his hand, palm facing up, and a drill was immediately placed in his grasp. He pulled the trigger and punctured three holes in the thick, blood-stained bone of the skull. With a thinner drill he began to connect the dots, pushing metal to bone. Flecks of white and red leapt in the air, and my nose was filled with the smell of burnt flesh. With the drill screaming, I watched as one hand guided the device forwards, an unstoppable force, while the other stopped periodically to suction away the blood left dripping behind. When he finally painstakingly removed the skull and peeled back the dura underneath, a brain sat exposed in front of me, pulsating gently.

(109-10)

While the poetry in Chen’s description of the surgery lies primarily in her excruciatingly palpable construction of sensory details, she also employs—quite knowingly—personification in her characterization of the blood’s momentary hesitance. And yet, doctor and patient, the presumed stars of any surgical scenario, lack the agency afforded to the blood as well as to the exposed, gently pulsating, brain. They are, instead, metonymically reduced to extended hand and penetrable skull.

In a subsequent paragraph, Chen reflects on the implications of her poetic choices, admitting that she, in fact, ignored the personhood of the patient. “I contemplated the biology and the surgeon’s dexterity,” she writes, “but not the person lying on the table” (110). In this way, Chen’s poetic choices mirror—perhaps even influence—her interpretive insights, highlighting an important symbiotic relationship between style (how we convey our thoughts) and content (what we wish to convey). In Chen’s essay, the discovery of an idea (i.e., that the
self does not reside in one’s corporeal identity) is dependent upon poetic style perhaps as much as it is on her capacity for keen analytical reasoning. But how as teachers of composition, a discipline already so inferiorized by literary studies (Berlin “Rhetorics, Poetics, and Culture”), can we justify an emphasis on poetic writing in the classroom? Moreover, how can we ensure that such an emphasis will not undermine our social-epistemic allegiances that value learning as a collective endeavor?

For Pat Hoy and the EWP faculty, poetic-academic writing (such as that which is seen in Chen’s vivid depiction of brain surgery) does not occur in a vacuum. The writing process, in fact, begins with reading, a particular kind of reading that always involves responsibility—“the obsolete word,” recalls George Steiner in his essay “The Uncommon Reader,” signifying “the process of examination and reply.” Chen’s poetic, image-centric prose, thus, is the result of intensive intellectual wrestling with several written texts—Ways of Seeing by John Berger, “Aching for a Self” by Jim Corder, “Seeing” by Annie Dillard, and “Souls on Ice” by Mark Doty—that form the foundation of her inquiry into the tensions surrounding perceptions of self. Chen’s imaginative writing emerges in response to these written texts, and it serves not only to allow the writer to better understand the concepts conveyed in these texts, but to develop additional meaning from them.

Poetic imagery is an essential tool for understanding our complex worlds, for constructing knowledge, and for developing literacy, argues Kristie Fleckstein in Embodied Literacies: Imageword and a Poetics of Teaching. “Because imagery is an inescapable part of our psychological, social, and textual lives,” she explains, “it needs to be an integral part of our epistemologies and of our literacy teaching” (4). To this she adds some words of caution for educators who fail to see the value in nurturing poetic, image-based writing:
By failing to attend to imagery, or doing so only elliptically, we cannot adequately address how our images imprison and free us, how they hurt and heal us, and how they oppress and transform us. We cannot address how meaning is aesthetic, embodied, and spiritual at the same time that it is intellectual, communal, and secular. What is necessary for our meanings and our classrooms is a double dialectic, a double vision of literacy as image and word, as imageword.

In her essay “Mapping” (see appendix B), first-year NYU student Emma Wisniewski performs Fleckstein’s “double dialectic” of image and word in order to critically address her complicated relationship to home—in her case, Long Island City, Queens. “I’m following a trail,” she writes. “It begins—for me—underground on the subway, on train cars and past walls covered with graffiti tags.” “Or,” she continues, “it begins at the Court Square stop on the 7, where absolutely everything has an aerosol mark” (127). She continues in this vain, struggling—purposefully—to find her footing, all the while constructing a rich, imagistic tableau of memory and her sense of the significance of the place she once called home, a place defined by the since-demolished graffiti museum the Five Pointz. “I hardly know where to begin,” she admits. “I never did” (127).

And yet, in the process of reconstructing this place in words, she arrives at an important glimpse of understanding about the relative and mercurial nature of the places that loom so large in our hearts and minds. To absorb this discovery more fully, Wisniewski describes her visit to the Panorama of the City of New York, an impressively vast scale model of the city that affords the author the ability to “look down on [her] memories” (132). Queens is sprawling (“even in miniature”), and she struggles to locate the Five Pointz warehouse/museum that serves as the
nexus of her selfhood-forming years. When she finally finds it, she is overwhelmed by its objective smallness:

It is a tiny beige cube, probably much smaller than my thumb. I want the Pointz to be painted red, maybe with a small animated light bulb on the roof—anything to acknowledge the miracle that had single-handedly (or many-handedly, as it were) saved a neighborhood’s soul. Saved me, in many small ways. The 7 line runs through the *Panorama*, pristine, devoid of caution tape, cranes, and dump trucks. Not a single piece of scaffolding suggests that in real life, homes are crumbling to dust over the hard hats of construction workers. Only CitiBank stands out. (133)

Wisniewski’s treatment of the *Panorama* in her essay serves as an image-rich metaphor for the fluidity of perception, even—perhaps especially—when it comes to the world of objects and our relationships to them. Fleckstein writes of imagery as the “incarnation of meaning ... inextricable from the linguistic manifestation of meaning and thus inextricable from the ways in which linguistic meaning is taught” (2). Wisniewski’s intellectual discoveries through writing, in other words, are dependent upon her descriptive representations of experience, which in turn are influenced (as Chen’s discoveries are in “Envisioning Vision”) by a diverse array of key written texts: “Hybrid Place” by Andrew Blum, “Speak, Hoyt-Schermerhorn” by Jonathan Lethem,” and “Enactments of Power” by Ngũgĩ Thiong’o.

These key texts, read—in George Steiner’s words—*responsively*, allow Wisniewski “to enter into answerable reciprocity with the [texts] being read … to embark on total exchange” (Steiner). In such an exchange, both the reader and the text will be changed. For Steiner, this concept is manifested in a particular image, that of Chardin’s *Le Philosophe lisant*. In the painting, Chardin depicts a reader, bathed in light, looming over a ponderous text, his quill (a
“reader’s quill”) resting in an inkpot at the ready. “The dual compaction of light on the page and on the reader's cheek,” observes Steiner, “enacts Chardin's perception of the primal fact: to read well is to be read by that which we read. It is to be answerable to it.”

![Figure 1: Le Philosophe Lisant by Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin](image)

We see this reciprocity, this “double dialectic” of what is external (texts, images, evidence) and what is internal (experience, poetic expression) play out in writing that moves us both intellectually and emotionally, in writing that expresses “factual truth” as well as “emotional truth” (Perl and Schwartz). In their 2006 book Writing True, Sondra Perl and Mimi Schwartz seek to expand the boundaries of creative nonfiction so as to include forms of academic writing. “Almost any writing—book reviews, cultural criticism, ‘how to’ pieces, photo essays, even academic essays and literary criticism—can be creative nonfiction,” they claim, “if the writing has voice, uses storytelling well, and has a grace of language and sensibility that shows and tells” (14). Creative nonfiction, they argue, is not a vessel for conveying universal
truths, “but rather presenting one person's truths about the nonfiction world” (77). And yet, I would argue that purely transactional nonfiction (often called academic writing) is equally inhibited by the limited perspective of the writer. In academic writing, we strip language of what David Bartholomae calls the “false dressings of style” in order to effect “the language of truth and reason” (“Writing on the Margins”); however, an effect is perhaps all this is—an illusion of objectivity.

In the Bartholomae-Elbow debate, Pat Hoy and the Expository Writing Program at NYU form a sympathetic intermediary. On the one hand, the program is charged with the task of acculturating first-year students to a strenuous and rigorous academic culture with an elite reputation to uphold. On the other hand, the program is directed and taught by successful practitioners of creative writing who fully understand the heuristic qualities inherent in voice, poetic style, and craft. They understand that, as Perl and Schwartz maintain, “new truths emerge if you are open to imaginative play” (4).

In her essay “Repairer” (see appendix C), first-year NYU student Jennifer Parkhill seeks to discover new truths about herself and her relationship to her mother by employing imaginative play with language as well as Steiner’s textual responsiveness and Fleckstein’s image/word dialectic. Unlike the essays by fellow students Stephanie Chen and Emma Wisniewski, Parkhill’s does not begin with conceptual reflections or personal experience; rather, “Repairer” begins with a detailed representation of an image, Louise Bourgeois’s 2001 sculpture Seven in Bed:

On a single bed, seven bodies are arranged in a tangle.

The scene looks more like a litter of puppies than an orgy: the bodies, not quite flesh-toned, are an embryonic pink, the pink of underexposure to the world. They are completely hairless. Some mouths are agape; some touch lips. Heads
hang locked around the crook of another’s neck. It is difficult to tell where one body ends and another begins. (115)

Parkhill’s opening paragraph is reminiscent of how Pat Hoy liked to begin his classes—cinematically, and with a spark of mystery and portentousness. Furthermore, the structure of Parkhill’s essay emblematizes the critical thinking process propagated by Hoy and the Expository Writing Program, a process that moves inductively from evidence to idea to essay. Having conveyed this first piece of evidence, Parkhill then moves to extract meaning from it using Steiner’s responsion method to “answer” the visual text that is Bourgeois’s sculpture. “Louise Bourgeois’s 2001 sculpture Seven in Bed captures the base, animalistic urgency we humans have for one another so precisely that it almost hurts to look at it,” she ventures in her next paragraph. What follows is a brief treatment of Bourgeois’s work that enacts a reconciliation of the sculptor’s intended conceptual expression and Parkhill’s subjective reading of it:

These bodies reach for each other without even knowing what it is that they want. Their desire is so fierce that it verges upon cannibalistic—they are unashamedly hungry. They are willing to devour one another in order to become stronger, grow full. Though genitalia are visible, the bodies seem asexual, as if they’re feeding from a mother buried somewhere beneath them rather than on each other. In this sense, even though they physically appear to be adults, they more closely resemble newborns, consumed by emotion, as yet unaware of a culture that would require them to deny their dependence upon one another. (115)

Parkhill’s image/word dialectic reveals much about the subjective experience through which she views and makes sense of Bourgeois’s work and, as such, foreshadows the conceptual tensions
her essay aims to pursue—tensions surrounding child-parent dependency issues, which Parkhill clearly sees “buried” in Bourgeois’s tangle of pink, suckling bodies. This conceptual foreshadowing is itself a rhetorical move borrowed from creative genres: literature, music, and, most overtly, from film.

Figure 2: Seven in Bed by Louise Bourgeois

Visual images, such as those we find in film, create meaning differently than images constructed through language. Filmic meaning is more nuanced, more dependent upon affect than a signifier/signified relationship. The contributors to Ellen Bishop’s anthology, Cinema-(to)-Graphy: Film and Writing in Contemporary Composition Courses, suggest that reading film can stimulate a more nuanced kind of conceptual and critical thinking less dependent on literary symbolism and thematism. They argue that writing instructors should assist students in internalizing and applying the rhetorical structures found in film to create more nuanced and evocative meaning in their writing. In one of the collection’s essays, “Writing Images,” Daniel H. Wild extols the benefits of “reading” films in the classroom because, if introduced carefully,
they can facilitate interpretive and critical thinking uninhibited by the fixed frameworks for
literary analysis students have too easily adopted. And yet, when working with film as
composition teachers, writes Wild, we must take care not to “impose a mode of analysis, or
reading, that reduces the field of visual images in film to a reference text merely pointing to an
interpretive text of a higher order” (24). In other words, when we apply the conventional
frameworks for literary analysis to film, we “ignore the complexities that the act of seeing film
entails, for it assumes a simplistic signifier/signified relation that cannot do justice to the kind of
thinking that is already in place on the level of visual images themselves” (24).

To employ film as a heuristic, Wild suggests we begin by asking students to introduce
themselves in “filmic terms”; that is, to construct “visual scenes as representative of their lives”
(29). In practice,

[a] writer who is able to construct an image of herself through fragmented close-ups of her dorm-room furniture and its objects demonstrates a more advanced
understanding of film than the writer who begins by writing that ‘we see a girl
who has led a happy life, ready to experience the adventures of college-life.’ (29)

Parkhill’s opening paragraph, in which she represents Bourgeois’s Seven in Bed, is replete with
the kind of cinematic imagery Bishop believes to be key for “[producing] undergraduate critical
thinkers who are well prepared to participate responsibly in the complex and often tense
multicultural global village we all live in” (viii).

What Bishop and Wild neglect to acknowledge, however, is the valuable triggering effect
that filmic description can have for producing in-depth, critical reflection. The student writing
showcased in NYU’s Mercer Street demonstrates this important relationship (or dialectic, as
Fleckstein writes) between image and word. Stephanie Chen, Emma Wisniewski, and Jennifer
Parkhill—along with the many other contributors to this annual publication—show us that meaning resides in and derives from visual, poetic description as much and as fervently as it does in and from abstract, philosophical reflection. *Mercer Street*, the publication that holds these truths, is as such an important artifact in the field of composition. It shows us what is possible in first-year college writing if we dissolve the boundaries between what we as a culture have used to separate “creative” from “academic” and “poetic” from “rhetoric.” At the same time, however, publications such as *Mercer Street* and the publication discussed in Chapter Three (*John Jay’s Finest*) hold significant potential as teaching tools. On the one hand, these publications serve as guides or mentors to incoming students struggling to acculturate to a complex, often inscrutable new discourse community. But, on the other hand, publications of student writing have an incentivizing effect, signaling to students that the work we do in composition is not merely simulated—that there is a real place and audience for this work. And yet, few writing programs utilize publications of student writing to their full, multifaceted potential. Even *Mercer Street*, which I will explore in the section that follows, falls short in using their publication to fully serve all of NYU’s first-year writers.

IV. The Other 99%: Reclaiming Student Publications in First-Year Composition

 Essays, you will learn, do not prove, repeat, or reiterate. They do not confine themselves to making a single point. Instead, essays, like ideas, develop, change, expand, turn on themselves—and captivate the reader, when the writer gets the words right. As you read the essays in this collection for your own pleasure and instruction, know that the student writers are asking you to see—just for a moment—as they see.
—Pat C. Hoy II, letter to NYU’s Class of 2016, *Mercer Street*

For a student to see one of her essays published in *Mercer Street*—the annual publication of outstanding essays from New York University’s Expository Writing Program—a number of
stars have to align. Approximately 4,000 students enroll in NYU’s required first- or second-semester composition courses each term, and, from this group, about 500 (or 13%) are encouraged to submit their work for editorial consideration. Of these 500 essays deemed to be outstanding by NYU’s Language Lecturers, the editorial staff at Mercer Street whittles the pool down to around 32 essays. This means that first-year writers at NYU have a less than one percent chance of seeing their work published in Mercer Street.

The motives behind NYU’s publication—like those of Boston College’s Fresh Ink, Cornell’s Discoveries, and John Jay College’s John Jay’s Finest—are two-fold. On the one hand, they act as incentivizing devices, motivating students to produce exemplary work that, if published, will reach a large swath of the discourse community they have recently entered into. On the other hand, such publications present themselves as “mentor texts” to each new class of first-year writers, modeling “best writing practices.” As incentivizing devices, these publications instill first-year composition with a readership—namely, students across campus, especially incoming freshmen. For Patricia Bizzell, author of "Cognition, Convention, and Certainty: What We Need to Know about Writing,” a sense of audience is essential to the composing process; however, without sufficient analysis of the discourse community in which such reading and writing practices take place, publications of student writing can never provide students with a keener sense of their composing processes. In other words, students’ sense of themselves as writers can never be disassociated from the social situations that inform them.

To be sure, the discerning collective eye of Mercer Street and other college publications play a fundamental role in defining the culture and expectations of academic writing at their respective universities. Every year, new students stream into the cavernous NYU bookstore on Broadway to purchase the perfect-bound, artfully designed anthology of student essays during
their first week of classes. Upon leafing through the slender publication, their eyes alight on vivid, intricately wrought sentences and images. For some, the experience is rapturous and inspiring; for others, intensely alienating. “Why do we have to read these essays,” a student recently wrote in end-of-the-semester evaluations, “when we’ll never be able to write this well?”

What many students cannot see in the impressive, highly wrought essays found in these publications is the laborious process that each and every one of them underwent in its journey from inception to completion. Most likely, publications of student writing—particularly those that are tightly controlled by faculty editors—have disavowed the social contexts in which such writing was produced, opting instead to present “models” of effective writing for incoming students to adopt. Such intentions are perhaps informed by what Bizzell calls “inner-directed” theories of writing—i.e., the assumption that the structures of thought and language can be taught, through the imitation of model forms, until the writer eventually internalizes such structures (390). Alternatively, “outer-directed” theorists believe that “thinking and language use can never occur free of a social context that conditions them” (390). What publications of student writing suggest, however, is that there are universal forms of thought and language that can be studied and learned. Unfortunately, such an assumption belies the fact that writing cannot occur outside of a set of conventions and expectations shared by a given discourse community. Because most publications of student writing are assembled beyond the walls of the classroom, the social contexts in which their essays were written thus lie beyond the publication—beyond the carefully crafted, type-set sentences, beyond the pithy titles and perfectly timed epiphanies. My concerns about college publications of student writing, then, arise not just from the way in which they exclude 99% of the student body, but from the way in which they occlude the very process through which their content is produced—the same process writing teachers depend on
day in and day out to help their students become better writers. Of course, we encounter such limited, contextless reading across the disciplines of academia, particularly in literary studies where literature is often read without acknowledgment that the author was actually a human struggling through writing strategies and processes to render life’s intricate, complex experience; however, if composition studies is to remain committed to process pedagogy, we must do better to draw the curtains on the highly prized specimens of student writing that we bring into the classroom.

Joseph Harris elaborates on the social conditions informing the writing process in the 2012 reissue of *A Teaching Subject*, where he suggests that attention to process should not be limited to discussions about invention, drafting, and revision; rather, writing programs should provide a view of process that goes “beyond the text to include a sense of the ongoing conversations that texts enter into” (91). In this light, even model-oriented publications of student writing (such as NYU’s *Mercer Street*, Boston College’s *Fresh Ink*, Cornell’s *Discoveries*, Illinois State’s *Redbird Reader*, etc.) provide an opportunity to show students that their writing has value and impact beyond the walls of the classroom. They do not, however, provide a sense of “how writers draw on, respond to, and rework both their own previous writings and those of others” (Harris 91).

In his essay “What Is Composition and (if you know what that is) Why Do We Teach It?” David Bartholomae calls into question this displacement of the student in student writing. He suggests that what we do in the composition classroom is rarely the result of what goes on in the pages of *College Composition and Communication* or in the panel rooms of its annual conference; rather, the enterprise of First-Year Composition is a complex negotiation between competing institutional factors, from “curricular agendas (stated and unstated), to daily
pedagogical encounters of all sorts and varieties, to the marketing of careers and materials, to institutional arrangements and negotiations, sponsored research, the importing and exporting of theory and method,” and on and on (11). Publications of student writing are not immune to this complex dance in which programmatic and institutional marketing initiatives butt heads with best teaching practices. This might explain why highly selective, polished publications are preferred over messier, more inclusive ones. The former, shinier publications contribute to a desired institutional image while the latter, less polished publication does not.

And yet, the earliest iterations of Mercer Street (2006 and 2007) attempt to reveal some of the inner workings of the writing process that led to the publication of some of the program’s most successful essays. This acknowledgment comes in the form of companion essays penned by instructors of published students that serve to illuminate the process behind the work. What we see in these reflections, writes Pat Hoy in his prologue to the 2006 issue, is “how teachers and students work together collaboratively to create stunning essays. That collaborative work takes place in the classroom and in individual conferences,” he assures, adding, “What you see in the teachers’ reflections reveals just what you can expect in your own classes” (iv).

“I fall in love with ‘Lusting for Literacy’ [appendix D] each time I read it,” begins NYU instructor Jennifer Leidner’s remarks on her student Sadia Kalam’s published essay (201). Leidner’s essay, “Reconciling Voices,” (appendix E) appears beside her student’s in the 2006 issue of Mercer Street as a meta-reflective account of how Kalam’s essay came to be. It props the student’s essay up as a “model” while, at the same time, extolling its idiosyncratic virtues. “Sadia Kalam’s essay, though wholly unique, works in the way all essays must work,” explains Leidner: “‘Lusting for Literacy’ develops, builds, and explores an idea through the essayist’s laying down and interpretive analysis of evidence (art, text, stories of her life) within the
structure of a beginning, middle and end” (201). If Leidner’s description of how an essay “works” sounds rehearsed, that’s because it serves as an oft-repeated mantra within the halls, cubicles, and classrooms of the Expository Writing Program. The one-sentence encapsulation of the essay’s form (although a mouthful) is an attempt at fostering coherence within the EWP curriculum. For most of the program’s directors and faculty, this standardized expectation promotes, rather than stifles, creativity—perhaps in the way that rigid poetic forms (such as the sonnet) often provide the stable conditions in which experimentation and play can occur (consider James Wright’s prose sonnet, “May Morning,” which will be discussed in Chapter Six).

Kalam’s “Lusting for Literacy,” a *personal-academic essay*, seeks to discover the relationship between her sexuality, her faith, and her attitude toward learning, which she does by examining her personal experiences through religious texts and images (and vice-versa).

Throughout Leidner’s reflections on her student’s essay, she depicts and analyzes Kalam’s rhetorical moves and choices while simultaneously considering the instructional moves and choices that may have impacted the student’s work:

[I]t is Sadia’s ending that makes her essay, finally, cohesive. The final draft did not have the ending we see. She had used the same quotes but had not yet properly read the cited text. In my feedback to her and in our subsequent meetings, I focused on a re-working of the ending. In a way, the destination had been already predetermined by the rest of the essay—she had simply not realized it. In my endnotes I noted that she needed to direct our interpretation of the text. I also asked: *Where do you find yourself at the end of the essay? Willing to renounce your secular self?* Which, of course, she does not. Rather, her
embracing of her lust for her faith allows her to enter and examine the primary source of the Qur’\textit{an}, reading (and translating) the scene in which Gabriel embraces the Prophet and instructs him to read. This scenic moment, resonant with echoes, is the satisfaction of the lust that drove the essay from the beginning.

(203)

In describing her feedback to the student, Leidner lifts the curtain—if only briefly—on the process governing the student’s writing. Such a divulgence of the work going on “behind the scenes” of \textit{Mercer Street} essays sends the message that such writing is the result of responsive reading, revision, and collaboration with others.

When we publish student essays in highly selective magazines such as \textit{Mercer Street}, however, we run the risk of presenting them as works of art in a museum—a “peculiar sort of cultural temple,” suggests Geoffrey Sirc, “in which students are ‘invited’ in to sample the best that has been thought and expressed in \textit{our} language and maybe even, like the art students we see poised in galleries with their sketchbooks and charcoals, to learn to reproduce the master’s craft” (2). Perhaps, then, when my students complain that \textit{Mercer Street} essays set the bar impossibly high, what they are really suggesting is not that they can’t write like them, but that they don’t see the value of writing in a social context that’s been simulated rather than experienced. So what if we find that our students seem incapable of reproducing the old masters laid out in student publications? This does not necessarily suggest that they are unable to use language in complex, meaningful ways. According to Bizzell and the outer-directed theorists, “It’s just that they can’t think or use language in the ways we want them to.” College publications such as \textit{Mercer Street} showcase products so highly wrought that, without accompanying guides or “docents” to reveal the processes behind them, we cannot begin to
fathom how or why they were made in the first place. Some college publications, such as *John Jay’s Finest* (via CUNY’s John Jay College), reveal instructor remarks and assignment prompts; however, such publications rarely (if ever) depict the messiness of invention, peer feedback, reworkings, and revisions. Perhaps what we need, then, is a publication that bears all—one that, instead of predetermining the form and feel of college writing, demonstrates the various paths a piece of writing may take from inception to completion.

My hunch, however, is that each of these methods of publication (the refined and the chaotic, the inner-directed and the outer-directed) possesses important pedagogical functions to be harnessed in the writing classroom. What makes publications of student writing so valuable is the way in which they showcase student writers’ unique identities by celebrating what they have to say as well as how they say it. The existence of such publications and the hard, earnest work that goes into editing them proves to students that their writing is taken seriously. Such publications fail, however, to acknowledge that the writing process is complex and messy—that it is a social process rather than an activity undertaken in total isolation. “If we want to understand writing as a social process,” writes Harris, “we need to cultivate a similar sense of reciprocity, of how a text emerges as part of an ongoing conversation between a writer and her readers” (94). How, then, might we harness the pedagogical value of student publications (their power to inspire creative expression and idiosyncrasy), while, at the same time, make visible the reciprocal, social aspects of the writing process?

Edith Wells provides some historical context surrounding anthologies of student work in her essay entitled “College Publications of Freshman Writing,” which appeared in *College Composition and Communication* in 1950. In this article, she profiles four noteworthy publications of first-year writing, detailing their editorial processes, funding methods, publicity
campaigns, curricular functions, challenges, successes, etc. Ultimately, Wells concludes, “by giving prestige to freshman writing, the magazine can brighten the often dull composition classes” (11). In doing so, Robert Scholes argues in his book *Textual Power*, we afford student writing the same respect garnered by literature and print journalism (7).

Wells and Scholes’ conclusions, however, are dissatisfying in that they present only the slightest glimmer of pedagogic potential. Surely, such publication initiatives should bring more than the mere glow of prestige and respect to the way we approach student writing. Dawn Putnam’s essay, “Authentic Writing Using Online Resources: Selling Our Words in the Community,” which appeared in *English Journal* in 2001, begins to hint at some of the untapped, more nuanced ways in which publication initiatives bring to light the social processes of writing. After implementing an e-publication of student work in her writing classroom, Putnam discovered the awesome effect that audience could have on her students’ level of engagement with and enthusiasm for writing. Before employing e-publications, writing for Putnam’s students was, humorously captured by one of them, “just something to get done so you don’t have to do it” (102). But when Putnam announced that the class’s writing would be published and disseminated among the community, they suddenly cared a great deal about the quality of their work. Workshops exhibited a newfound fervency, with students endlessly deliberating over which ideas they wanted to express to their community, and how (104). Bizzell would applaud Putnam’s success in facilitating a keener awareness of audience among her student writers; however, she might also say that, by applying too much focus on audience, we lose sight of what truly informs our composing processes: the discourse community. “Audience analysis,” explains Bizzell, “aims to persuade readers that you’re right; it is to dress your argument in flattering apparel.” Discourse analysis, however, “aims to enable you to make that argument, to do
intellectual work of significance to the community, and hence, to persuade readers that you are a worthy co-worker” (329). How, then, can we utilize the motivating, audience-informed approach that inner-directed theories of writing take while, at the same time, facilitate a deeper sense of the conventions and expectations of the discourse communities our students enter into in college and beyond?

In an attempt to further explore Putnam’s experiences with grassroots-style student publications and the social processes of writing, I decided to implement a more localized, classroom-centered publication initiative of my own—a publication by and for the people of English 101 sections X, Y, and Z. Because I teach at NYU’s Tandon School of Engineering in downtown Brooklyn, I decided to call the publication Jay Street (an homage to its parent publication, Mercer Street, and a local reference to the street where NYU-Tandon is located). Each semester, Jay Street, a Web journal created through Tumblr, publishes three outstanding essays from each of my three sections of expository writing (nine essays in total). Every student is given the opportunity to bring an essay before Jay Street’s editorial Board (i.e., the students in the class). During these editorial meetings (i.e., class periods), student editors provide constructive feedback that the student writers can then use to revise their essays in order to enhance their chances of being selected for publication. Once the essays have gone through this editing process, the student editors discuss their nominations for publication until something
resembling a consensus is reached.

Figure 4: Homepage for *The Jay Street Review*, Fall 2012 edition

When I first thought to create a Web journal devoted to featuring writing from a small pool of student writers, I assumed it would create a buzz in the classroom, an added incentive for students to take pride in what they wrote. What I had not anticipated, though, were the numerous pedagogical moves it would facilitate *at the same time*. When students were assigned to bring drafts before the student editors, their work was often more creatively charged and audience-driven—more *in touch* with the conventions and expectations of the local discourse community than the drafts they submitted to me alone or even to a smaller group of their peers. The full-class workshops took on the atmosphere of an audition, and the student writers up on stage aimed to impress. But they could not win hearts with humor and heat alone—the editors demanded finesse. They zeroed in on issues of form and style, talking at length about the essays’ *ideas* and how best to unleash them. I was impressed (if not a little dismayed) to find that much
of this pedagogical simultaneity occurred without me, but within the enthusiastic back-and-forth between writers in a local community. In hindsight, the success of the editorial meetings makes a lot of sense because, as Joseph Harris sees it,

We write not as isolated individuals but as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain, at least in part, the sorts of things we can say. Our aims and intentions in writing are thus not merely personal, idiosyncratic, but reflective of the communities to which we belong. (134)

The editorial process of workshopping and selecting essays for The Jay Street Review, then, created a community in which the social process of writing could be revealed and, in effect, inspire socially conscious as well as craft-conscious writing. In other words, once the social factor was ignited, other essential elements of the composing process were dredged up in the dialogue performed between the students. Bizzell says that, “To help poor writers, then, we need to explain that their writing takes place within a community, and to explain what the community’s conventions are” (402). Explanations can only do so much, though. I found that, in the full-class production of a publication of their writing, the conventions and expectations of our local discourse community were made transparent.

Lee Ann Carroll discovers the developmental importance of such community enactments in Rehearsing New Roles: How College Students Develop as Writers. In this longitudinal study of student writers at Pepperdine University, Carroll finds that “writing is always learned in communities that contain both written texts and more experienced practitioners, the kinds of communities we would expect to find on college campuses” (26). The learning process, she argues (citing Lev Vygotsky’s zones of proximal development), is dependent upon interactions between students of varying levels of literacy. Such a “mutual community,” adds Jerome Bruner,
“models ways of doing or knowing, provides opportunities for emulation, offers running commentary, provides ‘scaffolding’ for novices, and even provides a good context for teaching deliberately” (qtd. in Carroll 24). The peer-to-peer interactions facilitated by editorial workshops in my classroom help to foster “dialogue between the learner and more proficient members of the learning community” (Carroll 25). Because the student writers in my classroom—as in many—are at varying levels of talent and proficiency, dialogue between them not only aids the less proficient writers in completing complex literacy tasks, but also works to enhance the more proficient students’ metacognitive awareness of such literacy tasks. In other words, my students’ awareness of their composing processes came about, in part, because the editorial meetings made them more conscious of the writer’s presence in written texts—particularly that of the student writer.

Vygotsky’s theory surrounding zones of proximal development (the notion, essentially, that cognitive development occurs in communities whose members socialize at varying cognitive levels, pushing each other to progress to the next “zone”) may help explain why polished publications of elite student writing such as Mercer Street can have a stultifying effect on many first-year college writers. The essays that appear in these publications reside in a zone of accomplishment and know-how that is out-of-reach to the average student. Companion essays provided by the instructors of published students can serve to provide useful behind-the-scenes commentary revealing the the complex, mess processes that give way to exceptional essays; however, as Harris notes, discussions of process are much more effective in the context of a student’s own classroom community. In-class student publications, then—such as The Jay Street Review—provide a much-needed bridge between the upper echelons of student writing
showcased in institutionally produced publications and the important *social* learning environments cultivated in individual classrooms.

When student become better aware of their *place* in the writing process, they also develop an acute awareness of their readers as living, feeling beings. Their audience is no longer a shuffling stream of anonymous museum-goers, but a room filled with unique, sensitive, highly emotional—and easily distracted—human beings. In this setting, students are not writing for the discipline of English Composition—what Sirc deems “post-Happenings Composition”—they are writing for an audience of peers who are not concerned with reproducing relics found in the dusty pages of *Mercer Street*; they want to be *moved*.

To this end, Bartholomae champions the use of unpolished student work, not just as an object of study, but as the impetus for a collaborative writing project in which students take up the reigns to revise and complicate (not polish) other students’ work. When students are asked to take responsibility for each other’s writing, they in turn become more conscious of their own composing process. Bartholomae calls this “a [lesson] in practical criticism” that “teach[es] students to question the text by reworking it” (28). In doing so, Vygotsky would say that students’ learning capabilities are thereby “socially facilitated” rather than “biologically determined” (qtd. in Carroll 26). The editorial meetings for the *Jay Street Review* invite students to do this kind of textual reworking; whereas, larger, institutional publications disavow the collaborative, teachable aspects of writing by engaging in this process behind closed doors. Such published essays are intended to “mentor” student writers; however, they are presented as finished products and therefore disallow the kind of socially facilitated, textual reworking that Bartholomae, Harris, and Carroll have found to be an essential tool of writing instruction.
Undoubtedly, however, product-oriented publications of student writing such as *Mercer Street* have been invaluable to me and my students as instructional tools. The trick, I think, is to employ them in ways that don’t mythologize or romanticize the gritty, often painstaking work of writing. Lee Ann Carroll invites her students to create rhetorical outlines that allow them to see “how each section of their essay was meant to affect a reader”:

This was an “aha” moment for Chris. The rhetorical outline helped him more fully grasp the idea that writing was not only a vehicle for expressing his own thinking but that he could strategically structure his discourse to persuade readers to take his arguments seriously. (75)

If published student essays are to be used as mentor texts, then, Carroll’s rhetorical outlining should be employed in *reading* them. This way, students can gain a deeper, more nuanced understanding of how such essays are produced, thereby diminishing the paralytic sense of awe such polished writing has the tendency to elicit. In my class, students read *Mercer Street* essays with an eye toward, not just what the language is saying, but how the writer utilizes language to create an effect on the reader as well as how the writer *arranges* ideas in her essay in order to create a sense of wholeness. Students painstakingly record the “saying” and “doing” aspects of these mentor texts using a paragraph-by-paragraph reading chart that begins like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Par.</th>
<th>Brief description of what the author is doing</th>
<th>One-sentence distillation of what the paragraph is saying (first-person point of view)</th>
<th>Key Terms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Author introduces her concept of hero-worship with characters from <em>Scrubs</em> and <em>House</em></td>
<td>We are fascinated by doctors and surgeons on television shows because they are solely responsible for the outcomes of their patients’ lives.</td>
<td>seduction, heroes, idol, reverence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Once the students have completed the chart, they will not only have comprehensively *distilled* the entire essay, they will have created a map detailing all of the essayistic moves that the writer has made along the way, providing them a clearer picture of how discursive practices are performed in writing models.

When a student completes a first-year writing course complaining that expectations set by published student essays were unreachably high, we have failed to show him the initial messiness that necessarily precedes such an exemplary finished product. Having participated in their own publication’s editorial process, my students have, I hope, gained a more nuanced and realistic understanding of composing processes and their relationship to the discourse communities in which they are enacted. They know now, for instance, that the formal eloquence of a *Mercer Street* essay is not the sole product of some frighteningly talented student whose shoes they could never fill, but rather the work of *reworking*, aided by the minds of an entire community of writers, teachers, and texts. Such a realization challenges the assumption that writing is comprised of fixed forms that must be drilled into our students; rather, an analysis of the discourse communities in which they compose can instill in them the understanding that academic writing is “a country in which it is possible to learn the language and the manners and even ‘go native’ while still [remembering] the land from which one has come” (Bizzell 408).
Chapter Five: Border-Crossings: Pragmatic and Aesthetic Discourses in Experimental Academic Writing

Beatriz Preciado’s *Testo Junkie* begins on October 5: “Tim tells me you’ve died. He’s crying. He loves you” (“Your Death”).

We begin at the beginning, with the event that forms the impetus of Preciado’s “body essay,” a three-month experiment that involves taking T (Testogel, testosterone in gel form) and documenting its effects. The resulting text is part memoir (or “autotheory,” as Preciado classifies it), part queer theory, and part biting critique of technocapitalism. He\(^1\) does all of this in homage to a deceased friend and in the spirit of empowering the “low-tech” human body in the dizzying era of chromosome-level technological advancement and neoliberal-expansive corporate power. Preciado frames and foreshadows this complex work in a complicated time through the mingling of expressive, poetic, and transactional rhetorics, a marriage between multiple genre partners that is emblematic of his complex relationship to his body and gender identity:

Until now, no one was aware of your death. You rotted for two days in the same position in which you had fallen. It’s better like that. No one came to bother you. They left you alone with your body, the time necessary for abandoning in peace all that misery. I cry with Tim. It can’t be.

. . . .

That same day, a few hours later, I put a fifty-milligram dose of Testogel on my skin, so that I can begin to write this book. It isn’t the first time. This is my usual dose…. I’m not taking testosterone to change myself into a man or as a physical strategy of transexualism; I take it to foil what society wanted to make of

\(^{1}\) The use of the masculine pronoun when referring to Preciado is not done in error; it is what he prefers.
me, so that I can write, fuck, feel a form of pleasure that is postpornographic, add a molecular prostheses to my low-tech transgender identity composed of dildos, texts, and moving images; I do it to avenge your death. (“Your Death”)

In these opening paragraphs (movingly descriptive, emotionally strained, and intellectually charged), Preciado reveals much about his research and writing process, situating himself both personally and politically. In presenting this work as a “lived process” (Gesa and Kirsch ix), Preciado effectively “gives away” his “game,” revealing to the reader the various preconceived notions, inspirations, prejudices, etc. that he carries into research and into writing about the research. He aligns himself with Max van Manen who in Researching Lived Experience states, “[T]he language of thinking cannot be censured to permit only a form of discourse that tries to capture human experience in deadening abstract concepts, and in logical systems that flatten rather than deepen our understanding of human life” (17). Preciado’s work exemplifies a combination of narrative, analysis, and knowledge-making that resists deadening abstraction and attempts an unflattening.

In their collection of essays exploring the role of the expressive researcher, Gesa Kirsch and Liz Rohan argue that “a particularly strong feature of these first-person narratives is that the writers name the subjectivities with which they intentionally and unavoidably approach the print materials, the ephemera, and the physical sites they interrogate” (vii). In doing so, researchers make transparent the critical lenses they employ beyond the textual—lenses constructed through the enigma of authorial presence, an enigma that can be usefully glimpsed through first-person, expressive, and poetic rhetorics that reveal crucial information about a writer’s subjective position.
Sherrie Graden theorizes about this mingling of expressive and transactional rhetorics in her 1995 book *Romancing Rhetorics* in which she endeavors to rescue expressivism from its associations with shallow, egocentric navel-gazing—associations propagated, most notably, by writers James Berlin and Lester Faigley. The author historicizes expressivist rhetoric by tracing its roots to Romantic poets Coleridge and Wordsworth and their ideas on educating the imagination, an education based on empathy and social awareness more politically informed than is currently recognized. This hybrid rhetoric, Gradin claims, combines “the expressivist concern for voice, emotive processes, and lived experience” (xiii). Moreover, a pedagogy informed by social expressivism promises increased levels of support in our advocacy for feminism and multiculturalism in the composition classroom and for underprepared and nontraditional students as they write their ways into the academy encouraged by “a pedagogy that honors student voices, lived experiences, and... emotional capacities” (154), yet continues to stretch their analytical boundaries.

Still, Gradin—and others who have attempted to breathe new life into expressivism (see Roeder and Gatto’s *Critical Expressivism*)—have yet to provide models for the kinds of writing that could conceivably emerge from a pedagogy that embraces voice-driven narrative and lived experience. Preciado’s *Testo Junkie* offers one possible outcome—a text that enacts the experimental, hyper-inquisitive nature of its author through its verbal candidness and its temporal and topical closeness to the subject(s) in question. But the very nature of social/critical expressivism lends itself to infinite outcomes. This chapter, thus, explores several imagined outcomes of social-expressivist pedagogy through the works of Annie Dillard, Maggie Nelson, Matthew Goulish, Jeanette Winterson, and, as we have begun to see, Beatriz Preciado in the hopes of teasing out some rhetorical patterns—patterns to be scaffolded and fostered in our first-
year composition courses. All of these authors demonstrate how form can serve to guide and maneuver thought in critically expressive ways. They are intensely aware of how, as Eve Sedgwick points out in “Teaching Experimental Academic Writing,” form can possess knowledge about a given subject of which even the subject’s author may not be fully aware (105). Finally, interlaced among these experimental academic works I include interludes in which, inspired by Preciado, et al., I conduct my own “experiments” with critical-expressivist prose so as to develop an internal awareness of the relationship between poetic rhetoric and academic thinking.

* * *

First Interlude

To travel by train from Kyoto to the southern tip of Kyushu—where the city of Kagoshima lies wreathed in volcanic debris—takes twenty-six hours, sixteen transfers, and one overnight stay in a karaoke lounge in bawdy, libidinous Mihara town.

The moving train car, however, is the focus of this piece, as it is one of the most ideal settings in which notation can take place—not “true” writing necessarily, but the faint scribbling, or semi-conscious acknowledgment of the surrounding landscapes, woven together, and through which the train car is pulled like some willing piece of thread.

In fact, the very act of travel can sometimes induce (very pleasantly) a feeling of in-betweenness that in turn can render a writer uniquely receptive to the work of notation—which, if in the proper state, is hardly “work” at all. For instance, if a writer finds himself inside a train car, heading grimly through Hiroshima, then south toward youthful, quaking Fukuoka, he finds
himself surging through valleys of fluorescent cherry-blossom pink (it being the season), then over an inland sea which slips gently, perpetually, through the fishermen’s nets.

In this state, the pen must be a camera, taking snapshots that are almost haiku-like in their apparent indifference to affect or style; rather, they result from impulse, desire, or necessity (indistinguishable from one another while in the space of a moving train car). The haiku poem especially resembles notation in the way it, as Roland Barthes describes, “sets a bell ringing, a sort of short, unique, and crystal-clear tintinnabulation that says: something has just moved me” (Barthes Preparation of the Novel, 49).

* * *

According to Jeanette Harris, there is no category of expressive discourse; rather, what rhetoricians have come to call expressive discourse is actually comprised of a variety of discourses and kinds of writing: aesthetic, pragmatic, interior, and generative (170). As teachers, focusing on just one of these kinds of writing will not sufficiently meet the educational or intellectual needs of our students. Harris admits that expressivism has led to democratic pedagogies that have put forth innovative heuristic assignments based on “expressivist” writing practices; however, we need to acknowledge that the most effective texts for students to write—and perhaps read—are not uni-modal or singularly expressive, but rather multi-modal and multi-discursive.

In her study of composition textbooks published between 1980 and 1990, Harris finds that the term “expressive writing” gets applied to writing that is writer-focused, experiential, personal/private, or conveys feelings or emotions of any kind (3-4). This kind of writing manifests as “diaries, journals, narration, description, autobiography, writing-in-progress, exploratory writing, and all kinds of literature, especially familiar essays and poetry, [which] are
all categorized on occasion as expressive” (53). And yet, the fact of the matter is, aesthetic (or expressive) discourse is never based solely on personal experience, and pragmatic (or transactional) discourse is not exclusively fact- or information-based. “Poets and playwrights do research,” points out Harris, “and technical writers and scientists write out of their own experiences. In fact, most effective writing, whatever its purpose or type, derives from both experience and information” (64 - 5). Annie Dillard’s writing, in particular, reflects this effective blending of both pragmatic and aesthetic discourses.

“I live by a creek, Tinker Creek, in a valley in Virginia’s Blue Ridge,” Annie Dillard sings in the opening chapter to *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, her 1974 meditations on nature, life, and spirituality:

> I think of this house clamped to the side of Tinker Creek as an anchor-hold, It holds me at anchor to the rock bottom of the creek itself and it keeps me steadied in the current, as a sea anchor does, facing the stream of light pouring down. It's a good place to live; there's a lot to think about. The creeks—Tinker and Carvin's—are an active mystery, fresh every minute. Theirs is the mystery of the continuous creation and all that providence implies: the uncertainty of vision, the horror of the fixed, the dissolution of the present, the intricacy of beauty, the pressure of fecundity, the elusiveness of the free, and the flawed nature of perfection. (5)

*Pilgrim* is plodding and recursive, richly—and yet implicitly—metaphorical in its vivid, often grotesque representations of the natural environment. The book is diaristic in form—a more aestheticized, polished version of Thoreau's journals, perhaps. Yet Dillard's prose style is not overwrought. Rather, it is effortlessly idiosyncratic, though sometimes esoterically so. After
all, the book teaches us how to see, which is a lesson untouchable through conventional forms of rhetoric and knowledge formation.

Perhaps most importantly, Dillard’s work reflects, while it enacts, an undeniable and invaluable relationship between writing and seeing. In other words, for Dillard, writing provides a more scrupulous way of observing her surroundings. In her essay “Seeing,” she reflects on two types of seeing—one that is a letting go, which she describes as “walking without a camera,” and another that is hyper-aware of the physical world and its buried metaphors—i.e., “walking with a camera.” The ballpoint of a pen, too, holds a fastidious eye:

When I see this way I analyze and pry. I hurl over logs and roll away stones; I study the bank a square foot at a time, probing and tilting my head. Some days when a mist covers the mountains, when the muskrats won’t show and the microscope’s mirror shatters, I want to climb up the blank blue dome as a man would storm the inside of a circus tent, wildly, dangling, and with a steel knife claw a rent in the top, peep, and, if I must, fall. (“Seeing”)

What Dillard describes is a form of writing that is both lush with sensory feeling and rigorously analytical. It is through this hybrid rhetoric that we are best able to scrutinize our worlds “a square foot at a time.”

To achieve such aesthetically charged prose in college composition would necessitate a pedagogical approach part Elbowian and part Bartholomaen. That is, respectively, our students must be able to seem themselves as writers while, at the same time, develop a keen awareness of rhetorical forms and how they function affectively and transactionally in various contexts and situations. In order for our students to see themselves as writers, we must allow them to write, imagistically, from personal experience—to transpose their most sensorially significant
memories into language so that, in doing so, they may transmit *themselves*. In this ultimate endeavor (the work of opening one’s *mind* to another), our students will be faced with the important task of locating and employing the most appropriate formal and discursive modes of communication, fulfilling social constructivism’s emphasis on modes of expression that, as Joseph Harris writes in *A Teaching Subject*, “go beyond the power of the individual,” that belong to the culture (25). Richly evocative and worldly aware writing, such as that crafted by Annie Dillard and the like, is not the product of an either/or approach to writing—either expressive or critical; it is the product of this/and—experiential, imagistic, and analytic.

In *Textual Power*, Robert Scholes expands on the importance of embracing multiple discourses in our attempts to interpret our worlds through writing. In order to introduce students to the power that texts have in the classroom and in the world, we have to introduce them to a range of discursive modes, he asserts: "What the student needs from the teacher is help in seeing discourse structures themselves in all their fullness and their power” (144). Reading and writing (and, by extension, the English discipline) are important because "we read and write our world as well as our texts, and are read and written by them in turn” (xi). Reading and writing, Scholes notes, are dependent upon one another. The reading process isn’t complete until we’ve interpreted what we’ve read and criticized it (through writing). Writing, on the other hand, isn’t possible without the reading of our world and the texts that comprise it. It should go without saying that the texts we read exist beyond the written word but extend to our pressing external surroundings as well as our vast unexplored interiorities.

For Dillard, the natural world presents a particularly intricate and complex text rife with concepts through which we are able to see our internal selves more clearly. Dillard reads and interprets her surroundings in the way one might a painting in a museum: "The pale network of
sycamore arms, which a second ago was transparent as a screen,” she writes in “Heaven and Earth in Jest,” “is suddenly opaque, glowing with light. Now the sycamore arms snuff out, the mountains come on, and there are the cliffs again” (12 - 13). Like Preciado in his “body essay” Testo Junkie, Dillard is an autotheorist, blurring diaristic and analytic writing to arrive at a fresh understanding of her identity and her place in the world. As in Testo Junkie, Dillard’s Pilgrim at Tinker Creek includes descriptions of methodology in which she “gives her away her game” so that the reader can glimpse the woman behind the curtain: "I propose to keep here what Thoreau called 'a meteorological journal of the mind,’” she explains, “telling some tales and describing some of the sights of this rather tamed valley, and exploring, in fear and trembling, some of the unmapped dim reaches and unholy fastnesses to which those tales and sights so dizzyingly lead.” And yet like Preciado, Dillard readily admits, “I am no scientist” (13).

One need not be a scientist to know one’s world. And while it is certainly true that theoretical knowledge can serve, as Matthew Goulish puts it, “as a window into another world,” this other world cannot be fully grasped unless we are able to articulate the window’s “particular exhilaration” and, in doing so, “open a way to inspire a change in ourselves, so that we may value and work from these recognitions” (45).

* * *

Second Interlude

_In the moving train car, this a common occurrence. Between Fukuoka to Nagasaki, blossoms wilt in valleys growing dim then dimmer until dark. A sidling river shimmers and goes blank, drawing a dark curtain around the car. The writer looks around, and the aperture of his pen widens to take in the scene—faces turned toward him, some away, grocery bags and briefcases (it’s a local train this train car is trailing) all in motion, and yet they are so indelibly_
still. Here, the act of notation is in itself a kind of moving stillness (cf. a slight rain falling on the rock garden inside the gates of Ryōan-ji, or Pablo Neruda: “Is there anything in the world sadder / than a train standing in the rain?”).

In the moving train car, the writer and his fellow passengers sit politely still, expectant of (or indifferent toward) their eventual arrival. For the writer, however, arrival presents a problem. Of course, all journeys must come to an end, and all travellers must arrive. But for the travelling writer, it is the journey that facilitates the necessary conditions for notation—the feeling of in-betweenness (spatially, temporally) that leads to satori, not so much in the Buddhist sense, where it is the first step toward enlightenment, but rather in the way Barthes uses the term to indicate an “abduction of consciousness” (Preparation of the Novel, 1).

* * *

Matthew Goulish’s 39 Microlectures: In Proximity to Performance is a meta-cognitive meditation on creative acts in which there is no distinction between poetry and scholarship. He describes knowledge creation in terms of architecture, disparaging the elevator for its ability to make connections within a building without any thoughtful interaction with the architecture of the structure itself: “Where architecture, in order to make connections, has to go through incredibly complicated gestures, the elevator simply ridicules, bypassing all knowledge, and establishing connections mechanically” (6). Goulish’s metaphor speaks to the value of process, to the intellectual rewards of tracking an idea circuitously rather than head-on. In a 1992 episode of Seinfeld, the eccentric, big-minded character Kramer embodies the image of the tangled path-weaver when he endeavors to direct Jerry to Coney Island via the subway:

KRAMER. All right, Coney Island. Okay, you can take the B or the F and switch for
the N at Broadway Lafayette, or you can go over the bridge to DeKalb and catch the Q to Atlantic Avenue, then switch to the IRT 2, 3, 4 or 5, but don’t get on the G. See, that’s very tempting, but you wind up on Smith and 9th street, then you got to get on the R.

Elaine cannot help but interject: “Couldn’t he just take the D straight to Coney Island?” she asks, to which Kramer blurts, dismissively, “Well, yeah.” Elaine and Jerry’s raised eyebrows serve to undermine Kramer’s convoluted sense of the world, but what if Kramer and Goulish are on to something?

I showed this episode of *Seinfeld* to a group of my New York City first-year composition students one semester after having spent weeks trying—and failing—to teach them something about compositional coherence. Up until this moment, we had whiled away hours deconstructing published essays, identifying moments of recursion, repeated key images and words, transitional phrases, and every other minute rhetorical strategy that amounts, somehow, magically, to a piece of writing’s *wholeness*. But they were still unable to see how discreet moving parts can be permitted to scatter (as the characters in *Seinfeld* do), yet still come together again to create wholeness. To put it another way, they could not see the value in Kramer’s circuitous directions. Why wouldn’t Jerry just take the D straight to Coney Island? Why wouldn’t anyone?

The current-traditionalist approach to writing instruction encourages students to take the path of least resistance, the path trodden firm and thus reliable by decades of sure-footed voyagers. I’m speaking, of course, about the thesis-driven, five-paragraph essay that moves deductively from claim to evidentiary proof—a predetermined structure in which the ending “restates” the beginning. Such circularity is not the problem, however. At the end of *Seinfeld*’s “Subway” episode, we return to the diner from which the episode begins. The characters have
reconvened; and yet, the paradigm governing their relationship to one another has been imploded by their individual encounters on the subway that day. In an inductive essay—an essay that moves from evidence and encounter to idea—we may well return to the place from which we came, but we are forever changed.

Critical-expressivist thinkers such as Goulish, Dillard, Preciado—and, of course, Kramer—embrace the road famously less travelled because it requires a level of mindfulness otherwise deemed excessive when travelling on paths of least resistance. For Goulish, the productively strenuous path is one that seeks out and embraces contradiction through an earnest search for what he calls “moments of exhilaration” in everything he encounters—the good, the bad, the ugly—and through embracing a plurality of voices via a “rhetoric of combination.”

“Criticism only consistently changes the critic,” explains Goulish, “whether further narrowing the views of the art policeman, or incrementally expanding the horizons of the open-minded thinker” (45). Therefore, we should read the texts of our world not for their “faults and shortcomings” but for their “moments of exhilaration” (45). These moments, Goulish admits, will be subjective—“a moment of humor or sadness, an overarching structural element, a mood, a personal association, a distraction, an honest error, anything at all that speaks to us”—but they can, as previously described, serve as “window[s] into another world” (46). Admittedly, some of these windows may open to contradictions, which, Goulish suggests, we allow into our writing and thinking so as to foster multiplicity and “strange harmonies” (16).

Such harmonies, writes Goulish, may also be achieved through what he has described as a “rhetoric of combination.” In the third grade, Goulish was tasked to write a report on earthworms. For his first attempt, he copied his report word-for-word from the encyclopedia. His teacher told him he had to rewrite the report in his own words, but, he says,
I didn't at that time have any words that I considered my own, and still don't. So I was told to find a second book, and to mix the two together. I forced myself to rewrite the report, changing certain words and adding in other words that came from my second book. I discovered in doing this that instead of saying, 'The earthworm awakes in the spring and burrows into the wet earth,' I could say, 'Once upon a time, an earthworm awoke in the spring and burrowed into the wet earth.' I could start to make my report sound less like a report and more like an exciting tale of the supernatural. This was no doubt because my second source was Washington Irving's *Rip Van Winkle*. In this way I produced my first piece of writing: a hybrid, in my own words, although none of them were in fact my own.

What was my own was how I read. (18)

*What was my own was how I read.* To a great degree, how we read, argues Scholes in *Textual Power*, informs how we write. “Without a serious act of ‘reading’—of a book, a face, or a tone of voice,” he notes, “we will never be able to agree or disagree with another person, since we will have turned all others into mirrors of ourselves” (40).

The same singular, diminutive mode of reflection occurs when, as Goulish’s anecdote illustrates, we read too narrowly. Through his third-grade report, Goulish learned that an original utterance is the product of amalgamation. To this day, he still does not know whether he has any words that he can call “his own” (and perhaps no one does), but he has discovered that meaning is made through creative acts of reading and relating the texts he reads to himself and to each other. “I consider the entire library my first draft,” he writes in explanation of his process:

I go in search of lines to add to a paragraph. I pick up a book I feel affinity toward. I look to certain writers for certain qualities. Mostly I copy and rewrite
lines, then forget where they came from, and whether I wrote them or not. I have
to track them down all over again when I collect the source notes…. Maybe I
found the path to my own words in borrowing enough of the words of others. As
Calvino said, 'Today I will begin by copying...' The texts must be related
somehow. After all, both Rip Van Winkle and the earthworm 'awake.' (19)

While few teachers of composition would intentionally encourage the messiness that
characterizes Goulish’s writing process, in such a process resides the acknowledgment that (1)
writing is an imperfect tool for representing the chaos of ideas and (2) writing is always dialogic.

In his Dialogic Imagination, Mikhail Bakhtin argues that the power of writing stems from
the tensions that arise between different types of speech: the speech of characters, textual
sources, narrators, and even the speech of the author. He calls this productive confluence of
voices heteroglossia, which he defines more pointedly as “another's speech in another's
language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way” (324). Bakhtin identifies
authorial narrative as the primary source of this conflict, which extends, of course, to extended
and internal monologue. “Because language itself is a social construct,” Jeanette Harris explains,
“the ideas that a writer puts into words result from a process of internalized conversation” (67).
For Goulish, this internalized conversation is fueled by the books residing in his library. When
he half-jokingly wonders if he has any words he can call his own, he is considering how the
“social nature of language argues against the concept of writing for self” (Harris 67).

For writers such as Maggie Nelson, “writing for self” requires an elaborate
circumlocution of the self and painstaking deflection. Her 2012 book The Art of Cruelty is as
ambitious as it is exploratory. Its sixteen chapters read like interconnected essays, essays that
turn in on themselves and back on each other in order to move forward. Essentially, Nelson's
project is to discover the value (if there is one) inherent in representations of cruelty in art and film. Beginning with the French dramatist Antonin Artaud, who believed that important ontological lessons resided within cruelty (in that it “signifies rigor, implacable intention and decision, irreversible and absolute determination” [11]). Nelson examines for herself the subject of cruelty through the works of Sylvia Plath, Paul McCarthy, Francis Bacon, Diane Arbus, Lars Von Trier, and others. “This book does not shrink from expressing strong opinions, from ‘taking sides,’ when it feels the need to do so,” she offers by way of describing her rhetorical approach. “But at the end of the day, its greater aspiration is Barthes's: to live according to nuance. By definition, there is no master sketch for what such a thing might look like. It can only be an experiment” (22).

The experimental nature of Nelson’s work parallels that of Preciado’s body experiment recorded in Testo Junkie. Preciado’s work is emphatically not nuanced in its use of language (see Preciado’s many detailed descriptions of sexual practices), but, like The Art of Cruelty, Testo Junkie aims not to present any definitive conclusions but rather “to leave a trace of a political experiment that lasted 236 days and nights and that continues today under other forms” (“Introduction”). Nelson’s work, in kind, leaves a trace of an active, curious mind, corkscrewing through the surface of a subject that can never be satisfactorily penetrated.

The subject in Nelson’s case—in the cases of all the writers discussed here—stems from the personal, from the emotional self. Nelson’s treatise on cruelty orbits around four lines from William Carlos Williams’s poem “The Ivy Crown”: “The business of love is cruelty, / which, by our wills, / we transform / to live together.” Nelson yearns to discover how love can thrive in a tangled web of compassion and cruelty. She is interested in Williams’s “calm admission of the coexistence of love and cruelty—its acknowledgment that they can exist within one another,
rather than at opposite ends of the spectrum, or locked in an oppositional embrace” (385), and she welcomes the notion that “the possibility of transformation is always alive, and always ours" (385). In order to realize this transformation, however, she must first grasp the essence of cruelty. “Why,” she asks, “would I want to spend so much time thinking about cruelty?” She justifies her intentions as operating in the spirit of the old adage, Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.

Cruelty, as the Buddhists see it, is the far enemy of compassion. Compassion also has a near enemy—that is, an enemy that so closely resembles it that it can be difficult, albeit utterly crucial, to differentiate between them. This near enemy is called idiot compassion. I would like to understand more about compassion, and I am gambling that one way of doing so is to get to know its enemies, near and far. (“Styles of Imprisonment”)

Nelson’s endeavor to understand compassion through cruelty corroborates Matthew Goulish’s hunch that knowledge is most effectively formed through the amalgamation of contradictory elements—that is, when we allow for multiplicity by embracing a rhetoric of combination. Nelson also understands, as both Jeanette Harris and Robert Scholes have theorized, that intellectual discoveries are made visible through a multi-discursive writing practice—one that recognizes the importance of “emotional truth” and “factual truth” (Perl and Schwartz).

In fact, Nelson began her inquiry into the subjects of love and cruelty in her 2009 book, Bluets, classified as verse but widely considered to prominently exemplify the genre of the lyric essay. Bluets, a meditation on loss that, like the best essays, produces no clear-cut resolution, questions the complex relationship between love, memory, and suffering. The form employed by
Nelson, an imagistic collage of emotional pain that, as conscious beings, we continually inflict upon ourselves (especially after a breakup), embodies the blurring of rhetorics that allow for the construction of multiple levels of meaning:

[N]euroscientists who study memory remain unclear on the question of whether each time we remember something we are accessing a stable “memory fragment”—often called a “trace” or an “engram”—or whether each time we remember something we are literally creating a new “trace” to house the thought. And since no one has yet been able to discern the material of these traces, nor to locate them in the brain, how one thinks of them remains mostly a matter of metaphor: they could be “scribbles,” “holograms,” or “imprints”; they could live in “spirals,” “rooms,” or “storage units.” Personally, when I imagine my mind in the act of remembering, I see Mickey Mouse in Fantasia, roving about in a milky, navy-blue galaxy shot through with twinkling cartoon stars. (81)

In the above reflections, Nelson implies a parallel between memory and writing—both being imperfect tools for representing how we think/thought and feel/felt. For Nelson, articulating her thoughts and feelings through a filter of blue (i.e., loss, melancholy, paralysis), serves as a conceptual framework that allows her to explore her subject from a vantage point outside of her so-called “singular self.” In this way, the color blue (its associations and connotations) functions in the way a theoretical text might form the basis of more traditional scholarly inquiry.

Such nontraditional frameworks for intellectual inquiry can also be found in the other “hybrid” texts discussed here. In Preciado’s Testo Junkie, the body experiment (which involves applying 50 milligrams of testosterone gel to the author’s skin each day) engenders a fresh, chemically altered perspective through which to contemplate the relationship between gender,
sexuality, and technocapitalism. In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Dillard frames her inquiry not around a color or her physical body; in fact, she actively seeks to transcend her senses so as to see what she calls “the artificial obvious”—or the thing you do not expect to see and thus cannot. *Pilgrim* orbits the infinitive phrase “to see” (which occurs 54 times throughout the book) in the way Nelson’s book orbits the word blue (and all that it holds). Goulish’s *39 Microlectures* is, in turn, influenced by his complex relationship to the notion of escape: “Escape from facts, from mathematics, from the complex and the simple. Escape from the impossibility of escape. Escape from ourselves, from the limited perspective of the individual ego” (15). He accomplishes this through his acceptance of contradiction and insistence on the knowledge-building power contained in the word “and.” In her latest work, *Argonauts*, Nelson too pursues contradictory impulses, convinced that rich, provocative ideas can sometimes—even though not always—masquerade as legitimately “bad” ideas:

> Most of my writing usually feels to me like a bad idea, which makes it hard for me to know which ideas feel bad because they have merit, and which ones feel bad because they don’t. Often I watch myself gravitating toward the bad idea, as if the final girl in a horror movie, albeit one sitting in a Tuff Shed at a desk sticky with milk. But somewhere along the line, from my heroes, whose souls were forged in fires infinitely hotter than mine, I gained an outsized faith in articulation itself as its own form of protection. (123)

Here, Nelson seems to be speaking to the indecision in direction (*a la* Kramer) that needs a certain amount of faith to find its path. She finds this faith in language—a bridge between the bad and the good, or perhaps a magical tool capable of remarkable acts of resuscitation.

* * *

122
Third Interlude

*From Nagasaki crossing Shimabara Bay, seagulls flank the train. Outlying islands of disputed claim wander into view, then out. The train—this one heavy with the dreadful longing of arrival—rumbles south to its final “destination.” For the writer in this space, between these landscapes and moments in time, the boundaries separating haiku (from the window seat / wind turbines cut listlessly / through panorama) and notation (Nagasaki in shadows—the silhouette of a lookout and his ladder) begin to blur. Both depict “what happens ... but only in that what happens surrounds the subject—who, moreover, only exists, and can only claim to be a subject, through this fleeting and mobile surrounding...” (Barthes The Preparation of the Novel, 52).

In the moving train car, a calming disorientation takes over, compounded by a deep contrast between the subject and his surroundings—this is writing at its most pleasurable, drawn out of a kind of emotional urgency to collect, imbibe, or perhaps, simply, to set a bell ringing. Having finally reached Kagoshima, the writer wistfully departs the space of the train car, for the journey, in all its transience, afforded him (above all else) a point of view—which, in turn, instilled in him the capacity to be moved.*

* * *

Canonising pictures is one way of killing them. When the sense of familiarity becomes too great, history, popularity, association, all crowd in between the viewer and the picture and block it out. Not only pictures suffer like this, all the arts suffer like this.

—Jeanette Winterson, Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery

Jeanette Winterson's essays remind writers ("artists," broadly speaking) of Modernism's call to "make it new." She believes that consumers of art (i.e., audiences) are too easily wooed by artistic styles that are familiar and thus comfortable (or not too difficult). Instead, she asserts, artists should be striving to innovate, and the onus should be put on audiences to work harder to
appreciate aesthetic and stylistic innovation *in the moment* of innovation rather than ten (or more, as is often the case) years later. “We have to recognize that the language of art, all art, is not our mother-tongue,” she writes (4).

Shouldn’t such recognitions also extend to the language of ideas? We have, to borrow Winterson’s word, *canonized* the discourse of the academy to value what Marianna Torgovnick has classified as “thus-and-therefore style,” a discursive mode that serves mainly to distance the writer—and the reader—from the subject of inquiry. As a critical writer, Torgovnick found herself using “a style that censored my own experiences and visceral responses and that hid my writing’s source of energy.” Her writing group advised, “When you start to get dull, pretend you are La—because you are La” (“La” referring to the Queen of Opar from the *Legend of Tarzan*). For Torgovnick, “‘Writing like La’ became a metaphor for getting to a place where I was not afraid to write in a voice that had passion as well as information, a voice that wanted to be heard” (26). In academic writing, this voice—the voice that *wants* to be heard—can only be achieved through a hybrid of critical and expressive styles, pragmatic and aesthetic.

Critics of expressive/aesthetic rhetoric in academic writing tend to equate such writing with “personal writing”—writing that is egocentric or diaristic. This, I believe, encapsulates a point of misunderstanding that has, historically, hardened the walls between the genres of academic and creative writing. In his *College English* article “Presence in the Essay,” Gordon Harvey articulates his own concerns surrounding the encouragement of personal writing in first-year composition. He admits that the personal/textual essay has appeal for its potential to reconcile “our desire that students learn to deal closely with texts, and our desire that students engage their own experience and write about what they know”; however, he worries that the personal/textual essay exaggerates students’ “impulse to find themselves and their values too
quickly and simplistically reflected in whatever they read” (642, 646). In order for personal writing to transcend navel-gazing, then, the author must read and interpret the personal in the way one might a text—to interpret it as evidence so as to arrive at some broader truth. In other words,

[i]f a piece of autobiographical writing is an essay, it has already moved beyond private confession or memoir to some shareable idea, for which the personal experience works as evidence. This move from experience to idea, and then, through painful revision from a dull idea and simple, narrative structure to an interesting idea and structure, bringing general insights out in the particulars and erasing narcissism, is precisely the great challenge and the great value of the personal essay as a Freshman Writing assignment—this, and the broadened sense it gives of what can count as evidence for ideas. (Harvey 648-49)

Such movement (movement from private to public significance) can be found in all of the experimental academic texts discussed in this chapter: In *Testo Junkie*, Beatriz Preciado conveys graphic, intensely personal scenes of hormone manipulation in order to assert the fluidity of our bodies and the power individuals wield in exercising this fluidity. Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* provides readers a front row seat to her frontal lobe as we see the natural world in all its enormity through eyes that bring new meaning to our own interactions with the world. Maggie Nelson’s dialogic wanderings ping-pong ahistorically through a labyrinth of personal experiences and textual voices blurring the personal and the textual so completely that the personal becomes textual, the textual personal. Jeanette Winterson, whom we tend to classify as a novelist, uses the form of the essay in *Art Objects* as a tool for blurring first-person narrative with sharp, critical analysis of our problematic relationship with art. And yet, as a first-person
scher, Winterson’s prose is conspicuously devoid of experiential narratives. Instead, the
author’s presence is implicitly felt. And, finally, in my own interludinal experiments with
critical-expressive composing, I have attempted to transform my personal experience journeying
through Japan into a critical examination of the relationship between solo travel, notation, and
creative invention. In these interludes I strove to cultivate “a voice that wanted to be heard”
(Torgovnick 26), and worked to achieve this not by employing (or regressing to) my “natural
voice,” but by attempting Bakhtin’s dialogic refraction of numerous voices: that of the passenger
observing the train’s interior as well as the passenger observing the passing landscape, that of the
philosopher (namely Roland Barthes), and that of the poet (in this case Pablo Neruda).

Harvey theorizes that authorial presence can be announced without the use of
straightforward anecdotal evidence in the following ways: (1) in the way an essay establishes its
motive or reason for being; (2) in the way its development explores—rather than shirks away
from—detours and meaningful complications; (3) in the way it manages and selects quotations
with a keen curatorial eye; (4) by avoiding cliché and understanding the power of silence; (5) in
its broadening to pursue big questions that may transcend the intended topic; and (6) in its
judgments and reasons (649-52). Adding to Harvey’s criteria for maintaining presence in an
essay, I would add that a writer’s voice resides in the rhythm of his prose, the movement of
words within sentences in which traces of his spirit animal may be found—the slow, steady
rumbling of a rhinoceros or the swift, staccato flapping of a free-tailed bat.

In Art Objects, Winterson abandons personal narratives and adopts an implied, rhetorical
presence in order to convey her ardent support for art that changes how we see and how we
think. Poetic emotion, argues Winterson, is instrumental to such transformative works of art:
I hope it is clear that poetic emotion, the emotion recollected by the writer, is not a sloppy, chaotic dogs-tongue of feeling indiscriminately slavered over people and happenings. It is the deep emotion raised up out of the best that we are; emotion of passion, of love, of sex, of ecstasy, of compassion, of grief, of death. It is an operatic largeness. Soap-opera tears are best suited to celluloid. Art is cellular. The emotions it draws upon are fundamental and not always available to the ducts around the eyes. By re-moulding the reality we assume to be objective, art releases to us realities otherwise hidden…. Against daily insignificance art recalls to us possible sublimity. It cannot do this if it is merely a reflection of actual life. Our real lives are elsewhere. Art finds them. (58-9)

Winterson’s poetic defense of poetic emotion—its ability to reveal important hidden realities—aligns with Sondra Perl and Mimi Schwartz’s defense of play, in which they outline the important dichotomous relationship between factual truth and emotional truth. In other words, we cannot adequately derive meaning from our worlds via a singular discourse, as Jeanette Harris reminds us, but rather through a multi-discursive mode that draws on experience/emotion as well as information/facts (65).

At the heart of this inquiry into a multi-discursive approach to first-year composition is the question, What kind of relationship do we want to help our students cultivate with writing? The “writer-teacher-writers” (this is Wendy Bishop’s term for writers who also teach and also write about writing) among us would agree that, above all, we want our students to receive a kind of pleasure from writing that necessitates a rigorous engagement of the mind and body and the subjects that arouse them. One way to elicit such engagement is to treat student writing as literature—meaning, specifically, to value each piece of student writing for the hidden realities it
has the potential to reveal through its blending of pragmatic and aesthetic discourses, its vigorously implied authorial presence. After all, writes Preciado in *Testo Junkie*, “Our personalities arise from this very gap between body and reality” (“Testo-Mania”). If we can learn to trust our students’ instincts for discovery, for making sense of the chaos that surrounds them, they will find a way to locate this gap or, at the very least, recognize it when at last they come upon it.

In the following chapter, I examine the heuristic power (and pitfalls) of subjectivity in the brand of experimental academic writing discussed here. This examination will, I hope, bring us closer to pragmatic (as pragmatic as a subject as slippery as this one will allow) insights into the actual *practice* of teaching experimental academic writing in first-year composition.
Chapter Six:
Hiding Our I’s: Reconciling Constructivist and Expressivist Views through the Lyric Essay

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
—Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”

I. The Identity Paradox

In “Untitled Film Still #92,” a young girl’s fair, freckled face bores fearfully into the dark, unknown space beyond the camera lens. Her body, garbed in schoolgirl plaid and rumpled white button down, lolls upon weathered floorboards that are everywhere stricken with shadows. In the face of whatever direful destiny the girl is sure to meet, her wide eyes ring blue and ring askance.

This awry gaze tends to characterize the subjects of Cindy Sherman’s photographic portraits. In her “Untitled #70,” however, the gaze is untroubled, unafraid. The model’s eyes are polished stones from some ever-darkening river, her steady face reflecting the red neon of a city coming to life after dark. Between her fingers she holds a narrow glass tumbler around the rim while a liquid the color of gasoline tips toward her parted lips from what seems an insurmountable distance. Like the subject of “#92,” this woman is frozen in time and space, her ever-fleeting, ever-fluid identity tied to this particular moment captured in chromogenic color film. The distinct and unique subjectivities portrayed in Sherman’s work appear to reside in contained, isolated universes; and yet, they seem somehow, uncannily, related. And indeed, perhaps the most interesting—and surprising—thing about Sherman’s varied and dynamic portraiture is that it consists entirely of self-portraits; the models are Cindy Sherman herself.
In 2012, the Museum of Modern Art staged a comprehensive exhibition of the work of photographer/performance artist Cindy Sherman, which dates back to 1970. Wandering the fluorescent gallery spaces I was struck not by Sherman’s appetite for the grotesque (her work features disfigured centerfolds and horrific, grinning clowns), but by the multiplicity of selfhood represented and constructed in her photographic self-portraits. Not only are the models who appear in Sherman’s vast oeuvre Sherman herself, but, in fact, the photographs are entirely auto-produced: Sherman stages, appears in, and creates the images entirely on her own.

This process entails a deliberate positioning—and repositioning—of the self that facilitates important inquiries into the role that subjectivity plays in the creative process. For Sherman, the self is pluralistic and explorable through costume, make-up, and self-portraiture; and yet, at the same time, the tool (i.e., the camera lens) with which Sherman is able to explore the boundaries of selfhood is a tool quite literally limited by boundaries. (After all, it captures information about its subject only one frame at a time.) In order for Sherman to counteract the limited scope of the photograph, she has thoroughly and tirelessly explored the depths of the photograph’s subject (in this case, herself), as well as the fields of inquiry in which her model/she exists; one expects that something else may be happening in the rest of the room, a secret life only imagined by the viewer. In each of these explorations, Sherman examines complex questions surrounding subjectivity’s capacity to convey novel, inimitable truths—as well as its capacity to, as Whitman puts it, “contain multitudes.” To adequately examine the nature of subjectivity, however, Sherman must first dissolve her own. She does this, paradoxically, via a distinct photographic voice that constructs a first-person identity while simultaneously dismantling it.
While the visual artist’s voice has long been celebrated for bearing qualities of singularity and originality (as have the acclaimed writers’ voices in Chapter Five), any acclamation of the academic writer’s voice, particularly the student writer’s voice (the subject, ultimately, of this dissertation) has been derided as excessively romantic and egocentric. The intellectual legitimacy of voice and individualistic expression has been explored extensively and debated vigorously by social constructivist and expressivist scholars in the field of composition (most famously between David Bartholomae and Peter Elbow in the pages of *CCC*). Constructivists maintain that our verbal utterances are the result of our social context rather than acts of individualistic expression, while expressivists champion the unique and inherent wisdom embodied by each and every writer. But what’s in between these two positions and perspectives?

It is difficult to deny that there is something deliciously paradoxical residing at the center of each school of thought. Constructivists renounce the individual in favor of a socially constructed consciousness, and yet it goes without saying that the social depends on the individual. Expressivists, meanwhile, wish to celebrate the voice and linguistic play emanating from the individual writer all the while acknowledging and affirming Vygotskian theories that stress the fundamental role of social interaction in cognitive development. In order to reconcile these divergent, yet clearly complementary camps, we should look to models of writing that are creatively expressive and yet subjectively self-aware. In other words, we should look to the Cindy Shermans of the written word—writers who question their subjective authority while simultaneously mining their subjective experiences for important ontological insight.

This decentering of subjectivity is explored considerably in works of imaginative, elliptical nonfiction residing in a genre we have come to call the *lyric essay*. *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes, *The Body: An Essay* by Jenny Boully, and *Humiliation* by Wayne Koestenbaum,
for example, all call attention to the multiple selves inhabited by an individual and the paradox of expressing one’s “true self” in writing. In his experimental autobiography, Barthes, like Bartholomae, frets over the challenges surrounding singular self-expression, lamenting that “nothing is more a matter of the image-system, of the imaginary, than (self-) criticism” (120). And yet, writers in the wake of Barthes, particularly “lyric essayists” (i.e., writers who employ poetic and expressive discourse in pursuit of intellectual and academic quandaries), continue to write from positions of subjective authority, suggesting that critical revelations can indeed arise from self-directed reflection and analysis. These writers (writers such as Barthes, Bouly, and Koestenbaum) distinguish themselves from writers of creative nonfiction in that they tend to examine their subject positions and situate themselves within their respective social and rhetorical contexts. In this way, the lyric essay can provide a framework for reconciling the key tension between the constructivist and expressivist schools of thought, exemplifying an academic discourse that is both critically aware and imaginatively expressive.

In concert with WAC Clearing House’s recent release of *Critical Expressivism: Theory and Practice in the Composition Classroom*, this chapter will reopen conversations surrounding the constructivism/expressivism debate by examining ways in which the lyric essay productively complicates the binary thinking that divides composition’s approach to teaching, composing, and theorizing about academic writing—a binary that draws a heavy line between poetic and critical writing styles. Through a *poeticritical* analysis of subject positioning in the lyric essay, I would like to develop an image of the genre’s place in the composition classroom and imagine how, by exposing students to subject positioning, teachers of writing can demonstrate the important relationship between expressive and social-epistemic rhetorics in the writing process while, at
the same time, address and affirm the variety of “Englishes” that comprise our pluralistic identities.

II. On Concealing and Revealing Our I’s

In Chapter One, I introduced the long-reverberating debate held between constructivist David Bartholomae and so-called expressivist Peter Elbow in a 1995 issue of *College Composition and Communication*. Responding to Elbow’s seminal book, *Writing Without Teachers*, Bartholomae contends that to hide or de-emphasize the teacher is to “to hide the traces of power, tradition and authority present at the scene of writing (present in allusions to previous work, in necessary work with sources, in collaboration with powerful theories and figures, in footnotes and quotations and the messy business of doing your work in the shadow of others)” (63). Elbow acknowledges the social fact of writing (that we do not write in a vacuum), but he nonetheless stands by pedagogical practices that perform individual expression because he believes that for his students to be successful writers they need to *identify* as writers. To facilitate this, Elbow works to cultivate “independent, self-creative, self-expressive subjectivity” in his classroom (88). These aspects of humanity, he maintains, are not at odds.

A main point of contention between Elbow and Bartholomae (and the pedagogical camps that follow them) resides in the kind of relationship we as writing teachers want our students to have with language. Elbow believes that to be a writer one must trust language, whereas Bartholomae insists that successful writing necessitates not *mistrust* per se, but *criticism*. I wonder, however, whether these attitudes toward writing are really irreconcilably at odds. Might it be feasible, for instance, to derive a kind of pleasure—perhaps even passion—from a rigorous engagement with language that is both attentive yet playful, soulful yet conscientious?
Tara Roeder and Roseanne Gato set out to identify this reconciliation between constructivism and expressivism in their 2015 anthology *Critical Expressivism: Theory and Practice in the Composition Classroom*. By merging two pedagogical ideologies that have been historically at odds, Roeder and Gato effectively dismantle the field’s preoccupation with labels and binaries, categories and compartments that limit crossover collaboration and thereby limit the field’s potential impact on writing studies and, worse, the success of our students.

In the book’s opening essay, “‘Personal Writing’ and ‘Expressivism’ As Problem Terms,” Peter Elbow returns to the conversation to remind us that “there is no black/white dividing line between personal and nonpersonal language, but rather a continuum” (17). He goes on to argue that all writing is composed on a sliding scale of not only nonpersonal and personal language, but also nonpersonal and personal topics, and nonpersonal and personal thinking. A writer, for example, can approach a nonpersonal topic (for example, the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election) *personally*, and she can also approach a personal topic (for example, My First Kiss) *nonpersonally*. Elbow believes that our tendency to dismiss personal writing out-of-hand in favor of nonpersonal writing in the classroom hampers our students’ ability to *think personally* (that is, creatively, idiosyncratically, and thus *critically*). Personal writing can be effectively applied to nonpersonal topics, writes Elbow, citing the originator of the essay himself, Montaigne:

> Montaigne enacted and celebrated what can only be called personal thinking, even when his topic was nonpersonal (the education of children, for example). Because he actually invented the essay and named it with a word that means “an attempt,” many have argued that the essay itself is a genre with an inherent link to informal personal thinking. He associated what is “human” with what is not “ordered” by a
strict (French) “method” [—essayer (defined: to try)]. Naturally, much poetry too applies personal, intuitional, associative thinking to nonpersonal topics. (20)

Elbows essay, itself, enacts a hybrid form of writing that bounces between the personal and the impersonal. In Part One of “‘Personal Writing’ and ‘Expressivism’ As Problem Terms,” he avoids personal language and personal thinking because he wants the reader to “assess it entirely in terms of the logic of its analysis” and to understand that he is "just making an empirical claim ... about how the different dimensions of the personal are separate and can be mixed" (22). He embraces personal language and thinking in Part Two because he knows “it's impossible to make a purely rational disinterested argument that works entirely on its own logic,” and, moreover, “you could even say that it's intellectually dishonest to pretend to do so” (22).

Roeder and Gatto’s anthology is an invaluable guide to what a marriage between critical and expressivist pedagogies can contribute to the field of composition and the success of its students. Through scholar-teachers Thomas Newkirk, Nancy Mack, and Derek Owens we see how writing the self is, in fact, a critical act, and we glean the pedagogical value of dissolving meaningless boundaries between creative, personal, and academic writing. We learn how personal writing is linked to a kind of critical empathy that has the power to bring about lasting social change, and we discover the historical relationship between Romanticism and expressivism that reveals a strong link to Emersonian “critical conscience.” Critical Expressivism omits, however, any acknowledgment of how and where such writing exists in contemporary literary culture. After all, if we wish to encourage critical expressivist compositions from our students, we need, as Janet Emig reminds us, “viable sources of criteria” for teaching (and evaluating) such writing. Thus, in Part Three of this chapter, I intend to
introduce and examine several texts that enact meaningful explorations of the personal/nonpersonal continuum that Elbow describes for us. These are texts that consciously and voraciously eschew the boundaries of creative, personal, and academic writing that the contributors to Roeder and Gatto’s *Critical Expressivism* call for. These are texts that, for lack of an agreed-upon category, we will describe as belonging to the genre of the *lyric essay*.

III. The Lyrical I/Not I

‘Personal writing’ as a single term, tempts one to assume that there’s a single kind of writing that can be so described—instead of recognizing how the personal and the nonpersonal are often mixed across three dimensions.

—Peter Elbow, “‘Personal Writing’ and ‘Expressivism’ As Problem Terms”

The impetus for John D’Agata’s search for the “next American essay” occurs in 1990. He is about to enter high school, about to be “trained for a lifetime of five-paragraph essays,” when he stumbles upon James Wright’s metrically perfect sonnet “May Morning,” which happens to take the form of prose. This accidental encounter, writes D’Agata in his introduction to *The Next American Essay*, “leaves me with the suspicion that there are essays somewhere to love” (75). D’Agata’s anthology manifests as a genre-bending essay in and of itself. It begins with questions: What is the contemporary essay capable of? What are its boundaries/limitations? To facilitate this inquiry, he assembles a collection of contemporary voices that are testing the boundaries of the genre in earnest—Anne Carson, John McPhee, Jenny Boully, Susan Sontag, Mary Ruefle, Annie Dillard, Wayne Koestenbaum, among others. Between these entries (which serve as beloved tracks on a fervent mix-CD) D’Agata includes critical, reflective interludes that ultimately lead him to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of what the essay—as a conveyer of/container for ideas, a portal through which we may come to know ourselves—is capable of.
To characterize this new American essay (an essay unrestricted by conventional boundaries of form and style), D’Agata coins the term *lyric essay*. “What the lyric essay inherits from the public essay is a fact-hungry pursuit of solutions to problems,” he comes to realize, “while from the personal essay what it takes is a wide-eyed dallying in the heat of predicaments” (436). Because I intend to use his sense of this hybrid form of nonfiction (at once creative and academic, sometimes verse sometimes prose, exploratory yet searching), I will present the entirety of D’Agata’s definition of the lyric essay here:

It takes the subjectivity of the personal essay and the objectivity of the public essay, and conflates them into a literary form that relies on both art and fact, on imagination and observation, rumination and argumentation, human faith and human perception…. The result of this ironic parentage is that lyric essays seek answers, yet seldom seem to find them. They may arise out of a public essay that never manages to prove its case, or may emerge from the stalk of a personal essay to sprout out and meet ‘the other.’ They may start out as travelogues that forget where they are, or begin as prose poems that refuse quick conclusions. They may originate as lines that resist being broken, or full-bodied paragraphs that start slimming down. They are unconventional essays, hybrids that perch on the fence between the willed and the felt. Facts, in these essays, are not clear-cut things. What is a lyric essay? It’s an oxymoron: an essay that’s also a lyric; a kind of logic that wants to sing; an argument that has no chance of proving anything” (436).

What inspires me (as a teacher and as a writer) about D’Agata’s conception of this “new” kind of writing is his emphasis on and celebration of the genre’s in-betweenness—its nature to
reside between the “willed” and the “felt,” its comfort with unproven truths, and its ability to
“arise” and “emerge” from virtually any encounter in life and in literature. In D’Agata’s sense of
the genre, the lyric essay is a vivid embodiment of the personal/nonpersonal continuum that
Elbow insists all writing struggles to negotiate. This continuum, Elbow suggests, exists in three
dimensions—namely, the topic, language, and thinking that comprise a given piece of writing.
Each of these dimensions operates on a broad spectrum between the personal and the
nonpersonal (or, as D’Agata would say, between the personal and the public). D’Agata views the
lyric essay as a form unto itself, an alternative to the narrowly conceived boundaries of the
personal and the public essay. Elbow’s conception of the personal/nonpersonal continuum,
however, allows us to see the lyric essay as, simply, an essay that is aware of the fluidity of this
continuum, an essay unafraid of crossing the dimensional waters.

Wayne Koestenbaum’s 2011 book-length essay, *Humiliation*, exemplifies the
dimensional awareness that Elbow and D’Agata are calling for in contemporary essay-writing.
Koestenbaum employs both personal and nonpersonal language and thinking to examine the very
much universal (i.e., nonpersonal) topic of humiliation, a human experience that, on the one
hand, disturbs the author, and, on the other hand, excites him. In his own words, Koestenbaum
describes the book as consisting of a series of fugues, a term he embraces for its denotative
slipperiness. “I call these excursions ‘fugues,’” he explains, “not only because I want the
rhetorical license offered by invoking counterpoint but because a ‘fugue state’ is a mentally
unbalanced condition of disassociated wandering away from one's own identity” (4). We have
seen this desire to lose—if only temporarily—one’s self, one’s identity, one’s subjectivity in the
photographs of Cindy Sherman, where the personal and the nonpersonal merge to create
provocative—and evocative—alchemical reactions. For Sherman, such subject positioning and
dissolution involves the staging of eclectic, visual tableaux, as well as costume play; for Koestenbaum, the process is necessarily more nuanced, though no less committed to locating hidden—for lack of a better term—*truths*. He goes about this with the belief that writing can be “abreactive,” a psychoanalytical term that accounts for the release of repressed emotion through some kind of expression, usually achieved through hypnosis. Thus, through a fugue-inspired essayistic form, Koestenbaum attempts to enact hypnosis via the written word. In this way, writing can be abreactive. “I release the emotion of humiliation,” writes Koestenbaum, “by replaying it” (7).

In *Humiliation*, Koestenbaum enumerates an associative collage of shameful experiences from his own life, from cruising for sex in public to fantasizing about one of his twenty-something-year-old writing students (although, he writes, “I could be making up this fact” (5)). He relates such personal humiliations in the same space as nonpersonal humiliations, enacting the personal/nonpersonal continuum that Elbow and D’Agata champion while simultaneously inviting the reader to participate in the shared shame of human experience:

Recently in New York City an arrested man was strip-searched—standard procedure—on Rikers Island. The arraigned man said, “I was put into a cage and told to take off my clothes.” He was ordered—according to *The New York Times*—“to squat and spread his buttocks.” The accused, who’d been arrested for possession of marijuana, described the strip search as “horrifying”: Being a grown man, I was humiliated. (1)

While Koestenbaum admits, “Any writer’s humiliation I take personally,” he is nonetheless impacted—as perhaps we all are—by a universal humiliation affecting all of humankind, which he eloquently and conscientiously examines in terms both personal and public.
What fascinates me most about Koestenbaum’s treatise on humiliation is the way he relates the experience to subjectivity (or, in this case, the absence thereof):

I'm suggesting that we define humiliation as *the intrusion of an unwanted substance or action upon an undefended body*. The pain of the intrusion—but also its suddenness and incomprehensibility (what substance is entering me?)—constitutes the humiliation. The subject ceases to be a subject and becomes a thing acted upon, the terrain on which a violation occurs. Giorgia Agamben calls the procedure “desubjectification.” (29)

Because I am a writer who teaches writing and also writes about writing, I am forever tempted to read *ars poetically* (i.e., with the assumption that all writing is somehow tangentially—if not directly—*about writing*). In writing—especially writing that absorbs its writer (and reader) fully—we are often a “thing acted upon.” I won’t go so far as to suggest that the agent of action is something akin to a *muse* but rather a deep groove of focus that cradles and compels us forward. Koestenbaum, too, employs the metaphorical system of the “line” or “plane” when describing language’s role in humiliation:

In language’s system, the word itself (a set of letters and sounds) rides above the horizontal line; the meaning hides below. (I might be twisting Kristeva’s point.) What lies below the line is occluded by the word above, a circumstance of servitude implying that words (as physical objects, as sounds) humiliate their absented meanings. The hard material presence of the word is a husk that humiliates the missing flesh that has been torn from it and left behind as roadkill. (45)
Unfortunately, the dogma surrounding academic writing—particularly the sort of “pure,” “taut,” and “muscular” writing promoted by strict constructivists—exacerbates the humiliation Koestenbaum describes being perpetrated in our language system. In fact, the language of strict, nonpersonal logic and ordered reason not only “occludes” whatever meaning may reside below the word, it walls off the potential for alternative, deeper meanings entirely. Koestenbaum’s book not only provides useful metaphors for reimagining the shape and tenor of academic, analytical writing, it also enacts a form that allows meaningful overlap between personal and nonpersonal language and thinking so as to both enlarge and intensify its investigation, as well as to move beyond the confines of a singular subjectivity and the expressive boundaries therein.

After all, maintain Sidney Dobrin, J.A. Rice, and Michael Vastola in Beyond Postprocess, “agency is writing, not intention” (10). In their 2011 collection of essays, Dobrin, et al., attempt to theorize how something so varied in form and process as writing can actually be taught. In other words, postprocess argues that writing can “never be taught as the version or mode of a writer’s subjectivity; rather, writing accounts only for the multiplicities active in each writing situation” (3). On the surface, this thinking appears to undermine expressivism’s defense of personal thinking/language in academic writing; however, postprocess is simply underscoring the multidimensional nature of writing that Elbow himself acknowledges. Like Elbow and many proponents of critical expressivism, postprocess is advocating for writing “not tempered by disciplinary pedagogical dictate” (17). This shift, write Dobrin, et al., “requires a reconfiguration of writing theory … away from the idea that autonomous agents produce and circulate writing.” Rather, they insist, “pedagogy … must be set aside in order to see writing as not bound by the canons, grammars, and rhetorics of pedagogy that have been naturalized as the methods through which writing is learned and performed” (17).
While expressivism under the philosophical umbrella of process has long been viewed with derision by postprocess devotees, critical expressivism’s goals can find aid in both theoretical camps. While it is true that expressivism has placed undue emphasis on the singular subjective perspective, critical expressivism advocates for the kind of subject interrogation and positioning exemplified by artists such as Cindy Sherman and lyric essayists introduced to us by John D’Agata. If critical expressivists are calling for first-year composition students to produce the kinds of multidimensional, formally unprescribed texts showcased by D’Agata and exemplified by Koestenbaum (which I believe they are), then pedagogy (“systems that assume ideas, knowledge, information can be transmitted from one agent to another” (Dobrin, et al., 17)), must truly be dismantled and redefined so as to allow for the cross-dimensional play between the personal and the social that knows no earthly bounds.

This is the kind of play Geoffrey Sirc calls for—and enacts—in his 2002 work, English Composition As a Happening. “Is this book of mine composition, art history, basic writing theory or cultural studies?” he wonders. “Sometimes I’m not sure if the first-year writing course I teach is a course on rap, writing, or technology.” The distinction is irrelevant to Sirc because he enjoys how “that blurring messes up a stable reading; it energizes a text or scene, preventing it from becoming fixed” (12). I think it is fair to say that a worthwhile pedagogy is one that does not allow for writing to become fixed.

Scholar-teacher heroes of Sirc such as Charles Deemer and Ken Macrorie were committed to this enterprise as early as the 1960s when they embraced tactics of shock and surprise in the classroom to ward off passive learning slumps and consequent static compositions. Charles Deemer, author of the essay “English Composition As a Happening”—from which Sirc borrows his title—implores us to “let the ‘teacher’ shock the student. Let him
speak, not from behind a podium, but from the rear of the room or through the side window. Let him discuss theology to Ray Charles records. As long as there is reverence for the student and the process of education, no shock is too great.” Despite Deemer’s unquestioned associations with expressivism, his tactics of authority subversion (that is, abandoning the podium for the rear of the room, for the side window) have resonated with critical pedagogues who aim to cultivate social consciousness in first-year composition.

Ira Shor’s 1980 book “Critical Teaching and Everyday Life,” for example, adapts Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to model a kind of teaching that provides students with the means to examine their lives critically and consciously. As a compositionist, Shor sees the writing classroom as particularly suited to this kind of critical teaching: “Literacy and political awareness,” he writes, “evolve simultaneously because reading and writing are the occasion for questioning social reality” (48). To facilitate this kind of critical consciousness (which Freire calls “conscientization”), Shor calls for dialogue in the classroom (between students) and a *diminished teacherly presence*. He calls this “liberatory learning”: “One goal of liberatory learning is for the teacher to become expendable,” Shor explains. “At the start and along the way, the teacher is indispensable as a change agent. Yet, the need to create students into self-regulating subjects requires that the teacher as organizer to fade as the students emerge” (98). In this way, Shor’s work coincides with Peter Elbow’s, especially *Writing without Teachers* in which Elbow outlines techniques for achieving an autonomous, idiosyncratic writing practice and identity. Shor, however, reorganizes the process by which the teacher leaves the room. While Elbow theoretically declines to even *enter* the classroom, Shor gradually *weans* students off the need for teacherly authority.
Sirc advocates for all of this—for authority subversion, liberatory learning, for formal fluidity in our scholarly pursuits. Such a pedagogical approach might perhaps give rise to the compositional exhilaration and conscious subject positioning we encounter in works by Cindy Sherman and Wayne Koestenbaum. And yet, these are works that bear little resemblance to the kinds of compositions we might realistically expect mainstream culture to perceive as having a legitimate heuristic value (particularly in the context of a college curriculum and its often test-laden measures). Eileen Myles’ book, *The Importance of Being Iceland: Travel Essays in Art*, however, may serve as a more pragmatic bridge between conventional college writing and what is possible when—or if—we truly embrace Sirc’s so-called composition-as-a-happening movement. In this collection of essays, Myles keeps a fastidious, diaristic record of her intellectual and emotional experiences. This is the kind of prose that Sirc advocates for—part criticism, part history, part memoir. Sirc calls for scraps; Myles calls for what Kerouac described as “language sketches.” Her approach to writing is informed by something Alice Notley taught her: that “everything is poetry if you know how to say it.”

Myles is a poet, and a particularly lyrical one at that, and thus writes prose with an ear attuned to music, an eye open to enigma, and a heart heavy with some indiscernible melancholy. The subtitle of her book (*Travel Essays in Art*) hints at the work’s *modus operandi*: to embrace hybridity, overlap, a wandering mind and body. In the book’s opening essay, “Iceland,” Myles writes about travel as an exercise in forgetting:

> The work for the traveler is making the effort to understand that the place you are moving through is real and the solution to your increasingly absent problems is forgetting. To see them in a burst as you are vanishing into the world. Travel is not transcendence. It’s immanence. It’s trying to be here. (41)
Much of Myles’ strength as an essayist comes from her ability to take up ordinary subjects, experiences, and encounters and move, inductively, toward extraordinary insights on culture, art, and simply, on being. Incidentally, I’m struck at this moment (in my tendency, again, to read ars poetically) by how when Myles reflects on travel as an exercise in forgetting, an exercise in immanence, in being “here,” she is also describing writing. In fact, Myles’ *Iceland* is rife with rhetorical philosophy, some of it indirect, but much of it overt too. What she writes about the relationship between form and content in her essay “Everyday Barf” resonates in particular with my overarching argument that writing pedagogy should pay as much attention to form as to content. They are, as Myles points out, inextricably linked: "It simply strikes me that form has a real honest engagement with content and therefore might even need to get a little sleazy with it suggesting it stop early or go too far. How can you stop form from wanting to do that” (163). Indeed, if we want our students to write engaged compositions, we need to not only cultivate sensitivity to form’s capacities and constraints, but we must also introduce our students to an arsenal of forms—from the academic essay to the prose poem and across the spectrum to language games such as OULIPO—so that, as Wendy Bishop intones, they can “think in and through them all” (“Places” 17).

In the book’s concluding essay, “Reunion,” Myles reflects candidly on her rhetorical aesthetic and perception of language, implicitly linking herself to Koestenbaum’s musings on the fraughtness of language’s relationship to meaning, and explicitly linking herself to Jack Kerouac’s automatism-inspired approach to writing:

Let's face it, language is invisible. This is not *it* here, exactly. Kerouac was also always an inspired explainer of his own craft. He called what he did “sketching language” and the arbitrariness and the uniqueness of each subsequent take of
writing was key to his idea of bop prosody. Writing was performance. You begin with something familiar. Something almost anonymous in its familiarity. (283)

First-year composition could benefit from adopting some of the Myles-Kerouac perspective that values the concrete over the abstract, spontaneity, performance, and pleasure in the writing process.

In his 2003 book, A Rhetoric of Pleasure: Prose Style and Today's Composition Classroom, T.R. Johnson attempts to theorize “authorial pleasure through a long but 'renegade' tradition in the history of rhetoric not as the stuff of whimsical self-indulgence but as a feeling of connection with one’s audience” (xii). He believes that a style-based approach to teaching writing may not only lead to more critically conscious writing but may also serve to cultivate positive attitudes toward writing in an academic culture where English composition is compulsory and thus something to “get out of” or “get through.” He reminds us that, in order for a student’s writing to be persuasive, “the student must first learn to experience composing itself as a kind of pleasure-charged performance, for once they learn to generate a rigorous, positive excitement around the task of rhetorical action, they’ll stand a much greater chance of spreading that feeling to their audience” (2).

As writers who teach/teachers who write, we know firsthand the role that pleasure has had in allowing us to even fathom a career in writing. More likely than not, we gravitated toward this profession inspired by a deeply felt something surrounding the experience of putting pen to paper, becoming entangled in a ponderous sentence, or combining syllables like notes in an evocative phrase of music. My own desire to write was, in fact, inspired by music when, as a teenager, I spent hours after school scribbling lines of poetry in a suburban Detroit basement to a friend’s haphazard strumming of distorted power chords. In fact, many of my colleagues in first-
year writing programs came to academia through a love for writing. Rarely was the writing that motivated their career choices ever characterized as “academic” writing; ironically, many of my colleagues’ academic careers were born in the stanzas of poems, the characters of fiction, and in the verses of song lyrics. “Herein lies the paradox that perhaps divides our field at its very heart,” Johnson observes: “[T]he enthusiasm and pleasure, the ‘sensational rush,’ that colored our profession when it first began to form are, in a very real sense, unprofessional” (6).

Johnson’s analysis underscores the absence of play in FYC’s conception of a successful writing practice/process and how to teach it. Instead of drilling style into students through a series of exercises, Johnson suggests we present stylistic techniques “as a form of play,” and that we “emphasize play not simply as something children do, but also as something that musicians, actors, and athletes do, something they do with utmost discipline” (32). In A Rhetoric of Pleasure, Johnson introduces one such activity particularly consonant with lyric essayism’s skepticism of language’s denotative powers. This one involves poetry:

I first copy a poem onto the board (or the overhead projector, or the PowerPoint screen) and then have my students pick out its various formal features. We mark the strong and weak beats, the moments of significant enjambment or caesura that impact its tempo, and we code the rhyme scheme of the poem itself, leaving in view only the notes about formal properties. I then ask the class as a group to fill in new words, words that conform, line by line, to the rhythmic patterns and poetic devices that we noted.

Johnson’s activity imbues students with the understanding that ideas in writing are often driven and even engendered not by cerebral epiphanies but by form—its expectations and, especially, its constraints. This is what Myles recognizes in Iceland when she writes that “form
has a real honest engagement with content” (163). This is what Eve Sedgwick wants her students to recognize when she asks them, “What does the form of this piece know ... that the reader or even writer may not already know?” (105). Johnson’s work, a playful riff on the mind numbing exercise of sentence diagramming, demonstrates Myles’ point. He goes on to explain how his students respond to the activity:

I stand at the board scribbling in their suggestions. I tell them not to worry about meaning at all, but just to mimic the sound, moment by moment, of the previous poem. What eventually emerges is, of course, almost wholly devoid of literal meaning. And yet my students find it impossible not to offer quite compelling interpretations, for the musical properties of the text they’ve created have them virtually spellbound. (15)

For Johnson and his students, the product that comes out of this exercise is irrelevant. The value is had in the experience, in the process. The students find figurative meaning in the text or they make meaning out of it. Either way, Johnson’s activity succeeds in getting his students to think critically about how form begets content and content begets meaning. There is an important performative aspect to what Johnson advocates that aligns with much of the thinking we have encountered thus far, from Cindy Sherman’s photographic performances of subjectivity to the writing teacher’s performance of authority subversion in the classroom. Johnson—like Elbow, Myles, and Kerouac—values extemporaneity in the writing process and the productive surprises that can occur. “Teaching students to play with stylistic devices and encouraging them to read out loud,” Johnson believes, “are part of the broad project of helping them to develop a sense of audience and engage in inward dialogue, critical reflection, and generative ‘magic’” (52).
Johnson’s goals for his students seem to me both lofty and attainable. I too want to help my students develop a keener “sense of audience” and the invaluable ability to engage in “inward dialogue,” “critical reflection,” and, especially, “generative magic.” And I firmly believe that the lyric essay embodies these desirable characteristics, characteristics I value in literature for the infectious air of authorial pleasure that emanates from them. The question that remains for me—and perhaps for others who maintain concerns about expressivism’s penchant for first-person pronouns—has to do with authorial presence and the role of personal experience in writing that meaningfully employs the desired traits discussed above. In other words, does the use of personal experience in academic writing empower the critical expressivist composition classroom, or does it undermine it?

In *Personally Speaking: Experience As Evidence in Academic Writing*, Candace Spigelman makes a compelling argument for how the inclusion of experiential evidence in academic writing can provide students with an enhanced interpretive lens for developing and complicating ideas. She acknowledges the epistemological concerns of postmodernism (that identity is fluid, socially constructed, and as fickle as consumer culture), but nonetheless maintains that choosing sides—“personal versus academic writing, expressivist versus social constructivist teaching”—is counterproductive, “for all around us, experiential writing is already serving the needs of critical cultural examination” (2). Spigelman calls for a “blended” form of academic writing that incorporates personal experiences and perspectives (what Elbow would call “personal thinking”) into academic writing. Such an amalgamation, Spigelman argues, creates a desired effect she has named “surplus”: “the ‘excessive’ consequence of simultaneously viewing an issue from alternate perspectives” (3). After all, she explains, much of what we label “academic argument” in scholarship is really an act of enlarging, elaborating upon, and
negotiating the ideas of others. In incorporating personal experience and personal thinking, we can further intensify and augment this endeavor.

As I compose this chapter on negotiating subject positions in first-year writing, it is summer in Chicago, early morning. I am taking advantage of my apartment’s generously deemed “three-season porch” before the temperature climbs back into the nineties and the squirrels start fighting over the dumpsters ripening down below. As I attempt to hone my focus on the concepts I’ve laid out before us—identity construction, personal/nonpersonal continuum, critical expressivism, et al.—the borders of my attention are perpetually thronged by the trappings of my experiential self: daycare pick-up, shopping errands, the cat licking himself atop my desk, and the sixty-four students spread across two sections of advanced English composition that I’ve been teaching this summer online.

Like Spigelman, I have adopted a blended approach to teaching the academic research argument that allows for as many perspectives as possible to come into conversation with one another (to use Kenneth Burke’s metaphor of the parlor conversation to describe the form of academic writing). Many advocates of personal writing in first-year composition employ the personal essay or personal narrative assignment as a springboard into the semester, as a kind of “ice-breaker” that tricks students into believing the course might actually be fun (not that it isn’t or can’t be). The challenge of beginning the course with personal writing, however, is that students don’t always know which personal experiences can be successfully developed into important universal ideas. As Bartholomae points out, student writers often resort to clichéd moralizing when bereft of a quiver of textual resources to help them extend their ideas (Writing on the Margins 67). I began my course with this in mind, and thus began with responsive reading, which involves the process of “examination and reply” (Steiner “The Uncommon
Knowing that I wanted my students to be able to engage with these texts personally and through a myriad of perspectives, I chose texts we might characterize as particularly ambiguous and inconclusive:

“Hiroshima” by John Berger
“No Name Woman” by Maxine Hong Kingston
“A Shark in the Mind of One Contemplating Wilderness” by Terry Tempest Williams

In addition to their interpretive malleability, I chose these three texts in concert because they are successful examples of “blended” texts (texts that cross the dimensions of personal/nonpersonal topics, use of language, and thinking), and they are all as different from one another as they are, at the same time, related.

It was important that the chosen texts comprise a spectrum of themes, concepts, and ideas because, immediately following our guided responsive readings, students would be asked to compose a personal essay inspired by one of them. To prepare the students for this difficult work, I reminded them that Berger’s “Hiroshima” is not just about the bombing of tens of thousands of Japanese civilians (it is also about capturing history through art and how we distinguish war from terrorism, evil from good); Kingston’s essay is not just about the shame-induced suicide of the author’s aunt (it’s about cultural traditions, the immigrant experience, and the power that writing has as a tool for honoring a family’s forsaken ghosts); and Williams’ essay, as well, does not narrowly attend to sharks and wilderness (it is about preservation and how we designate between art and our worldly surroundings).

The personal essays I received in the wake of these initial readings were not, as constructivists often fear, singular-minded streams of navel-gazing; they were critically anchored
in the serious and substantial concepts introduced by Berger, Kingston, and/or Williams. Crucially, the course’s foundational readings forced the students to consider how their own experiences related to a broader conversation, and, furthermore, the texts inspired rigorous inward-looking and critical reflection worthy of the heightened level of discourse they had entered into.

This intellectual process is supported by Lev Vygotsky’s research surrounding the social factors in cognitive development. The initial course readings serve not only to provide a concept bank upon which students can draw throughout the semester, but they also serve as *mentor texts*, allowing for what Vygotsky describes as collaborative dialogue. In other words, students seek to comprehend the actions performed by the mentor then internalize the information, using it to guide their own performance. Whether or not the personal perspectives employed by the mentor texts had a hand in stimulating a collaborative dialogue is unclear; however, to harness the cognitive benefits of social development, a connection on the personal level would likely need to take place. In my course this summer, this initial personal connection has sparked considered, critical engagements with nonpersonal topics—many of which strike a successful balance between personal and nonpersonal thinking.

Spigelman calls this genre of writing “personal academic writing.” I have chosen to describe it, in my classes, as “personal dialectic writing” because the term “academic” feels too fractured by associations and thus imprecise. *Dialectic*, meanwhile, denotes the reconciliation of divergent perspectives that academic arguments, when at their best, also strive to do. By incorporating the personal into dialectic writing, we increase the charge between the perspectives in negotiation, a charge brought about by the personal stakes brought into the act of writing, stakes that often engender the kind of “authorial pleasure” that Johnson argues will lead to
developing a keener “sense of audience,” sustained engagement in “inward dialogue,” “critical reflection,” and “generative magic.”

Because I am always in search of literary texts to serve as mentors in my own teaching and writing endeavors, I have been looking for work that moves inductively, in the way I’ve described above, from text to personal relation to idea (or from evidence to analysis to idea). Recently, I came across a book by Phyllis Rose that enacts this interesting process. In *The Year of Reading Proust: A Memoir in Real Time*, Rose contemplates her scholarly and literary challenges, her complex emotional self, her relationships, and her encounters with art all in proximity to Proust’s *oeuvre*. While by all accounts well-read, Rose encounters Proust late in life, and the experience inspires a yearlong exercise in dredging up feelings and memories from what she calls “the waters of unconsciousness.” Subtly and indirectly, Proust aids Rose in dealing with challenges of memory loss and recovery and with the subsequent, more pronounced challenges of constructing a memoir from the increasingly muddied waters of unconsciousness.

Moreover, this collaborative relationship (between a text to which the writer feels a strong connection) has an impact on Rose’s prose style: Just now, writing, I got carried away by my exercise in Proustian style,” the author unexpectedly interjects, “of whose chief elements—paradox, inclusiveness, and simile—simile was the horse that took me off on that wild ride to Rome, Venice, and Florence. I will try to rein him in” (17). Many writers actively seek out the opportunity to absorb some of an admired writer’s voice through osmosis. The poet Alice Notley claims to have spent much of her early career copying out the long poems of James Schuyler. In doing so, she believes she “internalized the structures and sounds of these poems … and that they influenced much of [her] later work…. This is magic,” she says (qtd. in Zucker 16). I don’t think it’s a stretch to assume we all want our students to experience this magic—otherwise we
wouldn’t bother forcing them to read from a canon of personally and universally admired literary practitioners. What we fail to realize, however, is that to have a transformative experience with a text, one that generates *magic*, the connection must be *felt*, not just understood.

To dismiss the importance of facilitating personal connections between our students and the texts we present as academically “worthy,” or to not actively seek out these points of connection, is equivalent to imposing silence on our students, suggests Jaqueline Jones Royster in her *CCC* article “When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own.” “Even when our intentions are quite honorable, silence can descend,” warns Royster: “Their experiences are not seen, and their voices are not heard. We can find ourselves participating, sometimes consciously, sometimes not, in what Patricia Williams calls ‘spirit murder’” (38 - 39). To ward against silencing and spirit murdering in the classroom, Royster calls on teachers to allow for—and celebrate—*polyvocalism* (i.e., the presentation of multiple viewpoints). Like Spigelman, Royster insists we can do this by creating opportunities for our students to employ personal thinking and personal language in their academic texts. “Using subject position as a terministic screen in cross-boundary discourse permits analysis to operate kaleidoscopically,” Royster argues (channeling Kenneth Burke), “thereby permitting interpretation to be richly informed by the converging of dialectical perspectives” (29). She goes on to outline subjectivity’s heuristic value, not only in our attempts to understand ourselves inwardly, but also in our struggle to comprehend and engage in the power systems surrounding language and, especially, higher education:

Subjectivity as a defining value pays attention dynamically to context, ways of knowing, language abilities, and experience, and by doing so it has a consequent potential to deepen, broaden, and enrich our interpretive views in dynamic ways as well…. In a fundamental way, this enterprise supports the sense of rhetoric,
composition, and literacy studies as a field of study that embraces the imperative to understand truths and consequences of language use more fully. This enterprise supports also the imperative to reconsider the beliefs and values which inevitably permit our attitudes and actions in discourse communities (including colleges, universities, and classrooms) to be systematic, even systemic. (29 - 30)

Royster’s analysis of subjectivity’s function in the socially conscious, critically aware classroom reconciles much of the discord between expressivism’s support of personal writing and postmodernism’s belief system that denies the existence of a rational, coherent self. Royster seems to be saying that, by employing our subject positions, we enhance our ability to pay attention to the forces (social, political, environmental, etc.) that impact us most, that shape our sense of self (or selves) most. Of course, this phenomenon is most effectively exploited when we facilitate the conscious use of subject positions in our students’ writing. We find this subjective and rhetorical awareness in the work of lyric essayists such as Koestenbaum, Myles, and Rose, who reflect on their relationship with language and on the challenge of wielding language as a tool for making meaning.

In “Democracy, Pedagogy, and the Personal Essay,” Joel Haefner makes a forceful argument for maintaining our students’ critical awareness of the choices they make in navigating the personal/nonpersonal continuum:

Let the students—collaboratively or individually—address the issue of the personal essay and its place in the curriculum. Let them explore and debate the issues of individualism and collectivism which have informed our recent re-evaluations of the personal essay.... We can use personal essays to raise important questions with our students about the nature of knowledge and education. We can
ask them: What is a personal essay? What makes it “personal”? Does it have any role in a writing class? Why are personal essays so widely used in writing classes.

Haefner’s proposal that we let our students decide, for themselves, whether there is value to be found in personal writing is an important reminder of what our key objectives should be as college writing teachers: not to coach students into producing publishable works of literature or scholarship, but rather to facilitate their entrée into a more advanced writing practice—one that is soundly conscious of rhetorical structures and their effects.

IV. Opening the Doors of Identity Construction to Our Students

The purpose of poetry is to remind us how difficult it is to remain just one person, for our house is open, there are no keys in the doors, and invisible guests come in and out at will.
—Czeslaw Milosz, “Ars Poetica?”

While leaving the Cindy Sherman retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, I happened upon a series of lithographs by Glenn Ligon called The Runaways. Each the size of a 16 x 12” poster, they depict grayscale, nineteenth century style illustrations of runaway slaves paired with verbal descriptions of who we assume to be the runaways but are in fact descriptions of the artist himself:

RAN AWAY, Glenn, a black male, 5’8”, very short hair cut, nearly completely shaved, stocky build, 155 - 165 lbs., medium complexion (not “light skinned,” not “dark skinned,” slightly orange). Wearing faded blue jeans, short sleeve button-down 50’s style shirt, nice glasses (small, oval shaped), no socks. Very articulate, seemingly well-educated, does not look at you straight in the eye when talking to you. He’s socially very adept, yet, paradoxically, he’s somewhat of a loner.
To produce this series, Ligon called on friends to compose physical descriptions of him as though they were describing him to a police officer. “Runaways,” he explains, “is broadly about how an individual’s identity is inextricable from the way one is positioned in the culture, from the ways people see you, from historical and political contexts” (Golden). Ligon’s astute commentary on identity construction, particularly among historically oppressed and “othered” groups, echoes Jaqueline Jones Royster’s concerns surrounding the “silencing” of student voices and identities in academia. But rather than accept an external construction of her identity, Royster would prefer to, in bell hooks’ words, “construct social realities that celebrate, acknowledge, and affirm differences, variety” (qtd. in Royster 38). We can do this, Royster believes, by providing our students with opportunities to summon and examine the various subjectivities that reside within them rather than silencing them and thereby barring them from knowing themselves and the complex systems they should have a hand in negotiating.

Cindy Sherman, the youngest of five, was brought up with an impulse toward disguise and impersonation. She recalls, as a child, struggling to be seen by her much older siblings and wanting to shout, “I’m here. I can be like this, I can be like that” (Baker). In her career as an artist, Sherman would harness this penchant for metamorphosis in her photographic self-portraits, an endeavor that did more to reveal her multiple selves than to disguise them.

In a 2012 interview with Kenneth Baker, Sherman confesses, “For the longest time, up until a couple of years ago, I was trying to lose myself in the work, literally and figuratively, so that I would never be recognized. Not just that it wouldn’t look like me but that it wouldn’t look like any of the other characters I’d done before.” And yet, from a postmodern perspective, Sherman’s attempts to “lose herself” in her work may actually be an act of self-realization: agency, after all, manifests in the work, in the act of doing, not in the work’s intention.
Moreover, in her efforts to invent forever-distinct “characters” in her work, Sherman is employing what Royster would praise as polyvocalism through multiple, subjective terministic screens. In doing so, she explores (exhaustively) a multiplicity of varying perspectives on what it means to be an incoherent, yet conscious, perpetually fluid, yet unsilenced, self.

After thinking and writing about Ligon and Sherman’s work and its relation to subject positioning in first-year composition, I placed my students in groups of four and asked them to create runaway posters for each other. The students composed verbal descriptions for each of their group members based on physical features alone. Unsurprisingly, they described the experience as awkward and humiliating. Some, justifiably, found it offensive. But it brought about an important conversation—a conversation Royster helped us realize we needed to have—about the experience of having your identity constructed for you.

To counteract the silencing effect of the runaways project, I then asked my students to independently create a series of “polyvocal” photographic self-portraits depicting their multiple identities. This exercise proved more difficult than composing the simple, surface-level descriptions for the runaways posters, but the project had an absorbing effect on my students, and they consequently put a lot of time and thought into their self-portraits.

As I complete this chapter, it is the final week of the summer semester. In reviewing both the runaways posters and the photographic self-portraits, it occurs to me we have just—somewhat serendipitously—conducted preliminary research for a lyric essay project that draws on personal experience in pursuit of answers to universal questions surrounding identity construction and the function of the personal in academic writing. It’s time. I need to let my students—we all do—explore these issues for themselves.
Chapter Seven:
New Media and a Rhetoric of This/And in College Composition

Technologies are not responsible for texts, we are, within the limitations of what different technologies afford—and those limitations are always less restrictive than we might think.
—Anne Frances Wysocki, “Opening New Media to Writing: Openings and Justifications”

I. The Search for Balance Between Mind, Body, and Screen

In 2006, the year I graduated from college, I moved from densely populated and skyscraper-clad Chicago to a small farming town in central Japan. When I first entered my cramped, empty apartment, thick with the stench of stale tatami, housed within a gray, cinder block building ringed by rice fields as far as my jet-lagged eyes could see, the first thing I asked my new host was, “Intānetto ga arimasu ka?” (“Is there Internet?”)

Reflecting back on this moment, I feel a twinge of shame. Of all the things I might have asked Ms. Yotsuzuka then and there (What are my new neighbors like? Where’s the nearest supermarket?), of all the questions (What can my Japanese toilet do?), I had to ask about the Internet, a tool she and I both knew would be used as a distancing device between her and me, between my country and hers. And yet, without it, how would I maintain my relationships back home? How would anyone know if I were even alive?

That year, as I found myself teaching high-school English in the remote foothills of Mt. Ibuki, Facebook was still an infant, and I had just graduated from AOL mail to Gmail. And even though I spent my formative years oblivious to the technological revolution taking place at my generation’s fingertips, I found myself clinging to it during my time in Japan, as though it were a
portal that allowed me to straddle two places at once, or a time machine capable of assuaging my most melancholic bouts of nostalgia and homesickness.

Eva Hoffman calls these attacks of nostalgia, in her native Polish tongue, *tesknota*—“a word that adds to nostalgia the tonalities of sadness and longing … an annunciation of how much an absence can hurt” (176). Her memoir *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* attests to the intense “geography of emotions” that come with expatriation, immigration, or, for Hoffman, escape from a worn-torn city like her hometown of Cracow (176). Like me, Hoffman was desperate to regain some semblance of the comforts and rituals she knew from home (what, despite considerable poverty and threat of danger, she nevertheless deemed her “paradise”). But because Hoffman fled Cracow for Canada in 1949—more than half a century before Facebook, Gmail, et al.—she could only return there in her mind. “No wonder,” she writes. “But the wonder is what you can make a paradise out of” (177). For Hoffman, thus, home could be found in the imagination, in the careful construction (and reconstruction) of memory. I, on the other hand, had grown used to the ostensible sharpness and immediacy of technology, of the ability to conjure old rooms and familiar faces with a few strokes of a computer keyboard. What use did I have for imagination?

Ms. Yotsuzuka (the chair of my school’s English Language department and my boss) had little sympathy for me and my digital needs. She was a true Buddhist, minimalistic in every way. After school, while I was typing epic, chatty emails to friends and family back home, she was stoically practicing *ikebana*, her normally tidy desk strewn with thorny flower stems and cherry blossom branches. (Unless it was Wednesday, in which case she would be directing the school’s tea ceremony club, or Friday, which was when she practiced *kendo* with the wily boys from homeroom B.) It was only when I began to run out of interesting things to report in my emails
back home that I learned to negotiate a balance between my *digital life* and my *real life*. This took some time. Having been thrown into a world so different from what I was used to, it wasn’t immediately clear to me how I might even begin to strike some kind of balance between these lives. Which life was my “real” life anyway?

A decade later, in my final semester of graduate school, I was given an apropos opportunity to experience what could perhaps represent the future of first-year writing: *new media composition*. The course, *Writing with the Body: Felt Sense, Composing Theories, and New Media Experiments*, was taught by Sondra Perl, whose extensive work on cognitive and emotional impacts on composing processes has afforded her, most recently, the 2016 Exemplar Award from the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Perl began the course by introducing us to *felt sense*, a term coined by philosopher Eugene Gendlin to describe the internal awareness that we call on to aid us in matching words to what we think/feel. In 2004, Perl adapted Gendlin’s notion of felt sense to the composing process and published a set of guidelines to assist writers in accessing their own internal awarenesses. We, the members of Perl’s felt sense and new media course, participated in this exercise on the first day of class.

The composing guidelines begin by directing writers to get comfortable: “Shake out your hands, take a deep breath, settle into your chair…. Find a way to be quietly and comfortably aware of your inner state.” From here, Perl leads us through a series of prompts meant to stimulate meta-reflection. When we hear ourselves locating answers to the prompts, we are to transpose these answers into writing. The prompts—phrased as questions—aim to stimulate thinking about *process* in favor of content (though content is, eventually, generated (as if “by magic”)): 
What’s going on with me right now? Is there anything in the way of my writing today? What’s on my mind? Of all the things I know about, what might I like to write about now? Now that I have a list—long or short—is there anything else I’ve left out, any other piece I’m overlooking, maybe even a word I like, something else I might want to write about sometime that I can add to this list? What here draws my attention right now? What could I begin to write about, even if I’m not certain where it will lead?

The prompts continue in this reflexive manner and conclude by reminding us to check in with our felt sense as a means for measuring the alignment of our words to our thoughts/feelings, the accuracy of our expression:

Once you feel you’re near or at the end, ask yourself, “Does this feel complete?” Look to your “felt sense,” your gut reaction, even to your body, for the answer. Again write down whatever answer comes to you. If the answer is “No,” pause and ask yourself, “What's missing?” and continue writing.

In the context of our new media class, Perl’s felt sense guidelines demonstrated two important points about the relationship between digital and traditional methods of composing: (1) that, in working with digital tools and platforms, it is important that we remember to remain meta-reflective, to slow down now and again in order to check in with our internal awarenesses, and, (2) that traditional composing methods (i.e., the sequential ordering of words and sentences in an 8.5/11” frame) can never, by themselves, sufficiently capture the subtlety and complexity of human thought and emotion.

In A Rhetoric of Pleasure: Prose Style in Today’s Composition, T.R. Johnson calls on teachers of writing to embrace a “renegade rhetoric” in the classroom: “That highly pleasurable
practice in which selves, texts, and worlds are experienced as dynamic, interanimating processes” (25). This, Johnson suggests, is an approach to writing that celebrates the five senses; and yet, as others before me have argued (Wendy Bishop, Anne Wysocki, and Jody Shipka, to name just a few), we cannot fully represent our senses through a singular mode of expression—academic writing, say, or even through strictly alphabetic texts. This final chapter, thus, takes stock of the ever-increasing adoption of new media—including digital technologies—in the writing classroom to envision the dissolution of traditional student genres (i.e., dry, thesis-driven prose) in favor of complex, fluid forms galvanized by a sudden and forceful boom in the development of innovative and accessible composing technologies.

II. Postmodernism, Multimodality, and English Composition

Anne Wysocki’s 2004 anthology Writing New Media: Theory and Applications for Expanding the Teaching of Composition was an early entrée into the world of alternative composing methods. In her introduction to the book, Wysocki argues for the integration of new media texts in the classroom that showcase the materiality (in other words, the social, political, and technological factors) of the composition. These “new media” texts, thus, are not necessarily digital, so long as there is an astute consideration of craft or, in other words, an aesthetic investment. In this way, predicts Wysocki, “the idea and the ideal of the book will change: print will no longer define the organization and presentation of knowledge, as it has for the past five centuries” (1).

In her contribution to the same anthology, Cynthia Selfe establishes the identity forming features of new media compositions that require “the exercise of power, and the negotiation of new social codes” (51). She calls on the field of composition studies to adapt its pedagogical
approach to a postmodern world in which knowledge is not disseminated (or produced) in
tangible wholes. This means crossing the boundaries of the traditional student genre and
embracing communicative modes of expression beyond even the written word:

   To make it possible for students to practice, value, and understand a full range of
   literacies—emerging, competing, and fading—English composition teachers have
got to be willing to expand their own understanding of composing beyond
conventional bounds of the alphabetic. And we have to do so quickly or risk
having composition studies become increasingly irrelevant. (54)

Concerns over composition studies losing relevancy are not particularly new. As far back
as 1992, Lester Faigley expressed his own concerns for the field’s failure to embrace postmodern
sensibilities. “[I]f composition studies coincides with the era of postmodernity,” he writes in the
early pages of his book *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of
Composition*, “there is seemingly little in the short history of composition studies that suggests a
postmodern view of heterogeneity and difference as liberating forces and there are very few calls
to celebrate the fragmentary and chaotic currents of change” (15). Ten-plus-years after the
publication of Faigley’s book, however, we have seen a surge in scholarly research and
publication on new media inspired pedagogical practices that, intentionally or not, promote the
qualities of postmodernism that Faigley yearns to see enacted in the composition classroom,
qualities such as antiform, play, chance, anarchy, and even silence (14).

In her 2011 book, *Toward a Composition Made Whole*, Jody Shipka seeks to overturn
archaic assumptions about what college-level texts should look and sound like. Here, Shipka
provides a critical exploration of the uses of multimodal composition practices at all stages of
writing instruction: theory, pedagogy, and assessment. In her teaching, Shipka encourages
multimodal compositions as a heuristic for getting students to think critically about the choices they make in their endeavors to develop and convey ideas. She suggests that the production of texts (“whether linear, print-based, digital, object-, or performance-based texts, or some combination thereof”) is secondary to cultivating a more “nuanced awareness of the various choices they make, or even fail to make, throughout the process of producing a text and to carefully consider the effect those choices might have on others” (85). This goal is more likely to be achieved, she suggests, when we refrain from predetermining the “specific genres, media, and audiences with which they will work” (87). In promoting compositional play and experimentation with her first-year composition students, Shipka hopes to foster rhetorical sensitivity—an acute understanding of how effects are generated through signs and symbols that is hampered by conventional write-by-numbers approaches to college writing instruction.

A section of Shipka’s website, remediatethis.com, is devoted to showcasing multimodal projects created by previous students. One of Shipka’s “all-time favorite texts” was created by an engineering student who had never produced a piece of writing for school “that wasn't modeled after the genres most often associated with school writing practices (i.e., the linear essay, a lab report, an essay written in response to a test question, class notes).” The project, entitled “United Van Lines,” consists of seven invoices from the United Van Lines moving company that have been repurposed to convey the traumatic and childhood-defining experience of moving seven times between the ages of one and ten. In each invoice, the moving services that would have originally been itemized in the “description” field have been replaced with the student’s memories of and reflections upon the home he has just been forced from:
Leaving the first apartment that my newly immigrated parents ever had in America. The place where they were so poor they had me in a cardboard box as a crib.

Leaving the apartment where I said my first word, “McDonalds,” and the place where I said it for my grandparents on film.

Moving out of a town where I was told that I had been taught the wrong way to write. Having to learn cursive all over again, because on the East coast things were different than in the Midwest. Realizing how big this country is.

The author of “United Van Lines” created the work in response to Shipka’s “Educational Autobiographic” assignment—a riff on the literacy narrative that asks students “to focus on one moment (or a series of linked moments) in their histories of learning and to re-present for others, using whatever genres, materials, or media, what they learned, how, why, etc.” (Remediate This). While this student did not choose to utilize digital media in his response to the assignment, other students of Shipka’s have—from documentary videos to websites, from podcasts to video games.

Often, Shipka is unfamiliar with the materials students choose to use for their multimodal compositions, and so, to aid her in evaluating them, she asks students to provide written responses to these core questions:

1. What, specifically, is this piece trying to accomplish?

2. What specific rhetorical, material, methodological, and technological choices did you make in service of accomplishing the goal(s) articulated above?

3. Why did you end up pursuing this plan as opposed to the others you came up with? How did the various choices listed above allow you to accomplish things
Shipka has her students compile responses to the above questions into what she calls a “statement of goals and choices” (SOGC) so as “to ensure that students are thinking carefully, critically, and flexibly about the communicative potentials of the choices they have made about their work—as well as those that they may only have briefly considered making” (Toward a Composition 113). This meta-reflective component of Shipka’s assignments aids in fostering students’ rhetorical sensitivity, which, again, Shipka views as paramount in her objectives for first-year composition. In fact, while Shipka’s “mediated activity-based multimodal framework for composing” (87) might seem radical to some, her objectives are firmly rooted in the Council for Writing Program Administrators’ Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition.

Developed in 2000 and periodically updated, the Outcomes Statement articulates “a general curricular framework for first-year composition, regardless of institutional home, student demographics, and instructor characteristics” in such a way that does not “prescribe or infringe” (321). Moreover, it demonstrates how, as a discipline, we are committed to fostering pluralistic student identities (the academic and the writer, et al.) in its encouragement of multi-genre composition and in its emphasis on the importance of understanding the roles of voice and tone (323-25).

And yet, at the same time, the Outcomes Statement is hamstringed by its focus on external writing purposes and the conspicuous omission of reflexive writing terms such as “expression,” “discovery,” or “creativity.” To balance the Outcomes Statement’s conventionally academic leanings, then, a postmodern (or “renegade”) approach to first-year writing should consider the more recently published Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing (2015),
devised by the National Writing Project at the University of California, Berkeley. The Framework articulates the “habits of mind” required to fulfill the learning objectives laid out by the Outcomes Group, including “creativity” and “flexibility,” and it cautions against “formulaic writing for nonauthentic audiences” (3):

At its essence, the Framework suggests that writing activities and assignments should be designed with genuine purposes and audiences in mind (from teachers and other students to community groups, local or national officials, commercial interests, students’ friends and relatives, and other potential readers) in order to foster flexibility and rhetorical versatility.

In order to facilitate writing for “authentic” audiences in the composition classroom, instructors should employ what Shipka describes as “environment selecting and structuring practices” (ESSPs), which take into account “the use of external actors and aids as a way of shaping and directing consciousness in service of the task at hand” (75). By reminding students of the nonclassroom factors that influence how they think, interpret their surroundings, and thereby construct themselves, we remind them of the nonclassroom impact their compositions can have as well.

A multimodal framework for composing, such as that utilized by Shipka, Wysocki, and Selfe, calls on students to be hyper aware of rhetorical purpose and the various choices involved in fulfilling that purpose. When we give these choices back to our students (as opposed to prescribing compositional forms, genres, paragraph and page lengths, etc.) we are presenting them with a challenge that necessitates a great deal of critical thinking and creativity. And while critical thinking has been at the forefront of FYC’s outcomes objectives from the beginning, creativity is an often overlooked yet crucial soft skill that, according to the Framework, should
be fostered in our first-year writing courses. We can meet these aims by encouraging our student writers to:

- take risks by exploring questions, topics, and ideas that are new to them;
- use methods that are new to them to investigate questions, topics, and ideas;
- represent what they have learned in a variety of ways; and
- evaluate the effects or consequences of their creative choices.

(“Framework for Success” 4 - 5)

As students in Sondra Perl’s graduate seminar, *Writing with the Body: Felt Sense, Composing Theories, and New Media Experiments*, we had the opportunity to explore the creative and pedagogical possibilities afforded to us by digital composing methods. Many of us—myself included—had never composed anything outside the digital environment of Microsoft Office; and yet, in the spirit of experimentation, we immersed ourselves in the strange worlds of iMovie, Prezi, a website builder called Wix, and Tiki-Toki (an interactive timeline software), among others. For me, the experience had the effect of dissolving much of the pent-up anxiety I had developed about writing—anxiety about getting started, about not writing enough, about turning my back on my poetry, and anxiety about sharing my work with others. Working in these new media reignited in me a desire to write (rather than simply a need or obligation to write). To put it another way, these multimodal composing methods unsettled my creative process, a process that had become so rigid that it had begun to have a stifling effect on me.

When we help ourselves become more aware, more rhetorically sensitive, and less risk-averse composers, we help our students too. Perl’s course introduced me to a range of literacies beyond the alphabetic—literacies I want my students to be able to employ and “think through” as well.
Part of what it means to be rhetorically sensitive is being able to “[suffuse] the materiality of daily life with an aesthetic,” explains Geoffrey Sirc in his essay “Box-Logic.” It’s “taking an art stance to the everyday” (117). To do this, Sirc suggests, as I’ve argued throughout this dissertation, that we move students away from the conventional academic essay “in which the easy falseness of a unified resolution gets prized over the richer, more difficult, de facto text the world presents itself as” (123). His vision for first-year composition comes, in part, from Joseph Cornell’s boxes (the nostalgia-infused dioramas that depict whimsical, idiosyncratic worlds beyond our own). Much of Sirc’s fascination with Cornell’s work derives from their perpetually unfinished quality: “The tops of his boxes, in fact, were often only screwed down, so he could re-open them and fiddle with their contents.” Perhaps this is why, for Sirc, “Electronic composition has always tantalized with the potential for such open-ended texts” (120). Moreover, Sirc admires Cornell’s boxes for the way in which the “objects of Cornell's boxes were like words from a personal vocabulary” arranged via idiosyncratic association (123). “It is this associational logic of linkages,” Sirc proclaims, “that we need to develop in our classrooms, in order to help foster a personal aesthetic among our students” (123).

Certainly, then, new media and the personal freedom of choice afforded by a multimodal framework for composition, appears to support the kinds of idiosyncratic composing habits yearned for by Sirc and—admittedly—myself. Multimodality affords us the opportunity to unscrew the top off our writing approaches and “fiddle” with their forms, genres, and strategies because its media is decidedly *unfixed*, forever mutable and thus amenable to change via tinkering. The essay, on the other hand, is a form conventionally comprised of words on a page, published resolutely to screen or to paper. Sirc, thus, suggests we do away with the essay entirely as a central genre in first-year composition:
With the essay displaced, our new classroom genre might best be called a diary journal repository laboratory, picture gallery, museum, sanctuary, observatory, key ... inviting us to see things in a light in which we do not know them, but which turns out to be almost that one in which we have always hoped one day to see [our students] bathed. (146)

And yet, as I sit here composing this chapter—formally very much in step with the conventions of academic essayistic prose (as is, it’s worth pointing out, Sirc’s “Box-Logic”)—I am locked into the kind of focused inner dialogue I only ever really experience in the midst of a paragraph. What is the essence of this dialogue? Is it dependent on prose, or is it simply the result of an arbitrary ritual to which I have nevertheless become accustomed? Does it have something to do with the language and grammar I have developed all my life, as Vygotsky tells me, in sync with my thoughts themselves? Does it have something to do with silence?

III. Silence in Cyberspace?

Earlier in this chapter I introduced the Guidelines for Composing that Sondra Perl developed from the concept of felt sense, an exercise aimed at activating an intense awareness of our bodies as we write, a bodily awareness perhaps integral to the writing process. When we write, our minds are in dialogue with our bodies, a relationship dependent upon the dialectical tension that exists between speech and silence. When we listen closely, our bodies transmit ineffable senses which we nonetheless attempt to capture in language. The result is messy, tangled, skeletal remains fogging up the windshield of a long-abandoned car—and they are often beautiful, terrifying, and true. Perl’s writing guidelines serve to amplify the meaningful silences that lie hidden in our bodies, silences that lend themselves to the airy, wayfaring nature of
essayistic prose. In “Box-Logic,” Sirc idealizes the postmodern composition student as “cyber-flaneur in the virtual urban,” suggesting that digital composing methods may be better-suited to facilitate the kind of broad and meandering intellectual inquiries we desire from our students (121).

And yet, the important dialogue between silence and speech is disconcertingly complicated by increasingly “born digital” compositions that bring audio and visual (and sometimes tactile) elements into the composing conversation. So how, then, can we nourish the meaningful relationship between speech and silence in the often cacophonous composing environment of the digital world? How might the audio and visual elements of the digital composing process actually rescue meaningful silences by serving to break dead silences?

When I think about the positive role of silence in the writing classroom, I am at the same time acutely aware that silence can also be confining and oppressive—what the poet Adrienne Rich refers to as “dead silence” (“like a dead spot in an auditorium,” she writes, “a dead telephone, silence where language needed to be and was prevented” (“Arts of the Possible” 322-23).). When I work with multilingual writers, inexperienced writers, blocked writers, and writers outside the humanities, I am often working with students who have been rendered silent by an academic discourse community in which they feel alienated. These students, David Bartholomae notes, are saddled with having “to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing” (“Inventing the University” 60).

Last year, as a writing instructor at NYU’s Tandon School of Engineering, I experimented with ways to embrace nonverbal communication and thinking processes as modes of intellectual and creative thought in the composition classroom. In practical terms, this has meant opening up the boundaries of the exclusively written text in order to realize the
possibilities of visual and audio modes of expression made available to us through an increasing number of digital technologies. Such technologies and media, argue Anne Wysocki and Kristin Arola, “enable us to extend what we can do with our given sensory apparatus” (Composing (Media) 4). In other words, when we invite students to wield digital composing tools (such as software like iMovie, Prezi, and even Comic Life), we are empowering them to extend their cognitive reach—a span that can sometimes be stunted by the discursive standards and expectations of the strictly analog classroom. Using nonverbal digital composing methods to give voice to silenced students may seem counterintuitive; and yet, as Wysocki and Arola have discovered, such methods have a reflexive effect that enhances our sense of engagement with the world around us. Such an enhanced engagement in the writing classroom often has a unique way of inspiring speech.

Throughout this dissertation, I have described some of the digital composing strategies I’ve introduced into my first-year writing courses—from strategies involving the creation of a class-edited literary online journal (The Jay Street Review) that engendered an authentic writing purpose to the implementation of photographic self-portraiture that fueled our inquiries into identity construction and subject positioning. Respectively, these projects were conducted with engineering students at an elite private university and with advanced composition students at a two-year college in an online environment. In both cases, the students’ digital literacy levels could be confidently described as highly fluent—more fluent, probably, than my own. Because of this fluency, the assignments required very little scaffolding on my part, and because of the dynamic nature of the projects, the students were (for the most) instantly engaged in the work and completed the assignments enthusiastically. In another two weeks, however, I’m going to find myself standing before a class of twenty-four basic writing students at the College of Lake
County (CLC) in suburban Chicago. Many of them will not own a personal computer. Many of them will struggle with learning disabilities. Many of them will have just begun to grasp the structure of a thesis-driven, five-paragraph essay and will be holding onto this structure for dear life.

When I came to CLC last year as a developmental writing specialist, I faced the difficult question of how to harness the rich rhetorical play fostered by embracing multimodal composing methods with a student population for whom college was an overwhelming and intimidating place far outside the reaches of their comfort zones. Ultimately, after weeks spent rifling through research on basic writing and multimodal pedagogy, I turned to images as a point of entry.

“Because imagery is an inescapable part of our psychological, social, and textual lives,” Kristie Fleckstein reminds us, “it needs to be an integral part of our epistemologies and of our literacy teaching.” For basic writing students, images constitute a way in to the intellectual discussions such students have been left out of and, in many cases, actively barred from. So with Fleckstein’s “double vision of literacy as image and word” (4) and Barbara Stafford’s perception of “linguistic supremacy” in academia as a “narcissistic tribal compulsion to overemphasize the agency of logos and annihilate rival imaginaries” (7), I greeted my twenty-four basic writing students not, as I have done in the past, with Anne Lamott’s sage Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life, but instead with James Nachtwey’s “Afghanistan, Kabul” from his black and white photographic series The Lost Souls of Kabul.
We began by filling the room with descriptions of the photograph’s “minute particulars” (a term used by Pat Hoy, which I describe in Chapter Four). This activity serves, on the one hand, to inspire speech in a typically reserved group of students and, on the other hand, to enact a process of analysis integral to academic inquiry that moves from evidence to idea (and not the other way around, as the formulaic thesis-driven essay has led these students to believe). As the students called out observations related to the image (*rubbled bricks, turbaned men, American sneakers, the long shadow of a tank gun*), meaning began to emerge. And after all of the image’s significant characteristics (physical and stylistic) had been voiced, I asked the class to describe, in writing, what these images amounted to. In other words, what did they think Nachtwey was trying to get them to see or understand that perhaps they *could not see or understand before*? I emphasized the phrase “could not see or understand before” because I wanted to push my students beyond easy reading, past the ready-made pronouncements that comprised the five-paragraph writing assignments that suppressed their voices and thus ruined academic writing for them and threatened (and continue to threaten) their potential to be creatively and critically minded human beings.
This first day activity—which I have come to repeat with different images—sets up our
first major assignment, “A Picture’s Worth,” a multimodal project inspired by the poetic form of
*ekphrasis*. Ekphrastic poems, such as William Carlos Williams’ “Landscape with the Fall of
Icarus” or John Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” seek to render a visual work of art into words.
Of course, as with all translations, the end result can never precisely mirror the original. It
becomes corrupted as it passes through the filter of another’s imagination. And in this corruption
new meaning is made.

In my assignment description to students, I begin by drawing out a scenario, an
“authentic purpose” to ground the tasks in the world of tangible things:

*Scenario*

The Art Institute of Chicago is seeking critical and expressive responses to some
of its featured works (paintings such as Van Gogh’s *The Bedroom*, Seurat’s
*Sunday Afternoon*, and Georgia O’Keeffe’s *Sky Above Clouds*). Essays that
successfully engage in a meaningful dialogue with a painting, photograph, or
sculpture and, at the same time, *transcend the piece so as to create something new*
will be featured alongside the selected work on the museum’s website.

In the end, all of the students’ ekphrastic responses to works of art are incorporated into a class-
created Wix website, whose design templates foster the visual intermingling of image and text.

The final product of the Picture’s Worth assignment (i.e., the students’ individual
contributions to the class website) materializes as a result of a process stretched over ten class
periods in which we enact responsive readings to theoretical texts on the nature of images as well
as ekphrastic texts that respond to images; rehearse collaborative ekphrastic responses to images
encountered in the classroom; and draft several iterations of individual responses to self-selected
works, which are subsequently peer-reviewed before being “published” to the class site. This act of “publishing” is a symbolic gesture of finality, however, students are free to log onto the site and make adjustments to their work at any point during the semester, and even long after the semester has ended. In this way, the composition can remain, as Sirc describes yearning for in “Box-Logic,” an “open-ended text” (120).

When I began teaching at the College of Lake County, the 2016 presidential election cycle had just begun to churn. Election seasons underscore the open-endedness of the historical text we are living, and the four-year term of a president’s tenure can be paralleled in interesting ways to the length of a student’s college career. With these parallels in mind, I’ve designed a multimodal project inspired by the presidential campaign advertisement, a form that relies heavily on rhetorical modes of persuasion as well as adept fluency with digital composing methods. This project, The Making of a President, serves as a challenging move forward from the Picture’s Worth assignment in that it asks students to create both a linguistic text and a corresponding visual text.

**Scenario**

You’re running for school president, and your school news station, the Lancer, has agreed to broadcast your campaign commercial. You will need to create a 1- to 2-minute commercial that will persuade the student body to vote for you, but first you’ll need to learn what goes into an effective political ad. To do this, you will study recent and historical ads and analyze their techniques of persuasion in a 3- to 4-page review essay.

The assignment, also scaffolded over ten class periods, begins with the challenging yet engaging work of reading *moving* visual texts (i.e., *video*). In many ways, this process of analysis
is akin to that which we use to analyze still images, and, it’s worth mentioning, the process we use to examine written texts as well. We begin with minute particulars. We begin with what we can point to, remembering Williams Carlos Williams’ maxim, “no ideas but in things.”

To rehearse the kind of responsive reading needed to identify and internalize key, Aristotelian modes of persuasion, we begin with some of the more dramatic campaign ads of the 1960s: Lyndon Johnson’s 1964 “Daisy” ad, for example, which juxtaposes a young girl’s sweet error-ridden counting of a flower’s petals with the blinding flash of white hot light and unmistakable fiery billow of an atomic blast; or Richard Nixon’s blood-soaked montage of 1968, depicting a stream of violent images from some of the many civil rights protests of the era set to an eerie and discordant soundtrack. These ads, along with every televised presidential campaign ad between 1952 and 2012, have been archived by the Museum of the Moving Image and can be found at livingroomcandidate.org.

Students quickly learn to discern instances of *logos, ethos,* and the political ad’s omnipresent *pathos* in these videos and discover that the most successful ads rely on a balance between all three modes of persuasion. This realization, then, sets the expectations and standards for their own presidential campaign ad, which—in concert with Cindy Sherman’s creative process—they will write, stage, direct, and produce on their own.

Because the levels of digital literacy in the classroom are extremely varied—as they are in most communities outside Silicon Valley—the students are given a broad range of composing methods with which to develop their advertisements. Some students, for example, shoot “selfie” style videos that depict, simply, their faces speaking into the camera (a technique that, if done well, can effectively utilize all three modes of persuasion). Others, those with some technological know-how, employ digital editing software such as iMovie or even YouTube Editor (an open
source tool accessible to all). Several other students still, those without access to a smartphone or recording device, utilize friendly-and-familiar Powerpoint to create a moving slideshow set to music and a voice-over recording.

On the final day of class, we hold a CLC Student Party Convention (our play on the traditional end-of-term celebrations and the pageantry of the major political party nomination conventions). This is when the students are given an opportunity to present their work—their final video ads, of course, but also the process, what Jody Shipka describes as the Statement of Goals and Objectives: What is the piece trying to accomplish? What rhetorical, material, methodological, and technological choices did you make in service of accomplishing your goal(s)? Why did you end up pursuing this plan as opposed to others you came up with? How did the various choices you made allow you to accomplish things that other choices would not have? (114). This important meta-reflective task is completed by students in private as they prepare for the Convention, but then vocalized publicly in combination with the presentation of their work. Bringing the discussion of process into open classroom waters allows for engaged responsive and fosters cooperative learning in which the less experienced composers can learn from the more experienced within, what Vygotsky has termed, the “zone of proximal development.”

It turn out that, as a lifelong wrangler of words, I am, unlike Sirc, unwilling to give up on the alphabetic text as a mode for inventing, developing, and conveying thought. The essay in particular holds immeasurable value for its sheer, inexhaustible versatility. “The essay is a notoriously flexible and adaptable form,” writes Phillip Lopate in his preface to *The Art of the Personal Essay*: “It possesses the freedom to move anywhere, in all directions. It acts as if all objects were equally near the center and as if ‘all subjects are linked to each other’ (Montaigne)” (xxxvii). In light of these virtues, it would be a mistake to dismiss the genre of the essay from
first-year writing, just as it would be a mistake to withhold any genre whatsoever from our students. And yet, it is becoming increasingly clear that, in favoring one genre or mode of composition over others, we are undermining our goals of fostering rhetorical sensitivity in our classrooms.

As I consider how all of these goals for formal versatility, multimodality, and rhetorical sensitivity might actually play out in a way that doesn’t feel contrived or heavy-handed in my classes this fall, I am reminded of the Glenn Ligon- and Cindy Sherman-inspired assignments I describe at the end of Chapter Six. I am reminded of my frustration with singular modes of expression—compositions, in other words, that are either academic or personal, critical or expressive, essayistic or poetic, linguistic or imagistic. When, in the previous chapter, I labeled my advanced composition students’ photographic self-portraits as “preliminary research” for a subsequent critical-expressivist writing project, I unwittingly and wrong-mindedly positioned the linguistic form as superior to the imagistic. Rather, the relationship between the photographic self-portrait and the corresponding essay constitutes a this/and relationship rather than an either/or relationship.

IV. Toward a Theory of This/And Composition

Sondra Perl’s New Media Experiments course served as a much-needed incubator for the dozen or so enrolled graduate students and first-year composition teachers. As relatively inexperienced users of digital media, we were forced to find some familiar footing before diving into the unknown. For me, that familiar footing came in the form of linguistic composing, and so I used this known form as a guide. The resulting experiments reveal a rudimentary sense of what a this/and approach to college composition might actually look like in practice. I would like to
briefly present a few of these projects, not because they are particularly successful (remember, I am a *basic* digital composer), but because I think they may inspire ideas about how to incorporate such projects (or elements of them) into our first-year writing courses.

*New Media Experiment #1: Comic Life Narrative*

In an early course assignment, Professor Perl asked us to write a digital literacy narrative and then recast it as a digital text. I chose to use a comic book application (which I downloaded on my iPad for four dollars) called Comic Life. I’d never used it before, but it was relatively intuitive, and I liked that it compelled me to seek out and incorporate images to interact dialogically with the text I had already written. The images I used (some from my time living abroad in Japan, some from the Web) forced me to rethink the narrative structure of my written piece in new and interesting ways. Suddenly I was able to envision my narrative as a sequence of related images rather than a chronology of events. Moreover, the images allowed for meaningful silences to linger; whereas in a written text such silences would be broken by explanatory analysis. Or perhaps not. The Comic Life project provided insight into how I could improve the written text by making it more image-driven, more visually evocative, rather than so breathlessly word-driven. After all, writing that is rich in metaphor is writing that incorporates silence out of respect for the reader’s ability to *see* meaning rather than be hit over the head with it. (See excerpts from my Comic Life narrative below.)
In 2006, the year I graduated from college, I moved from densely populated and skyscraper-clad Chicago to a small farming town in central Japan called Nagahama.

When I first entered my cramped, empty apartment, thick with the stench of stale tatami, housed within a gray, cinder block building ringed by rice fields as far as my jet-lagged eyes could see...

The first thing I asked my new host was...
"INTERNET GA ARIMASU?"

...(IS THERE INTERNET?)

OF ALL QUESTIONS TO ASK, I HAD TO ASK ABOUT THE INTERNET...

A TOOL SHE AND I BOTH KNEW WOULD BE USED AS A DISTANCING DEVICE BETWEEN HER AND ME, BETWEEN MY COUNTRY AND HERS.
AND YET, WITHOUT IT, HOW WOULD I MAINTAIN MY RELATIONSHIPS BACK HOME? HOW WOULD ANYONE KNOW IF I WERE EVEN ALIVE?

AND EVEN THOUGH I SPENT MY FORMATIVE YEARS OBLIVIOUS TO THE TECHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTION TAKING PLACE AT MY GENERATION’S FINGERTIPS, I FOUND MYSELF CLINGING TO IT DURING MY TIME IN JAPAN...

AS THOUGH IT WERE A PORTAL THAT ALLOWED ME TO STRADDLE TWO PLACES AT ONCE, OR A TIME MACHINE CAPABLE OF ASSUAGING MY MOST MELANCHOLIC BOUTS OF NOSTALGIA.
IT WAS ONLY WHEN I BEGAN TO RUN OUT OF INTERESTING THINGS TO REPORT IN MY EMAILS BACK HOME...

(WHICH WAS INEVITABLE)

THAT I LEARNED TO NEGOTIATE A BALANCE BETWEEN MY DIGITAL LIFE AND MY REAL LIFE.

THIS TOOK SOME TIME. HAVING BEEN THROWN INTO A WORLD SO DIFFERENT FROM WHAT I WAS USED TO, IT WASN'T IMMEDIATELY CLEAR TO ME HOW I MIGHT EVEN BEGIN TO STRIKE SOME KIND OF BALANCE BETWEEN THESE LIVES.

WHICH LIFE IS MY "REAL" LIFE ANYWAY?

Figure 6: Comic Life Narrative

New Media Experiment #2: Evocative Objects Prezi
Professor Perl’s “Evocative Objects” assignment is predicated on the notion that the tangible world is rich with associative meaning. The assignment, inspired by Sherry Turkle’s work, invited us to trace our associations with a particular object of our choosing. I chose the image of a commercial airplane’s interior cabin, one, because airplanes fascinate me and, two, it was conference season at the time and I had been jetsetting about. When I travel, I like to work on poems; however, since I cannot focus for more than a minute at a time while on an airplane, the poems are written in jumps and starts, one fractured phrase or line at a time. I decided to use Prezi (a Web-based visual presentation software) as my digital composing tool this time because it allowed me to evoke, visually, the stuttery experience of writing on an airplane. And yet, the background image and accompanying musical soundtrack created a framing effect that gave the otherwise fragmented writing a kind of structural coherence. Without Prezi and the framing devices it provides, this kind of writing would be relegated to private writing. While there is nothing inherently wrong with private writing, I think it’s important that our students be aware of methods by which to give voice to and share such writing. (The entirety of this experiment can be found online by searching “Nolan’s Evocative Objectives Prezi.”)

New Media Experiment #3: Felt Sense YouTube Reflection

In my final reflections on the course, I began to think about the seemingly discordant relationship between multimodal composition (which for me is turbulent and loud) and traditional composition (which again is that hopefully tranquil dialogue between the mind and the body). Ultimately I’ve come to value the tension between the two composing methods, between silence and cacophony. In an ironic twist, I’ve learned that, while multimodal compositions are not necessarily created in a tunnel of silence the way written works sometimes
are, they are nonetheless better able to let meaningful silences linger—this by employing expressive sounds and images that allow for meaning to be felt rather than simply said.

A voice-over recording of the following reflections accompanies a five-minute, first-person-point-of-view video of a motorcycle racing through the streets of Paris. Layered behind the voice recording, viewers will hear the murmuring bass lines and delirious piano plinking of Duke Ellington’s “Fleurette Africaine”:

On writing days I awake early, hours before that first bleary-eyed commuter worries my window panes with his car horn, before others answer his call, the sound traveling up four stories to pause and sing in my ear some discordant little distraction.

I get up early so I can write in that liminal space between sleep and wakefulness—two impenetrable states between which exists something softer, a place in which, for a moment, I can achieve a felt sense, what philosopher Eugene Gendlin describes as “the soft underbelly of thought… a kind of bodily awareness that can be used as a tool.”

To attain this awareness, though, I need a quiet brain and a quiet room. I need silence.

The quiet body and the quiet environment are engaged in a kind of symbiotic relationship: For the writer to listen to himself, he needs an environment that is similarly attentive to itself, to its inhabitants. For some writers, such as John Edgar Wideman, the environment must be removed of other thinking, feeling people. “When I'm pausing, looking out at water, trees and sky,” he writes in an essay entitled “In Praise of Silence,” “the silence of my hideaway
in the woods meets the silence inside me and forms a horizon as tangible and razor-sharp as the shoreline across the lake, dividing trees from their upside-down reflections on days when water and wind are calm” (546).

When we write, we are reaching for words, words that lie behind the horizons Wideman describes, horizons that, for me, are perhaps like the boundary between sleep and wakefulness, between night and day. Stillness and cacophony.

Yet isn’t it strange how we cultivate this erotics of silence, this intimacy between inner and outer silence, for the express purpose of locating words suitable for breaking silence? Perhaps, then, silence and speech, like inner and outer silence, complement one another in ways that are instrumental to acts of creative expression. In fact, Anne Ruggles Gere reminds us in her article “Revealing Silence: Rethinking Personal Writing,” “Recognizing silence as part of speech eliminates the dichotomy between the ‘truth’ of speech and the ‘lie’ of silence, as writers of fiction have demonstrated convincingly” (207).

But the rhetorical and affective functions of silence, we know, extend beyond written and spoken language. They mark time, explains Wideman. “Silences structure our music, fill the spaces—point, counterpoint—of rhythm, cadence, phrasing,” he writes, adding: “Think of the eloquent silences of Thelonious Monk, sometimes comic, sometimes manic and threatening. Recall gospel's wordless choruses hummed, moaned, keened, words left far behind as singers strive to reach what's unsayable, the silent pulse of Great Time abiding within the song” (549).
In this way, the silence of those listless, early writing hours are necessarily fleeting. In a sense, perhaps the silence isn’t even real to begin with, but a state of being we trick ourselves into so that, as Wideman writes, “we have the power to see ourselves other than we are.” Perhaps, ultimately, “Silence is proof that the decision to listen or not is ours. Proof that we are called to pay attention” (549). Yes, the silence can be uncomfortable. “But,” Gendlin assures us, “if [we] can stand the silence, [we] may keep [our] attention on the ….., on that edge where there is more, but no more can be said” (26).

Experienced in tandem, the linguistic text of the composition and the visual/aural text enact the complex structural elements of silence that Wideman refers to, the point and counterpoint that is enhanced by a rhetoric of formal and stylistic combination: the linguistic and the visual and the audio together. (The video described above can be found through an online search for Nolan Chessman’s YouTube channel.)

At our end-of-semester “Student Party Convention,” an array of voices, sounds, and images emits from the projection screen at the front of the room and ricochets off the cinder block walls to illuminate the attentive faces of twenty so-called “developmental” writers who have just spent the last sixteen weeks critically contemplating their worlds through expressive means. They have discovered that the discourse of the academy is something cultivated and thus grown rather than manifested, and they have discovered that this discourse need not consist of a language devoid of style and authorial presence. It need not—I too am reminded as I reflect on my new media experiments in Professor Perl’s class—rely solely on linguistic expression. In essence, a framework for multimodal composition is a framework that allows for this and that,
for a multiplicity of forms, media, and voices that allow us to, finally, not only think in and through them all, but express ourselves too.

V. Hopeful Reflections for an Ever-Evolving Student Genre

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I began this dissertation by situating myself in the intellectual and creative context of my mentors, professors and admired poets from the creative writing programs and literary journals in which I immersed myself before coming to composition studies. Now, as I conclude this examination of the student genre in college composition, its self-imposed limitations and its potential to function as a powerful multimodal tool for enhanced critical and expressive thought, I feel compelled to acknowledge the mentors that, in company with those of my youth, will serve as essential guides leading the field into a more open-minded, collaborative, and thus productive future: Sondra Perl for her work bringing together felt sense and new media into the composing process; Mark McBeth for his perspectives on writing and teaching through the lens of performance studies; and Wayne Koestenbaum for pushing the boundaries of the essayistic form.
while maintaining a critical awareness of authorial subject positioning. These are the figures directly influencing my work and my identity as a scholar, teacher, and writer; however, this dissertation is populated by the scholar-teacher-writers who will provide both the subtle—and sometimes forceful—tug of the leash drawing me and our approaches to first-year composition ever forward into greener, and hopefully thornier, pastures.
Vision is a job. Every week patients sit in a chair, cover one eye, and read the letters twenty feet away to an ophthalmologist. “T, Z, V, E, C” means you have perfect vision. “O, F, L, C, T” suggests you’re struggling to see the board in school and need glasses. “E, G, H” could imply crippling dense cataracts. Vision is mathematical, mechanical. It is a collection of waves of different lengths, waves that bounce around the room and with any luck land on your retina. If they fail to, we create lenses, operate on cataracts, laser leaky blood vessels, reattach retinas; do all we can to prevent the loss of this basic evolutionary tool. We believe sight to be a mere replica of the external world. It is the fixed, unalterable image that arises from physics—a penetration of reality into our ethereal minds. Yet in her essay “Seeing,” Annie Dillard describes the failure of pure sight. Patients who have lived for years without sight are suddenly endowed with the ability, experiencing for the first time this “pure sensation unencumbered by meaning” (21). But instead of relief or security, their world becomes an even more incomprehensible “field of light, in which everything appears dull, confused, and in motion,” an overwhelming assault of detail that makes them want to retreat to their familiar, comfortable obscurity (21).

Vision is my study. Every week I ask my experiment participants to sit in a chair, stare at color squares on a computer screen, and rate their perception of the changing color saturation. I investigate how the meaningless “colorpatches of infancy” that Dillard describes begin to swell with meaning (23). I research the neurological pathways that translate, filter, and distort the incoming waves so that in place of “the confusion of forms and colours” we benefit from discernible images (21). After all, it is these concepts of form, distance, size, and space that
render vision an evolutionary achievement. It is this repackaging of our surroundings that makes vision a device for self-preservation. Our brain learns without our consent to code colors as a function of their borders, create shapes by assuming depth, attend to moving rather than stationary objects. Thus, although sight feels effortless and immediate, it is only seemingly fixed. In fact it is wholly dependent on both intrinsic and extrinsic context. But Dillard seems to feel that at times this dependency has robbed her of the raw “dazzle of color-patches” (21). She finds herself unable to stop her own verbalizations, the instinctive itch to reason everything she sees. And thus, she nostalgically longs for a world in which space doesn’t make such “terrible sense” (23). But perhaps she can’t halt the incessant analyzing because without the prioritizing and categorizing, vision is limited to the enthralling but trivial admiration of aesthetics.

John Berger celebrates these interpretations of sights as the products of the diversity of vision. In *Ways of Seeing*, he asserts that our individuality lies within our unique ways of seeing. Our identity is dependent upon the distinctive interpretive reasoning that transforms color patches into meaningful trees, buildings, faces, etc. And therefore, vision is not the invariable passive absorption of waves, but an active faculty of “looking at the relation between things and ourselves” (9). He says, for example, “The photographer’s way of seeing is reflected in his choice of subject. The painter’s way of seeing is reconstituted by the marks he makes on the canvas or paper” (10). Our soul is reflected in our selections of significance, the deliberate preference of a “single sight [from the] infinity of other possible sights,” a single element, object, person, moment from innumerable others (10). We deposit a trace of ourselves in these sights. An image not only represents how something or somebody once was, but also “a record of how X had seen Y” (10).
Vision is my inspiration. Every week I walk down the streets of New York and at least once, I see a reproduction of a photograph taken 50 years ago. This iconic photograph by Alberto Korda persists as one of the most popular, most recognizable in the world. It is reproduced, re-interpreted, recalled time and time again by people of all ages, all cultures, for all different reasons. The face of Ernesto “Che” Guevara adorns the side of buildings, covers of books and magazines, posters on dorm room walls, t-shirts, keychains, etc. Why are people so obsessed with this photograph? Is it, as Berger suggests, that we all crave to see Che the way Korda saw him on that day in Havana’s Colón Cemetery: resolute, resilient, angry, yet pensive with the trace of sorrow that accompanies a lifetime of fighting? Do we celebrate this image as a “direct testimony” of the sentiments during the Cuban Revolution (Berger 10)? Perhaps, but even more than the mere record of how Korda saw Che, how a follower perceived his leader, the usage of this image has become a representation of how we see Che’s vision. How I see how X saw how Y saw what the world could be. Traveling through Latin America as a young medical student, Che became profoundly troubled by the ubiquity of disease, poverty, and oppression he witnessed. He observed, recorded, wrote and then propagated his vision of justice through action, speech, and text. A whole society shared and implemented this vision. How was he so successful? How has he come to represent something more than a person, more than a mere preference or point of view?

In the essay “Aching for a Self,” Jim Corder worries that our ability to transform the “soul in here” into the “self out there” through rhetoric is fatally inadequate (6). He tells us, “We try to get real only to learn that our rhetorics won’t let us; they go off and leave us behind, remnants” (6). Our words take off from the page, contorted by the mind of the reader, transformed by the analysis of the critic, and thus they bifurcate into ideas that no longer represent the mythically
unique essence of the author. However, for Che and Korda alike, that escalation is the goal. A mere translation of the soul, even in its most perfect form, is not enough. Korda encourages the replication and distribution of his image in hopes that it will inspire, that his vision of Che’s vision will provoke action. Its popularity suggests that they are successful—countless chests flaunt the tenacity of Che—but if that is the goal, why does it feel so disingenuous to wear the face? I read about Che’s journeys, his sacrifices, his philosophy, and can’t help but feel that the parade of memorabilia is a betrayal, a superficial façade of rebellion and nonconformity that cheapens Che’s conviction. For as revolution once again reverberates throughout the world, I sit comfortably unaffected in a small Vietnamese café in the Lower East Side with a hot cup of coffee, looking at human destruction through the artificiality of pixels and paint.

Vision is not enough.

I watched as he sliced through the scalp, and with only a moment’s hesitation, the blood began to spill down into a plastic bag. The thick piece of skin was clipped all along the severed edge with small plastic contraptions that looked as if they could have been hair accessories, causing the bleeding to all but cease. He extended his hand, palm facing up, and a drill was immediately placed in his grasp. He pulled the trigger and punctured three holes in the thick, blood-stained bone of the skull. With a thinner drill he began to connect the dots, pushing metal to bone. Flecks of white and red leapt in the air, and my nose was filled with the smell of burnt flesh. With the drill screaming, I watched as one hand guided the device forwards, an unstoppable force, while the other stopped periodically to suction away the blood left dripping behind. When he finally painstakingly removed the skull and peeled back the dura underneath, a brain sat exposed in front of me, pulsating gently.
Suddenly people were in and out of the operating room: residents, medical students, surgeons, nurses. The body was left alone for a minute as people and machines shuffled around, a deserved break after the violence of the past few hours. The lights around the room were dimmed and just the brain remained featured in the spotlight. A giant microscope with two heads was lowered in front of the surgeons, who both reflexively leaned in to assume their positions at the eyepiece; one colossal body with four hands, three brains, and one aneurysm.

The vascular portion of the surgery was strangely peaceful. The slow rhythmic beeping of the heart monitor mirrored my own beating chest. But I was minuscule, creeping through the brain along with the probe. I had the intuition that this is what it would feel like to be guided through a jungle by an experienced hunter, hacking down brush and branches with a machete, looking at the tracks and trees, not knowing what would be up ahead. Similarly, we squeezed through cortex, sliced connective tissue obstructing our path, cauterized blood vessels that threatened to drown us. Guided only by the markings of the vasculature, we traveled for two hours before we spotted the menacing aneurysm, an ugly flat brown creature surrounded by yellow calcification. It was examined. Poked, prodded, lifted, it remained stagnant; an innocent provocation of a dead animal. A small plastic clip was used to close off the blood supply to the aneurysm to prevent reoccurrence and further weakening of blood vessels in the area. The animal forever contained.

I left the room shortly after, never to know the outcome of that surgery. However, this didn’t bother me, for I had witnessed an incredible feat—a rescue mission in the very organ that gives rise to both the soul and the self. I left the hospital with my heart racing, invigorated, excited, bursting with the inexplicable awe that Dillard had had in her youth. I had beheld the pinnacle of science and medical expertise.
But I had also spent six hours in the operating room, witnessing an attempt to save a life without really thinking about the brain as part of that life. I contemplated the biology and the surgeon’s dexterity, but not the person lying on the table. That 64-year-old fat man sprawled with every vulnerability exposed was a mere project, a learning experience. We seek to see, to experience, to gain exposure to the cultures of the world with the belief that we are learning, growing wiser and more aware. But perhaps in reality, we are merely chasing the exhilaration of novelty. Whereas I had once thought myself a scientific, knowledge-driven individual who, like Dillard, “talks too much,” I suddenly worry that I too will be lamenting the dull rationalizations that eradicate the alluring mystery of new sight (23). I can’t help but feel that without the rawness of the new, knowledge is dull, disconnected; that the ubiquity of information on human strife in the Middle East somehow degrades its empathetic effect; that with enough exposure, aneurysms will cease to be anything more than a tedious procedure. How can our experiences take on profound meaning and affect the soul inside when we quickly become jaded by familiar sights?

Perhaps the answer lies not in eliminating the knowledge of sights to preserve their novelty, but by adding to it. In “Souls on Ice,” Mark Doty describes the arbitrary image of a collection of rowed and stacked mackerel in an ordinary Stop n’ Shop. He stands before them, fully aware of their purpose, familiar with their taste, consistency, and color, and yet remains entranced. He attributes his “sense of compelled attention” to the “part of his imagination that gropes forward . . . looking for the right vessel” to carry his thoughts (26). He is excited, not by an entirely novel sight, but by the possibility of novel insight into even the most familiar. He subsequently realizes this possibility through the re-creation of the image in the form of a poem. Among the words, between the lines and stanzas, within the internal discourse in his mind, he
discovers the significance of the image. As he simultaneously reflects on the death of his partner and the collective beauty of the mackerel, it becomes apparent that it is in those moments of contemplation and creation that we craft the connections between what we see and what we have seen. An event, an image, an experience is not just another snapshot in time, but becomes indelibly intertwined in our history as it converses with all that came before.

Perhaps Doty’s enduring fascination with his sight eluded me and Dillard because “[we] see what [we] expect” (Dillard 17). Without the deliberations, we have only physical sight, sight that is limited by the boundaries of the external world. However, in insight, in the unexpected patterns of relation, there exists the verve of freedom and novelty. Corder describes the “inventive world” engendered by writing and speaking that is free because “no one knows for sure the next word they’ll say or inscribe” (8). In this way, experiences (novel or banal) have the ability to touch the soul inside when we rewrite, re-tell, re-create events in relation to the poignant experiences that had previously shaped our identity. We begin to empathize with similar situations or understand the conditions it would take for us to feel the same way. We don’t always see everything in relation to ourselves as Berger suggests; rather, works of prose, discourse, and art force us to do so. And as a reward we receive insight—the perception, understanding, and empathy to care about foreign situations. Only through this contortion of sight into insight can events even begin to affect us, begin to produce an empathetic response.

Che wrote in Notas de Viaje, “I am not the person I was. All this aimless wandering through our America with a capital A has changed me more than I thought” (32). Embedded in the written scenes and records of that first trip through Latin America is the reflection that gave him insight into the extent of injustices suffered, suffering that he would come to empathize with. Interwoven throughout the narration are the thoughtful considerations of a community that
would reveal the power of human solidarity. This insight not only changed how he felt, but also inspired a Vision, with a capital V. Sight, digested into insight, provoked him to envision a better world.

Corder and Doty cite collectivity and community as a consolation for the loss of the individual. The inability for us to be remembered and preserved exactly as we are seems so grave that we tell ourselves our actions are propagated through the community, a part of the “collective experience” that lives on (Corder 7). But perhaps the only means to true memorability is through the celebration of the release of self, the emergence from the confines of corporeal identity, the metamorphosis into the imagined. The envisioned does not yet exist in reality, persisting only as an abstract concept in the realm of writing, speech, and art, and thus it transcends a singular context, transcends any one person’s way of seeing. A better world thus envisioned can be morphed and modified to fit all contexts; it can be truly shared, adopted, propagated. This is why Che Guevara, aware of his own metaphysical transformation, bellowed at his executioner, “Shoot, coward, you are only going to kill a man.”

Vision is our eternal identity.

Works Cited


Appendix B

“MAPPING” BY EMMA WISNIEWSKI

Mapping

I’m following a trail. It begins—for me—underground on the subway, on train cars and past walls covered with graffiti tags. Or it begins a few blocks away on Queens Boulevard, following similarly tagged MTA columns. Or it begins at the Court Square stop on the 7, where absolutely everything has an aerosol mark. It begins on my first day of high school, nervously walking past Aviation boys with spray cans. It begins in 10th grade, strolling under the painted tracks with my best friend after escaping yuppies who gave us dirty looks. It begins a week after prom, standing outside Quiznos in the aftermath of a very tense conversation, kissing the cause of a very complicated relationship for the very last time. He was wearing a graffiti t-shirt.

In Long Island City, tags are scattered like breadcrumbs. They peer out from behind every parked car, adorn the walls of every sketchy deli, bar, and take-out place, announce themselves by spilling over from construction sites. This neighborhood is defined by its layers of paint. The overlapping tags are a key to the passage of time, like rings on a tree trunk. For me, tags are gold stars on my mental map of this place. They highlight places to eat, frequent haunts of drunks and perverts (to be avoided), sites of important events, borders of my own design. The center of my memory is the Pointz.

All trails of tags lead here. The gigantic warehouse that is the Five Pointz takes up an entire block. It would be just another worn-out building in a worn-out neighborhood but for the fact that every square inch is covered with the most eye-popping, brazen, and beautiful graffiti you’ve ever seen. Dozens of artists contribute to the canvas of the building, which changes every time an old piece is painted over and a new one takes its place. Every green mermaid, flaming
skull, old-school cartoon character, or furious animated light bulb is a fleeting, unforgettable, and one-of-a-kind addition to the living museum.

I hardly know where to begin. I never did.

The space is accessible from every angle, accommodating every possible viewpoint. A spectator can stand an inch away from any of its four walls and scrutinize every aerosol spray, lean on a parked car to gaze at large pieces, or even cross the street and contemplate the whole wall at once. On the Davis Street side there is an open parking lot and loading dock area that is also painted on every surface, nook, and cranny—including the sidewalk and the dumpsters around it. There is even a set of stairs on the side of the building, so that, if you’re not afraid of heights, you can gaze down on it all from four stories up and discover that the rooftops are painted as well. The broadest viewpoint is also the most fleeting. Any commuter can glimpse the Pointz through a subway window on a Manhattan-bound 7 train running from Queensboro Plaza to Courthouse Square. It stands in shocking contrast to the surrounding gray, yelling out to everyone passing through, tourists and natives alike. Determining whether that yell is a cry for attention, a plea for rescue from decay, or a defiant assurance that the area thrives without help requires that you actually get off at the next stop and take a closer look.

But few people actually do. It seems that, for many, all of Long Island City is just a station—a brief stop on the way to bigger, cleaner, and shinier things. Everywhere you look is a new suggestion of where to go from here, every street a potential trail to someplace else. Andrew Blum would call it a “hybrid place” in an essay that explores the aspects of an immediate place that hint at faraway places—hints of culture, technology, transportation, anything that evokes the memory or experience of someplace else (5). LIC is a “hybrid place” because it contains aspects
of both the local (what is here) and the remote (traces of what is not). A simple walk down the block reveals the myriad of people and places that are passing through.

I hear English, Spanish, and at least ten different accents. There is a Chinese takeout place (lightning fast, as I recall), a seedy Irish bar, and a Spanish Pentecostal church. The man who runs the pizza place watches world news on a small TV, and I remember his excellent calzones and the time my school, a few blocks north on Thompson Avenue, was featured on ABC 7. P. S. I showcases artists from all over the world, and the young professionals who walk by it chat on cell phones with clients from all over the country. Teenagers text on Sidekicks, construction workers shout into walkie-talkies, cars speed toward the expressway, the E and V run underneath my feet, the 7 roars overhead, and Manhattan—everyone’s destination but mine—looms in the distance.

For me, LIC is not only a hybrid of where, but a hybrid of when. In his essay “Speak, Hoyt-Schermerhorn,” Jonathan Lethem chronicles his struggle to understand the life of his childhood subway station through its human history and the passage of time. He writes that the experience of a public space becomes “tidal” as “the lapping of human moments forms a pulse or current” (428). For me, that pulse is so strong that years of my life flash by in every direction as I stand on the corner of Jackson Avenue. I see markers of time in every available space.

I am on this corner at this moment. But I am also in the bakery under the 7 train in November of 2004, getting coffee with a new friend. I am on Jackson Avenue, but I am also at the entrance to the V train in freshman year, saying goodbye to a curly-haired boy across the turnstile with a silly grin on my face. I am here, but I am also at the fountain in the fall of 10th grade, listening to a vague acquaintance’s tale of an acid-induced adventure and wondering where his life is going to take him. I am here, but I am also there—right there in that diner under
the tracks. I’m sitting in March 2008, eating an omelet between matinee and evening performances of my first foray into Greek comedy. I’m on 23rd street later that night, performing that Greek comedy. I’m not up to par because my costume is mint green lingerie, and Mr. Complicated Relationship is sitting in the front row. With every glance, a new space pulses a trigger in my memory, lapping and overlapping at the shoreline of my past. I am here, but I am also there. I am now, but I am also then.

The Five Pointz encapsulates both the allure and the confusion of the spatially and temporally hybrid. Artists working inside can easily look out the windows, across the river, and glimpse the Manhattan skyline, which is often featured in Pointz murals as a misty, idealized horizon, in contrast to the sharp and assured pictures that are the work’s main focus. The Twin Towers also pop up frequently, and not necessarily in realistic detail. The fantastical, imaginative quality of these depictions of Manhattan comes from speculation about the spatially remote and the exaggeration and selection of personal memories—whatever makes a gold star on an artist’s mental map.

My memories are on exhibition in this neighborhood, layered like tags and competing for space and attention on every corner. In the museum of the Pointz, no piece remains on the wall forever. Its time on display is measured in direct proportion to how much time the artist took to create it. Then it is painted over and replaced with something new, but like waves on a shoreline, every spray of paint leaves an indelible mark. LIC is alive with its human history, pulsing and vibrant with layers of experience that are created anew with every aerosol can. The Pointz thrives on constant reinvention.

By the same token, any person—and by extension, any institution—inhaling a place laps at the shoreline of history. In his essay “Enactments of Power,” Ngũgĩ Thiong’o asserts that
all public spaces are sites for the performance of and struggle for power. Using, as evidence, the heroic efforts of Kenyan theatre artists to bring indigenous art to a people oppressed by a brutal political regime, Ngũgĩ explains that an institution wishing to successfully control or confine the artist must seek to take over the artist’s space, rather than take issue with the art itself. Denying an artist a place to perform, for any number of stated reasons, is less destructive to that institution’s image than censoring the work. Seen through this lens, the neighborhood showcases not only overlapping memories but also the influences of the spaces that trigger them—and the tensions between them.

This neighborhood is more than a museum—it’s a living theatre if I ever saw one. The set design is imposing. The elevated tracks cast a shadow over 23rd street, making it dangerous for a small blonde girl like me to walk alone at night. Just two blocks away from the Pointz on Jackson Avenue, in a supposedly “nice” little pocket of the neighborhood, are the oldest and newest additions to the stage. On the east side of the Avenue is the County Courthouse, picturesque and intimidating—a frequent backdrop for *Law and Order*, if the editors manage to cut out the rest of the crumbling industrial buildings behind it. In front of the Courthouse is a small landscaped square with a marble fountain that seems only to run two months of the year. Across the avenue, glittering and cold in the sunlight, is the CitiBank building, the tallest skyscraper in Queens, utterly alien to its surroundings.

If we take Ngũgĩ at his word, every person here is a soldier in an unspoken spatial war, each word and subtle gesture a fight for influence in this theatre of power and control. The yuppies assert their importance through technology, isolating themselves from the unsavory aspects of the neighborhood by hiding behind Bluetooths or Palm Pilots. The lawyers carry briefcases and speak Legalese, a language no one else here speaks—especially the (mostly
teenage) petty criminals who are tried at the Courthouse. The teenagers, stuck in the middle at the fountain, disrupt the performance of power with skateboards, radios, and cigarettes, frequently shooed off but never quite gone. The construction workers, the closest to a neutral party that LIC can get, don’t have a problem telling anybody off. In high school, I was a performer here, trying valiantly to carve out my small space within the chaos. Now, I am an observer, an extra—almost like a commuter passing by on the train. If it weren’t for my memories, I wouldn’t fit in.

During my walk to and from school every day, I saw CitiBank and was reminded of the American Dream. Then I saw the Courthouse and was warned not to stray too far outside it. The fountain was a popular hangout for my friends, but I always felt uncomfortable sitting in the shadow of these buildings. Taken with the Pointz, a colorful, confident David to these Goliaths, the neighborhood’s changing architecture closes in against the colorful defiance.

It’s no wonder the Pointz is so popular among these high school kids. I’ve never met a teenager who didn’t love a big symbolic middle finger to the status quo, but this monument is much more than a taunt. These artists have taken public art’s most extreme and controversial incarnation and created a living monument to it, running amok and spilling over (illegally) onto trees and fire hydrants, under the towering shadows of Justice and High Finance. The Pointz is a testament to the power of passions that society may consider useless, irresponsible, or even antisocial and destructive. As a student of theatre, with these two institutions breathing down my neck, I sometimes needed a reminder that art was not a long, hard trail to nowhere. When I tried to mentally map out my career, I could never get very far—the trails were convoluted and confusing, the borders misty like the skyline. This building always told me what I needed to hear. The Pointz defiantly survives in the midst of towering disapproval, without any help and
the danger of compromise that comes with it. Along with this validation, however, is a firm nudge toward a constructive, rather than destructive, outlet for creative, youthful restlessness. On one doorway is painted a message: “Stop tagging, do the world a favor.”

The Pointz loudly and unequivocally insists that art be allowed to exist in a society of constraining institutions. Furthermore, it insists on art’s existence within its own creative context. Much more than a sculpture that is commissioned and dropped into a park somewhere, the Pointz is truly of, by, and for its neighborhood. It seems to rise straight out of the concrete, a startling beacon of creativity, even as it manages to harmonize with everything thrown its way, letting everyone know that LIC has been rolling with the punches for years. It even finds a balance (albeit a precarious one) in the midst of flurries of “urban renewal”—read here as “demolition to make room for fancy condos with proximity to the Manhattan subway lines,” incidentally another link to somewhere else, another gentle nudge to move on and to avoid making LIC your final destination. Graffiti looks perfectly at home with caution tape wrapped around it. By sharp contrast, P. S. 1, the only hipster holdout in Queens, is a state-funded and regulated outpost of Manhattan Museum Culture. It has no anchor here.

The Pointz is anchored by its tags. I have never been able to figure out whether they are a byproduct of the Pointz or the raw materials that make it what it is. I have come to think of this place as something like a rubber-band ball—the core is there, but it is what it is only because of what has built up, over time, on top. The tags have always led me toward the center of things. They increase in concentration as you get closer to the warehouse, until even the sidewalks are covered with a million colors of paint, and you can’t take a step without checking whether you have left your footprint on a masterpiece. I don’t feel comfortable making a journey here wearing fancy shoes. The only ones that make sense are my old, beat-up Converse sneakers, ripped,
splashed with paint, autographed by friends, and embellished with poetry and song lyrics in Sharpie, a high school scrapbook worn and worn out over four full years. They are layered like the Pointz and the neighborhood. They match.

The Five Pointz is both museum and theatre, but even more, I think, it is a monument, because it is where I go to remember. It commemorates the struggle of this neighborhood to survive in the midst of neglect and against the looming threat of institutions, gentrification, and constant attempts to define it by its proximity to something else. What is on the wall now is like a Facebook status update on LIC—how are you doing, what’s on your mind? Each brick I see forces me to think about what’s underneath, what can only be seen now because it was once important enough for me to note on my mental map. But the problem with memorials is that we use them to remember the dead.

Sneakers and tags attract and lead me to my favorite part of the Pointz— the loading dock. Standing in the inner sanctum, I am reminded of Mark Doty’s encounter with the Panorama Mesdag. In his essay Doty recounts his journey to the Hague in search of a funny little museum specializing in the work of an eccentric Dutch painter, whose crown jewel was a painting that depicts 360 degrees of a seaside scene; it covers every inch of a circular room’s walls. Like him, I am surrounded on all sides. Art like this is truly immersive. Doty remembers feeling that he was “‘inside’” something, that the “‘world’” around him was a “work of art” and that he was “‘at its center’” (375). Every angle offers you a different picture and perspective, challenging you to find your own point of view. The Pointz, like the Panorama, demands an experience you simply cannot walk away from. To get out, you must push back the chain link fence, squeeze between the blue van and the brick wall, and walk back down the street. Even if your resolve carries you all the way to the next block, tags follow you, forcing you to remember.
I’m not sure when or where, or even how, this saga ends. Sometimes I imagine it doesn’t.

After weeks of viewing the Pointz from the ground up and losing myself in the huge, mythical stomping grounds of my past, it is a shock to revisit the Panorama of the City of New York and look down on my memories. Queens is sprawling and vast, even in miniature. I struggle to locate the Five Pointz warehouse, reluctantly using CitiBank as my guide. I want so badly to lie down on top of the model and look towards Manhattan from the painted rooftops, as so many artists have done. When I finally find it, I don’t know what to feel. It is a tiny beige cube, probably much smaller than my thumb. I want the Pointz to be painted red, maybe with a small animated light bulb on the roof—anything to acknowledge the miracle that had single-handedly (or many-handedly, as it were) saved a neighborhood’s soul.Saved me, in many small ways. The 7 line runs through the Panorama, pristine, devoid of caution tape, cranes, and dump trucks. Not a single piece of scaffolding suggests that in real life, homes are crumbling to dust over the hard hats of construction workers. Only CitiBank stands out.

LIC is dying. The contracting companies who are tearing down the old buildings and erecting hip condos would say that its future has never been brighter. But I know that in a few years, I might come back to Jackson Avenue and not be able to fix my memories to a location. The Pointz cannot stop this evolution, no matter how much it screams at the subways. The building itself won’t fall victim to hard hats with hammers, because ironically, it is protected by the very same City of New York that has decreed LIC’s “rejuvenation.” But the essence of the neighborhood will vanish along with those old houses. Soon, the Pointz will stand alone, surrounded by glittering high rises and devoid of its creative context. The artists will recognize this change, and for a while their work will be more defiant than ever. But eventually, they will accept the inevitable march of Progress and pack up their spray paint, remarking to one another
as they leave that a socially recognized graffiti museum was too good to be true anyway. The layering will slow, bit by bit, and then stop. With the actors gone, the theatre will close, leaving its brazen beauty to gather dust and fade. The Pointz will stand only as a memorial to itself, a solitary relic left over from a once-defiant neighborhood.

But for me, for four years of my life, the Pointz was my destination, and somehow I must preserve it in my memory, because I know that the time may come when there may not be a single tag to lead me back. The warehouse, for as long as it stands, will be an unsettling monument for others, an odd skeleton in a picture-perfect neighborhood’s back-room closet. As it loses the strength to shout, its whispering will plead to the passers-by—yuppies, lawyers, cops, commuters, hard hats, and disruptive kids—to remember what it once was, what it once did for LIC. But even the whispering will cease, and I, the lone architect of my memory, will be left with only the trails that I have drawn.

If I could build a panorama to match my mental map, I would construct it on a different scale. The Pointz would stand taller than anything around it. In the real Panorama, CitiBank is the center, the only destination worth highlighting. The rest of the neighborhood is defined by links to the remote—the 7 train to Shea Stadium, the expressway leading to the 59th Street Bridge.

But I am like Lethem—“I don’t remember the train. I remember the station” (430). Climbing the stairs and clutching the railing, I relish the paint chips on my hands, knowing they link me to this place, bind me to it. At the top, I stand at the center, four stories up, searching for the borders of my memory. Queens Boulevard. Twenty-third Street, four blocks to the left, under the tracks. P. S. 1. To my right, the rail yard on the fourth side of the Pointz, along a street that has no name. Tracing trails in time and space with my eyes, I draw my map with that much more
detail, praying for some kind of preservation, praying the lines don’t blur. Staring out at defiant light bulbs, a fiery Manhattan skyline, and a stunning portrait of Biggie Smalls, I feel, like Mark Doty, that I will never leave—or that even if I do, I never really can. Every tag in New York will pull my memory back.

And yet I fear that one day I’ll look back and find that it was all so much smaller than the way I drew it; that even in my memory, that little thumbsized cube was never really as red as I hoped; that, ultimately, I was only passing through.

Works Cited

Repairer

On a single bed, seven bodies are arranged in a tangle.

The scene looks more like a litter of puppies than an orgy: the bodies, not quite flesh-toned, are an embryonic pink, the pink of underexposure to the world. They are completely hairless. Some mouths are agape; some touch lips. Heads hang locked around the crook of another’s neck. It is difficult to tell where one body ends and another begins. Louise Bourgeois’s 2001 sculpture *Seven in Bed* captures the base, animalistic urgency we humans have for one another so precisely that it almost hurts to look at it. These bodies reach for each other without even knowing what it is that they want. Their desire is so fierce that it verges upon cannibalistic—they are unashamedly hungry. They are willing to devour one another in order to become stronger, grow full. Though genitalia are visible, the bodies seem asexual, as if they’re feeding from a mother buried somewhere beneath them rather than on each other. In this sense, even though they physically appear to be adults, they more closely resemble newborns, consumed by emotion, as yet unaware of a culture that would require them to deny their dependence upon one another.

Monday morning. I awaken sweaty and puffy-eyed, deeply disturbed by a nightmare in which my mother has died. A freak accident. A fluke. Something careless. She called for help and I couldn’t get to her quickly enough. It happened in her car. My stepfather didn’t answer the phone in time. The circumstances of her death made no sense, but the knowledge that I was unable to stop or reverse it remained.
It doesn’t take a psychoanalyst to recognize that all this fear stems from the fact that I am new to New York City and living a great distance from my mother for the first time in my life. I cannot jump to reach her, should she need me.

We spent ten difficult years together, my mother, my brother, and I. I held my mother’s hand, endured the sound of her sobs as she showered after work at the local diner each evening. I sat in the car while she attended her Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous meetings. I even offered to babysit people’s children at those meetings so that I could stay close enough for her to reach me, so that I could keep an eye on her, make sure she hadn’t slipped, that she wouldn’t trip over an unforeseen pothole and disappear down some dark street. For the five years before she entered recovery, I had wondered every morning if today would be the day that I would lose her to an overdose, to suicide, to harm by a junkie. I waited every night for that call. I told myself that she was already dead so that I wouldn’t be trapped in this limbo any longer.

When she finally found sobriety, she was resurrected, and I did everything in my power to make certain that I never lost her again.

My mother got me a job at the restaurant where she worked. We worked side by side every night, carpooled to work, stole moments in the silverware closet to share a sent-back steak. I cooked our meals, cleaned our home. We pooled our money and took turns driving my brother to school. I became her shrink, her partner, her supporter. When she remarried a few years ago, I helped her into her dress, did her makeup, styled her hair, and drove with her to the ceremony. I felt that I should have been the one to walk her down the aisle, but based on gender alone, the duty of giving her away was given to my brother. He and I both cried as he pushed her, very gently, into the new— but loving—arms of her groom.
I am infinitely proud of my mother; at times I am not sure who raised whom, who birthed whom. Moving to New York City, away from her, was one of the hardest things I have ever done. For there is no shaking the feeling that even with her over fifteen years of sobriety, if I am not there to protect her from life’s troubles, some unexpected obstacle could shake her so violently that she will fall again. And so I dream. All the fears I shove away during the day come out at night.

Monday morning. I am sitting in a lecture, half-listening to what the professor is telling me about art, bits of information drifting in through a haze of old nightmares. I am browsing the internet for Louise Bourgeois. I have seen a documentary about her. I know that I am supposed to write about her. I click on a thumbnail of The Woven Child, enlarge it, and the lecture hall fades away completely.

This 2002 work by Bourgeois features a woman’s fleshy, pale-pink torso—headless, armless, legless—with a baby resting on her belly. The woman appears to be stitched together from patches of heavy cloth. The stitches are large and tight, they look surgical. She is nude. Her breasts, also made of cloth, are full, with nipples made from slightly darker fabric. The infant that rests on her belly is also flesh-toned, but ensconced within sheer blue cloth. It appears almost to be inside the safe bubble of a womb, yet it is lying outside of the mother’s skin. Something does not add up. This woman has no arms with which to carry her child, no head with which to smile at it. The baby is with its mother, but this mother is only a vessel for bringing life into the world, a vehicle, nothing more. Neither can survive like this.

I put on my art-analytical hat. Bourgeois is exploring a certain helplessness, pointing to the interdependency between people, a circular quality, with a keen awareness that no one being
is ever complete in itself. The mother gives birth to the child out of a desire to quench her need
to care for another, and the child quite literally cannot live without the mother’s care. I find it
interesting that Bourgeois herself was a mother but thought of herself more purely as a girl,
stating that “The feminists took me as a role model, as a mother. It bothers me. I am not
interested in being a mother. I am still a girl trying to understand myself” (qtd. in Searle). This
headless mother seems to illustrate Bourgeois’s understanding that to be a mother does not make
one a completed woman—and that no human is ever complete. We all depend on one another for
meaning; even a mother depends on her child as a source of joy. Maybe this is why, even as
grown women, we are always looking for a part of ourselves that will not mature. Is the
recognition that one will always in some way be a girl the rite of passage to becoming a woman?

Of course, I know that my mother and I are hidden beneath this neutral analysis. Eating
sent-back steak, laughing. My analysis of Bourgeois’s artwork is only possible because my
mother is buried beneath it, beneath the tangle of my pink, newborn words.

Like many people, my first encounter with Bourgeois’s work was with her giant spider,
Maman, crafted out of steel in 1999 for the opening of the Tate Modern (Beaven). So popular
was Maman that Bourgeois went on to create six additional bronze casts (Beaven). However, the
one that thrills me so stands before the Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa, the height of a small house.
At over thirty feet tall, Maman is startlingly huge. You can walk between her legs and stare up
into her giant underbelly.

Bourgeois’s creation of the series Maman came late in her career—she was already
eighty-eight—but it has become perhaps her most famous work of art. Maman is aesthetically
pleasing. She is mildly alarming, but beautiful in her horror. The notion that a predator this
powerful is supported by such delicate legs is perplexing and makes the spider appear that much
more dangerous. That something so stealthy and predatory can be embodied in such a dainty package is jarring. People don’t trust her. There are numerous photos of Maman on the internet in which adults and children are seen running away, pretending that they are about to be snatched and devoured. Maman belongs to the schlocky universe of Honey I Shrunk the Kids, The Incredible Shrinking Man, Arachnophobia, Tarantula.

Maman travels (Beaven). In Canada, the United Kingdom, Spain, most people who pose before her, ice-cream in hand, don’t think twice about her innate horror. They don’t necessarily know that “Maman” means “Mommy” in French. But for Bourgeois, Maman epitomizes the beauty and strength of motherhood. “The spider,” she once said, “is a repairer. If you bash into the web of a spider, she doesn’t get mad. She weaves and repairs it” (qtd. in Searle). A repairer. With this in mind, I suddenly notice the steel chain net hanging below her torso—the skin of her egg sack. I start to imagine the baby spiders nestled inside.

The 2008 documentary, Louise Bourgeois: The Spider, the Mistress and the Tangerine, strives to make sense of her work in the context of her life. It contains numerous interviews, in which her interrogators try to bait Bourgeois into revealing some concrete meaning of her art, into comfortably categorizing her work as serving one specific purpose, highlighting one social or political pattern. But her responses are always confounding. Bourgeois puts everything in terms of emotion, explaining that, “The purpose of the pieces is to express emotion. My emotions are inappropriate to my size. My emotions are my demons” (Louise Bourgeois). Not satisfied by the answers expressed by Bourgeois herself, the filmmakers turn to her childhood.

When she was a girl, Bourgeois’s father brought a nanny home to be his live-in mistress. His affair was a betrayal, but one that Bourgeois’s mother came to tolerate. Her father dominated the household, exerting his control over her and her mother through regular acts of humiliation,
making them, in Bourgeois’s own words, a “‘captive audience’” (qtd. in Kifner). According to the documentary, this emotional wounding influenced Bourgeois’s work until the day she died. Her art is rife with anger and violence. In her 1974 sculpture, Destruction of the Father, I see a fresh crime scene in which the children have murdered—and have begun to devour—their father. The symbolism is so explicit that I cannot help but interpret this piece as a coping mechanism of some kind, an externalization and expulsion of emotions that would otherwise corrode Bourgeois from the inside. Her art seems a means of survival, a way to express savage fantasies that, in turn, offer her the intellectual ability to counteract any emotional trauma. She is dependent upon her art, and her art depends upon the drama of her inner turmoil for existence.

Caring, too, is a circular process. I know that we all know this. A child is born dependent on its mother; when its mother grows old and her body begins to weaken, the child cares for her in turn. There is a cross-stitching of care that occurs: we mend and we are mended. But because of my mother’s addiction, I became a mother to her when I was thirteen years old. Yet as she healed, regained her footing, I found myself losing my own—reverting, reversing, undoing.

And so the wounds necessitate the repairs. I suspect it is Bourgeois’s fascination with the innate female ability to repair whatever may come—her ability to endure, her strength, her power—that stoked her creativity. Where we see an intimidating spider, she saw a web—an improvised creation, a testament to its creator’s ability to sway and shift, to repair what has been damaged.

There are vestiges of this toughness everywhere. Bourgeois’s 1952 sculpture Spiral Woman resembles the body of a woman being wrung out like a wet towel. Like The Woven
Child, Spiral Woman also features heavy stitching. In both, Bourgeois indicates the female’s ability to withstand great pain, even torture, using the wounds of yesterday as grounds for new creation, restructuring the aches of the past into the fruit of the future, stitching them together in order to rebuild. With The Woven Child, Bourgeois suggests the female’s ability to transform her own body to bring a life into the world. Women are literally and figuratively torn apart by the birth of that child— but they are able to come back together. They are the same person, though forever changed by the experience. There is nothing a little stitching cannot fix. A little web glue.

I finally left home at twenty-eight years old. I am almost ten years older than my classmates, yet I have entered college as if I were fresh out of high school. I still feel an eighteen-year-old’s need for my mother’s support; I call every day to tell her about class, to seek her advice and approval. I thought this dynamic had died with my role as a midwife, aiding my mother’s rebirth into the world of sobriety. But moving to New York, experiencing my first real separation from my mother, has pulled me back into this cycle. My mother looked older when I came home for Christmas. There was more grey in her hair, proof of the passage of time closing in and picking up speed in my absence. I felt that I had missed something. Bourgeois’s emphasis on the mother-child relationship disturbs and overwhelms me in a way that could keep me thinking for a long time. The rest of my life, perhaps. Long enough for the grey to touch my own hair.

I found a portrait of Bourgeois online, a black and white photograph taken by renowned photographer Annie Leibovitz. Bourgeois is shown in profile. She is in her later years; her skin is weathered. Her hair is flung behind her neck in thick black and grey ropes, pushed out of the way.
for efficiency, speed, sight. Her palm is outstretched to the camera, as if waiting to receive a baseball—or the world. It is her palm that catches my attention: the leathery skin, the frail wrist holding up that too-strong hand—more powerful than a catcher’s mitt—fingers outstretched and ready to hook themselves around life, capture it in tangible forms. She winces ever so slightly, but the hand is steady. Fierce. All-knowing. I begin to understand that her sculptures have been shaping her—hands, psyche, heart, and mind—as much as (or more) than she has been shaping them. These hands themselves are a work of art, the skin a roadmap of scratches and scars earned through hours wielding sharp tools, molding iron, clay, stone, cloth into forms. The grooves in her hands tell the story of her life; they are the riverbeds through which emotion has flowed again and again. These hands give her monsters a way out. They are perhaps her greatest piece of art, her highest achievement. I am unsurprised, then, that Bourgeois once proclaimed, “I am not what I am. I am what I do with my hands” (qtd. in Art:21 24)

_The Woven Child_ caused in me an emotional car accident; by chance, the piece found me when I was coming off a dream that had unearthed the cold reality that I often push from my mind—my mother will someday die. Bourgeois—the work, the woman, the artist—forced me to consider that perhaps the female is simply a vehicle for new life, human or otherwise. This collision of life and art pricked me in a way that made me feel simultaneously intensely alive, deeply alone, and utterly fearful—human. My connection to Bourgeois’s work can only be described as what French philosopher Roland Barthes calls “punctum”: “that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (27). It is a violent attack of emotion; it is thoroughly individual—that which evokes punctum for me will not necessarily do so for you. Punctum is reserved for the work that affects us, often for reasons beyond verbal explanation. It
affects us on a visceral level, unearthing something that can be neither denied nor explained. We are let in on a human secret that we may not understand but feel permeating our bones.

Bourgeois’s work is loaded with emotional aches profoundly different to any I have felt, but she exposes herself—her wounds—so completely that I cannot keep my own wounds from fusing with hers. This, to me, is the power of punctum at work.

When I encountered The Woven Child, scenes from my nightmare rattled through me. What I felt with sudden certainty was an understanding that my bond with the body that birthed me into this world will not last eternally. At least, not on earth. It is a bittersweet truth for all of us fortunate enough to have experienced such a bond. I am aware that this bond between my mother and me—between any mother and child—could theoretically be passed down to my own children one day. I am equally aware that the life I have chosen—a life in the arts, a life on stage, traveling in a constant state of selfish self-discovery—may offer no place for children. The thought stirs great panic within me, heartbreak even, given this new wave of understanding. My contact with The Woven Child has opened a wound of which I had previously been willfully ignorant: I am deeply troubled by the possibility of this chain of DNA dying with me. As I watch many of my friends beginning to have children, I cannot help but recognize in them what they may not: a primal sense of the maternal bond’s slackening as their mothers age, and an intuitive desire to recreate it by becoming mothers themselves.

In all of this I recognize my own fear of growing up, of no longer being my mother’s little girl. The idea of having my own baby would cancel out my ability to be my mother’s baby. The Woven Child prompted me to think about the safety of the womb, the inability to protect a child from the world beyond, and the desire to climb back inside that warmth and safety. Who wouldn’t want to stay inside? The world is harsh and cold and bright and unprotected. And yet,
and yet . . . it is beautiful and worthwhile. This is a constant conundrum for me; perhaps it springs from my need, shared with Bourgeois, to insist that I am, above all, still but a girl trying to understand myself. Or perhaps I feel that I have done enough: I have cared for others; I have been mother to my mother at times; I can repair; I can be a mother to myself, now. Perhaps it is my turn.

In Seven in Bed, we see the undeniable need that people have for one another. I’m beginning to understand that it is creation, maintenance, and destruction that keep our world spinning. Women, like Bourgeois’s spiders, create webs—made from the most delicate of substances. Webs that are queerly beautiful, able to be restrung, reworked, repaired, but also able to ensnare things so as to devour them. Perhaps what I and Bourgeois are actually searching for is a keen understanding of the duality that a woman must embody: the duality of these webs. I am learning that life is about repair, about growing through my art and through the people who hurt me, love me, leave me, challenge me, and need me. We are all continually birthing ourselves—life-giving does not have to include being a mother in the biological sense. I can be that spider, that continually creating creature who is power and might in a dainty package. I have the right to be the intense female, the lost little girl searching for self-understanding, a mother, a lover, a seeker, and most of all, a human.

Works Cited


Lusting for Literacy

My knowledge of lust came from Joel. I sat directly across from him at Saturday school, in a house-turned-masjid on 168th Street and Highland Avenue in Jamaica, Queens. Joel was tall, perhaps the tallest boy in the room. I thought that he must have been in junior high school but later learned that it was only a year that separated us. He was beautiful. His skin was soft and his lashes curled. He was perfectly sculpted.

I pretended to recite Arabic reading exercises aloud without looking at my books, but I was generally mumbling nonsense as I stared at his face. I would periodically shift to prevent the carpet from imprinting its bland pattern on my bare feet. And each time I stretched my legs, or rubbed my feet to keep them from falling asleep, I would look at him. I would observe his body, his face, his eyes. But whenever I looked, his head was dutifully bowed over the Qur’an, as if his mind were devouring the words. He never looked back at the stranger with the lop-sided head scarf and the wandering eyes.

I knew I didn’t belong in the masjid. I spent my cold Saturday mornings in Arabic class solely because of Joel. I progressed very slowly in the class, if learning the alphabet over a span of two months can even be called progress. The otherwise lackluster hours spent there were mostly devoted to daydreaming. I imagined Joel approaching me after class, his hands equipped with the Word of God. I envisioned him smiling at me, his splendid mouth, the one with which he uttered those holy words, one day on my lips. I even imagined how his body intertwined with mine would one day produce lots of beautiful babies.

I was seven. And I still couldn’t read Arabic.
I lusted after Joel. Those lips that smiled, those lips with which he recited divine utterances intoxicated my soul. But more than his soft lips and perfect smile, it was his head that fascinated me. His was a head that almost never looked up from reading. A mind totally engrossed in his Arabic books, in the beloved Qur’an.

At first, it was the physical lust that consumed me. It was a desire to become physically linked to his body. In Psychology class, I learned how there are different stages to love, that while it begins as attraction, it progresses to romance, then passion, and finally commitment. However, I could not conceive of a love that developed in stages. There was no structure to love. Instead, lust and love were inexorably linked, overwhelming, uplifting, and captivating my heart all at once.

But was it Joel, my body, my nafs, yearned for? Or was it the projection of Joel that had moved me as a nymph child of seven? Of course, I never gained that physical proximity to Joel, never shared an embrace, or even a conversation. Instead, I lusted after his passion, his dedication, his concentration. More than his body, I wanted to revel in his mind and his spirit. The physical desire continued to tear my senses the way your eyes flood and your nostrils burn when you’ve inhaled the onions and masala from your mom’s spicy soup. But gradually the biological desire to eat Joel was confounded by another desire—to understand the active participation with which he engaged in the Qur’an. He did not merely recite scripture. He seemed to absorb it, drink and understand the verses as if the words were of secular, everyday origin rather than through the divine transmission of the Prophet. I wanted that same connection to text. I lusted for Joel because through him I first learned to desire the ability of others.

Throughout my life, I have modeled myself after others. In high school, I would borrow other peoples’ characteristics. Sophomore year, I would catch myself wanting to become
Sharma. I would be funnier, less serious, and very interested in Mos Def and black studies. Later I would want to become Seth, to get A’s without even going to class. And then by senior year, my wandering eyes would find Moran. From him I would learn to warm my heart to others, to listen and appreciate my friends. Layer by layer, my character would develop as my eyes wandered from my books and lusted after these remarkable boys, who possessed the qualities that I lacked, whether it was the stellar bubble-filling-in ability that allowed for a 1580 SAT score or the patience to attend an 8 AM class.

Beginning in the fourth grade, I walked a mile to the Queens Central Library to do research for my weekly biography reports. The Asian librarian with the chunky legs and sheer silk blouses showed me how to find books in the Youth division, but every time I entered through the wooden arch, I was wrought with paranoia. My palms liquefied as I feared that the books I needed for my report were already checked out, leaving me with only secondary sources like encyclopedias with which to do my research. To read paragraph summaries of the lives of famous people seemed like an easy but cheap trick because I missed out on the drama and complexity that make autobiographies worth reading. But just as I was afraid to be left with only the World Book Encyclopedia to extract information from, I also appreciated the concise, linear structure of the encyclopedic entries. I liked how the infinite wealth of knowledge was systematically alphabetized and catalogued, making the facts and dates of a good report accessible to me.

Yet I knew the seemingly simplistic composition of the encyclopedia belied its inherent contradiction. How can all of knowledge be reduced to 23 volumes of the alphabet (xyz was a single volume)? How can a one-dimensional book that prided itself on objectivity further your quest for understanding if it reduced people, events, and nations to dates, facts, and maps? What
could you gain from a secular book that did not allow emotion and colorful nuances to shape its interpretation? Despite its reductionist logic, the encyclopedia offered a short cut that I continued to exploit when writing my reports.

The use of secondary sources instead of primary documents for my assignments did not bother me, just as my lust for Joel never seemed like a moral dilemma. The English-translated Qur’an did not seem problematic either. Secondary sources were just another roundabout way to arrive at the same ideas.

But was there something lost in the translation?

In my “Images of the Orient” class, I learned that with each translation of a particular trope (whether a hookah pipe or odalisque) in nineteenth century French Orientalist art, the trope changes. The recycled image is rendered unique by each artist. For example, Nicholas de Nicolay’s 1567 travel book included the first pictorial representations of a veiled woman and her slave adorned with what appears to be a large and decorative lamp as a headpiece on their way to the bath. What appears at first to be only an amusing engraving has influenced the works of many subsequent French Orientalist artists, including Ingres, who in his rendering of the Turkish Bath (1808) relocates the now unveiled woman in an orgy of naked bodies that lie about leisurely, some napping, others prancing around. Ingre’s translation of the veiled woman created a nuance in reading the hammam, or Turkish bath.

Perhaps one of my favorite images from the class however is Hodja in Yellow Caftan (1905) by Hamdi Bey. In it, a woman sits with her legs tucked under her almost metallic gold-patterned caftan, with its wrists stylishly cut and embroidered. The red bandanna tied around her hair looks like a split watermelon, ready to be eaten. Despite the woman’s costume and keen fashion sense, I am drawn to her eyebrows, which are knit as her eyes are solely focused on the
Qur’an. It seems she is not merely reciting the Book. She is thinking, interpreting, maybe even questioning. Nevertheless her focus is the Book. A book I have yet to read.

The Qur’an is positioned in the center of painting, perhaps to divide the canvas into two parts. Directly behind the reading woman is the mosaic wall, patterned with hexagons within dark-blue Stars of David. The ordered tiles are on the right but to the left is a contortedly screened window behind which tall conifers stand pregnant with red fruit. But instead of metal safety bars across the window frame as would be found enclosing me within my 21st century apartment building, the window is covered with a bronze metal that has been twisted and elongated into a chaotic pattern that seeks to rearrange the background. It does not overtake the background like safety screens often do, but it does create the illusion of a nature jigsaw puzzle.

The many elements to my personality were like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, stolen and collected from all those that I admired. The intelligence was borrowed from Seth; the racial commentary was a remnant of Sharma; the rare bouts of sincerity I learned from Moran. And the lust was from Joel. I had gradually imprinted these people into my psyche. I was a composite of these collected qualities and traits.

I was the composite Muslim who did not choose between the encyclopedia and the translated Qur’an. I did not choose between lust and literacy. I did not choose because I could not choose. There was no distinct choice between physicality and spirituality, between illiteracy and literacy. The Qur’an in the painting does not divide the room as I had once thought it did. The woman’s ability to read the Qur’an, too, does not create a barrier between the open window and the ordered pattern of the mosaic wall. Rather, the Qur’an serves to integrate the differences between the disorder of the open window and the order of the man-made mosaic. It is Islam that
integrates the secular world of lust with the divine text of creation in an amalgamation of color and emotion and reason.

In an attempt to create a dichotomy between the secular world of lust and the quasi-divine realm of the translated Qur’an, I have alienated myself from the truth of hybridism. By denying my hybridity, I have failed to learn the Qur’an in Arabic because I feel that somehow a part of my wretched secular self will be lost in translation. But ultimately, I do not need to relinquish my lust for God. I can find Him, despite lust.

Joel was the first piece to my inner mosaic, and he left an indelible mark like no one since. Lust began earlier and traveled deeper than any of my other borrowed traits. Lust began in my body but enhanced the pores of my mind with an intense yearning to mold, to shape, to sculpt myself into a better Muslim. Perhaps lust was the prerequisite for being a better Muslim. To hold the Qur’an with the same degree of reverence, with the same degree of knowledge and understanding that Joel possessed, with the same degree of concentration as the woman in the painting, was all I desired. I lusted after the Qur’an so I could find the textual Islam I had been avoiding for so long.

Ideally, Quranic literacy should bring me closer to God. I know that if I cannot read the Word of God, then I can neither learn to authenticate my life with Islam nor appreciate the beauty of the Qur’an. I cannot function in masjids or in Arabic class. I cannot function as a Muslim because I cannot read the Qur’an.

Nevertheless, I purposely sought illiteracy for the past eighteen years. My Pickthall translation of the Glorious i has left me complacent. Out of convenience, I have clung to my English translation, just as I have clung to Joel as my very own secondary source to greatness,
just as I have resorted to the half-truths of the *World Book Encyclopedia* for my biography reports.

Even without absorbing melodious *Quranic* recitation, the Islam in my heart continues to grow. While the seeking of knowledge is compulsory for Muslims, my particular lust is also integral to my *iman*, or faith. Lust is a natural and necessary part of everyday human experience that does not impede the moral dictates of religion. In fact, I reaffirmed my Islam through secular means, by ogling the beautiful boy from my Saturday Arabic class. “There is no distinction between the sacred and the profane,” writes Seyyed Hossain Nasr, a prolific scholar of Islamic Studies. “[W]hat we now call the ordinary or every day is integrated into the matrix of the sacred.” Somehow the ordinary act of lust brings me closer to my faith because, like Joel, I wanted to know God.

Without ever speaking to me, Joel reminded me that I was all style and no substance. I was a fake because I could not read Arabic but continued to love Islam. The qualities I borrowed I eventually managed to integrate into my own personality. Lust, sincerity, humor, intelligence—they are part of the Sadia-package now. But the *Qur’an* never became my own because I could not pass off the translation as anything other than a translation, a secondary source.

I started attending Arabic classes again this semester. Unfortunately, this time there is no beautiful boy cross-legged and facing me across the room. Now, there is a partition that cuts through the room, flimsy but effective dividers that separate the boys and the girls. But here I was no longer looking for lust of a boy, but lust of my faith, something that I had not lost, because it had never been found. I wanted to be able to read and satisfy my lust.

One of the first chapters I examined in class was Sura Iqra. When the angel Gabriel appeared to the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) as a man, the angel said, “Recite.” “I
can not recite,” the Prophet replied. He then describes how the angel whelmed him in his embrace. When he let the Prophet go, Gabriel commanded “Recite.” Again, the Prophet replied that he could not recite. And again Gabriel squeezed the Prophet and let him go only when he was exhausted. Then he said, “Recite,” and the Prophet said, “I cannot recite.” Finally, Gabriel squeezed for a third time and said, “Read in the name of your lord, who created (all that exists) man from a clot. Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous!” Gabriel said in Arabic:

\[\text{Iqra biismi rabbika allathee khalaqa} \]
\[\text{Khalaqa alinsana min Aaalaqin} \]
\[\text{Iqra warabbuka alakramu} \]
\[\text{Allathee Aallama bialqalami} \]
\[\text{Aallama alinsana ma lam ya Alam} \]

And my English Qur’an translates:

Read! In the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created—
Created man from a (mere) clot of congealed blood.
Read! And thy Lord is the Most Bountiful.
He Who taught (the use of) the pen—
Taught man that which he knew not.

It’s as if these words are inscribed on my heart, just as the Prophet said. Indeed, God taught me what I knew not: literacy found via lust.
Appendix E

“RECONCILING VOICES” BY JENNIFER LEIDNER

Reconciling Voices

I fall more in love with “Lusting for Literacy” each time I read it. But it is not enough simply to state my pleasure—I need to understand it. (Although, I must confess, the writer in me who writes to be read is now whispering in my ear; she is telling me that it is enough, that the essay has done what it does best: it has drawn me into this intimacy of the mind.) And so, in this early hour of the morning, when most of my muses find me, I am listening to my other voice. She is calling me back into the essay to tell the story of this love. If I can listen closely, the journey of the telling will be the revelation.

Sadia Kalam’s essay, though wholly unique, works in the way all essays must work. “Lusting for Literacy” develops, builds, and explores an idea through the essayist’s laying down and interpretive analysis of evidence (art, text, stories of her life) within the structure of a beginning, middle and end. What pleases me this morning is the artistry with which I see her essay achieving this wholeness: conceptually charged images echo throughout the three-part structure and find resonance within each other, each time adding a layer of complexity. For me, this essay highlights the beauty of the familiar essay—it is a map of the writer’s path to discovery and also a reflection of the writer herself, of the “Sadia-package”: sincere, humorous, intelligent, and engaging. And the writing is lovely. As in the best novels, each sculpted moment in the essay contributes in its particularity to the vastness of Sadia’s reckoning. Finally, it is Sadia’s complex idea work—the way lust and literacy, two seemingly separate callings, become inextricably linked, weaving together and integrating the disparate pieces of her identity, so that lust becomes the very window into knowledge, to the sacred world of literacy, and, most
important, the very window to her faith—that makes this essay so compelling. It is here, in this essayistic journey of meaning making, that we see her mind, and spirit, alive on the page.

At the heart of her reckoning, evident in her interpretive work at the end of the beginning, is her desire for what she calls Joel’s “same connection to text.” She writes, “He seemed to absorb [the Qur’an], drink and understand the verses as if the words were of secular, everyday origin rather than through the divine transmission of the Prophet.” This sentence, while deepening her reading of the first image she presents of herself as a “nymph child of seven” lusting after a “beautiful boy,” also sets up the promise of the essay, which is, in this case, the desire for and the fulfillment of Quranic literacy. I love that this desire for knowledge literally drives Sadia’s search and the essay forward. I can hear my teaching voice in this beginning. 

*What is it about this moment, this story, that haunts you still? And then, What is your thinking problem? What are you trying to understand?* Her first question, which carries the echo of my questions, is the beginning of her answer: “But was it Joel, my body, my nafs, yearned for?” Because she was not inclined to write scenes, I encouraged her to sculpt her original, longer narrative to focus on the moment of fascination within that exercise: with Joel, in the masjid. Looking back on my notes to Sadia in these early exercises, I see that I was already valuing places of intrigue and descriptive language (most of which ended up in the final draft), while encouraging her to read and question her evidence to discover the rich meaning embedded there.

Why spend this time absorbed in the writerly moves Sadia makes in the beginning of her essay? For one, I want to draw attention to her work in the beginning because it reveals the larger, governing principle at work in the middle. She continually focuses her evidence in such a way that her interpretive energy is already present inside the moment, generating her idea work before her reflection makes it explicit. Second, her reckoning with this first story reveals the
character of mind present in the rest of the essay. Sadia engages—through the act of reading, analysis, and interpretation—with the stories of her life in a way that generates the very concepts she wrestles with: secondary and primary sources of knowledge; literacy and illiteracy; sacred and profane; hybridity and integration; her relationship to Islam. Her use of *Girl Reading the Kuran*, 1880 is particularly elegant in the way she reads and analyzes it so that her idea rides on the back of her interpretation. The movement from paragraph to paragraph is seamless because we see her on the path of her idea, making sense of things, being gripped by the curiosity of her discovery. She weaves back to former evidence not simply because it is one of my requirements, but because in the act of returning she allows us to see her mind reexamining the evidence, deepening the original reading of the text to continue developing her idea. After all this work, and this gathering, what joy when she arrives at the claim, “It is Islam that integrates the secular world of lust with the divine text of creation in an amalgamation of color and emotion and reason”? What I have just described is an act of opening and closing, one that occurs throughout the middle. This act, the movement from interpretation and exploration to knowing, the naming of what is found, seems the essential rhythm of idea, the very movement of essay.

But even with all of this said, it is Sadia’s ending that makes her essay, finally, cohesive. The final draft did not have the ending we see. She had used the same quotes but had not yet properly read the cited text. In my feedback to her and in our subsequent meetings, I focused on a re-working of the ending. In a way, the destination had been already predetermined by the rest of the essay—she had simply not realized it. In my endnotes I noted that she needed to direct our interpretation of the text. I also asked: *Where do you find yourself at the end of the essay? Willing to renounce your secular self?* Which, of course, she does not. Rather, her embracing of her lust for her faith allows her to enter and examine the primary source of the Qur’an, reading
(and translating) the scene in which Gabriel embraces the Prophet and instructs him to read. This scenic moment, resonant with echoes, is the satisfaction of the lust that drove the essay from the beginning. The entirety of the ending—back in Arabic class, the act of reading, the texts themselves in both versions, and the final couplet—integrates the varying parts of her idea by enacting the very thing she’s been reckoning with. The ending, in establishing the essay’s wholeness, also reveals the writer’s own move towards completion. Through the journey of the essay, she has arrived at an understanding, at a discovery about her relationship to her faith; “Indeed, God taught [her] what [she] knew not: literacy found via lust.”

So why does this essay seduce me more each time I read it? Yes, the writing is engaging; yes, the story-telling, a form that captures my novelistic heart, seduces me; yes, her idea work, a world in and of itself, reaches out to me in an intellectual play of minds. But there’s more. The resounding echoes I continue to hear in the text also seduce me, that complexity. What I am seeing now, now that it is no longer morning, is how the text itself, the familiar essay, is the framework upon which the Expository Writing Program stands. Its essence—the three-part structure; the primacy of the student writer’s mind being the activating force that generates, through the interpretation, analysis, and reflection of evidence, meaning; the seeking of idea through the journey of writing; the transformative power of its discovery—is the very spirit that must be alive in each essay our students write. Here’s another: the inhabitation of text that defines Sadia’s quest for knowledge reflects the inhabitation of text we ask of our students. We want them, drawn by their fascination, to enter into and be absorbed by the texts of this world. The claim governing both her essay and the course is that knowledge arrives through the integration of text and self. The acts of reading and writing are acts of integration. And the
teaching of these two skills tunes the student’s ear to listen to the voice of her own mind, always calling her.

But it’s hard to hear the call. It’s hard to get past your resistance to the unknown, to listen, even when your teacher (the angel that she is) is commanding you over and over to read, doing everything short of embracing you. Since I began working here, the Program has called me out of a silence I never knew I carried. Now, there is always some part of me alive with a dialogue about essay, about writing. The complexity and creativity inherent in this conversation are what drew me to mentorship—and they are what call me towards a lectureship. For three years I have struggled to separate my two callings. I have divided my days so that I am a novelist from eight to noon and a teacher from two to six. I have attempted to separate my teacher’s voice from my writer’s in some effort to preserve the sanctity of my novel and the work of my classroom. The problem lies, though, in the fact that this perceived division, born from fear and not faith, has been misleading me. In my most inspired moments, it is impossible to distinguish where one voice begins and the other ends. This seamless integration is, ultimately, what I lust for— not knowing the difference between the echo and its source.
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