

## Introduction

It is late at night, a cool spring evening, and I am reading and grading creative writing portfolios. One student, in a self-evaluation of her work, explains, "Writing—it's more than an escape—it's not an escape; it's part of me, something that keeps me rooted to reality. . . ." Her realization prompts me to ask anew: How did I come to embrace a life guided by a love of words? How did I come to know as a child and as a teenager that teaching and writing together would give my life form and meaning? How did I come to feel that the classroom was a place where at times I felt most "rooted," most at home, most alive?

These recurring questions, these late-night meditations, were the genesis of this volume. Convinced that we brought our whole selves into the classroom—the dramas of our early lives, our relationships with family, with friends, with lovers, our experiences with schooling, our attitudes, values and beliefs—I began including autobiographical creative writing and reflection in my graduate theories of writing course with the hope that the more we learned about ourselves, the more aware we would be as teachers. When I began including autobiography in the course in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I searched for works that meshed personal recollection and reflection, meditations on the writing life, and theories about composition instruction because I felt that these areas of experience were inseparable and enriched each other. I discovered Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* and next searched for complementary works by women writing teachers. I found Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle*

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and Sylvia Ashton Warner's *Teacher*, which presented compelling portraits of the classroom teacher; however, I did not find works by women that intertwined autobiographical reflection, contemplation of the writing life, and discussion of pedagogy. As I have continued to weave autobiography into the course, I have used several essays that have found their way into this volume; and, since the early 1990s, several autobiographies by women writing teachers have been published.<sup>1</sup>

Although very few of these autobiographical, hybrid works by women have been available until recently, several literary and scholarly developments in the late 1980s have urged the intertwining of the private and public; the autobiographical and the theoretical; the meditative, and the pedagogical aspects of women's lives. There were explorations of the writing life by such artists as Gloria Anzaldúa, Annie Dillard, Audre Lorde, and Eudora Welty. In addition, feminist theory's critique of rational, phallogocentric discourse and of the split between the objective and the subjective led to what Nancy K. Miller labels "personal criticism": "an explicitly autobiographical performance within the act of criticism" (Miller 1991, 2). Some feminist literary theorists practiced critical acts rooted in personal passion, emotional connections with subject matter, and theoretical and cultural critique (see, for example, Diane P. Freedman, Olivia Frey, and Frances Murphy Zauhar's *The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism*). Concurrent with this emergence of "engaged" criticism (Miller 1991, 2) was a developing interest in both autobiography and the personal essay in composition studies. Such scholars as Richard Beach and Linda Peterson<sup>2</sup> investigated approaches to autobiographical writing in the composition class while others like Margo Culley and Cinthia Gannett focused on forms of women's autobiographical writing, specifically women's diaries and journals. Autobiography studies itself, led by such critics as Sidonie Smith and Estelle Jelinek, also emerged as a full-blown discipline, with particular attention paid to contemporary women's autobiography and forms of self-representation for women.

Not only did study of women's autobiography expand, but finally, after many years of neglect, composition theorists began to connect feminist theory and pedagogy and composition instruction. In a 1991 article, Elizabeth Flynn notes that "there can be no chronicling of the impact of feminism on the field of compo-

sition studies because until recently the field has strangely resisted addressing women's issues" (Flynn 1991, 137), and she asks what would constitute a feminist rhetorical tradition (Flynn 1991, 140–141). Indeed, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, composition scholars began examining writing theory and pedagogy through the lens of gender, and focused on such issues as male and female language, curricula of courses, structures and forms of discourse, and women's processes of reading, writing, knowing, and composing, in an attempt to shape a feminist pedagogy of composition instruction. Caywood and Overing's groundbreaking 1987 volume, *Teaching Writing: Pedagogy, Gender and Equity*, presents models of feminist composition instruction based on visions of nonauthoritarian classrooms, collaboration, and nurturance of women's voices. Janet Emig's and Louise Wetherbee Phelps' 1995 collection of essays—*Feminine Principles and Women's Experience in American Composition and Rhetoric*—expands our vision of feminist theory and praxis in composition studies and considers such topics as the authority of the female writer in the postmodern age, the need for experimental forms of academic writing, and a feminist pedagogy that fosters developmental stages of growth for women students.

The essays then in this volume reflect these concerns and arise out of a need to merge autobiographical reflection, contemplations of the writing life, and critical examination of our pedagogical practices in order to comprehend more fully our complex lives and struggles as feminist writing teachers in the academy. This collection brings together works by women, instructors of composition, creative writing, and women's studies, who view writing and teaching as a central way that we have created meaning in our lives. In our essays, we explore the particular configurations of our pasts, gender, class, ethnic backgrounds, personalities, and cultures that have shaped our personae as instructors of writing (our feelings, values, and beliefs; our philosophical and pedagogical assumptions; our stances in the classroom). Autobiographical writing prompts us to lay "claim" to our lives (to use Patricia Hampl's term); to connect past and present; to reflect on and to re-envision our experiences; and to authorize and to shape our complex identities as feminist writing teachers.

The essays address certain feminist questions:

- What intersections of past and present experience guide women's development as writers and instructors of writing?

- What early experiences—particularly with reading and writing and forms of language acquisition—have influenced women's development as writers and influenced their choices of careers?
- What attributes of literacy stories are apparent in their visions of development of self (e.g., narratives of socialization, experiences of schooling, mentors)?
- How does the hidden curriculum of the schools have an impact on women's coming of age and schooling?
- How do women emerge from silence? shape their voices and stances as professionals? gain authority and power as professionals? balance the private and public aspects of their lives?
- What conflicts and crises associated with gaining literacy and entering mainstream culture as women have taken place?
- How do women constitute themselves as literacy teachers? What forms of literacy and expression and modes of academic writing do women adopt and value? What clashes of culture emerge? How do women cope with what Mary Louise Pratt calls living in "the contact zone"—a space of unequal power relations and authority?
- What characterizes the postmodern sense of self for women writers and teachers? How do women create a language for teaching that captures and interprets the multiple dimensions and the often elusive and fragmented life of the feminist teacher in the class?
- What models of feminist teaching emerge? Are themes of attachment and relational thinking evident (Gilligan 1982)? Is Belenky's (1986) model of "connected teaching" apparent? Do women teachers embrace an ethics of caring (Noddings 1991)? Do they compose a vision of liberatory education (Weiler 1988) and see themselves as "agents of social change" (Weiler 1988, 89)?

Each person's responses to these questions are singular. The essays represent a range of perspectives across the academy (diverse ethnic backgrounds, disciplines, and roles in the

university). However, common themes do emerge and point to shared issues, struggles, and visions of language and teaching. I offer these readings as one way to configure the interwoven tapestry of our life stories and urge readers to conceive other patterns in the fabric of these texts.

I write and rewrite the 'stories' of my life; life's repeating patterns well up in steep banks; I am tossed about in their boiling swells and pulled under by the force of the pounding surf of autobiographical memory; seconds later I shoot back to the surface, gasping, alive. (Ann Victoria Dean)

Ann Dean writes of her need for words, her passion for words that remind her that she is "alive." Indeed, one strong theme evident in these works is the relationship between words and consciousness, words and an affirmation of identity. Words make these writers real to themselves. Witness Elaine Maimon's revelation that being named by her mother " 'Elaine, the fair' " of Tennyson's "Idylls of the King" gave her a confidence that she carried into adulthood: "What was important was that I was named (and deemed beautiful) in a book." Maimon also bestowed through naming a sense of entitlement upon her daughter, Gillian. Or hear Diane Glancy's realization that the desire for words as a child—the desire to "poke through" the veil of a culturally imposed silence—led her to scratch "marks" "on [her] inner thigh," "under [her] arms." Glancy reveals: "The whole universe was trying to blow me away, but the words kept me there." And I think of my depiction of the words and stories read to me by my father as "round glass blown bubbles," luminous moments of sensate and creative consciousness in which I felt most truly alive.

Not only did many of us live in and through words, but we also were children like Pamela Chergotis—outsiders in mainstream culture—who found our place in the world through reading. Lynne Crockett's crayon marks on *The Rise and the Fall of the Third Reich* (a book that she as a prekindergartner could not possibly have known or read) evoke the ways in which reading became an escape, a hiding place, an ongoing drama, a source of pleasure, or a source of power.

Opposing this vision of words as a generative force central to the development of selfhood is the power of social, cultural, and historical forces—the power of the patriarchy—to silence

women and to deny them voice and language. Karen Chaffee, for example, investigates her working-class girlhood, a world that demanded "silent submission to God, to husband and father, to nature," and explores how her parents' words—"weapons" used against her—made her feel insignificant. For Chaffee, schooling confirmed a sense of invisibility and powerlessness that she represents in a vision of her locked jaw and hospital stay—a time of total immobility and silence. As I write this Introduction, I realize that I symbolize my fear of annihilation and loss of selfhood in the terror that I experienced in the hospital in the aftermath of an eye operation at age four, a terror rooted in my inability to mouth words: "I opened my mouth as wide as I could and tried to scream. Still no sound."

Sondra Perl also confronts those cultural forces that limited her development as a woman, that prompted her to be the good daughter and then wife right after college, cut off from her own needs and desires. Perl reveals: "Before most of my friends had ever married, I was yearning for something I had not yet experienced and some submerged part of me rose up, remembered art history and literature and . . . left." The entitlement to seek pleasure and fulfillment becomes for Perl a profound act of rebellion. Lynn Z. Bloom, extending the context of this silencing to her life in the profession, juxtaposes her early sense of illegitimacy and marginality (as an adjunct and untenured temporary instructor) with her growing commitment to the field. Bloom contrasts those patriarchal forces in the academy that tell her that her work does not "count" with her efforts to "raise [her] voice" and to create her own "life-saving story" as a writer and as a teacher.

"The difficulty of saying 'I' "

—Christa Wolf, *The Quest for Christa T*

The need to discover the range of our own voices—to gain authority as women, as writers, as teachers—is also central in these reflections. For many of us, personal authority, agency, and authorship are intertwined. Nancy Sommers, for example, explores her family background and her early career in academia to determine the reasons for her dependence on false notions of authority that constrain her voice as a woman, as a scholar and as a teacher. She conceives of a place "between the

drafts" where one can feel the "pull" of one's own voice as it struggles to create knowledge in relation to and against other voices. She envisions genuine authorship as a way "to bring life and writing" together and to develop a sense of personal authority. In their essay, Elaine and Gillian Maimon connect authorship with a shared web of three generations of mother-daughter storytelling. In her section of the essay, Elaine Maimon explores how her mother's passion for reading gave her a love of drama and performance that endowed her with a personal sense of authority that she carried into adulthood. In turn, Gillian Maimon demonstrates how her emerging sense of voice, nourished by a legacy of reading and writing, prompts her as a student teacher to challenge the authority of her supervising teacher and to advocate for the "sovereignty" of each child in her classroom. Linda Brodkey also links a sense of authority with her ownership of words (revealed in her census-taking in the neighborhood as a prekindergarten child) and with her mother's ethic of fulfilling labor. For Brodkey and for her mother, work—whether it is Brodkey's writing or her mother's sewing—comes from a union of physical, emotional, intellectual, and imaginative capacities. This ethic grants these women autonomy, authority, and voice.

Gaining authority as women/writers/teachers, however, does not necessarily mean that identity is fixed or that the self is unified. Many of these essays present selfhood as a dialogic interaction of multiple voices created by our class, gender, ethnicity, communities that we are part of, and stances as teachers. Like Gloria Anzaldúa's persona in "To live in the Borderlands means you," we carry these voices "on [our] back[s]" (Anzaldúa 1987, 194) and live in a psychic space without borders—"sin fronteras" (ibid, 195). Many of us wrestle with a state of selfhood that is fluid, ever-changing, momentarily named, and then dissolved.

I think of the many voices speaking within me as I write this essay. Am I the young child straining for words, battling insecurities? Or am I the meditative poet? Or the passionate teacher? Or the more distanced composition scholar? Or the feminist pedagogue? The collision of these voices interferes with my work on this introduction; I have difficulty determining an appropriate theoretical perspective, point of view, and tone. I finally decide to write from a meditative place and space within where these multiple voices converge and enrich each other. In the process of writing, I discover a new, hybrid perspective; I let the writing take over.

Perhaps what is most striking in these essays is the perception that the writing must take over—that we search for, examine, and shape our multiple selves through language. Min-zhan Lu's experience is exemplary. Lu portrays a divided state of identity in her upbringing in Communist China during the Cultural Revolution when she spoke English and a Shanghai dialect of Chinese in her home and Standard Chinese in school until only her school language was sanctioned and she found that she experienced tremendous "frustration and confusion" that she could not articulate until adulthood. Judith Ortiz Cofer experienced similar dislocations in her bilingual upbringing, but she realizes that these experiences taught her to be flexible, to travel across boundaries, and to be a "survivor in language."

Our multiple selves—if often in conflict—do offer possibilities for growth and fulfillment. In *Composing a Life*, Mary Catherine Bateson theorizes that women now lead "lives of multiple commitments" (Bateson 1990, 17), lives of "improvisation" (ibid, 16), and that the convergence of these lives presents multiple opportunities for change and growth. We develop in relation to our students; we nourish relationships with family, with friends, with colleagues; we nurture intellectual friendships; we rely on informal and formal mentors; we search for models in our reading. We create intellectual communities of colleagues. We recognize that those moments when "the seams of life" break down (Sommers)—moments that Jacqueline Jones Royster calls "spiry"—times of "convergence"—are sustaining. Our multiple lives enrich and support each other.<sup>3</sup>

I am taken these days by Roland Barthes' image of a seminar as a 'suspended site' where all of us, students and teacher alike, come together to 'write in each other's presence.' He brings to mind a circle in which what circulates is our knowledge, our desire to know, our questions and responses. Barthes likens the circle formed by the seminar to the circle formed by children in the ring game where 'the object is to pass the ring but the goal is to touch each other's hands.' Teaching, to me, allows us to touch one another—what we pass is not a ring but our words. (*A Metaphor for Teaching*, Sondra Perl)

Is the teaching life any more ordered and contained than our personal lives? These essays also portray the world of teaching as multifarious, dynamic, and ever-changing. They envision the



feminist teacher as a full human being who lives emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually in the classroom and has the same expectations for her students. hooks' belief that teaching should "foster the intellectual and spiritual growth of . . . students" and teachers is echoed in many of the works in this volume. hooks' vision of "engaged pedagogy" is represented in E. M. Broner's scene of the women in her creative writing class in Israel, combing each other's hair: the physical action symbolizes the physical, emotional, and spiritual bonds that developed in Broner's classroom.

What are the key themes of feminist teaching that emerge in this volume? We envision a pedagogy not of exhortation, not an "assembly-line approach to learning" (in hooks' words), but one in which teachers and students act, as Dean theorizes, as "participant[s]" in the learning process. Maimon's revelation that her students critiqued drafts of her essay for this volume presents a pattern of collaboration evident in many of our classrooms. It is a pedagogy that honors students' complex voices, both past and present. "Always go for the intact part," Mary Gordon counsels. "This is what one must find, first, in all teaching." It is a pedagogy in which teachers value each student's capabilities, creativity, and contributions to the class. As Perl reveals, she wants to convince students that "their words matter." It is a pedagogy in which teachers are receptive, attentive listeners who practice what Nel Noddings calls an ethic of "interpersonal reasoning": an attention to listening, connecting with others, understanding the position of the other, and then engaging in response and dialogue (Noddings, 1991, 160–163). Perl's classroom scene strikingly vivifies this pose:

I have learned to listen carefully. . . . To look closely at what is in front of me and to listen to what is being spoken. As I meet the challenge to take in what my students say and ask, I am simultaneously called out of myself.

It is a pedagogy that asks teachers and students together actively to create learning communities and to construct knowledge.

This pedagogy creates spaces in which the private and public, the "personal" and the "academic" (Sommers), the classroom and "the world outside" (Bridwell-Bowles) merge. It is a world in which we struggle to craft curriculum that will be meaningful to students, one in which students are urged to acquire not just

"tokens"—as Brodkey theorizes—but fundamental aspects of literacy: questioning, critical and imaginative inquiry, and the desire to write and to discover meaning and knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

These aspects of literacy—reading, writing, inquiry, dialogue—are conceived of as fluid, interwoven, and cyclic processes that move students into larger and larger arenas of feeling, thought, experience, and knowledge and give students "ways of knowing that enhance their capacity to live fully and deeply" (hooks). And these processes offer us similar opportunities for growth and renewal. As Dean reveals: "Teaching and writing, writing and teaching, it is the singular rhythm of life."

These essays, however, do not present idealized classroom worlds. Although many of us possess features of Belenky's midwife teacher in that we do nurture students, we do "draw" knowledge out of them, we do "foster" their evolution as thinkers and writers (Belenky 1986, 217–219), we also are deeply cognizant of students' resistance, passivity, and struggle with words. I ask: "Can words fight poverty, loneliness, despair, apathy, violence? Can words ever create a safe space of the classroom. . . .?" We confront differences of race, class, and ethnicity that must be dealt with in the classroom. Storytelling does offer the possibility of bridging cultural difference. For example, E. M. Broner depicts a moment in a women's literature and writing class that she conducted in 1983 in Jerusalem at Hebrew University, in which the Israeli women sensed their differences from what they perceived as their privileged American classmates until the American women told stories of their pain and loss; then, through listening, Broner relates, the Israeli women gained more respect and understanding of their American counterparts. Hephzibah Roskelly, speaking from her perspective as a white Southern woman, also hopes that sharing narratives about the intersections of class, race, and gender will lead students to understand the position of the other: "Hearing these stories may be the most powerful way for students to understand race, class, and gender since it connects and distances experience at the same time. . . . Reading stories, their own and others', brings students an understanding and consciousness of their own and others' contexts that allows them to grapple with the frustrating and painful issues that they have grown up with and have hidden." Roskelly hopes that autobiographical writing and story-telling will help students forge connections with others and become "whole."

These are visions of change. In many of these stories, we hear calls for engaged learning, cultural critique, and cultural transformation. Broner celebrates the roles of the feminist writing teachers in the cultural revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s, reminding us that the drive to "al[ter] language" was a drive to change reality. Lillian Bridwell-Bowles also urges us to "make our classrooms vital places where students learn not only the various conventions of academic writing, but also the power of communication to change things, to transform."

These are hopeful visions. Language invokes an eternal present: moments of reading, writing, teaching, and storytelling that offer opportunities for change, growth, and renewal. As Mary Gordon suggests regarding her work with the elders: It is a source of "something entirely hopeful, entirely loving. A spot of light. Presence and the present. A nest of language for the past." And, I would add, a "nest of language" for the future.

These visions suggest that if we work "as if [our lives] depended on it," if we "write across the chalkboard" (Rich "As if"), we can change our worlds. For the classroom is the place where, as Lynne Crockett suggests, "the past and future meet."

### Notes

1. See, for example, autobiographies by Joan Cutuly and Mary Rose O'Reilly.
2. See, for example, Beach, Connors, Peterson.
3. Many of us live in what Gilligan defines as a "web of interconnectedness" (Gilligan 1982, 57) with others.
4. These themes echo recent explorations of feminist composition pedagogy. See, for instance, Ashton-Jones; Daümer and Runzo; Flynn (1988, 1991); Goulston; Hunter; McCracken and Mellin.

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