Telling Stories, Speaking Personally: Reconsidering the Place of Lived Experience in Composition

Daniel Mahala
Jody Swilky

Academic Storytelling and the Limits of Conventional Knowledge

Tell me a story.

The phrase strikes a chord in the Western imagination, evoking images of children at bedtime, fireside intimacy, the most natural and unimpeded of human communications. And yet, such associations mask the immense variability of the forms and functions of storytelling in contemporary and traditional cultures, and the very conditions that, in recent years, have enabled the practice(s) of “storytelling” to emerge across the disciplines as a powerful challenge to Western discursive norms.

The turn towards “story,” “testimony,” and the “personal” in professional discourse is a complex and many-sided phenomenon. In one sense, storytelling as a mode of professional discourse is nothing new. Autobiography, the “personal essay,” the memoir, the travelogue, and other written genres of storytelling have long enjoyed an important position in the pantheon of Western literary genres, and reading and writing in some of these genres has long been a staple of writing instruction (see Connors, “The Rise”). This relative isolation of storytelling within literary studies is determined significantly by what has been reductively perceived as the “subjective bias” of personal writing, that is, “subjective” when compared with the more “objective” rhetorical stances generally associated with other forms of professional writing that seem to represent unmediated modes of knowledge. By contrast, we wish to highlight the move towards a practice of storytelling and the “personal” which deliberately challenges the boundaries of this reserved space of Western culture for aesthetic self-reflection. Increasingly, the work of a number of minority and third-world writers reflects a sense of storytelling as the marrow of a heritage that can revive dispossessed cultures and experiences, and make possible a newly critical relationship with the dominant culture. As Trinh Minh-Ha puts it, “[s]torytelling is the oldest form of building historical consciousness in commu-
nity” (148). For a postcolonial writer such as Michelle Cliff, storytelling is a means of reclaiming an identity that transforms the self's relationship to the colonizer:

To write as a complete Caribbean woman ... demands of us retracing the African part of ourselves, reclaiming as our own, and as our subject, a history sunk under the sea, or scattered as potash in the canefields, or gone to the bush or trapped in a class system notable for its rigidity and absolute dependence on color stratification. It means finding the artforms of these of our ancestors and speaking in the patois forbidden us . . . . It means also, I think, mixing in the forms taught us by the oppressor, undermining his language and co-opting his style, and turning it to our purpose. (“A Journey” 14)

Moreover, this sense of storytelling among black, Asian, and Native American writers, especially women writers, seems increasingly allied with a broader push towards "personal" writing, autoethnography, and participant observation across the disciplines, especially in the humanities and social sciences. Thus Patricia Williams, an African American legal scholar, begins her book *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, “[s]ince subject position is everything in my analysis of the law, you deserve to know that it’s a bad morning.” Far from merely painting mustaches on the Mona Lisa, Williams explains how her writing aims to transgress the norms of legal writing which

presum[e] a methodology that is highly stylized, precedential, and based on deductive reasoning . . . I am trying to create a genre of legal writing to fill the gaps in traditional legal scholarship. I would like to write in a way that reveals the intersubjectivity of legal constructions, that forces the reader to both participate in the construction of meaning and to be conscious of that process. (8)

Williams' aim here coincides with a much broader goal reflected in many interjections of the “personal” in professional writing. When we advocate attention to the personal in writing, we are talking about discursive strategies through which writers can present themselves as historically situated subjects exploring how their knowledge has been shaped by lived experience. This sense of the personal encompasses Cliff's conception of the postcolonial woman writer and Williams' understanding of the writer's subject position. It includes Jane Tompkins' notion of “speaking personally” as well, which she explores in her essay “Me and My Shadow.” Speaking of women (writers), Tompkins contends that the personal is “what is important, answer's one's needs, strikes one as immediately interesting” (1089). As a discursive stance, it breaks down the public-private dichotomy by activating feelings suppressed by traditional academic discourses so that discussion of, say, “epistemology, or James Joyce” is not “segregated from meditations on what is happening outside [the] window or inside [the] heart” (1080). Speaking personally, then, broadens and complicates the critical attitudes writers exercise as scholars. The personal inevitably, as Tompkins' exploration of this concept demonstrates, draws women writers to speak about fascinations, curiosities, confusions and aversions, which have attended their inscriptions of themselves as professionals. Thus, to articulate the
personal is to write the self reflexively, as an historical subject who tells stories from lived experience, yet also draws on ways of reasoning, arguing and writing that empower her as a professional.

This kind of personal interjection can make visible the social positioning of the writer, and how her arguments on often abstract, professional issues are shaped by myriad "personal" circumstances, social group memberships, and relationships. Hence, the move towards "story" and writing from "personal" experience can reveal conventionally suppressed contextual conditions that mold a discourse. By making visible the multiple voices, identities, and interests that animate our experience and communications with others, the turn towards the personal can enable a more acute sense of ethics in the production of knowledge. As Patricia Williams puts it,

one of the most important results of reconceptualizing from "objective truth" to rhetorical event will be a more nuanced sense of legal and social responsibility. This will be so because much of what is spoken in so-called objective, unmediated voices is in fact mired in hidden subjectivities and unexamined claims that make property of others beyond the self, all the while denying such connections. (11)

The relationship between writing from personal experience and storytelling that has been becoming more conspicuous in the humanities and social sciences represents a rich intersection and layering of story, introspection, scholarship and theorizing. Story may be subsumed within writing from personal experience, and story may be a framework for moving beyond personal narrative. Such layerings of discourse can connect writers to the locale of their experience, while moving them beyond it. If writers understand how their experience is rooted in various sociohistorical processes and community traditions, they can more easily move between them, integrating personal and scholarly ways of knowing the self, others, and the world.

On the other hand, if this sociohistorical sense of experience is not cultivated, a writer is much more likely to suffer in her development of a critical stance. As teachers of writing and as writers associated with academic disciplines, we are concerned about the consequences of instruction that subordinates students' need to develop a critical stance—sense of their sociohistorical location and agency as writers—favor of students' need to assimilate dominant discursive conventions, formats, and styles of academic writing. Thus, in this essay we will explore how academic storytelling can work to develop the critical stance of writers, as well as how pervasive senses of the personal in composition studies over the last ten years have promoted and limited such development.

We acknowledge that the establishment of a critical stance in academic writing requires knowledge of discursive conventions dominant in a field. Academic storytelling, as we wish to define it, never exists wholly "outside of" established knowledge. Nor do we wish to erase the presence of academic traditions and conventions from the scene of student writing. However, our sense of developing a critical stance entails not only knowledge of prevailing
conventions, but also what Linda Brodkey calls “finding a bias.” In a wonderful example of academic storytelling, Brodkey tells how her own literacy instruction consistently substituted “ritual performances” for her own desires as a writer. Thus, in her first recollection of a writing assignment (“Write about your favorite country”) Brodkey recounts compiling sentences from an encyclopedia on “Africa.” Such assignments—as well as other “ritual performances of penmanship, spelling, grammar, punctuation, organization, and most recently thinking”—suppress “writing on the bias,” a metaphor Brodkey uses to describe the politics of her location as a white, working-class woman in her current writing, as well as her identifications with the resourceful “pleasures in playing out possibilities” of work, modeled in her childhood by her mother’s sewing (547; see also 544-45). Writing on the bias—from within the tangle of desires, fears, beliefs, knowledge and group identifications that constitutes the historicity of experience—was a forbidden practice within the dominant literacy of the school. Instead of rooting labor in the immediate pleasures of performance, as Brodkey’s mother did in her sewing, the act of writing becomes a proficiency, divorced from experience, to be mastered and converted into the middle-class “cultural currency” of test scores, grades, and, eventually, credentials (547). Hence, the substitution of ritual for writing inhibits development of a critical stance because it both obstructs the interweaving desires, identifications and experiences that motivate writing and obfuscates historical self-understanding of such motives.

The writer’s search for a bias is an attempt to locate oneself in social and historical contexts, acknowledging the logics, structures and systems that make experience intelligible and significant to oneself and others. In Brodkey’s case, her urgency to impress her teachers through ritual performances in writing was motivated by her longing to become middle class, a bias not recognized by her at that time (541, 546). For her, the process of “finding a bias” entailed recognizing this longing as well as finding out how her identifications with her working class mother might still be shaping her work. Thus, having a bias and writing on the bias are not the same thing. The former cannot be avoided; the latter is the result of long reflection on and struggle with the cultures that impose on and work through the writer.

Unfortunately, the sociohistorical sense of personal writing rendered in Brodkey’s prose as the search for a “bias” seems to have had little influence on the writing students are called on to do in composition classrooms. Despite the increasing frequency of personal interjections in composition research (to the point where James Raymond, former editor of College English calls them “I-dropping”), personal writing still appears in many composition textbooks and classrooms as a preliminary to “research,” alternately valorized for its sincerity, and excoriated for its self-indulgence. Many textbooks, for example, are structured so that personal writing or narrative precede, in either temporal or logical terms, the writer’s forays into more “public,” and often implicitly more valuable, types of writing. As Robert Connors has demonstrated, the conven-
tional "modes of discourse" have lost their currency in the composition theory of the last fifty years. But the teleology they imply lives on. Instead of beginning with narrative and description and moving towards exposition, argument and persuasion, students are often told to move from "inside" to "outside" (Burnham), from "subjective" to "objective" (see McCormick's study of the "research paper" as presented in writing textbooks), or from "expressive" to "transactional" writing (Britton; see also Maimon "Some Uses" 132). Moreover, when "personal" stories are affirmed as a valid focus for writing, they are often valued mainly for their "aesthetic quality" or "authenticity," rather than as a diverse set of strategies for transgressing dominant ideologies of style, and for engaged scholarship and social critique. Books like Coles and Vopat's What Makes Writing Good demonstrate the powerful attraction of personal stories for writing teachers, but they also, as Lester Faigley has argued, demonstrate the reserved space for the expression of an artful self afforded to "high and solitary minds" in the dominant Western traditions of personal writing (114-129; see also France). Evidently, the valuation of personal writing described by Connors, Halloran, and others in writing courses of the last half century has done little to promote "writing on the bias," a more historical consciousness of the biases that animate acts of writing in our classrooms.

Hence we wish to explore the potential of these emergent kinds of storytelling and "personal writing" in writing classrooms. Just as important, we will examine how the polarization of personal and public discourse in the history of composition pedagogy, particularly during the period of the mid-70s through the 80s, creates obstacles to realizing this potential. In the next section of this essay, our focus will be the "social turn" critique of process pedagogy, which offered some important correctives to process views of the relationship between knowledge, discourse and experience, yet simultaneously seems to have repeated some of the same errors. Our use of the term "social turn" refers to, yet also raises questions about, John Trimbur's review essay "Taking the Social Turn: Teaching Writing Post-Process." Trimbur discusses examples of "post-process" theory and practice in sharp opposition to process pedagogy, arguing that the latter encouraged students to construct "the authorial persona of self revelatory personal essays ... in a decidedly non-academic style." Ironically, Trimbur argues, process pedagogy desired to subvert the constraints of oppressive discourses and institutions yet in actuality it "reinstated the rhetoric of the belles-lettres tradition at the center of the writing classroom" (110).

In our view the problem with Trimbur's view of history is that it envisions the move beyond process as a 'doing away with' rather than a working through the contradictions of process. Indeed, as we will show, many social turn theorists have foregone close attention to process pedagogy's interest in personal writing, offering a corrective that merely transvalues and reinscribes many of the familiar oppositions structuring process pedagogy—individual and community, personal and public writing, freedom and necessity. In these accounts, process theory is often represented through its weakest, and most anti-historical,
versions. And such simplifications of the legacy of process have opened the way for reinscriptions of the teacher, and of professional discourse communities, in terms that reproduce the dominant traditions of Western instrumental rationality. However, instead of doing away with process pedagogy, we might be better served by examining contradictory concepts of self and experience inhering in process and post-process rhetorics, and reconsidering them in light of feminist, postcolonial and postmodern senses of storytelling. Towards this end, we need to ask: What dynamics of identity and difference are implicit in process and post-process conceptions of the personal? How are the senses of “personal writing” implicit in the work of academic storytellers such as Patricia Williams, Jane Tompkins, Michelle Cliff, and Linda Brodkey different from the senses of “personal writing” implicit in prominent composition pedagogies? How can we revise these senses of “personal writing” in composition to achieve the “more nuanced sense of... responsibility” that Patricia Williams argues will come from a more acute sense of knowledge as a socially positioned “rhetorical event”?

**Storytelling and the Social Turn in Composition: Positioning the “Personal” within Discourse**

The social turn in composition research in the 80s can be read as a reaction against earlier process rhetorics, which social turn theorists faulted for inadequately representing the social contexts of writing. We use the term *process rhetorics* broadly, to include a range of work from the informally narrated reflections on writing classrooms of the 60s and 70s by Peter Elbow, Ken Macrorie, and others; to the neo-Kantian philosophies of “expressive writing” championed by James Britton and other early “language across the curriculum” (LAC) teachers in Britain and disseminated to the US through the influential Dartmouth seminar in 1966; to the methodical studies of cognitive processes associated with writing by Linda Flower, John Hayes, Sondra Perle, Janet Emig, and others through the 1970s and early 80s. Several composition theorists have been especially influential in criticizing the “process revolution” accomplished by these teachers and writers, and initiating the so-called “social turn” in composition studies, among them David Bartholomae and James Berlin. While important differences exist among the criticisms of process offered by these theorists, they generally criticized the ways in which process rhetorics positioned the individual subject as the prime source of language and knowledge, and often suppressed, inadvertently or intentionally, consideration of the social dimensions of language, knowledge, and agency.

From the perspective of our advocacy of certain postmodern senses of storytelling, these criticisms of process rhetoric are important because they have deeply shaped the ways in which storytelling and personal writing are understood and practiced in classrooms. In our view, these critiques justly identify the individualistic character of many process rhetorics. But in excoriating this individualism, these critiques also tend to ignore ways personal writing might be used in classrooms to help illuminate the self as a sociohistorical subject.
Indeed, despite their emphasis on the social character of experience, these critiques of process often subtly reinforce the public-private dichotomy widespread in contemporary culture, implicitly assigning “personal” ways of knowing to the “private” realm, and ignoring their importance in “public” or “critical” discourse.

In the early 1990s, David Bartholomae describes the “process paradigm” in terms fairly typical of the general critique of process pedagogy. Also typical is Bartholomae’s association of experiential narrative generally with the most romantic and anti-historical versions of it. Bartholomae characterizes the work of process theorists such as Elbow, Britton, Moffett, and Emig as representing “a general shift away from questions of value and the figure of the writer in a social context of writing (“Writing With Teachers” 68). These process theorists, Bartholomae contends, offer a “modern curricular production of the independent author, the celebration of point-of-view as individual artifact, and the promotion of sentimental realism (the true story of what I think, feel, know and see)” (68-69). In polar opposition to such a curriculum, Bartholomae would teach what he calls “academic writing,” “critical writing,” writing that is “part of a general critique of traditional humanism” (71). Our point here is that, from Bartholomae’s perspective, the critique of process rhetorics seems primarily to lead to a devaluation of “the true story of what I think, feel, know and see” and corresponding elevation of “critical” knowledge. Little sanction is given to defining alternative uses of experiential narratives to explore the writer’s historical location in relation to others and the world.

An effect of such critiques of process rhetorics is to sharpen oppositions between personal and professional writing. However, when the personal is perceived primarily as opposed to critical knowledge, the meaning of the social is distorted as well. Instead of signifying the complex field of human relationships through which identity forms and changes, the meaning of “the social” is distorted to signify “the demands of the collective” (see Raymond Williams 194). In the case of college writing classes, the social becomes the assimilative demands imposed by the dominant university culture.

To understand how the social turn may have contributed to this distortion, we need to explore how personal writing has been defined differently in the practice of academic storytellers like Tompkins and Williams than in most process and post-process pedagogies. For Tompkins and Williams, the polarization of personal and professional writing has consequences, such as female oppression or the erasure of the racial subject. For instance, Patricia Williams explains how the editors of an academic law review “carefully cut out” her “fury” and “eliminated” references to her race when they edited her essay to make it more in line with the conventions of professional legal writing. Her article told her story, as a black woman, of being excluded from a Benetton boutique, when a fearful clerk refused to “buzz” open the door, based on his assessment of her (possibly criminal) appearance. By exercising the “blind application of principles of neutrality,” the editors of her essay not only reduced her “rushing, run-on-rage…to simple declarative sentences,” but their omissions
By contrast, to regard this article as rhetorical event is to examine how Williams' lived experience as a racial, gendered, ethnic subject shapes her arguments about the law, as well as how herself-representations shape the effects of her arguments on others. In many respects, Williams' interest in knowledge as rhetorical event seems close to the interest of social turn theorists in examining how social codes interact to shape speaking, writing, and knowing in academic settings. Indeed, Bartholomae notes in his recent CCCC debate with Peter Elbow the emergent tendency towards academic storytelling in the work of Jane Tompkins, Mike Rose, and others. However, in his view, such writing stands as "examples of the academics pushing at the boundaries" of academic discourse, but not as a "transcendence" of academic discourse ("Writing With" 67). Instead, such writing calls up different (but highly conventional) figures of the writer. These writers are taking pleasure in (or making capital of) what are often called "literary devices"—dialogue, description, the trope of the real, the figure of the writer at the center of sentimental realism . . . [Such writings are] examples of blurred genres, not free writing, and both genres represent cultural interests (in reproducing the distinct versions of experience and knowledge). In my department, this other form of narrative is often called "creative non-fiction" or "literary non-fiction"—it is a way to celebrate individual vision, the detail of particular worlds. (68)

However, while such statements seem to affirm the value of academic storytelling, they also enclose such work within the reserved space for "literature" or "art" in Western culture. Tompkins and Rose may be blurring genres, but Bartholomae quickly places them within the traditional polarity of literary and non-literary genres. Hence, such writers cannot help "reproducing the distinct versions of experience and knowledge," reproducing the polarity of "individual vision" and "the detail of particular worlds," on the one hand, and of generalizable truth on the other. It's just a matter of choosing between (or blurring the enduring difference between) two conventional figures of the writer, two genres, two sets of cultural interests, which remain nonetheless "distinct."

The problem here is that positioning contemporary academic storytellers within the reserved space for "literature" in Western culture blunts the main critical impetus of this work. The aim of academic storytelling, as we advocate it, is to introduce conventionally suppressed social interests into the discourses of philosophy, sociology, rhetoric and law, as well as into belles-lettres writing. Such interests include open discussion of the politics of location, especially the race, class, gender, and sexuality of the writer, which continue to be suppressed through conventions of "rigorous," "critical," "scholarly," or "objective" prose. Indeed, Patricia Williams is careful to illustrate how polarities between art and knowledge in Western traditions often suppress discussion of the social position-
Lived Experience in Composition

...ing of knowledge, or shunt it off as an “objet d’art,” a morsel for our depoliticized contemplation. Consider, for instance, Williams’ paraphrase of a rejection by a “prominent law review” (having been denied the right to publish the rejection letter) of an article offering an account of the near-schizophrenic tensions she has experienced in being a black female law professor:

If . . . you genuinely want to confront the risks of mental illness involved in your being a ‘vain black female commercial law professor,’ either you should do so by rewriting the piece as an objective commentary, weaving in appropriate references to the law and, if necessary, social science data; or, since you have a very poetic way of writing, you should consider writing short stories. (214)

Clearly, such dichotomies between “stories” and “data” narrow the area of public discourse available for considering lived experience as a source of knowledge, and in particular, the lived experience of marginalized groups as, in Foucault’s terms, “subjugated knowledges.”

Bartholomae’s recent positioning of academic storytellers within the boundaries of literary prose emphasizes “recognizable” style over politics, domesticating discursive practice by assigning it to the realm of the familiar. It focuses on what seems conventional rather than different. But the whole issue for someone such as Jane Tompkins is to speak in “personal” ways that have been generally excluded from mainstream academic prose. The political value of such speech for Tompkins derives partly from her realization that “the conventions defining legitimate sources of knowledge overlapp[ ] with the conventions defining appropriate gender behavior (male).” From this perspective, convention involves not simply “literary devices” or “figures of the writer,” but concerns the way “emotion is excluded from the process of attaining knowledge,” a situation that “undercuts women’s epistemic authority,” since women have been typically positioned as “bearers of emotion” in Western culture (1081). Hence, Tompkins wants to disrupt conventional postures of academic writing, which feel “like wearing men’s jeans,” and to “speak personally,” even if, as she realizes, “[t]o break with convention is to risk not being heard at all” (1081).

Of course, as the social turn has argued, “speaking personally” depends no less on conventions than academic writing. However, looking back towards the development of early post-process pedagogies, we find this insight employed more prominently to homogenize than to differentiate the possibilities of “speaking personally.” To use Bartholomae’s early work as an example, the 1985 essay “Inventing the University” describes all individuals as constituted by multiple discourses, but repeatedly dichotomizes “academic,” “public,” “privileged” or “specialized” discourses on the one hand, and “common discourse,” “private motive,” the “naive” codes of ‘everyday’ life,” and “the wisdom of experience” on the other (156). Given such polar categories, the task is to move the student from the latter stigmatized categories to the former favored ones, not to differentiate the “common discourse” as a complex interweaving of social
forces and motives. On the contrary, the student "has to invent the university by . . . finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, on the one hand, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline, on the other. He must learn to speak our language" (135). Interestingly, Bartholomae emphasizes the "common" and random character ("idiosyncrasy") of the student's "personal history" while the destination of her development ("the requirements of convention") is specific and community-based. Such descriptions obscure the socially organized character of the affiliations, first-hand experiences, and local knowledge that define "personal history" and reproduce an ironical kind of individualism: the student is positioned as a single "person" against the massive weight of social "languages," "codes," "discourses," "communities" and "conventions."

In effect, as we suggested before, the meaning of "the social" is distorted to mean "the demands of the collective," the demand that students submit to dominant institutional discourses. In contrast, the academic storytellers we have been discussing use the personal as an opening through which to bring what seems "outside" into the academic game. Lived experience testifies to relationships that problematize conventional knowledge. Thus, Patricia Williams makes race matter in the law by testifying how experience and the law conflict. Jane Tompkins renders the personal as the problem many women experience in becoming legitimate sources of knowledge. And Michelle Cliff disrupts the "King's English" by stringing together "myth, dream, historical detail, observation" with "native language," tearing "into the indoctrination of the colonizer" and making overt its character as heteroglossia (Bakhtin) (16).

More recently, Bartholomae has incorporated explicit attention to the place of experience in writing instruction. Facts, Artifacts, Counterfacts, Bartholomae's co-authored text (with Anthony Petrosky) describing a basic writing course, encourages students to use experiential knowledge to explore subjects such as growth in adolescence, or the nature of work. Assignment sequences in this text suggest, however, that a primary purpose of reading "academic" discourses is so students "appropriate" ideas from them to revise their earlier renderings of experience. The course described in Facts does allow students to "argue with," "ask questions of" or "write about how your understanding . . . is different from" understandings represented in assigned theoretical texts (99, 85). As Bartholomae and Petrosky put it, "[i]t is not a course designed to make the academy—or its students—disappear" (9). However, the sequence of assignments perpetuates the familiar teleology of moving from experience to established knowledge as students use theoretical texts overwhelmingly as academic lenses through which to unveil the generalizable truth of their experience. Indeed, the sheer difficulty of the theoretical texts used reinforces this teleology, since students' initial self-understandings, rooted in their own complex affiliations and experiences, are likely to be overwhelmed by the forbidding task of penetrating an opaque text. Rather than amplifying and historicizing initial self-understandings as a way of helping students find a bias in writing, students are likely to feel
intense pressure to substitute an "academic" explanation of their experience for more deeply felt meanings. Certainly, the reported 60% failure rate of the final exam is likely to be an intimidating reminder of one's "outsider" status in the university, and a spur to accept the privileging of "inside," "theoretical" knowledge over experience (102).

This subordinate positioning of experience vis a vis knowledge is, perhaps, even more clearly structured in Ways of Reading, where the curriculum is oriented not towards basic writers but mainstream freshman students. For instance, in "The Aims of Education," Sequence One in the second edition, students begin the first assignment depicting an educational experience but are asked to read it "as Freire would" (680). In the next two assignments dealing with Adrienne Rich's work, students are asked to use her notion of "revision" to read her poems and then to apply the concept of "tradition" to their experience (681-83). The next two assignments ask students to write about their experience reading Emerson and then to use an aspect of his "argument" to analyze school curriculum (685). We are not arguing that writers such as Freire, Rich, and Emerson should not be used in writing classes. However, we are arguing that the focus on getting through such a difficult sequence of readings, and their contextualization as specially authorized lenses on experience, will likely overwhelm the social meanings and identifications embodied in students' self-understandings. Rather than pursue the historicity of such self-understandings, these assignment sequences press student attention into the service of more authorized concepts of "consciencization," "tradition," or the "Emersonian scholar."

We are troubled by the persistence of these divisions of experience and knowledge because their representation in Bartholomae's work echoes a larger, entrenched division in composition, and indeed, Western culture as a whole. The scale of this division was dramatized for us by our memory of standing on the margins of a huge crowd at the 1991 CCCCs, listening to "the debate" between the amplified voices of two tiny stick figures: Peter Elbow, celebrated advocate of personal writing, and Bartholomae, spokesperson for the social turn. This scene, amplified by recent publication of the debate, presents writing teachers with a choice that is too stark, and ultimately complicit on either side with reproducing the status quo: We can perpetuate "sentimental realism" or "teach them [students] its critique" ("Writing With" 69). At the end of his speech Bartholomae put it in the form of a question: "should composition programs self-consciously maintain a space for, reproduce the figure of, the author at a time when the figure of the author is under attack in all other departments of the academy?" Or should they "preside over a critical writing... academic writing" (70)?

We doubt teachers must choose between being "academics" who are critical of experience, and "authors" who are dupes of it. Indeed, our best choices might derive from another question: how can we help students integrate experience into their writing in ways that neither mimic the sentimental persona of the personal essay nor the impersonal persona of authoritative knowledge? The
problem with composition’s social turn in the 80s was that, rather than exploring lived experience as potentially critical knowledge, it tended to lump all personal writing and storytelling as self-indulgent retreats from the real business of college writing programs. In the early 80s, this real business was commonly explained as “initiating” students into “the conventions of the academic discourse community.” Left-oriented versions of this pedagogy emphasized the explicit teaching of the social conventions of “academic writing” as a way of helping working-class, and other non-traditional students, succeed in college. Thus, scholars such as Patricia Bizzell, articulated a growing sentiment against “concessions to the ‘personal’ in process pedagogy which was distracting teachers from instruction that “demystifies the institutional structure of knowledge” (Bizzell 112).

However, in practice, this “demystifying” of knowledge has more often than not proceeded in ways that reinforce the polarity between knowledge and experience (for an analysis of this aspect of “social” WAC pedagogies, see Mahala). Indeed, we would now like to broaden our earlier analysis of Bartholomae’s work, showing how, across a broad political spectrum, prominent social turn theorists have neglected how the biases woven through student experience might form a basis for learning to write, and for social critique. More typically, social turn pedagogies have produced new sets of collective demands, in Brodkey’s terms, new “ritual performances,” to substitute for writing on the bias. In Brodkey’s experience as a student, she tells how her college professors replaced the “inverted pyramid,” which she mastered in high school, by the ritual of the “generic corrective display thesis” in which one argues that a “good many scholars/critics have concluded X, but X ignores Y, which is essential/critical to fully understanding Z.” In the wake of the social turn, many teachers have become more aware of discipline-specific variations in discursive practice, as well as alternative practices in communities beyond the academy. Moreover, at the left end of the spectrum, social turn theorists such as James Berlin have worked to demystify knowledge by teaching students how to deconstruct ideological biases inhering in different fields of knowledge. However, whether students are taught the perennial “thesis” essay, up-to-date conventions of writing in the disciplines, or how to deconstruct knowledge as ideology, we want to show how a broad range of social turn pedagogies have pushed lived experience to the margins of instruction, positioning it either as a subject for “private” inquiry, or as merely providing cases for the illustration of “critical” knowledge.

Towards the conservative end of the spectrum, Elaine Maimon, author of perhaps the most influential WAC textbook of the 80s, invoked an opposition between “public” and “private” types of personal writing to justify limited attention to the personal in writing courses:

Instructors might have more success in teaching analysis and exposition—public forms of writing—if the autobiographical writing of undergraduates were viewed primarily as a private way to find ideas, not always as material itself to be shaped into autobiographical public prose.
Lived Experience in Composition 375

Literary autobiography is a genre only a few can create. Writers like Cellini, Franklin, and Yeats have the artist's gift of distance. . . . Literary artists are able to write narratives that give shape and form to their lives. We cannot expect all students to do the same. Those students who have the talent can be encouraged to work in this difficult genre, but all students can be helped to nurture the autobiographical impulse as a seed-bed of thought (131-32). The irony of the "social turn" here is that it suppresses scrutiny of writers' biases as potential sources of knowledge shaped by social forces and relationships no less powerful than those shaping disciplinary knowledge. Indeed, Maimon identifies "public" writing about personal experience with bellettristic genres of personal writing, reinforcing the sense of the aesthetic, dominant in Western knowledge, as the realm for the display of beautified subjectivity, but walled off from the rest of knowledge and politics. Instead, students should pursue "private," or in alternate terms, "expressive" writing as an initial stage of learning, a preliminary exercise in preparing students to produce "public" disciplinary writing (see also "Maps and Genres" 120; "Knowledge" 98). Writing on the bias—in overt relationship to experience—becomes an act at the margins of the curriculum, unconvertible into the capital of grades. And perhaps more important, the space for scrutiny of the biases of disciplinary knowledge is shrunk, as students learn that the place where educated people express personal motives is, for the talented, in "literary autobiography" and, for the many, in private.

However, if we examine examples of academic storytelling, such as Brodkey's essay, we find they are often closer to the autoethnographic writing gaining currency in anthropology and sociology than to Maimon's concept of autobiography. In contrast to Maimon's (and Bartholomae's) sense of genre, contemporary autoethnography integrates knowledge from different contexts that are never distinct, contesting the notion that the personal is ever outside of writing. As Carol Rambo Ronai has argued in her autoethnographies of her experience as an erotic dancer and as a victim of child sex abuse, "all sociology is a personal reflection of the sociologist creating it" ("Multiple" 2). Hence, in her writing, "statistical analysis and other forms of scientific prose occupy a place beside abstract theoretical thinking, emotional understandings, remembered and constructed details of everyday life" ("Multiple" 2, 4-5; see also "The Reflexive Self" 104-105). Within composition studies, Kathleen Dixon has argued for the importance of "the 'personal' as a method of exploration" in research and pedagogy (257, 258). Dixon proposes encouraging more writing that integrates "personal narrative," "ethnographic method" and "feminist psychoanalytic and cultural studies theories" as a way of fostering "an intensely self-reflexive account of one's thought and feelings and of one's relationship to others" (256, 258). Indeed, the rift between "public" and "private" discourse in contemporary society is wide and pervasive enough that "speaking critically" may depend less on assimilating institutionally sanctioned conventions and genres than on exploring what the discourses that impinge on us have silenced—Williams' racial being, Tompkins' gendered voice, Cliff's self in cultural conflict, Ronai's lived experience as the mutable subject/creator of knowledge.
Ironically, the tendency to subject these senses of lived experience within genres, methods or regimes of disciplinary truth is not limited to the conservative arguments among social turn theorists. Towards the left end of the political spectrum, the social turn produced sharp criticism of writing teachers' preoccupation with personal writing, often justly, but without offering adequate alternatives. For instance, in a pair of influential essays, James Berlin denounced both the "cognitive" and the "expressionist" wings of the process movement for their complicity in reproducing social inequality. Of greater interest to us is Berlin's denunciation of "expressionist" rhetoric, because it is here where he airs his complaints about composition's focus on personal writing. In two influential essays from the early and late 80s, Berlin faulted "expressionists" like Stephen Judy, Ken Macrorie, Peter Elbow and William Coles for conceiving truth "as the result of a private vision that must be constantly consulted in writing" and for "emphasiz[ing] writing as a 'personal' activity" ("Composition" 772; see also "Rhetoric"). Berlin admitted that the emphasis in expressionistic rhetorics on narration of personal knowledge, on self-discovery and "realizing one's unique voice" can validate resistance to the status quo ("Rhetoric" 486). But as Berlin puts it, "resistance . . . is always construed in individual terms. Collective retaliation [against the status quo] poses as much a threat to individual integrity as do the collective forces being resisted, and so is itself suspect" (487). Thus, the politics of the personal in expressionistic rhetoric fragments political will, and "is easily co-opted by the very capitalist forces it opposes." Indeed, this rhetoric takes on a more sinister cast when it reinforces the entrepreneurial values of capitalism: individualism, private initiative, the confidence for risktaking, the right to be contentious with authority (especially the state)" (487). By contrast, "social-epistemic rhetoric," which Berlin recommends as an alternative to expressionism, is "self-consciously aware of its ideological stand" and regards "rhetoric as a political act involving a dialectical interaction engaging the material, the social, and the individual writer, with language as the agency of mediation" (478, 488).

From the perspective of our advocacy of feminist, postcolonial and postmodern storytelling in the classroom, we might expect Berlin to highly value writing on the bias, with its emphasis on the complex social positioning of writers and their stories. Indeed, we would expect a natural fit between social-epistemic rhetorics and classroom practices that cultivate types of reflexive writing that move beyond the individualism of "private vision," and overtly grapple with their own historical locations within the process of "dialectical interaction."

However, in turning towards classroom practice we find a subjection of lived experience to knowledge, although certainly opposed to Maimon's genre theory in its governing political interests. Rather than detailing the way "expressionist" senses of the personal have been specifically co-opted in classrooms, and offering alternative, politically engaged uses for personal writing, Berlin positions experience mainly as a field to be demystified through
interdisciplinary knowledge. Thus, citing Ira Shor's *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* as "the most complete realization of [social-epistemic] rhetoric for the classroom," Berlin describes the goal of the social-epistemic classroom as "enabl[ing] students to "extraordinarily reexperience the ordinary," as they critically examine their quotidian experience in order to externalize false consciousness" (488, 491). Thus, experience falls to its typically inferior position within a lopsided dialectic: stories and personal knowledge are placed before the scalpel of "interdisciplinary methods," but "interdisciplinary methods" do not undergo comparable scrutiny. Instead, the invisible hand of method transforms "quotidian experience" into its extraordinary opposite. In Shor's more detailed examples, students apply a "problem solving method" to familiar features of daily life such as a school chair or hamburger, enabling "structural perception" of their experience (*Critical 158-59*). Again, inquiry proceeds through a division of intellectual labor: the students apply a "structural paradigm" embodying critical method to their lived experience (156-171).

Certainly, both Berlin and Shor have performed valuable work in turning such critical methods towards dominant forms of science and knowledge (as well as experience) in their writings and their classrooms. As Berlin puts it, "[k]nowledge, after all, is an historically bound social fabrication rather than an eternal and invariable phenomenon" (489). Shor, in particular, warns against the traditional tendency "to teach [a discipline’s] special body of knowledge abstractly, conservatively, or narcissistically ... [in which] examples drawn in texts or lectures relate to no one’s experience, or promote the experience of an elite" (104). To work against "the academy’s fragmentation of thought," teachers must "resis[t] limits set by a single discipline’s methods" (114). However, these critiques often work more to magnify than resist the division between experience and knowledge. As Shor puts it, an "interdisciplinary approach . . . is the most potent means to free consciousness from the limits of the particular" (114-15). Indeed, in this context, "interdisciplinary" primarily means "multidisciplinary," drawing knowledge from many disciplines, rather than focusing on how the historical location of knowers (in disciplines, in classrooms, and on the street) shapes the way they select, order and generalize the particular, often in conflicting ways. Hence, the politics of location is homogenized through method. Teachers and students can borrow from many disciplines, but are not under equal obligation to examine what "limits of the particular" they experience in their lives, nor how experience might position them differently within knowledge formations that are polyvocal, and often contradictory.

We contend that valuing stories as possible starting points for knowledge is more likely to foster the critical agency of students than situating stories as cases awaiting critical "demystification." All of the storytellers we have been discussing integrate lived experience within disciplinary discourse in ways that contrast with Berlin's and Shor's pedagogical uses of experience. Both Patricia Williams and Ronai weave narrative, dream, and reflection into their application of disciplinary concepts and methods, attempting to reveal the hidden
subjects of knowledge, how experience informs even seemingly neutral uses of critical method. And Michelle Cliff mixes lived experience with "the forms taught [her] by the oppressor," articulating her connections to and differences from dominant culture, enabling her to "reveal," not just "speak fluently," and find that part of the self that has been suppressed by the "hegemony of the King's English" (14, 12, 13).

When social theories of writing reinforce polar senses of "personal" experience and academic methods, they risk compromising their aim of empowering students and promoting social change. As Berlin admits, "social-epistemic" rhetorics are not necessarily politically progressive, nor "expressionistic" rhetorics conservative (488, also 485). Given this admission, perhaps teachers should examine what critical senses of the social and the personal have been nurtured or "co-opted" within both "expressionist" and "social-epistemic" rhetorics, rather than assuming a categorical opposition between them. In this way, the typical pendulum swings of reform between advocacy of personal and academic writing might be interrupted, as dominant binary oppositions underlying reform movements are displaced, rather than merely reversed and reinscribed.

For instance, the focus on personal experiences in writing, so often traced to the Dartmouth seminar of the 60s (see Harris, "After Dartmouth"), arguably evolved from the widening realization among writing teachers that the dominant uses of writing in English and, indeed, across the curriculum, were not social enough, that they ignored or effaced the "native" social affiliations of students, as well as the sociality of learning. As Peter Medway recalls his participation in the beginnings of the language across the curriculum (LAC) movement in British secondary schools in the 50s and 60s, LAC teachers were troubled by their encounters with "bright but non-academic working-class children who failed in school and yet whose verbal resourcefulness and fertility were an inescapable fact." The pedagogical response of the British expressionists, disseminated to the U.S. through the 1966 Dartmouth seminar and other avenues, was a strategy of curricular reform to bring the experience and language of working-class and other downwardly tracked students into the classroom (See Britton, 38f, 99-100; Medway, "Finding" 28-37; Dixon 34-43, 100-106; see also Mahala 776-77). Thus, teachers might acknowledge "the role of language as self-identification" and work to develop the sense of identity that students bring to the experience of learning (Labov qtd in Britton 53). Indeed, these "expressionists" regarded their work not as a romantic defense of child-philosophers but as, in Medway's words, "a human rights issue" (157). The goal was to make "the dice less heavily loaded against ... bright working class children" in education (157).

Of course, more "individualistic" thinking coexisted with this strand of social activism both in the work of the British expressionists, and in the American aftermath of Dartmouth. We do not advocate British "expressionism," or Medway's working-class populism, as a current alternative to "social-epistemic" rhetoric. We cite Medway's account only as a disruptive moment
in the history of writing instruction, easily lost in the categorical oppositions of the social turn, when writing teachers’ concern for the “personal” converged with an awareness of rampant oppression to produce an acute sense of writing as a social act inevitably involving group, as well as individual identifications.

Contemporary academic storytelling is no less concerned with cultural survival than Medway. However, the uses of storytelling we advocate demand more than affirming our fluency in a “native” culture. For marginal as well as mainstream groups, economic and educational opportunity often demand fluency with dominant forms of knowledge and writing. Even Michelle Cliff acknowledges this, although she is more fiercely critical towards established knowledge than any of the other writers we have drawn on. Indeed, we do not wish it to escape notice that our own discourse defending “stories” closely follows dominant conventions of philosophical argument. This is a contradiction we cannot escape, as we are intently aware that discourse offers many more possibilities of speaking than of being heard. In other words, we have appropriated these conventions to maximize the impact of our discourse. We devote the next section to a pedagogy that responds to this situation by attempting to create a more equitable dialectic of experience and knowledge in the classroom, and perhaps eventually, in the larger culture beyond.

The Politics of Location: Examining Experience in Social and Historical Contexts

“My story, no doubt, is me, Trinh Minh-ha writes, “but it is also, no doubt, older than me” (123). As children, we are born into stories, and by retelling them, we testify to our identifications with, and differences from, our families as well as more extended social groups, formations, disciplines and institutions. Hence our storytelling can reveal ourselves in relation to the communities that have shaped us, helping us explore possibilities of personal development and social reform.

In refusing to reduce the boundaries of the storyteller to the boundaries of the individual, the pedagogy we wish to articulate here is part of “the general critique of traditional humanism” that Bartholomae advocates. However our “key questions in the debate on academic writing” are different than Bartholomae’s: At a time when storytelling is emerging as a provocative challenge to dominant modes of academic discourse/knowledge, shouldn’t composition programs help students participate in this challenge, especially if it can help open the university to hitherto excluded voices (“Writing with” 69)? If composition does, as Bartholomae claims, play “a privileged role in the production of authors in the university curriculum”, shouldn’t we encourage students to write as subjects who are neither independent of institutional cultures in their “private” life, nor empowered only through assimilation to them in their “public” life (70)?

We want to acknowledge what process and social turn pedagogies have taught us, and then move beyond their limitations. There is nothing wrong, we contend, with teachers positioning themselves in receptive roles that help create
spaces for storytelling, so long as teachers focus on the “authentic selves” that emerge as cultural articulations. Assigning theoretical readings can help teachers do this, but such work can be counterproductive if it merely superimposes its own structure of “insiders” and “outsiders” over those divisions already implicit in students’ experience. We recognize, however, that arguing from the “authority of experience” can also contribute to creating insider/outside divisions in the classroom. As bell hooks has claimed, essentialist arguments based on experience can generate such divisions, and not only in the stereotypical case where a student from a marginal group, say a black woman, claims exclusive knowledge of black female experience. Essentialist claims about experience are just as often expressed from “locations of privilege” (see hooks 81-82), as when, say, a white male student assumes authority to speak from experience, with few qualifications, about “human nature.” Hence, the teacher’s responsibilities in a classroom built around storytelling are complex; neither a receptive nor an authoritative role will suffice. Rather, teachers must move between eliciting stories and initiating examination of their politics of location, between the receptive, non-authoritarian roles advocated by many process pedagogies and the assertive, “critical” roles assumed by many social turn pedagogies. Moreover, the teacher’s choice of pedagogical roles must take into account how students perceive the teacher’s authority in terms of race, class and gender (see Jarratt 119 for a fuller account of this issue).

One way of foregrounding the politics of location in experience is to juxtapose our identifications with the dominant culture with our struggle to define ourselves as distinct from it. No one is completely outside the dominant culture, even those individuals who perceive themselves aligned primarily with marginal cultures because the identities of such cultures can be “made only in relation to a full sense of the dominant” (Raymond Williams 123). We all experience, though certainly in different degrees, what W.E.B. Dubois called “twoness,” somehow being, and often in asymmetrical ways, participants in the dominant culture, even if we are part of groups that are commonly seen as marginalized or oppositional. This view of identity sanctions a pedagogical approach in which students tell stories, and then examine the ways their stories reflect identifications with and differences from mainstream thinking. This process might begin with students’ using their stories to examine the traditions and institutions that have shaped their identities, or it might commence with their reading multicultural texts that dramatize or theorize the self as a product of cultural interaction, to which students could respond with their own stories.

To illustrate this pedagogy, we will now turn to a student’s writing, a section of her response to an assignment that asked her to connect her experience to her understanding of how gender is constructed in fairytales and television programs. After explaining how fairy tales such as “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” and sitcoms such as “Married with Children” reinforce sexist stereotypes of women by representing female beauty as a sign of naivete, stupidity or dependence on men, Kris extends her analysis to how she herself is a “gendered body” in the workplace:
The fairy tales, television shows, and advertisements are all a fantasy but they want the average American to believe they're true. . . . In all actuality, if a smart woman who was dressed risque went to a company for a job requiring extensive knowledge and hard work, she would probably not be taken seriously. Her physical resemblance of a "bimbo" would most likely flood the minds of the interviewers of the company, thus hindering her chances of getting the job. It seems as if sexiness of a woman is not respected especially if she carries it too far. . . . In most offices a woman's hemline cannot be higher than where her hands reach down her side in a standing position. This seems fair. . . . There are those who abuse or overuse what they were born with and deserve to be labeled.

I have found myself on both ends of the spectrum. I believe one should use what they have to their own advantage. Then there are people who have relied on their bodies or beauty all their lives and don't know any other way. Using your God-given assets to your advantage must be done carefully. This can't be over accentuated or it will cause doubt in your real talents. For instance, I am a waitress at a neighborhood bar. There is a generalization put on this position. People tend to believe that a waitress is dingy. It is a very public job and you must be friendly and bubbly; in turn, people like you and tip better. Along with that is how you look. The cuter you are, the more money you will make. Another big determination is dress. It is proven that on a given day the shorter of shorts worn will result in bigger tips. This is all acceptable until there is actual in-depth conversation. Then people are shocked to find out that being a waitress is not my life long goal. They seem very surprised that I am attending school to attain a degree in Accounting. Only then do they see me for more than surface and respect me. On the other hand, a co-worker fits in the generalization of a waitress. She is very cute, flaunts herself, and certainly shows off what she has. . . . "She is not trying to better her life; she is only working there to meet men. The belief again, she's cute and a man will come take care of her.

A woman in today's society must change the perception of a beautiful woman. . . . If a woman uses her looks to help get her somewhere she still needs to be able to use her brains to remain there. The world is a very competitive place and we all need to make ourselves appear better than another to win. . . . If society would change the teaching that beauty is accompanied by ignorance and dependency then many people would not be as confused. The idea that a beautiful woman must be taken care of because she can't do it for herself hurts those who are beautiful yet smart and independent and they in turn must work harder to prove this is not so in all pretty people.

Responding to Kris's essay, we would attempt to help her focus on the complications of the self that emerge when she experiences herself "at both ends of the spectrum," a self actively identified with and opposed to the dominant culture's representation of female beauty. For instance, we might highlight the way she constructs herself as both using the dominant culture's sexist imagery of woman on her own behalf and as struggling against the limits imposed by this particular form of subjectivity. As a waitress, she gains better tips by shortening her skirt, but she also imagines herself in settings requiring "extensive knowledge" where, if the hemline is too high, she would "not be taken seriously." Thus she constructs herself in multiple locations: as the waitress who justly uses "god-given assets" to make a living, and as the woman unjustly marked by others who read beauty as signs of superficiality, incompetence and passivity. Imagining herself dehumanized by such significations, she vows to rewrite them: "a woman in today's society must change the perception of a beautiful woman."
As teachers we might help Kris advance and recognize problems in this project. For instance, we might question her association of “bettering yourself” as a woman, being more than superficial, with becoming professional middle class. What about the waitress whose decision not to pursue a professional “career” is not a sign of superficiality? Is the project of “changing the perception of a beautiful woman” limited by conceiving it individualistically, something “a woman” must do? The aim of our response would be to incite something like what Bakhtin calls “critical interanimation of languages,” a process in which “ideological systems and approaches to the world... contradict each other and in no way [can] live in peace and quiet with one another,” which presents “the necessity of actively choosing” a language orientation (295-96).

In education, such choices are seldom free of conflict and struggle. In Kris’s case, she initiates a choice of language orientation through her project of “changing the perception of a beautiful woman.” However, the language orientations that students adopt will often not accord with those of left-oriented teachers. Even so, we would argue teachers’ response to stories must avoid reifying the student as a simple reflex of the dominant culture with its “politically incorrect” class-, race- or gender-based biases. We have found that when students are offered openings to articulate experience, their class-, race-, or gender-based biases are seldom without some ambivalence. Of course, gross displays of racism or sexism have surfaced in our classrooms, and we have assumed assertive persuasive roles to oppose them. But more often, and especially when writing instruction focuses on experience as a source of knowledge, teachers can help students illuminate ambivalence. In these cases, by initiating examination of the sources and functions of such biases in the student’s life, teachers can work from student experience towards broader historical contextualization of its meaning. Through this process, teachers resist imposing their own ideological biases while deepening and expanding student understanding of experience.

Consider, for example, this text written by a black female student, Joan, who was asked to relate her experiences of the meaning of race to its meaning in Michelle Cliff’s “If I Could Write This In Fire, I Would Write This In Fire”.

Cliff says that “Color was the symbol of our potential.” In her youth, the more you appeared to be white, the more successful you could be. The light skinned Jamaicans were taught to believe they might even attain whiteness. . . .

In the black community I know, here in America, the division among blacks is pretty much the same. I suppose that some lighter-skinned blacks look at how successful the whites are, and have a notion that to be successful you have to be white. So those who are light-skinned try to “pass.” Pass means to adopt another group’s culture as one’s own. I must admit though, I truly don’t understand what is exactly meant by acting “white.” I thought white was a color. Must everything in this world have a color in order to exist?

I was once told by another black person that by going to college and wanting to be a lawyer, I was acting white. Possibly he felt that by becoming a lawyer, I would forget where I came from. At first [I thought] there was some truth to what he said. But now, I know that the way we behave is not directly associated with a color; it’s a matter of our being human. I recall another incident where someone told me that.
I was acting white, back in high school, because I tried out for Color Guard. I guess she said that because she was afraid to do what she wanted, whereas I did what I wanted regardless of what everyone thought.

What exactly is acting “white”? My guess is that those who are short-sighted and don’t seem to have a goal are the ones criticizing those of us who want to meet challenges. Those who want to discourage us stand around being self-righteous, judgmental and victims of their own environment, which in turn drives us to want to be unlike them.

As a child, my environment led me to believe that people are people regardless of skin color. Unlike Cliff I was not separated and taught away from those who had a different skin color than my own. We weren’t taught that whites were the “superior” race. However, our educators didn’t teach much about how other groups in America contributed to history, literature or technology. We were led to believe whites did everything, and I am embarrassed to admit that I was in my teens when I realized how minorities contributed to making many discoveries.

Joan’s denial of race as a factor shaping behavior is in sharp contradiction to our own ideological position that color remains a “symbol of . . . potential” in contemporary America as much as in Cliff’s Jamaica. We find especially problematic the way her belief that “the way we behave is not directly associated with a color” carries over into the suggestion that by acts of individual will blacks can live in a society where white is just a color and class mobility has no relation to race. Hence, Joan stereotypes those blacks who have accused her of “acting white” for their failure “to have a set goal in life,” “to meet challenges,” and for “stand[ing] around being self-righteous, judgmental and victims of their own environment.”

If we respond to this text by attempting to show Joan how she has internalized the dominant culture’s individualism, as well as its erasure of race as a significant determinant of identity and class mobility, we risk reifying her experience as a mere reflex of the dominant culture. Such a response ignores the ways this student’s “naive” statements powerfully reflect her agency and desire, namely to protect her aspirations for a materially improved life against attacks.

Another approach might be to ask her to re-see her experience by using Cliff’s perspective on color. While this response might deepen her understanding of race in society, it also pushes her own experiential understanding of race into the background in favor of Cliff’s more authoritative understanding, which is rooted in a very different historical context. Although Joan may well have something to learn from Cliff, this approach runs the danger of encouraging unreflective appropriations of what Cliff calls the “the peculiar lens of the colonized,” ignoring how social and historical conditions have shaped Cliff and Joan differently as racial subjects (“A Journey into Speech” 17).

By contrast, our response would encourage Joan to examine the experiential context of her belief that white is only a color, and then explore the implications and consequences of this belief in broader historical contexts. We might begin by asking her to further explore her understanding and experience of a racial subject within local contexts, then attempt to broaden this investigation to the larger social order. For instance, we might ask her to further examine “where
she came from"—the location and socioeconomic make-up of her local community, and her social status within it—and then consider the location of the African-Americans who criticized her. We might ask her how differences between these locations might affect how she and "her critics" understand their experience. As her experience becomes more fully elaborated, we would encourage her to expand this analysis of race and class in society by asking her why internal divisions exist in America between blacks who eschew "acting white" and those who want to believe white is only a color and not a way of life. Why did she "fear that there was some truth to what had been said" when she was first accused of acting white? What effects might her characterization of some blacks as lacking a "set goal" or not willing to "meet challenges" have in other contexts (ie. beyond the self-protective one where she uses it), say, in the mouth of a white senator?

While we wouldn't position Cliff (or ourselves) as the voice of "authoritative knowledge," we would initially use texts such as Cliff's that dramatize the complicated effects of race, class, gender, and sexuality on experience to help Joan and other students think about their own experience as subjects in social and historical contexts. Of course, in performing their analysis students are likely to use concepts and perspectives articulated in the texts they read; but in our response we would not focus on helping them appropriate a perspective more rigorously, or to test or apply it more intensively. Since Joan seems to be taking Cliff seriously, there seems to be no need to magnify Cliff's authority as an "expert." Hence, in this case, we would try to encourage a more balanced dialectic between Cliff's perspective and the student's experience. Thus, we might encourage Joan's elaboration of a term such as "pass" which is not used in Cliff's text, but which seems to have been provoked by reading Cliff. We would also promote further investigation of a term such as "white," which does appear in Cliff's text but which Joan understands differently. We would encourage her to use these terms to deepen her understanding of the sources and effects of her experience in both local and broader social contexts. After she has spent some time working on this project, we might ask her to review her writings and the assigned readings, and then write about differences between the ways her work and the assigned readings articulate experience.

These pedagogical strategies are intended to redefine storytelling in ways that disrupt its conventional placement within the "rhetoric of the belletristic tradition" or in simple opposition to the "rhetorical engagements of argument" (Trimbur 110, 112). Understanding storytelling in terms of such connections ignores its uses for opening participatory spaces for the sharing of knowledge. It also ignores the emergence of storytelling as a powerful challenge to dominant ways of knowing across many disciplines. However, these aspects of storytelling may be precisely those most useful to writing teachers who wish to empower students within the dominant culture, but also as members of alternative or oppositional cultures who are capable of using established knowledge on their own behalf.
Opening participatory spaces for stories may seem less urgent than supplying students with a kind of privileged cultural capital, especially when so many view college as, primarily, a stepping stone into the “meritocracy.” However, despite gross and continuing inequalities of access to education, college populations are becoming more diverse, and even “traditional” students carry many more differences within themselves than process or post-process pedagogies have recognized. In a historical period when avenues out of poverty increasingly travel through the university, the fates of marginalized cultures and ethnicities may be more intertwined with those of writing teachers than we have cared to admit. It remains for us to define uses of the “personal” in literacy instruction in ways that better recognize and engage such present differences, as well as expand the prevailing senses of academic discourse to make way for yet excluded voices. The pedagogy offered here is intended as a step in this direction.

Notes

1 The notion of “academic storytelling” assumes no clear division between conventional categories of “creative” and “scholarly” writing. Thus, we include Jane Tompkins and Michelle Cliff, conventionally identified as literary critic/theorist and poet/personal essayist respectively, because both produce writing that integrates the personal with the professional.

2 As Faigley notes, at least 30 of 48 submissions by teachers of “excellent” student writing in this collection are “personal experience essays” and 20 are “autobiographical narratives.” Of the remaining 18 essays, several “include writing about the writer.” Moreover, Faigley notes that “only two essays present sustained analyses of other texts” and none resembles the frequently assigned “research paper” (Fragments120-22).

3 Thus, Trimbur’s review-essay hunts down the “residual pull of process pedagogy” on new multicultural pedagogies, only to reinscribe the teacher in conventional figures of moral leadership and enlightenment. Extending Patricia Bizzell’s recent defense of the traditional moral authority of teachers, Trimbur presents post-process teachers as bearers of “civic virtue” or the “common good” which can now (in the wake of process) be argued with less fear of, in Trimbur’s words, “simply overpower[ing] students and prompt[ing] either insincere compli­ance or resistant silence” (112).

4 For example Jane Tompkins contends that the academic writer is conditioned to believe that you can’t “talk about your private life in the course of doing your professional work,” that you have to pretend “whatever you’re writing about has nothing to do with your life, that it’s more exalted.” This “public-private hierarchy,” Tompkins writes, “is a founding condition of female oppression” because it subordinates knowledge deriving from women’s conventional positioning within the “private” spheres of family and home (1080).

5 In their recent essay, “New Rhetoric Courses in Writing Programs,” Linda Shamoon, Robert Schweigler, John Trimbur, and Patricia Bizzell date the lifespan of the process movement as extending from 1975-1985. This dating invites explication of “Inventing the University” as summarizing the dominant arguments and interests that displaced the “process movement” after 1985, at least among composition researchers, if not among rank and file secondary and college teachers, writing projects, and elementary school “whole language” language arts programs.
Brodkey explains the politics of this thesis pattern, and the relation of her own experience to it: "Not to put too fine a point on it, this quintessentially modern thesis assumes that reality, which exists entirely separate from and independent of language, is superficially complicated but ultimately governed by simple, underlying principles, rules, or verities . . . I no longer believe the thesis, but I believed in it then, if only because I desperately wanted to believe in middle-class houses, wherein everything seemed to conspire to protect the inhabitants from any of the complications that beset the people in my house and neighborhood" (540-41). Brodkey argues that this thesis pattern continues to dominate academic writing and mass media commentary today. Thus, students are turned away from biases rooted in their location as sociohistorical subjects and taught to avoid bias by "recast[ing] their first person claims into the third person [so that] the assertion assumes a reality independent of the writer" (546).


John Schilb has pointed out that the goal of "externalizing false consciousness" contradicts Berlin's theoretical attempts to, in his own words, "count[er] the ideology-science distinction . . . in which ideology is always false consciousness while a particular version of Marxism is defined as its scientific alternative" (770). However, this theoretical imperative gets lost in discussion of classroom practice.

For another discussion on the relationship between "twoness" and writing instruction, see "Constructing The Multicultural Subject: Colonization, Persuasion, and Difference in the Writing Classroom," forthcoming in PRE/TEXT 15 3A.

Works Cited


---

**M.A. and Ph.D. in English with Specialization in Rhetoric and Composition**

The University of South Florida offers a specialization in rhetoric and composition at both the M.A. and Ph.D. levels. Students can choose this specialization to prepare themselves to conduct research into rhetorical history, theory, and practice, and to teach composition and literature at the college and secondary levels.

This program allows students to study the history and philosophy of rhetoric, the theory of composition, composition research and its design, the teaching of writing and literature, the theory and practice of stylistic analysis, and the administration of writing programs. Students also study traditional British and American literature and critical theory.

Teaching assistantships, tuition waivers, and other kinds of financial aid are available. For further information call or write: Professor Sara M. Deats; Director of Graduate Study; English Department; University of South Florida; Tampa, FL 33620 (813-974-2421).