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Juanita Rodgers Comfort

## Becoming a Writerly Self: College Writers Engaging Black Feminist Essays

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This article asserts that personal essays by black feminist writers such as June Jordan might be used to teach first-year and advanced student writers how to connect their personal and social identities in ways that will enhance the rhetorical impact of their writing while transcending mere “confession” or self-indulgence.

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*My work requires me to think about how free I can be as an African-American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world. To think about (and wrestle with) the full implications of my situation leads me to consider what happens when other writers work in a highly and historically racialized society. For them, as for me, imagining is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is for the purposes of the work, becoming.*

—Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*

Whenever I tell people that I am studying the rhetoric of contemporary black feminist essayists, I’m inevitably asked why rhetoricians should pay attention to the writings of African American women. I’m asked to account for what makes their discursive situations “noteworthy”; after all, my questioners reason, isn’t

CCC 51:4 / JUNE 2000

the struggle for personal power, for voice, for credibility, shared by *all* writers? Then why focus on *black women's writing*, specifically—what can *they* show us? This question always echoes in my ears for days after each encounter with it. Despite my sense that most of the time it is asked out of intellectual curiosity and in a spirit of goodwill, it has always felt like a trick question to me, designed to somehow betray me as an academic “outsider,” to put me in my place and, perhaps, out of the business of locating black women's voices more centrally within the discipline. I've always managed to give what I hoped was an acceptably distanced, “scholarly” response (one that I always hope does not saddle me with the burden of defending my well-considered standpoint as a black feminist rhetorician or the contributions of African American women's writing to “mainstream” scholarly projects):

**Why focus on *black women's writing*, specifically—what can *they* show us?**

I study these works *as I think any rhetorician would*, in order to gain more insight into the challenges faced by all speakers and writers in negotiating an influential ethos for themselves. I examine the writing of African American women, specifically, because *their* texts document the authoritative spaces *they* have created for *themselves* within and against particular configurations of social, cultural, political, and economic power. This work represents *one scholarly direction to take among many*, but it is of vital importance because it contributes to *a useful culturally grounded theory* of rhetorical power.

This answer, for the most part, has satisfied my interlocutors. But I am usually left wondering how my answer, in positioning my black female self as critically distant from the issues involved, removes me from my own work and somehow impoverishes the meaning of that work. As I reread this answer, I see that several strategies of disengagement are apparent (and in fact work to negate the “I” that I have used twice): I locate myself in a mainstream—“as any rhetorician would”—that historically has been populated by white men. I exclude myself from the world of African American writers, obscuring the fact that I happen to be one, eschewing the self-inclusive pronouns “our,” “we,” and “ourselves” in favor of their self-excluding counterparts “their,” “they,” and “themselves.” I assign myself almost anonymous status among a cohort of scholars. I choose to reduce my conclusions to the neutral terms of “a (generic) theory” instead of the “my (personally located) theory.” And I choose not to articulate at all what is perhaps the most important part of my answer: *I'm doing this work because what “I” (a black woman who is also, ostensibly, an academic “insider”) have to say about the African American women's discursive practices contributes to making those practices matter.*

I invoke this brief self-analysis to frame my vision of how literary essays by black feminist writers can be used by college writers at both the first-year and advanced levels to gain valuable insight into writing as a self-defining activity. Displayed through features comprising specific texts as well as through a rhetor's general reputation (whether that rhetor is a professional or student

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writer), her image in the minds of her audiences can be one of the most powerful influences on their judgments of her work. The enfranchisement of African American women as makers of knowledge in situations where forces work toward muting or silencing us may very well hinge on the

task of distinguishing ourselves to audiences (for whom white male perspectives are the norm) specifically as black and female in our grounding assumptions, strategies of argument, and writing style, while simultaneously eliciting from those audiences a favorable impression of our perceived characters. Like all rhetors (student writers included), black feminist essayists must invent effective ways to answer readers' fundamental question: Who is this person and why should I believe what she says?

Cornell West's description of the struggle of the black diaspora to obtain and maintain status and credibility within a Eurocentric (masculinist) cultural framework invokes for me a similar struggle engaged in by student writers within the cultural framework of the academy. West analyzes the problematic of *invisibility* and *namelessness*, enacted by cultural authorities, which "promoted Black inferiority and constituted the European background against which Black diaspora struggles for identity, dignity . . . and material resources took place" (102). Perhaps because of my own search for a writerly self that is at once influential in the academic arena, representative of the places I come from outside the academy, and comfortable as a self-image, questions about the writerly self condition everything I write. Over the ten years that I have been teaching composition and rhetoric courses, I've observed that my most insightful students have generally sought to use their writing assignments as tools to help themselves mature as thinking individuals and become more powerful as social beings. Through their writerly eyes, I've come to see that successful college writing demands, and ultimately achieves, something more personally enriching than merely "inventing the university," as David Bartholomae would say. The most successful student writers in my experience learn how to move beyond merely imitating the prose styles and interpretive schemes of disciplinary discourses.

They animate those discourses by inventing complex and versatile writerly selves who are able to place their extra-academic worlds into a carefully constructed relationship with those discourse communities.

Universities are, of course, part of the genderized, racialized society that Morrison speaks of. A genderized, racialized society is one in which the statuses and roles of the people in its institutions (educational, military, economic, governmental . . . ) and communities (neighborhood, social, religious . . . )—and even the very structures of those institutions and communities—are influenced, even dictated on some level, by gender and race. Racial and gender groups, of course, must be understood not merely in terms of differential physical attributes, but also in terms of discursive habits and social practices, along with perceptions of intelligence, morality, values, and so forth that are typically associated with those attributes, habits, and practices.

The discourses of the university are heavily invested with markers of white race, male gender, and middle and upper socioeconomic classes. As an African American woman who studies and teaches rhetoric and composition at a university, I am keenly aware of the ways in which language constructs the person who knows as much as it defines what one knows. And I am unwilling to pretend that disciplinary discourses are value-neutral enclaves where race, gender, class, spirituality, and other cultural issues don't matter. And so, echoing Morrison, I think it's important for rhetoricians and composition specialists to ask important questions about what happens when *student writers* of any gender or any race work in a genderized, racialized society. If imagining, through composing, is something more significant to students than exercises in critical detachment, and if we do not expect them to remain essentially unchanged by their encounters with the ideas they write about, then composing text must be for the purposes of these students' education, *becoming* insurgent intellectuals (to use a term coined by West and bell hooks) who are personally invested in the world of ideas.

The rhetorical implications of writing one's way toward becoming in a racialized society came into particular focus for me last year, after teaching a graduate seminar on contemporary African American women essayists. The course employed methods of rhetorical criticism to draw insights from literary

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essays by black feminist writers June Jordan, Alice Walker, bell hooks, Nikki Giovanni, and Pearl Cleage. As I led the class of nine students through the semester (seven black women and two white women, along with several others who sat in on occasional sessions), we all felt strongly attracted to—and sometimes troubled by—the range of essayistic voices that were speaking to us. We raised numerous questions and engaged in more than a few debates about merits of the essayists' personal approaches to public issues. Class discussions defined spaces where issues of identity, location, and meaning emerged from a wide range of experiences with work,

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family, community, spirituality, and often, the academy. Our encounters with the diversity of these essayists' world views certainly complicated the taken-for-granted, almost stereotypical notions of "black" and "female" identity that were initially prevalent in the class. Regardless of the direction of our critiques, however, none of us doubted the powerful *presence* of these women in their works. As we moved through our reading list, it became increasingly evident to us that who these writers portray themselves to be as African American women had great bearing on their ability to entice us to entertain their positions, share their social agenda, or accept their conclusions. And their self-portrayals as distinctively raced and gendered beings posed a challenge to my students, both black and white, to reconsider what they themselves were about.

An extended example underscores this point. One of my students, a middle-aged white woman, who I'll call Eleanor, was deeply troubled by the way June Jordan's essay, "Requiem for the Champ" (which we read from her collection, *Technical Difficulties*) seemed to defend the aberrant personal behavior of heavyweight boxer Mike Tyson. On the day students presented proposals for their semester projects, Eleanor told the class that because she had always felt connected to Jordan, a renowned poet and political activist, as a "feminist thinker," she could not comprehend why the essayist would stoop to dignify Tyson with what she called an apology, and so she was planning to write a paper arguing for her misgivings. I don't think she realized it at the time she developed her proposal, but Eleanor was beginning an important journey toward a racialized consciousness made possible by Jordan's writing self.

Let me give some background about the essay. In "Requiem," Jordan outlines the horrific conditions of poverty and oppression under which Mike Tyson learned the life rules that have governed his personal behavior as an adult. In

keeping with the theme identified by the subtitle of *Technical Difficulties*—"African-American Notes on the State of the Union"—she asks of readers to consider the attitudes of politicians, military personnel, filmmakers, recording artists, and others who authorize, carry out, and applaud both acts of violence and the objectification of women (226). She indicts those who might share responsibility for maintaining the kind of social order that could dehumanize not only Tyson, but even someone as apparently different from him as Jordan herself. It is upon this point that she makes a crucial connection between herself and Tyson, designed to disrupt readers' easy categorizations of either one of them.

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The message in Jordan's essay is especially powerful because of its "self-disclosures"—bits of information about herself that Jordan endows with salience, places in specific locations in the essay, packages with other images, flags as revelatory, and connects to the essay's central message. Rhetorically, self-disclosures foreground the embodied nature of the self, which, through selective, insightful sharing, can build connections between writers and readers that authorize the writer to make claims and ensure the acceptability of those claims.

Jordan opens the essay with an assertion of physical proximity to Tyson:

Mike Tyson comes from Brooklyn. And so do I. Where he grew up was about a twenty-minute bus ride from my house. (221)

Then, she confesses that it took her most of her own life to learn the social lessons that Tyson apparently had not, emphasizing that she was, *for most of her life*, very much like Tyson is now:

*Mike Tyson comes from Brooklyn. And so do I. In the big picture of America, I never had much going for me. And he had less. I only learned, last year, that I can stop whatever violence starts with me. I only learned, last year, that love is infinitely more interesting, and more exciting, and more powerful, than really winning or really losing a fight. I only learned, last year, that all war leads to death and that all love leads you away from death. (223, italics mine)*

It is difficult to overlook that in the middle of this passage, Jordan speaks words that could easily have come from Tyson (which I indicate here in boldface):

*I am more than twice Mike Tyson's age. And I'm not stupid. Or slow. **But I'm Black. And I come from Brooklyn. And I grew up fighting. And I grew up and I got out of Brooklyn because I got pretty good at fighting. And winning.** Or*

else, intimidating my would-be adversaries with my fists, my feet, and my mouth. And I never wanted to fight. *I never wanted anybody to hit me. And I never wanted to hit anybody.* But the bell would ring at the end of another dumb day in school and I'd head out with dread and a nervous sweat because I knew some jackass more or less my age and more or less my height would be waiting for me because she or he had nothing better to do than to wait for me and hope to kick my butt or tear up my books or break my pencils or pull hair out of my head. (223, italics mine)

Then a little later in the essay, she identifies herself with Tyson again, and this time the connection moves beyond Tyson to identify Jordan with African Americans generally:

*I'm Black. Mike Tyson is Black.* And neither one of us was ever supposed to win anything more than a fight between the two of us. And if you check out the mass-media material on "us," and if you check out the emergency-room reports on "us," you might well believe we're losing the fight to be more than our enemies have decreed . . . (224, italics mine).

These passages illustrate two ways that self-disclosures function as a persuasive element. First, as a matter of strategy, Jordan provides specially chosen personal information in order to place herself directly—almost physically—between her readers and Mike Tyson. For the space of reading this essay, Jordan insists that readers perceive of her and Tyson not separately, but together, and as explicitly raced beings. The physical identification becomes a point of *stasis*: if Jordan is so much like Tyson, then we should either dislike Jordan as much as we dislike Tyson, or (the preferred reading) translate our respect for Jordan into a greater valuing of Tyson.

Second, the psychological power of Jordan's disclosures relies on her readers' sense that a defining relationship is taking place between the essayist and her subject. I'm drawn to Sharon Crowley's explanation for this phenomenon, that the writing subject is enmeshed in multiple relations, but when writing, the "writer becomes audience" as well (34). So, in the process of working through the problems posed by assuming a personal association with Tyson, Jordan constructs a self who speaks back to her from the pages of her work-in-progress. Having written part of Tyson's life into her own, and then reading reflexively what she has written from the subject position she created for herself, Jordan presumably has on some level become self-identified as "June Jordan, sister of Mike Tyson." So, in a sense, this is a "real" June Jordan who speaks to readers, not a mechanistically crafted persona. And as readers become familiar with the person in the essay who asserts a similar background to Tyson's but



demonstrates a decidedly different outcome, Jordan can hope that readers will better understand her stance on the fallen Tyson and why a requiem for him might be justified.

These effects of self-disclosure can shed light on the challenge that Eleanor was faced with. Until she encountered "Requiem," she seems to have been comfortable in a relationship with the essayist that foregrounded gender solidarity over race division. As long as race can be ignored, the two of them can be kindred spirits. "Although I can't share her experience as a black person," Eleanor could reason, "I can certainly share her experiences as a woman, and I can feel good about that." The feminist values that she believed she already shared with Jordan should have precluded either of them from having sympathies for people like Tyson. But the Tyson/Jordan connection in "Requiem," in both its textual strategy and psychological implications, confounded her: how is it possible that Jordan and Tyson can co-exist on the same moral or intellectual plane?

As the essay unfolds, Tyson's rape conviction and its underpinnings of misogyny and violence, about which Eleanor expected Jordan to have an overriding outrage, seem far less of an issue for the essayist than the implications of their shared oppression as black people. Even though Jordan clearly states at one point that she *does not* condone Tyson's behavior, the essay's rhetoric of black identification seems to counter that disclaimer. Eleanor witnesses her woman-to-woman connection with Jordan disrupted by Jordan's identification as a *black* woman, something that Eleanor herself can never be. Therefore, Eleanor must decide how to establish a new relationship with the person that Jordan becomes in the essay, so that she can begin to understand Jordan's message.

As I read Eleanor's semester-project essay, "Down for the Count: The Selection of Metaphor in 'Requiem for the Champ,'" I saw that Jordan's self-disclosures had inspired Eleanor to measure herself against the emergent image of Jordan and to decide what it meant for her to identify with a feminist thinker who claimed the violent sensibility of a Mike Tyson. Her essay dealt with the challenge to her own self-identity by emulating Jordan's strategy of self-disclosure. Her struggle to accomplish this illustrates a theory of modern rhetoric that is, in the words of Michael Halloran, "distinguished by its emphasis on the responsibility of speakers to articulate their own worlds, and thereby their own selves" (342–43). "It is no longer valid," asserts Halloran, "to assume that speaker and audience live in the same world and to study the techniques by which the

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speaker moves his audience to act or think in a particular way. One must turn instead to the more fundamental problem of why the gap between the speaker's and audience's worlds is so broad and how one might bridge it smoothly" (336). Jordan forces Eleanor to take on the responsibility of first acknowledging and then attempting to bridge the racial gap between their feminist worlds.

Eleanor uses Jordan's self-representational strategies to help her interrogate Jordan's position, placing herself between her own readers (her classmates and me) and the June Jordan and Mike Tyson who are the joint subjects of her essay.

Eleanor opens her essay with a disclosure about her eyesight that becomes a metaphor for her struggle to gain insight into Jordan's message:

The truth is that at age fifty-three, I see less clearly than I did at thirty-three. I now wear glasses most of the time so that my field of vision will not be so limited and the words on the page in front of me will be large enough for me to see without hyper-extending my arms. So you see, I have done my best to correct my vision. . . . so why am I having so much trouble "seeing" what June Jordan wants me to see? For the life of me, I just can't go along with her *apologia* for the troubled life of Mike Tyson, former heavyweight champion and lost soul. Or at least what I see as her defense of the fallen champ.

She answers her own question in a way that discloses her status as a white person:

. . . but perhaps I am constitutionally incapable of seeing or hearing what you **are** saying. Perhaps it is, as my African American classmates suggest, the myopia that accompanies white skin. This is my limitation, my visual impairment.

And later, responding to, and echoing Jordan's disclosures about encountering the war-like devastation of the neighborhood where Tyson grew up, Eleanor offers her own growing-up story:

I've never been to Brooklyn and I have not seen war up close and personal. I've never been in combat nor did I grow up in a war zone. I have only seen TV wars. I have not known the ugliness of racism and poverty, and I grew up in a neighborhood where you could buy tulips and ribbons for a girl.<sup>1</sup> . . . And mostly, *I have never been seen as "other"* the way Mike Tyson and June Jordan have. Maybe this is why I cannot see her point; but I can see that she has one. (my emphasis)

Jordan's assertion of a shared identity with Tyson became the catalyst for Eleanor to confront her feminist perspective *with her own whiteness*. I am defining "whiteness" here as a cultural construction of individual and group

identity that is associated with the images of race that underpin the structure of our society. The cultural construction of whiteness may be one possible answer to bell hooks' question, "from what political perspective do we dream, look, create, and take action?" (4). In a culturally pluralistic society like America, whiteness does not exist in isolation from non-white cultural constructions such as "blackness"; it must exist in juxtaposition against those other constructions. Whiteness has been a locus of (often abusive) power and privilege for those in society who can claim it and a source of subjugation for those who cannot. Certainly, part of the advantage vested in whiteness lies in its ability to mask its own power and privilege—to render them normative, even invisible, in the minds of most whites, in order to maintain the framework of white supremacy. This dynamic is often painfully visible to those who cannot claim the power and privilege of whiteness.

What June Jordan's essay did for Eleanor, I think, was to force upon her a representation of whiteness that could only be conveyed from the vantage point of Jordan's blackness. The essay's intention and effect were to make uncomfortably visible the taken-for-granted privilege of whiteness, along with its potential to dominate the non-white. It disallowed Eleanor's attempt to claim a "sameness" of perspective with Jordan based on gender solidarity. She responded in her course paper with a set of personal disclosures that certainly cannot be dismissed as merely confessional or self-indulgent, but are in fact essential to the problem of race that Jordan has challenged her to resolve.

The kind of critical engagement exhibited by Eleanor and her classmates at the graduate level has led me to envision the *undergraduate* composition classroom as a place where students can learn strategies for expressing themselves meaningfully within the context of academic discourse. Because first-year and advanced composition courses are a large part of my teaching load, the essayist course enabled me to view authorship issues in student writing in a more focused way. I was particularly able to see that the experiences of my master's-level students, reflected in their class discussions and course papers, displayed important similarities to those of my undergraduate writers. They both seemed to share a strong desire to call upon the resources of their personal lives in order to make sense of their subject matter and to negotiate their stances relative to the conventional demands of academic discourse. While the writing of my master's students was

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somewhat more proficient, in a technical sense, than that of my undergraduates, the ability to effectively integrate personal stances into academically oriented discussions seemed about the same at both levels.

I further saw that the range of experiences that my undergraduate students—white and non-white, female and male—bring to their classrooms resonates strongly with experiences asserted in the black feminist essays from the seminar. Significant parallels exist between the lives of my students and those of the essayists, in their relationships with spouses/lovers, in their child-rearing responsibilities, in their religious and political affiliations, in their work situations, and in the depth of their community involvement. These students have taken on numerous sophisticated roles, such as parents of children with disabilities, litigants in major lawsuits, career military members, entrepreneurs and businesspeople, and caregivers for relatives with disabilities and catastrophic illnesses. Many of the social, political, and humanistic issues that they

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expressed a personal stake in resolving in their course papers were the same issues raised by the essayists that my graduate students studied. So whenever I was able to suggest the idea of infusing their

school papers with personal stances (using excerpts from essayists to illustrate self-disclosure techniques), my writing students were as attentive as my seminar students. And anxious as well, since few of them felt that they had been given meaningful opportunities to express personal standpoints, and fewer still had been given explicit instruction in how to do so effectively.

What is most memorable about both the professional essayists and my students is what I believe most college writers can be convinced of—that, as Halloran asserts, “the rigor and passion with which they *disclose their world* to the audience, is their *ethos*” (343). Yet I am aware that many composition teachers have considerable difficulty in granting their student writers that *ethos*. Even while assigning compositions they call “essays,” these teachers have largely denied to academic writing the essay’s invitation to *explicit* personal engagement with its subject matter, viewing most attempts to assert such a personal relationship as incompatible with the critical detachment valued in much disciplinary discourse. I’ve heard teachers routinely insinuate, and sometimes even state outright, the criticism that Kurt Spellmeyer has described, that students are no more than incomplete knowers whose “right to speak must be learned—or perhaps more accurately, earned—through what is essentially the effacement of subjectivity” (265).

Anxiety over the disclosure of personal information has occasionally been expressed in our professional journals. In a *College English* article, for example, Gordon Harvey suggests that the overt “personal” gesture is often construed by academic readers as irrelevant, inconsequential, and counterproductive. He tries to resolve some of that anxiety by considering ways in which academic writing can be “*informed* by personal experience without injecting personal *information*” (649). Such a dance around the embodied self may well be based on an assumption that one’s subjectivity is an element separate from the world being written about, and—especially when expressed through personal disclosures—somehow interferes with clear, logical, critical thinking. However, I am concerned that this attitude can hinder efforts of student writers to integrate disciplinary knowledge with other aspects of their lives, in order to define themselves as distinctive intellectual agents in academic and professional situations and thereby locate meaningful vantage points from which to interpret and apply the information they are learning. Such wholesale dismissal of college students’ capability to assert credible knowledge created through placing one’s knowledge about a subject within the framework of one’s life experiences, which is reflected in the rather cynical teacherly question, “What do *students* know?” perverts the powerfully heuristic question, *Que sais je?*—what do *I* know?—that has driven the development of the essay genre from the time of Montaigne.

Harvey seems to reduce the territory of personal disclosure, advocated mainly by feminist theorists and scholars of the familiar essay, to narrative and autobiography motivated by a desire to make the public voice of academic discourse more connected with lived experience and empathetic to others, less abstract, and less competitive. In Harvey’s view, the impulse toward personal disclosure, so defined, often produces bad writing by both college students and professional academic writers. He cites, in particular, the difficulty of contextualizing close analysis of primary texts with personal report; the analytical and the personal (which he admits is an arbitrary distinction), when treated as separate entities, are much like oil and water for most of his student writers.

The students devote their energy to finding whatever personal connections they can, not to wrestling the issues out of the text or finding things to say besides summaries and platitudes. For students who can’t yet manage an extended development of an idea in a “linear” fashion, the invitation to jump back and forth is added disincentive to extending thinking. The textual and the personal sections, sometimes jarringly different in style, are only very roughly stitched together—prompting one teacher I know to call these “Frankenstein” papers. But the assignment also provides an excuse to avoid even the more basic work of focusing closely

and describing accurately. The picture given of the text in these essays is distorted, reductive, fudged to fit. (645)

Key for me in this statement is that students are often, at least implicitly, invited to invoke the personal, but not given any explicit rhetorical insight regarding its effective use. Jumping back and forth between personal and analytical is, as even Harvey later acknowledges, arbitrary. That the personal can be analytical,

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that the analytical can be usefully located from a personal vantage point, seems impossible not only for the student writer to manage but for the teacher to work from as well.

The idea that the essay might be faulted for being “personal” in the ways advanced by Harvey might be attributed, at least in part, to critics’ reliance on the notion that identities are the private property of the individuals—as Celia Kitzinger asserts, “freely created products of introspection or the unproblematic reflections of the private sanctum of the ‘inner self’” (82). The questionable relevance of the “personal” may stem from viewing the essay’s subjectivity as an element separate from the world being written about that can cloud or detract from that world. From this perspective, the “personal” gesture is often construed as irrelevant, inconsequential, and counterproductive, as Harvey suggests. However, looking at the personal dimension from the perspective of black feminist writers, for example, can show how subjectivity is indeed inseparable from the world of ideas—from their interpretation and analysis—and thus essential for ideas to be properly developed by writers and understood by readers.

The problems that Harvey has encountered in many student compositions certainly should not be discounted. Engaging the overt personal gesture is indeed a strategy mishandled in much student writing. Many would agree, I think, that we would like students to go beyond writing that is personal, as Wendell Harris would say, “merely by virtue of narrating a personal experience” (941). Harvey does have an answer, in terms of his concept of “presence” that incorporates, among other things, a sense of motive or why a text needs writing; a development that allows the writer to explore and shape a topic as ideas dictate rather than as a thesis-plus-three ideas formula; use of details such as original metaphors, non-academic analogies; opening up larger questions and issues; and elaborating on reasons for judgments (651–53).

However, I disagree with Harvey's attempt to render *embodied* writers invisible—particularly student writers who, in his eyes, merely “drag in their personal experiences” or allow personal narrative to “infiltrate” traditional academic analysis. I am convinced that significant problems arise with student writing precisely when they have not defined and located themselves as effectively self-authorized knowers for their evaluative audiences. The problem I identify in much personal writing by students is a lack of skill in articulating a self that genuinely contributes to the rhetorical power of their compositions. But identifying a student's lack of skill in this area does not invalidate the *concept* of personal engagement of his or her subject matter as a potentially powerful strategy, which is what I believe happens too often. Dismissing the self-disclosure strategies themselves because students have not yet mastered

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those strategies seems senseless if the strategies are not being taught to them in the first place. The problematic *ethos* of student writers, which often seems to trigger their instructors' denial of their right to ask (heuristically) and then answer the question “what do I know” from all of their intellectual resources, strongly resonates with the struggle of many African American women writers to do the same. It is this connection between these two groups that allows me, as a composition instructor, to investigate how black feminist essayists attempt to solve the problematic, described by Cornell West, of “present[ing] themselves to themselves and others as complex human beings” (102), and to investigate what students might learn from studying their essays.

Pamela Klass Mittlefehldt's work provides considerable insight on issues involved in the construction of self-identity that black feminist writers typically bring to the essay form. For Mittlefehldt, the essay's focus on the author's voice, the visible process of contemplation, its grounding in particular experience, the reconsideration of and resistance to the orthodox, “make it a useful genre for Black feminists who are writing to change their worlds” (198). The essay's rhetorical edge, rather than the dispassionate contemplation that has characterized Western male essay traditions, is the attraction for black feminist writers. Essays by black feminist writers deal with the dynamic of social identity in provocative ways. Mittlefehldt explains that in the essay, “the author matters intensely. When that author is a black woman, the voice that comes through is one of radical import, for it is a voice that has been traditionally obliterated in



Western thought and literature" (198). Having moved from the margins and established a space for their voices by virtue of their success as writers, black women find the essay to be an important space for continually re-forming, re-visioning, and renegotiating personal identity in light of the past and ongoing experiences that shape their lives.

In fact, it becomes even more important for these essayists to allow readers to enter their lives, after they have become more centrally located. Kevin Murray states: "Whereas social identity is a problem for marginal individuals . . . personal identity becomes difficult for people who have achieved a successful moral career to the point where it is hard to distinguish oneself from the

**Black feminist essays teach many possibilities for negotiating self-identity and promoting *ethos* given the multiple locations from which the authors speak as African American women.**

official social order" (181). In ways not unlike black women in American society at large, college students constitute a social and cultural category within an institutional hierarchy that includes professors, administrators, support staff, and other

members of the college/university community. In light of the diversity of our student populations (in terms of race, ethnicity, class, age, gender/sexual orientation, literacies, and so forth), it is all the more striking that college students, like members of other hierarchies in our society, are subject to the same kinds of invisibility and namelessness.

Black feminist essays teach many possibilities for negotiating self-identity and promoting *ethos* given the multiple locations from which the authors speak as African American women (gendered, cultural, economic, generational, spiritual). It is the skillful interweaving of those locations into the subject matter under discussion that allows African American women writers to claim authoritative voices. Two concepts related to this notion of *ethos* are of great import for writing instruction. The first, as expressed by Patricia Hill Collins, concerns the development of an "ethic of personal accountability," wherein individuals place themselves in positions of direct responsibility for their own knowledge claims. For Collins and other black feminist theorists,

Assessments of an individual's knowledge claims simultaneously evaluate an individual's character, values, and ethics. African-Americans reject the Eurocentric, masculinist belief that probing into an individual's personal viewpoint is outside the boundaries of discussion. Rather, all views expressed and actions taken are thought to derive from a central set of core beliefs that cannot be other than personal. . . . Knowledge claims made by individuals respected for their moral and ethical connections to their ideas will carry more weight than those offered by less respected figures. (218)



The second concept is a suggestion that black women's essays can in fact, model for student writers those strategies that would enable them to create a distinctive place for themselves in a given discourse community. Mittlefehldt asserts that black women's essays

... are a resistance, a refusal to be silenced, a refusal to be *said*. By telling the stories of their own and other Black women's lives, [the essays] counter the attempts to erase and deny the experiences of Black women in American culture. At the same time, they also challenge the seductive ease of connection by engaging in dialectic tensions of difference (199)

These two concepts contribute to an understanding of the strategic nature of the essay as a means of knowledge-making grounded in the creation and manifestation of a writerly self. Writing instruction should enable students to recognize the writerly self as a *persuasive instrument* that can be strategically deployed and to learn to make effective use of their own multiple locations to take personal stands on public issues *that transcend the confessional*. A large part of what writing does for people is to help with their personal growth; as writers develop and then read their own work, they place themselves in subject positions relative to their texts and adapt to the role they have laid out for themselves in relation to the subject under discussion. Every text that is produced (in college or elsewhere) contributes to this re-visioning of the self that has been constructed for the writer and includes that self in the social dynamic that is writing. As Stuart Hall asserts:

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we. . . occupy our identities very retrospectively: having produced them, we then know who we are. We say, "Oh that's where I am in relation to this argument and for these reasons." So, it's exactly the reverse of what I think is the common sense way of understanding it, which is that we already know our "self" and then put it out there. Rather, having put it into play in language, we *then* discover what we are. I think that only then do we make an investment in it, saying, "Yes, I like that position, I am that sort of person, I'm willing to occupy that position." (qtd. in Drew 173)

This reciprocal movement between writer and text, I believe, must be as much a part of a writing student's rhetorical education as the movement between writer and reader. Since every text represents a cultural position, drawing texts by African American women into writing instruction may serve to

make student writers more keenly aware of how their own (and other) texts are constructing them, so that they can exercise greater influence over the Eurocentric masculinist vantage point that has been promoted as objectivity, even though it reinscribes Eurocentric masculinist scientific vision and values.

Judicious use of these essays may also avoid another significant danger, articulated in Gesa Kirsch and Joy Ritchie's critique of the essay's invitation to the personal. They charge that the essayistic writing that has become popular in feminist scholarship offers essentialist renderings of a confessional voice

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leading to more master narratives (8). A sophisticated understanding of self-disclosure as rhetorical strategy can, I believe, be a way out of such a trap. According to Mittlefehldt, "The self that is constructed in [black feminist] essays emerges from the complexity of each writer's personal experiences as a Black woman. It is strikingly apparent that for these women, that self is multi-voiced and

in constant dialogue with others" (201). The multi-layered voice of the writing self that speaks in the essays offers new angles of vision, unique juxtapositions of understanding and accountability. There is a passionate sense of connection in these writings, a clear impression that these words are directed towards others and that they invite response. The self that emerges here is one "grounded in a community. . . . It includes a spectrum of relationships, including ancestors, family, Black women, Black people, women, all living beings" (201-02).

The way a writer uses language to describe, report, narrate, or argue actually shapes a particular self-image both for the writer and the readers. This "rhetorical identity"—the presence invested in the text, developed by the writer to accomplish particular persuasive effects in the minds of readers, not only contributes to the writer's authority/credibility but also helps build a mutual relationship to readers as fellow scholars. Effective rhetorical identity defines a textual voice that is at once distinctive and strongly resonant with readers. My essayist course afforded my students a measure of comfort and a greater sense of strategy in developing their own ideas, which I think can be transferred effectively to the undergraduate writing classroom. The results in my courses, in terms of the rhetorical impact of the writing produced, validated for me the claims of Kurt Spellmeyer, W. Ross Winterowd, William Zieger, and other composition scholars, summarized by Ja-

nis Forman, that critical reading of and writing essays in composition classes “open up for students ways of knowing that are too often underrepresented in the curriculum—a willingness to value ambiguity, to invent, to suspend closure, to situate the self in multiple and complex ways through discourse” (5).

What do writing teachers need to consider in helping student writers to develop a more sophisticated approach to personal disclosure, with help from black feminist essayists? One approach would be to consider how these essayists can increase our sensitivity to the situational factors that generate a writer's *ethos*, to compare the constraints of school writing with those traditionally imposed upon African American women writers, and ultimately to draw conclusions regarding the contribution of *ethos*, in turn, to the evolution of the essayist and the student writer alike as an intellectual, as a professional communicator, as an enlightened self.

Having seen personal power at work in the essays by black feminist writers that we studied, Eleanor and the other students in my essayist course managed to enhance the rhetorical force of their own writing. They were able to recognize more circumstances that invite writers to invoke personal statements, to use specific kinds of words, images, and signals that construct a personal perspective; to see how distinctions between spiritual and secular, or between blackness and whiteness, can be manipulated for various reasons; and to learn how these discursive actions

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taken by essayists make considerable difference in how readers think about a given topic. And sometimes, as happened with Eleanor, students followed up on their observations by taking the risk of asserting their writerly selves more explicitly in their papers. Reflecting on Eleanor's project and the rest of that semester's work, I have come to see that the questions and concerns—even complaints—raised in that class regarding self-portrayal and authorization to speak demand closer examination, not only in seminars on the essay, but also in first-year and advanced composition classes, as well as in writing-intensive courses across disciplines, where student writers are struggling for the kind of credibility born out of rhetorically meaningful self-representations, the kind of credibility that these essayists, at their best, were able to achieve.

One important goal of writing instruction, of course, is to help students become effective communicators in academic and professional situations, where the expectations of audiences constrain what and how something should be said. In a society that is so culturally diverse, technologically sophisticated, and hierarchically complex, finding a vantage point, a place to stand, and a locus of authority, respect, influence, and power cannot be ignored as a teachable subject in rhetoric and composition courses. What many student writers seem to long for, even without knowing exactly how to articulate it, is meaningful instruction in using writing to assess, define, and assert who they are becoming as knowing beings. I think these students would find Black feminist essayists useful for their ability to reconcile social and personal identities and for directing those identities toward rhetorically useful ends.

## Notes

1. Here Eleanor is responding to the question posed by Jordan in describing Tyson's desolate environment: "In his neighborhood, where could you buy ribbons for a girl, or tulips?" (223).

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