CHAPTER 2: MEETING THE CONSTRUCTED SELF IN THE ESSAY

> I'm no heroine
> I still answer to the other half of the race
> I don't fool myself
> like I fool you
> I don't have the power
> You know, we just don't run this place
>
> - Ani Difranco, "I'm No Heroine"

Last spring, I had a student who jeered at the rape and murder of women in the personal essays he submitted to me and to the class. When I first met with the student to talk about the content in his essays, he was hostile: "But this is who I really am!" he exclaimed. "I have a twisted sense of humor!" At the time of our conference, we were reading works by Peter Elbow and bell hooks on voice, and in response to those works, he felt empowered to tell the truth, his truth, on the page. To be frank, this was a revelatory moment for me as a writing teacher; I realized that the concept (the convention in essay writing) that I had practically come to worship over the years because I and my students had found it to be so inspiring had provided this student with fodder for a terrible expression. By invoking the concept of voice, this student was indeed justified in voicing, through the expression of his truth, what he saw as his true self, even if that voicing silenced, marginalized, or threatened others.

The problems with this concept of voice in the personal essay have major implications. As explained through the examples of Berry's and Hazlitt's essays in Chapter 1, one such implication is that the social world's influence functions primarily as a threat to the essayist's true self and, as such, is an influence to be rejected. To put this in my student's perspective, he felt that in a truly authentic personal essay, he should discard what he considered to be "prudish ideas about sex," imposed on him by a society that did not allow him to be and express who he really was. In this example, the principal trap of voice emerges clearly: voice in the essay works by privileging one voice, the individual writer's voice, over all others. Thus, if one were to take seriously the idea that one can and should voice his/her soul or mind in an essay, then voicing that soul or mind necessarily becomes an act of domination, where the writer's voice silences other voices in order to make itself heard. Consequently, despite its work to subvert any social act of domination, "voice" only perpetuates it—by establishing its own.

This is what I call an "it's-all-about-me ethic," by which I am referring to the essayist's obligation to what Didion famously calls the writer's "implacable 'I.'" As Lynn Z. Bloom explains, "Writers of creative nonfiction live—and die—by a single ethical standard, to render faithfully, as Joan Didion says in 'On Keeping a Notebook,' *how it felt to me*' (134), their understanding of both the literal and larger Truth. That standard, and that alone, is the writer's ethic of creative non-fiction" ("Living to Tell the Tale" 278, emphasis added). The ethical imperative of the essayist is to be true to his/her interpretation of what is happening in and around him/her. The writer owes nothing else to the reader, not even consideration of the social implications of the truth that the writer feels/interprets. Given this ethic, this responsibility, it is no wonder that the personal essay has its critics.

VOICING MY SELF V. CRITIQUING CULTURE

There are many rhetoric and composition scholars, perhaps the most famous and persuasive of which is David Bartholomae, who argue that writing teachers are not doing their students any favors by privileging the often unreflective personal narratives that commonly constitute students' personal essays. Specifically, Bartholomae argues that creative nonfiction students write "[…] as though they were not the products of their time, politics and culture, as though they could be free, elegant, smart, independent, the owners of all that they saw" ("Writing" 70). Despite the unsettling suggestion that student writers are only imagining themselves as "elegant [and] smart," [15] Bartholomae's argument has gotten a lot of traction among writing teachers; many, today, would agree with his claim that in creative nonfiction (including personal essays), students write without considering sociopolitical influences on their identities.[16] To put this in other terms, writing teachers often complain that students write personal essays as if they (the student and the essay, itself) are not what many in the field of Rhetoric and Composition call "socially constructed."

For Bartholomae, this shortcoming in creative nonfiction is due to the fact that through their encounters with the genre, students are not taught how to participate responsibly in any given discourse community; instead, in creative nonfiction, they are asked to state what they already know of their own experiences and selves. As such, like a subject caught in "the matrix" and unaware of his/her own entrapment, more often than not, students' essays reflect the very hegemony that may be oppressing them, precisely because voice privileges "telling my story" for what it means to me over "examining my story" for how it participates in a larger discourse. Essentially, the line drawn in the sand here is between the two very different practices of self-expression and social critique.

This difference in practices is essential. Writing teachers and essay teachers, in particular, generally sympathize with Bartholomae's call for 'examination' over 'telling' in personal essays; however, the same teachers would see his insistence that the practice of examination function more like critique as one that flies in the face of Elbow's or any other voice-advocate's call to voice the self in writing. In fact, in other works, most famously in *Writing Without Teachers*, Elbow argues that the role of the reader-as-critic (including the writer-as-reader-as-critic) is counterproductive to expression, even to thoughtful or reflective expression, inhibiting it like any social influence would.[17] Of course, it is in response to this claim that Bartholomae leverages his own argument in "Writing with Teachers: A Conversation with Peter Elbow," which I quote above and which is the first piece of the famous debate between the two scholars in *College Composition and Communication* (Feb. 1995)—a debate that in some ways marks the separation of Creative Writing's and Rhetoric and Composition's treatment and valuing of the genre of the personal essay.[18]

VOICE AND THE SOCIAL SELF

At least in the field of Rhetoric and Composition, it would seem that in response to the debate between Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae about whether composition teachers should emphasize voice or participation in discourse communities (i.e., scholarly critique) in their writing courses, rhetoric and composition scholars and teachers have responded by doing a bit of both—by still calling the subject-on-the-page the "voice" of the writer and by still arguing that the voice is created and owned by the writer. Now, however, the field generally acknowledges that any voice on the page comes from and is created according to the writer's "situatedness." For example, in *Voicing Ourselves*, Christian Knoeller states, "Thus, the field [of Rhetoric and Composition] has moved beyond accounts of 'authentic' voice as individual identity, to situate voice within discourse communities: a means for signaling membership and establishing authority" (9). In another example, one voice scholar, Lizbeth Bryant states, "A writer constructs a voice out of his or her social milieu: a constructed subject voice that correlates with the writer's position in his or her world" (6). Point being, the *en vogue* theory of voice in the field of Rhetoric and Composition is one which figures the subject-on-the-page as possible not through the expression of the mind/soul of the writer, but through the construction of the writer's identity—which the writer specifically and deliberately constructs by "participating in" particular social contexts.

This conception of voice has found its way into essay scholarship, as well, though it hasn't gotten the same traction.[19] For example, essayist Douglas At-

kins argues that the writer must select, "like selecting an article of clothing," his/her voice within each context. He argues that the voice of the writer must be "real": "[meaning] truthful within the created context" (170). In taking seriously the analogy of picking out an article of clothing to wear, readers can infer that by "real" Atkins is referring, more specifically, to a voice that functions, as a concept, more like ethos but with a strong, necessary, and explicit tie to the personality and [socio-historico-political] circumstances of the real writer. Still, as I demonstrated in Chapter 1, the more common conception of the essay is that it is deeply wedded to some essential part of the self, a self that is imposed upon by the social world and that is best realized by being brought into an intentional relationship with the natural world. There is not much discussion, by comparison, of a concept of voice in personal essays that adheres to this idea of the socially constructed self.

On the other hand, I think I state the obvious when I point out that in the field of Rhetoric and Composition, there is a massive amount of scholarship available on the socially constructed self in writing; the concept is so pervasive that it has become invisible, even, in its inscriptions on the field. Consequently, in this chapter, I will introduce and explore the tenets of the field's conception of the socially constructed self in order to give it shape and make it perceptible. I will bring that conception into relation with, and apply it to, a few personal essays in order to explore how this different conception of voice might function in the personal essay. Thus, this chapter is a kind of thought experiment, one I attempt for a few reasons: to explore this other option for how we might understand the relation between the writer and the page in an essay; to discover how this option is meant to free the essayist (or writer, more generally) from some of the traps of the conception of voice discussed at the beginning of this chapter and in Chapter 1; and, finally, to demonstrate that because of the operations of objectification and transcendence that are foundational to this conceptualization of the writer-page relationship, it functions in much the same ways as the prior conception, creating similar traps and others of its own for the essayist.

WRITING ESSAYS [BY] PARTICIPATING IN DISCOURSE COMMUNITIES

The terms sometimes shift, but the basic tenets of any conception of a socially constructed self and its voice(s)-on-the-page are consistent: 1) the voice-on-the-page or the "textual self," as I'll call it in this chapter, is constructed by the writer, who is a participant in various "discourse communities"; 2) conventions and practices of the various discourse communities in which one participates more than likely come into conflict with each other; and 3) the conventions

and practices of any discourse community, as well as any internal and external conflicts in and among them, can be examined and consciously negotiated by the writer, if s/he becomes aware of them.[20]

In order to teach student writers to be aware of and to participate in particular discourse communities—in particular, the discourse community of the writing classroom—Bartholomae suggests that writing teachers approach student texts by being what he calls "dismissive." He states,

> In the course that I teach, I begin by *not* granting the writer her 'own' presence in that paper, by denying the paper's status as a record to her own thoughts and feelings. I begin instead by asking her to read her paper as a text already written by the culture, representing a certain predictable version of the family, the daughter, and the writer. ("Response" 85, emphasis in original)

What Bartholomae calls being "dismissive," I identify as part of the process of "critique," and that larger process of critique works on many levels within the discourse communities operating in a writing class. For example, in the essay courses I teach, writers critique each other's work throughout the semester: we sit in a big circle and talk about each student's essay-draft to see where readers are in agreement, where we're confused, and where we disagree entirely about how each draft is working (in terms of content, organization, style, etc.). In essence, the class takes some of the ownership of the work accomplished in any particular student essay and of the insights, even, that are rendered in each.

Throughout the course of the semester, as part of the practice of critique, the students learn from me and from model texts the conventions of the form, what sorts of strategies generally work in the essay, what pitfalls to avoid, and how to comment on peers' essays. As part of that effort, they learn to identify hackneyed moves or insights in the drafts (what Bartholomae refers to, above, as claims that "represent a certain predictable version" of a topic), and we talk together about how to complicate them, how to push them so that the essay does more work.[21] As the semester progresses, I talk less and less, while they learn to catch the problems, point out strengths, and debate complexities on their own. In these ways, they learn the conventions and practices of engagement (both oral and written) within an essay class, within a writers' workshop, and within an essay. In turn, they learn to 'participate,' as Bartholomae calls it, with greater intensity, as the semester progresses, in the discourses driving the work of and circulating in our course.

Participation/critique does not, however, simply involve my training student essayists in the conventions and practices of the particular discourse commu-

nities at work in the essay course. For those who are invested in the concept of the socially constructed self and the written voice of that self on the page, it involves, in theory, students being trained to identify and comprehend their own construction, which is dictated by the conventions and practices of relevant discourse communities. So, in order to raise their awareness around that construction in this essay course, I'd have to do some work around how the conventions and practices involved in reading and writing essays both enable and limit their engagement with the genre, enable and limit what shows up in their own essays, as well as how the coursework both enables and limits the ways in which they function as individual identities in the classroom and on the page.

Participation/critique also involves my providing writers with the critical skills to refuse these conventions and practices—to break, perhaps, with a convention in an essay or to read an essay through the lens of a different tradition or theory, as I will do in this chapter. Thus, according to this conception of the writer-page relation, student essayists can and should be trained to write against the "norm" that may dictate the shape and content of their selves and their essays. Only then will they be able to find ways to critically participate in discourse communities in the ways in which Bartholomae refers. Only then will they be given the means to resist the forces that are working on them and that have made them complicit in the truths of a "society" (e.g., a classroom); only then will they be able to develop more autonomous voices on the page.

In his article "Writing with Teachers," Bartholomae figures this particular kind of participation in a classroom as a "contact zone," where the classroom functions as a space for critical inquiry, a space within which to discover strategies and to learn practices for critiquing the homogenizing and/or intrusive conventions and practices of discourse communities (66), while also learning to deploy them, as one wishes or chooses. By considering the essay as a space of critical inquiry, as a contact zone, the writer-page relationship is essentially remade—made in decidedly different ways from the processes described in Chapter 1. Here, the essay becomes a space where the same [social, political, and historical] conventions and practices that construct the flesh-and-blood writer are brought, by the writer, into contact within a complex of power structures on the page.

RE-PRESENTING THE SOCIAL SELF IN WRITING

The often cited example of a contact zone discussed by Mary Louise Pratt in "Arts of the Contact Zone," involves an Andean (Guaman Poma), who wrote a text that does not simply "imitate or reproduce" the "representational repertoire of the invaders," but "selects and adapts it along Andean lines to express […]

Andean interests and aspirations" (36). This practice (of selecting and adapting) is an example of transculturation: "processes whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture" (36). The process of selecting and adapting "materials transmitted by a dominant [...] culture" is equal to the work of participation/critique described above: in it, students should select, by writing about, the materials of culture (e.g., the clichéd, popular understandings of complex issues as divorce or gun control) but turn them on their heads in order to resist them and to construct a more autonomous self. In trying to teach essays this way, however, I have found that the practice of "re-presenting," which seems central to any writing task in a contact zone, involves the operations of objectification and transcendence, and these operations make any writing task in a contact zone ultimately impotent in making change—e.g., in creating a more autonomous self.

Writers in/of contact zones *re-present* their real (as in living) selves on the page. To do so, they hone their awareness of the social categories and power structures that work on their real selves. Then, they carefully and responsibly select and adapt those social categories and power structures and reconstruct them on the page in the form of a textual world in which the writer's textual self lives. For example, in Pratt's use of Poma's text, she shows that he "construct[s] a new picture of the world, a picture of a Christian world with Andean rather than European peoples at the center of it" (34). Poma has selected the social categories of "Andean" and "European"; he has placed them in a world he has constructed in such a way that their power structure is inverted. In the process, he has also constructed a textual self that is the same but different when compared to his real self: it is a self that has resisted (by inverting) the real power structure in which the real Poma lives (which is, of course, a fiction), but that self is also, decidedly, "him."

To break Poma's process of critique down into observable steps, I suggest the following explanation: first, he identifies, from a subject-object position, what "The Andean" is and what "The European" is; then, he chooses what parts of each he'd like to put on the page; finally, he puts them into a relationship that is critical of the real-world relation between the two. Through this process, in a rather confusing twist, Poma gets to have it both ways—or four ways, to be more precise: he constructs on the page the subject (himself), which is, according to Pratt, equal to Poma-the-real-person but also equal to the more general category of the Andean; in his rendering of this individual/group identity within an inverted binary (the Andean and the Spaniard), he has made that identity both authentic in its relation to the real-world power structures, as well as critical of the same power structures by revising them in the text. All of this, he manages by pretending to work from outside of the actual power structures within which he

lives, stepping outside of them in order to identify, assess, and reconstruct them on the page, like a god creating a world instead of like a citizen utterly inundated and made ("constructed") by the very structures he is critiquing.

Confusions aside and at the risk of sounding biting, it seems clear enough to me that rather than create an autonomous and critical self that is no longer complicit in the undesirable social forces working on him, as Bartholomae and others invested in critique may hope for, Poma has not done much more than imagine a simpler self living in a simpler world (simple, in part, because each culture has been reduced to a social category rendered within a binary). The failure of the text to accomplish the intended end of critique is due, in part, to the objectification at work in the process of re-presentation (of self, of cultures, etc.). To explain, I point to another excerpt from "Arts of the Contact Zone" in which Pratt asserts that "[i]n so far as anything is known about him at all, Guaman Poma exemplified the sociocultural complexities produced by conquest and empire" (34). In this statement, Pratt suggests that: 1. Poma, the flesh-and-blood man, is equal to the historical and political context within which he lived, and 2. the textual Poma is a kind of micropicture of the same "picture of the world" that he constructs in the text.

The problem with these assumptions and with the steps I described above is that they are, to use Nietzsche's famous accusation, "arrogant": in reducing what is necessarily complex and infinitely various to these easy social categories and, then, by asserting/assuming that the process of constructing this reductive re-presentation makes the writer's self stronger, more autonomous in the real (complex) world. To recognize this arrogance is, I think, to ask certain questions: How can a single individual "exemplify" a culture? How can any human being (or group of human beings, for that matter) adequately capture and re-present on the page an entire culture? How can any individual decide which forces will act on him/her—whether in "real life" or on a page? Such powers would suggest the existence and work of a kind of superhuman (and, I should note, not the kind that I think Nietzsche is after in the figure of Zarathustra): one who is incredibly aware and in-control of his/her own "social-ness" to the extent that s/he can make herself/himself true to or impervious to certain social forces, to the extent that s/he can, in fact, wield those social forces.

The point is that the assumptions that drive this concept of the socially constructed self and its re-presentation on the page hinge on a process in which the socially conscious and rhetorically savvy writer can transcend the social categories and power structures within which s/he lives, identify from that position those that s/he wants to re-present in writing, and then, revise the ways in which they function by re-presenting them in critical ways on the page. Because of these assumptions, this conception of the socially constructed self of the writer

and his/her re-presentation on the page smacks of the same problems described in the first chapter of this project—problems that stem from a conception of self that perpetuates the myth of transcendence.

THE DETERMINISTIC INFLUENCES OF DISCOURSE COMMUNITIES AND THE POWER OF CHOICE

A few scholars (e.g., Patricia Bizzell) have reminded us that though an "aware" writer (like Poma) might be able to choose how s/he appropriates and re-presents the conventions and practices of particular discourse communities, we don't have a choice as to what discourses we are subjected to; at best, we can only choose among those that are available to us (see Bizzell's "What Is a Discourse Community"). For scholars like Pratt and Bartholomae, who are interested in the concept of the contact zone, and for essayists and essay teachers who, in turn, may be interested in the essay functioning like a contact zone, the key to writing critically is choice, itself: through it, the essayist can overcome the otherwise unstoppable influence of "society." For example, in the popular creative nonfiction textbook, *Shadow Boxing*, Molly Ivins's "Texas Women: True Grit and All the Best" explores what are essentially the various discourse communities of Texan women, though she doesn't call them "discourse communities"; rather, she presents several "strains" of Texan culture that determine Texas Womanhood. Via these "strains," Texas women have a few possibilities (choices) within which their womanhood can be constructed.

Ivins states, "As has been noted elsewhere, there are several strains of Texan culture: They are all rotten for women." They include (among others) the Southern belle of Confederate heritage, who is the flirtatious "woman-on-a-pedestal"; the "pervasive good-ol'-boyism of *Redneckus texensis,*" which maintains the virgin/whore dichotomy; and "the legacy of the frontier," where the "little ladies" are protected by "the big, strong man" (53-54). Texan culture is divided into perceivable and broadly applicable categories within which women's roles are determined by the conventions and practices of each. Those conventions and practices are suggested in the categories themselves (e.g., the "woman-on-a-pedestal" is idealized by others), so I won't focus on these here. Instead, what seems most important to this discussion is that Ivins suggests in her essay that a woman's personality is in some way, if not in all ways, determined by the discourse community to which she chooses to belong: e.g., she can either be a "woman-on-a-pedestal" or a "little lady."

Given the limiting and insidious nature of the conventions and practices of these particular discourse communities, it would not be too difficult to argue that any female subject in any one of them would be entirely regulated/controlled by

those conventions and practices. In an interesting move toward the end of the essay, however, Ivins states, "Texas women are just as divided by race, class, age, and educational level as are other varieties of human beings," (55) which seems to be an admission of what could be, what are, far more complex subjectivities living in these discourse communities. Nevertheless, Ivins continues a sentence later: "There's a pat description of 'what every Texas woman wants' that varies a bit from city to city, but the formula that Dallas females have been labeled goes something like this [...]" (55). Oddly, despite Ivins's admission that women are "just as divided" by other social categories, she swiftly moves into further categorization in the "pat description" of Texas women's wants and offers no critique of that description. I suspect that this is because a critique of such a generalization would disable the operation of objectification: it would unravel her claim that this particular group of women is determined by the conventions (in this case, the desires) of its respective discourse community. To put this another way, there can be no critique of a discourse community, no selecting and adapting, no choice among and within them, if there are no consistent and identifiable qualities to delineate one community from another.

As many scholars have already argued, though, discourse communities consist of more than one, agreed-upon set of rules and practices.[22] This is even demonstrated in Ivins's articulation of several competing strains of Texan culture that are all operating within the larger discourse community of Texan women. Such contradictions/conflicts are so normal that in Ivins's essay, for example, it is not difficult for the reader to accept the following tensions: that though they are the victims of pervasive sexism, Texan women are also "tough in some very fundamental ways" (56); and that despite her awareness of the sexism behind notions of Texas Womanhood, Ivins at one point adhered to it. However, in order to critique a discourse community, one must be able to identify it according to at least a few generalizable conventions, and in that generalization, the writer in/of a contact zone erases complexity, objectifies a community, and moves into a [false] transcendent position. Ivins, in fact, confesses that she can opt out of these discourse communities because she is "more of an observer" (52). Consequently, she is both able to play the critic and able to construct a subject-on-the-page that is not determined by any of the strains of Texan culture that she has re-presented.

According to composition and essay scholars who are invested in this socially constructed concept of the self, in order to "participate" critically in discourse communities, writers must become observers, thus transcending the discourse community in question by enacting a subject-to-object relation to it. More specifically, writers in/of contact zones find criteria by which they can categorize a discourse community; only then can they betray those criteria, choose to write

against those criteria, e.g., by creating a self-on-the-page that rejects conventions and practices of the Texan "little lady" or of the oppressed Andean. Again, the supposed benefit of the objectifying and transcending move is that if they learn the practice well, writers can step far enough away from the culture that is imposed on them to construct a self that has more agency with regards to that culture.

WHERE THE CONTACT ZONE FAILS US

In an example meant to stand as a recommendation to all teachers of writing, Bartholomae states that he encourages one of his writers "to revise in such a way that the order of the essay is broken—to write against the grain of the discourse that has determined her account of her family" ("Response" 85). He doesn't say what the student's representative narrative is, but if one follows his cue that this student has written a paper about her parents' divorce, then chances are good that she's done the work through one of the more normative binaries, perhaps like the following: divorce is good because it gives couples the choice to find a better/different life, or it's bad because it gives couples the choice to "give up" on their life together.

Bartholomae is also not specific about what a paper that "works against the grain of the discourse that has determined her account" would look like; however, to use the example above, the student might look closely at the values and assumptions at work in both sides of the binary: that divorce is necessarily good or bad and how her position as daughter, as young female, as member of the middle class, etc., influences her evaluation of divorce as good or bad. The irony is that in order to be capable of writing against one deterministic discourse, the student writer must write within the conventions and practices of another discourse. For example, the student whose paper is described above would have to learn how to talk about "assumptions," how to critically engage "evaluative terms," how to problematize binaries, and so on.

In a more explicit example of this movement between the conventions of a couple of discourse communities (i.e., using the conventions of one in order to critique another), I point to Linda Brodkey's essay "Writing on the Bias." In it, she writes about her inundation in the conventions of academic speak, or what she calls "objective" language. She finds that in actuality, the objective, which she explains as a middle class convention, is a lie, ultimately an impossibility.[23] In contrast, Brodkey states, "[Writing on the bias] recognizes the third dimension of seemingly two-dimensional material" (547). That "third dimension" is the subjective orientation to a topic, experience, idea, argument, etc. For Brodkey, her family's economic class and her subsequent orientation to the middle class

(her membership in both would constitute a "contact zone") are part of her subjective approach and, ultimately, decide for her how she can and must write. The third dimension of her writing, comes from her orientations to these two economic classes—orientations she feels she can choose between, since she now recognizes that the objective (a "middle-class construct"), for example, often stands in for "reality," when it actually works to squash or "silence" the experience of "other quarters" (547). Thus, in her essay, Brodkey says "yes," by giving voice to her own bias and, in turn, says "no" by refusing the oppressive conventions of objective language.

In this example, again, the assumption seems to be that a writer can not only recognize what social influences are at work on his/her self and on a group of people, but s/he can also say "yes" or "no" to them in a text. Saying "yes" or "no" suggests that the operations of objectification and transcendence are at work again, for the writer is assumed to be able to observe the social influences at work on him/her from a subject-to-object relation and to decide which social forces to implicate in the self-on-the-page. The problem is that by saying "no" to one set of conventions, we can only do so by deploying another set of conventions; critique doesn't happen in a vacuum after all. It must always happen within particular power relations, which are already in existence and operating within and among discourses long before any individual writer or essayist picks up a pen or faces a cursor. In Brodkey's case, she writes in the conventions and practices of one discourse ("the subjective" or what rhetoric and composition scholars and teachers might recognize as "the personal") when she chooses not to write in the objective. Thus, there is no moment of transcendence over/beyond social forces, when the writer says "yes" or "no." To assume that we can transcend is deeply problematic; in fact, the element of choice, itself, is also deeply problematic.

These problems are brought home in decidedly powerful ways in Richard Miller's article, "Fault Lines in the Contact Zone." Miller describes a situation where a student realizes that in order to read the work of Anzaldúa, whom the student initially brands a "femo-nazi" (among other pejorative markers), he would have to "set aside [his] personal values, outlook and social position in order to escape the bars of being offended and discouraged" (406). Though Miller seems to see this admission as progress, I would argue that it is based on the false assumption that one is capable of "setting aside" (of transcending) personal values, social position, etc. Perhaps more importantly, Miller's use of the example as a positive point of change suggests that this "setting aside" *should* be done—e.g., that Anzaldua's work should no longer be read within the dynamics of racism and sexism, dynamics that are essential to the work of the text. To ignore them, to displace them, is to deny the work its own fabric, its own constitution, as well as the writer's own fabric and constitution. Worse, the effort to ignore, displace,

and "transcend" accomplishes absolutely nothing in changing the power relations at work in the reader-text encounter. For example, in this case, the student only manages to compartmentalize his prejudice for the sake of an exercise—a process that is, frankly, no more than a grand pretend.

In the field of Rhetoric and Composition's turn to "the social," as Patricia Bizzell calls it, this belief in a scholar's (and potentially, a student's) ability to "set aside" his/her own subjectivity is a common one. In fact, scholars and students are often required to deploy this skill—transcending social context—a skill that stems from an institutionalized belief that Stanley Fish calls "theory hope." As Bizzell explains the concept, "The tendency […] is to hope that by becoming aware of the personal, social, and historical circumstances that constitute our beliefs, we can achieve a critical distance on them and change our beliefs if we choose" ("Foundationalism" 205). In other words, some of us—and some of our students—believe that by becoming aware of the construction of our subject positions within/according to discourses on gender, for example, we can decide to no longer be gendered—except, perhaps, according to our own preferences.

Perhaps it's obvious why such a belief would be problematic, but to quote Bizzell again, the reason is because "no theory can achieve transcendence of, and explanatory power over, the discourse in which it is framed" ("Foundationalism" 215). No individual can achieve that transcendence either. Even when we examine how individuals function within discourses concerned with gender, sexuality, race, etc., that examination occurs (is deployed) within and according to discourses always, already at work. I, for example, don't get to just invent a whole new discourse from and within which to talk about the essay. Rather, I must work within discourses that already exist, that are operating in every sentence, indeed in the language, of this project. In other words, there is no way "out"—however much we'd like to believe there is.

WHERE TO NOW

That said, just because the concept of the socially constructed self is a pawn in an impossible game, where players believe themselves capable of objectifying and transcending culture and their selves in order to (re)construct and re-present them on a page, that doesn't mean we should throw out all practices that are part of the processes of self-examination and social-awareness. Instead, the question intensifies: how can we, teachers of the essay, empower student essayists without asking them to practice the impossible, transcendent move that is enabled by a belief in an essential self or a socially constructed self?

I don't think the answer to this problem lies in identifying social categories, reversing power structures, or trying/hoping to write from outside of our own

social construction. In fact, I would steer clear of the question that Robertson and Martin pose in "Culture as Catalyst and Constraint": "[…W]ho is in charge of what or whom, through what means, and toward what ends?" (507). Their question hinges on the belief that if people can figure out who is constraining whom, then out of mutual respect and continued confrontation, people can make a "genuine change" (509). The problem with this belief is it misleads writers into thinking they can rise "above" their social-ness, above the page, above the discourses at work at any given moment, even above their own selves, manifested in flesh or in black squiggles on white pages. Somehow, it invites or encourages the assumption that if we are constructed, then we are constructed like a house—and that the solution to any power structure problem is really just a matter of moving things around—which is, frankly, overly simplistic. We miss the mark (and likely get ourselves into trouble) if we assume that we can just accept or reject social influences ("I will not be gendered today!") or that the game will fundamentally change with another captain calling the shots or, worse, that we can change the game from the sidelines.

The bottom line is that in the conceptualization of subjectivity I've traced out in this chapter, the writer, the essayist, is privileged as the creator, conveyor, tyrant of the text and of the self that may show up on a page. Consequently, I would argue that those of us who may have bought into this conceptualization of the self are only inviting the same sort of tyranny, the sort of self-serving engagement that I saw in the student essay I described at the beginning of this chapter. Couldn't he argue that he has rejected the prudish codes of conduct and attitudes of one discourse community in order to affirm a different set of codes and attitudes? If so, then not enough has changed in the shift from one conception of the writer-page relation to the other. As such, I propose that we ask, instead, what would happen if we worked from the assumption that the subject is not the originator, not the creator, not the actor—at least not in the "arrogant" ways in which we like to pretend that s/he is. How might a subject *be constituted* in a text, i.e., how is a subject constituted in discourses (e.g., of the essay), in the practices at work in those discourses? And, how might the writer participate in that constituting? In other words, how can we (re)conceptualize subjectivity in the essay in terms that are not reducible to the "old shoe" binary of the essential self v. the socially constructed self?

NOTES

15. I think it worth noting that Bartholomae's production (with Anthony Petrosky) of *Ways of Reading* suggests that he, in fact, does think his students capable of being "elegant [and] smart." The textbook incorporates readings that many first-year

writing teachers would probably see as too sophisticated, too dense, for first-year writers. Yet, here are Bartholomae and Petrosky on the matter: "[…T]his is why a course in reading is also a course in writing. Our students need to learn that there is something they can do once they have first read through a complicated text; successful reading is not just a matter of 'getting' an essay the first time. In a very real sense, you can't begin to feel the power a reader has until you realize the problems, until you realize that no one 'gets' Geertz or Rich or Griffin or Wideman all at once. You work on what you read, and then what you have at the end is something that is yours, something you made" (vii). Clearly, Bartholomae thinks students capable of elegant and smart work, work that at least approximates the scholar's.

16. See, for example, recent discussions on the WPA listserv about the value of personal writing (a search for "personal writing" in the listserv archives will bring up those discussions).

17. Regarding the value of readers' responses, Elbow does not throw the baby out with the bathwater. There is value for the reader in the writer's process, but that role is significantly different from the reader-as-critic that I will describe in this chapter. In *Writing Without Teachers*, Elbow discusses at length the value of receiving peer feedback, i.e., "movies of the mind" from readers, so that the writer, then, can have a clearer understanding of how her work is managing her intentions—if readers are getting from her writing what she wants them to get from it or not. She is then supposed to use this feedback to make adjustments to her work so that it aligns better with her intentions. There is also Elbow's work on the believing/doubting game in which writers challenge and take seriously their own claims—i.e., they play critics to their own works. Both seem to be strategies for encouraging the writer to take full ownership of the text, even of its critique. The major difference in Bartholomae's and Elbow's notions of critique seems obvious enough: the former sees it as being most productive if it is rendered by one who understands the topics, values, and beliefs at stake, as well as the discourse within which they are circulating, better than the writer; the former sees critique as being most productive if it is owned (if not rendered from, then accepted or rejected) by the writer.

18. Admittedly, Bartholomae is focused here on what should go on in a first-year composition classroom: what kind of writing should be privileged, what kind of relationship we should be teaching our students to have to their texts, what kind of work they should be doing as writers, etc. Perhaps, as a consequence, it could be argued that the kinds of writers or written selves that are taken up in the debate between Bartholomae and Elbow have little to do with the self of the essayist/essay. I understand this argument, but I disagree. Granted, the goal of Elbow's classroom (to teach students to express themselves) is different from Bartholomae's (to teach students to critique culture). On the other hand, these goals are driven by the same impetus—an interest in "student rights" (see Jeanette Harris), or more specifically, an interest in students' empowerment, which hinges on concepts of agency. I would

argue that essayists have the very same interest.

I, as an essayist, admittedly come at my own empowerment, my own agency, through different means in an essay, than I do as a scholar in my scholarship. I'm addressing a different audience and am expected to work within different genre conventions. However, the basic assumptions about the writer-page relation that are at work in conversations about one genre can speak to those that are at work in conversations about other kinds of writing. For example, is it not interesting that in Technical Writing, the student is expected to keep his/her voice "out" of the writing? Is it not interesting, too, that in a composition course, voice teachers teach students to "find their voices"? The question then becomes: what is the writer-page relationship in each?

To put this in more explicit and applicable terms, it is easy to read the Elbow-Bartholomae debate as one of missed lines, i.e., as a debate over totally separate issues: voice and critique. However, I'd argue that the two interests are not mutually exclusive in a personal essay, for how critique is conducted has much to do with how a subject is believed to be reflected/constructed on a page and vice versa. This symbiotic relationship—between subjectivity and critique—will become clearer throughout the course of this chapter, but for the time being, it should suffice to say that what composition teachers have to say about voice and writing speaks in interesting ways to what essayists have to say about voice and the essay and vice versa. This conversation is worth pursuing in order to discover what the implications of it are, and that pursuit is exactly the impetus behind this chapter.

19. Two particularly interesting works of scholarship that take up the issue of a socially constructed self in personal writing are as follows: Stuart Ching's "Memory as Travel," which engages the problematic relationship in creative nonfiction of memory and narrative in a socially constructed identity; and Elisabeth Leonard's "Assignment #9," which is an example and exploration of "experimental" writing that specifically engages the concept of a socially constructed self.

20. I hesitate to use the term "discourse communities" because as Joseph Harris says of the latter term "community," "there is something maddening and vague about the term" ("Community" 6). Given the concession in the field about how "we write not as isolated individuals but as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain" (Harris *Teaching* 98), though, I have chosen to stick to the term "discourse community." However, I will use this term in a pointed way: in order to set up and analyze how the concept of "contact zones" works, a concept that at least professes to disrupt the tyrannizing concept and influence of discourse communities.

I understand and deploy the term "discourse communities" according to the work of Bartholomae and of Patricia Bizzell. Bizzell, in her article "Cognition, Convention, and Certainty," explains the concept as such: "Groups of society members can

become accustomed to modifying each other's reasoning and language use in certain ways. Eventually, these familiar ways achieve the status of conventions that bind the group in a discourse community, at work together on some project of interaction with the material world" (214). One such project of interaction with the material world is, of course, the writing classroom.

21. What they learn, too, and what they comment on most to me with each new round of drafts is that a lot of the students' essays "sound the same." That is, my students begin to see the very issues that Bartholomae complains of in "Writing With Teachers," but for them, the stakes are not so much about participating differently in order to practice critique effectively; rather, for them, the stakes are about doing "something different." They are pointedly, even passionately, interested in creating works that stand out, that are remarkable.

22. For example, Patricia Bizzell argues, "Healthy discourse communities, like healthy human beings, are also masses of contradictions" ("What" 235). Or to quote Pratt, "People and groups are constituted not by single unified belief systems, but by competing self-contradicting ones" ("Interpretive" 228). These competing beliefs do not change a discourse community's ability to be recognized as a unit, though. As Harris states, "One does not need consensus to have community" (*Teaching* 106).

23. Incidentally, this is often the rally-cry for many creative nonfiction advocates (for example, see Lynn Z. Bloom's "Living to Tell the Tale").