# CHAPTER 3: CULTIVATING A SELF IN THE ESSAY

> We take the opinions and the knowledge of others into our keeping, and that is all. We must make them our own. We are just like a man who, needing fire, should go and find some at his neighbor's house, and, having found a fine big fire there, should stop there and warm himself, forgetting to carry any back home. What good does it do to us to have our belly full of meat if it is not digested, if it is not transformed into us, if it does not make us bigger and stronger?
>
> - Michel de Montaigne, "Of Pedantry"

As I mentioned at the beginning of Chapter 2, not long ago, I had a student who jeered at the rape and murder of women in the 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!" In taking this case to several of my rhetoric and composition colleagues, the most consistent bit of advice I got from them was to steer the student away from thinking about his self-on-the-page as a constitutive act of voice (an expression or a textual re-presentation of the "real" writer) and, instead, as a construction of ethos. With this shift in perspective, the assumption was that he would be able to see the self-on-the-page as his audience might see it. Then, we could talk about the ineffectiveness of that ethos and about how to revise so that the essay's ethos would be more effective. Of course, what was implied in their advice, too, was that the student would then see the error of his ways, for inevitably, he would find that the more effective ethos would be one that aligned with the values, morals, and codes of conduct deemed acceptable by an audience of me and of upper-level English majors.

The problem with this implication is, I hope, obvious: that the student would be required to conform to institutionally accepted values, if he wanted to produce an effective essay. This would not necessarily be a problem if those values only involved his use of the conventions of a "good" essay—e.g., those mentioned in Chapter 1 (freedom, walking, and voice). Instead, in this particular case, what counted as a good/effective essay involved the rendering of a particular kind of voice or textual self—one that embodied the values and ethical practices that would be deemed appropriate, that would be accepted by

a group of his peers and by me. Consequently, by asking the student to examine the ethos in his writing in order to deploy it more effectively, I would not have been asking him simply to reflect further (on) the voice-on-the-page or his textual self; I would have been teaching him to align his voice/textual self with particular socio-political values so that the ethos would be perceived to be reliable.[24] As such, I would have become a part of a system where the disciplining practices of our field take a turn toward the silencing practices of intellectual tyranny—just the sort of practices with which any voice scholar and/or teacher would take serious issue.

No doubt, one could argue (as I often do, myself) that it's more important to teach students to be attentive, respectful, socially-responsible, and critical thinkers than it is to give them the space to "be their own persons," which in my student's case, would translate to being a person who participates in and perpetuates some of the most horrible 'isms' that exist today. Yet, doesn't that privileging fly in the face of the real work of the personal essay as the last "free" space for self-expression? Perhaps even more importantly, by teaching said values, how am I much better than the kind of person whose ideology I'm trying to disempower?

Certainly, I know—and can argue—the difference between the self-righteousness that I am invoking and the self-righteousness articulated in the rape-celebrating essay written by my student. I can argue that in asking my student to revise the ethos of his essay and that in explaining why he needs to revise that ethos, I would be inserting myself into discourses that perpetuate dangerous hierarchies and abuse; I would be trying to create a disruption, trying to break a chain forged over centuries of problematic thinking, talking, and acting along perilous conceptions of gender roles. But after making such attempts over a decade of teaching, I know for certain that if students read such an attempt as me trying to silence them, then my attempts at "disruption" only persuade them to shut down the exchange (and, ironically, often in the name of "self-expression").

In part, the problem seems to stem from our modern-day conceptions of self. To be more specific, as Crowley and Hawhee explain to rhetoric and writing students in their textbook *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students,* "Americans tend to link a person's opinions to her identity. We assume that someone's opinions result from her personal experience, and hence that those opinions are somehow 'hers'—that she alone 'owns' them" (5). Thus, folks tend to get very upset when their opinions are challenged because the assumption is that their opinions are not all that is at stake in a discussion; their identities, their selfhoods, are.

The presence of this assumption about opinion-as-identity in personal essay courses, in writing pedagogies, and even in writing and essay scholarship is, arguably, the residual effect of an institutional purchase of (with all the associated

advertising for) romanticism and its hero, the romantic subject. Borrowing the wording of John Muckelbauer in his work on imitation (and the humanities' resistance to it), we are seeing the effects of "the institutional emergence of romantic subjectivity, an ethos that emphasizes *creativity*, *originality*, and *genius*" (52, emphasis added). One of those effects can be seen in the fact that conceptions of the essayist, especially, are bound up in the belief in "opinion-as-identity."

To explain with regards to agency, as it is forwarded in Chapters 1 and 2, if we buy the concept of the essential or socially constructed self, then we tend to see our subjectivities as entirely dependent on our ability to *have* and to interpret our experiences, as if *how* we experience and *what* we experience happen in a subject-object relation (i.e., me vs. the experience). When we enter into a relation with the object-that-is-experience, we interpret it and become, in that act, agents that can control it. In this relation, "life" becomes a series of events to be interpreted. We possess those interpretations by imposing on them a narrative (enter "creativity") that is the product of our unique perspective (enter "originality"), which is unique because of the unique constellation of experiences that have been interpreted by our individual selves (enter "genius").[25]

The upshot of this tangle is that we get to see ourselves as agents in this world—not simply as actors but as unique entities that necessarily interpret and possess experience differently. What we also get is the belief that my perspective is who I am and that any challenge to that perspective—which, ironically, can be represented by groups to which I belong, e.g., institutions, families, etc.—is a threat to my very existence. One can easily see this belief in opinion-as-identity at work in my student's argument for his voice, his true/honest self, on the page. One can easily see it in the failed attempts on my part to interject in a discourse in which that voice is implicated.

If we give in to the "implacable I" of the essayist, as Joan Didion calls it, or the "it's all about me ethic," as I called it in Chapter 2, and if we, consequently, dismiss any responsibility to the people who may be belittled or silenced by that implacability, then just how valuable can the essay really be? What is it likely to contribute to any discourse it participates in? Is it likely to be rigorous, skeptical, profound? I'd argue "no" because, contrary to popular belief, the essay would not be freed by the essentialized or socially-constructed self that is expressed or re-presented in an essay; rather, the essay would be limited by that self—and in dangerous ways.

For the purposes of this chapter, then, I would like "to make visible a bygone way of approaching the self and others which might suggest possibilities for the present" (Rabinow xxvii)—in particular, possibilities for how one might conceive of subjectivity in the essay. To do this work, I turn to the work of Michel Foucault. The practices that will be examined in this chapter are described

best in Foucault's piece, titled "Self Writing." In it, he introduces self writing as a series of practices in which the writer participates in order to constitute and "cultivate" his/her self. Through this exploration of Foucault's work on subjectivity, I hope to describe a compelling and progressive study of subjectivity in essaying, one that enables productive debate and, even, self-transformation, one that does not send writers right back into the traps created by the theories of the writer-page relationship that I articulated in the first two chapters of this project.

Foucault's work, however, only provides the system of thought—the skeleton, so to speak, around which one can shape the conception/articulation of an actual subject-in-writing. In order to provide a few subjects-in-writing in which to examine relevant writing practices and in order to flesh-out this particular version of subjectivity, I have chosen to take up the essays of Montaigne. I've chosen his works for at least a few important reasons: the most important reason being that Montaigne is considered the "father" of the genre; the second reason being that his essays are often quoted to support each of the conceptions of the relationship between the writer and the self-on-the-page that I described in Chapters 1 and 2. As I will demonstrate, however, reading his essays as evidence of either conception of that relationship is a misreading, and as such, we have missed a very real, very productive possibility for conceiving of that relationship in the essay.

## SELF WRITING

In "Self Writing," Foucault looks at "the role of writing in philosophical cultivation of the self just before Christianity: its close link with companionship, its application to the impulses of thought, its role as a truth test" (208). Specifically, he studies the practices of self writing in the works of Seneca, Plutarch, and Marcus Aurelius. What he finds is that the "close link with companionship," as well as self writing's "application to the impulses of thought" and "its role as a truth test," are all elements found in the works of these writers. These three elements should sound familiar to essayists and essay scholars, for essay writing involves conversing with the writer and with a reader (companionship), expressing or constructing "the mind on the page" (the application of writing to the impulses of thought), and experimenting with and/or exploring ideas (truth tests). The difference, though, between Foucault's articulation of these elements and more common articulations is that the former involves the privileging of practices—of conversing, of applying, of testing—not the sovereignty of the writer, as the creator of companionship, as the creator of the application of writing to thought, as the creator of the truth test.

To explain, much of Foucault's work focuses on several modes of objecti-

vation, modes through which the subject "subjects" his/her self. "Subjecting," however, does not simply imply "making into an object," as the term "objectification" might suggest. Rather, a different process happens in that subjecting, so that the subject-on-the-page is constituted, not reflected or constructed. The distinction I want to make here between "constituted" and "constructed" is one of agency: i.e., saying a subject is "constructed" puts more emphasis on the writer (or the culture) that is doing the constructing, while "constituted" emphasizes the processes of subjection, the practices within which a subject is subjected.[26]

For example, the practices of self writing, at least pre-Christian self writing, are driven not by the creative genius or essence of the expressive writer but by the cultivation of "the art of living."[27] Foucault argues that according to the Pythagoreans, the Socratics, and the Cynics, "the art of living" can only be acquired with exercise, via "a training of the self by oneself" ("Self Writing" 208). This training is a way of caring for the self. Foucault states, "In Greek and Roman texts, the injunction of having to know yourself was always associated with the other principle of having to take care of yourself, and it was that need to care for oneself that brought the Delphic maxim [Know thyself] into operation" ("Technologies" 20). In other words, self writing is not simply the process of figuring out what I already know, who I already am. Rather, care of the self, which involves multiple practices that shape the self, makes possible knowledge of one's self. In the ancient world, such practices often included the use of *hupomnēmata,* which, according to Foucault, were written for the purpose of meditation; as I will show, this, too, is precisely what Montaigne's essays were written for.

## The Hupomnēmata

Examples of *hupomnēmata* include "account books, public registers, or individual notebooks serving as memory aids." These memory aids were used, though, not simply for the purpose of aiding memory but for the primary purpose of being "guides for conduct" ("Self Writing" 209). In "Self Writing" Foucault states, "They constituted a material record of things read, heard, or thought, thus offering them up as a kind of accumulated treasure for subsequent reading and meditation" (209). He explains further that they were "a material and a framework" for the exercises of "reading, rereading, meditating, [and] conversing with oneself and with others" (210). In other words, these texts were not written out, (re)read, and referenced simply for the sake of recollection but, to quote Plutarch, to "[elevate] the voice and [silence] the passions like a master who with one word hushes the growling of dogs" (qtd. in "Self Writing" 210). So, for example, in high school, I kept a quote journal, which was comprised of lines from texts I found to be particularly compelling. I returned to them when

I needed them—usually for ideas for paper topics, but also for good advice when confronting complicated situations in my personal relationships, schooling, etc. This is [a simplification of] what I think Plutarch meant by "hush[ing] the growling of dogs"—the dogs, in this case, being conflicts and deadlines, for example.

The primary purpose, however, of the *hupomnēmata* is "to make one's recollection of the fragmentary *logos* transmitted through teaching, listening, or reading, a means of establishing a relationship of oneself with oneself, a relationship as adequate and accomplished as possible" ("Self Writing" 211). As to how that collection becomes a means to establishing a relationship of oneself with oneself, the process is complicated. To start by putting this relationship into more general terms (and work down to the specifics), the truths constituted in these texts are—through the practice of meditation—"planted in" the soul: that is, "the soul must make them *not merely its own but itself*" ("Self Writing" 210, emphasis added). To understand this process and to practice it, one must shift away from thinking about subjectivity in terms of the socially constructed self or the natural/essential self, and toward a different version.

In these more common conceptions of self, the assumption that the soul makes these truths its own would have been true. Students would accept and own the truths they encounter in readings, or they would reject them. In turn, when writing about those truths, the writer would become the owner of those beliefs by interpreting and rendering them through his/her own unique perspective. However, in stating that the soul does not merely make particular truths its own but "makes them itself," the distinction is as follows: the soul does not create, possess, and/or wield truths; rather, the soul is *constituted in* the practices of reading, rereading, and writing about those truths.[28]

As shown in Chapter 1, essay writing is often used in contemporary writing classrooms as a tool for expressing the innermost self, as a tool for expressing what is hidden/secret, what is oppressed/silenced in the self—the "stuff" of the soul that we own but have not owned up to, so to speak. Despite this common conception of the essay, though, in Montaigne's work, expression does not actually seem to be the purpose. Rather, Montaigne's essays work much like the *hupomnēmata*, which were written "for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self" ("Self Writing" 211). Montaigne admits to this project in "Of Giving the Lie." He states,

> And if no one reads me, have I wasted my time […]? In
> modeling this figure [this book] upon myself, I have had to
> fashion and compose myself so often to bring myself out,
> that the model itself has to some extent grown firm and taken

shape. Painting myself for others, I have painted my inward
self with colors clearer than my original ones. I have no more
made my book than my book has made me—a book consub-
stantial with its author […]. (504)

In effect, he is saying that in writing his book, he's not expressed a self; instead, in writing his book, the writing has cultivated his self.[29]

## THE PRACTICES OF READING AND WRITING: "RETURNING TO THE HIVE"

Montaigne further describes at least a part of this process as such: "I have not studied one bit to make a book; but I have studied a bit *because* I had made it, if it is studying a bit to skim over and pinch, by his head or his feet, now one author, now another…" ("Of Giving" 505, emphasis added). Accordingly, it is not that he simply studied other works and then wrote about them; rather, as I will show, in the making of the book, Montaigne meditated on other authors' works, and they became a part of the constitution of his book/self. For example, in "Of Books" he talks about "transplanting" original ideas (e.g., from the works of Seneca) into his own "soil" and "confound[ing]" them with his own (296).

In this context, I can imagine that the *hupomnēmata* can be used like personal diaries or writers' notebooks, much like Didion describes in "On Keeping a Notebook," where writers collect material for reflection and/or for future writings.[30] However, it's worth noting that there's a difference between collections like Didion's notebooks and my students' diaries. The latter, at least according to my students, are often simply collections of confessions, which have very little use-value beyond the act of confession (and in fact, are oftentimes impossible, even, to understand after any considerable lapse of time because of their opaquely self/situation-referential prose). The writer rarely returns to them. The *hupomnēmata,* on the other hand, are supposed to be guidebooks. As such, the students' confessions would have to be used for meditative purposes—as material to later reflect on (in reading and in writing), to test the truth of by recontextualizing them in other experiences/scenarios, and if necessary, to revise.

The *hupomnēmata* are not, however, just another practice in pop-psychology. They are not simply collections of affirmations I repeat to myself in order to feel okay about myself or my life. Rather, in the act of meditating on those texts, a disciplining, a cultivating, of self occurs, for in that act, a relationship of oneself with oneself is established, a relationship that should be "as adequate and accomplished as possible"—i.e., one that makes possible a relation between

the two (subjected) subjects so that they work agonistically toward an end that belongs to "an ethics of control" (*Care* 65). This ethic in practice, in process, is a bit like Heracles wrestling the Nemean lion, which (if I may make a somewhat obscure reference) is described in *The Mythic Tarot* as a symbolic struggle between Heracles and his ego. It is an encounter of oneself to oneself, the latter of which is in relation to the former but not as its reflection, not even as its equal. Rather, the two are constituted in the encounter and struggle agonistically toward an end that is the conversion of the self. Thus, the end that belongs to an ethic of control is not an end where Heracles slays the lion or vice versa. Instead, he masters it. It is submitted, as is he, in the encounter that involves a series of practices—perhaps of tactical maneuvers of fatal bites and pinched veins. In fact, in Greene and Sharman-Burke's reading of the story in *The Mythic Tarot*, neither player can be negated or rejected; to convert/transform, neither can be killed.

To come at this relationship another way, one of the ways that one can cultivate that relationship so that it is "as adequate and accomplished as possible" is to practice "turning back," fixing the past in such a way that it can be studied. In this practice, the writer can, in turn, prepare for the future. To explain further this emphasis on composing a self capable of adapting to future events, I point to Foucault's analysis of dreams in the first chapter of *The Care of the Self.* There, he quotes from Achilles Tatius's *The Adventures of Leucippe and Clitophon* to show how the analysis of dreams was a life practice, practiced for the purpose not of controlling or outwitting one's destiny but of preparing for it. Tatius states, "[…F]or when disasters come all together and unexpectedly, they strike the spirit with so severe and sudden a blow that they overwhelm it; while if they are anticipated, the mind, by dwelling on them beforehand, is able little by little to turn the edge of sorrow" (5). This practice of studying dreams relates to the practice of self writing, for in both, the self is constituted within practices that are used for the purpose of disciplining the self—in this case, to discipline the self in order to abate sorrow or to avoid the debilitating effects of suffering.

In another example, in "Of Presumption" Montaigne states, "Not being able to rule events [or 'Fortune'], I rule myself, and adapt myself to them if they do not adapt themselves to me" (488). In other words, he cannot control the future, so instead, he cultivates a self that can adapt to the events that may happen in the future. In describing how one can work toward this self, in "Of Experience," Montaigne states, "He who remembers the evils he has undergone, and those that have threatened him, and the slight causes that have changed him from one state to another, prepares himself in that way for future changes and for recognizing his condition" (822). In that remembering, in meditating

on the past, and in preparing for the future, he practices control, and because of it, he also will be able to practice control in whatever future struggles he encounters.

## The Practices of the Disparate (the Truth Test)

To the question, again, then: How does one "write" the self, particularly a more vigilant or less susceptible self? In part, one does so by collecting material, reading it repeatedly, reflecting on it, and writing about it. However, that is not enough. In order for the writing to work—in order for it to actually create a more disciplined or at least a different self—the truths (the maxims) of the writings being meditated on and the truths generated in that meditation must be tested.

Again, self writing is not repeating affirmations ("I am a good scholar. I am a good scholar"). In order for it to work, in order for that relationship between writer and page to transform the self of the writer, truths (e.g., quotes from my quote-journal or entries from a student's diary) must be put to the test. Consequently, they are not "adopted" as the writer's own, but in the process of testing them, the writer is disciplined in them. To put this is Foucault's terms, "the writing of the *hupomnēmata* is also (and must remain) a regular and deliberate practice of the disparate" ("Self Writing 212). The "practice of the disparate" is a way "of combining the traditional authority of the already-said with the singularity of the truth that is affirmed therein and the particularity of the circumstances that determine its use" ("Self Writing" 212). In other words, writing becomes a practice of meditation in which the writer considers the selected passage as a maxim that may be true, suitable, and useful to a particular situation—or not. The purpose in practicing the disparate is mastery of the self—not via a conclusive and utterly naked revelation of self, as is so often argued about Montaigne's work, but "through the acquisition and assimilation of truth."

For example, in "Of Experience," Montaigne finds that in all of the interpretations that might occur in the "art" of language, there is not one universally "true" interpretation. However, this does not discourage him from the practice of the disparate, for while belying the possibility of clear, irrefutable meaning in the language-use of, say, lawyers and doctors, Montaigne quotes Seneca (which is an example of the already-said, of a maxim): "What is broken up into dust becomes confused" (816). He explores this maxim at length in the next paragraph, applying it to the language-use of lawyers in contract sand wills. In the end, he explains that by picking apart the language of such contracts and wills, by debating the meaning, "[lawyers] make the world fructify and teem with uncertainty and quarrels, as the earth is made more fertile the more it is crumbled

and deeply plowed" (816). This is an excellent example of the writer testing a maxim's truth, suitability, and usefulness in a particular context: in ultimately arguing that there is no single, absolute interpretation for a text, Montaigne finds Seneca's statement to be true, suitable, and useful to his point. He has brought together his experience and Seneca's insight and tested the truth of the latter in the context of the former.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if our student essayists approached the essays we have them read in the same way? Instead of inserting quotes that have been taken out of context, reduced to isolated entities, and thrust among the students' own essays like fence posts, they might actually test out the truth, the validity, of some essayist's insight. They might meditate on it, try to apply it to some situation in their own lives, bring it into relation with other insights from other essayists and test out the relation between multiple insights when brought into another relationship with some situation. I, for one, would much rather read those essays than the ones where students write what they already think they know, while simultaneously practicing reduction or outright misrepresentation of others' works. After all, how much generation of knowledge, shared discovery, or intellectual exchange are we going to see in writings that do not practice any genuine attentiveness to others—other writers, other ideas, etc.?

## The Process of Unification

It's important to remember, though, that in self writing, the writing practices are not simply all about others. They are as much about the subject-that-is-the-writer as about any other author's truth or insight. They are about constituting that subject-that-is-the-writer. To put this in Foucault's terms, "the role of writing is to constitute, along with all that reading has constituted, a 'body.'" That body is constituted because the writing "becomes a principle of rational action in the writer himself." Per this principle, "the writer constitutes his own identity through this recollection of things said" ("Self Writing" 213), unifying these "things said"—the fragments found in his/her *hupomnēmata*—by bringing them together and meditating on them.

To put this in other terms, the writer constitutes his own identity by historicizing his self. Foucault states, "Through the interplay of selected readings and assimilative writing, one should be able to form an identity through which a whole spiritual genealogy can be read" ("Self Writing" 214). To put this in very practical terms, the writer "enters into the conversation," as so many of my colleagues call it, a conversation that may, for example, be between the works of Montaigne and Foucault. In practicing the disparate, the writer becomes a part of the ideas/beliefs s/he is engaged with/in and is remade in them. Consequently,

s/he becomes a part of a lineage of ideas, of a system of beliefs, etc.

Thus, an essay is not the transparent representation of an isolated, fixed, stable, "unique" agent, nor is s/he the socially constructed representation of a pre-existing agent in a world that consists of re/oppressive practices. Rather, the self is a historical moment, an event in the movement of discourses. To relay an apt metaphor, Seneca states, "The voices of the individual singers are hidden; what we hear is the voices of all together…. I would have my mind of such a quality as this; it should be equipped with many arts, many precepts, and patterns of conduct taken from many epochs of history; but all should lend harmoniously into one" (qtd. in "Self Writing" 214).

## THE SUBJECTED SUBJECT

In reference to classical texts, Foucault states, "The care of the self is the care of the activity and not the care of the soul-as-substance" ("Technologies" 25). In this statement lies the most profound distinction between the technologies of self that are articulated by Foucault and arguably by Montaigne and the writing-of-self described in other versions of subjectivity: the self is not a substance. There is no given, fixed, stable self that is then acted on and manipulated by outside forces. Rather, in the act of writing (an act of caring), selves are constituted. Admittedly, this seeming reversal, where the subject is subjected, flies in the face of most of Western philosophy. In an interview with Foucault, the interviewer states, "But what I don't understand is the position of consciousness as object of an *epistemè*. The consciousness, if anything, is 'epistemizing,' not 'epistemizable'" ("An Historian" 98). This confusion, perhaps, sums up the bewilderment toward Foucault's work on subjectivity, for most of Western philosophy operates within the fundamental belief that "transcendental consciousness… conditions the formation of our knowledge" (98).

The two major theories of subjectivity (what one might call "expressivism" and "social constructionism") in Rhetoric and Composition operate under the assumption that the writer is the agent that can exist outside of its own construction or outside of its social context, even outside of its own mind. Foucault's theory of subjectivity refuses "an equation on the transcendental level between subject and thinking 'I.'" He states, "I am convinced that there exist, if not exactly structures, then at least rules for the functioning of knowledge which have arisen in the course of history and within which can be located the various subjects" ("An Historian" 98). For example, within the *hupomnēmata* there are specific rules—like the (re)reading of other author's texts, like the testing of truths from those texts—that serve as particular operations within which the subject-on-the-page is constituted. Obviously, the writer practices these practic-

es, but s/he is not the transcendent origin of these practices. Rather, the point is that *in* these practices, the self is possible.

To quote Foucault: "[T]hese practices are nevertheless not something invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group" ("The Ethics" 291). Through these models, a relation of self to self is created, and through this relation, selves are constituted differently, newly, so that, for example, the constituted self on the page serves as the material for meditation and transformation of the constituted self of the writer. But, admittedly, it is this conceptual tangle that many scholars may find too alien to engage. So, in the next section, I will unravel this conceptual tangle via a discussion of the care of the self.

## CARING FOR THE SELF

Foucault states, "In Greek and Roman texts, the injunction of having to know yourself was always associated with the other principle of having to take care of yourself, and it was that need to care for oneself that brought the Delphic maxim [Know thyself] into operation" ("Technologies" 20). In this, two ideas are most important: through the care of oneself, one knows oneself, and care is not simply a principle but involves a series of practices. Foucault argues that writing was one such practice in caring for oneself. He states, "One of the main features of taking care involved taking notes on oneself to be reread, writing treatises and letters to friends to help them, and keeping notebooks in order to reactivate for oneself the truths one needed" ("Technologies" 27). Examples of these features are evident in Montaigne's works, e.g., where he has written about his endeavors to make a study of himself, to address his dearest friends (see his letter "To the Reader"), and to study other authors' works in order to test the opinions he formed long ago. Examples of these features are also found in the work of Marcus Aurelius. [31] Foucault argues that Marcus Aurelius writes "an example of 'a retreat within oneself': it is a sustained effort in which general principles are reactivated and arguments are adduced that persuade one not to let oneself become angry at others, at providence, or at things" (*Care* 51). [32]

In both cases (of Montaigne's work and in Marcus Aurelius's), the practice of writing is a disciplining of self; it is a way of composing a self that is somehow better—perhaps less angry or fearful of the future. This composing happens because one "retreats into oneself" in the act of caring for oneself, but this does not mean that the writer cares for his/her self by turning inward to examine the essence seated within flesh. Rather, the practices of caring for oneself are ways of producing a subject so that the writer participates in the engineering of the sub-

ject, engineering that is a product of knowledge of the production of the subject.

To explain further, I point to a passage from Montaigne in "Of Experience." He states:

> He who calls back to mind the excess of his past anger, and how far this fever carried him away, sees the ugliness of this passion better than in Aristotle, and conceives a more justified hatred for it. He who remembers the evils he has undergone, and those that have threatened him, and the slight causes that have changed him from one state to another, prepares himself in that way for future changes and for recognizing his condition. (822)

In essaying (even in the explanatory excerpt above), Montaigne studies his experiences and assesses his condition; in so doing, a self-on-the-page is constituted, a self that is wiser, less prone to anger, and so on. The ancients knew this kind of writing to be one practice that lends itself to the composition of the self. They practiced this kind of writing in order to participate in the engineering of the self. In that engineering, not only is the self-on-the-page made stronger, but that self serves as material for reflection for the essayist. In meditating on that self, the essayist is transformed, potentially made wiser, etc. This is the self-to-self relation of which I spoke earlier.

That said, if self writing, in general, is done in order to make us better people, then I can foresee essay teachers' and scholars' concerns that I might be condoning the teaching of essay writing as a mode for moralizing students. However, that would be a gross misreading of Foucault's work and of my work here. It would presume, for example, that the practices of self writing should govern a universal self—i.e., that they should objectivize the same type of person, perhaps the moral or civic person—in the same ways and toward the same end. However, for Foucault, self writing is a way of practicing freedom.

By "freedom," Foucault does not necessarily mean "liberation." Rather, he shows that for the Greeks and Romans, "Not to be a slave (of another city, of the people around you, of those governing you, of your own passions) was an absolutely fundamental theme." In turn, "the conscious practice of freedom has revolved around this fundamental imperative: 'Take care of yourself'" ("The Ethics" 285). In this model, where practices (not codes of conduct or morals) are emphasized, "greater attention is paid to the methods, techniques, and exercises directed at forming the self within a nexus of relationships. In such a system, *authority would be self-referential* and might take a therapeutic or philosophical form" (Rabinow xxvii, emphasis added). I am reminded of Socrates saying, "The unexamined life is not worth living." It is this examination that is crucial to the

practice(s) of freedom, for in examination, a self is formed—one that does not have to be a slave to the discourses that shape it.

## THE SO WHAT AND WHERE TO NOW

This shift in thinking about subjectivity—about how the self is constituted in practices—has implications for how we exchange ideas, how we enter into conversations and participate in them, and most importantly for this project, how we essay. If we took seriously the idea that the subject is constituted in practices, in the practices of self-writing, for example, then we would be able to get past the belief in opinion-as-identity and to actually exchange ideas, share opinions, and, even, potentially cultivate different selves. We'd be able to participate in the generation of other possibilities, in critique, and even (sometimes) in the resolution of conflict—not simply the back-and-forth articulation of what we already know/believe. In other words, *we'd be cultivating more fluid, dynamic selves, not finite selves.*

As such, I could have a productive conversation with the student who joked about the rape of women. I could ask him to examine where his willingness/ desire to see humor in violence toward women comes from, where its roots and branches extend and where the shape of that willingness/desire is amplified or diminished. I could ask him to examine, even, why that attitude took hold in him and what it gets him in his work in the care of the self. In other words, I could help him to push his examination of the self-on-the-page further, and with any luck, he'd begin to see that self at play in a complex of discourses of which he, the writer, would also be a part … but differently.

There are at least two major possibilities for essaying and for conceiving of subjectivity in the essay that I'd like readers to take away from this chapter: 1) that essay writing can be discussed and taught according to a series of practices, particularly the practices of meditation (i.e., reading and writing), that it need not rely on a list of conventions; 2) that the relation of the writer to the page is an agonistic one, not a tyrannical or transparent one. The first possibility—that essay writing is a series of practices—stems from the fact that subjectivity does not have to be conceived in terms of an essential or socially constructed self. I have discussed here a different conception of subjectivity, one that is conceived in terms of practices of subjection, and this different conception of subjectivity has implications for how we talk about and teach essays. Instead of talking about and teaching essays as texts that allow students to discover and express their true selves, we might talk about the essay and teach it as a mode that does different kinds of work—work that is still invested in the self, but not The Self (a stable, often hidden, potentially transcendent self).

Regarding the second possibility I'd like readers to take away from this work (that the relation of the writer to the page is not a transparent or tyrannical one), I like to think of the relation, instead, as one of subject to subject— that relation writing me as much as I'm writing the page. As such, even when I receive a critique of this page, I can go into that exchange knowing that this work is not equal to me (and that it is not done). It does not equal who I am, where I come from, or my mind on the page. It's an experiment. A long, arduous, but also in my opinion, compelling and important experiment—one that has made me as much as I have made it.

## NOTES

24. Here, I'm deploying a simplistic distinction between voice or the textual self and ethos: the former being the expression/construction of the writer's self on the page (see Chapters 1 and 2) and the latter being the character of the self that is created to establish the writer's credibility and judged according to accepted notions of "the ethical."

25. Here, I'm referring to the concepts that Muckelbauer aligns with the concept (and celebration) of the romantic subject. Within that concept, creativity, originality, and genius all hinge on the belief that the subject is utterly originary—that from it, creation happens. The capacity to create and to exist as the source of creation is "genius."

26. It's important to note that one implication of this different conception of the subject (as one that is subjected) is that this version of subjectivity takes seriously the idea that the writer is one subject being subjected by a number of forces (acting on the body, for example) and that the subject-on-the-page must, therefore, be something different because it is subjected by other forces.

27. Though perhaps obvious, it's worth pointing out that reconceptualizing essay writing as a complex of practices subverts the idea of the innately talented essayist. If we writing teachers want to take seriously the idea that essaying can be taught, then this theory of subjectivity gives us a way to teach it as a complex of practices, as something other than an expressive art that the student writer is inherently "good at" or not.

28. This is not to say that Foucault does not take seriously the question of ownership of texts. In "What is an Author?" his study of the author function does not involve any assumptions about the author-as-creator of the text, though, or about the author-manifested in the text. Rather, Foucault is most interested in the historical operations that are part of the author function, a function that does not invoke the privileging of an author's agency over/in a text, but is an enunciation of how the author's name provides a mode of "existence, circulation, and functioning of certain

discourses" (211). For example, a text with the name "Montaigne" attached to it can be expected to be a prototype of the essay. It can be expected to be written in a meandering, contemplative mode; to quote many important, classical authors; to incorporate personal experiences; and to be relentlessly skeptical of its own claims.

29. The similarities here in Foucault's articulation of self writing and Montaigne's description of being made by his book are very likely due, at least in part, to the fact that Montaigne was such an avid reader of Seneca's work—a writer who was very much invested in the self-disciplining practices of self writing. Montaigne goes so far as to write about the "Seneca in [him]" in his essay "Of Books" (297), and in the same essay, he states that the books from which he learned "to arrange [his] humors and [his] ways" are those of Plutarch and Seneca (it's worth noting, too, that in the 2003 Penguin Edition of Montaigne's essays, translator M.A. Screech uses the verb "control," instead of "arrange" (463)).

As Foucault points out, "[…T]he theme of application of oneself to oneself is well known [in Antiquity]: it is to this activity… that a man must devote himself, to the exclusion of other occupations" (*Care* 46). Montaigne, too, takes this occupation as seriously as the writers of Antiquity. He states, "For those who go over themselves in their minds and occasionally in speech do not penetrate to essentials in their examination as does a man who makes that his study, his work, and his trade, who binds himself to keep an enduring account, with all his faith, with all his strength" ("Of Giving" 504). I should note that "essentials," as Montaigne is using the term, refers to tendencies or habits, not to an essence of self.

30. In "On Keeping a Notebook," Didion argues that we should use our notebooks to "keep in touch" with old selves, past experiences, seemingly fleeting ideas/images/feelings. She states, "It is a good idea, then, to keep in touch, and I suppose that keeping in touch is what notebooks are all about" (140).

31. Though I've not found any evidence of the claim in my own reading, Bensmaïa states in *The Barthes Effect* that Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* is one of the models that have been "invoked" as a "springboard" for the essay (90). In general, the essay scholarship I've read that reaches for roots older than Montaigne's essays most often points to Seneca (see Lopate and Hall, for example).

32. Incidentally, this phrase "a retreat within oneself" should sound very familiar to Montaigne/essay scholars, for it is commonly used (even by him) to describe his work.