

INTRODUCTION

It is no secret that the academy has become obsessed with argument, nor is it a secret that other forms of writing have been demoted to “preparatory” work—their unique strengths diminished in the face of the rigors of argument. We college writing teachers and administrators, in particular, have become so focused on argument that we have neglected or at least devalued other exercises. In most college writing curriculum, for example, any exploration is reserved almost exclusively for the preparatory work our students do (e.g., in freewriting, journaling, and class discussion) before completing the more important work of constructing an argument. Even when we talk about Writing Across the Curriculum or Writing in the Disciplines, where there are so many other options for the kinds of writing that could be valued, we writing teachers, scholars, and administrators wave the banner of “everything’s an argument.” This obsession with argument becomes especially problematic when examined in relation to the uses and conceptions of argument at work in forums outside of the academy.

The forms of argument that the American public typically witnesses (e.g., playing out in political arenas and in social media forums) tend to polarize participants by trapping them in a position. Perhaps, in part, this trapping happens because there is simply not enough time in these forums to fully develop a more complex or reflective position, much less to shift a position. I’m thinking of the 2008 presidential debates and of the blog posts tacked onto almost any online newspaper article that deals in a contentious topic. Time, however, cannot be the only contributing feature in this trapping. Americans’ use of argument as an aggressive and competitive mode of engagement is an immeasurable factor.

Today, instead of negotiation and compromise, there are talks of secessions and the creation of new states. Both liberals and conservatives are accused of being compulsively loyal to their respective parties, of lacking critical thinking skills about “the issues.” We are so divided and intractable that our government shut down in a stand-off that had reverberating, negative effects on our political and economic lives. Unsurprisingly, there is talk about the U.S. people being “ungovernable,” due to our inability to negotiate and our competitive positioning. Surprisingly, though, I’ve seen the same kind of polarization happen among academics—the people who are supposed to be experts at productive argument (by which I think most of us mean or hope for something more like debate). Think of the ways in which we’ve inherited the famous Elbow-Bartholomae exchange in *College Composition and Communication* in the early 90s, for example, or of the latest conflict about writing curriculum that erupted in your

department meetings.

Of course, argument is supposed to be rendered more carefully in academically-informed spaces: participants are not supposed to ignore opposing perspectives, resort to ad hominem attacks, rely on faulty logic, or use bullying tactics. We (academics) profess that we want rational arguments—arguments that are forwarded through reason, that are constituted in rational exchange and grounded in goodwill. However, they often are not, which is really no surprise, given that, as human beings, there is often so much more at stake in any argument than its rational validity.

For example, even in the decade or so that I've been a member of professional listservs, I can't recall witnessing any scholar or teacher, who was passionately for or against the incorporation of the personal essay in college writing courses, changing his/her mind due to the persuasiveness of a particularly logical argument—certainly not publicly, anyway. Perhaps for the academic, such changes are more likely to happen in private, after s/he has had some time to mull over the claims made in a listserv conversation. On the other hand, the absence of such changes in perspective/belief may be due to a formative assumption about subjectivity that drives our conception of argument and its value both inside and outside of the academy.

What if Peter Elbow decided to give up on the concept of voice and confessed it to be no-longer productive or useful? What if David Bartholomae became an Expressivist? Yet, there are many scholars—important, field-changing scholars—whose work evolves over the course of a career. Patricia Bizzell's *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness*, for example, can be read as a narrative of the evolution in her thinking about academic discourse and of students' (and the field's) relation to academic discourse. Theorists such as Nietzsche and Foucault famously revised their projects during their careers (e.g., Nietzsche moved away from dialectical investigations and toward genealogies; Foucault moved away from archeological investigations and toward genealogies as well). Elbow and Bartholomae, too, have revised concepts and arguments from their earlier works. I suspect, though, that as Foucault famously points out in "What is an Author," readers struggle to make sense of such rifts, such transformations in an author's work; they are quick to overlook them entirely. Instead, readers look for unity and not just in the work, across concepts and arguments, but in the identity of the author, as it is constructed in and across texts.

We professional readers, we academics, are not above the search for or assumption about unity, even though we know better, even though we have seen changes in our own work, even though we see changes (and, in fact, hope for changes) in our students' work. We look for determinism in Foucault's work, even when his later works deliberately shift away from it; we look for brutality in

Nietzsche's, even when his later works clearly revise his prior arguments. In my conversations with colleagues at national conferences, it's clear to me that, generally speaking, we expect, too, the same of ourselves: e.g., "I am a Foucauldian." Is it arrogance on our part to expect unity in the scholar? Do we somehow assume that in the moment we graduate from our respective Ph.D. programs, we should have simultaneously "arrived" at a truth, a vision, or a way of being in the world that we can spend the rest of our careers arguing from and for?

I think, rather, that we suffer from the same burdens that politicians, students, or any person participating in an exchange suffers: the expectation that we "stay true" to who we are, that we stay true to our platforms, our beliefs, our values, and our subject positions. For the academic, the platform and the subject position are almost always defined by the ever-increasing pressure to carve out a clear and definable attitude in the discipline. The more clearly and definably "you" you are, the more singular and recognizable you are to and in the field (and vice versa).

I'm not the first to point to this effort and expectation among academics to define and narrow their professional selves through their work. In "A Common Ground: The Essay in the Academy" (1989), Kurt Spellmeyer complains of the increasing specialization in the academy and its consequent "bubble"-effect, as one might call it. According to Spellmeyer, the great bane of the thrust toward ever-increasing specialization is isolation, an inability (or unwillingness) to create connections across disciplinary boundaries. Why would I examine scholarship produced in the field of history, for example, no matter how compelling and relevant, if my argument will only be deemed credible when I work with scholarship from my own field? Why would I use works by Deleuze to help me make an argument about subjectivity, when I have defined myself as a Foucauldian? I take this one step further, though, and point to the fact that this effort toward specialization, then, disables the opportunity for debate and change.

To think of this in terms of political discourse, I propose a scenario: imagine that you are sitting in a classroom with a group of students and talking about a text in which the topic of abortion comes up. Now, imagine that one speaker identifies as a democrat and another as a republican or that one speaker identifies as a feminist and another as a conservative. I'd suggest that it takes little in the way of imagining to predict the impossibility of productive exchange in this scene. Through the emphasis on specialized niches (and, thus, subject positions), agendas and interests become unproductive and isolating in any forum in which people come together to talk about disparate beliefs, ideas, and experiences.

Here's another easy (and common) example of this specialization-turned-unproductive but in the academic sphere: I am of a generation of faculty that is about fifteen years junior to the next generation in my department. When we

argue about the root-problem responsible for our students' inability to transfer writing abilities and aptitudes from one course to another, I often argue that the problem is in our inconsistent pedagogies and disconnected curriculum. My senior colleagues often argue that it is in our inconsistencies in grading criteria. We have yet to be able to come to any compromise in identifying the cause of the problems we're seeing; as such, we've yet to be able to revise our work, as a department, to address that cause. I believe that our differences stem from the generational divide: each group became specialists in composition pedagogy in different eras in the field, when what it meant to be a writing teacher and specialist was decidedly different.

Whenever I find myself avoiding such departmental conversations or when I leave them feeling frustrated and depleted, I wonder: why does it feel like such "differences" function more like fundamentalism in their polarization, in the isolation and the silencing that occurs on and from both sides? Why is it that "taking a position" has become so mired, so bogged down, in individual identities and social categories (e.g., liberal vs. conservative, junior vs. senior) that we have no means to speak, to debate and explore, across their boundaries—without shouting?

Deborah Tannen has been famously writing about our "argument culture" for decades; despite her warnings and others', the field of Rhetoric and Composition emphatically embraced the mantra that "everything is an argument." No doubt, there is a certain idealizing of the Ancient world that is driving that mantra: we have hoped that if we could teach our students that claims are profuse and negotiable, if we could teach them to be aware of such claims' contexts and implications, then we could also teach them to argue responsibly and effectively, to participate in a world of their own making—one that they could revise, if they were careful and responsible enough. The hope has been that if we could do all of this, then we could help communities to negotiate effectively within and outside themselves. As some of my colleagues who are historians like to remind me, though, this is not Ancient Greece.

Despite this fact, there are those who would argue that we should not give up on trying to make negotiations, public and private debates, function more like the debates in the agora, that we (academics) just need to try harder, be smarter. There's a part of me that agrees. I think, though, that the problem isn't necessarily in argument, itself. The problem is in the modern, Western world's common conceptions of subjectivity, and argument only amplifies the worst aspects of those conceptions. Essentially, we have been trying to teach and use a method of negotiation that worked in the ancient world because there were very different subjects working in it.

Thus, as I will show throughout this project, we need not try harder in teach-

ing argument, but we need to teach and to practice a different notion of subjectivity. We can't just talk about it (in scholarship and in our classrooms), as we have been doing since the rise of modernism, though. We need to make it, to cultivate it. To my mind, the way to cultivate it is through privileging other kinds of writing—kinds of writing in which writers would be empowered to practice different ways of engaging with ideas, with texts, with each other. At the risk of participating in an incredibly problematic binary, I consequently turn to “the opposite” of argument for an alternative: the personal essay.

This alternative is risky, as I said, because it has traditionally inhabited the position of opposite-to-the-argument in writing studies and, thus, carries with it the byproducts of opposition (e.g., irreconcilability, mutual exclusivity). I acknowledge, too, that even without the framing of the binary, the personal essay comes with another, potentially more pressing set of problems. The very problems to which I refer came into play recently in a professional listserv of which I am a member:

In the spring of 2013, there were a series of arguments on the WPA listserv centering on the values (positive and negative) of “personal writing” in college writing curriculum. Just a few of the concerns expressed about the use of personal writing were as follows: that such writing runs counter to the goals we associate with writing argument; that it allows, if not encourages, students to ignore the sociopolitical contexts of their experiences and of their interpretations of those experiences; and that it invites students to produce work that is often not “reflective” or meditative enough. On the other hand, participants also (and often in the same posts) noted many of the positive values of personal writing: that it is a space within which to explore identities (individual and collective) and that it can create empathy between individuals and groups. By far, though, the most celebrated value of personal writing was also that-which-was-found-lacking in many student works: reflection and/or meditation. To my mind, both terms, taken in their context, denote an intense interest in analysis but with the purpose of *exploring* an idea or belief. As my colleagues pointed out in the listserv discussion, though, that exploration seems to be neglected in the personal writing produced by students.

There are scholars of the personal essay, too, who argue that the personal essay is one genre of personal writing that is valuable for the reasons I list above. They also argue that its greatest value is in its openness to the exploration and cultivation of connections—e.g., among scholarly ideas and personal beliefs, among community beliefs and personal experiences, and even among academic disciplines whose discourses have become utterly and mutually exclusive. Point being, despite common complaints about personal writing produced by our students, the genre of the personal essay actually does provide a space for student

writers to do something other than argue—namely, to reflect and meditate on their experiences. It allows them to do so, even, by considering the sociopolitical contexts of their experiences and of their interpretations of those experiences—scholarly, personal, or otherwise. The question, thus, emerges: why, then, is the personal essay failing to be reflective/meditative enough, when practiced by our students?

Part of the problem with the personal essay's life in the academy is, no doubt, due to the emphasis on argument that is manifest in writing curricula, as well as in informal, public, and professional conversations. Students have inherited this obsession with argument, though they are, ironically, quick to recognize the damage that arguing-to-win causes. They know that our political "debates" are flighty and impotent, save in further dividing peoples. They know that our current use of argument encourages conflict instead of helping in the effort toward resolution and progress. They know that all of this conflict and impotence makes for a world too fragmented to understand, much less to change.

In another ironic and terrible twist, though, they also don't see much value in the form of argument that we, teachers of writing, offer them. I think that even the least savvy student recognizes that the standard college English paper taught and produced in a first-year writing course, for example, wouldn't have any real persuasive power outside of that course (in fact, it doesn't have any persuasive power in the course, since papers are produced by students to demonstrate skill, not to actually persuade the reader of a position). Are we really surprised by the highly ineffectual sound-bite arguments in presidential debates and short rants in blog posts that are responding to complex, high-stakes sociopolitical issues, when the academy, itself, teaches students to produce the kind of argument that can be captured in single statement (thank you, thesis statement) and that can be mapped out through the listing of evidence, but with very little work done to explore the complexities of any particular stance (thank you, five-paragraph essay)?

As they progress through curriculum, students tell me that they are building on the formula of the thesis-driven, five-paragraph essay by learning how to better explain in an argument why they believe what they believe and, thus, why others should believe the same. Frankly, it's a weird process. It is based on a series of assumptions that make very little sense in real time, when tested out among real people (e.g., the assumption that a position is more convincing if it can be stated in a single sentence and prior to any other real discussion about the issue). Yet, my students have inherited this version of argument so well that when I ask even my sharpest and advanced undergraduate writing students what the value is in attending to "other sides" of any argument, they always explain that the greatest value is in knowing who "the enemy" is and how to bolster one's own thesis in the face of that enemy. This belief suggests two primary assumptions: 1.

that the argument equals the person (e.g., the enemy is one who argues against me), and 2. that the value of exploring the various sides of an issue is only beneficial when it helps students to better know themselves, to better know their own arguments, and to effectively win their own arguments. When I ask if there might be other pay-offs for such an exploration, I am usually met with baffled expressions and silence.

The problem with my asking my students to explore ideas in a personal essay is that I am asking for a fundamentally different mode of engagement from them—one that may seem entirely alien or, worse, valueless to them. To my mind, the feeling of the essay being alien or valueless is deeply related to (if not caused by) the fact that it doesn't permit them the stability (of belief, but also of identity) to squat firmly in a single position and to speak from and for it. That said, it's clear to me that what students want from their writing training and what we need to offer consistently and deliberately are opportunities not for further conflict, polarization, and isolation, but for connection, negotiation, and change.

There's an awful lot about the past that does not inspire nostalgia; however, there are ways of knowing that were embraced in other times that might do us some good now, if we were to reinvent them—not whole-meal but in the rhetorical sense of the word “invention.” If we were to reinvent the personal essay, then through that process, we might discover a way to engage with the beliefs and markers that constitute [individual, community, institutional] identities in different, less-divisive, more-connective ways. For example, leaning heavily on what he deems to be Montaigne's project in his *Essais* (1580), Spellmeyer presents an older way of “knowing”: he states, “Montaigne's real concern is not knowledge proper, but the relationship between individuals and the conventions by which their experience is defined and contained” (263), which seems to be another way of saying that Montaigne works to examine the rhetorical-ness of his [interpretation of] experiences. This seems a fruitful way of thinking about (and writing about) the modern-day self, in knowing the self; it enables opportunities for connection in that “rhetorical-ness,” as I've called it.

To explain, let me offer another example: just last semester, a student asked me why he couldn't argue for a kind of “oversoul” (but without the baggage of Transcendentalism) by using the existence of ghosts to support his argument. In speaking with this student, I found myself in a position where I had to explain what kinds of evidence count in academic argument, what kinds don't, and why—a largely rhetorical exercise. The rhetorical-ness of the exercise, in turn, makes me wonder why I cannot open up a space (in an assignment, perhaps) where such evidence could be remade as material for an exploration of this different conception of an oversoul. The personal essay would be one such space. In

it, “evidence” would be transformed into objects of meditation, and as such, this student would have a chance not simply to forward a belief through a thesis that would inevitably speak most effectively and persuasively to those with a similar belief system. Instead, the objects of meditation (e.g., the concept of and belief in ghosts) would become fodder for an exploration of what counts as evidence in such a belief system and/or what the existence of ghosts might mean for conceptions of life, death, the human relationship to the natural world, etc. Those objects of meditation might, that is to say, become part of a thought experiment, one rendered in words on a page.

The value of writing in order to test an idea could be that such exercises would prove to be more important to “real world” work than even argument is. In such an approach to writing, students would have the opportunity to try out an idea, instead of having to invent an argument that, essentially, is not being used for and would not be effective in its purpose (to influence an audience). Given this practice of “trying out” an idea, instead of arguing for a claim’s “rightness” and for its adoption by an audience, students might learn a different mode of engagement—one that actually enables negotiation and change.¹

I think we all know that talking in academic argument about how to approach differences among individuals and communities, for example, is not at all like negotiating differences among individuals and communities in any other public. As one of my prior students once passionately confessed in class, “I’ve read all this material about Latino identities and about the oppression that occurs through our school’s silencing of everything but Standard English. I get it, and I think that oppression is wrong. But, I still get really pissed off when I go to Wal-Mart and find a bunch of Latino men ogling me and making me feel like a piece of meat. How am I supposed to feel?” To which I have to say, I can’t remember reading a piece of scholarship that even peripherally examines those feelings—positive or negative. To my mind, this is a serious failing on our part, as scholars and teachers; if we can’t help our students connect and carry that negotiation into the world, into their lives outside of the classroom, and make it productive, then what, exactly, are we doing?

More to my point here, wouldn’t the personal essay provide the answer to this gap and the others I’ve written of above? Couldn’t it enable a different kind (a decidedly civic kind) of engagement, by bringing all of the academic work we do in our classrooms and curriculum into relationship with our and our students’ very real, very personal experiences? Couldn’t the personal essay provide students with an opportunity to create connections among the seemingly contradictory forms of evidence found in popular culture and in academia, as well as among the seemingly exclusive forms of knowledge found in different disciplines? Perhaps most importantly, couldn’t the personal essay repair the schisms

that occur between people because of the social categories and rigid beliefs that make up our subject positions?

Of course, this opportunity, if personal essay advocates were to embrace it, will require of us quite a lot of work. To begin with, there is the common complaint that the personal essay is not generally understood (across courses, across disciplines, even among essay teachers and scholars) according to any particular theory—a complaint/selling point which, at first, may seem liberating, but actually has crippling consequences.² For example, Wendy Bishop points out repeatedly in “Suddenly Sexy” that we, quite simply, don’t know what creative nonfiction is (and thus, what the personal essay is). All we know for sure is that it can be a wonder-full, empowering form or that it can be responsible for unreflective, solipsistic, “confessional” ranting. Yet, as Bishop will go on to explain, there are qualities worth celebrating in the genre (e.g., exploration), and for those qualities, she argues for the teaching of creative nonfiction in composition classes.

I find this seeming contradiction about the genre possessing qualities/conventions but no recognized theory to be interesting and for a variety of reasons. For example, I think that the contradiction, in part, is responsible for the misconceptions and misuses of the personal essay in our writing classes. As the last “free form,” the essay resists being disciplined into a theory, yet there are conventions of the essay (e.g., the use of personal voice) for which it is celebrated and persists in the academy. This project, if nothing else, constitutes several attempts at theorizing the personal essay and, at the same time, at investigating the costs and benefits of theorizing the personal essay in the different ways treated in each chapter.

More specifically, in Chapter 1, I explore the most common conception of the relation between the essayist and the essay: that the two are in a transparent relationship to one another. This conception of the essay is enabled and perpetuated through what I will argue are the three major conventions of the genre: freedom, walking, and voice. I focus the last half of the chapter on the third convention, which seems to be the most celebrated of the three because there is the most at stake in it—namely, the opportunity for empowerment through writing.

To do this work on the third convention, I turn to Expressivist notions of voice-in-writing and examine the ways in which voice is thought to manifest and operate on the page. To explore said Expressivist notions, I have taken up the work of Peter Elbow, who is generally understood by the field of Rhetoric and Composition to be the figurehead of Expressivism. As such, he seems an easy choice for my work in Chapter 1. On the other hand, as I’ll discuss briefly in Chapter 1, Elbow’s concept of voice is slippery. His descriptions of it are often tentative, highly metaphorical, and they evolve in important ways over the course of his career. It has been no easy task to try to pin down the concept in

his work. Consequently, I rely on key passages in his work and explore them at length but always within the framework of this project's question: what might a productive theory of the personal essay look like?

In the end, I find that the voice-informed conception of the relationship between the writer and the page ultimately fails essayists who are interested in the free form of the essay and in the possibility it is supposed to engender: writing that expresses the natural or essential self, unmediated and uninhibited by social impositions. The problem is that the concept of voice in writing hinges on the assumption that a writer can transcend not only the social influences working on him/her, but also his/her own self in order to express the self in unmediated form on the page. As I will show, even if one could transcend social influences and one's own self, that transcendence would cause the self-on-the-page to function not as a subject wielding social forces but as an object acted on by the writer and the reader, one that is essentially made impotent by its pretended dislocation from "the social."

I turn, in Chapter 2, to the most popular conception of the relation between writer and page in rhetoric and composition scholarship, a conception that takes the shape of the "socially constructed" self. Bringing, again, the two disciplines of Creative Nonfiction and Rhetoric and Composition into conversation with one another, I present this conceptualization of the writer-page relation and apply it to the essayist-essay relation in order to test out a different theoretical framework for the essay. Specifically, I examine David Bartholomae's and others' work on discourse communities, Pratt's work on contact zones, and Fish's and Bizzell's work on (anti)foundationalism. I find that however much said scholars labor to move away from the problems that occur in Expressivist notions of the writer-page relation, any theory of the socially constructed self still works by objectifying the subject through the use of an impossible transcendent move. I show how this problem occurs in personal essays that enact a contact zone on the page (e.g., in essays by Molly Ivins and Linda Brodkey). In the end, I find that such essayists and scholars who are invested in the concept of a social self and its construction are still participating in what Bizzell and Fish call "theory hope" (the belief that we can transcend our socialness in order to have some say in it, in order to wield it, even), and as the same scholars so famously point out, theory hope is really just a grand pretend; it doesn't accomplish the kind of empowerment-through-engagement that it hopes.

Consequently, I find that these two potential theories of the essay don't actually accomplish what they set out to do; they don't empower the essayist to negotiate his/her self in relation to the world in the ways they promise. As much as I value both potential theories of the essay for their reflective ways of accounting for the self of the essayist and the self-on-the-page, I find myself turning to "The"

great obstacle to the personal essay to find another possibility: poststructuralist theory. Many scholars of the essay emphatically proclaim that the essay is not only atheoretical but that it is opposed to poststructuralist theory.³ For example, in his well-known article “The Essay: Hearsay Evidence and Second-Class Citizenship,” Chris Anderson argues that in the essay “a certain number of a priori assumptions are allowed.” He describes those assumptions as such: “the stones we kick are here, people are born, there are origins.” These assumptions, he pits against “contemporary scholarship,” which he describes as “articles necessitated by poststructuralism,” i.e., articles “in which no assumptions about words can be taken for granted” (301).

Above, Anderson leverages what seems a common critique of poststructuralism: that in poststructuralism there are no origins, that objects don't exist, and that meaning is impossible or, perhaps, naïve. Of course, all of the criticisms listed in the above statement would present major obstacles for the essay, for the essay is celebrated for its origination in the individual essayist, is valuable precisely because reality exists and can be explored in an essay, and is at its core an exercise in meaning-making. I would argue, though, that many advocates of the personal essay, who posit it against poststructuralism, are essentially doing what the academy has done to the personal essay: misreading it. Anderson's reading of poststructuralism, for example, is misleading—at least with regard to one “poststructuralist,” Michel Foucault. Though his work would easily fit into the “poststructuralist” category, in Foucault's work there are, in fact, origins, objects, and meaning, but the difference is that they are not metaphysical origins, objects, and meanings. Origins happen within a complex of relations of power, so that origins are more like junctures than sources.

In “Foucault Revolutionizes History,” Paul Veyne best explains this concept of origins in response to Foucault's study of madness. He states,

To say that madness does not exist is not to claim that madmen are victims of prejudice, nor is it to deny such an assertion, for that matter.... It means that at a level other than that of consciousness a certain practice is necessary for there even to be an object such as ‘the madman’ to be judged to the best of one's knowledge and belief, or for society to be able to ‘drive someone mad.’ (169)

To clarify, Foucault never says that madness does not exist; rather, his point, as I think Veyne is trying to explain it, is that madness does not *pre-exist* as a stable entity/category that then acts on or determines an individual's mode of existence. Instead, Foucault emphasizes that there are ways of talking (discourses) about an individual and ways of acting (practices) on/by an individual that

“objectivize” (make into a subject) him/her as “the madperson.” I will explore this idea at greater lengths in the third chapter.

It’s important to clarify here, though, that Foucault does not mean to make “discourse” or “practices” the origin of all things either. Veyne states, “Foucault has not discovered a previously unknown new agency, called practice” (Veyne 156). Instead, these practices are “what people do,” and they originate “from historical changes, quite simply, from the countless transformations of historical reality” (156). In other words, practices originate in other practices, in relation to other practices, in particular historical moments, in relation to other historical moments, at points of rupture and continuity.

Perhaps this seems a strange example, but I’m reminded of the new interest in natural horsemanship (I live in Colorado and ride a horse, so this is a discourse to which I’m privy). Many critics of the movement argue that there is nothing new in the practices of natural horsemanship; rather, they are old practices that have been repackaged in a leftist belief about how human beings should interact with animals. If so, then in this example, the practices of natural horsemanship originate in much older practices, but they have been made new in the discourse which has emerged around a responsibility to animals and to the natural world.

Of course, Foucault’s conception of origins would disrupt the traditional conception of an essay’s origin: that it derives from some unique essential or social makeup of the essayist. And much of poststructuralist theory would do the same, though by different means. Thus, poststructuralist theory, though it has reinvigorated the academic article in new ways, presents the essay with a supposed impasse. The problem is that when this impasse is endorsed in order to keep essay writing from adapting to different and new conceptions of subjectivity, then the genre, itself, consequently gets left behind. Indeed, one might easily conclude that the fact that the essay remains an outdated and under-theorized form is precisely why it is an often neglected form. If it can’t accommodate new and different conceptions of self—especially given that it is the form that claims to be most interested in the self—then it inevitably will be discarded and replaced with modes of writing that can.

Perhaps more importantly, though, given the particular sociopolitical context within which we now work (with all of its attendant investments in argument), personal essay scholars’ rejection of a more fluid, complex, “postmodern” notion of self deprives the genre of its greatest (or at least most timely) potential: to enable the productive exchange and exploration of ideas and beliefs that have constituted a momentarily fixed self. That productive exchange and exploration can disrupt the fixed self, remake it, or at least remind it that it does not have to sit, squarely, in its socially-sanctioned sociopolitical space.

I will show that there is much that at least one thought historian’s “poststruc-

turalist” theory provides in the way of a compelling and progressive study of subjectivity in essays. This is not to say that the other versions of subjectivity should be tossed out entirely. Rather, my goal (like Foucault’s) is “to make visible a bygone way of approaching the self and others which might suggest possibilities for the present” (Rabinow xxvii), a way which is described in Foucault’s work on the writers of Antiquity and their emphasis on the care of the self.

To make visible this other way of approaching subjectivity, in the third chapter, I turn to Foucault’s work on self writing and to Montaigne’s *Essais* in which I find a version of subjectivity that does not essentialize the subject. Instead, the subject is that which is constituted in the practices of the care of the self, including practices such as the truth test. Through these practices, the writer disciplines a self by enacting a relationship of oneself to oneself: the writer, the self-on-the-page, and the various practices of writing and reading all work in a complex of relations in which each subject is constituted in relation to the others. Via this conceptualization of the subject, I discover a mode of engagement that enables productive debate, a mode of engagement that isn’t about argument but is about exploring ideas, a mode of engagement in which writers take seriously the texts of others, of themselves, and are *effected* by their engagement with them.

To further explore what this different mode of engagement might look like, the fourth chapter takes one kind of meditative practice in self writing and examines it much more closely. Specifically, I argue that imitation is one kind of meditative practice in which the writer must attend closely to the texts of others, test the truths available in those texts, and ultimately be re-constituted in that negotiation. As many rhetoric and composition scholars have pointed out (e.g., Connors and Corbett), imitation may work in a variety of ways: paraphrase, translation, straight copying, etc. In this chapter, I focus on how the practices of imitation can be transformed and made productive according to the ethic of the care of the self: how they encourage attentiveness, make genuine response possible, enable change or transformation, etc. To do so, I examine the ways in which Seneca, Foucault, and Nietzsche make use of the same metaphor (the beehive), referencing each other’s use of the metaphor explicitly, but then constituting the metaphor differently within their own work and, thus, transforming the metaphor, their work, and the self-page relation. One of the most exciting implications of this examination of imitation as a practice in the care of the self is that, despite concerns about assimilation and homogeneity in imitation, the possibilities for the constituting of the subject and for self-transformation seem limited only by the variety and complexities of the truths and contexts that are available to writers for imitation.

That said, I anticipate that essay teachers might still be tempted to slip back into a belief about writers being capable of transcending the practices of the

care of the self, of transcending the texts writers imitate and/or produce, of transcending even one's own constituting. So, for the final chapter, I will share course assignments, student writings, and reflections for a course in self writing. After all, this belief in transcendence is pervasive. For many of us, it was part of our training. ("Teach students to see how they are made by societal norms, and they can refuse that making.") In particular, I will provide writing assignments and readings which can help students negotiate in and among (often contentious) discourses. If students come to see this negotiation as one that occurs among discourses (instead of among distinct and essentialized individuals/communities), then that negotiation—with all of its attendant practices (e.g., analysis and revision)—will not be simply another instance of foundationalism. Rather, negotiation among discourses necessitates awareness that knowledge itself is constituted in those discourses, not prior to them, and that the subject that emerges in response to said negotiation is not some unique combination of the essential characteristics of particular cultures or of the writer's mind or soul, but is, itself, constituted in those discourses and by that negotiation.

My hope is that essay teachers and scholars, as well as writing curriculum administrators, will begin to see the value, again, of the personal essay and that they will remember its rigorousness, when they see the genre's potential as it is enabled through the practices of the care of the self. I hope that essayists and essay scholars and teachers will find themselves less afraid, if they were to begin with, of "theory" and that they will feel encouraged to further explore potential theories of the essay so that it can take its proper place in the academy as a rigorous and explorative form. Most importantly, I hope that essayists (student and professional) will hear my call to use the essay as a space for the cultivation of a very different kind of subject, one that is capable of producing, living in, and negotiating connections—across our disciplines, as well as across our communities and selves. We advocates of connection, we practitioners of it, will have to find ways of coming together, of working together, and the essay is one remarkable way of doing so.

NOTES

1. In this emphasis on a different mode of engagement, we too, as academics, would be contributing to change (in the academy, in the world, in our students, in ourselves). Perhaps, then, we wouldn't be complacent in what Patricia Bizzell calls "the anti-intellectualism of the American academic." She explains this anti-intellectualism as "[the American academic's] reluctance to emerge from our respective disciplines, to act as intellectuals in the larger community of the whole university and the whole society" ("Foundationalism and Anti-foundationalism" 220).

2. Of course, there are theories of the essay. In fact, I'll refer to many of the works that theorize the essay in Chapter 1; however, my point is that there is no particular theory of the essay that essay scholars acknowledge as grounding the discourse.

3. Notably, the loudest complaint by essay scholars against "poststructuralism" is specifically directed at Derrida's critique of the logocentric conception of presence—the assumption that words make present the thing to which they refer (for example, the words of an essay make present the essayist). Unfortunately, as a result, the baby has been tossed out with the bathwater, as the saying goes. In other words, the assumption seems to be that if Derrida's "poststructuralist" theory defies the work that essays are supposed to do—e.g., to work within "the realm of 'human evidence'" (Anderson 301)—then essay scholars shouldn't take up poststructuralist theory at all in order to study essays and essay writing.

To offer another example of essay scholars' resistance to poststructuralist theory, I point to Graham Good's study of the essay, *Observing the Self: Rediscovering the Essay*. In it, he states:

Montaigne and Bacon would also undoubtedly have rejected Derrida's textualism as scholastic, as privileging the order of words over the order of things. It was exactly against that mentality that the essay originally reacted. But academia, with its concern to organize discourse into disciplines, will always tend to give priority to 'theory,' to the structures of learning; the unstructured, or rather, personally and provisionally structured, world of the essay is all the more necessary as a counterweight. (182)

This is an explicit and typical example of the leap that is often made in essay scholarship, a leap from a resistance to Derrida's work to a refusal of "theory" all together. This seems to me a dangerous and debilitating leap because, in this case, it dismisses other provocative and productive possibilities.