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## Feminist Pedagogies in the Creative Writing Classroom: Possibilities and Reflections

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FEMINIST PEDAGOGIES IN THE CREATIVE WRITING CLASSROOM:  
POSSIBILITIES AND REFLECTIONS

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August 2017

We hereby approve this Master's thesis for

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for the Department of English

and

Cleveland State University's

College of Graduate Studies by

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Dr. Ted Lardner, Department of English, 27 April 2017

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Date of Defense: 4/27/17

In memory of Dave, always, with love

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FEMINIST PEDAGOGIES IN THE CREATIVE WRITING CLASSROOM:  
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ABSTRACT

As a first-time student in a creative writing course and a long-time instructor of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, I see possible paths that instructors in both fields could take in order to integrate creative writing and feminist pedagogy in ways that might increase students' desire to write and to share their writing while at the same time helping students undertake feminist analyses. In the creative nonfiction writing class I took with Professor Lardner in the fall of 2015, I saw how many students (myself included) were writing about transformative personal experiences, but in this class, we never discussed these experiences as such. Instead of letting the content of the students' writing take the shape of the elephant in the room, using a feminist lens of inquiry to examine these experiences via the content of the students' writing would, I argue, benefit the creative writing classroom. I believe this feminist-informed approach can be the kind that helps students understand their environments, their perspectives, their positionalities, ultimately *themselves*, better.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

At first I could not use the word “murder,” so I told people my friend Dave was shot and killed, which he was. I mentioned this refusal in an early draft of a personal essay I wrote for my creative nonfiction class (CNF) that fall of 2015; I wrote that “clearly I was playing some kind of semantics game with myself.” In comments on an earlier draft, Professor Lardner remarked on “the phenomenological resistance you report to using the word ‘murder.’” In a later draft, Prof. Lardner wrote in the margins of this section: “I think I’m as interested in this as in anything else this draft is exploring! I feel like you sort of ‘arrive’ at something, a moment, a realization here!” I read these comments and thought they were interesting points, but I did not expand on this section in subsequent drafts. But since then, I have thought more about my refusal to say that Dave was murdered, and I have come to realizations about my refusal by exploring intersections of feminist theory, creative writing, and rhetoric/composition studies.

As a first-time student in a creative writing course and a long-time instructor of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGSS), I see possible paths that instructors in both fields could take in order to integrate creative writing and feminist pedagogy in ways that might increase students’ desire to write and to share their writing while at the



same time helping students undertake feminist analyses. In the CNF class, I saw how many students (myself included) were writing about transformative personal experiences, but in this class, we never discussed these experiences as such. Instead of letting the content of the students' writing take the shape of the elephant in the room, using a feminist lens of inquiry to examine these experiences via the content of the students' writing would, I argue, benefit the CNF classroom. I believe this feminist-informed approach can be the kind that helps students understand their environments, their perspectives, their positionalities, ultimately *themselves*, better.

Writing is an important component of WGSS pedagogy because it helps students analyze formative life experience. In *Getting Restless*, Nancy Welch reports asking herself, while writing and revising a short story, "What does this story say about how I am already adapted – and to what?" (139). In a similar vein, Mary Ann Cain devotes *Revisioning Writers' Talk* to the pursuit of using narrative to explore what we know and how we know it. Narrative, according to Cain, "is the appropriate mode for representing and interpreting experiential knowledge" (10). Cain understands narrative as a means through which we can ask ourselves questions such as "How do we know our knowledge? By what stories do we tell ourselves what we know? How is meaning constituted within a given discourse community?" (10). Both Cain and Welch draw our attention to important ways in which gender dynamically shapes these questions, explorations, and answers. I want my students to ask themselves – and I as a writer want to ask myself – Welch's and Cain's questions, as a way to critically self-reflect in all writing we produce.

In the classes she teaches, Wendy Bishop states that her plan is “to use writing to learn and to study ourselves as writers” (“Because Teaching Composition...” 66). I appreciate Bishop’s use of “ourselves,” in that we all – instructor included – are learning in a classroom. For my own pedagogy statement, I would tweak Bishop’s. One of my goals in all the classes I teach is to use writing to learn about and study ourselves as beings who variously experience power, privilege, and oppression; this goal is nearly invisible in typical creative writing classes. In the WGSS classes I teach, I give writing assignments in which personal writing is encouraged; in fact, it is the primary focus of the assignments (I include an example of a prompt and student response later in this thesis). The plan in my classes is to use writing in a way that does not focus on formal aspects of writing (i.e., grammar, thesis statement, paragraph development, etc.), but rather uses writing as a tool to help us learn about the personal and political interplays of our intersectional identities and our various life experiences. In many cases, the personal writing produced by the students becomes a central part of our critical analysis discussions.

The focus of the writing assignments I give is on the content of the personal narrative, on the students’ critical analytic explorations of their places in this world, not on the form of the writing. I guide the students – via writing prompts, class discussion, lecture, and reading materials – on how to practice and develop critical analysis skills, and we spend a great deal of time discussing analytic approaches that emphasize, for example, asking questions such as: Who benefits in this situation? Who is at a disadvantage? Who holds the power here and how did they obtain it? What problems do we see in this situation? What would a more ideal situation look like? How might we

work toward that more ideal situation? Answering or attempting to answer these questions often yields tremendous insight. I had one of these “ah-ha!” moments as a result of writing I did in the creative nonfiction class with Prof. Lardner.

This thesis includes a draft of the personal essay I worked on during the Fall 2015 CNF course at Cleveland State, taught by Prof. Lardner. As the culminating project for this course, the students and the instructor created an anthology, entitled “What We Wrote in the Margins,” to which each person submitted a piece of creative nonfiction that originated in this course. A version of my personal essay about Dave, “Offerings,” is included in this anthology; I have most recently revised “Offerings” for its inclusion in this thesis. Using my essay and some other material from the CNF class, I am interested in thinking about how revision (and discussion) grounded in feminist analyses may shape the space of the CNF classroom. In other words, I am interested to see how feedback and revision strategies might extend beyond the parameters of craft and form and venture into spaces of feminist-informed pedagogies that stress critical analyses of personal experience and socio-cultural, politically-informed perspective.

In this thesis, I aim to show how an exclusive focus on craft or form (in writing classrooms) can preclude students’ explorations into the content of their writing, which may prohibit them from writing and/or revising. Since a main goal of creative writing and composition is for students to write, this kind of silencing is counter-productive in a writing classroom. Students in creative writing and composition classrooms may benefit from space being created, within the classroom, that supports them in writing from and about experiences that have profoundly affected their lives, a direction taken by many students in these classrooms. To create this kind of space for students, creative writing

and composition instructors may learn from feminist pedagogy. For example, students' formative life experiences should be recognized as such. By taking a direct approach to the content of the writing, instructors can include analyses of power, privilege, and oppression (and how these systems operate) to help students contextualize the content of their writing, which in turn may help students develop their writing in directions that will enrich it. I will discuss feminist-informed approaches to writing in subsequent chapters and as a rejoinder to Brenda Miller's essay "A Case Against Courage in Creative Nonfiction."

Overall, I aim to show how feminist theory, praxis, and pedagogy may inform creative writing and rhetoric/composition theories, practices, and pedagogies. In this way, my thesis crosses some intra-disciplinary lines (from rhetoric/composition to creative writing) and some interdisciplinary boundaries (from WGSS to literary studies and literacy/writing studies). I explore how we might be able to draw from theories and pedagogies from these diverse fields in order to create possibilities of pedagogy and writing opportunities that may create spaces for students to learn about themselves and others by increasing their awareness of how to critically analyze their experiences via experiential processes of writing about them, as opposed to focusing only on form and craft. In short, I want to create spaces for students in which they learn from what they write about, from what they produce.<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to have experienced this kind of learning in the CNF class. As a case study, I use an example from "Offerings" to show how a specific piece of feedback (from Prof. Lardner) and subsequent content revision

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<sup>1</sup> I am also interested in how the content of students' writing informs *how* they write about it, but that topic is outside the scope of this thesis.

improved the essay substantively and perhaps formally but definitely increased my awareness of privilege and how it operates.

In Chapter II, I provide brief overviews of the fields of feminist (literary) studies, rhetoric/composition, and creative writing. Because these are large topics, I limit them to select foundational and contemporary texts, with an emphasis on the fields' intersections and divergences. Along with my reflections on my position as a WGSS instructor and first-time student in a CNF class, these texts illuminate the possibilities of merging feminist and creative writing pedagogies. In Chapter III, I discuss a fellow classmate's contribution to our CNF anthology, to show how, by including feedback focused on systemic power relations that directly influence the piece, this student might have been able to explore more deeply these influential power relations. In Chapter IV, I include the most recently revised draft of my personal essay "Offerings" to show how a continuous understanding of myself as a feminist creative writer influenced revisions of the essay. I dedicate this chapter to providing a feminist rhetorical analysis of my personal essay and its revisions, to show how feminist theory and praxis might be useful in creative writing pedagogy. In the Afterword, I suggest some possible directions toward integrating creative writing, composition, and feminist pedagogy.

## CHAPTER II

### FEMINIST STUDIES, CREATIVE WRITING, AND RHETORIC/COMPOSITION

Rhetoric/composition studies have a long-standing history of providing helpful perspectives on working with the student/writer. For instance, Robert Brooke sees the traditional role of the student as one that adheres to convention (i.e., teacher provides prompt and form/structure requirements and students write to follow them), whereas the role of the writer is one in which students “see themselves as unique, productive writers with influence on their environment” (104). The first limits creativity, imagination, and self-development; the second encourages all three and therefore helps the student develop “voice,” which is “the unique stance she takes towards experience, and the unique way she relates herself to her context” (104). Providing students with opportunities to write about their lives, whether in a creative writing, composition, or WGSS classroom, enables them to craft their own writerly voice and to craft representations of themselves and their lives; it allows them agency.

According to Tom Romano, this crafting requires one to transition from the role of the student to that of the writer by “cutting loose.” In other words, students take control of their writing by trusting their experience and confidently conveying their purposes via writing that might not follow academic constraints and/or prescription. An

integral part of the “cutting loose” process, Romano insists, is for teachers to help students find their own voices by removing barriers of form and structure by, for example, having them do free-writes for the first few minutes of class, with no requirements other than writing their thoughts on a topic quickly and earnestly. Teachers can also help students by providing feedback aimed at recognizing the value of the student’s work in developing ideas and by bolstering confidence in the student’s ability and potential to write. The more one writes without constant worry about form and structure, the more one will be able to write, which in turn will help one develop confidence and generate voice. These emphases on the roles of experience, relationality, and context and the idea of “cutting loose” are ones that I want to explore through feminist pedagogical perspectives. As rhetoric/composition studies has moved toward pedagogies that promote writing as acts of meaning-making, I want to explore ways in which feminist-informed approaches of writing as meaning-making may contribute to these advances.

As I mentioned previously, a main focus of my argument here is for interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary approaches to writing. My inquiry lies in the desire for creative writing to incorporate feminist inquiry into the curriculum because taking the time and space in a creative writing classroom to learn about and discuss the subjects about which students are writing will help students delve deeper into their writing about them. A discussion about a woman’s essay about body image issues that is approached in terms of formal revisions can be helpful for the student, to be sure. However, a discussion about the content of the woman’s essay that analyzes how and why women experience body hatred and shame would likely offer significant revision possibilities for the student

that would not be raised in a discussion focused only on form. If a goal in creative writing classrooms is to help students write and revise original pieces of creative writing, then feminist analytic discussions of the topics about which they write will help achieve this goal. Many students write about or out of personal experiences that are rooted in issues of power, privilege, and oppression. To discuss these systems of power explicitly is one important way to help us think about them more critically, and, in a creative writing classroom, is one important way to help students write about them.

While my own experiences with feminist studies and writing offer a unique vantage point from which to consider these topics, the argument for boundary-crossing is not new. In an essay exploring composition and creative writing boundaries and overlaps, Ted Lardner begins by acknowledging the many maps one could create to show relationships between these two disciplines (72). Specifically, Lardner argues that creative writing stands to learn from composition in terms of “process, pedagogy, and epistemology,” and that composition stands to learn from creative writing in terms of axiology (72). In this thesis, my argument is similar to Lardner’s focus on axiology. For instance, I argue that feminist-informed pedagogy in the creative writing classroom will help draw out what is important and meaningful for students – what they want to write about – and in turn will help create a study of writing that is valuable for them.

Lardner stresses that the disciplines of creative writing and composition could both learn from each other, and Wendy Bishop argues for the merging or even dissolution of these academic boundaries. The first two sentences in Bishop’s “Crossing the Lines: On Creative Composition and Composing Creative Writing” are: “We need to be crossing the line between composition and creative writing far more often than we do. In



fact, we may want to eliminate the line entirely” (181). We have much to learn about ourselves when we direct our energy toward critical analysis endeavors that focus on the material at hand in all of its complexity instead of worrying about boxing material into rigid academic disciplinary categories. In this way, feminist analyses would permeate all critical analytic endeavors and not be relegated to a women’s studies classroom, as they often are.

In my experiences teaching composition and remedial writing, I find myself careful to walk a line of not making the course “too feminist;” I have never received this criticism from students, but I can easily imagine it. I have managed to infuse composition and remedial writing classrooms with feminist material, discussions, and assignments, but I have grown weary of the effort to force feminist analysis to the backseat in order to focus on the form and content of, mostly, academic writing. Again, because many students write about or out of personal experiences that are rooted in issues of power, privilege, and oppression, feminist analysis is crucial in creative writing classrooms.

In support of her claim that the line between composition and creative writing should be erased, Bishop intends “to describe what it has felt like to enter the creative writing classroom as a composition specialist and the world of composition studies as a creative writer...” (181). Similarly, in this thesis, I hope to describe what it has felt like, as a feminist studies specialist, to enter the creative writing classroom (as a student) and the composition classroom (as an instructor) and what it has felt like to reflect on my practices of feminist pedagogy with the information and experiences learned in the composition and creative writing classrooms.

In the introduction to her essay, Bishop includes an undergraduate journal entry in which the student, referred to as Fran, bemoans the murkiness of terms such as “creative writing” and “composition” (181). Bishop summarizes Fran’s musings as such: “students in creative writing classes seemed launched on a teacherless field-trip and students in composition classes entered a kind of academic prison” (181). I did not experience the “teacherless field-trip” in my creative writing classroom (although that sounds interesting), but I did feel, as an instructor of first-year composition, that I had entered a kind of academic prison – one focused too much on the formal requirements of academic writing. Interestingly, Lardner suggests that there is more freedom in a composition classroom than a creative writing classroom to incorporate the kinds of questions (of power and personal experience) that I am pushing for here. He writes:

Creative writing as a practice of literacy—culturally overdetermined, fraught with power relations—runs tangentially to the conversation in many creative writing classrooms at a time when it has pushed to the forefront of concern in composition. In this respect, the typical creative writing class may be more conservative than the composition classroom, where the subtext of composing (as a social process mediated through power relations) runs near the surface of classroom discourse. (73)

As a student in the CNF class, I saw the way in which it was, as Lardner says, conservative. The disconnect seemed almost palpable to me, in that so many of us were writing about experiences with systems of power, and yet these dynamics were not discussed. This feeling of disconnect is what started to make me wonder about what might be possible in a CNF class if feminist analyses of the content of students’ pieces were included along with discussions of form. I also see Lardner’s point about the freedom (relatively) that exists in a composition classroom to host these kinds of critical discussions about composition and power structures. In the composition classes I taught, I

was able to include these discussions to some extent. I have taught first-year composition for only a few terms; yet, I find myself moving away from the composition classroom and even more toward the feminist studies one, in which I feel I have the freedom to use writing to facilitate learning in ways liberated from the constraints of academic prose and form that are front and center in a composition classroom.

Feminist scholars have long critiqued the disconnect between feminist studies and all other academic disciplines. In Elaine Showalter's influential "Towards a Feminist Poetics," originally published in 1979, Showalter calls for English studies scholars to acknowledge the important contributions feminist criticism has made to English studies and, once acknowledged, to move forward by actively engaging feminist criticism in the field of English, thereby sustaining "an interdisciplinary effort to reconstruct the social, political and cultural experience of women" (25). Feminist calls to action have revised Showalter's in important ways that include feminist analyses of intersectionality and the critiques of a singular or monolithic "experience of women," and significant contemporary contributions to feminist praxis have been made by feminist scholars such as Sandra Harding, Patricia Hill Collins, Catherine MacKinnon, bell hooks, and many more.

bell hooks has made great strides throughout her career in stressing the importance of making feminist theory accessible for a widely diverse reading contingent (see *Feminism Is for Everybody*), and, in *Feminist Theory*, she stresses the importance of accessibility in writing: "Concentration of feminist educators in universities encourages habitual use of an academic style that may make it impossible for teachers to communicate effectively with individuals who are not familiar with either academic style

or jargon” (112). In this instance hooks specifically addresses feminist scholars and educators, but she also addresses the importance of making feminist writing accessible for everyone.

She begins *Feminism Is for Everybody* with a vignette about how she tells people she meets that she is “a writer, a feminist theorist, a cultural critic” (vii). She states that most people are interested to know more about the writer and cultural critic identities but not more about the feminist theorist identity. hooks tells us that when she asks these same people about their knowledge of feminism, “they respond by letting me know that everything they know about feminism has come into their lives thirdhand, that they really have not come close enough to feminist movement to know what really happens, what it’s really about” (vii). Not surprisingly, “mostly they think feminism is a bunch of angry women who want to be like men” (vii-viii). hooks attributes this incorrect characterization of feminism and feminists to the lack of reading people do about feminism, and one of the reasons people do not read about feminism, hooks argues, is that feminist theory has been written largely in ways that are not accessible for the general public and are exclusively for academics and scholars. hooks explains why she wrote *Feminism Is for Everybody*:

Each time I leave one of these encounters, I want to have in my hand a little book so that I can say, read this book, and it will tell you what feminism is, what the movement is about. I want to be holding in my hand a concise, fairly easy to read and understand book; not a long book, not a book thick with hard to understand jargon and academic language, but a straightforward clear book — easy to read without being simplistic. (viii)

hooks addresses concerns that writing about feminism should be accessible for all – for those outside of academic communities in particular, since those communities have been largely excluded from writing by and for academics.

I teach WGSS at two community colleges. Most of the students I teach say that they have never heard of feminism or they know very little about feminism or they tell me they know what feminism is, but like hooks' vignette, they tell me incorrect descriptions and definitions of feminism and feminist. Also, many of my students are not familiar with, as hooks says, the "academic style or jargon" (112) that can impede understanding of feminism and feminist theory. Therefore, it is important to have students read narratives not written in such a style and to encourage students to write feminist analyses that are not restricted to such a style. I also am committed to providing my students with feminist writings that are accessible to a wide audience. In this vein, I am not, in my Introduction to Women's Studies classes, concerned with requiring students to replicate traditional standards of academic writing. As hooks states, "The value of a feminist work should not be determined by whether or not it conforms to academic standards" (113). I aim to facilitate students' understandings of feminism by requiring them to write about it in ways that foreground their own undertakings of critical analyses. Some students choose to write about it in ways that are more creative and less academic and vice versa.

Feminist theorists make many significant critiques of writing in general and the purported objective stance of academic, masculine writing in particular. Susan David Bernstein's contribution to these critiques is pertinent here because she explores the first person "I" as a "rhetorical event" (121). She explains that "this textual moment carries the capacity to accentuate and overturn conventions of authority, particularly the pretense of objectivity as an ideological cover for masculine privilege" (121). I am interested in Bernstein's ideas of the use of "I" and/or personal writing as rhetorical events that have

the power to challenge systems of power and privilege. In teaching students about patriarchy, power, privilege, oppression, and feminism, I have found that one of the most powerful ways to help them think about these issues and apply them to their own lives is to have the students write reflection papers on such topics. Using “I” in writing is one of the ways my students access experiences that have profoundly affected them.

Interestingly, students often double-check with me to make sure that I am really allowing them to write in first-person, since they have spent most, if not all, of their academic lives being told that they are not allowed to write in first person. Using “I,” and writing about their experiences in ways that are free from a focus on form, is liberating for many of them.

For example, after discussing in class various “isms,” this is the prompt I use for the first reading response assignment I give students:

When did you experience your first, or significant, understanding(s) of an “ism” or intersecting “isms” (i.e., heterosexism, looksism, racism, sexism, ableism, or any others)? Describe and analyze this experience (or more than one experience) and how it made you feel. What did you learn from this experience? How/have the materials and/or discussions in this class helped you analyze this experience? Be sure to quote directly, at least twice, from at least two different articles/readings/sources in *Women’s Voices, Feminist Visions* to help your analysis.

I require that my students quote twice from the textbook, so that I can evaluate their understanding and application of course materials to their writing. I also require a minimum length of 900 words, so that students will use the space to extend, and hopefully deepen, what might be cursory beginning analyses of topics such as power and privilege. In addition to not plagiarizing and a few other standard requirements, these are the assignment parameters. The form or craft of the students’ writing is not paramount

here, as long as they effectively convey their thoughts and are engaging in critical analysis about their topic.

The following are two paragraphs from a former student's reading response, about her struggle with an eating disorder (I have copied the paragraphs exactly as she has written them):

It all began at the age of 14. First, it started as thinking that I looked bigger than the people I saw on TV and around me. I had too much in certain places. So I began to watch what I ate. I began to lose weight and enjoyed the feeling of seeing less in places that I had once seen more. This enjoyment turned into an obsession that took control of my life for five long years. I had always been a tomboy and athlete my entire life. I loved the thrill of competition and I enjoyed playing outside and having fun being a kid. As I got older, I began to become more "girly" and observant of the way that I looked and wanting to change it to make it better. I began dieting when I was in the eighth grade because my dad had told me I looked solid and could afford to lose a few, little did he know what those few words would do to my mind and confidence in myself. My eating disorder took a large turn when my dieting turned into starving myself and as shown in *Women's Voices Feminist Visions*, "dieting seems to trigger the onset of an eating disorder in vulnerable individuals (200)." I worked out and dieted so intensely that I lost twenty pounds in a matter of two weeks. I was obsessed with my body and shows like *America's Next Top Model*. For two years, I kept everyone in the dark, and that is when the depression part of it started. I tried to control myself and ease my mind but then one day I discovered that I could eat as much as I wanted and with two fingers, I was as empty as if I had never put anything into my stomach. This was the turning point of my disease.

I include this excerpt here to show how the student, in a free-form writing assignment, uses the textbook material to analyze her experience of surviving an eating disorder. As the instructor, I see that she is critically thinking about some of the factors that contributed to the development of the eating disorder and that she is applying the course material to these issues; I include these kinds of observations in feedback for students. While I do not recall what exactly I wrote to this student (I do not have the copy of the paper on which I wrote), my feedback to the student likely would be: "Thank you for

sharing your experience. I see here that you are carefully thinking through and analyzing your experience in terms of the class and reading material,” and I would likely include some commentary on which articles the student chose to include in their reading response and which other readings might be useful for the student to consider when thinking or writing about this topic and experience.

I have learned a great deal about how to give helpful feedback from reading composition theorists. For instance, C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon recommend that writing teachers take “an essentially receptive rather than essentially evaluative reading posture” (122) to students’ writing, which requires that instructors “take the writer’s competence *generally* for granted” (122), so that students will write for the instructor with the general sense of acceptance instead of critique. The instructor’s receptive posture will ideally keep students wanting to write. Knoblauch and Brannon claim that this will create a type of reading which will contribute to the student’s ability to keep responsibility and control of decision-making because, instead of reading the student’s text and evaluating it against the Ideal Text, the writing instructor will read the student’s text to see how successful the writer is in conveying her purposes via assertions that the reader understands as pertinent.

Like Knoblauch and Brannon, I want my students to feel that they are the ones in control of their writing, not me. When I grade and provide feedback, I am most concerned with the student’s engagement with WGSS ideas and critical analysis. I do take into account writing in general, by which I mean that the writing is clear enough that I as the reader can understand it, that the student follows assignment instructions and parameters, and that the student has not plagiarized. I provide this kind of receptive



feedback because my aim is to help students think about their experiences as they directly relate to systems of power, privilege, and oppression, and the most successful way to do this, in my experience working with widely diverse groups of students, is to focus on the content of what they are writing, not to the total exclusion of form, but the focus is on the content. The assignment's focus on the content of the student's writing, and not the form, allows the student to delve deeply into these critical analyses. The lack of attention on form in my Introduction to Women's Studies classes allows the student's attention to turn to critical analytic development.

I choose these types of assignments because I believe it is important to conceptualize writing as a process through and in which one makes meaning. What is most important to me, as a teacher, is that students learn to think critically and to think for themselves. Writing is one way to help students practice critical thinking, but it does not appear to be as successful when students are writing form assignments about which they do not care. Knoblauch and Brannon point out that educators often require students to complete school writing assignments meant to teach students to replicate the formalities of academic writing (i.e., the traditional five-paragraph essay). Knoblauch and Brannon call for educators to move away from this traditional direction because it does not require the student to create information. They claim that information "is a product of the mind's habit of differentiating in order to synthesize, a procedure that language peculiarly enables through its capacity to represent experience 'grammatically' – as aspects, alternative modes, hierarchies of abstraction, and so forth" (65). In other words, information is produced when the writer is able to explain and integrate realizations (which may arise in/from/out of spaces of surprise, conflict, relating across difference,

empathy, keen awareness, and so on) via written composition so that others can learn what she has come to understand through processes of thinking and writing. These spaces are some of the most generative for producing information and knowledge.

Discussions of tensions among seemingly conflicting or polarized ideas can help writers see spaces in-between, can help writers stay in the area of tension without running for one side or the other, and these dialectic dialogues are productive for creating information. Therefore, I appreciate Knoblauch and Brannon's statement that "language represents differentially, portraying a dialectical relationship between analysis and synthesis" (65) in that, from these spaces of tension or difference, we can employ language to express in detail thoughtful examinations of interconnections involved in making meaning and the dialectical relationships out of which meaning evolves. In regard to composition, meaning is made when these examinations are communicated effectively to another via words, sentences, paragraphs, various forms of writing. Meaning is not, Knoblauch and Brannon would say, "out there" to be discovered; it is not regurgitation or a re-presentation of information. Instead, Knoblauch and Brannon propose that language guides us into creating meaning and information as much as it conveys meaning and information. In short, information is the written product of differentiation and synthesis, which creates meaning, and feminist pedagogy adds analyses of power, privilege, and oppression to this approach to creating information via writing.

Knoblauch and Brannon state that information "comes out of the perspective a given writer applies to a subject; it is located through a process of coming to know that subject – thinking, making observations if possible, reading, talking, wondering, asking

questions, seeking answers; and its pertinence is estimated from a writer's own sense of intention and audience, the impression of what needs to be said in order to accomplish a particular end" (66). Information is borne out of a writer's unique positionalities in relation to the subject that she pursues and is found during and as a result of this pursuit of inquiry. Feminist theory discusses in depth the importance of considering one's positionalities of race, class, gender, sexuality, and more in relation to the subject she is pursuing and the knowledges thereby produced. Writing is a process of producing knowledge and information and is subjective, but that does not mean that writing is arbitrary or absolutely relative. Knoblauch and Brannon state that the "value [of information] as pertinent writing material" is reliant upon "a writer's sense of purpose and audience" (67). If the writer expresses what she wants to convey (i.e., her purpose, pursuit of inquiry, explanation of findings, and the information she produces) through a form of written communication that enables the audience to understand and synthesize this information, then this would be considered pertinent writing.

Knoblauch and Brannon's discussion of pertinent writing (which implies that there must be non-pertinent or less-pertinent writing) reminds me of feminist standpoint theory, which proposes that, while knowledge is never objective, some knowledges are more accurate and comprehensive than others. To use a broad, general example: knowledges produced by women and located in women's experiences are more likely to accurately represent gendered systems of power, privilege, and oppression than knowledges produced by men since women develop knowledges and strategies of how to survive in unequal power structures. Since the dominant, privileged group does not need to know how to survive as the oppressed, they experience only the position of privilege.

The oppressed, however, directly experience ways in which power privileges others and disadvantages them, and they must develop extensive knowledge of how both sides work in order to survive in a system working against their survival. By having knowledge of both functions – privilege and oppression – women participate in meaning-making that, feminist standpoint theorists argue, is more accurate in terms of understanding gender.

Knoblauch and Brannon advocate for writing as meaning-making, which requires that writing be approached and practiced as a three-part process of conceiving information, making assertions, and connecting assertions (64). A written composition which is presented as a coherent whole is the end result of this three-part process.

Knoblauch and Brannon do not mean to suggest that each of these steps is neatly separate from the others. Instead, they claim that all three work together from start to finish during the event of composition. They discuss ways to foster this process, and one is to create assignments and writing environments that allow students to be engaged with material that matters to them. When students feel invested with and directly related to the material, they are more likely to think and write seriously and carefully; in turn, they connect with deep processes of writing.

My student's writing about experiences with eating disorders demonstrates Knoblauch and Brannon's perspective of writing as meaning-making. The student conceives the academic material in my class by reading information and statistics on eating disorders, first-person narratives of survivors of eating disorders, and feminist articles about gendered norms of beauty and sexist representations in media, for instance. In light of this information, she makes assertions about how she first learned about gender roles and gendered expectations of beauty, how and why she first began dieting,

and how and why the dieting developed into a severe eating disorder. She connects all of these assertions by showing how gender roles and beauty expectations interlink with dieting, eating disorders, depression, identity, and self-esteem, to name some of the most prominent assertions in her piece. She is also writing toward a critique of larger systemic power relations, and in so doing, she is participating in feminist revision.

A main goal of feminist movements has been and is to re-vision ideologies and workings of power. Carolyn Heilbrun, in *Writing a Woman's Life*, defines power as “the ability to take one’s place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one’s part matter” (18). This exercise of power has been historically and traditionally denied to women, and Heilbrun asserts that women must reclaim it, specifically by writing their lives. I see Heilbrun’s definition of power come into play in this thesis in that I want to show that writing about a personal experience of grief, for example, matters, and that by dedicating my thesis to exploring these topics, I am claiming the right to have it matter. By giving students opportunities to write about their lives, instructors give them opportunities to participate actively in making meaning and to share these meanings and representations with others.

Feminist research on writing is not relegated to the discipline of WGSS, of course. In the field of rhetoric/composition, a significant feminist pursuit is that of “strategic contemplation” (21-23), as discussed by Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch in *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*. One of their main goals is to show how feminist rhetorical studies can help us approach and understand rhetoric as “an embodied social experience” (131). This point is important here because, as I will show, I came to understand one of the revisions in my thesis only after reflecting on how, rhetorically, my

refusal to use the term “murdered” was an indication of my embodied social experience and privilege.

Royster and Kirsch also stress the importance of braiding “an ethics of hope and care” (145) into feminist rhetorical analyses. They explain:

Hope...is more than engaging in wishful thinking. This view of hope calls instead for sharp analytical skills...[It is] to inhabit a sense of caring about the people and processes involved in the use of language by immersing ourselves in the work, spending time thinking broadly and deeply about what is there, not there, and could be there instead. The effort is to think beyond the concrete in envisioning alternative possibilities in order that we might actually work, often collaboratively, toward enacting a better future. (145)

Royster and Kirsch’s inclusion of the importance of thinking about “what is there, not there, and could be there instead” links nicely with Welch’s pursuit of “something missing, something else,” which I describe in detail in a later section. The feedback Prof. Lardner gave on drafts of my personal essay exemplifies this ethics of hope and care in that he carefully considered what was there (in the draft) and what was not. What he pointed out required me to think beyond the concrete and the obvious, and it required me to spend time thinking about the specific rhetorical instance – I could not use the word “murder” – and its possible underlying implications.

hooks, in *Teaching to Transgress*, also stresses the importance of care in a teaching environment, one that can and should be fostered, in part, by instructors:

To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin. (13)

This ethics of hope and care, and the ways that it can manifest in feminist rhetoric, composition, and creative writing classes, is important because it facilitates the student's ability to consider her socio-cultural positionalities, in ways in which she might not have before, by offering a space that simultaneously is supportive yet asks the student to approach learning and analysis in ways that are often unfamiliar and quite uncomfortable. I often remind my students that some of the best learning can be the most uncomfortable.

Giving feedback provides rich opportunities to practice this ethics of hope and care. Royster and Kirsch's suggestions may be linked to Adrienne Rich's theories of writing as re-vision. In the short introduction Adrienne Rich writes in 1979 to her 1971 essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision<sup>2</sup>," she spends only a short paragraph describing the sexist state of literary studies and then acknowledges the important contributions feminist studies and scholars have made to literary studies, especially in the eight years since she had published "When We Dead Awaken." By challenging sexist and patriarchal structures of literary studies, Rich makes larger challenges to sexism and patriarchy, for literary studies is one component of these at-large regimes of power.

An overview of Rich's essay will illuminate what Rich means by re-vision, why it is necessary, how it works, and what it will do for feminist literary studies. Rich begins by claiming that coming into political consciousness can be "confusing, disorienting," but also "exhilarating" (34), and that obtaining and acting on political consciousness is necessary in order to improve the lives of women and redress oppressive patriarchal

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<sup>2</sup> "When We Dead Awaken" was originally given as a talk by Rich in the panel "The Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century," at a meeting held by The Commission on the Status of Women in the Profession in 1971.

conditions. A first step in these processes is the act of re-vision, which she conceptualizes as such:

Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. (35)

In order to raise consciousness, Rich argues that we must be able to see, both literally and figuratively, what has been rendered invisible by dominant power structures. We must work toward re-visions of literature and literary history, practice, and criticism by analyzing how power relations produce and perpetuate in/equalities.

While the act of re-vision carries serious implications for academia, its primary and most important implication is that it is necessary for women's survival. Rich claims that self-knowledge goes beyond identity for women. Because we live in a patriarchy, women must first unlearn what we are taught about ourselves. Clearly, it is imperative that we learn about and know ourselves in ways that resist patriarchal representations and expectations of women. We must first know ourselves, Rich claims, so that we are able to resist. Self-knowledge, therefore, plays a prominent role in activism and resistance by assisting women in their fight to survive patriarchal conditions. In this way women survive literally, physically. Women must write themselves into poetry and prose in ways in which they choose to be represented (and are not limited to representations determined by men). In this way women survive historically and contemporaneously, in literature and beyond.



Rich remarks on why it might be difficult and dangerous for women “to find language and images for a consciousness we are just coming into” (35) for two main reasons. First, women will have to take on, resist, expose, and counter deep-seated and long-valorized traditions, such as romance myths. Second, “male judgment, along with the misnaming and thwarting of her needs by a culture controlled by males, has created problems for the woman writer: problems of contact with herself, problems of language and style, problems of energy and survival” (37). For me, writing and revising “Offerings” has been an exercise in finding a voice in grief and in working through problems with language in ways that ultimately help me understand myself better. As a woman writer, Rich argues, these are no small tasks.

In terms of her life and creative writing, Rich explains how she negotiates identity, language, and flourishing. In “When We Dead Awaken,” Rich charts, via her poetry, how she transitioned from being a woman writer who wrote within and to the expectations and confines of social and literary constructs and demands to a woman writer who wrote for herself and other women. Born into a middle-class family, Rich was surrounded by books, and her father encouraged her literacy (38). She laments how girls and women go to literature to find themselves, to see themselves in language, but often are thwarted and disappointed because what they find is an impenetrable, silencing, and almost indefatigable “image of Woman in books written by men” (39). When Rich came upon this roadblock, she started reading early women poets, but even she fell into the trap of being disappointed because she still believed in the illusion that being equal meant “sounding the same” (39). She critiques how she wrote for and to please a man (her father) and the Man (patriarchal norms, such as silencing anger) (38-39), and she

points out the split self that she as a woman poet thus experienced “between the girl who wrote poems, who defined herself in writing poems, and the girl who was to define herself by her relationships with men” (40).

Rich recounts how at one point she “was writing very little, partly from fatigue, that female fatigue of suppressed anger and loss of contact with my own being; partly from the discontinuity of female life with its attention to small chores, errands...” (43). She wrote so little at this point because she had to work to suppress her emotions and feelings, since women were required to do so; anger was (and in many ways still is) considered an “unfeminine” emotion, and women were expected always to be complacent and docile. Rich wrote some early poems in a neutral, removed tone, but soon realized that acting complacent and writing detached poems did not satisfy her. She began to articulate that

for a poem to coalesce, for a character or an action to take shape, there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive. And a certain freedom of the mind is needed... Moreover, if the imagination is to transcend and transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at that moment... For writing is re-naming. (43)

And Rich begin to use her imagination in exactly this way: “Over two years I wrote a ten-part poem called ‘Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law’ (1958-1960), in a longer looser mode than I’d ever trusted myself with before. It was an extraordinary relief to write that poem” (44-45). It was a relief for me to write the essay about Dave and his death. Because of feminist gains in academic disciplines, I do not experience the same oppressive situations that Rich did, for example, but traditional academic disciplines still have much to gain from feminist studies’ emphasis on the importance of the personal, on its insistence that the personal is political.

In short, Rich calls for women to (re-)write accounts they feel accurately represent their experiences, especially when conveying emotion and using one's imaginative faculties, in order to avoid falling into the trap of disguising feelings and creativity via patriarchal notions of detachment, passivity, and objectivity (49). Rich, a feminist theorist and creative writer, calls for women to re-unite their split selves by writing what they feel and thereby re-naming themselves as women. Rich's essay, in its ability to be continuously revised and reformulated by those who read it and implement its theories into their own writing, actualizes the theory it espouses and works to dissolve the often-constructed divide between theory and praxis, preventing its own theory from becoming stagnant and prescriptive.

Re-vision as Rich constructs it and re-vision as the composition theorists (included in this thesis) construct it are similar in that all call for writing as an important way of making meaning. Rich aligns more with composition theorists such as Welch and Cain, who undertake feminist analyses of composition. I draw from Rich's essay at length not only because of its landmark status in feminist studies but also because Rich's ideas about revision and re-vision speak to a main point here: that women writing and re-writing their own stories is crucial to the continuous development of feminism, and feminism constitutes a catalyzing stance toward liberating possibilities of literacy and writing, especially in the form of personal narrative.

Writing can validate experience, for the writer and for readers. In the introduction to *We Are the Stories We Tell* (a collection of contemporary short stories by women), Wendy Martin emphasizes that "to articulate experience, to give language to otherwise inchoate perceptions, is always empowering and liberating. To write the truth about all

sorts of experiences is both the fruit and the wellspring of freedom and knowledge...stories can teach us much about women's lives, American lives, and lives in general" (7). In writing about our lives, we learn to write and re-write our experiences in ways that help us know more about ourselves and in ways that help others move toward understanding. This discussion of Rich in detail serves as a foundation for Chapter IV, in which I analyze some revisions of my personal essay "Offerings."

## CHAPTER III

### POSSIBILITIES OF FEMINIST FEEDBACK IN A CNF CLASSROOM

But first I want to return to Romano's notion of "cutting loose." Another way in which instructors can help students "cut loose" is by spending time in a creative writing or composition classroom discussing how, for example, systems of power, privilege, and oppression play out in students' writings. Indeed, a critique of expressivist pedagogy's focus on the individual's voice has been that this focus de-situates and de-historicizes the writer. I will explain by using a personal experience of mine in which the roles of student, writer, and teacher were interwoven. I was in a unique position during Prof. Lardner's CNF class in that I was a student in his class, a writer in and out of his class, and a WGSS instructor (who has previously taught both college remedial English and college composition classes); I inhabited and learned from all three simultaneously, especially as demonstrated in the following example.

Before I explain my thoughts on how we can include feminist feedback in the workshop and revision phases of a creative writing class, I first address a specific example of a piece that might have benefitted from feminist-informed feedback. What follows is my classmate's submission to our CNF anthology, "Bodytalk."

Mom sits on the bench in the corner of the small room. Her head in her hands, she begs me to stop crying. I'm afraid kids at school will make

fun of my chubby belly protruding under my t-shirt. She's afraid I won't find any outfits I'm satisfied with. I'm afraid of being called "fat" because my love handles hang over the top of my pants. She's afraid I'm going to grow out of these new clothes too soon. I'm afraid that passing patrons can see my half-bare body through the small slits in the saloon-style door. She's afraid the changing room attendant thinks I'm being beaten in the farthest stall. I'm afraid I will never look pretty. She is afraid she is handling this all wrong. She asks me to try on another pair of jeans. Another size. A larger size. Maybe a pair with a higher waist. Maybe a pair that isn't form-fitting. Maybe a pair from the clearance rack. Maybe we should just go home.

In the fifth grade, we had one hour each Tuesday and Thursday to spend in the school's library. Looking through chapter books. Learning to search with the computer database. Listening to the librarian about the amazing things you can learn from reading. During this precious library time, I read old copies of a preteen girly magazine and learned the importance of being a pretty girl. It was a down-to-earth fashion and lifestyle magazine called *GL* — Girl's Life. A small group of us gals huddled in the magazine aisle, whispering over the shiny sheets of girlhood scripture. We poured out our hearts' desire to emulate what we were supposed to look like. *This girl is so pretty! I wish I was as pretty as her! Look at how skinny she is! I wish I had her thighs! You can see her ribs! And her hip bones! I wish I looked like her...*

When I was young, there were four types of women's bodies: *willowy, curvy, apple, and pear*. Fashion editors of *Cosmopolitan*, *Teen Vogue*, and *Glamour* showed us how to dress these bodies. Proper clothes to highlight the body's special features and to fix its shortcomings. Policing what clothes women should wear to flatter their shapes and make their bodies more desirable. *To whom?* Certain styles of jeans fit better on certain bodies. I stared at the models in the magazines and at my own reflection at the same time. The models were skinnier than I was, less body fat, lower BMI. I was sort of apple shaped, I think. But I was also a bit curvy because the placement of my excess fat. I certainly wasn't willowy and I knew I never would be. But I wished to be pear shaped, a thinner waist and wider hips. So sensational. So stylish. So not what my own body look like. I would turn to the side. I would run my hands along my abdomen and scoop up my fat and squeeze it as hard as I could into my body. I tried to make it disappear. Not to permanently get rid of it. Just to see what my body would look like if my weight was more evenly distributed. I wished to fit into the rigid 4-type mold, fitting into society's prescribed notions of beauty just a little bit better...

My aunt bought me my first women's magazine — a *young* women's magazine. *Seventeen*. I was ten. It was a gift subscription. A bargain. Buy ONE year, give ONE year for FREE! She bought one year, maybe for herself, or for her daughters — ages nine and six — or maybe for another niece, an older niece perhaps. Grandma Pat bought me my

second women's magazine. Another *young* women's magazine. I begged her to pay for the subscription. All the other girls in my grade read *Teen Vogue*. I was on the brim of teenagedom. I was twelve. For a few years while we could afford it, my parents renewed my yearly subscription to each publication, letting me pick up new ones as well. I even gave a few subscriptions as gifts. Buy ONE year, give ONE year for FREE! Not only was it a bargain, but I could share the good word with my friends. It was a hit present for birthdays.

I suppose some of a young girl's body image issues stem from her mother. And her mother's body image issues stem from her own mother's body image issues and so on and so forth. A learned self-hatred, simultaneously planted and fostered by a social environment that polices women's bodies in more ways than one. I suppose I learned some of my own body image issues from my mother, who, on numerous occasions, reminded me that I was beautiful and somewhat congratulated me on being a smaller size than she was at my age. A continuous reminder that I am smaller than she was at my age is also a recognition of her own personal insecurities. Such deeply ingrained insecurities are harder to shake than the devil.

I sit on the bench in the corner of the small room. My chin resting in my hands, I beg my mom to try on more outfits. She is afraid to wear a pencil skirt for fear that it makes her look fat. I am afraid she has little taste in contemporary fashion. She is afraid the top is too busy. I am afraid she's never going to find an outfit she's satisfied with. She is afraid her arms are too chubby to pull off a sleeveless top. I am afraid we'll never get out of the store alive. She is afraid her calves are too big. I am afraid the room's long mirror is from a fun house. She is afraid her neck is too wide. I am afraid that, no matter what I say, I won't be able to convince her differently. She is afraid that her body looks too big. I am afraid that all the bad bodytalk has made it that way.

There are now more types of women's bodies. *Willowy, curvy, boyish/apple, pear, big booty, short legs, wide hips...* Magazines cover a wider range of possibilities. They still run hypersexualized ads for perfume, ads with runway-thin models for designer brand clothes. They use a few "plus-size" models in their own publication and call it diversity. They use the body positive movement to change the message of their magazine. They scream for inclusivity but sell out for exclusivity. They claim to aim to improve women's lives by more than just fashion and makeup. The majority of the paper space suggests improvement only by socially constructed standards of beauty. They talk the talk, but don't really walk the walk. *What about me?*

I am surrounded by women's magazine correspondence wherever I go. I am baited by website headlines about diet trends, workout tips, busty bras, booty-lifters, waist-training corsets, calorie supplements, fat-burning cleanses. I read article after article about how to dress my body (now an apple/boyish shape with a wide waist, a long torso, and short legs, with

very little butt) with the latest shirt, pant, short, skirt, blouse, legging, coat, trend. *I am independent.* I now buy my own magazines. I'm subscribed to three. Each time I am close to the end of my subscription, they send me a great deal for renewal. I have received at least three complementary totes to accompany my magazine renewals over the years. Instead of giving magazines as gifts, I give these totes, just a small token of my buying into the bodytalk hype. Not the deliberate spreading of the possibly toxic message. *I am a follower.* I talk about the grotesque state of bodytalk yet I feed on their message. I feed on being told that I can improve in these five simple steps. I feed on being told I'm not good enough. *If I haven't their message to fuel me, what will I fight against?*

I can't imagine being a mother having to do clothes shopping for her ten-year-old daughter. I can't imagine being a mother to a daughter who is so fraught about her body that she can't even get through the first store. I can't imagine being a mother in a society where a woman's body shape and size is somehow indicative of her worth. Alternatively, I imagine living in a world where a woman's worth is based solely on her intellect and personality. I imagine body shape and size will have little to do with a woman's worth. I imagine the daughters of this particular future not being judged by the way they look. I imagine these daughters scoffing at the thought of being put down because of their appearance. I imagine future mothers of future daughters watching carefully over their young women, warning and reminding of what used to be.

I sit on the bench in the corner of the small room. My nervous hands clasp in a tight ball as I watch my future daughter try on new clothes. She begs me to stop worrying. I am afraid she will think she looks fat. She has no idea how that simple descriptor was ever meant as an insult. I am afraid that she will think she looks ugly. She fails to understand how the vast possibilities of a unique physicality could be seen in such a negative way. I tell my future daughter that she looks beautiful. She smiles and shrugs her shoulders. She knows nothing different of her appearance. She does not define her worth by her shirt, dress, or pant size. She lives in a perfect world where the only bodytalk is good.

“Bodytalk” is a narrative that my classmate wrote out of her experiences struggling with body image issues and weight. As a class we workshopped this piece, and Prof. Lardner, my classmates, and I suggested thoughtful feedback on how she could formally revise it. While I do not specifically remember what was said during the in-class workshops (and there is no written record of them), I do recall thinking that I wish my classmate was a student in my WGSS class, where we have the time and space to delve



into these issues. I recall thinking this, because, what was never discussed in class was the content of the piece in terms of a feminist analysis of why the student might have struggled with body image issues, how such issues predominately affect women, how and why young women learn from an early age that they are valued more for their appearance than for their intelligence. I remember thinking, during my classmate's in-class workshop, that in the classes I teach, topics such as these would have been the primary focus of the discussion of the student's paper.

Because I wanted to share these directions with my classmate, I address feminist inquiry and analysis regarding her piece in my written feedback to her. The following is this feedback:

I see these pieces as being explorations into aspects of familial relationships – especially with your mother and grandmother, experiences as a child and perhaps the influences of those on your adult self, mortality, being, existence, the future, self-esteem, awareness of your body, relationships between different generations of family members, and understanding and critique of social norms of beauty imposed on girls (beginning at a very young age) and women. I don't mean the previous list to be exhaustive, just that those are some of the main themes I see coming across. As you said in class, all three pieces are essay form. Maybe you could play with writing "Slipping" as a list or poem-like form? Or maybe you could try writing it as a letter to a good friend, as you are looking back on these experiences as an adult and describing them to the friend?

I've marked particular places of imagery, description, word use, etc. that I like. I like how you use the technique of parallelism and repetition. I think it works particularly well in "Bodytalk." It struck me how the parallelism and repetition of "She's afraid" and "I'm afraid" at the sentence/line level interlink with the parallelism and repetition of the scene-setting in the first, fifth, and seventh paragraphs. "Bodytalk" is my favorite of the three, and I think this one could be made into an excellent research essay by researching the histories of the girls/women's magazines you mention, the socio-cultural context of feminist movements of your childhood/adolescence and US feminist movements in general (you could look specifically at critiques of mainstream magazines in second and third wave feminism, for example, and you could even juxtapose these magazines with feminist zines made with intentions of fostering girls'

empowerment), research that argues that magazines such as *Seventeen* etc. negatively affect girls' self-esteem, increase amount of eating disorders etc., and you could even include some feminist theory. I'm probably getting carried away! But this is particularly interesting to me because I teach Women's/Feminist Studies. If you're interested in expanding your essay in any of these directions, I'd be happy to offer some suggestions. If not, of course no worries. In "Bodytalk," I'm struck by the image of the dressing room mirror as being one from a fun house, and I wonder if you could elaborate on that more in this piece or another. It is a great image to sum up how, when we women look at our bodies, the reflection can be grossly distorted because the lens through which we see our bodies has been so warped by media, magazines, social norms etc.

I like the first sentence in "My Mother's Mother," but I hope you continue on with the essay so the reader isn't left hanging as to what the letter says! Also, in this piece, could you give the reader more information about the trip to Disney World, when your grandmother was with your family? Do you remember how she interacted with you and/or your family – was it awkward, uncomfortable, exciting, fun?

Thank you for sharing your work with us. I enjoyed reading it.

And here, lastly, is the revision feedback I gave to my classmate after reading a draft of another one of her writings that dealt with body issues in ways differently than "Bodytalk," but the piece included many of the same overarching points as "Bodytalk" does. Again, I addressed feminist inquiry and analysis:

Thank you for sharing this essay and your experiences with us. The issues you bring up about women and body image are very important. I would be so interested to read the final draft that you turn in. I see you writing about issues of gender, body image, social norms and expectations, self-worth, self-confidence, media, sexism, looksism, the influence that reading certain material and viewing certain images can have on (specifically) girls/young women, and BDD [body dysmorphic disorder]. As a reader, I enjoy details you include such as: the McDonald's napkins and your mom crying into them, the descriptions of the dressing rooms – especially the "small slits in the saloon-style door" – and the various kinds of jeans your mom wants you to try one (second paragraph, page 1).

I like where you're going with the paragraph discussing reading – how reading is praised, so good for our intellectual development, etc., but you complicate that by showing that it depends on *what* one is reading (and what images one is viewing), especially in a culture saturated with copy and images that cause women's self-confidence to plummet.

I have some questions: could you use the researched parts on page 1 as section-headers? Some way to use the official BDD language to segment your narrative? I'm not sure who Gigi is – the person's grandmother? In the scene where you open with you and Lauren sitting at a McDonald's table, I think you should include information about what, if anything, you and Lauren are eating. I think this is an important detail since shortly down the page you reveal that Lauren is anorexic. And of course, if you're sitting in a McDonald's and no one is eating, that should be something to highlight. Also, are your moms eating? If so, what? About Lauren, you write that she "was dealing with deep-seeded body issues she wouldn't discuss with me, her best friend." I'm a bit confused by this: did you know she had body issues before you found out she was anorexic? If so, that could be interesting to include. If you didn't know, did you suspect she did? Did you and Lauren *ever* talk about body issues? Was there a specific instance when she asked you to never bring it up? I think you should tell the reader which three magazines you still subscribe to, and use that as part of your self-reflection that you discuss in the paragraph in which you mention the three magazines.

I'm a big fan of the last paragraph.

Do you read *Bitch*, *Bust*, *Ms.*? If so, have these magazines influenced you in ways counter to *Cosmo*, *Teen Vogue*, *Glamour*? What is your opinion of feminist magazines? I have some titles of essays from anthologies from which I teach, just as suggestions that might be helpful for this essay as you're working on it (some are more closely related to your essay than others, but I think you'd probably be generally interested in them all): "Breast Buds and the 'Training' Bra" by Joan Jacobs Brumberg; "Beating Anorexia and Gaining Feminism" by Marni Grossman; "The Body Politic" by Abra Fortune Chernik; "Hold That Nose" by Lisa Miya-Jervis; "Is Fat a Feminist Issue?" by Janna Fikkan and Esther Rothblum; "Bad Girl, Good Girl: Zines Doing Feminism" by Alison Piepmeier; "Teen Mags: How to Get a Guy, Drop 20 Pounds, and Lose Your Self-Esteem" by Anastasia Higginbotham; "Gender in the Media" by Marielena Zuniga; "The Beauty Myth" by Naomi Wolf; "Breaking the Model" by Graciela Rodriguez. I hope this list doesn't seem overwhelming or anything – I just wanted to include these in case you're interested. They're all relatively short essays. Even after this class ends, please don't hesitate to get in touch if you'd like other feminist resources/texts/etc.; I'd be happy to help!

I really enjoyed reading your work throughout the semester. Thank you for sharing your writing with everyone. I hope you keep writing after this class is over, and I wish you all the best.

My intent with this feedback was to provide the student with some contextual ways of approaching the content of "Bodytalk" that directly relate to and/or come out of

feminist inquiry. Since the issues raised in “Bodytalk” were never explicitly addressed in the workshops, I wanted to create the space to address them in my written feedback. Of course, I realize that WGSS and creative writing have different specific goals and that there is not enough time in a class period, or in a semester, to cover all or even most of the topics we as instructors would like to cover. And I understand that WGSS and creative writing are different disciplines with distinct parameters, but I believe that both stand to benefit from each other. The CNF class discussion and the student’s essay might have been enriched by a feminist analysis of the content of the essay, and my classmate might have been able to revise or take the essay in different directions that would help contextualize gendered experiences of body image and self-esteem. In addition, I believe that WGSS students benefit from the opportunities to write narratively, about personal experiences and positionalities, in ways that more fully render the textures of their lives.

I am not sure how to incorporate such analytic discussion into a creative writing classroom (the analysis of power relations as part of creative writing syllabi and curriculum would be a good start), and I leave many of the questions and ideas I pose in this thesis open-ended. But one point worth mentioning is that raised by Brenda Miller in her provocative essay “A Case Against Courage in Creative Nonfiction,” in which she raises some concerns about a focus on “bravery” or “courage” as a primary determinant of one’s creative writing. In this essay, she calls for a vigorous investment in form, and she claims that it is this total immersion into form—she uses the examples of metaphor, image, syntax, and structure, among others (80)—that will produce successful writing and that should be the mark of a successful writer. Miller’s emphasis on craft is intended to replace an emphasis on, or even consideration of, courage. Indeed, Miller makes

interesting points about how the content of a piece might be expressed more profoundly through careful attention to form. However, I want to raise a few concerns with Miller's argument in light of considerations of gender, specifically.

Miller argues that courage and bravery are not needed in writing creative nonfiction and that a focus on an author's bravery or courage in writing is missing the point:

I wonder if in order to distill strong emotion into images and voices that will endure, the *opposite* of courage is actually needed. What does it take? Maybe a certain naiveté. Denial that we are doing anything dangerous. Maybe it actually takes courage's evil twin, cowardice—a refusal to really face those emotions the way a normal, healthy person would, but retreating instead into the refuge of form: words, sentences, images. Maybe it really takes avarice, a desire to plunder the most exposed parts of the self for the sake of a good paragraph. (80)

Surely Miller is not unaware of the systemic power relations of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and more, which cause writing not to be undertaken in a vacuum. As my WGSS positionality informs me, I assert that we do not write under equal power differentials. As Rich and many others convincingly show, we do not all write from a place where bravery and courage are not needed. Miller's calls to dismiss bravery ignore actual sociocultural, political contexts of systemic privilege and oppression that actively discourage—even silence and shame—certain writers and topics (women writing about their experiences with abortion, for instance). Perhaps Miller has never felt the very real constraints placed on what someone can say, via writing, but many, many people have, and the courage to overcome these constraints and speak anyway, to write anyway, are not acts to be dismissed, and they certainly are not acts that should be glossed over by encouraging everyone to trade in bravery and courage for naiveté, denial, cowardice, and avarice.

Miller dwells on the goal of “distilling strong emotion,” emphasizing the affective dimension of writing but downplaying, even dismissing, the affective experience of the writer while writing. Remember, she calls for writing in which the writer is participating in “a refusal to really face those emotions the way a normal, healthy person would, but retreating instead into the refuge of form: words, sentences, images.” Yet, creative writing students often write about deeply personal, and therefore formative and transformative, experiences, and instructors would do well to acknowledge these affective experiences of the writer and to acknowledge what can be a courageous act in writing about them. When students feel invited to dig deep into content that really matters to them, they are encouraged and supported to continue writing. And when students’ attempts to understand formative experiences are deflected onto a sole focus on form, craft, or genre, it can hinder their progress in writing and revising. So much depends on an instructor’s response to a student.

I want to address two arguments often raised here: first, that instructors need to gear students toward writing that does not focus on themselves, with one assumption being that they are already doing too much of that kind of writing, and second, that classrooms are not therapy sessions. First, as I previously stated, students often double-check with me to make sure that they are really allowed to write about themselves and to use first person. The fact that they are doubtful of this indicates that they are not used to practicing this kind of writing in school. In fact, it shows me that they are used to never being allowed to write about themselves. Second, acknowledging the affective experience of the writer and critically analyzing the content of the writing do not constitute therapy, but both of these acts do help the student learn more about, and perhaps through, their

writing. Significantly, WGSS emphasizes the importance of the expressive dimension of writing *and* the significance of the writer processing emotion while writing *and* the problem-posing analytical-critical dimension of writing. WGSS pedagogy demonstrates that all three of these dynamics can work together to create optimal learning experiences via writing. Unfortunately, Miller focuses on one of these dynamics to the exclusion of the others.

I will address Miller's claims specifically in terms of gender. Contrary to Bernstein's call to use the first person "I" as a mechanism for women writers to challenge masculine power and privilege, Miller praises writing in which, as she claims, "the 'I' was taken out of it."

My students and I move on from collage and braided essays to experiment with the "hermit crab" essay; in these essays, sensitive material finds a carapace outside of the self. Such essays can take the form of a "how to" article, for instance, or a "to do" list, or a menu, or a field guide. For example, one student had been trying for months to write about her experience growing up with a mother who had a hoarding disorder; her home was a nightmare, and the first drafts I saw were incoherent, long rambles without any center. When she chose to write this material in the form of a real-estate ad ("Home For Sale"), the voice became crystal clear, and the images indelible and coherent. The "I" was taken out of it; the narrator now became the "owner's daughter" who reports on the condition of the home. (87)

I am not challenging the strategy of trying different forms in order to find one that best serves the writing. However, I am uneasy with Miller's assertion that writing improves when the "I" is taken out of it and displaced into a third person "owner's daughter," and part of my unease comes from the fact that she selects as her examples of writings (that are form-focused to the exclusion of bravery) those by women and one gay man. In other words, the samples she uses to show that displacing the personal produces "better" writing come from groups who have been historically told that the personal does not

matter, that their personal experiences are not deserving. Women and queer writers have fought, and continue to fight, these and other oppressive conditions in order to even be recognized as writers. The fact that Miller never once in this article raises these power dynamics is concerning, but perhaps not surprising, as the omission reflects the ahistoricist ideology that dominates the focus on craft in creative writing pedagogy. Feminist-informed pedagogy maintains that the student/writer's positionality is meant to be understood and examined in terms of power relations and ideology. Displacing the "I" from narrative has been used historically to silence certain groups, and Miller's stance here arguably perpetuates this silencing.

An interesting example arises in Miller's discussion of form and control. The two main pillars upholding systems of privilege and oppression are power and control. Oppressed groups lack power and control; privileged groups have it. One way in which members of oppressed groups have worked to regain agency is to take back some control over their lives, and one way to do this is to write about them. For instance, writing can be a therapeutic tool for survivors of sexual assault and rape because it is a way to regain some control that has been taken from them by the attacker. Writing their experiences can also be a therapeutic tool for women who have had abortions because it serves as a way to take back control of their dignity and agency, which is often attacked. These are no small matters. Miller, however, stresses that "concrete forms allow for what [she likes] to call 'inadvertent revelations,' where the writer no longer seems in complete control" (82). This strategy might work fine for someone who is not writing with a goal to regain control over something previously taken from them, but it will not work for everyone. Miller's vision of creative writing is that a creative writer's goal should not be to use



writing to regain control over an experience, but the observable evidence in our CNF class was to the contrary. Many pieces from our CNF class (including mine and “Bodytalk”) show that writers were writing to learn more about themselves and their experiences, which very well might be (brave?) attempts to regain control over experiences that deeply affect them. The kinds of writing I create spaces for in my classrooms engage this possibility and do not shut down considerations of bravery and courage.

In addition, throughout her piece Miller stresses that a mark of good creative nonfiction writing is the ability to deflect the direct meaning of an author’s point onto something else; she uses select examples of a sloth, a bear, and a doctor’s office, from other authors’ writings. She praises these authors’ ability to focus “on a fact external to her own experience” (83). While I see Miller’s point in regard to variety (we would not want every creative nonfiction piece to begin “I experienced X” or “My experience with Y”), I want to draw direct attention to this claim’s gendered implications. Gender norms have historically required women to focus on “fact[s] external to [our] own experience,” and we continue to fight against these constraints. I have grown weary of having to dance around what I want to say, and I do not want to require my students to do so in writing. Feminist author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in a recent article in *The New Yorker*, points out the dire necessity for writers and speakers *not* to obfuscate: “Now is the time to talk about what we are actually talking about.” In response to Miller’s assertion that meaning is best left to metaphor, I propose a middle path, one that meanders between metaphor and unbound recounting of feelings. The middle path consists of students writing about and from experience in ways that they choose to best represent the content

of their writing, in classroom spaces that acknowledge and are supportive of these endeavors.

Also, this kind of indirect meaning-making that Miller praises (for instance, using a bear as a metaphor for one's marriage) also becomes its own trope with which one could easily become as "bored" as she and her co-editors become while reading submissions for the Annie Dillard Award (88-89). I have read excellent essays that use this trope, such as Barbara Kingsolver's "High Tide in Tucson," Annie Dillard's "Living Like Weasels," and Joan Didion's "Many Mansions," but I also see the merit of discussing something directly instead of deflecting the meaning into metaphor. Miller refers to indirect meaning-making as "'peripheral vision': turning the gaze to focus on something that seems peripheral to the emotional center or ostensible topic. Instead of facing your 'stuff' head on, you turn away from it, zero in on something that has fluttered up on the side, and see what angle it gives you" (87). While metaphors can engage the reader creatively with the author's purpose, direct explanation can also be beneficial. For example, in Cheryl Strayed's "There's A Bundle on Your Head," Strayed uses the metaphor of a bundle of fabric on a woman's head but then directly explains the meaning of this metaphor.

In my Introduction to Women's Studies courses and in what I ask my students to write, I am interested in looking directly at what is being experienced and how the students can directly translate that into language and then analyze it. Systems of privilege and oppression function – in large part – because they are rendered invisible, and during the in-class feedback session on "Bodytalk," that rendering invisible was evident. It is a crucial act to directly name such systems, and it is a difficult act to undertake. Miller's

“peripheral vision” might not be the most useful tool with which to expose and name experience.

To be sure: I do not disagree with Miller that form is and should be a main concern in creative writing classrooms. What I want to suggest, though, is that I have seen many students write narratives about their experiences in ways that I argue are brave and courageous, and that dynamic is important in creative writing and should not be excluded from consideration as to what can help produce “good” creative nonfiction.<sup>3</sup> I believe that students benefit from the instructor working to create space that is supportive for students to write from and about profound experiences by recognizing these experiences as such and by recognizing the (often courageous) work it requires to write about them; in effect, I take the opposite of Miller’s stance. For instance, one of my students wrote about her experiences as a rape survivor who decided to terminate the pregnancy. She wrote about these two experiences in the form of diary entries. She shared this piece of creative writing with her classmates, and she gave me permission to share it anonymously with future classes. Writing about her experiences as a rape survivor and her experiences opting for abortion is brave. It is brave because rape survivors and women who get abortions are often shamed and blamed, and many survivors are not even believed. I would guess that this student would not have written this same piece for submission in a CNF class, because, in large part, she was concerned with processing her experiences via writing, not with the craft and form of writing. But if she had submitted it to a CNF class, my guess is that comments during workshop would

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<sup>3</sup> Another concern is who has the power of defining and determining what is “good” or “successful” creative nonfiction, or writing in general. Miller’s analysis here comes directly from her experiences as a college professor and editor of *Bellingham Review*.

have focused on form to the exclusion of content and that the student would have felt that the point of her writing was at best misunderstood.

A final thought on Miller's piece: she extols the displacement of direct experience as a mark of good writing: "The narrator does not force us to gaze upon her life and her experience; rather, she *invites* us to look with her at the common things that both startle and amaze" (89). In many cases, throughout history and today, especially in the current climate of a Donald Trump presidency, women have been in positions in which we must force others to read our stories, to listen to us, to read about our lives, to understand our experiences in order for them to not be silenced, dismissed, and marginalized. Invitations are oftentimes declined or ignored. I wish Miller would have at least acknowledged these power dynamics in her essay.

I am reminded of my student and her piece about her experiences with rape and abortion when I read Nancy Welch's reflections on her experience talking with a part-time instructor about revision: "Lisa is aware each time she sits down to write of working against the grain of the dominant culture, a working-against she's only recently found the confidence to try. Viewing revision as the work of toning down and fitting in, the work of moving away from, not into, disturbing new positions and truths, she fears the silencing of a voice she's only just begun to use" (153). Would Miller tell Lisa there is nothing about which to be concerned? I see why creative writing instructors are focused on form, but I do not believe it has to be to the exclusion of content and encouraging students to bravely find a voice from which to speak/write. I am a bit concerned that, in creative writing classrooms, the craft-oriented focus precludes the possibilities of integrating content-oriented discussions and revisions that may help creative writers write the kinds

of narratives that, as Cain might say, will help them learn what they are seeking to learn from writing about such experiences.

In an email conversation with Prof. Lardner on this issue, he writes:

In other words, what I keep finding in students' stories and essays in the beginning creative writing course that I teach is that the lived experiences of dislocation, violence, and silencing related to sexism and racism are, often enough, the experiences that seem to compel students to write. To then respond to those personal essays (or works of fiction) by focusing on form and technique (tone, diction, narrative structure, for example) seems on the one hand to be exactly what commonplace creative writing pedagogy is supposed to do, while on the other hand it seems to deny these central experiences as formative of the writer's sense of herself and sense of the world.

Here Prof. Lardner points to what I see as one of the main challenges of creative writing pedagogy – how to encourage students to write of and about and possibly through their experiences in ways that will help them learn about themselves via their writing but still focuses primarily on form. Romano's emphasis on "cutting loose" is a good start. I am drawn to Welch's suggestion that writing is sparked and developed by responding to the prompt "something missing, something else." Welch convincingly argues that this nudge-like prompt is best used in "settings...that promote and support an excessive understanding of revision," or perhaps in a writing class environment that fosters and encourages critical analytic thinking: "[a setting] that questions the ideal of the complete, contained, and disciplined body, the complete, contained, and disciplined text; one that takes the double perspective that revision involves both movement toward social goals *and* questioning what's being perpetuated or omitted in the process" (165). In this thesis, I give an example of how Prof. Lardner's feedback helped me to think about "something missing, something else" in regard to my apprehension in using the word "murder," but I also include Prof. Lardner's email note here to highlight a tension I recognized as a

student in a CNF classroom: how a focus on form could be precluding some students' explorations into the content of their pieces.

To return to "Bodytalk" momentarily: In my feedback to my classmate, I focus on some of the issues raised by and in her drafts that we did not discuss in class. I point to specific, formal parts of the draft that resonate with me (i.e., the imagery, the repetition, etc.), but I also make sure to raise large analytical questions that might prompt her to analyze extensively the gendered implications of the issues raised in her drafts. I also offer additional texts and resources she might consider consulting to round out the research aspect of the anthology contribution. After reading Welch's chapter on revision, I see my comments to my classmate as a way of asking her to consider the possibilities of "something missing, something else" (136) that might help her journey through the pieces, and through the experiences from which she is writing, in ways that will help her learn about these experiences, about herself, and about the larger cultural and socio-political contexts in which she and her experiences are immersed.

Welch wants to "promote revision as getting restless with familiar and constrictive ways of writing and being, as creating alternatives" (136). While I do not know to what extent – if at all – my comments to my classmate would help her get restless with familiar ways of writing, I do believe that the types of comments I include to her in the feedback would be a helpful start in getting restless with familiar and constrictive ways of thinking around such issues as body image, weight, and beauty and gender norms. Again, I realize that these discussions might not be considered a part of a creative writing classroom, but I argue that they should be because raising and thinking about these issues would help the writer craft a well-rounded piece. The discussion of

content in an in-class workshop just might help craft the form, and since form is the primary focus in a creative writing class, a content-based discussion would be an appropriate use of time. Content-based discussion is tantamount to feminist inquiry and is the crucial third dynamic to interpose within the binary opposition of form versus emotion that Miller deploys.

The next example I give is of my own revising, prompted by Prof. Lardner's comments, which I detail in the first paragraph of this thesis. Even though his comments might not be categorized as "feminist," they prompted me to consider how dynamics of gender and privilege work in my own life, which is one of many goals of feminist analyses.

## CHAPTER IV

### “OFFERINGS”

As I have discussed, women writers and women characters have often been negatively received and analyzed; second wave and contemporary feminist literary critics have been successful in correcting many of these biases. For instance, Susan Bennett Smith analyses how Virginia Woolf has been one of many women writers whose portrayals of grieving women have often been (mis)understood as women who are, as Smith says, “mentally unbalanced” (310). In *To the Lighthouse*, Smith argues, Woolf successfully de-links the women-grief-madness equation to “provide a positive model for grief work” (310). “Offerings” is an attempt to provide a positive model of grief work, by writing an essay born of grief, revising while in acute stages of grieving, and now, more than a year later, revisiting and revising the essay to see how it helps me work through a grieving process that cannot be separated from feminism. Revising “Offerings” is a crucial part of creative writing and feminist work because, in revising the essay after reading Prof. Lardner’s comments, I worked through a critical analytic thought process that helped me to see some aspects of identity and privilege that I had not considered previously. These considerations of privilege were prompted by Prof. Lardner’s remarks regarding my refusal to say that my friend was murdered.



As a new student to creative nonfiction in Prof. Lardner's CNF class, "Offerings" was my first attempt to write about experiences that center around grief, friendship, and violence. I include "Offerings" as part of this thesis because it is central to my argument to discuss the essay both in its entirety and in regard to a specific revision about which I now have new insight; I analyze that revision and insight after the essay concludes. I also include "Offerings" as part of this thesis because I believe this sample of creative writing to be just as important a piece of work as the academic writing and analysis that surround it. "Offerings" is not an abortion narrative, or a survivor narrative; it is a narrative about internalized ideas of privilege, of who can be directly affected by murder, and of how I experienced a type of loss and grief I had never known before. These have been transformative experiences for me, and writing about them helped me learn about them. As a result, I have come to understand even more the importance of including personal writing in the classroom, and through revising the essay based in part on Prof. Lardner and my classmates' comments, I have come to understand even more the importance of how others respond to one's personal writing.

"Offerings" has been revised several times. The draft of the essay included here reflects revisions I made after receiving Prof. Lardner's last set of comments. In an early draft, I wrote the essay as a series of email letters written between me and another friend of Dave's. In the spirit of Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola's advice, in their chapter on the writing process and revision, I used the early drafts of this personal narrative essay as "discovery drafts," in which writers write "to discover what [they] know" and aim "for

the details, the unexpected images, or the story line that reveals itself only as” the writer writes (183).<sup>4</sup>

One strategy that Miller and Paola emphasize fits nicely with my intention for my Introduction to Women’s Studies students; Miller and Paolo state: “The best writing you do will have this sense of exploration about it; you will allow yourself to go into the unknown, to excavate what lies beneath the surface. It’s important to allow yourself permission to write *anything* in a first draft; otherwise you might censor yourself into silence” (183). In a way, I view the assignments I give to my WGSS students as first drafts. I say this because I am not concerned with them revising their writing to craft and hone writing skill and/or form; I am concerned with the exploration, the unlearning and learning that is involved in these kinds of explorations, the first steps into speaking and finding a voice that for so many of my students has been silenced for so long, the freedom of allowing oneself to write about issues that are usually silenced in public spheres (i.e., abortion, rape, assault, abuse, and many more). For me, writing “Offerings” was primarily an exercise in exploration and expression, but through the revision process I sharpened these dynamics so that the reader could more easily walk with me through the story.

In his comments on the early draft that was in email-letter form, Prof Lardner suggested that, because of the letter structure, too much significant information was unavailable for the reader, since the letters were written between old friends who already knew and would not explicitly write such information. I revised the piece to be a narrative essay, so that I could provide more of the backstory of my and Dave’s

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<sup>4</sup> One of our CNF class textbooks was *Tell It Slant*, which I was reading in conjunction with writing and revising “Offerings.”

friendship and the details of his death for the reader. Following, on pages 44-62, “Offerings” is an attempt to find a voice in grief. It is also an example of a piece of writing that came out of and can benefit from considering the intersections of feminist theory, creative writing, and rhetoric/composition studies and the complementary approaches to revision that each discipline offers.

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### “Offerings”

A couple weeks after running into Alison, I still haven’t talked to Dave. I think I’ll stop by Black River Café when I’m in Oberlin in a few days to see if he’s at work. Back from dinner with my parents, I decide to go to the grocery store before I continue grading papers, so that I don’t have to do either on a Monday. It’s Sunday, September 20, 2015, a spectacular early autumn day. On my drive to the grocery store, I sing along with Jason Isbell:

*You thought god was an architect, now you know, he’s something like a pipe  
bomb ready to blow.*

I’m still humming this song as I walk into the store. I pick up pistachios and pumpkin cookies before heading to the far diagonal corner of the store for Tide laundry detergent. I scan the red bottles for the medium-size Original scent, with the small HE designation. I spot one, and as I pick it up with my right hand, I think about how I’ve always liked to carry bottles of Tide: the distinct hardness of the plastic, the way my skinny fingers curl around the curved handle, the sturdiness of the not-light bottle filled with blue liquid soap, and the slight press of the raised ridge of plastic that runs down the middle of the

handle, down the middle of the inside of my fingers, and down the middle of my palm. Both its weight and its durability are welcome sensations.

Back in my apartment, streetlights shine through my open windows; the glow forms a compass, or a cross. I open the balcony door, even though now it is a little after 9pm, and leave my phone on. I sit down, legs crossed, and pick up the next student's paper. She identifies with Cheryl Strayed in *Wild*, she writes, because she is adopted. The comparison lies, the student explains, in that Strayed feels abandoned by her mother, brother, sister, and stepfather, and the student feels abandoned by her birth parents. Strayed's mother dies, the student notes, and that feeling of abandonment must be a different kind of experience – not totally dissimilar, according to the student – but different in that it is definitive. No hope for reunion, no possibility of a future relationship. I'm thinking about how this student was the only one to use an outside source in her paper – an article about grief and adopted children – when my phone rings. I stop grading. It's Alison, and I think it's strange that she is calling me. We haven't talked on the phone in many years. I know without thinking about it that I should answer the phone.

“Hello?” I say

“Hi, how are you?”

“Good, how are you?”

“I can tell by the way you answered the phone that you haven't heard what happened.”

“What happened?”

“Dave was shot and killed this afternoon.”

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Dave opens the door to the bedroom and looks directly at me.

“You should come downstairs with me, now.” Dave’s strong suggestion is just shy of a command.

I’m sitting near the side of the bed, cross-legged, picking at the tiny knobs of raised beige fabric on Jason’s bedspread. Rob is sitting on the other side of the bed, knees tucked under him, his palms running up and down his thighs. Rob and I came upstairs to Jason’s room to talk, for some privacy. Jason’s parents are out of town. The first floor of Jason’s parents’ house is filled with my friends from high school, drinking, smoking, and trying to talk loud enough to hear each other over the first disc of the Grateful Dead’s *Without a Net*. **We attend a small, private Catholic high school, only about one hundred people in each of the four grades; everyone knows everyone. Dave is a year ahead of me. He is friends with my ex-boyfriend, Rob, who is also in Dave’s class. Dave and I are good friends, even though Rob and I broke up about a year ago and even though our cliques currently overlap in complicated-and-crucial-high-school ways: Dave plays football and I’m dating one of his teammates, Mike, who has become friends with Dave. Rob and Mike are not friends. Everyone here is about 16 or 17 years old.**

When Dave pushes open the door, I’m startled but not embarrassed. Rob and I only want some space to talk. We haven’t talked much since we broke up a year or so prior. Mike is not at this party. I don’t remember why not or where he was.

“No,” I say to Dave.

Dave looks at me, steadily. His brown eyes beam a silent warning before he turns around and walks out, leaving the bedroom door wide open.

Later that night Dave and I meet again, in the kitchen. I shut the refrigerator door and turn around to pop open a can of cheap beer as Dave walks up the steps from the living room.

“I don’t know what you’re doing, but talking with Rob upstairs in Jason’s room is disrespectful to Mike. You better knock that shit out.”

I ignore him, which isn’t difficult to do in the midst of an obnoxious high school party. He does not drop it.

“And *I’m* pissed that you’re putting *me* in the middle of this, since I’m friends with both of them and with you.”

“I’m not putting you anywhere. It’s not your business. Leave it alone.” I walk through the torn screen patio door and outside to Jason’s backyard, where light grey smoke from cigarettes and joints threads the midnight air.

**After Jason’s party, Dave and I don’t speak for a while. I don’t remember for how long, but it’s nowhere near as long as he doesn’t speak to me in a few years, because of Alison. At the party, I’m angry, and I don’t consider what might have been occurring between Rob and Dave while Dave stands in the doorway. Now I wonder if Dave was worried that Rob would be mad at him but believed that he was doing the right thing. I wonder if Dave really did feel like he had to choose among his friendships with me, Rob, and Mike that night. I don’t know the answers to these questions because I never asked him. That night I interpreted**

Dave's actions as overbearing, presumptuous, and, even though I didn't know this word then, paternalistic. Now, I temper that interpretation with the likely possibility that Dave in part acted the way he did because he wanted to prevent misinterpretations or incorrect assumptions that would lead to hurt feelings. Dave could be stubborn. He was also sensitive and caring, always trying to be a peacemaker, even as a teenager. His bluntness and conviction walked side by side with his loyalty, compassion, and thoughtfulness. I don't remember how we made up after Jason's party, but we did.

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In the parking lot, heat and dust make wavy the deep blue and purple hues of the summer night. Dave makes his way over to me.

"Can we talk for a minute?" he asks.

"Sure," I say.

We walk a few rows over from where our cars are parked. When Dave decides we are far enough from our friends to have a private conversation, he stops and leans against the trunk of one of the many cars made dusty by the parking lot gravel. I'm thinking this conversation is long overdue, and I'm trying to ignore – even if just momentarily – the annoyance I have felt for quite a while toward Dave, for the duration of what I view as his ridiculous abandonment of our friendship.

I stand near him, leaning against the bumper. Part of the reason I prop myself up against the car is to try to mask the awkwardness I feel, even though Dave and I have been friends for several years now. I have a feeling Dave props himself up against the

Camry for the same reason. We're at a Phish concert in Columbus, Ohio, with our group of high school-turned-college friends.

Dave loved Phish. This is probably an understatement. One night, soon after I had graduated college, Dave picked me up in his car. I don't remember where we were going, but I remember it was going to be a bit of a drive. "Slave to the Traffic Light," Dave's favorite Phish song, was on. We said hi, hugged. "Slave to the Traffic Light" ended. "Slave to the Traffic Light" came on again.

"Why is 'Slave' on again?" I asked.

"I made a CD of this song, on repeat basically."

"The entire CD is nothing but this song?"

"Yep."

"Are we really going to listen to this song the entire drive?" I asked, laughing.

"Oh yesssssss, we are." Dave smiled, looking at me across the front seat.

And we did.

Dave and I have not really spoken for a year or so. I have a good guess why he has been avoiding me, but I'm not sure. His warm brown eyes flit while he speaks. He looks across at me, then down at the boxy silver trunk, and then into the dark night, across the lot, toward the hill behind which people are pissing.

"Look, I'm sorry I've been avoiding you. It was too hard for me to be around you since you're always with Alison. I couldn't deal with her breaking things off in Athens. It just seemed easier to deal with by cutting her and you out of my life for a while."



This is what I figured was the cause behind Dave's dismissal of our friendship. Upon actually hearing him say it, I feel annoyed, frustrated, upset, relieved, and hopeful that we can get our friendship back on track.

"That's what I thought, Dave, but I can't believe you'd just screw our friendship like that because Alison decided she didn't want to date. I wasn't even here when all of this was happening. I purposely stayed out of it as much as I could, which I thought I did a pretty good job of doing."

I was living in Spain when Alison and Dave's short-lived romance sparked and flamed out. I remember sitting in a smelly computer lab, in a utilitarian classroom building at La Universidad Pública de Navarra, reading emails from him about how sad and upset he was. I would reply, trying to carefully craft emails so to not take sides in a love-gone-wrong drama involving two of my friends. It was easier to correspond with Alison because she had decided she couldn't date Dave. It was much harder to correspond with Dave because he was devastated. I don't remember what I wrote to him exactly, but I bet the emails started off as expressions of empathy and concern and then, when he didn't seem to be getting over it on a timeline on which I thought appropriate, my comments likely turned shorter, crisper, implicitly telling him that he should just get over it, that he was too sensitive and dramatic.

"It was what I had to do. I'm apologizing to you now because I don't want it to be like this anymore. I'm in a better place about everything with Alison. I've dealt with it."

“Ok, let’s just let it go.” I’m only sort of surprised by how quickly I say this. I have been hurt by him avoiding me and angry with him about it, but I also miss him.

It isn’t until years after Dave’s apology that I realize the role I had played in what I thought, at the time, was Dave’s ridiculous self-imposed exile; I would realize how insensitive I likely had been. He was in love with someone who decided she could not date him. At that point in my life I had only ever been in Alison’s shoes, not Dave’s. I didn’t realize then the importance of explicitly saying to Dave, “I’m sorry you’re heartbroken and I’m here for you, no matter how long you feel sad and down about it.” I think that is exactly what Dave wanted to hear. He wanted to know that I respected that he would deal with heartbreak and sadness and loss not on my timeline but on his own. I didn’t know to say that then. I didn’t understand that about heartbreak and sadness and loss. I have more of an understanding now.

Dave reaches out his arm and offers his hand. I take it. I’m comforted by how his firm fingers slip easily between my long, bony ones. His hand is warm and rough, scarred from cooking. We gently swing our joined arms and walk toward our friends. The weight of his hand in mine balances our airy first steps into forgiveness.

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New Year’s Eve, 2012 is turning into 2013. It’s snowing, and even though I don’t like driving in the snow, I pick Dave up and we slowly make our way to Lakewood to spend the evening with Patty, her partner, and Melissa. Before going to their apartment, we stop at a liquor store in Rocky River. We walk up and down the two aisles, deciding

if we want to share a six of dark beer, or maybe a bottle of pinot noir. We get both, plus a bottle of champagne in case we all want to make a cheesy toast at midnight, because we want to be able to leave some beer or the bottle of wine as a thank you gift for our hosts.

When we walk in, Patty has a feast of fish tacos ready for us. She had told me earlier she was nervous to cook for Dave – our master chef. We all fill our plates with small corn tortillas, hunks of meaty Mahi, plump shrimp, ripe red tomatoes, purplish cabbage, and chunky guacamole.

“I’m so hungry,” Dave says and dives right in. “Patty, this is awesome. Who knew you could cook??” He teases her.

“Oh I’m so glad you like it! And shut up, I know how to cook.” Patty teases back.

Dave is happy tonight, talking and joking, light shining through his brown eyes, making them almost glow. He has always struggled with sadness, so being with him on nights like this feels extra special to me. We toast at midnight, but not with champagne. Dave and I click our bottles of beer to everyone else’s wine and water glasses. I drive us home to Elyria, and we hug before Dave steps out into the freezing wind. I sit in the warm car and watch him trudge through snow, up to his door. I think about how grateful I am that he is in my life.

**About a week after Dave dies, I go to that liquor store in Rocky River just to walk up and down the two aisles. I think about buying the dark beer, pinot noir, and champagne. I don’t.**

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Dave and I haven’t talked in several months, but that isn’t unusual. He has always been a bit of a recluse, even more so as we’ve gotten older, now in our late(r)

thirties. One early summer afternoon my mom and I drive past Dave's mom's old house. My mom asks about him, curious if I've seen him lately, since I hadn't talked about him recently. I have to think for a minute about when the last time I saw him was.

“Oh, when Connie, Patty, Melissa, and I went out for my birthday, last November. We talked to him before we left Black River.”

Dave had been a cook for years. He worked at Black River Café in Oberlin for many of those years. Every time I went there, I would wait until after I had eaten and then ask someone on the floor if Dave was working. If he was and they weren't busy, the server would get him, and he and I would stand at the bar and catch up. Part of the reason I'd go to Black River was to see Dave. He was notorious for being difficult to get in touch with. It took him a long time to call people back. He rarely texted. He liked to joke around about his ancient cell phone and how he rarely had it with him.

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Dave comes to my apartment about a year after I move in.

“This kitchen is so small! I could never cook in here.” First thing he notices.

“It's a good thing I don't cook.”

“Ugh you are *still* on that?” Dave is always bewildered by my refusal to cook anything.

“Some things never change, love.”

He walks around the rest of my apartment, nodding his approval, looking out the windows, down to the city streets. We walk back to the kitchen to grab a couple of

waters to go. While I'm still in the kitchen, he walks toward the living room, to see if he can see the courthouse from my bedroom windows.

"Wait, did you see the glass door and doorknob on this cabinet?" I tease him, knowing that he just looked at it.

"Yessssss," he turns around in my narrow hallway and smiles at me.

**After Dave dies I will remember him stopping mid-step, turning to look at me and smiling. I will be comforted by this memory of him and think of it often.**

\*\*\*

"Sorry, the wait is about an hour." The hostess tells us. Dave and I are at a brewery.

Dave turns to me, "I'm hungry. Let's go across the street to this dive bar I like. We can eat and drink there."

"Sure," I say.

We sit at the bar and talk. Dave has just discovered the XM/Sirius radio station Lithium, which plays music from the 90s, and he loves it. He names song after song that the station plays that reminds him of high school. After a couple beers, he starts talking about his current living situation and about work.

"I can't take either of them anymore. If I don't get out of that house, Matt and I won't be friends anymore. And every day I dread going to work. I hate it, it sucks, but I don't want to quit because I don't have anything else lined up."

"I know what you mean about work. We are the Midwestern hard-working stereotypes. We don't quit unless we have somewhere else to go."

“Yeah. I am moving out though, to my friend Tony’s place. You don’t know him. I grew up with him in Ridgeville, played Little League with him. He went to public school. Great guy.”

“Sounds good, can’t wait to meet him.”

At the beginning of the night I don’t think much about Dave’s comment about work, but the more we talk, the more I see that he is miserable, and I begin to think it is not healthy for him to stay at Black River.

“I don’t know, Dave. I think maybe you should quit. I know you have some money saved. You’ll get a job soon enough. I don’t think it’s worth it to stay.”

“Yeah.” He kind of drops it.

**I was worried about him that night. He was sad and angry and frustrated. The next morning I called Patty, a therapist, and asked for her advice. I talked to Dave on the phone later that week and suggested again that he should consider quitting his job.**

**I didn’t know until after he died that he had quit Black River not too long after we talked that night.**

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I’ll have to tell Dave about this the next time I talk to him, I think to myself. I had just run into Alison in our hometown. Alison and I had a falling out several years ago; I had not talked to her since then. I knew Dave and Alison had not talked since college. She told me about her divorce and was very upset. She texted me the next day to apologize, to ask if I thought she had shared too much. I wrote back saying there is no need to apologize.

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When I recall the evening of Sunday, September 20, 2015, I will distinctly remember looking down at my right arm – elbow on the desk, forearm slightly raised – and seeing it shaking. I will remember noting to myself, with the cool distance of a seasoned doctor assessing a curious case, “How strange that my right arm is numb, yet shaking, and the only way that I know it’s shaking is because I am looking at it.”

\*\*\*

Alison does not know what happened other than Dave was at someone’s house named Emily Phillips, in Avon, when he was shot. Alison was the first one to call me, and she was one of the first people to find out, because she is friends with Melia who is married to Matt who is one of Dave’s oldest friends.

I don’t remember what else I knew the night of September 20 or when I learned which details or when I knew enough information to put together at least a general idea of what happened that day. Grief and shock have done anything but keep my chronological memory clear.

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I keep thinking about an essay, “The Fourth State of Matter,” by Jo Ann Beard. Some of Beard’s co-workers, one of whom was a close friend, were murdered at the University of Iowa shooting in 1991. Gang Lu, a disgruntled former PhD student, shot and killed Beard’s co-workers in their office, walked to another building and shot two more people, and then killed himself. Beard had left work early that day and therefore survived. I read this essay a week or two before Dave died and was impressed by it. I’m impressed by it still, but for an additional reason now. Beard details Gang Lu’s attack. I

assume she writes this part of her essay based on information she's gathered from her co-workers' families, the media, and maybe even police reports, just like we've heard various accounts from Dave's family, Emily Phillips, the police, and the media. But I also assume that Beard imagines some of the attack as she re-creates it:

*Gang Lu turns and walks back up the stairs and enters the meeting room again. Chris Goertz is sitting near the door and takes the first bullet in the back of the head. There is a loud popping sound and then blue smoke. Shan gets the second bullet in the forehead, the lenses of his glasses shatter. More smoke and the room rings with the popping. Bob Smith tries to crawl beneath the table. Gang Lu takes two steps, holds his arms straight out, and levels the gun with both hands. Bob looks up. The third bullet in the right hand, the fourth in the chest. Smoke.*

I don't know if I can write the details of Dave's death that I have imagined. I don't know if I can creatively imagine how Robert Miller attacked Emily Phillips and Dave that day.

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On Sunday, September 20, Dave drives to Avon – about twenty minutes from the house he shares with Tony – to watch Sunday afternoon football with Emily Phillips, the woman he had been dating for a couple months. None of us had met her yet. He had worked late, cooking, the night before and was tired; he is thirty-seven years old, and although used to long nights in hot, busy, cramped kitchens, he was starting to feel them – especially the days after – in ways he hadn't when he was younger.

Driving slowly down the suburban street, Dave notices how bright the blue sky is. He leans forward, to look up and out of the front windshield, and sees how the extra-large



clouds hover above the trees that surround Emily's one-level house. "I'll have to tell Emily to come out and look at the clouds," Dave thinks to himself. Dave turns right into Emily's driveway, and everything looks normal. A child's small, bright red motorized vehicle sits to the side of the driveway. The white basketball hoop net swings slightly in the breeze. Dave grabs the CDs on the passenger seat but leaves his cell phone, gets out of his old blue Ford Taurus, and shuts the door with his right hand, being careful to avoid the bottom of his palm where he burned himself at work the night before. Dave walks up the couple concrete steps, opens and shuts the front door quietly in case the baby is sleeping, and walks in.

"Emily?" he whispers.

He hears Emily's baby crying in the crib. Immediately he feels that something is wrong.

He walks through the hallway to her bedroom and sees that the door is open, slightly. He sees Emily tied to a chair with braided white rope. Her face is bloody and her eyes are black and red. A man's voice starts yelling about how he is not going to stand for this bullshit anymore, that now he is in control. Emily blinks her eyes twice in Dave's direction. In these few seconds Dave realizes that Emily's ex-fiancé, Robert Miller, is holding her hostage and abusing her.

**At Dave's services I would find out from Tony that Dave was fearful of Robert Miller and had recently put a baseball bat in his car. A couple weeks earlier Robert Miller sent Emily a text, in the middle of the night, that said nothing but Dave and Tony's address. A clear threat. Emily informed the police; they did nothing.**

Dave turns around, silently, to get outside to his phone or to a neighbor's house to call for help. Instinct tells him this is the best way to help Emily and the baby. Robert Miller sees Emily's pointed blink and throws open the door.

"What the fuck are you doing here," he yells at Dave.

Dave turns around, briefly, and sees the glossy, wild look in Robert Miller's eyes. He sees the gun. While walking toward the front door, he tries to pacify Robert Miller, to de-escalate the situation, to buy himself time to get outside.

"Hey man, I was just bringing some CDs over for Emily. I'm on my way out."

Dave reaches the front door, pushes the small horizontal metal handle to open it. As he steps onto the narrow concrete step, Robert Miller shoots Dave four times in the back. Dave falls on the front steps. A neighbor calls 911 at 2:45pm to report what seems like a disturbance at 3341 Sandy Lane. "I can't tell if that's a person laying down or if it's a joke of some sort," the caller tells the 911 operator. It is not a joke. Dave dies on the front steps of Emily Phillip's house.

A house none of us had ever been to. A house that I have only seen via the internet. A house that my friend Fritter drove by the day after Dave died and then drove straight to my apartment. A house that, a couple days after Dave died, Fritter and his wife, Betsy, went to. They brought a makeshift shrine - a guitar pick, some of Dave's favorite CDs, a football, incense - and placed them on the steps, which were still covered in Dave's dried blood. Fritter and Betsy said prayers for Dave, to change the energy of that space, to reassure Dave that Dave was not alone when he died.

The baby is screaming. Robert Miller walks into Emily's bedroom and unties her. He tells her to go look at Dave, to go look at what she had done. He is squeezing her upper arm with one hand, holding the gun with the other. She is yelling at him to let go of her. He brings her into the kitchen when he hears police sirens.

"I'm not going to jail for the rest of my life for this," Robert Miller informs Emily. He puts the gun to his head, shoots, and kills himself in front of her. Emily runs outside to the Avon police and SWAT team.

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Some questions haunt me: Did Dave know he was about to be shot? Did he die instantly? Did he feel any pain? Melissa, my friend who is a nurse, tells us that many gunshot victims who survive and come to the ER have difficulty even telling ER staff where they were shot because the shock numbs the pain. I hope Dave was not in pain. I hope that Dave felt surrounded by all of our love.

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I slept maybe an hour or two the night of September 20<sup>th</sup>. I taught an 8am class the morning of September 21<sup>st</sup>, but all I can think during the class is that I feel like I am outside my body, and afterward I wondered what my students thought of that spectacle. I came home from teaching that class, sat at my kitchen table, and stared out the window to the busy street below. I don't know how long I stared. I do remember thinking, when Fritter called, that I was relieved because I might have sat, staring, for hours, maybe all day. I don't know if it would have occurred to me to move, to eat, to pee, to take a drink of water.

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Several times in the days right after Dave died I was freezing, bone-chilling cold. It wasn't cold outside; in fact, it was nice: highs in the 70s and lows in the mid-40s to mid-50s. I have low blood pressure and low body temperature in general, but this was extreme. I was so cold, I was putting on winter clothes in my apartment, shaking, using an old space heater. After the second episode of this one afternoon, I texted Melissa to ask her if shock and grief can cause your body temperature to go dangerously low. She said shock and grief can do pretty much anything to the body but that she believes that friendly spirits are with you when your body temperature changes like that. During these days I start to think about questions like: Does grief make you hungry? Does shock burn calories? How much energy is expended by grieving? Does shock make you expect to be smashed by the next semi that drives by you? Does grief or shock follow *any* rules? Should anything be unexpected?

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I happened to read Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, a graphic memoir in which she depicts her father's unexpected death, after Dave died. Something she says about death stays with me:

*It could be argued that death is inherently absurd, and that grinning is not necessarily an inappropriate response. I mean absurd in the sense of ridiculous, unreasonable. One second a person is there, the next they're not.*

At one point during Dave's funeral, I happened to glance over to where our friend Eric was standing, with the other pallbearers, and saw he had a sly grin on his face, almost chuckling. I briefly wondered what the hell he was doing. But later I thought,

maybe he had been thinking of how Dave's wit made a room full of people laugh, of Dave's spot-on impersonations of all of us. Maybe an image of Dave impersonating Fritter, with a pinched voice and his palms turned up at his waist, had popped into his head. Any judgement that might have passed through my mind when I saw Eric almost chuckling is long gone, after having experienced telling people Dave was murdered.

At first, I wouldn't or couldn't say that Dave was murdered. I said he had been shot and killed. Clearly, I was playing some kind of semantics game with myself. It was too painful to say murder. I have started to be able to say it now, but I've noticed, in the last couple months, how awkward and uncomfortable it is to tell someone, anyone, that my friend was murdered.

How do I tell someone my friend was murdered?

Last weekend I met an old friend for drinks who was in town from Michigan. He didn't know Dave, and I knew he would not have known what happened. When I told him that a close friend of mine was recently murdered, I caught myself trying to suppress a small, choked laugh. I was furious with myself for this at first. Of course, I don't think this is funny. But the experience of telling someone my friend was murdered is absurd and ridiculous and surreal to me, and the utter unreasonableness of it, like Bechdel says, is at the root of my involuntary reaction.

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Fritter came over my apartment the day after Dave died, after he had driven by Emily Phillip's house. He had pulled into Emily's driveway and could see Dave's blood on the front steps.

Sitting across from me on my couch, Fritter said, “I want to know every minute of Dave’s day yesterday, minute by minute.” I could tell he was going to say something else but couldn’t because he was choking on the words. I moved over to him on the couch, curled up into him, my head tucked into his chest, and we held on to each other, sitting together in silence. I distinctly remember having a vision of us from above, it was as if I was looking down on us, and I thought: “This is what grief looks like.”

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I jog regularly. One of my favorite routes is the Oberlin-Elyria bike path. It winds through local country roads, with views of rolling farm fields, dense woods, and a small river or two. Since Dave has died, I feel him with me often, but some of the times I’ve felt his presence most strongly is when I’m jogging on the bike path. Often, I will be jogging and feel like I see something move, out of the corner of my eye, near me or in the woods or to the side of the path. I usually feel a little startled and will turn to look. I will see nothing of concern but the heightened awareness helps me to notice the beauty surrounding me, to feel no separation between me and the sublimity of nature, to recognize that everything *is* interconnected, that bliss and melancholy coexist. My senses are magnified. I will smile and say, out loud, “Hi, Dave.” A couple days ago, this happened again, and as soon as I turned back forward from peering over my shoulder, the trees that overhang the path, creating a canopy, shook in the wind and let loose a shower of red, orange, and yellow leaves. They drifted across and down the path, covering it. I looked up at the brilliant blue sky, the bright orange and warm red and yellow leaves falling. “Hi, Dave,” I smiled and said out loud. These have become regular conversations between me and Dave.

I feel older since Dave's death, and slightly fragile, like the crisping leaves on the bike path. Yet I also feel more alive, more aware of sensation and presence. Dave is offering to me experiences of intense joy intertwined with experiences of intense sorrow, and I accept them.

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The afternoon of Sunday, September 20, 2015, at about the same time that Dave was murdered, around 3pm, I was riding in my dad's white SUV with him and my mom, on rural county roads. It was a beautiful, warm early autumn afternoon. My dad was driving and telling us something about new farming technology. I was only half listening.

I gazed out the passenger side window and watched the clouds hang, floating alongside roofs of burnt red barns and well-kept farmhouses, nudging round cows chewing grass, letting prickly wire fences pass through their wisps. I imagined extending my arm out the window, slowly, and cupping a feathery cloud in my palm. I think it would be like holding glitter, but softer. I wanted to hold the cloud up, as an offering, to the sky. I wasn't sure, though, if I could offer something to the place in which it exists. I now know that I can. And I do.

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The section on page 70 is the one that I want to analyze here, especially this part:

“At first, I wouldn't or couldn't say that Dave was murdered. I said he had been shot and killed. Clearly, I was playing some kind of semantics game with myself. It was too painful to say murder. I have started to be able to say it now, but I've noticed, in the

last couple months, how awkward and uncomfortable it is to tell someone, anyone, that my friend was murdered. How do I tell someone my friend was murdered?”

As I state in the introduction, Prof. Lardner commented on this section on at least two different occasions, in written feedback. I did not revise the section because, at the time, I thought there was nothing more to say. Yes, I thought, it is too hard for me to say “murder” because it sounds so harsh, because it makes people uncomfortable, because saying “my friend died unexpectedly” (which I often said) absolves me from having to say how he died. And those reasons are all still true. But a nagging thought persisted, borne of Prof. Lardner’s comments: why did I *feel* that “he was shot and killed” was a less-difficult alternative? What was my specific problem with the word “murder”, and how and why was it causing me to *feel* a certain way?

I want to note here, again, Royster and Kirsch’s feminist rhetorical strategy of employing an ethics of hope and caring: “With patience and quiet as salient features, the goal with an ethics of hope and caring is to learn to listen and speak, not just with our heads but with our hearts, backbones, and stomachs, thus making feminist rhetorical action a fully embodied experience for both the subjects of research and the researcher” (146). When I briefly thought about my reluctance to use the word “murder,” I was satisfied to call it a game of semantics. But when I paid attention to *feeling* through the difficulty (on the few occasions when I used the word “murder”) and after having thought critically about these questions in terms of feminist theory, I came to see my reluctance, in part, as a result of my privilege.

I recall thinking often in the time after Dave’s death that I would have never believed that someone I knew, let alone someone close to me, would be murdered. And I



have wondered, more than once, if Jo Ann Beard experienced this same kind of disbelief. Re-reading “The Fourth State of Matter” after Dave’s death reminds me that others have experienced grief in some ways similar to mine, and it has prompted me to consider ways in which grief is so poignantly personal and unique and yet simultaneously universal. Re-reading Beard’s essay also reminds of me how I have spent my life in environments and circles in which murder is something that is assumed to happen only to others. I recall when I first read Beard’s essay, before Dave died, feeling shocked along with Beard that the murders happened to her colleagues, her friends, in her workplace. Then, and immediately after Dave’s death, the notion of murder directly affecting my life seemed absurd to me, and that impossibility translated into my feeling that it was preposterous to articulate “murder” in regard to my friend and my life. This kind of assumption results, at least in part, from privilege.

One morning, while prepping to teach and having just revisited Prof. Lardner’s comments, I was re-reading Peggy McIntosh’s essay “White Privilege and Male Privilege” and stopped on a sentence that I have read many times: “I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious” (86). In this essay, McIntosh lists many specific ways in which she benefits from white privilege. Re-reading McIntosh’s essay that morning I thought about how many of my past and current privileges – race, class, where I live, where I work, for example – converge to create a situation that renders actual realities of murder invisible to me, an actual reality, for example, of having to tell someone my friend was murdered. I could read about a murder and feel compassion for those involved, but all the while I believed that would never

directly affect me, that I could remain separate from that, that I could count on cashing in each day on the ability to remain oblivious about murder. For many people, murder or the possibility of it is a reality they acknowledge; it is not rendered invisible for them.

Extricating this understanding of my relationship with the word “murder” has helped me learn more about myself; as Rich reminds us, “Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves” (35). It would have been interesting to see if my privileged position in relation to this topic would have been pointed out in a class discussion of my essay in a WGSS class.

My realization also prompted me to self-reflect on how I responded to a news item I read after Dave’s death. In “Murder Suicide Stuns Usually Quiet Avon Neighborhood,” Patrick Cooley interviews Avon resident (and Emily Phillips’ neighbor) Richard Mason, who says: “Things like that just don’t happen here,” and “You hear about shootings in cities like Lorain and Elyria, but that seems so far away. You never think it will happen here.” When I first read Mason’s statements, I felt frustrated that he would think that domestic violence, abuse, and assault do not happen somewhere like Avon. (I do not know Mason’s reasoning behind his statements, of course, I only know what was reported in this article.) I have heard many students throughout the years make assumptions that domestic violence, for example, does not happen in predominantly white, middle- to upper-class communities, which is not true. I was also annoyed by Mason’s Avon-to-Lorain-and-Elyria juxtaposition (I grew up in and currently live in Elyria), which I read as Mason suggesting that one should just expect shootings in cities like Lorain and Elyria, but not somewhere as “civilized” as Avon. While I still think some of my critiques of Mason’s statements are valid, after a great deal of reflection on

Prof. Lardner's comments about my refusal to use the word "murder," I realized that, in some way, I was making the same kind of privileged assumptions as Mason.

This example, of my own slow awakening to the ways socio-ideological constructions were inflecting both my language about Dave in my essay and my experience of grief, affirms my assertion that students (and teachers) have much to gain from classrooms (whether they be creative writing, composition, or feminist studies classrooms) in which students are encouraged to write discovery drafts, as Miller and Paolo describe, and to analyze the content of their writing along the lines of feminist theory. In *Teaching to Transgress* bell hooks writes:

I find writing — theoretical talk — to be most meaningful when it invites readers to engage in critical reflection and to engage in the practice of feminism. To me, this theory emerges from the concrete, from my efforts to make sense of everyday life experiences, from my efforts to intervene critically in my life and the lives of others. This to me is what makes feminist transformation possible. (70)

My goal for my students and for myself is in line with hooks; I want to create and participate in writing opportunities that foster spaces for critical feminist reflection.

After having the new insight into my reluctance to use the word murder, I considered revising the essay to include these thoughts. Each revision I tried did not seem to fit right, but I am still thinking of possible directions in which to take "Offerings." Even though my reflection in this case has not yet resulted in a formal or technical revision, it has changed my critical understanding. The goal is not achieved or measured in terms of a final, finished test. And as I stress to my students and as hooks makes clear: one of the most significant ways to theorize and participate in feminist activism is to critically analyze one's life experiences continuously. As a student, a writer, a teacher, and a feminist, all of this matters.

## CHAPTER V

### AFTERWORD

When I started writing about Dave, I did so as a way to grapple with overwhelming shock, grief, and sadness. I did not, at the time, consider how the essay would become an exercise in merging feminist praxis and creative writing. I had never thought about how my privileged positions might shape or limit the ways in which I express grief. All I had considered previously is how grief is gendered (i.e. women are allowed to cry and show emotion; men are not) and, like Smith discusses, how grief in women is and was oftentimes labeled as a form of insanity. I am grateful that, out of the experience of writing this essay and thesis, I have come to see how my socio-cultural positionalities directly affect how I write about subjects such as murder and grief, and I am now even more convinced that classroom discussions of students' socio-cultural and political positionalities may directly affect what students choose to write about and what they might learn from this writing. In future teaching, I am interested in exploring more how Miller and Paola's system of discovery drafts (and onward through revision and publication stages) can help students explore and create from their own experiences. I am also interested in merging emphases on the processes of writing, as explored in creative writing and composition classrooms, with feminist studies' focus on critical analyses of

power, privilege, and oppression, to create optimal learning environments for students to write, create, and critically analyze their experiences.

One of the possibilities Bishop suggests in “Crossing the Lines” is the following:

I believe we should teach “creative” writing in the first-year program, as has been done at my school for many years with good effects—particularly on student and teacher attitudes—and no reported harm. Students are well prepared for future academic writing when they explore creativity, authorship, textuality, and so on, *together, all at once*. In fact, I suggest that they are more prepared to think about and perform the complicated act of writing when they study this way. Many of our students pick up conflicting understandings about textuality from traditional courses, the ones that define writing or reading very narrowly and focus on skills rather than on active learning and process, or that offer only a naïve theory of texts (if any). Understanding writing as a subject, I believe, aids the development of written products. And, certainly during the college years, if not earlier, a well-developed metacognitive and metalinguistic understanding of the demands of writing and reading enables a student to develop flexible responses to class-assigned or self-assigned writing tasks. (193)

I also believe that creative writing should be, at least, a component of first-year composition classrooms and that a focus on classroom learning environments in which students are encouraged to “explore creativity, authorship, textuality” and more will do more to facilitate the critical analytic skills so important to writing. Perhaps personal narrative writing should be a component of first-year composition curriculum.

I also encourage the blurring of academic boundaries of disciplines and of genres that relegate feminist inquires to WGSS classrooms. The personal essay can be a vessel for deeply informed and incisively realized analyses of systemic privilege and oppression. One does not need to be a feminist to study feminist studies, just as one does not need to be a Marxist to study Marxism. What is important here is that feminist inquires often inspire students to write – to write passionately and purposefully and pointedly about topics that help them understand themselves and others. Also,

experiences that inspire students to dive deeply into the fissures and tensions of their lived lives very often lead them to feminist inquiries. This kind of writing, in which we ask ourselves questions important to our lives and put forth our critical analytic responses to such questions, is, I believe, the purpose of higher education. This is the kind of writing I want to teach my students, and this is the kind of writing I find to be a worthwhile academic endeavor.

In short, the merging of these three academic disciplines — creative writing, rhetoric/composition, and feminist studies — has an amazing potential to create learning and writing spaces (both in and out of class) in which the practice of writing is undertaken with specific attention to the socio-cultural and political contexts of what the student is writing about and the experiences and positionalities from where the student approaches the writing. In an essay that draws extensively from Adrienne Rich's work on gendered oppression and education, Bishop reminds us that "we need to remain active while realizing that we are a formidable challenge to the status quo" ("Learning Our Own Ways..." 500-01). This reminder is as critical in 2017 as it was when published in 2003. While inhabiting spaces of feminist student, writer, and teacher, I experienced first-hand the critical reflection possibilities that lie where these three academic disciplines overlap.

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