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# Talking Voice in Women's Advocacy Sites and Composition

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TALKING VOICE IN WOMEN'S ADVOCACY SITES AND COMPOSITION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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December 2014

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This study looks at how three feminist non-profits use writing as a vehicle to support women and strengthen their voices. It re-examines the metaphor of "voice" in writing instruction through a lens for feminist advocacy and offers suggestions for writing instruction that are grounded in feminist theory and advocacy. The project points to ways for instructors to give greater consideration to their female students' experiences and material lives amidst writing instruction.

The narrative inquiry method provides stories from advocacy workers around four themes: women's issues, the metaphor of voice, ideas about writing, and feminist principles. Via interviews from staff who daily collaborate with women and support thousands of women annually, this study identifies a list of women's issues from the participants' contexts and relates stories of how feminists make use of many means of voicing in varied discourse communities and contexts. The study brings some current women's issues into the consciousness of writing instructors, feminist rhetoricians, and women's advocates and explores ways writing is used for women's advocacy. It also notes the choice of feminist advocacy groups to do feminism without taking the risk to overtly identify themselves as "feminist."

The results point to the continued need for women's movements, as noted by many feminist rhetoric scholars. It relates data about voice and voicing to a review of literature on voice from rhetoric and composition, while naming the ways in which the participants conceive

of voice, namely as action-oriented self-direction. The findings also reveal the merits of hospitality in composition pedagogy as it is embodied at each of the advocacy sites.

Keywords: Women's writing, feminist rhetoric, voice, hospitality, narrative inquiry

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

“The complex interweaving, undoing, and reweaving of situations, identities, and discourses are at the center of composition studies. Acknowledging the multiplicity of feminist voicing, we can move among rhetorics of advocacy, possibility, and intervention...and imagine rhetorics that remain as yet unformulated.” Susan Brown Carlton, “Voice and the Naming of Woman”

#### **Introduction**

I had never been as excited about civic issues as I was during the 2008 presidential election. I watched Hillary Clinton’s momentum toward the White House but was knocked back into a mildly-interested view of the election when her name was not on the Democratic ticket. Civic electricity shot through me again when I heard Palin, a “Sarah,” would be a part of the race. My dad, a man most gleeful during election season, called me to chat about it.

He said, “Your mother has never been so excited about an election.”

My mom. The woman who spent much of my growing-up years working at the city newspaper pasting up layouts from 4 p.m. to 3 a.m. In those days, she’d come home and look for my next morning’s school outfit slung over a dining room chair. She ironed it, and I discovered the outfit placed back neatly on the chair just three hours after she had gone to bed. These days, she takes classes at her local community college. Her latest was HIST 130 Women In History. She wants me to read the textbook when she’s done with it. And these days, she’s excited about politics for reasons she’s been waiting her whole life to see—viable female contenders for vice-president and maybe even president someday soon.

“Well, Dad, for the first time she sees herself on the ticket. She could vote for a mother of five,” I said.

When my grandmother was 18, she did not have the right to vote. Much progress for women has been realized since then, but it wasn’t so long ago that we can say the work to be

done on behalf of women could possibly be complete. When I first read Sojourner Truth's speeches, I was doing my coursework for my Ph.D. I marveled at her words, and I found myself wishing for my own compelling, far-reaching, urgent cause to speak up about; I wished I were part of the Civil Rights or early women's movement. I met Sojourner on the pages of *Reclaiming Rhetorica* by Andrea Lunsford. As I made my way through the essay, again and again I felt flashes of indignation. I had studied rhetoric throughout undergrad, and only had one lecture that included feminist rhetoricians. And this duo, Sonja and Karen Foss, were the only females I had studied. I did not see myself in my discipline class after class, and what's worse is, I didn't even feel that missing female presence until Lunsford's book pointed it out. I had written all my papers on men: Aristotle, Quintilian, Burke, and Whately. But in the essays in *Reclaiming Rhetorica*, I discovered my personal connection to rhetoric via the women of rhetorical history. Lunsford's motivation in guiding this project was to pull women from what she calls the "dark corners of the discipline" (*Reclaiming Rhetorica* 7) where female speakers, writers, and thinkers have been exiled. Truth's famous "Ain't I a Woman?" speech is analyzed for its rhetorical value in the essay by Drema R. Lipscomb, but most compelling for me is the character representation of an amazing rhetor and woman. Truth had a strong sense of self and stood before large, hostile crowds, managing to win them over with the means available to her—most often her personal pain, gospel songs, and quick wit. Lipscomb provides excerpts from speeches where Truth turns the tables on bigoted opponents, makes her audiences roar with laughter, and connects with people in profound ways. Truth is a hero and a precious example of how women employ rhetoric to change their individual realities and reality for all women.

My research is situated in feminist rhetoric because I believe in what Cheryl Glenn said at Conference on College Composition and Communication during a feminist rhetoric session—

younger generations of women coming up in rhetoric and composition should carry on the excavation of female rhetors from our history and continue to promote female voices employing rhetoric for a cause—her cause and the cause of humanity (address). I see myself in my rhetorical studies now. Mostly this started when I read Lunsford’s book. I also gained more connection with my field of study by listening to the feminist rhetorical scholars who speak at CCCCs and who mentored me through their works I quote in this study. This research study strives toward the outcomes that *Reclaiming Rhetorica* has achieved. The book does the important job of making female scholarship relevant to the work rhetoricians and compositionists are doing now. It positions feminist rhetorical strategies not merely as female but as human. Lunsford’s book demonstrates how emotional displays are honest and should be valued, how rhetorical acts of service respond to real needs and should be valued, and how personalized expressions, though sometimes hard to find in academics, should be valued. My data gathering takes place in feminist organizations using writing and rhetoric to address these things.

The intention of this study is to look at how non-profits use writing to support women and strengthen their voices. It started with the goals of understanding the metaphor of “voice” through a feminist advocacy lens and drawing out insights grounded in feminist theory and advocacy for writing instructors. I included three sites in the Los Angeles area because they do advocacy work using writing as a primary vehicle to live out their missions: BoldInk, a nationally recognized writing program for teen girls; The Good Enough Project, a perfectionist recovery group; and Clothesline Project, a sexual assault and domestic violence awareness campaign staged by a university women’s resource center on its campus. Each of these tackle current women’s issues with the work they do, and they all make use of the metaphor of “voice” when describing their missions and work.

I gathered narratives from staff members at the organizations through in-depth interviews and one follow-up interview, and I describe here each of their ideas about women's issues, voice, writing, and feminist principles. I also tell the stories of my connections to the participants' work and how those impacted my inquiry. I do this by including personal narratives that developed while I did observations or attended events put on by the organizations, and I include excerpts from my dissertation journal. My experience conducting and writing about this study was a gendered one, and many of the women's issues my participants address also emerged in my research journal. I value the stance that "...a precondition of writing is the belief that one's experiences, perceptions, and spheres of participation are meaningful and thus discussable" (Welch, *Living Room* 45). At first I hesitated to tell my own stories, and I had to address my concerns about whether or not to include in an academic writing task my emotional and gendered experiences. But quotes like this one from Nancy Welch and from narrative researchers I cite later encouraged me to tell the whole story, aspects of which are both discipline-specific and personal. My writing and research here is my own contribution to women's movement and progress.

Employing the methodology of narrative inquiry, I conducted interviews with program directors and staff of feminist non-profits to gather their stories as women's advocates, identify some current factors they see limiting women's voices, and conduct content review of programming aimed at developing women's voices and identities using writing and rhetorical practices. This study generates insights into the development of voice and provides ways for instructors to give greater consideration to their female students' experiences and material lives. It also examines the obligation we may have to contribute to students' identity-building and to the strengthening of their voices. My research questions for this inquiry are:

1. How are non-profit advocacy workers making use of texts and writing to help women?
2. What are the feminist principles and orientations that guide the staffs at the non-profits?
3. What ideas about writing inform those principles?
4. What insights about writing instruction can be discovered as a result of studying women's advocacy sites?

### *Background of the Study*

Nancy Welch notes that knowledge of rhetorical history is more complete when it includes not only the work of individual rhetors, but also the work done at public spaces that shape public opinion and policy. Studying the places Welch calls “crucial sites for rhetorical training” reveals a history of people “contesting their exclusion from public participation and visibility, claiming full public voice and rights...” (*Living Room* 41). She names such sites as “schools, associations, unions, clubs, broad social movements, and countercultural affinity groups.” I take her observation as a worthy suggestion, and although my inquiry is not a historical one, the result is this study, an inquiry seeking to note connections between two spaces that undoubtedly impact many women's lives and shape how they read the world and author their own stories: feminist advocacy organizations and writing classrooms. My study is motivated by some of my own broader questions for composition instruction, and the responses come from specific out-of-the-classroom contexts that have shared values with the student-centered composition classroom. The broad questions: Can students, as is commonly expressed, “find their voices” in our writing classes? How can rhetorical acts respond to messages and factors that impede and limit women? The context: non-profit advocacy groups working to develop female identities, well-being, and voices.

I interviewed workers and advocates at the organizations who promote feminist values through writing programs. The data and narratives in my study reveal how the feminist workers' and the programs' "histories led them" (Schaafsma, Pagnucci, Wallace, and Stock 291) to view women's issues and writing as they do. The experiences and methods gathered and documented in my data provide implications for composition instruction along four themes: women's issues, the metaphor of voice, ideas about writing, and feminist principles. Susan Jarratt writes about the "touchpoints" shared by composition studies and feminism in a collection of essays edited with Lynn Worsham, *Feminism and Composition: In Other Words*. Jarratt notes the overlapping interest in "gendered differences in language, teaching, and learning—the very places where subjects take shape in writing, reading, and teaching contexts, both academic and 'real world'" (3). Most notable for establishing the groundwork for this study is Jarratt's observation that ahead of us lay "unacknowledged ways" in which feminism and composition "speak to each other" (4). In this study, I discovered and named some of the touchpoints between writing instruction in the academy and feminist advocacy in my research sites. Writing classrooms and advocacy sites, such as non-profits and community organizations, share values in student/people-centeredness, empowerment, skill-building and confidence-building.

During some of my initial contact with executive directors when I attempted to gain access to the non-profits, I shared examples of the questions I hoped to ask their staff members. We had conversations about whether or not they thought the work they did connected with what I planned to study. In most of my initial meetings, the directors expressed their views and stories about their work. Some of what I heard from the directors was new and insightful for me—it pricked my teacher's heart to do my work differently, more in tune with the students' experiences. Some of what I heard was not new—it struck familiar chords with feminist values I

had gathered from scholars in rhetoric and composition and from trial and error in the classroom. So much of what these women said offered insight for me as a writing instructor and evaluator, while other points they made confirmed what I had read in research and feminist writings. By interviewing the staffers who work with women daily and thousands of women annually, I gathered advocacy stories, named factors limiting women, and gathered insights of how compositionists might conceive anew of the metaphor of “voice” in writing instruction. This study names approaches and program values that work to strengthen women’s voices, documents some of the rhetorical practices of women in advocacy sites, shares the narratives of advocacy workers, and analyzes factors about women’s writing and self-efficacy.

## **Significance of Study**

### *Contributions and Discoveries*

In linking the rhetorical sites of the writing classroom to feminist organizations, “voice” is a tie that binds. In a collection of essays on voice in composition studies, Kathleen Blake Yancey describes how the field uses the metaphor: “From helping students to find a voice, to authorizing those voices, to teaching the written voice, to empowering others through voice as agency or discourse, we in composition studies seem to be about voice; to use voice, almost unconsciously, as a metaphor that informs who and what we do” (xx). In *The Mythology of Voice*, author Darsie Bowden identifies voice as a “pivotal metaphor” in the field because it “focuses attention on authorship, on identity, on narrative, and on power” (viii). She goes on to argue throughout the book that voice as a metaphor is no longer useful and instead, “the problem with voice is as much about the baggage it carries with it as it is its lack of efficacy in referring to things text do” (Bowden, 118). But, Peter Elbow’s 2007 article “Voice in Writing Again: Embracing Contraries” provided an update on the status of the “voice” discussion in composition noting that

the “concept of voice in writing seems to have been successfully discredited in our journals and books” even though the concept of voice “keeps not going away” (170). Elbow says students discuss issues of voice and view themselves as having a true self and voice, “despite the best efforts of some of their teachers” (170).

My study brings a feminist advocacy reading and application of the metaphor of “voice” as a teaching metaphor in composition. Advocacy work often employs the metaphor of voice as it represents power, and compositionists employ it “in a variety of ways,” as Bowden points out. Deconstructionists would say that “voice is a myth,” and those compositionists who view it as real, even if mostly metaphorical, have historically discussed it in these ways:

- as infusing the process of writing;
- as a reference for truth, for self;
- as a reference for human presence in text;
- as a reference for multiple, often conflicting selves;
- as a source of resonance, for the writer, for the reader;
- as a way of explaining the interaction of writer, reader, and text;
- as the appropriations of others; writers, texts;
- as the approximations of others;
- as synecdoche for discourse;
- as points of critique;
- as myth. (Yancey xviii)

Kathleen Blake Yancey notes that even though voice is contested as being fiction or nonfiction, it is always “faithful” when considered as “the current voices composing the writer” (xix).



In feminist organizations as well as in the research topics and papers our students compose, female voices respond to the many messages that shape a woman and speak of her worth, her ability to influence, and her ability to thrive (or the messages that disparage all of these things). In “Voice and the Naming of Women,” Carlton says an “explanation for the dominance of metaphors of voice in feminism and composition studies is that both the student writer and the woman find their ‘voicing’ of opinion, experience, analysis, and passion restricted because of their positions in the social order” (226). The applications and understanding of “voice” in writing instruction found at the feminist non-profits in this study suggest that the metaphor resonates with their advocacy work and their women writers who face limitations amidst social order. Carlton describes and defends a feminism that is foregrounded at the feminist non-profits in my study. It is a new wave of cultural feminism, where a socially constructed understanding of gender highlights how women have been limited to certain roles and narrow contexts, and this has been done in part because of “gender’s embeddedness in linguistic and cultural processes” (229). Carlton makes a call to compositionists to not disregard cultural feminism and to understand “all that we can about the rhetoric of advocacy, the need for which has in no way diminished” (235). Much of the cultural feminism lived out at the three sites in this study resist the politics of gender and radical feminism to focus, instead, on individual definitions of success as women and praising female virtues. The latter also foregrounds the presence of difference feminism emerging at the sites; the participants at times reveal beliefs that women have unique ways of knowing and relating. Carlton echoes the findings in my study about women’s issues and feminisms, specifically along the lines of self-advocacy values purported by all the participants: “Unless we are willing to accord the collectivity of women specifically, we cannot work as advocates for women’s experience or,

perhaps more importantly within composition studies, make it possible for women to become their own advocates through revisioning their experience” (235). Carlton provides an excellent outline to the varied ways in which feminists voice their personal key priorities and resist or embrace aspects of essentialism and deconstruction of gender categories, and she points out that feminists make use of many means of voicing in the face of the varied discourse situations they face. This perspective rings true for the participants in my study who, at times, essentialize women, and, at other times, resist constructs imposed on women as a category.

These additional discoveries, beyond an examination of voice, stem from my study:

- compilation of themes from current non-profit feminist work identifying what factors they name as limiting women
- description of methods and writing programming for strengthening self-esteem and identities for people who experience limitations or oppression
- demonstration to practitioners in advocacy work of the option to utilize writing and rhetorical practices on behalf of their missions for change and social justice
- re-articulation of the definition and value of feminist pedagogy in composition studies through the telling of advocacy workers’ narratives

### *A Feminist Way of Being*

bell hooks describes how “feminism” as a term is “without any clear significance” (“Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression” 51). She lists reasons why this may be so: the uncertainty of the term, reluctance to offer support to a movement that primarily aides white women, homophobia and the equating of feminism with lesbianism, female avoidance of any political movement (especially one viewed as radical), and the familiarity of negative images instead of positive aspects of feminism. She writes, “It is this term’s positive political significance and power that we must now struggle to recover and maintain” (51). I believe that some of my long-term work in education will be fueled by the need to maintain awareness about

feminisms in new generations of students and in my field. Kay Siebler compiled a thorough account of how feminists have influenced composition studies in her book *Composing Feminism*. Her words express my concern about the ways in which feminism is viewed in composition studies:

Most scholars prefer to use words like *critical*, *liberatory*, *postmodern*, and *democratic* to describe pedagogical themes and principles that other scholars defined as feminist. The avoidance of the “f” word may also speak to why use of the word *feminist* evokes deviant concepts and disruptive models....It is because of the ambiguities, stigmas, and stereotypes regarding feminist pedagogy in composition that we need to give more credit to how feminist pedagogy has shaped contemporary composition studies. (31)

When I speak about and personally claim the word feminism, I remind myself to “give more credit” to it as Siebler writes. Whether it is while introducing a text in class, discussing a movie with friends, or describing my dissertation with classmates and colleagues, it is common I find myself in territory unfriendly to feminists. But as I work out my identity as a scholar and teacher, I find I belong in a camp that believes in empowering all people. Lynne Worsham described to Kay Siebler, in *Composing Feminism*, that feminism is a “way of being.” By observing feminist advocacy sites and interviewing the staff, my study describes specific embodiments of how feminism is a way of being. The findings discuss how feminist ways of being in writing groups, classrooms, and rhetorical communities are supportive, self-directed, and hospitable without being anti-intellectual or sentimental to a fault. By researching what is new and old in feminism, this study contributes to defining and expanding what the sometimes

loaded, often misunderstood, and always powerful word “feminism” can mean, primarily for women and for writing instructors and secondarily for those who misunderstand feminism or think its usefulness has expired.

### *Defining Feminism*

Feminism is a complex word and it contains a variety of important aspects for naming and knowing. In this study, the framework for understanding feminism and its related terms that I use comes from Krista Ratcliffe’s landmark essay “Bathsheba’s Dilemma: Defining, Discovering, and Defending Anglo-American Feminist Theories of Rhetoric(s).” Throughout the literature of feminist rhetoric, concerns about essentialism, constructionism, and otherising weave through the conversations, especially when critiquing research that makes generalized claims about women or “the” female experience. I believe Ratcliffe’s handling of the definition of feminism helps to clarify and relieve concerns about reducing women to a collective female identity in such a way that limits women, as well as concerns about describing women’s experiences defines women too simply as opposite to men. Ratcliffe defines feminism in the following way:

My use of the term *feminist* refers to a materialist feminism that can be position, in part in relation to the following terms: *female* is defined as characteristics grounded in biological sex differences, *feminine* as behaviors grounded in socially constructed gender differences, *women* as non-essentialist real-life historical subjects, *Woman* as an analytical category, and *feminist* as an ethical stance that foregrounds sexual and gender concerns as a particularly productive means of demystifying and critiquing the cultural matrix—including the complexities of

gender, race, class, sexual orientation, religious preference, geographical location, and so on, within which power relations function. (84)

This definition is useful to my study because it cuts through some of the tensions about essentializing women when trying to conduct research about women. It points out that women are real-life historical subjects to be studied even though essentializing women is a risk when researchers look for patterns within this demographic. As well, this definition clarifies terms that are too easily conflated or misnamed such as female and feminine. The definition also makes the case that while women can be studied as an analytical category, it is more ethically done when the research is done from a feminist stance. Feminist researchers are bound to research practices that humanize participants and minimize the tendency of scientists to flatten the human identity into a single variable. As Ratcliffe points out, gender can be a useful aspect to focus on, but it cannot be falsely separated from “race, class, sexual orientation, religious preference, geographical location, and so on.” As a feminist researcher, this definition reminds me to be a human first and a researcher after.

Belenky’s response to the critique that her work essentializes women answers some of my own concerns about conducting a study that tries to sketch out or give form to female experiences. She said, “It’s very confusing because we’re gendered, but we’re also just human beings” (qtd. in Brady 33). Sometimes the researcher must focus on gender as a factor to draw out useful data, specifically when valuing the goal of feminist research to improve women’s lives. Belenky makes the point that a voice in an interview that eventually becomes data can be “associated with gender without being encased in gender” (Brady 33). In my study and in any study conducted to gather data about women and their lived experiences, there comes a point when researchers look for norms and say that *on balance* the data shows that women often

experience *this*, value *that*, and so on. This does not have to be viewed as essentializing or erasing the experiences of those outside the norms or in the extremes of the data norms.

I am also cautious about upholding the standard to acknowledge difference in varied feminisms, a critique made decades ago by womanist theorists such as Audre Lorde and Alice Walker. Ede, Glenn and Lunsford acknowledge “the extent to which feminism—like rhetoric, for that matter—is not only a construction, but a place of contest and difference” (56). I believe my study acknowledges how documenting particular feminist rhetorics will create valuable case studies, as well as how analyzing women’s rhetorics reports wider implications about women and writing, including women’s complex differences and varied contexts. My hope is that feminist advocates, as well as composition instructors, might find my study useful for raising awareness about writing and identity issues, as well as gaining insights into women’s lives that can come from individual narratives, collective analysis of the data, and grand narratives in society that women confront daily.

### *Defining Identity*

For my study, I define identity through a discussion taken from *Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture* written by the collection’s editors Jens Brockmeir and Donal Carbaugh. They suggest that in order to understand aspects of what makes up identity, story-telling is needed. They write, “The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and others organize our sense of who we are, who others are, and how we are to be related” (10). I use this narrative theory to define identity because the authors connect self-awareness and meaning-making through experience, and they note that stories about individual experiences lead to “a sense of who we are, who others are, and how we are to be related.” My inquiry

approaches the social process of identity-building via stories and how people “live storied lives on storied landscapes” (Clandinin and Connelly “Experience and Story” 8).

Jacqueline Jones Royster’s *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women* provides telling insights as to the importance of studying and honoring women’s literacy practices and identities within their given landscapes. In the chapter “Going Against the Grain,” Royster’s goal is to reveal how, historically, African American women’s literacy is one where women speak, write, and organize in ways that remake their worlds and themselves. Simple descriptors of being silenced or oppressed do not satisfy the many visionary and durable self-concepts African American women embodied, even as they were enslaved and dehumanized. Royster’s nuanced discussion of identity and literacy provides a compelling framework for discussing identity in the midst of academic research. Her writing offers an example to feminist researchers to be open to seeing and naming the complex identities of women who experience varying degrees of oppression and privilege. Royster studies the lives of women based on the status they held in their communities as well-respected people. In the slave world, “African American women still found opportunities to maintain images of themselves as integral to the community” (*Traces* 111). Royster’s take on agency and self-esteem gives play to the many layers of identity, and it reminds researchers not to flatten the multi-dimensional identities of those we study.

Through her historical review of African American women’s literacy, Royster reminds feminist researchers that identities are *becoming* and should not be researched as fixed. This understanding of identity is increasingly accepted as the way to understand identity, but the nature of research is to nail down fixed variables and to have concrete findings. Likewise, narrative inquiry resists descriptive and formulaic findings that might propel researchers to stray

from a complex handling of identity. Royster's effort to so thoroughly examine and interact with identity formation is a testament to the import of studying women's rhetorical selves. She also notes that to study the literate lives of some may very well apply to the literate lives of others. This truth frames my inquiry as I observe women's writing and generate insights that reflect back to the general writing classroom. Royster claims that the literacy practices of African American females "overlap with the experiences of others" (*Traces* 8). Results from studying specific groups can be generalized for practitioners to consider and weigh in relation to their own teaching contexts. Royster states that the outcomes of her project are not the similarities or differences between whom she studies and others; her goal is "to make better sense." I examined how women are making sense of their lives through writing, and considered how writing instructors might make sense of some of the women's issues and feminist insights in the narratives and findings of this study.

#### *Gender Awareness in Composition Studies*

The widely cited book, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, provides an extensive study offering constructs to identify female experiences and expression. Although critiqued for its potential essentializing of women, the authors' discussion on the aims of education is useful to consider:

educators can help women develop their own authentic voices if they emphasize connection over separation, understanding and acceptance over assessment, and collaboration over debate; if they accord respect to and allow time for the knowledge that emerges from firsthand experience; if instead of imposing their own expectations and arbitrary requirements, they encourage students to evolve



their own patterns of work based on the problems they are pursuing. (Belenky et al. 229)

Discussions of varied women's ways of knowing belong in our discussions about effective and ethical teaching. Keeping in tune with our students may require us to consider trends and norms in their gendered experiences and identities. Elizabeth Flynn's landmark essay "Composing as a Woman" reminds us "we ought not assume that males and females use language in identical ways or represent the world in a similar fashion. And if their writing strategies and patterns of representation do differ, then ignoring those differences almost certainly means a suppression of women's separate ways of thinking and writing" (431 and 432). Flynn points out that the push to universalize education erases difference (425), and often at the expense of female voices that are compared to male standards. In the twenty-two years since this article was published, progress has been made on behalf of females in the academy. New concerns related to gender have emerged, and some of the old problems have been re-packaged, showing up in our classrooms via the identities and experiences our students bring with them. This study seeks to place current issues about gender awareness into the general consciousness of writing instructors, feminist rhetoricians, and women's advocates, and to explore what some contemporary women's advocates are doing with writing in the lives of women to address existing women's issues.

### **Implications for Higher Education**

This study has its roots in rhetoric and composition, particularly the area of feminist rhetoric, but makes connections to some of the larger work and values of higher education. I make a brief case here for three ways in which the big picture usefulness of this study connects to the academy: in issues of diversity, through liberal arts values, and with civic engagement via service-learning.

### *Women's Issues in Diversity Studies*

Awareness and programming for diversity is now largely mainstreamed on campuses, and professors have been challenged to reach diverse student populations. Cultural sensitivity and inclusive instruction for diverse students are now widely talked about in academia. I would like to consider gender as a division within diversity topics specifically. I am concerned as to whether the “right to equality” has overshadowed a still present need to support female students and to value varied female ways of writing, learning, and knowing. Research and popular understanding would tend toward the perception that women receive equal treatment in the classroom, (often that which is unfortunately equal to a traditional, male-oriented instruction) and that they achieve equally in school. The American Association of University Women’s report on gender equity in schools from 2008 noted that “women and girls have made remarkable gains in education during the past 100 years, disrupting the belief—now largely unspoken—that boys and men are better ‘suited’ to intellectual work” (Corbett, Hill and Rose 13). But, what are women still up against? What are some predominant concerns that point to the need for feminisms and women’s movement? A quick list includes the fact that human trafficking is a current day slave industry with 27 million slaves globally, and 80 percent of them are women (Freedom Summit). The FBI’s recent statistics show that 84,376 rapes were reported by women in the U.S. in 2012 (Federal Bureau of Investigation). The National Institute for Justice reported that for every 1000 female students on a college campus, 35 of them will be raped during an academic year, so at a school with 10,000 students, this means that 350 women will be raped each year (Fisher, Cullen and Turner 11). Case studies about college, programs such as the now famous Harvard Business School experiment reported in the *New York Times* in 2013, reveal that women arrive to programs like Harvard’s with the same grades but do not perform in the

classroom or on transcripts like their male classmates. Harvard's first female president, appointed in 2010, has engineered attempts to promote gender balance in faculty and in student outcomes. She addressed biased grading by challenging the case study instruction method where only nine percent of the 250 cases included female protagonists. A recurring internal factor that plagued women in the program was reportedly their concerns about balancing their academic success and social lives, including pressures to look attractive and be dateable (Kantor). Women business graduates will enter a field where only 21 of the Fortune 500 companies have women CEOs. In the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) industries, women's representation and success in their careers are strained by gender stereotypes, biased learning environments, and limiting social beliefs, according to an AAUW report. The findings revealed "people judge women to be less competent than men in 'male' jobs unless they are clearly successful at their work. When a woman is clearly competent in a 'masculine' job, she is considered to be less likeable," (Hill, Corbett, and St. Rose 4). In 1970, three percent of professional in engineering were women, and in 2011 it was 13 percent (US Census Bureau). Women in decision-making positions in the media reveal more underrepresentation for women in an industry that mentors society on how we value women and their contributions, most often selling women short as sex objects and passive players who watch men as the heroes. Women hold only three percent of "clout" positions in the media, and only 25 percent of new media jobs created from 1990 to 2005, even though they made up 65 percent of college graduates who studied in media-related majors (Women's Media Center). As for elected officials in the country's highest offices, only 17 senators are women and half of the states have never elected a woman senator or governor (The Representation Project). Whether it is a biased political process or women are opting out of running, women are not there in the same numbers as men.

And during election seasons, politicians from major parties discuss a “war on women” when it becomes convenient to address women’s issues for the sake of votes.

Gender equality is now an assumed norm in the minds of many in society and, even, in academics. Still, I question whether this broadly applied “given” of equality may be masking underlying inhibitors that still keep women’s access and potential at bay. This point makes me wonder whether or not the perception of equality has cut short discussions about female identities in writing classrooms and the problems of systematic sexism in educational settings. It is as if a few major talking points from feminists’ waves were achieved and then checked off, such as the right to vote and laws about equality or sexual harassment, and we have moved on to other societal issues. Third wave feminists and women in America are benefitting from earlier feminists’ efforts. The genders are now deemed equal, and women can participate. But, can women participate and be engaged in particularly female ways or ways that resist tenants of patriarchy that are maintained in society and systems?

Some of the literature in rhetoric and composition matches trends in feminist thought, specifically noting that gender discussions need to continue moving beyond demands for equality and into valuing diverse perspectives. bell hooks identifies this discussion in the 80s in her article “Feminism: A Movement To End Sexist Oppression.” She observes that “many women active in women’s liberation movement were far more comfortable with the notion of feminism as a reform that would help women attain social equality with men of their class than feminism defined as a radical movement that would eradicate domination and transform society” (48). hooks makes the point that equality is not the goal even if that notion has been popularized by stereotypes of feminists and by the media. It is not difficult to argue that there is still progress to be made on behalf of women, as may be argued regarding all areas of diversity. Studies such as

this one look to reframe the general understanding of feminist agendas beyond equality and to look further into valuing women's freedom to self-direct and self-advocate, to voice opinions and ideas as they choose, to define success for themselves, and to continue to resist restrictions and oppression for all people and all voices.

At the March 2010 CCCCs convention, Jacqueline Jones Royster spoke during the featured session on Rhetorics and Feminisms. When talking about diversity issues and the feminist call for equality for all people, Royster said to those in attendance to remember this idea: "We have not failed, and we have not succeeded yet" (address). This is true for women's advocacy, and it is true for feminist rhetorical studies. We have not failed to make progress for women, but we have not fully succeeded yet in bringing about the change needed to eradicate oppression of women and to promote feminist ways of being in writing and identity-building in education. In Kirsch and Royster's article on feminist rhetorical practices, they affirm the principle that "there is value to be recognized and appreciated in the lives and words of women" (666). They suggest that excellent feminist research requires paying more attention to where humans dwell: "Thus we become more willing to study local, specific sites at the same time as we need to become willing to stand back and assess the vastness of all before us, the newly emerging terrain" (664). This position is in sync with my outlook for this study; I researched feminist sites, and then stood back to analyze how the learning from data and narratives I have gathered fit into the landscapes of feminism and composition. The feminist rhetoricians working in rhetoric and composition have called for research that not only recognizes the work of women in history who have been previously ignored or underappreciated, but these scholars also call for new work to be done to document rhetorical practices of women now.

## *Feminism and Liberal Arts Values*

In *Beyond English Inc.*, the authors discuss concern over the corporatization of English studies, and this collection generates profound reminders of what the mission of many universities has been and should be. In the introduction, readers are directed to the importance of staying attentive to shifts in curricular and educational values that would undermine educational purposes: “A culture will ultimately impoverish itself, both economically and socially, if it doesn’t invest for a well-educated citizenry where critical thinking, imagination, creativity, and independence provide resources for a better world” (13). Rhetoric and composition instructors are not merely teaching skills that will secure careers and paychecks for our students. They are educating the whole person and the future citizen. The humanities help develop humane students; feminism promotes humane treatment of the self and all others. My study examines how writing and rhetorical practices of women connect with the very heart of education where liberal arts and feminist values converge.

My vision for my field is one where our student-centeredness is purposefully enacted to address oppression our students might experience in their lives (as the oppressed, oppressor, or observer), and to also provide the option for them to be people who promote freedom when they go out and put their diplomas to work. Any power or person who dehumanizes others is exactly the power or person the liberal arts and feminism seek to reform, rehabilitate, and hopefully repurpose along the lines of promoting independence and well-being for humanity. Universities’ core purpose is not to grant diplomas, but to develop citizens and humane people. The principle here is that in developing a society of people marked by an ethos of care and a logos of freedom, the economic and civic success of the country can be managed by people more prepared to do so successfully for both profit *and* humanity. In the essay “The Classical Liberal Arts Tradition,”

the authors also resist the corporatization of education. They write, “However much America—and the world—need technically skilled workers and professionals, there can be no doubt of the critically greater need for liberally educated citizens and human beings who can distinguish good from evil, justice from injustice, what is noble and beautiful from what is base and degrading” (Flannery and Newstand 6). When the good of the whole is sacrificed for the profit of the few, injustice ensues. When the good of the oppressor is enabled by the silence of the oppressed, injustice ensues. Acknowledging the liberal arts’ historical values may help clarify some of our axiology as compositionists and rhetoricians, so that we might keep our key values ever at the forefront of our work.

I believe that liberal arts values and feminist rhetorical values are complementary. From *The Liberal Arts in Higher Education*: “And the first task of the liberal arts is to secure the liberation of the mind from those many fetters that can bind it; notably ignorance, prejudice, and the influence of the passions” (Flannery and Newstand 11). From the writing of bell hooks: “The foundation of future feminist struggle must be solidly based on a recognition of the need to eradicate the underlying cultural basis and causes of sexism and other forms of group oppression. Without challenging and changing these philosophical structures, no feminist reforms will have a long range impact” (“Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression” 47). The “first task” and the “long range impact” of rhetoric and composition must surely interact with core goals of the liberal arts and humane education. In a composition studies context, it might be articulated as the Writing Program Administrators set out in their first-year writing standards amended in July 2008, that students should “understand the relationships among language, knowledge, and power” (CWPA). Even as our discipline continues to work out its identity in our research,

publications, and keynote addresses at major conferences, I suggest that writing instructors are duty-bound by many of the higher aims of the liberal arts.

In “Composition at the Turn of the Century,” Richard Fulkerson identifies composition studies’ major identity struggle as he sees it based on his examination of how the field has become more quarrelsome and less unified. He concludes with this description of a major controversy: “Are we teaching students to write in order that they should become successful insiders? Or are we teaching them to write so that they are more articulate critical outsiders? (Or even so that they “know themselves”?) (679). An answer to these questions may be found in our liberal arts values, and I believe the compelling reasons appear in the duty to developing students as citizens and in preparing them for their lives outside of the university. Our pervasive, shared value in composition studies of student-centeredness may best serve our students when we care about them as humans in a way that we do the work of contributing to a more balanced and healed citizenry. The structures of our societies are reinforced by the values our citizens hold. Rhetoric and composition instructors are poised to develop students with values that will reinforce structures of a just society. The editors of *Beyond English Inc.* close the book with the question, “How does our teaching fulfill our obligation to others?” (233). Looking to the roots of the liberal arts, I believe writing instructors can respond honestly to this question remembering that creative capacity, freedom from prejudice, and self-determination in community make up much of our overarching priorities. I hope to remind myself and any who read this research that, as a field and as individuals, we can hold tightly to liberal arts and feminist values as we go about coaching students in the classroom.



### *Service-Learning Connections*

In addition to exploring the rhetorical practices of community organizations that work with women, this study offers connections to community sites engaging in rhetoric and writing in a way that may be helpful to instructors who engage in service-learning pedagogies. There are natural connections between my data sites, non-profit organizations and community centers, and service-learning pedagogy. The field of rhetoric and composition has historically valued experiential learning, community literacy issues, and civic engagement via service-learning. Some of the narratives gathered and insights generated through my study contain implications for service-learning pedagogy and contexts because they come from locations that invited students to do service-learning at their locations. Liberal arts values and feminist goals can work within service-learning in ways that promote educational reform as well as in ways that are ripe for feminist critique. In *The Practice of Change: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Women's Studies*, Tobi Walker discusses some of the nuanced ways in which service-learning is sharpened when critiqued through a feminist lens and theorized through women's history:

First, women's history of activism points to the ways in which service becomes "depoliticized" as a private activity that is both purer and more moral. When women's activity is reduced to private, it is not a challenge to the traditionally male world of politics. Feminist revaluations of women's work as public work can give us a model for service that is highly political. Exploring the history of women's activism also challenges us to think about the ways that service constructs the "served" as needy and enforces certain norms of behavior that are gendered, raced, and classed. (29-30)

The nature of my research sites and the work the participants are doing provide insights into the concerns Walker raises about the themes of public and private in feminism, as well as the ways in which community members are labeled by composition's pedagogies and practices. Additionally, the majority of students engaging in service-learning are female (Walker 27), and professors using service-learning in their courses may benefit from considering the implications of this study—female experiences in rhetorical practices within community sites working to help women.

Service-learning advocates often purport that to promote students' sense of efficacy, having them observe and work with community partners where skills in rhetoric and writing are essential for political and civic engagement may be a fast-track to learning key lessons in democracy. Nancy Welch wrote, "Though we can't call a strike or launch a social movement from a classroom, we can teach and learn the attitudes, relationships, and practices that are the preconditions for imagining oneself and others as participants in social policy making and agents of social change" (*Living Room* 15). Some of the major reform movements in education, such as diversity, global learning, and civic engagement, can be realized in service-learning projects and pedagogies that provide students opportunities to work with community partners for social change. Caryn McTighe Musil makes the point that even though each of these three movements has influenced education in different ways, all share the same process of moving students' priorities "from the self, to others, and finally to cooperating with others for a larger public good" (57). Even though diversity, global learning, and civic engagement movements are divided by name, even by physical locations on campuses and within majors of study, they all promote education and skills to develop "socially responsible citizens in a diverse democracy and increasingly interconnected world" (57). This final point ties together the implications my

study has for higher education. Feminism, as do the liberal arts and service-learning pedagogy, promotes the kind of change that moves people from a focus on the self, to a focus on others and the ways in which we function in systems and in community. The feminism and the composition at work at the sites included in this study, see texts as a “cultural capital” (Cushman, *Beyond English Inc.* 207) and a vehicle for justice and healing.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

In the last four decades, feminism has developed as an important area of study within rhetoric and composition studies. The histories of women's identities in the field, the research done with regard to women in the classroom, and the reclaiming and revisioning of women's rhetorical contributions continues, even as many feminist values are currently mainstreamed in pedagogy and research methodology. Scholars have gathered some of these histories in key collections about women's rhetorics: *Feminism and Composition: A Critical Sourcebook*; *Available Means: An Anthology of Women's Rhetoric*; *Feminism and Composition Studies: In Other Words*; *Readings in Feminist Rhetorical Theory*; *Fractured Feminisms: Rhetorics, Context, and Contestation*; *Walking and Talking Feminist Rhetorics: Landmark Essays and Controversies*; *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women*; *Reclaiming Rhetorica*; and *Teaching Rhetorica*. Each of these documents the vitality of feminism in our field as well as sharing the history of feminist rhetoric and composition with new generations of scholars entering the field. Others have laid a strong foundation for feminist methodologies, recently authors in the collection of essays, *Rhetorica in Motion: Feminist Rhetorical Methods and Methodologies* (2010) edited by Eileen Schell and K. J. Rawson and the article "Feminist Rhetorical Practices: In Search of Excellence" by Gesa E. Kirsch and Jacqueline J. Royster.

The following review of literature is primarily taken from the feminist rhetoric and composition anthologies and articles listed above, along with other useful articles in composition studies. I reference these sources to expose my underpinning arguments going into the study. I

consider the main points of this literature review chapter to be key values and theories that justify my topic, research questions, review of voice, and implications for rhetoric and composition practitioners. This chapter presents the evidence for core beliefs at work in my study and how voice connects with each. Without accepting these arguments, it would be difficult to place value in my study or its goals. I consider the main points of my literature review to be the support from composition studies and the ideas that fuel my research questions and my motivation for the study. Each section describes my leaping off point from my current composition paradigm into the data gathering.

### *Chapter Overview*

This chapter outlines three arguments within my study and discusses them through the content and findings of academic publications: 1) writing has power to shape identities, 2) women's writing is important as a research topic, and 3) composition instructors should consider our students' material lives when developing courses and writing theories. For each argument, I provide evidence of this thinking as put forth in research and writing published in feminist rhetoric and sometimes in the larger body of literature within composition, specifically, research on voice. When studies similar to my own link to my points, I provide a summary of the study, especially noting those studies that examine women's writing in and beyond the academy.

### **Writing's Power to Shape Identities**

In my study, I look at organizations whose missions are to improve women's lives. This advocacy on behalf of women invites a conversation about what writing does because, within these organizations, people are banking on the power of writing to shape the authors. Writing training is not just a service effort to propel people into future coursework to get through school. It can be integral to developing a person's connection to academic and social contexts as well as

understanding their own views and values more. For the participants in my study who are working to improve women's lives, writing often functions as activism. This view of writing crosses over from advocacy work into composition studies and composition classrooms. Cushman says dismantling the walls between communities and universities is where activism starts (12). She suggests that typical understandings of what accounts for activism do not consider enough the change in day-to-day interactions "in which people use language and literacy to challenge and alter the circumstances of daily life" (12). My study observes routine actions and writing that addresses the daily lives of the study's participants, noting activism in the organizations' foundings and missional documents, along with activism in the writing sample content, whether these actions are collective or individually driven. In "Reconceptualizing Rhetorical Activism in Contemporary Feminist Contexts" Sowards and Renegar note how personal activism can take place through writing and storytelling. If many third-wave feminists lean toward activism that is private and self-beneficial, as Sowards and Renegar report, researchers should consider observing private spaces and study how women become advocates in their individual lives. In the case of writing research, Sowards and Renegar looked to the Internet and web-based writing where individuals use humor and entertainment writing to resist oppression by enjoying their lives while "laughing off" certain injustices (63). In their study, writing also functioned as activism in sharing stories. "This process of sharing is a form of feminist activism because it creates a network of experiences between women and acts as a story telling process that others can learn from if they so choose" (Soward and Regar 66). Writing is an easy-access form of activism for some women, but in what these researchers observed, it also expands beyond traditional parameters of activism to include a "self-oriented activism that is more about self-affirmation, catharsis, and expression than generating social change" (67). This

view of writing as activism, even self-beneficial activism, is discussed here to illuminate one way in which writing has power to shape identities.

In the editors' reflections at the close of *Feminine Principles and Women's Experience in American Composition and Rhetoric*, Phelps and Emig discuss how writing classes offer a chance for women to "compose their lives" (411). The idea of writers composing their identities and sense of self is central to what my participants do at BoldInk, The Good Enough Project, and Clothesline Project. The option for individuals to improve their lives and their sense of efficacy is also what Phelps and Emig discuss. They note that writing helps people take a hard look at how a life can be restored and reconstructed by the author and how writing offers insights and direction for the future. This valuing of personal lives and personal experience reminds feminist compositionists that "composition can never transcend experience as a component and source of feminism" (411). In an interview with Gloria Anzaldua, Andrea Lunsford asks the author of *Borderlands/La Frontera* questions about her experiences with writing and the connections between composition and postcolonial studies. Anzaldua suggests that writing and postcolonial studies get students thinking about "how they are in the world" and how they might say "I'm different and this is who I am, your way is maybe a good way, but it's not the only way" ("Toward a Mestiza Rhetoric" 51). Anzaldua told Lunsford "Writing is very liberating and emancipatory; it frees you up. In the process of writing, you're reflecting on all of the things that make you different, that make you the same, that make you a freak. You're constantly grappling with identity issues" ("Toward a Mestiza Rhetoric" 51). My project explores how acts of writing and composing one's self shape women's identities. Anzaldua names writing as a liberating project. In her article, Lunsford describes images from Anzaldua's writing to name what the act of writing is like for this renowned scholar: "daring and dangerous," "a terrifying ride in the

‘night sky,’” “like ‘carving bone,’” “giving birth,” “an endless cycle of ‘making it worse, making it better, but always making meaning out of experience,’” “a ‘blood sacrifice,’” and “ongoing transformation” needed for borderland existence (“Toward a Mestiza Rhetoric” 35). What writing seems to have done for Anzaldua was to demonstrate, in her words, “how one composes one’s life, how one creates an addition to one’s house, how one makes sense of all the kinds of coincidental and random things that happen in one’s life, how one gives it meaning” (“Toward a Mestiza Rhetoric” 43).

In the interview with Lunsford, Anzaldua uses the metaphor of *compustura* for her composition theme. Being a seamstress speaks to how we writers go about piecing together bits of our experiences and identities to make something we can wear. For Anzaldua, writing is and always has been about narrative, her story outside the dominant culture, and the story of all master narratives and outsider narratives (“Toward a Mestiza Rhetoric” 38). Participants in my study utilize writing to help women piece together their identities and in many cases, discover or re-energize neglected talents and abilities that will be crucial to their literacy and potential to engage in their work and lives. Anzaldua’s interview reveals a strong testimony of how writing can shape an individual’s life and identity, can confront limitations, and open up opportunity for self-perceptions to be healed. The Lunsford interview closes with an important discussion about writing and activism quoted at length below. She says:

The differences that I felt between me and other people were so excruciating. I felt like such a freak. I was trying to make meaning of my existence and my pain, and that in turn led me to writing. In writing I’m trying to write about these moments where I took things into my own hands and I said, “This is not the way things are supposed to be. Girl children are not supposed to be treated this way.



Women are not supposed to be battered; they're not supposed to be second-class citizens. Chicanas shouldn't be treated this way in society." I started grappling with those issues, and writing became a way of activism, a way of trying to make changes. But it wasn't enough just to sit and write and work on my computer. I had to connect the real-life, bodily experiences of people who were suffering because of some kind of oppression, or some kind of wound in their lives, with what I was writing. It wasn't a disembodied kind of writing. And because I am a writer, voice—acquiring a voice, covering a voice, picking up a voice, creating a voice—was important. ("Toward a Mestiza Rhetoric" 63-64)

Her narrative highlights how writers use writing to heal wounds and come to voice, just as the participants in my study are engaged in doing. The way participants discuss voice or employ voice often includes embodied writing, composition that includes their real-life connections and personal advocacy grounded in women's experiences.

#### *Voice in Writing and Advocacy*

The metaphor "voice" is cited in the mottos or mission statements of well-known feminist advocacy groups such as the YWCA, and Girls Inc., and also in my participant BoldInk's motto. All of these non-profits strive to help a woman find her voice, use her voice, or strengthen her voice. The metaphor of voice is also commonly used in composition instruction (Elbow, Bowden, Kutz, Cherry). Even though publishing about voice seems to have fallen out of trend since the 1990s, it still emerges in discussions of expressivism and critical pedagogy (Lensmire, Lee and De Finney, Greco, hooks, Freisinger). In his 2007 article "Voice in Writing Again: Embracing Contraries," Peter Elbow says when he looks at composition classrooms, scholarly journals, and the world at large, he sees a "kind of stalemate" regarding the metaphor

of voice in writing instruction. He writes, “The concept is alive and well, yet no one comes forward anymore in our field to argue for it or even to explore very seriously why it’s so alive” (171). Specifically in my study, the term “voice” maintains its vitality in part because “developing voice in reaction or opposition to other voices takes on special significance for women students” (Greco 73). The above quote illuminates a key area of inquiry from my participant interviews when they discuss voice as a metaphor in their lives and literacy. I interviewed literacy workers regarding how they came to voice in their own lives, and how they describe the topics of voice and agency in their programs. What does the metaphor mean to my participants? Are there fresh ways for compositionists to consider voice and the idea that students “find their voices” in our classes or “strengthen their voices” via writing? What is added to our understanding of voice when we consider what the idea of “voice” means to those who work in advocacy sites?

Again Elbow tackled the theoretical issues of voice in composition in his article “What Do We Mean When We Talk about Voice in Texts?” pointing out that too often social constructionists have a simplistic understanding of voice as “unique, single, and unchanging” (1). While describing how voice is understood in a variety of ways such as speech intonation in writing, character or author in writing, a distinctive style in writing, and authenticity or “real self” in writing, Elbow also talks about “having a voice,” or authority as a way in which feminist work in composition describes voice (15). He describes this type of voice as demonstrating the nerve to express ideas presented with assurance, and he says, “As teachers, we frequently notice and applaud the difference when we see a student who is a timid writer finally speak out with some conviction and give her words some authority” (15). He goes on to point out a limitation in this way of understanding voice: “When we see this kind of authority in writing, or the lack of

it, we are not necessarily getting a good picture of the actual writer. It's not unusual, for example, for someone to develop a voice with strong authority that doesn't match their sense or our sense of who they are" (15). Elbow goes on to caution teachers that too many times our pedagogy or feedback result in making students less authoritative and more measured in their writing. He also says the variety of voices in one writer often reflects a variety of writing tasks and rhetorical situations even though with a habitual task like writing, familiar ways of doing it may emerge as a "style" or voice. The mystique of voice is in part that an experienced writer can "bring in craft, art, and play so as to deploy different styles at will, and thus not have a recognizable, distinctive voice" (14), thus dismantling a common assumption about voice that having a recognizable voice in your writing is the goal and demonstrates a strong identity. He makes the important point that voice is hard to separate from the identity issue, and like identity, voice is not fixed. Likewise, Cummins points out how a writer's voice protects her identity or identities at times, even while expressing "internal attributes, qualities, and selves of the writer" (49). She says definitions of voice often fail to explain how writers know their identities or how they can change amidst being employed. Her questions challenge these problems: "How does the writer come to have a particular voice? Does the voice change over time? How is the authority to voice granted? Does a writer have more than one voice? How are these voices nurtured? Is it necessary to know these voices in order to write?" (49).

### *Identities in Community*

Another case that reveals writing's power to shape identities and connectedness with others appears in a longitudinal study about a women's writing group that met for a number of years starting in the late 1980s in San Francisco. Caroline Heller's *Until We Are Strong Together: Women Writers in the Tenderloin* tells the stories of women gathering to share their

writing and to witness each other's lives through the reading, critiquing, and performing of their poems, stories, essays, and novels. The group setting is similar to the setting of my participants; they gathered in a non-academic space to share writing they hoped would improve their lives and in many cases, mean something to others when performed publicly. Heller writes, "The dynamics of the workshop taught me much about the many levels on which a person can be educated—and can teach—when a premium is placed on telling and examining the truth of one's personal, social, and political experience rather than on credentialing, certifying and standardizing learning, most often at the core of how we think about what constitutes real education" (14). Her findings included implications of writing's power to raise social consciousness, build community between people, expose people to new information, build skills as writers strive, and to both be and promote activism. Heller reports the participants became agents for change in their own and each other's lives as they wrote about and discussed issues like housing and access to government resources. Heller's writing brings to light aspects of how writers locate themselves in life and society, and it reveals how writing in community settings can promote this kind of identity development and self-awareness.

Heller's study also highlights writing's function to build self-esteem. The Tenderloin writing group embodied how writing is used specifically to deliver the message that the writer's lives are valuable, and as Heller points out, writers' lives "could be—through the precision of their own words—felt, understood, and remembered by others" (18). This outcome is an explicit and implied goal of all my participating organizations. Heller's examination of writing in communities and group identity instructs my own data collection, reminding me to examine space and place and explore how identities are constructed through group writing initiatives. This happens in many forms for the women in the writing group, one being gaining self-

awareness when they put words to secret and everyday experiences they had not fully claimed. They also find place or a sense of belonging and connection with others when an audience witnesses their writing and in turn, sees them as people. The factor of having “a witness” became an integral expression of writing’s power to shape identities in their workshop. Writing and sharing writing provided the component of witnesses to their lives, people to know, see, and appreciate the complex experiences each writer carried with her. The thrill of “the event” of sharing writing with an audience validates who they are, as well as their experiences. They find place, or belonging, and a sense of needed connection, when they share experiences and “declare a self” through writing (132). This workshop relates to James Oldham’s definition of rhetoric in *Reclaiming Rhetorica*: “a way of understanding how people do things, and have things done to them, with words” (Oldham 247). The writers are doing things inside themselves, within their small group, and in their neighborhood and city. The work with the Tenderloin Women Writers Workshop reverberates the simple but powerful belief that writing has power to shape people and form group identity and association.

Another classroom example of acts of writing increasing self-awareness comes from Patricia Shelley Fox’s study of nontraditional female students returning to college. She demonstrates how when students write about their ideas regarding the text, they decipher life and their place in it. She writes, “Their voices, both written and oral, tell stories of their encounters with ideas and texts that, often for the first time, offer them (and those of us who work with them) ways of seeing and naming women’s lives that allow them to make sense, to lay claim, and to move forward” (200). Fox comments that composition instructors often conceptualize their work around traditional teenagers newly graduated from high school and imagine they need to propel them “from credulity to incredulity” as they work to “complicate a worldview that,

until now, has rested upon received truths and inherited cultural narratives” (200). In her research, though, Fox describes her students as tested and tried by life. Her female students wrote about the experience of packing up children and leaving abusive husbands, of coming to grips with unrealized fantasies about what life as wives and mothers would be, and of facing the reality that their neglected potential and lack of education robbed them of even more than credentials and upward mobility. I initiated this research in large part to discover for myself the ways the claims of the organizations make and the claims composition studies make can be true. Is literacy a ticket to a fuller life? Does writing empower people helping them to see themselves and the world more critically? Can the stories like those in Heller’s book about a Tenderloin writing group or in Fox’s article be accepted as evidence that writing is that powerful in individuals’ lives and self-perceptions?

At the close of this section on what writing does to shape identities, I look to Nancy Welch’s article “‘And Now That I Know Them’: Composing Mutuality in a Service Learning Course” to add balance to my review of how writing offers many beneficial and empowering outcomes. When making a case that writing is powerful, I should avoid being too idyllic about what writing does. Welch suggests that we need “complex representations” of people and issues amidst critical literacy discussions. Understanding literacy is not as simple as citing published works that show writing is used to empower people. When Welch’s students in a U.S. Literacy Politics course volunteered at a downtown community center, they worked with young people who nearly all described having had reading and writing used as a punishment. They described writing narrowly as a school-sponsored activity, and excluded their acts of composing in their personal lives (“And Now That I Know Them” 249). While at the center, Welch’s students grappled with problems such as unintentionally reinforcing stereotypes and reiterating messages

of “things will never change” for those who live in the neighborhood. The students at the center were too often tagged with labels like “lacking and deficient.” Welch said that sometimes educators, well-meaning programmers, and volunteers at the center would reinforce these labels. Like the youth in Welch’s article, the women writers in my study are not void of literacy skills before they show up to the organizations. Welch points out that the teens her class worked with were not disengaged or passive, and those working to increase literacy must not assume that we arrive in classrooms, community centers, or outreach organizations, and with us comes the ultimate way to empower others (“And Now That I Know Them” 254). While discussing the myth that people succeed through hard work (even people with very little privilege in oppressive systems), one of Welch’s students broke through mutually exclusive thinking to say “while hard work isn’t everything, it isn’t nothing either.” This mutual view can also be applied to writing; writing isn’t everything, but it isn’t nothing either.

My study collects the stories of what writing is at the advocacy sites participating in my research. What does writing mean to the lives of the women who write there? What does writing mean to the programmers who believe in the power of writing so much, that they would build their careers around using it to help women? Located in that mutual or overlapping space Welch talks about, is evidence suggesting writing does things. In that space, the act of writing certainly does invite disturbance. It stirs things up and creates moments to see and consider ideas. Welch says that while working at the center, she sees “a great deal of agitation as students seek to reclaim the possibilities of language, dialogue, collectivity, and creativity in tension with a recognition that the problems are greater than the micro-formulations and micro-solutions” (“And Now That I Know Them” 257). The mindsets of mutuality and intersectionality can help

researchers such as myself avoid conveying simple representations of complex literacy issues and sophisticated identities.

My belief that writing has power to shape people's identities is a control belief; it dictates how I do my work without me being consciously aware of how influential this idea is. I believe the importance of literacy goes well beyond first-year composition and deep into how students see themselves as thinkers, contributors, and valuable human beings. Writing offers an internal reflection through an outward expression. Writing reaches into all arenas of life as people seek to send messages, know and be known, get access to resources, take risks, heal, liberate, name and rename, build self-esteem, and come to voice. If educators and advocacy workers are looking for ways to make life better and more livable, writing is a tool for doing this work. This study stands on the idea that writing has power to shape identities, and proceeds from there to gather narratives from some who are using writing as advocacy.

### **The Importance of Documenting Women's Rhetorics**

In their article "Feminism in Composition: Inclusion, Metonymy, and Disruption," authors Ritchie and Boardman outline a historical survey of feminism in composition. In the early 70s, the focus was on addressing "the long absence of women from intellectual and political landscapes, inserting women's perspectives into contexts dominated by patriarchy, and giving women equal status with men," (10) even as composition studies stood out in the academy as a discipline already opening its structures to women. The central goal of inclusion occupied major NCTE publications and communication in an effort to "disrupt business-as-usual in the profession" in regard to women's access to leadership and to insert feminist practices such as "nurturing, collaboration, revisioning and decentering" (Ritchie and Boardman 11 and 15). Throughout the 70s, women made strides in leadership in the field and especially in publishing.



Ritchie and Boardman name such women as Mina Shaughnessy, Janet Emig, Ann Berthoff, Sandra Perl, Anne Gere, and Lillian Bridwell-Bowles as models whose works were widely read in a time when the field's prominent roles were held mostly by males (15). The consciousness-raising that took place in the 60s and 70s for women in society-at-large also took place in the essays and personal narratives written by women in composition.

These disruptive essays are what Ritchie and Boardman said created disruptions also within feminism, giving more play to a key aspect of feminism—"the proliferation of difference" (19). The feminist writers at the time would "recount their worries about being accused of biological determinism, about seeming to exclude men, about appearing unprofessional, and about calling attention to themselves as women" (18). Today feminist rhetoricians continue to read and re-read the feminist writings of the 70s, considering how early voices resisted marginalizing women, how they disrupted the norms and the scripts we follow, and how they speak to us about the actions and reactions toward progress for women. All point to the "rich tradition of feminist thought and activity in composition" (Ritchie and Boardman 21). The authors close their article with the observation that even though compositionists working in the field have researched aspects of race, class, and gender shaping our pedagogy, they have not yet "come to terms with the students' or teachers' gendered, classed, or raced position in the academy..." (23). My study seeks to respond to this feminist concern while also hearing some of the stories of women's experiences and identities as writers who are coming to terms with contemporary issues for women.

In the article "Border Crossings: Intersections of Rhetoric and Feminism," Ede, Glenn, and Lunsford map out how the borders along traditional rhetoric and feminism create spaces that mingle rhetorical techniques with feminist approaches to promote exchange, invite inclusivism,

accept difference, build understanding, and do all this without colonizing Others. The authors remind us how “feminists had to recognize, remember, and challenge traditional understandings of the rhetor, for until recently, the figure of the rhetor has been assumed to be masculine, unified, stable, autonomous, and capable of acting rationally on the world through language” (59). Any person not fitting this description such as people of color, women, uneducated laborers, and people who could not contain their emotionalism were not candidates for employing the rhetorical arts. This article documents rhetors who defied the traditional image of a capable rhetor to challenge norms. They included feminists such as Audre Lorde, Jane Tompkins, Margaret Fuller, Emma Goldman, Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva, Michelle Cliff, Sojourner Truth, Aspasia, Margery Kempe, Margaret More Roper, Anne Willis Richards, and Gloria Anzaldua, whose borderland metaphor frames the article. This comprehensive look at how notable historical and contemporary women approach knowing, writing, and speaking exemplifies the importance of studying feminist rhetoric and including the lives and work of women in rhetoric and composition. This section of the literature review acknowledges a portion of composition studies that engages in advocacy for women.

Katherine Kelleher Sohn’s study of Appalachian women after graduation examines the ways in which cultural roles influence women. Sohn’s study is an example of the benefits of studying and documenting women’s rhetorical practices. I include her research here because she worked with women who were seeking education and literacy awareness in order to improve their lives and along the way, they revision their identities. This parallels some of the motivations of the organizations and participants in my study. In Sohn’s context, the rural women carried with them the message to not get “above their raisings” (433). The results of the study showed that in their effort to seek higher education, the women overcame poor high school

experiences, restrictions based on their gender, and fruitless jobs. Sohn reports they were capable of “adapting academic literacy to their own purposes, and maintaining the common sense they valued” (440). Regarding her purpose as a teacher, Sohn says it was not in coaching students about what to write; her students did not have trouble generating writing content since they had a large amount of life experiences from which to draw. She saw her primary role as “boosting confidence” (434).

At the start of this study I asked these broad questions: Do we mostly teach skills, or do we also develop people/identities? Can students, as is commonly expressed, “find their voices” in our classes? How can rhetorical acts respond to messages and factors that impede and limit women? To close this second section of the literature review, I would like to address these questions through Sohn’s findings about her group of Appalachian students. The participants reported increased self-esteem and the chance to be “somebody” when they transformed “from a passive to an active role” (Neilsen qtd. in Sohn 443). Sohn writes, “The women are making their voices heard by using literacy in their jobs, community, and homes. Knowing the power of literacy, they are invested in the concept of lifelong learning” (443). She offers astute commentary on identity formation as it relates to regional prejudices and elitist attitudes of educators who might assume working class students want to move up and out of their communities. Her participants’ stories offer inspiring anecdotes to writing instructors; the women moved from silence to voice in part, because of their college experiences and personal values. This research study, like so many in feminist rhetorical studies, humanizes its participants and humanizes our work, and it exemplifies how composition studies does and should continue to value feminist rhetorical studies.

## **Pedagogy Informed by Students' Lives**

The editors of *Crossing Borderlands: Composition and Postcolonial Studies* cite a list of traditional values in composition studies including concerns “for access, agency, and material conditions of student writers and their teachers” (Lunsford and Ouzgane 4). My third argument in this literature review makes the case that students’ lives and selves outside the classroom should impact pedagogies and theories within the classroom. Ellen Cushman reminds writing instructors that we lose precious contributions to the generating of theory if we do not look beyond the ivory towers to people’s literacy experiences outside our universities (“The Rhetorician” 23). She echoes Freire in calling us to theorize and think about reality, and a way to do this is to seek the context in which our students live (“The Rhetorician” 11). When those who teach with a critical or feminist pedagogy consider how literacy skills shape students’ lives, we may move closer to truly empowering students. Cushman’s is: “(a) to enable someone to achieve a goal by providing resources for them; (b) to facilitate actions associated with language and literacy; (c) to lend our power or status to forward people’s achievement. In this sense, composition instructors contribute growth for students to experience ‘the luxuries of literacy’” (“The Rhetorician” 14) and observe how these might change their lives in small acts personally and in wider social change.

Students will go on to hold jobs where they need to work with authoritative structures built on control and individual success and they will go on to collaborative careers in service to others, possibly mixing the demands of both rhetorics in their workplaces. Nancy Welch discusses students’ preparation and asks a vital question about empowering women: “What are the full range of rhetorical practices and analytical insights we need to fight women’s oppression?” (“Taking Sides” 157). Students will need training in rhetorical strategies to

become skilled at working with others in ways that thoughtfully consider tensions and responsibilities to resist power abuses and support good work within organizations and structures that shape their lives. Welch writes, “We fall short of teaching the full problems and responsibilities, all that’s needed to go up against systems of oppression, when we remove the tension between exposition *and* assertion, inquiry *and* argument, unsettling *and* concluding” (“Taking Sides” 158). Welch cautions those working in literacy to prepare students for more than traditional structures where individuals seek to rise to the top; instead, our rhetorical instruction should highlight the collective and democratic strategies that prepare students for the “daily antagonisms (including bosses, bills, layoffs) from which a life in school is no escape” (“Taking Sides” 158). The relevance of rhetorical instruction should be more than preparing students for more college writing or writing in the workplace. Increasing students’ abilities to address societal limitations and life’s antagonism should inform compositionists’ plans and approaches in the classroom. My inquiry goes beyond classroom data-gathering to examine writing for the sake of naming and addressing factors and grand metaphors that restrict students’ identities and lives. The data in this study comes from beyond the classroom and springs from the material lives of women in a non-profit setting. What do advocacy workers say the women they work with need to do to increase their literacy skills and strengthen their voices? What are the women in my study up against, and how is writing addressing the limitations they experience? How might these stories and the data speak to compositionists’ pedagogy?

Our students sometimes write the primary text for our classrooms as they write their essays and papers or their creative fictions and non-fictions, and the content is often inspired by their realities, their research interests, or their perspectives on culture. Susan Jarratt speaks to how students’ gendered experiences are present in the work we do as writing instructors. She

notes cultural scripts tell us which traits and behaviors typically belong to women and which typically belong to men, trying to neatly divide these traits into two categories in which all people lose out. Jarratt writes, “Teaching students how this system works—and, perhaps even more important, learning from their experiences how it works now and in many different ways—is centrally connected with the teaching of writing—not a digressive special interest affair” (“Feminist Pedagogies” 116). I discuss the work of scholars in the field here to support my assumption that instructors should carve out a place on their list of many priorities—the classical canons that produce good writing, the assessment standards at our universities, the service-oriented nature of preparing students for future courses, the many paradigms and ideological struggles—to acknowledge more fully the material lives of students. What are students going through when they’re not in our classrooms? What factors might limit them or support them? How do they come to voice and what does that mean for them?

William Breeze’s article “Constructing a Male Feminist Pedagogy: Authority, Practice, and Authenticity in the Composition Classroom,” discusses how male teachers and students can connect with feminist teaching and “bear witness to experiences of their female students and peers,” (64). Breeze offers two insights about feminism’s and composition’s connections to students’ lived experiences. He says: “feminism has a crucial part to play in the political and social lives of our students, and that stereotypical depictions of feminism can be overcome in the composition classroom when particular attention is paid to the role the instructor’s identity plays in the classroom discourse” (71). Also, “feminist pedagogy encourages both female and male students to reevaluate their perspectives on gender relations within their own social spheres and draws attention to how they may be implicated in violent or sexist acts that demean themselves and others.” Feminism has not outlived its usefulness in our students’ lives and Breeze’s

observations from the classroom show how an instructor's personal commitment to feminism and giving feminism credit can help students understand it beyond the typical misinformation about feminism. If students are not engaged in this way, they may leave the academy having never experienced critical contact with gender issues that would consistently impact their daily lives and self-concepts. Gender is obviously a pervasive factor in humanity and social construction, and composition instructors are strategically located in a setting open to grapple with key life issues. Messages and social scripts about gender and systems of power surround students. Education should offer students literacy and language to engage these dynamics and equip students to more competently confront them. This belief is core to my study as I report how some advocacy workers' narratives speak to compositionists' understanding of voice and developing students' voices.

Heather Bruce's study *Literacies, Lies, and Silences: Girls' Writing Lives in the Classroom* is a strong example of this type of engagement that connects the classroom to advocacy in students' lives. The research took place from 1992 to 1995 in women's studies classes where Bruce wove gender-focused writing assignments into the curriculum for her ethnographic investigation. Bruce says:

In women's studies, writing became a strategic mechanism that allowed young women to give voice to and to critically examine their gendered worlds in an effort to construct other possible visions of gender performance. I used writing to dialogue with students in order to defamiliarize the familiar, to make visible the invisible, to rupture the boundaries between gendered oppositions, and to expand the limits of gendered thinking. (14)

Bruce found “multiple pedagogical insights about teaching writing to female students” (17) by analyzing the writing of high school writers as well as interviewing those in charge of their development. She argues that the discussion of composition’s legitimacy as a field prevents the important work of attending to the needs of gendered writers. This observation accompanies a list of implications and suggestions for writing instructors: foster environments that propel women to speak “above a history of silent and disenfranchised voices” (203); discuss their lives and the things they carry with them; connect academic studies to their lives; do not “deny our students’ desires to gain the ‘goods’ that their culture views as right and necessary” (210); consider the embodiment the instructor represents in relation to what degree he or she acts out the normative tropes or radically departs from them in his or her material life (211); and recognize discipline-specific competition between approaches to teaching writing as unhelpful to female writers and place the energy usually spent debating approaches toward writing invitations to students who are “aware of expressive, cognitive process, and social rhetorical/feminist interpretive, and performative transformation” (213). The writing from my participating sites often addresses social ills, and the programming at the feminist non-profits uses writing to increase awareness about women’s lived experiences and some of the material circumstances they encounter.

The remaining research to be cited in this section continues to make a case for instructors in the academy engaging intentionally with the material lives of students. Over the decades of research, the breadth of the discussion about women’s issues and women’s writing has grown increasingly more sophisticated and inclusive of the intersectionality of diverse women’s identity makeup. With this in mind, I cite publications about female student writers chronologically through the decades, working my way toward contemporary conversations that challenge my



own inquiries about how we might possibly study the more singular issue of gender as a part of complex networks in global societies and formation of identity for unique individuals.

In 1971, Florence Howe published an article in *College English*, “Identity and Expression: A Writing Course for Women,” that describes women as passive students taught to follow directions and as conflict-avoidant people conditioned toward dependency on others. She says when it comes to writing, they need “non-threatening conditions” and to witness female role models who embody strength and intellectualism. Howe writes, “Intense group discussion about their lives is meant to build students’ respect for one another even as it should allow them to trust themselves to sustain intellectual discussion—and hence to attempt it in writing” (864). Her theory on teaching women to write well confronts social conditioning in students’ lives starting with the perceived problem that women carry with them a sense of inferiority and a pattern of passive-dependency. Her theory is that writing instructors should help women critique gender stereotyping and increase their self-awareness about who they are and what constructs their identities. These goals will directly impact their writing. Howe concludes with this point: “Consciousness or knowing fosters control: all of these terms are essential for the writer, even as they are also political terms” (865). Howe’s theory on women and writing comes from fifteen courses and five years of teaching experience. My inquiry considers these generalized patterns as expressed by practitioners in the field working with women, and asks, what factors are still inhibiting women in these settings? Do instructors still need theory about women writers? In what ways should we consider their material lives in the goals and outcomes of our instruction?

In the mid-80s, Nora Bacon published “Writing Assignments in a Women’s Studies Composition Course” in *The English Journal*. She, too, suggests students’ lives be paramount in our writing classrooms. She moved from *expecting* students to write critically into *teaching*

them to do so via her efforts to “build up students’ intellectual defenses against sexism (as well as racism, homophobia, ageism, and other kinds of deceit)” they encountered (29). She challenges grand narratives from students’ lives such as marriage being equated to entrapment for men. One assignment focused on how in the midst of women’s movement, women’s lives were in flux and, at times, confusion, especially pertaining to roles women live out at work, home, family, and key parts of their lives. She asks them to write about how women’s magazines perpetuate old values, encourage new ones, and do both at the same time. In her conclusion, Bacon writes about the shared goals between a teacher of Women’s Studies and a teacher of English:

We want our students to think critically and write effectively about their experiences, their observations of the world they inhabit, and the materials they have read. When we give them the opportunity to draw upon both our experiences as writers and our understanding of feminism to inform our teaching, we can help students see the connection between politics and the English language and appreciate its importance. (33)

My findings gather stories and generate insights about women’s writing in life and the classroom as a contribution to this discussion over the decades of composition research on women’s writing.

From the 90s, a perspective about women’s bodies in the classroom emerged in *College Composition and Communication* in an article by Jill Eichhorn, “Women’s Bodies in the College Writing Classroom: The Threat of Feeling Exposed.” As I talk about my argument that students’ material lives should impact our instruction, I need to bring to this discussion ideas about embodiment because the research in this area quite obviously strikes at the center of

students' lived experiences. Eichhorn expands on Emily Martin's research that looked at how women describe their own bodily experiences, as well as how they resist and reflect what the dominant culture projects about women's bodies. Eichhorn considers female composition instructors' bodies in the classroom and the ways in which they impact power negotiations with students. The author says she becomes a "symbol of maternal authority" and someone whom students expect to be "nice, loving, nurturing," and they feel let down when she is not (308). She describes the tension of whether or not to share with her students her internal conflicts about being pregnant and tired, not being able to live up to her own expectations of energetic teaching, and not wanting to talk about her limitations because she fears crying in a space "organized and defined as male" (310). She decides to write her students a letter about the significance of being pregnant and what it means to her to be a feminist teacher. Eichhorn chose to model utilizing writing to address social issues and, in doing so, she turned her classroom into "a space for counterhegemonic critique of the academy and the outside world it represents" (310). She hoped to heal the divide for herself and maybe some of her students that creates a separation between ourselves and our bodies as we go about our lives at work or as students. In acknowledging her female body in the classroom, she opened up communication and agitated the dynamics at work that can damage women's body images and limit the way we read women's bodies. When we make connections between material aspects of life, such as the body, and we name connections between everyday experiences and classroom learning, we help each other read the world and thereby position ourselves in it, hopefully with more freedom and self-determination. Isolation can sometimes be deterred when we name our experiences, name our bodies in those experiences, and cast off false divisions between the classroom and life. When we "listen to the

signals that come through the walls of our classrooms from the world outside” (Gere qtd. in George 5), we work against what George calls a “culture of disconnect.”

Separating the intellectual self from the bodied self and separating the cognitive self from the emotional self teaches a sort of habit of mind that is false. These elements of our material lives and ourselves cannot really be compartmentalized. Herrington and Curtis’ examination of writing development in the students’ college years speaks to this idea. They propose change occurs in us, the teachers and the students, when we sense our environments and physiologies. They purport that a teaching approach focused on the change in ourselves and our environments will “take the long view and recognize that development is multidimensional, realize that cognitive development cannot be divorced from emotional and ethical development, aim to help students connect private with public interests, and, finally, aim to foster but not direct student development” (88). It is a core assumption that writing development and student development are part of a writing instructor’s job description because aspects of life and of the self intertwine so deeply with writing.

More recently, feminist researchers continue women’s movement over the last forty years toward an articulation of the complexities of global issues such as economic and cultural inequities. Transnational feminists explore worldwide gender issues. Contemporary feminists must “confront how histories, geographies, nations, cultures, and economies remain simultaneously *connected* and *disconnected* in complex and unpredictable ways in the continual making and unmaking of gender across diverse (and often incommensurable) times and spaces, modernities, and histories” (Shome 255-256). The viewpoints of transnational feminist scholars caution me to resist the dominant western cultural view of women for understanding all women’s lives. We are in the midst of learning to rethink gender more distinctly through spaces and

geographies, noting, we are not “free of geopolitical responsibilities that come from occupying geographically privileged spaces in globalization” (Shome 257). Transnational feminists focus on the conditions of women’s lives and the layered forces at work that shape societies. Kelsh poses this poignant question: “How will the many women on the planet whose daily focus is on staving off hunger, on gaining access to food, be helped by feminisms that argue for liberation in language rather than for liberation from exploitive labor arrangements?” (105). This question evokes a message to feminists in rhetoric and composition calling on us to consider our work beyond the arena of literacy issues and into the lived experiences of women everywhere. Schell suggests engaging by analyzing the rhetorical actions of international feminist social change movements, broadening our attention to “World English” beyond the usual attention to North American writing and language issues, and relating global labor struggles to the immediate struggles in the academy regarding unjust labor practices and exploitation of workers in composition studies (40). In her chapter “Materialist Feminism and Composition Studies: The Practice of Critique and Activism in an Age of Globalization,” Schell makes a noteworthy call to feminist compositionists when she writes:

It is often said that we are living in an ‘information age,’ but it is less often said that we are living in a time when the globalization of capital has brought wide scale and often devastating changes to world economies, to labor situations, to the environment, and to peoples’ lives across the globe. Our feminist theories of language and literacy work must account for the social and economic effects of these systems on people’s lives and livelihoods and work to address and change them through pedagogical and rhetorical scholarship and activism. (41)

This call to consider women's material lives is profound, and I believe it should make its way into the practices that teachers model via assignments, discussions, and assessments in writing classrooms.

I believe composition classrooms should be a space for disrupting the oppression and inhibiting factors in students' lives. Limitations on their lives can be the very things that limit their agency and self-regard as writers and thinkers. But Lu reminds feminist academic readers to reflect carefully on how we invoke personal experience in writing about differences in students' identities and lives. "We need to imagine ways of using experience critically: experience should motivate us to care about another's differences and should disrupt the material conditions that have given rise to it" (239). If compositionists want to teach students and ourselves to think critically about gender, we must not falsely excise gender as an analytical category from factors of race, class, and sexual identity, as well as location, economics, and issues of nationhood and globalization. Lu points out that writing instructors can help students "recognize that gender is not the only determinant of our identity" and see that when personal experiences are used critically in the classroom, it "can unite teachers and students across the lines of race, class, gender, and sexual identity" (251). My study analyzes writing by women that often includes their personal experiences. Much of the programming at the feminist non-profits I study relates to Lu in that they work to help navigate difference and invite students to analyze others' and their own identities with sensitivity and critical self-awareness.

## **Conclusion**

In *Composition and Resistance*, Stuckey's "The Feminization of Literacy" chapter opens with the observation that "to invade culture is perhaps the primary purpose of feminism, and certainly a key concern of feminist literacy" (105). The metaphor of invasion may be

unappealing to some feminists, but the point leads me to consider how feminist literacy is action-oriented. To borrow from Oldham, feminist rhetorics are a way we *do things* with words.

Where Stuckey says invasion is a primary purpose of feminist literacy, I would choose the phrases to revitalize culture, to bring light to dark places, and to occupy sexist and oppressive spaces with a new position of freedom. Writing and words are loaded. They have power, and a feminist invasion of words should bring freedom. Stuckey makes the case that historically, women's movement in education manifested the connection between freedom and literacy (111). "Within a classroom informed by feminized literacy, teachers and students will learn to understand and to shed domination without having to trade one form of subordination for another" (112). With this statement also comes the reality that the current outcomes of the feminization of literacy have not been a dream come true. Women make up the majority of the world's illiterate population (Ramdas 630). In light of this fact, Ramdas asks some compelling questions: "Why is literacy especially a women's issue? Why is literacy for women an issue of justice?" (630). Promoting the skills and opportunities needed to write, critique the world, confront wrongs, access resources and information, and author one's own story is tightly bound to issues of justice. The power and problems in female literacy are a worthy area of study that can inform our classroom practices and contexts.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Introduction to Methodology**

My questions and findings in this study may ask of any composition or rhetoric instructor who considers them to question their assumptions about women in our classrooms, our responsibilities in their identity-development, and how feminist values might impact our work. As a feminist researcher, I also had to question my assumptions, revisit my own identity-development, and consider how my values impact this work. In the article “Feminist Rhetorical Practices: In Search of Excellence,” Gesa E. Kirsch and Jacqueline J. Royster discuss feminist rhetorical inquiry, highlighting the reflective practices that shape feminist inquiry and practice. They suggest “there will be factors and dimensions of scenes and situations that we may not notice, and especially so if we fail to exercise a direct and specific commitment to look and look again, listen and listen again, think and think again recursively” (652). Kirsch and Royster promote “reflecting on how we bear ‘witness’ to another’s life, and how we carry that new knowledge forward into the future” (664). This study bears witness to female rhetorical practices in feminist advocacy sites and works to carry the learning forward into composition instruction and what we know or have considered about women student writers.

Kirsch and Royster’s 2010 article on feminist rhetorical practices maps out shifts in feminist rhetorical inquiry. They note that the field continues to move beyond “rescue, recovery, and (re)inscription” toward new levels of discovery via new methodologies, “designing research that aims to enrich, honor, and support the lives of those we study, whether in the past or the present” (643). Many of the scholars I reference here are engaged in historical inquiry and writing women into history, but I find their research instructional for my own project. These



scholars value women's rhetorics, they interact critically with political issues around female rhetorical practices, and they do not shy away from goals of transforming research to humanize its protocols more and more. In my study, I look to contemporary women's writing and rhetorical acts outside the university as sources of insight and possibly to serve as a challenge to what we currently think about composition instruction. My research methods attend to aspects of inquiry that are important to me, including articulating research goals that improve women's lives, treating participants with respect and acknowledging their authority, and including narrative and story-telling elements to understand and convey findings. Narratives from the sites and the researcher are both "the *object* of study, but also a *mode* of study to illuminate experience, thought, consciousness, and identities" (Shaafsma and Vinz 24).

I seek to help women by exploring both internal and external limitations on women, and also to connect professors and advocacy workers to ideas of how writing may combat inhibitors on women's voices, and how writing is used to support developing women's voices. My data gathering is governed by narrative inquiry that focuses on how people make meaning of life and events through story. A simple description of this methodology from Schaafsma, Pagnucci, Wallace, and Stock says it is "research in the form of story," or "exploring the world by telling a story about it" (282). The data is story gathering, and the report of findings is told in story, often including elements of character, scene, and dialogue. Shaafsma and Vinz pose the question, "In what sense can we think of narrative as 'provocateur,' this is provoking new thoughts, questions, and possible explanations for the issues and situations we are trying to understand?" (9). The responses to my research questions will be gathered through narrative research as I "learn about the ways individuals and groups shape their identities through stories" (Spector-Mersel 215) and the ways in which their stories provoke new ways of considering voice and self-efficacy in

writing. In the chapter sections to follow, I provide more description for my methodologies via a rationale for narrative theory, description of the participants, discussion of research procedures, and outlines for data analysis.

### **Research Questions**

My specific research questions focus on documenting what writing is taking place in three community settings beyond the academy, and pulls out findings that discuss touchpoints between feminism and composition.

1. How are non-profit advocacy workers making use of texts and writing to help women?
2. What are the feminist principles and orientations that guide the staffs at the non-profits?
3. What ideas about writing inform those principles?
4. What insights about writing instruction can be discovered as a result of studying women's advocacy sites?

### **Rationale for Narrative Inquiry**

Connelly and Clandinin make the important point that “humans are storytelling organisms, who, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (2), and humans make sense of life through stories. How we make meaning and come to know things often happen through narrative understanding. When researchers study narrative, they study the way in which humans experience life, according to the authors. Often information that emerges through narratives presents data that participants may not be consciously aware of, as well as illuminating assumptions participants hold (Bell 209). Stories provide windows into the participants' self-concepts, values, and beliefs. Bell writes, “Whether or not they believe the stories they tell is

relatively unimportant because the inquiry goes beyond the specific stories to explore the assumptions inherent in the shaping of those stories” (209). In my narrative inquiry, I attend to the assumptions and beliefs the participants’ stories reveal since I am working with self-efficacy issues and coming to voice. What experiences were important to the advocates? When and where did they start to experience their own power? The facts of their lives are not as important as the story they tell themselves about their lives. At the start of my research project, I recognized that I am not trying to prove what factors limit women at large, or make an empirical case for what helps women increase the sense of agency in their writing and lives. I interviewed at three sites and had eight interviewees; this is not a far-reaching pool of participants, but a specified group of interviewees doing work that overlaps with the heart of my inquiry.

Other studies have looked at the issue of women’s identity development and voice with sample sizes that parallel my own (Blakslee and Martin; Van Vlaenderen and Cakwe; Allen). Sample sizes in these studies included six women in “Influences on Identity: A Grounded Theory Approach to Descendants of Freedmen,” ten women in “Women’s Identity in a Country in Rapid Social Change: The Case of Educated Black South African Women,” and ten interviews in “Violence and Voice: Using a Feminist Constructivist Grounded Theory to Explore Women’s Resistance to Abuse.” These sample sizes are not meant to be representative of a population, but instead, they provide data toward the goal of developing theory and insights about women. I see my research as the authors of “Composing Storied Ground: Four Generations of Narrative Inquiry” describe their narrative research: “We weren’t trying to *prove* anything. We were *exploring!*” (Shaafsma, Pagnucci, Wallace, and Stock 290). The authors reject the values of hard science such as validity and proof in the study of human beings, and they work toward focusing on differences in the data.

Sometimes narrative researchers record certain stories and sense they are significant without really knowing why at first. Pagnucci explains the writing of his narrative dissertation this way: “I started to write, telling a story I’d experienced, leaving the question of why I was telling that story up to the story itself. I trusted that somewhere in the course of writing that narrative I’d figure out why I needed to write that story” (Shaafsma, Pagnucci, Wallace, and Stock 295). Narrative inquiry does not follow traditional conventions of research. It provides space in the research process to grapple with what sometimes cannot be consciously known at the start, and to follow instincts about what resonates with the researcher. “Stories connect what we know to what we’re trying to understand. They make things personal, give things meaning. They make things matter” (Pagnucci 9).

### **Sampling Context**

I interviewed program directors and staff members at three non-profit sites. One is a nationally recognized youth program, BoldInk. The second is an organization that works with women who deal with perfectionism, The Good Enough Project. The third is a women’s center on a Los Angeles college campus that hosts Clothesline Project, a widespread program adopted by women’s advocates that raises awareness against sexual assault and domestic violence. These organizations are located across Southern California and provide services and community for women. I made contact with each either by matchmaking with the groups already involved who agreed to participate, or by simply making initial contact with executive and program directors at organizations whose work fits the nature of my study. I have found that in making contact with the organizations, the community-building and friendly cultures within the feminist organizations offer an “in” for a researcher seeking to study their organizations’ work. I was welcomed and eagerly accommodated by the directors and their staffs. The heart of their work is

to encourage women, and I benefitted from this value when making initial contact with program directors.

The organizations in the study serve diverse demographics including working professionals, teens, immigrants, victims of rape and domestic violence, as well as college students in general. By interviewing the staffers who come in critical contact with women daily and thousands of women yearly, I gathered data to 1) remind educators of women's experiences as expressed and experienced in these particular feminist communities, 2) update writing instructors on some trends of what factors limit women's voices as reported from these contexts, and 3) consider women's writing and communication through the metaphor of "voice" in feminist non-profit work 4) gather personal narratives of directors and staff members to explore how they "came to voice" and developed a sense of personal agency in their own lives. As people who have chosen to work in women's advocacy, these participants have self-awareness about their own experiences "coming to voice."

The criteria for the organizations included are that they: 1) serve primarily women 2) provide a demographic not yet represented in the study such as varied ethnicities, age-groups or needs and 3) have a clearly defined mission to improve women's well-being 4) implement writing in their programming. Three participating organizations provided a robust data set to code, analyze, and generate insights about voice and writing instruction, and the data includes stories from non-profit directors and staff members working with a diverse population of thousands of women in Southern California.

## **Gathering Data**

### *Primary Method: In-depth Interviews*

A key reason to employ the in-depth interview in research is because this method enables the researcher “to understand the ‘lived experiences’ of the individual” (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 118) and, to do so in the participants’ own words. My study gathered the stories of people who work in non-profit organizations at the task of improving women’s lives, sometimes in high-stakes scenarios such as domestic violence crises, and sometimes in preventative scenarios such as pre-teen workshops that are awareness-raising experiences. My participants labor on behalf of women; they observe trends in society; they respond to problems in programming; they raise awareness to prevent and address oppression; and they encounter female experiences daily.

I did emergent interviewing and gave myself the freedom to respond to content in the moment of the interview and went in unplanned directions in response to the emergence of unanticipated data. I focused on my participants defining terms and describing experiences, while closely noting their language. I asked ten initial questions and posed follow-up questions based on their responses. The questions were as follows:

- 1) How would you describe the work your organization does?
- 2) Specifically in regard to the women you work with, what do you see limiting their voices or self-esteem?
- 3) How would you define voice and the idea behind “finding your voice”?
- 4) What is your story of coming to voice? Personally, as a woman working on behalf of women, how did you develop your sense of self and voice?
- 5) What factors supported you to become a person who works on behalf of women?
- 6) Why do you work with women now to develop them?

- 7) What does writing mean to you and what does it “do” for you?
- 8) My research is in part asking, how can teachers and professors help a woman to strengthen her voice; How does your program do this?
- 9) And, for women in your program who have strong voices and senses of self, do you hear from them how they developed these? How do they overcome factors that limit other women?
- 10) If you could coach teachers and professors from your experience working with women, what would you tell them women need in the classroom from instructors?

The BoldInk interview took place with all three interviewees at the same time. This included the founder, the program director, and an alumnae from the program, and the interview lasted for one hour and 50 minutes. For The Good Enough Project, the initial interview with Sarah, the founder, took place for just under 40 minutes and with Abigail, the participant in the workshop, for 55 minutes. I conducted follow-up interviews with Sarah for 30 minutes and by email with two questions for Abigail in order to ask them both to clarify some terms, expand on ideas from the first interview, and update their personal narratives about their advocacy work. I conducted follow-up interviews at The Women’s Center also to get more feedback on two years of running the Clothesline Project. I talked to Monica, the director, for just under 40 minutes and to Rachel, the graduate intern, for 30. All the participants received transcripts of the initial interviews and the follow-up interviews where applicable. I typed the transcriptions from the recorded mp3 files word-for-word, and I archived each transcription.

### *Text Analysis*

With the participants’ permission, I gathered programming documents such as mission-statements in brochures, program and event advertisements, facilitator instructions, and

published books and writing samples from participants where available. For BoldInk, I used the prompts handed out during the workshop, programs from two fundraising events, a published anthology of the girls' writing, and a spiral-bound workbook of writing prompts and writing advice the organization publishes. I used all of these documents to triangulate ideas between responses in the interviews and published documents that describe the work the organization does. I also used it to write my description of the participant in the results chapter that focuses on BoldInk. I coded the workbook using for ideas per main sections and compared those to themes that emerged from the interviews: women's issues, the metaphor of voice, ideas about writing, and feminist principles. Mostly, specific data about "ideas about writing" emerged from the workbook document.

For The Good Enough Project, I used the journal prompts and the director's published memoir as documents to reference for content within the themes from the interviews and to triangulate data. Sarah also sent me her agenda for the workshop with typed explanations describing the rationale for each section of the workshop. I used these documents to describe the organization's work and the setting for the workshop, and to triangulate ideas expressed in the interview with the prepared documents and stories in her published memoir.

At Clothesline Project, I collected the t-shirts participants had written on for display and I transcribed all the text from the shirts into a document in order to code it. I also gathered the advertisements and posters that were placed around the clothesline display that described the event and provided statistical information about domestic violence and abuse. I used these in my results chapter to describe the organization and clothesline event. I returned all t-shirts and the posters to the Women's Center.



Analyzing these documents did not function as a critique of whether or not these organizations are successful in their mission statements, but the text analysis helped to describe the organizations, definitions of voice, and specific content under the themes that emerged from them and overlapped with those that emerged during coding interviews. Reinharz encourages gathering such documents as cultural artifacts for data analysis. “Cultural artifacts invite grounded research if the researcher allows the analytic categories to emerge from the artifacts themselves” (Reinharz 161). The text data was used at times for “feminist intertextual deconstruction,” in which I was “looking for contradictions within or between texts that illustrate the pervasive effects of patriarchy...” (Reinharz 149). Organization scientist Joanne Martin, quoted in *Feminist Methods in Research*, explains that the deconstruction method is done by examining what the document “says, what it does not say, and what it might have said” (qtd. in Reinharz 149). Her work points to how “well-intentioned organizational practices can reify, rather than alleviate, gender inequalities” (149). This method was mostly called on while analyzing the t-shirt texts from the Clothesline Project, and the contradictions are reported in the results in chapter six.

For analyzing the documents, I attended to how language is used in the documents and took note of what stories were being told about writing in order to identify grand narratives and driving dynamics in the advocacy sites that shape expectations and identities for both the women they serve and the staff implementing writing programming. Spector-Mersel notes the connection between group narratives and identity building in her article “Narrative Research: Time For a Paradigm.” She says “through the stories common to the groups we belong to we create our familial, organizational, community and national identities. Our culture’s ‘grand stories’ teach us what ‘worthy’ life is, what we should aspire to and what we should avoid, what

is good and what is evil, what is forbidden and what is permitted” (Spector-Mersel 208). My coding highlighted themes along the lines of what the participants name as their “worthy” life and the values at work in their writing programming.

### *Observation*

I also made contact with each organization while they went about their work. In the case of BoldInk, I attended two fundraisers, one public reading, and one workshop. I took notes and reported the results in narratives about my experiences during those observations. For the Clothesline Project, I visited the campus staging the event two years in a row to take notes and experience the clothesline. They were the first group I interviewed, and during follow-up conversations, they invited me to attend the event again since I was still gathering data at other sites and my study had not concluded. I also visited the project at the institution where I teach in order to write my own shirt, and this story is presented in the chapter about the Clothesline Project. For The Good Enough Project, I attended a day-long workshop with other women who signed up for the workshop knowing that a researcher would be attending. Observation afforded me the opportunity to encounter the work firsthand and be impacted by it personally. The narratives I include demonstrate the impact these organizations had on me. Observing the advocates in action also helped me to provide detailed descriptions for the narrative inquiry, to inform my interview questions, and to make the most of the recorded interview time since I was already familiar with the organizations routines and programs having observed them.

### **Ethical Procedures and Protection of Participants**

Each director and staff interviewee received an informed consent letter outlining the purpose of the study. They were informed that they would not be named, nor would the organization be. They were able to check the transcripts of interviews in order clarify, strike, or

add to any comments they made. None of the participants wanted to make any changes, but I did send them their transcripts by email with a reminder that they could give me feedback. I used the transcriptions during the follow-up interviews with The Good Enough Project and Clothesline Project to point out to the participants where I was following up on specific content. This way, they were familiar with what they had said during the first interview. The interviewees also received a commitment that the interview recordings would be deleted no more than six months after the study was completed. They were also informed of the right to withdraw from the study at any time. I did not interact with the clients or women receiving services from the non-profits except in the case of The Good Enough Project. This organization conducts writing workshops for adult women and the women signed up for the workshop I attended with the understanding that there would be a participant-observer conducting research. The other organizations serve vulnerable populations, so in those cases I heard only from the women writers by analyzing writing samples published for public reading and listening to their public readings.

## **Analysis of Data**

### *Coding*

The pioneers in feminist rhetoric initiated important work that I hope to connect with to improve women's lives. My connections to their work is in my content, in studying women's literacy stories, and in my methods to implement practices that are humane and participant-focused. I have found that a useful aspect of the archival work done by feminist researchers illuminates my path as a researcher by modeling methods for reading and coding data. For example, Sarah Robbins' *Managing Literacy, Mothering America: Women's Narratives on Reading and Writing in the Nineteenth Century* models ways of examining and questioning

writing samples and literacy practices. When Robbins researches domestic contexts where mothers teach children to read and write, she interrogates the data questioning imperialistic teaching designs in the domestic literacy narrative and asks, “is it possible for writers and readers to use this flexible narrative form to claim social influence without constraining others?” (9). Robbins’ findings examine the agendas at work in the writing samples and in the commentary available from publications by the teacher-writers included in her research. Through her reading of the data, Robbins is able to “revise the understandings of middle-class American motherhood to highlight its nation-building agenda” (10). As I read this methodology, it reminded me to code data for aspects like agendas revealed through the organizations’ documents as well as in the women’s writing. This is how codes such as “positivity” for describing feminist advocacy emerged. I read over interviews looking for the “particular brand,” as Robbins describes it, of writing being purported by the organizations, and in what ways the women act out expectations put on them by facilitators, writing prompts, gender norms, or other factors outside themselves, such as was the case with t-shirt texts when women cited religious and social pressures. Archivalists’ methods embody a way of thoughtfully analyzing and coding data beyond the surface and into larger schemes of life and literacy.

My coding for interviews took place via initial and focused coding. This is done first by studying all small pieces of the data from words and phrases, to sentences and paragraphs describing incidents. During the focused coding, I compared data to data and developed codes, and then compare the data against the codes. Charmaz says “codes stick closely to the data, show actions, and indicate how dilemmas surrounding disclosure arise” (45), and at other times, the codes convey viewpoints, document actions, illuminate contexts. Kirsch and Royster name *critical imagination* as one of three key traits of feminist rhetorical inquiry, and this trait is one I

employed while coding the data. They note that this approach of critical imagination transports researchers into the context of the women being studied, and it can expand to research other than the historical as researchers pay close attention to how women frame their own questions about their lives and how they make their lives meaningful. When researchers seek to understand a woman's context, they can visit and revisit the data and the codes that emerge from interviews or documents related to participants. "These reflective and reflexive practices have predisposed us to understand the inevitability that, more than likely, there will be factors and dimensions of scenes and situations that we may not notice, and especially so if we fail to exercise a direct and specific commitment to look and look again, listen and listen again, think and think again recursively" (Kirsch and Royster 652).

In coding organizational documents, I coded line-by-line to identify the intended meanings of the document and noted how language reflects the values of the organizations. I gathered a limited number of documents from each participant including mission statements/statement of purpose, writing prompts, and philosophies of outreach and/or writing. For interviews, I coded line-by-line before moving to themes, as to make sure I did not impose meaning or delineate ideas arbitrarily in the process. Eventually I reported the themes under four major categories of women's issues, the metaphor of voice, ideas about writing, and feminist principles.

### *Triangulation*

My data was triangulated first by member checking interviews as a key step to ensuring the message I received in the interview was the message the participant was trying to send. Participants received a copy of the transcribed interviews, and with those who elected to, we met to follow up. Sarah from The Good Enough Project and Monica from the women's center both

had follow-up discussions about the transcripts and both did follow-up interviews at that same meeting. For further triangulation, I compared codes from the interviews, with data gathered through organization documents and client-generated texts.

I also compared findings between interview coding, document coding, and observation notes to check my own impressions and understandings and to compare what interviewees described with official reports or promotional literature they used to discuss their work. For example, in the case of BoldInk, I coded a workbook they publish that contains writing prompts and writing tips from the girls, and compared that to codes found in “ideas about writing” from the interviews and ideas expressed at events recorded in my observation notes.

### **Presentation of Findings**

Clandinin and Huber describe gathering narratives from a participant as an opportunity to have “metaphorically traveled with” her in “a time significantly attached with learning where she had come from, who she was, and who she might become” (165). This is some of what I did in retelling interviewees’ stories of realizing personal agency and coming to voice. They at times described turning events in their lives that propelled them toward developing their voices or toward women’s advocacy work, and I retold those stories. I also describe my own stories of making contact with the organizations, and I juxtapose my dissertation journal at moments where the data interacts with my own developing ideas as recorded over the years of doing this study. In chapters four, five, and six, I describe each participating organization, tell the advocates’ stories, share personal standpoints and narratives, and group the findings into the four categories that reflect answers to my research questions: women’s issues, the metaphor of voice, ideas about writing, and feminist principles. Chapter seven presents the results of the study

crystallizing data about the metaphor of voice and discussing implications for the field regarding feminisms and composition, as well as hospitality in composition.

### **Audit Trail**

I archived all the materials gathered and produced for the study, including interview notes, participants' forms, my research journal, originals and copies of organizational documents gathered for text analysis, transcripts and coded copies of transcripts, and drafts of the report of findings. I returned the t-shirts from the clothesline project, kept my journal from The Good Enough Project workshop, and filed the prompts from the BoldInk workshops.

### **Conclusion**

Feminist methodology is a perspective and a diverse collection of methodologies by which feminist perspectives are applied. "Making the invisible visible, bringing the margin to the center, rendering the trivial important, putting the spotlight onto women as competent actors, understanding women as subjects in their own right rather than objects for men—all continue to be elements of feminist research" (Reinharz 248). My methodology allows for narrative, metaphors, and dialogue construction; it promotes emerging ideas, humanizing participants, and revisiting the field mid-study. But amidst the play and contemplation innate in feminist research, leaders in the field also uphold the feminist priority of excellence in inquiry. Kirsch and Royster describe what excellence looks like in feminist inquiry: "Excellence involves an ethos of care, introspection, and attention to the material conditions of the past and the present. It demands that we pay attention to how lived experiences shape our perspectives as researchers and those of our subjects" (664). My in-depth interviews, textual analysis, and observations allowed me to make contact with women's rhetorics and consider how the material lives of women and women's writing interact, how they reciprocate meaning to each other, and how they speak to composition

studies. The following chapters provide the detailed description of each participant and a summary of findings.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### PROFILE OF BOLDINK

#### **Introduction to Results**

The following three chapters tell the stories of the people connected to this study, both the organizations' narratives and my own during the research and writing. Each of the three participating organizations is described in detail in chapters four, five, and six via narratives that emerged from observations and interactions with them during interviews and while participating in their events. These descriptions answer my first research question: *How are non-profit advocacy workers making use of writing to help women?* The narratives introduce themes from the data that will be summarized more directly in the chapter seven findings after the results are initially described in the chapters that profile and describe the participants' work. The sections within each chapter, organized by themes in the findings, answer the second and third research question for this study: *What are the feminist principles and orientations that guide the staffs at the non-profits? What ideas about writing inform those principles?* Excerpts from my dissertation research journal are included and inserted at points when they overlap with either the women's issues present in the participants' narratives or when they address research questions.

#### **Profile of BoldInk**

BoldInk motto: Never underestimate the power of a girl and her pen.

BoldInk is a mentoring and writing program that matches teen girls with professional writers in order for girls, according to one of its promotional brochures, to "explore the power of words and writing." The brochure also promises girls will gain "confidence, self-esteem, communication skills and a sense of the value of their own voices." When I ask the program director what BoldInk is, Anna says, "It's literacy in disguise. I would say it's a college

attainment program, but the girls don't know it, so they join." After more than a decade of work and almost more than four dozen book awards for their yearly anthology, BoldInk recently received an award from the White House honoring them as an outstanding program for youth. BoldInk has developed a specific path for participants in a writing "season" of seven full-day, writing workshops, college visit trips, an end-of-the-season gala, and public reading. The BoldInk experience offers young girls academic confidence, personal mentoring, emotional support, and a sense of membership. All of these emerge at one-on-one mentoring sessions and monthly "flash" half-day or full-day workshops that explore screenwriting, playwriting, songwriting, journalistic reporting, fiction and creative non-fiction writing, poetry composition, corporate communications writing, editing and publishing, and journal writing. The twenty-person volunteer staff along with the founder and executive director, Christine, have an office in Los Angeles and their workshops take place at inspiring locations throughout the city, such as the Disney Concert Hall when the workshop focuses on song writing, the Grammy museum when the workshop is about screenwriting, or the Los Angeles Times building when the workshop generates journalistic writing. Girls find the program through advertisements on their public school campuses, guidance counselors recommending it to at-risk girls, or by word of mouth from friends who have taken part.

At the workshops, each girl is paired with a mentor for the day or work with their ongoing mentor for the season. They receive writing prompts, work through writing stations, hear from professional writers, and do activities to revise their work before the day's end. The workshop always closes with a reading in which girls volunteer to read publicly from their writing journals. At the end of the season, BoldInk publishes an annual anthology that is

distributed throughout the United States. Each year, one hundred percent of the seniors among the 250 girls in membership graduate from high school and one hundred percent go to college.

The founder, Christine, says of all the ways she could describe what her non-profit does, she emphasizes how they develop creativity and confidence in girls. BoldInk wants to make sure that creative capacities are valued and developed in all students. During the interviews, the staff members discussed how they do not see creative instruction being offered in school to struggling students. “What we’ve done is flip that on its head. We use access to creative endeavors and the confidence that forms from it to engage them in traditional academics and pathways,” Anna says. “Once they build confidence in their creative self, then they can go back to class, they can go back to school....and once they get it, once they have validation and respect that that’s who they are, that their voice does matter, all they’re going to do from then on when they’re challenged is find a forum or create a forum where they can be heard. They won’t stop talking and writing and thinking and reading.”

BoldInk battles what could be described as a dismal trajectory for many teens in the Los Angeles area who attend a struggling school district. Anna tells the story of an early BoldInk event where they invited their first group of girls to visit a women’s college. She asked one girl in attendance what she thought of the day that had been filled with meeting the president of the university and visiting classes and dorms.

“Do you see yourself here?” she asked.

“No,” was the response.

“Well, you don’t have to go here, and you don’t have to know yet where you’re going to college,” Anna said.

“I’m not going to college.”

Anna asked, “What do you mean you’re not going to college?”

“My counselor told me I’m not college material.”

Anna retells the story more than ten years later with plenty of ire. “Ninth grade! Ninth grade! That day, that became what our program was about.” Anna and Christine work to provide resources and enthusiasm to young girls in Los Angeles so that the girls who call themselves BoldInk Girls can be safe to develop self-advocacy against such people and systems that might tell a ninth grader she is not college material. BoldInk is a writing club that is a “force of intervention,” according to its founders.

*Personal Standpoint: Witnessing BoldInk in Action*

Recently I was able to use an expression I’ve never had cause to use before—I said, “I can’t believe my eyes.” That isn’t as impressive of an announcement as I wish it were, but the truth is I’m not good with expressions and I don’t use them much. I tend to botch clichés and mix metaphors. I like to think this flaw makes me a better writer since most writing teachers I have ever had preached against clichés. But, I was glad to use this expression for the first time. When I utter such a phrase, I feel more like my mom. The best of my mom. Last weekend I watched her while she stood over a wrought iron skillet scratching up thick gravy for the biscuits she had made.

“I didn’t mean for you to get up so early to make breakfast for us, mom,” I said.

The apron she wore was folded over itself a few times and tied behind her waist instead of her neck. It was an early sixties print with a brown and orange kaleidoscope pattern. The letters D-A-L-E had been ironed on near the bottom hem. It was part of a matching his-and-her apron set that had been a wedding gift. I had never seen the J-O-Y-C-E apron. It was long lost,

but my mom enjoyed wearing my dad's name. The apron protected her clothes from the bacon splatter.

"Honey, I don't mind getting up early to make breakfast. It's like rolling off a log."

My sleepy 6:15 a.m. mind took a moment to translate. That didn't sound pleasant, but it is easy to do. I watched her a moment more and memorized the expression.

The inspiration for my own expression was a group of teenage girls at a performance in Los Angeles where they gathered to read their writing to an audience of about 200 people. I could not believe my eyes as I watched each group of girls take the stage in turn and read their poems, prose, and advice about writing. I could not believe my eyes how confident they were. It was a surprising phenomenon I spent most of the performance trying to name in my mind. What was it? None of the teen writers appeared coached or overly polished at the mic. They were not all a generic version of confidence methodically imitating someone else's example of how to appear confident. There was no glossy pageantry here. Each girl was distinctive and confidently herself even when standing next to another reader vastly different in appearance, style, and background from her. I could not believe my eyes seeing the authentic confidence that beamed steadily from the stage as 72 girls filled an afternoon with their writing. They read their writing about murals and graffiti they observed in their neighborhoods and their writing about immigration policies and about boys. They shared from essays about mothers who didn't want them to go to college. One girl, a memorable writer whose grandparents sat behind me and cheered proudly, read her detailed description of a glazed doughnut, perfect and warm. I turned to tell her family that her poem was my favorite. They filled me in on the girl's acceptance to Georgetown and what she might major in when she gets there.

As I said, sitting in the audience that day listening to teen girls read their work was a time in my life I could not believe my eyes. Teens are not this confident. People are not this at ease. How did these girls gain such poise while being so vulnerable in public sharing their thoughts and their words with so many? I wanted what they had.

A few weeks before the performance, I had read a book about women in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco who met in a writing circle to share their writing. In all the months of reading dozens of books for my dissertation, this book was the first to feel entirely like pleasure reading. I got lost in getting to know each character who was part of the group. I read the excerpts from their compositions and thought about what feedback I would give if I were sitting with them circled up in San Francisco. I wanted to be in a group like this. But I haven't been in any groups like this for years. I'm a PhD student. I'm jealous of my friends in book clubs. I drive past the community garden and wish I had some tomatoes planted there. I think about volunteering at an organization like BoldInk that coaches young writers who read with such confidence that you wouldn't believe your eyes if you saw them. But, I'm not in any clubs or organizations because any spare moment and thought outside of my teaching job is supposed to be directed toward my research. I'm studying women's writing.

#### *A Description of a BoldInk Workshop*

When I sit down to interview Christine, the founder and executive director, Anna, the program director, and Nellie, an alumna of the program, one of the first things I ask about is the individualized confidence of each girl I observed during the reading. How does BoldInk promote this kind of confidence? "We have such a culture of individualism, so we don't have shirts or a secret handshake, and we don't have competition. We don't have a lot of things that unify or divide the group. We have unifying principles that guide us, but people are guided to be

individuals,” Christine explains. “I think that is part of helping them cultivate their own voice. That emphasis on individualism and what is unique to you.”

All of us have just come from a day-long writing workshop at the Center for the Preservation of Democracy in Little Tokyo. We settle in at the tea house across the street from the center and talk for two hours about the program, the power of writing, and the implicit feminism at BoldInk. The discussion is peppered with reflections from the many great moments during that day’s workshop.

The day starts with a line-up of mentors waiting to be paired with the teens as they enter the door of the building. Each writer fills out a nametag with a line available to write in her favorite word. One mentor writes “magic” and one staff member has the word “ethereal.” I spot a student walking by with the words “good grades” on hers. Mine says “sassafras.” The pairs make their way to a room called the Democracy Lab with tables and bright orange chairs and a warm-up writing prompt. The task is to think about your ancestors or family and write down ten words in your family’s language or an imagined language shared with a real or invented family. We write translations for the words and a poem that incorporates as many of the words as we can fit. Next we go upstairs to an exhibit that examines how women and minorities have expanded the understanding of “we” in “we the people.” The task is to find a character we relate to and to write a word cloud inspired by the exhibit. With the list, we write journal entries about our own lives using the words. The options to frame our entries are poetry, prose, a letter, or a monologue.

I choose a Jewish woman who was born in the 1940s named Francis because that was my grandmother’s name. Also, Francis was a writer and an English teacher. She enlisted as an Army Corps nurse and cared for soldiers in Normandy just days after the D-Day attack. She

wrote a letter in honor of them and mailed it to *Stars and Stripes* newspaper shortly before she was killed in the field. My exhibit-inspired words I pull from her story are: news, synagogues, waded, truckloads, thinking, penned a letter, stars and stripes, enemy shell, grand reunion, home, who is not restricted? As the girls rotate writing stations, they walk under an electronic sign hanging over the exhibit's exit that flashes questions one at a time: "How do you fight for freedom? How do you fight for equality? How can you help? What do you believe in?" The final words say, "You shape democracy."

When the girls arrive at the last writing workshop station, they meet a local poet, author, and activist who shares her art of translitic poetry, poetry translated from one language in a way that focuses on sound and rhythm more than the meaning of words. She explains how she assembles poems from words and phrases cut from front-page newspaper stories. Her work as a professional translator makes its way into the discussion about translation versus interpretation and how we can have our own readings of texts. All of the talk centers on the excitement of language, its foreignness and weirdness. The poet takes her material, the news text, and positions the words in untraditional ways. She has guideposts around the page of the poem, like maybe a larger word or a word that starts farther over on the left side. But even when she reads her own poems, she may choose a new path in the text each time. "I'm translating myself to myself," she tells the girls. "And you can read it your own way too." Readers can, in a sense, choose their own adventure as they make their way through the poem. "Writing asks us to think outside how we normally use language," she tells the teen girls. "Writing asks us to reimagine how we use words."

When the poet turned 40, she cut up the newspaper on her birthday and every day after for the year. "To write a poem every day was how I marked this significant year of my life," she



says. When the Arab Spring made up much of the day's news, she wrote about that. She says writing the poetry helped her confront difficult things in the world. Before the girls create their own poem from words on little slips of paper piled in the centers of the tables, Christine stands up to encourage the writers with the urging that, "There's no limit how you do this. Go crazy!" Later, when she talks about this part of the workshop, she tells me she was asking the facilitator to go around provoking the girls to create their own ideas and to do their own thing with the words on the tables. She could see how the girls were starting to look for the rule that dictates how the activity should be done the right way. "I looked at the first table and I ripped off what was left of the end of the paper, to create another piece so I could write another word on it," Christine shares. "There was an audible gasp that I had done this. That's the power of 'I've got to do this right the way the rules are.' It was another powerful moment for me to see how stymied our girls are in life and in being creative and thinking about doing things differently. After that I went to every table."

We at the tea house talk about the role of structure in writing instruction and the role of self direction. Christine explains how this translit poetry art emulates BoldInk's overall ideas about how to teach writing. "Start with a frame, and then do whatever the hell you want. I appreciate a measure of structure," she notes. The interview talk turns to the tendency to be rule followers, and I say I especially relate to the restraint of rules. Anna smiles at me and says, "You can always clean up the mess."

The big event of the workshop day is the public reading. We gather in a steeply inclined auditorium with rows of hinged seats that pop up quickly as girls jump up to read. And they do jump. When Christine announces the format for readers to take the stage, eight veteran teen writers move quickly to the four seats called the "jump seats" where those on deck wait to take

the stage and read from their journals. The writing pours out quickly and courageously. One girl reads, “Red and blue, but mostly white. I know who they are. The ones who were excluded. Who am I? I am Miss Interpreted.” And one girl begins her poem, “Father, evil troll. Segregated sisters...” and she is quiet and steady as she reads. The poet who stands out to me is the one who proclaimed these lines: “To everyone who said I couldn’t make it, it’s not that I’m stupid. Because I’m not. I’ll be the one going down in history as the girl who made something of herself.” The audience responds with a knowing group shout and sharp applause that end quickly without too much fanfare. She had not shared new sentiments in the group, but she had shared a strong personal conviction that seems to resonate in the auditorium. One girl takes the stage and says she did not get to a jump seat in time at last month’s workshop, and she wants to read something from last time. She does not apologize for the change in format. She is going to make sure she gets to read this time. As more teens get up to read, I am impressed with their control of language and the quality of imagery and message they quickly composed that day before switching to the next writing station. “Someone named Liberty gave birth to a nation called Home. Mother warrior, queen...” The workshop ends with an impressive reading of first drafts shared with confidence to a room full of peer writers and professional mentors.

### **Themes from BoldInk**

In promotional material, BoldInk describes itself as a program where girls gain “a sense of the value of their own voices.” Writing is the vehicle for learning critical analysis, creativity, and communication skills that all combine to help girls navigate challenges they will inevitably face in life. BoldInk fully embraces the intersections between real life and learning to write. The literacy and college preparatory advantages are to be expected, and developing confidence and self-advocacy are not afterthoughts; they are primary goals for this organization. The results

that emerged from the narratives and interviews are grouped below into four categories for discussion: women's issues, the metaphor of voice, ideas about writing, and feminist principles.

### *Women's Issues*

The words "belonging" and "community" are often used in reference to the benefits of the BoldInk program. An interesting insight about the mentors involved in the program is that many of them say they wish they had this program when they were girls, specifically naming the sense of belonging as the attraction to this group. "We didn't have this journey. We still need this," Anna explains of the welcoming community. "Get here, be here. Whatever it is, if it's messy, normal, easy, whatever it is. We'll do it." This sense of belonging is what, in large part, counteracts the limitations the girls bring with them to the writing experiences. The interview with the BoldInk staff revealed four areas of restraint on the population that attends BoldInk programming; two of these are external forces the girls experience and two could be called internal limitations.

Christine described the personal stresses and demands from family and school many girls have, and she notes how it often takes a lot of time for the girls to unwind and get a flow going in their writing. "Many of them have tremendous responsibilities and pressures," she points out. It can often take a long time for the girls to relax and really engage in order to say what they think and feel. She also described the outside limitation of disregard or outright scoffing at girls' choices to do something creative and to write. "The courage to share your creative voice is met at every turn with dismissal, with mocking, with denigration, and especially if it's a co-ed environment," Christine notes. She says this points to the need for girls to experience a gender-specific community in order to bond and meet emotional needs. From her experiences, she

believes no one in other places is soliciting the girls' voices to be developed, and many of the girls keep their creative selves hidden from their usual circles of friends and family.

The BoldInk staff names the desire to do things "the right way" as an internal limiting factor the girls carry with them. "It shocks me after all these times, even experienced girls who have come to the workshops, they really want to know what the rules are. And that is a restraint on their own creativity because they are so caught in that dynamic of wanting to do it the right way," Christine notes. The program coaches the writers to use some of the guiding ideas for any writing activity, but also to be free in their writing. Still, the writers return to default modes of rule-following and performance for others. Outside of BoldInk events, they most often experience top-down structures that limit their efficacy and self-direction. So, many of the girls go back to the familiar posture of trying to please the teacher or the authority. Also limiting them is what the BoldInk staff describes as a narrow vision of what success is. It is often defined by school standards and getting good grades. Christine hopes the work they do helps the girls to define success for themselves and to self-direct in their interests and unique creative expression. "In our environment, it's just about the person succeeding individually in terms of whatever that is for them," Christine states.

### *The Metaphor of Voice*

During interviews with staff members, the metaphor of voice emerged frequently in response to a variety of questions. Overall, those running the program have a critical awareness of voice and can define what they mean when they use the familiar term in the context of writing or teaching writing. Voice at BoldInk is an intersection of confidence, individuality, and creativity. It is reinforced by skill-building, safe spaces, and self-advocacy. For them, when they see a girl's voice clearly on the page, there is no intellectualizing of the message and there is

no distance between the author and the ideas they communicate. “So where we have to bring them along is, hang on to that confidence and skill-build. I view the voice as the cloud above that journey, on the march to confidence in their creativity,” Anna said. She notes the courage it takes to again and again go back to work at a piece of writing and to again and again, be guided by your own voice to get over one bump and then another and another in the writing process. Her primary understanding of voice is framed in a beloved creative confidence theory. Voice is self-efficacy in an Albert Bandura way, and having a consciousness of tools and skills needed to get by guides writers to view writing tasks and life tasks as something they can tackle and do well in. When they develop confidence in one area, such as their writing, they will also increase in confidence and self-efficacy in other areas of their lives.

Dissertation Journal July 5, 2011

When I made the drive to LA from Orange County to see the teen writers read their work, I felt alive taking part in such an event. I felt like a community member supporting a good cause. I returned home inspired to write more. Maybe I’d even try to write a poem. There’s something in the doing that is empowering. Getting out and attending the event for BoldInk made me feel engaged with my local community and made me see the value of acting confidently on a personal wish. I decided I’d stop wishing for more connection with others and start acting on my personal interests. Instead of just studying women’s writing this year for my dissertation, I’ll be doing some of it, too. And, some with other women. I formed a women’s writing circle that will meet on Wednesdays at 2:30 in the community room at my city’s library. We meet tomorrow. For me, the group’s purpose is to provide an audience of real readers for women who enjoy or want to try writing. Just setting the intention to write more and share the writing stirs up something in me. Instead of wishing I’d write more, I’m going to do it.

For me another purpose of the group is that in the space of this writing circle, I'm being myself. I'm a person who loves words and expressions even if I don't always believe I handle them well. I'm a person who wants to circle up with other women to chat and connect. I'm a person who understands life through stories. I don't want to just care about things in idea only. I want to care by taking action and engaging. I'm 33, a soon-to-be Doctor of English, a professor for eight years, and a person who has written and rallied for two programs to be created at my university. I've taught and lived in Palestine and on the Baltic Coast. In college, I was a winner on the national debate circuit, an eager editorialist on the student paper, and a constant community volunteer. I am drawn to a good public protest and I see myself as an advocate for others. But when I watched a group of teen girls read their writing and share it in public, I wanted what they have. The question that's driving me right now is why I have every reason to be confident and I believing my calling is helping others strengthen and employ their voice in writing, but my self-perception as a writer is hesitant, measured, and limited. I know I have a need to grow in confidence and to take risks in writing and sharing. In the resume and career-building, I'm about to arrive. With my degree in Rhetoric and Composition, my expertise is supposed to be official. But I know I haven't really laid it all down when it comes to writing. I've played it safe and I've stuck to the writing that comes easiest for me. I've limited my identity and my growth as a woman and writer.

#### Journal Talk Back

Looking back at this journal entry after having completed the interviews and data analysis, I notice even more of the women's issues reported by my participants at work in my own life. I often played roles to get through school by avoiding risk-taking or demanding opportunities for growth, like dodging creative writing courses and taking only the writing

classes I felt comfortable in. In the journal I wrote about returning to activities that helped me feel like myself and remain true to my interests; I had lost my voice regarding pursuing my personal interests and protecting my time to be able to invest in them. It is imperative that those working in composition not abandon this idea of “voice” as it pertains to writers and writing professionals. It will cost women and others who are at risk for marginalization or shrinking back from their personal and professional development if the field does not continue to critically look at voice.

At BoldInk, they don’t like to think of the girls’ voices as having been limited, but instead as having not been heard. Anna explains, “Voice is bubbling and developing inside them all the time. After the initial shyness, we watch it happen and we watch it tick down and melt away. And, there they are. And they walk differently and they talk differently. So, the raw material is there.” Developing girls’ voices is their proudest achievement. “You can’t unwire that,” she says.

A part of developing voice is the girls having safety within which to develop skills. BoldInk’s award-winning books are full of revised and refined works by young authors who have been empowered to ask themselves about their writing, always returning to the question, “how can I make this better?” Christine explains how the hardest thing they do is to balance including all the writers in the yearly anthology while maintaining standards of excellence, but she ties this dilemma to developing voice. Through mentoring and opportunities to improve over time via one-on-one support and writing workshops, BoldInk creates space for girls to “leave the nattering voice in the back,” as Christine describes it, and just get to writing and then revising. They tell writers that the standards are high and they also tell them, “You will meet them.” Through relationship and commitment to writing process, the mentors bring writers along the

journey toward excellent and publishable writing. The girls choose what they want to submit for the yearly anthologies and the staff works with them on whatever choice they make. “We know that magic is in there,” Christine says. She positions herself as an editor-coach and mentor-encourager.

The alumnae of the program who joined in the interview, Nellie, discussed how women in her Latino culture do not speak up much. “Mostly the men come in and talk to you,” she says. Nellie would never have imagined herself reading her poetry to an auditorium with one hundred plus people listening. “To just have the strength and to not be afraid that what I had to say would be perceived as valuable, I think that is what voice is and having voice is,” she proclaims. Nellie benefitted from BoldInk’s practice of encouraging girls to say whatever they wanted to say and to say it in their own ways. The girls write and speak as individuals while also getting the support of an audience they simply assume is going to understand and relate to what they are saying, Anna points out about the writing and the public readings. “The comfort that they feel and as distinct as they all are, that’s incredible and it’s a breathtaking moment,” she says. Christine is adamant about the feedback writers get not being judgmental or critical. The key belief is that they are not trying to teach girls; they are trying to allow them to be themselves. “It’s a place of support and inclusion that I don’t think they have anywhere else in their lives,” Christine relates. “Talk about something that may save their lives and change the trajectory of their lives and help them stand up for themselves more and their ideas. They kind of go inward in a different way of really finding out who they are.”

### *Ideas about Writing*

BoldInk’s writing theory might best be phrased as “Don’t worry about getting it right; just say it for yourself.” Anna says that if the best writing teachers can do is teach a girl to get it



right and maybe be creative later, writing instruction will be damaging and limiting. Creative confidence is core to the outcomes of the program and to how BoldInk teaches composition. “There are not forums and places for girls to be creative and to be self-expressive,” Christine points out. BoldInk staff sees access to creative endeavors and forming confidence during creative writing as the channels to success in traditional academics. They emphasize writing process and revision because they will not be false and say that each attempt at writing girls do is fantastic. Rather, it is a work-in-progress worthy of support. Anna is determined to value creative expression and to make sure that creative training is not just something offered to privileged teens only, or that it is seen as “the province only for high achieving students to engage them after all the work is done.”

The hallmark of the writing content in the anthologies they produce and during the public readings is the artful and abundant concrete details the writers include. Anna describes the heart of their writing instruction: “Write it messy, write it big, write it all over the place. But, get me details!” She tells writers she has total confidence they can shape it up and make it fit any restraint, like a word count or style manual standard. Write and get it out there. Shape it up later. The editing process starts with praise for the content and really pulling ideas out of the writer to expand on intriguing and stand-out elements. Christine warns writing instructors not to focus on form over content. “Say, ‘I loved this part. I was intrigued by this image,’ you know. Stuff that dives deeper into the content of the material, and the subject matter, the images, and the places it took us to.”

BoldInk staff offers a tough critique of writing workshop culture where they say collaboration has become more about which writer is the best in the group and how peers can critique each other more than support each other. “It has become this ‘I have to critique you

down to the bone because I have to offer a comment, or my turn already passed,” Christine says. “You’re basically taking the pen while someone is still writing and you’re telling them how bad it is.” Anna points out how the benefits of the writing workshop as originally envisioned by writing scholars has now become “peer evisceration rather than celebration.” She says whether it is women doing the workshop or not, it has a male dynamic of competition and puts creativity at a zero. Most detrimental is an underlying assumption that if the writing is not *New Yorker* ready at the workshop, then it must be worthless. “So many people walk around with that thinking as readers and writers, and writing teachers who propagate that, that’s the most devastating of all.” BoldInk promotes low-pressure writing expectations and chooses celebrating over critiquing, even into the revision stages of developing a draft. What many in peer workshops call constructive criticism is, at its roots, negative feedback. Anna says that since confidence is one of women’s greatest challenges, it is especially detrimental to let writing workshops turn into a cage match where writers are beat up or discouraged to the point of not writing at all. “Never underestimate the power of giving someone confidence. Even a college student. There’s no line that says now that you’re out of high school you can handle anything, you can take criticism, and you’re ready to dive in... We’re still human beings and we still all need the opportunity to grow our confidence,” she says.

At BoldInk, the feedback is in question form and is communicated in a supportive tone. What did you intend at the end of the piece? Can you tell me more about this part? I was not really sure what was happening here, so can you explain? The benefit of questioning is that the writer remains central. It is her work and she has not received the feedback of “change” what you want to say or “fix” what is wrong with her writing. Authorship remains in her hands and in her voice. The staff jokes that the evidence for this type of empowerment shows up when the

writers will not even let the anthology editors change a semi-colon. “We have created these monsters! They own it [their writing].” The mentors position themselves as peers and remind the writers that they do not want to write it for them via their feedback. They always want the authors to have the comfort to talk with them as mentors.

BoldInk staff understands that the writing path might be very messy and there will be moments of darkness, but if the instructors or mentors give writers the “warm embrace,” writers will create writing that does more than just follow rules, but that instead, moves readers. Anna shares, “I just wish more teachers would let it all hang out and writer to writer, we can get you there. We’d have writers coming out of the woodwork. We’d have people empowered in a way that a class is never going to let you have.” Christine makes the point that much of what women are shamed over is not being more linear thinkers. So, it is key that those who are mentoring women give space and time to be messy, to double back, or to wonder and think. “Things are not linear, and things are messy,” Christine suggests. “I try to tell my boss at work, I don’t spit back the answer. I have to think about it. And I may come up with some steps, and tomorrow I’m going to reverse myself. I’m still pondering...The luxury to do that is needed [for women].”

BoldInk works to accommodate writing journeys. Writing is not linear and it does not fit easily into a semester syllabus. Anna says to writing instructors, “Every once in a while a superstar will come through or the rebel will flout rules and you’ll reward him for it. But you would never tell the whole class because you can’t control it. Let that journey be more free. Have a place to shepherd students who really take the journey, and then part two is refining.” She also says part of the writing journey is to push ourselves out of familiar content and our comfort levels. Humans are self-centered and will want to write about themselves, but when writing mentors and instructors provoke a girl to embrace research and the many voices in the

literature, the writer circles back around to herself and her own personal story is much more refined. And, Anna says, it is “populated with the rich world” she lives in. This kind of nuanced development and growth as writers may not fit neatly in a semester. Anna believes that if more instructors thought of teaching composition as stewarding a journey more than achieving a metrics, writers could be more free to explore the messy, dark places, or lulls in writing. This acknowledgement of twists in the writing journey may take the pressure off writing teachers as a service course or end-all preparation for students, and perhaps a realistic goal at the end of a course is that professors know they will be sending writers on to another course or to future writing tasks that will shape them, according to Anna.

During workshops, another idea BoldInk embodies about writing is a resistance to hierarchy in its instruction. The facilitators ask questions and pull the material out from the writers while limiting time spent to disseminate information or talk a lot about writing. “There’s still a cultural thing in society that we need to teach our youth who don’t know anything yet, and it’s still a top down thing,” Christine suggests. “We work really hard to create workshops where we’re asking questions, where we’re making the subject matter come from them and as little talking head and us to them as possible.” Earlier that day at the workshop, Christine shared a poem during the reading about the Newtown school shooting that took place that week. She was struck by all the news reports offering advice about how to talk to kids about the violence. She asks, “Why aren’t you asking them questions? Why aren’t you putting emphasis on the children’s voices?” For Christine, writing is how she makes sense of the world, as she did with her poem about the shooting she wrote during the workshop. A big part of writing is grappling with life and our place in it, she says. BoldInk believes in imparting freedom to writers to explore their worlds and contexts and how they fit or do not fit in them. “I think any professor,

any high school teacher, anyone leading a workshop has to have the courage that it will be okay in the end if they impart freedom,” Anna suggests.

BoldInk believes in using time with writers to stoke the writing fire more than talking at writers about writing. “Sharing those ah-ha moments is so much better than sharing information about how you should write that thing better. Writing comes to you in epiphanies. It comes to you in moments, so let’s honor that,” Anna suggests. This metaphor of teacher as fire stoker is especially fruitful since they recognize that for most people, themselves included, writing is hard. “Getting them into the habit of reinforcing their own instincts by positive feedback, that’s how you muscle through,” Anna says. “I mean, nobody types up a novel because the universe just put it in their heads. It’s always a struggle to get through.” Talk of the difficulties of writing emerges often at BoldInk events, and the mentors making their living writing or supplementing incomes with other jobs talk about the realities of a writer’s life. They embrace the messiness of writing and the dark places and lulls that are part of the process. Anna explains, “I appreciate many of us teachers or guides grow to accept the interest and the beauty of that lull...the logistics of it [writing] just don’t go that smoothly.” The motivation for BoldInk participants to write comes from the relationships with the mentors and other girls, the support and absence of critique, the promise of growth and accomplishment, and the outlet for creative expression that brings about valued voices and many times, individual and social justice in that girls are heard and their voices are validated. In this program, writing functions as an instrument for creative literacy and college attainment, and also reaches the lives of the writers and issues in society, to also demonstrate how, as Christine says, writing is a vehicle of justice.

## *Feminist Principles*

BoldInk was the only organization in the study to initiate and use the word “feminism” when talking about the advocacy their program does on behalf of girls and women. They talk about how feminism comes in many forms and they critique a purist view of what feminism has to be. Anna explains, “There are mass contradictions and we are accepting of how anyone choosing to express their feminism and their femininity and how it is for them.” For her, one of the key benefits of being a woman is being able to accept a lot of contradictions and not having the need to be right or to know for certain. She describes experiences of teen girls coming out on a stage in front of 500 people and their families. “The courage that takes. Somebody’s got to have their backs. That’s what I think feminism is. That we’ve got one another’s backs in whatever you show up there [on stage], we’re with you.” Part of her vernacular to the girls who really struggle is to say the phrase, “You are with us.”

The interview with BoldInk staff clearly articulates feminist values, including championing self-direction, resisting hierarchy, promoting non-competition, and critiquing patriarchy. Christine says their feminist values are implicit, but they have had some workshops that directly cited feminist theory or dealt with issues of men verses women (e.g. can a woman cry in the newsroom?) Mostly, they work from the foundational idea that the writer, as a woman, is valuable and has something valuable to say. That stance is present at every event.

“I love that it’s just this solid idea that you as a woman have a voice, have something to say, have something people need to hear, and that you have to work on cultivating it and getting it out in the most impactful way possible,” Christine explains. “So it isn’t about being better than men or men are keeping you down. We know about that as adult women and know it’s going on on some level, but we put the emphasis on some sort of a solution.” They discuss

during the interview how gender differentiation is happening from birth, and they hope that in asking questions about the structures and patriarchy, the girls will be enlightened about it in their younger years. The theory is an early awareness will propel the girls toward solutions or resistance in useful ways throughout their lives. The girls, then, may not enter as many structures or relationships that are sexist, or will at least have more tools and self-advocacy to confront them. This solution-based feminism is a shift from asking, “What’s being done to you?” to “What can you do?” according to BoldInk staff. “We are opening girls’ eyes to what they’re reading, what they’re hearing, what they’re seeing. But we don’t necessarily label it and say, watch for how women are derogatorily treated. We just make them critical,” Anna clarifies. In writing workshops, girls go look at their world and examine messages they are receiving in life and media. Facilitators prompt them to examine their cultures and examine their educations. “Use your mind to make your own conclusion,” Anna challenges. “And that is a powerful skill that will carry them the rest of their lives.”

The BoldInk staff also critiques certain voices in feminism that frame women’s issues as tension-filled or struggle-laden. “If our girls or some of our women go out into the world and say that their wants and needs and dreams and what they want to contribute have equal value, they’ll find a place to make that connection rather than always making this weird evaluation that they have to always climb a mountain,” Christine relates. “The way you get out of climbing a mountain is you figure out how to go around, and I think that part of feminism is a dirty word, that any “going around” or any navigating other than in a struggle construct is somehow less robust or successful.” BoldInk takes a non-sensationalistic approach to most things, from its embodiment of feminism, to moments of girls coming out in public, or reading their writing for the first time in public.

The mentoring relationships echo feminist values. Nellie spoke with energy about what her mentors meant to her. “This woman who has a busy schedule and who has a career and is writing is interested in me? And in seeing me and in hearing me write?” The mentors bring in the feminist value of representation of women since they are often professional writers and women with influence who take time to listen to and praise the young writers’ ideas. They model behaviors and choices by women to self-direct and define success for themselves, but they also bring in the value of connection with other women. The mentor and mentee relationships house the moments of learning about how women can advocate for themselves and others, create together, and gather to celebrate women. This “advocate and celebrate” progression is really the complete manifestation of feminist values at BoldInk. Anna shares, “It starts with, okay you’re wearing ripped jeans and you’re wearing a ball gown. Okay! Come on in! It starts with that. And they’re new here and they’re testing. That to me is a core feminist value, you start with ‘you’ve got to advocate for yourself’ and then it ends with ‘now celebrate yourself.’ The gift of that. I still feel it every time.” It is why she works at BoldInk and gets to a Saturday workshop at 9 a.m. to host writers. She wants to reconnect with the girls and women, she needs people to be glad to see her, and she needs to be who she is. BoldInk does not have matching t-shirts so each girl looks the same or feels artificially connected. The girls experience “a place of being,” as Christine says, that gives them a feeling of being part of something where they are safe and supported. When they started working with incarcerated youth, a population where 95 percent of the girls report being sexually abused or being pushed into prostitution, the girls tested BoldInk staff for a while. They were on the lookout to see if the mentors were just there to fix them. By the end, girls commonly stashed their writing journals in their penitentiary jumpsuits to smuggle them into their rooms to write more. When it came to reading their writing at the end-of-the-year



celebration, the presenters asked to read the writing of authors who did not get release time to attend the event. “This kind of community could save their lives, and they know that they can connect with other women, at a minimum. They can go out on a limb and trust,” Anna explains. BoldInk makes an event out of the public readings. The writers know they have an audience who wants to be there and to hear them, and the sense of belonging and community is strong.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### PROFILE OF THE GOOD ENOUGH PROJECT

The Good Enough Project is a small organization that started in Los Angeles as an outreach to women dealing with struggles related to perfectionism. Women connect with the program through the founder's published memoir, the website and blog, and workshops sponsored by women's groups, inter-faith organizations, schools, and community outreach programs. I asked Sarah, its founder and director, to participate in my study because her organization uses writing and reflective practices to address some major factors limiting women today: immense pressures to be ever-thin and beautiful, to be successful and sexy, and to be deferential and sweet. While the other two organizations in my study are nationally recognized, The Good Enough Project tells the story of one woman's efforts to help the women in her life directly and in small groups, a handful of women at a time. It brings value to my research project because it uniquely and specifically addresses a pervasive contemporary women's issue, "superwoman syndrome," in which doing and being it "all" has to be done all the time and, by the way, without breaking a sweat. The Good Enough Project is a recovery organization that, in Sarah's words, "recovers the self," or identifies factors in women's lives that keep them from being who they uniquely are and doing what they want to do in freedom and without shame.

Sarah identifies as a recovering perfectionist. She created her organization and wrote a memoir about her struggle in order to help other women. She earned a degree in spiritual formation in a psychology and theology program in order to work as a life coach and spiritual director. Recently, she has returned to academics to pursue her PhD, she is writing her second book on gardening and writing, and she teaches first year composition courses at a local college in Los Angeles. Sarah says that most perfectionists she works with at her workshops have

addictive behaviors and addictive personalities. Through writing about and talking about the constant self-induced, community, familial, or society pressures they face, women peel back the layers to get at the root of what's causing the alcoholism, eating disorders, or any number of evident or secret symptoms women have. The organization makes use of writing in one-day workshops and weekend retreats to awaken something within and create those moments when women look down at the paper and say, "Wow, I didn't know I was thinking that." Sarah calls it "giving permission" to think things and say things. "Just getting them out on paper and seeing it, there is some kind of release that happens for a majority of participants."

Dissertation Journal Oct 7, 2012

I'm back to working on my dissertation since having recently become a mom. The research rolled back into my life today when I placed a matrix of hot pink sticky notes on my dining room table. They are supposed to represent categories of my study—feminist orientations, narrative signs, VOICE. I read over notes from one of my favorite interviews and then I click on the ultrasound picture on my desktop to enlarge it. Do I recognize my little son there now that I've met him face-to-face? That question is a lot easier than the one I'm avoiding. Do I see a way out from all these notes? Is there a research study here?

Jack is asleep in his swing. Yesterday he only slept 20 minutes. It's hard to sustain a thought while he flirts with me from his infant seat. Every 14 seconds I reach over to help him get a seal on his pacifier. My most recurring question in recent weeks has been, "Where is his pacifier?"

He just woke up. I just wrote two paragraphs.

*A Day With The Good Enough Project*

The Good Enough Project motto: Perfection is overrated.

We start with the rules. Later Sarah tells me that, really, these rules contribute to the workshop becoming a safe place, a phrase I heard used by all of my participants repeatedly. The rules cut down on the things she says will defeat women—competition and comparing.

No apologizing.

No advice.

No interrupting.

No comparing.

Whoops. I was already thinking about how Sarah lives in my dream house. A two-story craftsman home with a bright, retro kitchen and plenty of wood beams accenting and dividing the rooms neatly. It is not cookie cutter. It is an expression of who she uniquely is. Above her dining room table hangs a montage of artwork including her husband's favorite poem written out in calligraphy. The dominant piece is a wood carving proclaiming the word "gather."

As other women arrive for the workshop, I walk down a long hall to find the bathroom to wash my hands. I really just want to see more of the house. The bedroom doors are open and the beds are unmade. I am surprised. She knew we were coming. As I dry my hands at the bathroom counter, I glance down at a very full trashcan. A full trashcan and a house full of guests. I round the corner toward the front room and look into the master bedroom to see the décor beyond the mess. It is really beautifully simple. And then it hits me that our recovering perfectionist host left the mess in sight as a message to all of us visiting her home and her way of life. Later during a follow-up interview I ask her about it while we sit near piles of books for her

new courses. She recently became a composition and leadership instructor for undergraduates at a four-year university in Los Angeles.

“It’s a lived in space. I get to be in it,” she proclaims.

I flinch thinking about the stress I invite into my home just before guests arrive. I know the speech I give myself about how having company is a healthy motivation to deal with the stacks that pile up and the generally lived-in appearance my home develops by the end of the teaching week. Really though, I am uptight about a clean house and I’m ill-at-ease if anyone steps into my home when anything is out of place at anytime. Not so hospitable.

Just about the time when the workshop is to start, I exit the hall and walk through the group to settle into a chair near a window and in a position where I can see everyone who has gathered. Six women varying in age from mid-twenties to mid-fifties circle up in the overstuffed furniture in Sarah’s front room. We are all there to recover from our perfectionism. Well, I wasn’t. I was there to observe for my study and to maintain my hope that I wasn’t really a perfectionist. Of course the day’s activities confirmed that I was; I kind of thought all along I might be. I mean, those ruffled beds and full trashcans really bugged me. But, perfectionism is much broader than I thought before talking to Sarah, and recovery comes in a 12-step kind of way, like layer-by-layer being peeled away.

“It’s about getting to the root of, why do you think you’re not good enough? So, it’s recovery in the sense that it’s recovering yourself,” Sarah explains.

I hadn’t thought about perfectionism as something that could be recovered from. Instead, I just saw it as the way a person is, in a fixed way. Sarah defines it as “the expectation you are supposed to be accurate, dead-on, and without flaw.” For her, it manifests in that feeling of never really having arrived, the feeling of never being good enough, and doing things out of

shame and guilt. It also comes with a really large, large sense of needing to have control. Sarah describes it as an overwhelming sense that you are the only person you can count on. “It’s a very lonely place,” she tells me.

“Engage today and listen,” Sarah tells the group after talking through the rules for the workshop. “Touch and taste. Use your sight and practice slowing.” The goal today is to get the thoughts out. Sarah hands out small journals with each of our initials on them. I bend my tablet back and forth to get it loose, and I look at the paisley red, green, and yellow pattern with the stately “K” stamped on the cover.

Our first journal prompt: This morning I carry with me....

A lot of hope and a sense of freedom to enjoy goodness in this life. When I have attended workshops for writing and reflection before, it was angst that drove me to sign up and attend. I’d write from very raw hurts and wounds. I’m going to have to learn to write about good things too.

Below this entry I write the quote, “The wish that our lives might express the people we in particular are.”

This morning I am not carrying with me....

expectations to perform or explain myself to others. They are here as fellow high achievers, self-doubting or self-bullying, perfectionists types.

Today I really want to give myself...

a reminder that being creative is when I often feel most alive and true to myself. Opening my notebook to write or my art journal to create is when I’m poised to hear from myself. I check in with myself. Am I operating out of my true self? Am I running my life, or is it running all over me? Are the events in my calendar what I care about? Am I living the

life I'm meant for amidst the details of my schedule? Why do I so often say I wish I had time for reflection, for art, for writing, for lounging?

As we settle in for the next reflection activity, Sarah tells us to slow our breathing and our thoughts. "Really sink into the chair you're seated in," she coaches. "So many women kind of hold themselves up in suspension rather than letting the chair hold them." Oh my gosh. She is so right. I was holding myself up while seated. Tiring.

### *Workshop Agenda and Theory*

The usual agenda for the workshop day at The Good Enough Project, or TGEP, starts with introductions and an invitation to relax. Sarah goes through a brief lesson on vulnerability and typical female roles, all the while trying to set a stage for openness and honesty. She goes over the rules and welcomes everyone just as they are, noting that, especially today, they don't need to take care of anyone else other than themselves. That's part of why there is a "no advice" rule. The goal of the first part of the day is a common theme in the data for this study, to create a safe space.

Further writing prompts are: "Today I really want to give myself," "I want to say yes to," "I want to say no to," and "I want to explain." Any time they write, the women do a stream-of-consciousness composing process where their pens do not stop moving even if they only write, "I don't know what to write," over and over. Sarah says, "As they write they can see how much is actually going on in their minds, which most of the time carries an important element of reflection and surprise for people." She has noticed how many women she works with rarely stop to see where they are and what they are dealing with immediately in their daily lives.

During the next step, sharing time, the dynamics shift from Sarah as leader, to the participants guiding their own experiences. If they'd like to share, the writers recount what was

important to them or “what jumps out to them” when looking over what they have written. At almost every workshop, someone cries during this time. At our workshop, one woman talked about an abortion she had and how her family did not support her. Another woman says she can’t remember a time when she wasn’t on a diet, even though she’s never been overweight. She doesn’t want to leave this example to her daughter, one of a mother with an endless concern about being thin. Sarah describes this type of vulnerability as an important movement in a group because it “allows people to be where they are.” Even though it is never a goal to have people cry, Sarah does have a goal that a little community forms for the day where people express vulnerability with each other.

The workshop day also includes two sessions of contemplative activities. The first, Ignation Contemplation, is taken from the 16th century spiritual director Ignatius of Loyola who founded the Jesuit tradition. Sarah practices a faith tradition, but her workshop participants come from varied faith or non-practicing backgrounds. Ignation Contemplation involves visualization where participants inject themselves into a story they hear read to them. They then write about the implications of where they placed themselves in the scene and what they felt, smelled, and heard. In this sensory activity, as well as with the second one, Visio Divina, the participants write after coming out of a time of silence. The journaling time can last up to 20 minutes for most writers. Sarah emphasizes that there is no wrong way to do this practice. Whatever direction the women go with it, it is their encounter and their learning.

Before lunch, the group of perfectionists is tasked with making a big mess. Outside in the backyard of her urban homestead, a small farm in Los Angeles with a garden and a few farm animals, Sarah has a butcher paper-wrapped folding table divided in as many sections as there are participants. Each woman gets some paper and paints and goes to work beautifying her own



space, inside the lines. Then they are coached to take a few steps along the edge of the table to stand in front of a new space. Directions and next steps are being doled out moment-by-moment and none of the recovering perfectionists knows the end goal or what might happen next. Every thirty seconds, the group rotates and gets directions to paint, add glitter, remove elements or somehow alter the space on the paper in front of them. What others have created is being covered up and reformed. Women glance anxiously at their original space to see the “damage” done. Sarah continues to coach them to write new words in the pools of paint forming or to grab bits from the yard to add in some organic touches. “What color do you think is missing?” Sarah calls on a woman who is quiet. She grabs purple from the paint supply and is instructed to dump a fresh and orderless supply on the table. The women continue to interact with the unpredictable. They create something in community. “The goal is to move from a perfectionist’s idea of the boxed, perfect life, to a colorful one that is full of embracing beautiful messes,” Sarah explains.

The day closes with an art journaling lesson, and there are once again many options for performing the task. The only rule is no scissors; the therapeutic and messy act of ripping up images from magazines invites the women to symbolically or personally resist the magazine industry and repurpose the images and words from it. Sarah says the goal is to retain the sense of being a leader of her own experience. If they don’t want to do the activity, women are encouraged to go for a walk or revisit something else from the day.

Before closing the workshop, the group goes outside to see how the big, messy group project at the table has dried. The women make observations and share how it felt to create the colorful mess, whether it was anxiety-producing to not know next steps or pleasantly surprising to feel so at ease about breaking from expectations in behavior. The key thing Sarah points out is that the art—the painting, tearing, reworking, adding, and smearing effort—would have turned

out differently if any one of the women had not been there to contribute or if any had stayed in her own box. Boundaries in life are important, Sarah says, but we cannot box ourselves off from community. We must be free to engage our creative selves and bodies fully in experiences. The women tear pieces from the butcher paper and take them home as reminders. My glitter-covered and dirt-dusted section proclaimed from a varied canvas of colors, “It’s OK.”

The day ends with Sarah reading a poem. It provides a concrete symbol for transitioning back into our usual lives in order to make the re-entry less jarring. The women are invited to enter back to their daily routines gently. Sarah created the specifics of the agenda in order to engage all the senses and to give space to different personalities. She explains, “I want to interact with different forms of learning as we deconstruct and reconstruct the perfectionist worldview.”

#### *Part of Sarah’s Story*

One goal of this study is to share and examine the stories of how and why women who are now advocates for other women came to a place of helping others develop their voices. Why do they work on behalf of women? What in their life stories were the turning points that strengthened their voices and shaped them to do feminist advocacy?

“In my growing up, everything was black and white and you had a role to play. And, you got told what that role was. Really not a lot of room for building your identity,” Sarah shares. “I don’t even know what I would have sounded like as a teenager if I would have been able to develop my own voice and had a mother who was conscious of her own voice. That didn’t happen.” Sarah grew up with plenty, all the extra-curriculars and opportunities in academics she could want. She never had to worry about where her next meal would come from, but she points out that this doesn’t mean she didn’t have life experiences that needed processing. This truth,

that women from all walks of life need help of some sort, is a key point of mutuality in the work Sarah does now. She points out that life is messy and we all are, too. As a perfectionist in her family, she chose getting all As and scoring goals playing soccer as her way of gaining control over her life. When her parents divorced, she didn't disconnect and isolate; she took charge. Sarah writes in her memoir, "As a perfectionist in this family, there was a hunger in me that was never met, an inner voice that told me I was never good enough. A pain that wouldn't go away though I tried and tried to mask it. So no, my family tale isn't tragic, but I needed to explore where I came from in order to rediscover my true self."

She ran into her first mean girl at age nine when she was the new kid at school. Sarah pushed her way through high school as a student leader desperate to keep up a spotless reputation. She went to a faith-based school that was intensely focused on right and wrong, a breeding ground for competition and perfectionism. Sarah developed an eating disorder she took with her to college. There she plugged into the college life and found a mentor for the first time. She learned to care for others, but not yet for herself. An early dawning in her self-realization journey came when she spotted a flier that came to her house for a women's self-care and art workshop. She almost threw it away, but a small voice within her told her to attend it and invest in herself. Sarah had recently started graduate school, and said she kept seeing herself in all the slides during lectures in classes that were supposed to be training her to help others. At the time, she kept getting sick, and she was addressing a lot of things in her body. She said, "I was forced to deal with finding my voice because I said, 'I can't get out of bed today, so what am I going to do?'" She notes how women are often so disconnected from their bodies and dismiss them. However, in order to function, Sarah had to hear from her body and take care of herself. "It was

pausing and going, oh, I do have this knowledge in me, and I do have this wisdom, and I do have these instincts. And, they're good in the truest form of the word."

Today Sarah says it is her passion and kind of her motto to create safe spaces for women to enter into the kind of healing her journey has brought her. Her workshops function as an entryway for participants to start to hear from themselves more. She talks a lot about the wisdom inside ourselves. Since she was little, Sarah has said she was going to write a book, and she did. She describes it as the book she needed to write, the "story of a perfectionist's journey through self-care." She shares, "Writing became the vehicle for telling the stories that needed to be told." Writing became a safe place for her. She also added some circles of women to her life so these friends could know each other and be known by others. This group became a place to trust one another and to set aside competition and comparing. Sarah thinks the fruitfulness of this type of circle of women lies in this: "The women who have come alongside me are women who have made their way and have lived their stories. They are totally okay with themselves."

#### *Abigail Attends a Workshop*

Abigail signed up for the TGEP workshop because she liked the phrase in the advertisement that read, "A refreshing way to address your troubles." She was a year out of a larger-than-life undergraduate experience and now had a job as a nanny. This year was meant to be a year all for herself, peaceful and non-cerebral. The last four years were about holding down three demanding jobs and a full-time course load. She still thought about applying for a graduate program in Women's Studies and spent some time reading over program descriptions online at the end of her day mothering other people's children. "This year I think my voice was more drowned out by just the pressure to survive," Abigail shares. She talks about knowing her truest self and says she too often views it as not the most practical. Listening to herself sometimes

makes decisions harder. She sees her logical self as something in conflict with her true self. At the workshop, the women discussed the goal of being in tune with all parts of themselves and with emotions that emerge, even to the point of greeting the emotion and talking directly to it.

“For me, I feel like my life is a daily attempt to gain a deeper understanding of who I am and how to function at an optimal level—reach my full potential I guess would be a cliché way to say it. For me, women especially are seeking understanding of who they are, why they are, how they should behave, what their behavior means,” Abigail tells me during an interview a few weeks after I met her at the TGEP workshop. She talks rapidly and smooths her long, blonde hair with her hand as she searches for exactly the right words. She says what she means. If she were an actress on her favorite show, *Gossip Girl*, she would only need one take. She is articulate, full of energy, and seeking. “Any women’s magazine is full of tips because women just want tips, even if it’s some infinitesimal thing, to have deeper understanding. I just wonder where that comes from. Why are women so needy in that sense that they need to sit down with their girlfriends and get advice? Why are we not raised with more self-awareness and more confidence? Why does it take so long for us to find our voices? Because we are definitely in pursuit of it. It’s a high priority for us to have that.”

Her ideas about writing and voice and feminism are expressed with maturity. She’s always been an old soul. She grew up in a few different countries, and she was surrounded by adults and what she called a very conformist and conservative family. “My worldview was so limited that my voice was very limited,” she remembers. When she moved away to college she completely separated from her family, ready to exchange their plan that she marry young and have a lot of children for a plan that was anything other than having her identity dictated to her. “I had never tested anything and I had never really listened to myself,” Abigail remembers.

Since then, every year of her life has been marked by intentionality to foster her voice and to know it more deeply. Her freshman year she focused all her research and writing projects on understanding third-culture, those who identify with one culture but live in another, children like herself. The next year was about independence and working extensive hours in order to buy a car and build her own life. By senior year, Abigail read and wrote all she could to help her figure out her purpose and where she was going. After she graduated, younger journalists at the student newspaper where she was editor would say, “I’m not a Abigail yet, but....” She describes herself as a strong seeker with deep curiosities, and maybe she’s a high-achiever. She was famous for tenaciously chasing down stories the administration did not want her to cover. Her senior thesis for her undergraduate degree focused on the pressure women feel to do it all and balance it all.

I ask her if she calls herself a writer now.

“I think to myself I do. It’s challenging to claim that. I feel like when a man claims that, it has more weight, like it’s a courageous thing. But if a woman says she’s a writer, oh, you’re Carrie Bradshaw. You’re venting.” To her writing is like talking to herself as a tangible way to acknowledge her inner self and to release the pent up things, documenting and making the abstract tangible and permanent. “You can kind of feel how feelings and emotions can drive your inner self with no defining of it. It just runs rampant, unpredictable and you kind of feel like a mess. But when you write it, it becomes verifiable that it exists in ways that can be expressed and defined and measured,” Abigail explains. Her journalistic writing she did for her student paper and freelancing at local publications was always an empowering thing for her because of having an audience, being driven by a story, and handling the weight of communicating that story. It refined her perspectives. Her research writing in classes validated many of her

hypotheses about life and it revealed new ones. She used academic writing assignments for concentrated exploration of whatever avenue in her life at the time needed attention. “I think that kind of writing will always lead to enlightenment,” she declares. “It gives power in the sense that if you’re looking for answers, you can explore something and I mean, research is just pulling voices. If you’re looking for answers, you may not find the answer you were looking for or that you thought you’d find, but it may lead you to others’ answers. You’ll find others’ conclusions. I think that it gives you power in the sense that it gives you hope. Hope that other voices exist in your curiosity and your ponderings.”

And to her, voice is knowing the truest version of yourself and being able to not only articulate that to others, but to have conversations with yourself that are honest. Abigail explains it by saying voice emerges when we, in part, allow our subconscious selves to dictate more than our conscious selves, not impeded by what we think or what we think others want to hear. And when it comes to writing, she composes in order to have a guide emerge at moments when she feels like she doesn’t have a voice or can’t hear her voice. The opposite of this would be when writing becomes a performance, then she is not listening to her true voice. Abigail is concerned that women are trained to perform and not to be guided by their true selves.

After completing a primary feminist research study for her undergraduate senior thesis (How does a woman do it all?), Abigail started to develop her feminist interests more. She also learned that to be at peace, she was going to have to focus on something deeper within herself. She thinks women’s number one problem is juggling things that are in conflict with each other like romantic relationships and demanding careers, and motherhood and self-care. When women are busy managing the priorities that are at war with each other, they can’t hear themselves. Abigail admits, “I just asked, if I wasn’t trying to juggle all these things, what would I want?”

What would I be doing? Where would I be? I mean, I didn't even know. I felt like, going forward, there was no way I was ever going to find peace if I just kept pursuing things that were going to conflict with each other. The idea that a woman can have it all, yeah, she's going to be always failing at something. I didn't want to feel like I was perpetually in this state that I was letting someone down because in the end, I was just letting myself down and living with guilt."

Dissertation Journal Nov. 1, 2012

It is November 1 and I did not finish my last two chapters of my dissertation as planned during October. I had a lot of days with a lot of choices. Do I put the baby in his bassinet to sleep so I can transcribe another interview, or do I cradle him longer in order to extend his nap time and my precious moments of starrng at his button-face? Do I spend the morning reading Golden Books to him that I've saved since my childhood to someday read to my child, or do I re-read my literature review again and wonder, "Is there a dissertation in here?" Unholy choices and the idea of balance. At least when I do turn my attention to my research data, I find hidden gifts from my participants when they speak unwittingly to my mommy-angst. One woman I interviewed tells me that women need to cast off the idea of balance in exchange for the notion of rhythm. What is the ebb and flow of your day in this season? You won't be able to be all and do all, so what will you choose to pick up today and what will you choose to put down? "Stop being torn and stop being burdened," she says. "Choose your rhythm and live into it."

Nov. 2, 2012

My son is four months old today and no one has yet called his father a "working dad." My chiropractor said to me this week, "So you're not going back to work, right?" I had already told him twice in recent months that I would be going back to teaching and I would be half-time for now. Maybe he just forgot, but I kind of sense he assumes I should stay at home. I also know he



serves as an elder at a church that doesn't allow women in leadership. That bugs me every time I step into his office. While I could in the moment confront his limiting gendered norm for what it is, I'm still hesitant to fight that battle for equal views of moms and dads. Something about standing up for my professional self to my chiropractor makes me feel like I'm zapping away what is special about a mom's role in her child's life, like I'm fooling myself thinking co-parenting is really possible or even desirable. I want my professional equality and my mom pedestal. I do sense all that is special about being a mom—that my son and I are close and there seems to be no one more important in his life than me. I am THE mom. I have to admit, it is hard for me to hand him over to another woman for childcare. I leave the babysitter's condo coaching myself in the parking lot: "It takes a village. It takes a village." And, "He loves to socialize with other people. This is so good for him." I walk to my car rethinking and circling over my identity as I head to campus. I am a "working mom." I regret it and I'm proud of it.

#### Journal Talk Back

The material lives of women in rhetoric and composition is a topic that makes up a significant amount of the published literature in feminist rhetorical studies. I didn't expect for my study to interact with this area of feminist rhetoric even though I was researching material lives; I limited it to students' lives and needs. I did, however, encounter tensions about my personal material conditions in the field such as workload concerns, compensation to childcare ratio problems, and self-imposed pressure to hide my pregnancy while planning classes and contributions to my department. I had often taught five to six classes a semester to survive, and it was having a child that made me intentionally say "no" to extra work tasks and overload courses for the first time. If compositionists care about social justice issues, we should look to the conditions of the field and explore what's at stake if women are not encouraged to voice

needs and concerns stemming from their material experiences as composition faculty and women. This journal entry calls attention to the unfortunate timing that the child-bearing and parenting of very young children years parallel key years in professional development and such things as going up for tenure and the season where many people move from an emerging scholar to an established researcher and writer. The field is wrought with tensions for the women in it. The field is wrought with tensions for the women in it who are often in high demand in the home, and/or get straddled with unacknowledged work in academic departments doing the interpersonal and social event labor that women are often expected to do. Many women must fight to have research topics such as the rhetoric of birth plans or studies about women authors taken seriously as academic inquiry. The reclaiming and valuing of women's work in the field is tension-filled. Relationship-building with students is a kind of shadowy work task that is hard to quantify for workload and compensation policies, yet composition as a field is highly dependent on this work for developing students.

In her follow-up interview, Abigail shares how she has organized a conference on motherhood at a well-respected graduate school. She is an emerging scholar in her cohort of Women's Studies students. "When you're growing a lot, you have to be staying in tune with your own voice," she advises. "I think when you live with extreme consciousness to your own voice, it means that you have to be flexible and willing to make changes and let your life evolve, which is contrary to societal pressures that tell us to pick something and run with it." Whether it was turning points in her writing process that led her to new conclusions or her choice to end a romantic relationship, Abigail sees following her voice as the way to live well and live out what makes sense for her. She, like many feminists, is okay with defining success for herself.

## **Themes from The Good Enough Project**

These stories have introduced some of the compelling themes for consideration in this study. Below the results that emerged from the narratives are grouped into four categories for discussion: women's issues, the metaphor of voice, ideas about writing, and feminist principles. Additional results from interview coding and Sarah's memoir are also included.

### *Women's Issues*

Sarah describes writing as a beautiful tool to not just tell students how to pass a class, but how to interact with life. The Good Enough Project works with hundreds of women each year. In the midst of the work, patterns and recurring factors in life that can limit women are brought to light. Those factors that emerged in interviews, workshops, and documents are the following: the damage caused by women comparing and competing with other women, the pressure to fulfill roles instead of live out who they uniquely are, a disconnect from their bodies and emotions, consumerism driving their lives, and being so busy and pressured to be perfect that they are out of tune with what is going on inside them. This context reveals the trend that when culture's expectations distract women from their true selves, women are less likely to pursue what they most desire. Sarah says women who engage in self-care and regularly invest in themselves are sometimes scoffed at as impractical or questioned like, "What's wrong with you anyway?" Sarah points out, "It's not normative to go on a self-exploration journey. People respond with, 'Let me know when you grow up.' It's seen as a very immature thing." Women attack women and all the while, women retreat into buying, working out, doing instead of being, keeping up appearances, and quieting the voice within, Sarah explains. "The permission to be okay right where you are, these spaces where they are okay with themselves, where they don't have to keep calorie counting and working out 18 hours a day and doing all these insane things,"

Sarah runs down the needs she sees in women's lives. "All of the sudden that time thing frees them up to read or write or retreat."

### *The Metaphor of Voice*

The goal of this organization is to help women recover themselves. With all that life and culture introduce that cover up and distract women from themselves, women may not be "living into" as Sarah puts it, their own stories. "Living into" requires switching from getting through things in life, to being present in them; it is not just surviving, but engaging. It is acknowledging emotions instead of ignoring them. Sarah explains, "So you don't ignore certain aspects of your life. If something that comes up is anger, I no longer see it as something to push down, but I'm present with it." Sarah believes that when emotions emerge, they can tell us things about ourselves. She meets an emotion like anger and literally asks it, why are you here? Living into things is asking "why?" In light of this way of being, Sarah works under the premise that voice is the still, small voice within a person, the gut instinct that wants to guide her, and it is innate knowledge that connects all parts of a person. To come to voice is the act of getting what is in you out and engaging with all parts of the self. Considered in a writing context, it is those moments when a writer might do something like shift a position on an argument and own the choice. It is a writer tackling a topic that is what she truly wants or needs to write. Also, a writer clearly supporting why she thinks or wants to say something in her writing that is key to voice. Recognizing her own worth and living into that recognition can propel a writer to invest in her writing. When she knows she is worth investing in, any creative act she engages in and any work she does is worth investing in. There's also an element of strong voices being those voices that are okay with failure, know how to ask for help, and know they have something to offer, Sarah says. "I think there's something that happens in this journey of life when you realize how

important you are to your own story, and you all of the sudden realize that everyone else has an equally important story,” Sarah points out.

Much of her use of the metaphor of voice includes considering voice in community. Voice may be better understood when we see it worked out in community, rather than seeing it as individualistic or uncontested. Sarah’s work compels her to address the isolation and loneliness perfectionism can cause, namely, the importance of considering how one woman’s voice in community shapes other voices. “I think when you have this voice and you’re operating within community, and you’re weighing things together, it can really be this beautiful partnership of this voice emerging to have a role in your own story,” Sarah states. During her retreats, she emphasizes that the day would not be the same if any one of the women were not there. She encourages the ideas that each person is needed, wanted, appreciated, and each woman’s voice will shape the discussions and the writing.

While discussing voice as a metaphor in her work, Sarah also described what it is not. Most of the points could be grouped into two areas for consideration: roles and survival. Sarah spoke often of shedding the pressure of going through life fulfilling roles or dancing to the tune of the choir of voices in a woman’s mind telling her who she should be or what she should do. Voice is not about performance to meet pressures. In her memoir, described earlier as the journey of a recovering perfectionist, Sarah writes, “We are a hurried people, run by a masculine culture that is not in touch with our feminine roots. These roots are places of nurturing, service, and human-to-human contact so that we can live out who we were meant to be and not because of someone else’s expectation on ourselves” (108). Voice is also not an overcompensating aggressive or loud voice, eeking out survival, according to Sarah. Voice does not need to overtake others or drown out others to be considered strong. Abigail also discussed that too

often, the need to survive, be it economic or social, drowns out a woman's voice. Time, energy, resources, and opportunities may be hard to come by for many women, and writing that takes place amidst the strain of needing to survive may hinder a woman's voice. She does not have the luxury of time and space to be in tune with herself and to come out from under responsibilities like caring for others or earning a paycheck to support herself.

### *Ideas about Writing*

What becomes evident from looking at the intersection of feminist advocacy work and the writing classroom is the idea that a writer's real life shapes her ability to write. Views of the self and authorship issues are central to both recovery work and teaching writing. The Good Enough Project promotes pausing in life and addressing the pressures it brings. In doing so, you begin to hear your present thoughts and feelings. Being in tune with your own voice is a practiced skill that may require a shift from focusing on what roles others want you to play, to instead invest in hearing from yourself and living out your truest self. As a writer, you may compose more authentically and freely when you face emotions and anxiety in yourself, especially those that emerge during the writing process. After sessions of writing at TGEP workshops, women often express the sentiment, "I didn't know I was thinking that." The time and place to unearth internal matters is often referred to as "a safe space" by Sarah and all the participants in the study. Safe in this context specifically involves these approaches to writing and reflecting: multiple options for engaging with the activity are always provided, there is no wrong way to do any of the activities, and participants are always free to guide their own experiences. When emotions or personal learning emerges, the participants get help in facing them and processing what they might teach the writer. Vulnerability is not seen as weakness, but as part of being human, letting go of appearances of perfection, and hearing and sharing from

yourself authentically. Sarah says the deep element of living into things and giving yourself permission to think things, hear things, and express things all come together when we are vulnerable in community. “Are we allowed as women to actually be okay right where we are at? That is the permission I wish we had,” Sarah says.

But safety should not be conflated with comfort. Sarah clarifies the difference, pointing out that safety has more to do with being okay with who you are at the table and being able to engage in controversy with civility. “I think when we say we want people to come to the table, there’s still a sense culturally that you have to conform to be at the table. So, safety for me means you just get to come to the table. You’re still responsible for what you say, but there is a sense in safety that you get to be where you’re at and we’ll meet you there,” she explains. At her workshops and retreats, the tone is one of mutuality to come together and of hospitality to be human together, not just safe and comfortable. “Safety says we’re going to go into some risky places, but we’re going to have respect while we go there,” Sarah says. It is a place of safety with respect instead of comfort with avoidance.

Another connecting point between advocacy work and composition classrooms is the view of writing that says, writing is hard. When Sarah introduces options for writing prompts, she will often hear groans or observe women talking about not wanting to do the “work” of writing. How do we reframe work and the work of writing to harness its joys and usefulness for ourselves? Sarah discusses writing as a means to communicate and employ voice. She asks of her participants, “What do you want to communicate to yourself right now? What would you tell others right now?” Just as with anything in life, we should be present with writing and not just survive or get through it. Sarah expands the idea of work when she talks about it with her composition students. She works on her writing just as she works on her marriage, works in her

garden, or works in her teaching, all the while observing ways in which these activities are life-giving to her.

### *Feminist Principles*

As an undergraduate composition instructor, Sarah emphasizes opportunity language and a spirit of hospitality in all her classroom and assessment dealings. She intentionally works to reframe language as non-violent and compassionate. She provides feedback to her writing students by saying here are your strong points in my opinion, here's what you did well and then, here are your opportunities to do more. It is key to her that writers guide their own experiences, a parallel value to feminism's self-direction as a key human right. At TGEP, whatever direction the women go with their writing, it is not about following a set of expectations put forth by the person in charge. Instead, it is their encounter and their learning to self direct. Like many feminists, they advocate that women define success for themselves. At the same time, Sarah offers participants tools for writing and techniques to generate ideas. She believes that demystifying the act or "how to" of writing is empowering to women who have not seen themselves as writers or may not have yet connected to their talents and creative capacities to write. She invites women into the world of writing and of considering themselves writers with idea that they, as people, are worthy of investing in.

The Good Enough Project also embodies the feminist priority of "each person matters." Policy and generalized standards should not erase individuals or their stake in a community. The workshops emphasize how each person brings something of value, and the day would be different if any one woman were not there. If anyone does not contribute or isolates herself, her development and gift of shaping others' ideas might be lost. Sarah promotes the practice of



engagement and believes we lose out if we isolate since every person's voice shapes others. There is an expressed freedom to "become" rather than rush to arrive as a person.

TGEP also embodies some feminist values that may not be as widely recognized as "feminist" in their essence, but should possibly be considered as such. Sarah's collection of feminist traits include cooperation, vulnerability, and availability. According to observation notes from the workshop, the suggestion to replace the common goal to "seek balance" with instead "finding a rhythm" was one that resonated strongly with participants. In regard to cooperation, Sarah said setting aside competition and comparison among women is a key aspect of living and creating well. Cooperation promotes women's movement and growth. She also defines vulnerability in a way that moves it beyond connotations of weakness and into a place of necessity for women to be authentic with themselves and others. To be in tune with the self and personal voice may require vulnerability in writing and in community.

Perhaps most striking about TGEP's specific manifestation of feminism is the way in which it promotes discarding the goal of balance to instead work toward a satisfying rhythm in life. In her memoir, she writes to women that, "we should live our lives in our own distinct rhythm, not clamoring after someone else's idea of what our balanced life should look like," (83). Balance is an impossible norm peddled to women and it creates undue pressure. From self-help books to study skills classes, women are told they can and should balance work, self-care, school, love, and relationships. The stress to balance everything and then to control that stress on top of it all becomes yet another limitation on women, especially acute among women with perfectionist tendencies, Sarah says.

Additionally, while the priority of making oneself available to others emerges as an original value, but it is feminist still. In her personal narrative, the struggle to find a female

mentor was a real point of contention for her as a developing writer and thinker. She suggests that those working to improve women's lives in any setting should work to make themselves available to connect with others and to be available to read others' writing and to hear their stories. Sarah's final statement in her follow-up interview echoed one of the broad questions I had written in my dissertation proposal. She challenged the field's professors by asking, "Are you just there to teach a class or to develop people?" She, like feminist researchers and teachers, hopes her work improves the lives of others.

## CHAPTER SIX

### PROFILE OF CLOTHESLINE PROJECT

Clothesline Project motto: Bearing witness to violence against women for over 20 years.

Universities and organizations, both domestically and globally, stage Clothesline Project events—visual art and performance rhetoric displays where the stories of domestic violence are shared on t-shirts with stories written on them by victims. More than 100 groups are self-registered with the national Clothesline Project, and thousands of victims every year create shirts at their events in order to speak about violence against women. The metaphor of a clothesline is employed to represent a place where, for many generations and in many cultures, women gathered to share their stories with each other at the clothesline, one of the few safe places women had to talk freely. Now, at Clothesline events, people who have been victims of domestic violence and sexual assault write their message or ideas about their experiences on a t-shirt and hang their story on a public clothesline. At the start of the week displaying the clothesline, organizers hang shirts made during previous years and leave open space on the line for people to write new shirts and hang them for public reading. The four goals of the national organization are: “1. To bear witness to the survivors as well as the victims of the war against women. 2. To help with the healing process for people who have lost a loved one or are survivors of this violence. 3. To educate, document, and raise society’s awareness of the extent of the problem of violence against women. 4. To provide a nationwide network of support, encouragement and information...” (Clothesline website accessed July 8, 2013).

The college Women’s Center that participated in my study has staged the event for ten years. I interviewed an intern, a half-time staff member, and the director. Their goals for bringing Clothesline Project to their campus, as reported during the interviews, are to express

that women's issues are not lost in the midst of what's going on in the world or in the busy lives college students lead, and especially to offer an arena for healing and processing experiences of violence against women. They emphasized the "healing-freeing factor" that writing and sharing personal stories with others can provide. Also, key goals for the organizers are to respect the stories of victims and to join with women across the nation about raising awareness for domestic violence and sexual assault. One Women's Center staff member shared that even though people may know violence is prevalent, they need to know that it is personal, too. An individual woman's words on a shirt humanizes the statistics and closes the distance from the issue of domestic violence for those who may not have experienced domestic violence or assault. My study's participants say Clothesline Project allows women to say, "It happens; it happened to me. Please hear me." For the writer or the reader at the clothesline, both come in contact with the stories of domestic violence and enter what many describe as a sacred space where the written texts on the shirts do the talking for victims. The Women's Center intern who hosts the week-long Clothesline event says it is programming that encourages emotional growth in the students who take part. It raises awareness to promote safety and reduces naivety about how prevalent violence against women is across all social contexts.

### *My Day at the Clothesline*

When I went to write on my shirt at the Clothesline Project also staged at my campus, I thought I was ready. I had visualized this moment for five years—going into the space, writing my story, and discovering what this might do for me. I picked a bright purple, large marker. As I wrote, my heart picked up its pace. My knuckles tingled and my printing got more labored with each letter.

“I said, it will never be me too.” And it was. “Black and Blue.” I write the words and draw in the five splotches mimicking the grip of a hand on my arm.

I couldn’t get myself to display my shirt as long as students were in the amphitheater ambling through the clothesline reading shirts others had hung. I stood with a rumpled t-shirt and two wooden clothespins in my hand, waiting to go to work. I sat back down at an empty table and wrote my last name in the crewneck on the inside seam. I thought about writing my grandmother’s name there also.

My grandmother used to sew her own clothes. She, like me, was too tall for conventional sizes in the stores. She made patterns for her suits and dresses with the inches of fabric needed to accommodate her long torso. Sitting in the amphitheater that day, I wore a Clothesline promotional t-shirt I ordered a size too big just to make sure it would be long enough to cover to my waistline.

I write her name above mine. Daisy. A woman whose stories of being abused heightened my awareness against such treatment. I knew that, as a teenager, she had locked herself in an outhouse at her in-laws’ farm when her husband was at war and his brothers were trying to rape her. I knew she had been knocked over a couch backward by a boyfriend later in life. She had been beaten while pregnant. When I heard mention of these stories, the tape always played in my mind: “That should never be me. That will never be me.”

But it was, for a flash. He taught at my university. He grabbed my left arm when I defied what he wanted. We had called off our wedding and now, he wanted the ring back and he wanted to date. And I didn’t. He taught feminist literature. I tried to leave and step around him in the doorway. Then I couldn’t. He slammed me against the wall. I could have called for

friends nearby, just around the house in the front yard—the embarrassment held me back. I folded.

I scrambled in the backdoor of my house once he left and I stood with my hand still on the deadbolt and thought of Daisy. I was she in that moment.

Each year following when I walked by the Clothesline Project at my university, I thought about stepping in and making a shirt with black and blue marker on the sleeve where I once wore bruises for more than a month. Five years later I contributed to the shirts on the line because I finally wanted to engage with my story and I wanted more control over it. I had things I wanted to say about it. That even smart professors like him don't practice what they teach. Even smart professors like me can be battered. Even my grandmother, who stopped going to school in the fifth grade, who worked at a BB gun factory as a test shooter with the meanest aim and perfectly fitting pants she sewed herself, could be battered. Even Daisy, even me.

That semester I shared the story in my classroom for the first time. We were discussing violence and power in a Gender Communication course. We talked about how we language violence and how we talk about survivors and how survivors talk about violence. One student, Mandy, shared her story of abuse in a methodic but invested tone for a few minutes. I sucked a quick breath in and decided that for the first time, it seemed like a space and time to join a student like Mandy in sharing what had happened to me. I briefly talked about it with a steady voice as my heart jumped in my chest again. And, I made sense of it a little more that day with my students. I had already written it down on a t-shirt and I hung it up on a clothesline. I had included my last name where the tag should have been and I did it in a world where I am known by that name, as Professor Sorensen-Lang. I think it took the sting out of the memory. Writing about it made it useful to me. The abuse and the hit to my identity could then make its way into

my classroom and into some learning. The story entered my most important place and I liked that it did.

It all sounds a little intellectual describing that teaching experience now, but the classroom is my most consequential place to be. Relaying it to an audience, I experienced the assault again, and I felt all the nerves about being judged, I thought about my professionalism, and I talked back to that with a feminist challenge about not dividing the personal and the public. What made telling my story feel right was that I owed it to Mandy to stand with her. At my point of healing and processing, I would have felt dishonest not saying, “I get it. Me too.”

*Part of the Women’s Center Director’s Story*

I find my way to the Women’s Center on her campus and locate Monica’s office. She is newly appointed as the full-time director to the Women’s Center, a job she did half-time before the university funded a full-time position. I am Monica’s first appointment after her having been out of the Women’s Center for a week at a conference. When we step into her office, I notice two small, potted plants on her desk. Next to them, her staff has placed a sign in bubbly, markered letters that says, “Happy Bosses Day!” She stares for a moment at her gifts and comments to me how thoughtful this is. “I mean, truly, truly thoughtful,” Monica exclaims. She begins to tell me the devastating news that her house burned down over the summer, just a few weeks before our scheduled interview. Her staff at the Women’s Center knows one of the many things she has lost includes a vibrant collection of houseplants. The plants on her desk are a small bit of greenery compared to the domestic grove she had cultivated for 30 years in her home. But she receives them enthusiastically as yet another new start in her life.

### *Why Monica Works on Behalf of Women*

She was the fourth of five kids in her family and said she always needed to find herself or she'd get lost in the crowd. In her traditional culture, the father was in charge and the mother would say so too, if asked. "But she was always running the show from behind the scenes," Monica said. When people would tell this future women's advocate she couldn't do something because she was a girl, she would say, "Just watch me." Her rise to administration in higher education came about in large part because of the male mentors who pulled her into meetings with the higher-ups and invited her to give input in decision-making. But her most significant mentor was the first female Latina administrator at her school who told her, "People might treat you differently because of your gender or your ethnicity, but don't play the victim role. Because you're not." She encouraged her to never think of herself as the token female on a committee or the token person of color. Instead, she thinks of herself as a person with diverse experiences and values to bring to circles of influence, even if the committee gets extra points for diversity if she's there. Monica chose to trust that people were including her because of what she uniquely had to offer. She clings to assuming the best of others even though she has had interactions that devalued her. One colleague said he would never get a promotion if he were up against her because she is a woman and she is a minority. "I was just like, really? You would actually say this? It has nothing to do with the fact that I might be more qualified than you are? But his fighting words were that I was a woman and I was a person of color. He was a white male. I was so appalled by it."

I asked Monica, "What's your story of coming to voice? How did you arrive where you are now as an advocate for women?" Monica didn't want to share the details of her story, but simply said after ten years of marriage and being a stay-at-home mom, she found herself



divorced and needing to support her children. “All the things that men held dear, you know, ‘the buck stops here’ or ‘I get to decide everything,’ it all fell to me, whether I asked for it or not,” she explains. “I wouldn’t say I had to develop a different skill set, but I had to understand that I was capable of this skill set.” She wanted to be in a line of work where she could help women understand that they could make it too.

Monica says the word empowerment is overused, but that’s what she wants for women—to empower them through education and support. She wants women to determine what success means for them and she wants them to know they have their own stories and their own paths. “Women have so many things and so many issues that we don’t even talk about,” Monica says. “So many women are walking around campus doing extracurricular and doing everything so well, but they’re carrying a load around. What if they didn’t have to carry that load with them? What if we could actually meet some of that need here?”

Monica had the right people investing in her path, and she broke new ground by achieving dean status at her college. She regards giving back and community as cornerstones of her work. “I believe we all stand on somebody else’s shoulders. If someone else can stand on my shoulders, then I did my part. To know that there is someone else who stood before me and paved the way, it gives me the responsibility to do my part to make sure that women’s voices are heard.” She lives with the belief that she is shaping others’ opinions of hiring women in their male-dominant workplace. If she creates a positive experience working with a woman, she opens the door for more women to move up. Even as she functions as the prototype of the female administrator on her campus, her message to educators about women is, “Don’t stereotype them. And don’t make assumptions about their stories because they come from different experiences. In order to validate their voices, you’ve got to listen.”

### *Rachel's Story as a Women's Center Advocate*

As the graduate intern for the Women's Center, Rachel says it's scary that she went through four years of undergrad and never discussed women's issues or feminism in her classes. When she became a resident advisor looking out for 40 freshman women, she said she realized what women's issues are and what needed to happen to address them. When a speaker came to campus to speak about sexual assault awareness, some big conversations in Student Life programming took place, but soon after, the topic was dropped. Rachel started to ask her faculty mentor questions about why there were no resources on campus for victims of sexual assault and why was there no visible advocacy or information for women about sexual assault awareness. She decided to start a group with her friend that would continue the conversation. "I was so willing to help with the group, but I was not going to talk about me," Rachel said. She had been assaulted as a 16 year old, but didn't talk to anyone about it until her junior year of college. When her faculty advisor questioned her about why the sexual assault awareness work on campus was so important to Rachel, she started to talk about the experience. "I'm really grateful to the faculty members who really pushed me and said, let's get personal," she said.

Rachel says what motivates her to be an advocate for women and work at the center is mostly frustration. She qualifies that it's not anger toward men, but a frustration about silence and not having a voice for years about her own abuse. She also values walking with other women to improve women's lives. When one of her friends attempted suicide their senior year, she was the second person in to visit her. She simply said, "This isn't you. What's up?" Rachel believes it was the pressure around body image and all that's required of women to be valuable that pushed her friend toward suicide. As the intern for the Clothesline Project, Rachel hosted women around the clothesline as they wrote their stories and shared their thoughts about violence

against women. Her favorite shirt was one jam packed with text. “What I think I loved was that it took me five minutes to read it. And I had to sit there, and I had to just be with it.” On the sleeve the author had written, “This is just a snippet.”

### **Themes from the Clothesline**

The stories from this participating organization contain more of the results for consideration in my study. The specific themes that emerged from the interviews are again grouped into four categories for discussion: women’s issues, the metaphor of voice, ideas about writing, and feminist principles. Additional results from the Clothesline Project t-shirt texts, as well as promotional and explanatory documents used on site during the event are included at the end of this section. These results reflect the experiences and opinions of four staff members at a Southern California, four-year-college’s Women’s Center.

#### *Women’s Issues*

When the director of the center did a survey of the female student body in order to assess programming needs, she was surprised by the results. The results did not report the usual topics Women’s Centers like hers tend to address: sexism in culture and media, sexual assault and rape, body image struggles, or awareness raising about traditional women’s issues like representation and access. Monica was surprised the survey findings reported that female students wanted resources to help them navigate romantic relationships, female friendships, and demanding schedules/stress management. Is this an indicator that progress has been made in these areas, or does it point to a lack of awareness on the part of the women who filled out the surveys? Interestingly, these results may substantiate the suggestion that the four staffers shared in separate interviews in response to the question about what limiting factors they see at work in the context of the women’s lives where they work. They all said women they work with are not

aware enough of women's issues and aspects of themselves that relate to gendered concerns. Are young adults in a place in their development where they would have this awareness, or do these staff members have such a sharp lens toward patriarchy that they are imposing women's issues, in part, on the women on their campus? Part of their work at the Women's Center is to value women's experiences and concerns, but also to name gendered struggles that exist both personally and systemically. The tension exists between pushing an advocacy agenda that raises awareness for women and resourcing women in their self-directed points of need.

One intern said, "Women would rather just not think about it."

"It?" I asked.

"Think about inequalities, think about violence against women, and the areas of the world that are still a man's world."

The director said women's issues just aren't named and analyzed enough among the students she works with. "There's a misconception that women have made a lot of gains, so we turn our attention to something else," Monica said. She says pervasive patriarchy is a major limiting factor for women, but even more so if they do not know what it is or see its role in culture.

T-shirt texts from the clothesline:

"I'm tired of being objectified. I feel expendable. I feel used. Why would you do that to your granddaughter? Why do you still think of me this way? I distrust older men."

"My best guy friend gave me a 'gift' I'll never forget. Happy birthday to me."

"Don't go back to that person who thought he was a 'man.' There is other love out there."

"Men define sex in today's culture, but women uphold that. I'm sick of being treated like a sexual object. I'm NOT! No woman is!"

The staff also reported concerns about a disconnect between positive beliefs about women and actions or living out these beliefs. “If I could change something about legitimizing women’s issues, it would be to not just know we are capable of doing anything we want, but to see more women actually doing it,” one intern said. Monica used the metaphor “voice” when she said that for her, voice isn’t just what you say, but a sense of personal efficacy that backs up what you are saying. She observes the growth in students she works with and believes that for a female student to most authentically have a voice in her own life, her actions change to begin to reflect her beliefs and personal values. “They start to respect themselves and stop doing things that are hurting themselves,” she said. “They do things like choose the major they are passionate about and not just do what others want or think they should do.” She did not think that the root problem is confidence issues for women, since they often report they are empowered and they feel empowered—this is a group of women who grew up wearing “girl power” shirts—but Monica does not see this translating enough to action for individuals. “They know women can, but they don’t see that they personally can,” Monica said.

The other limiting factors reported during interviews looked at the issues of “space,” meaning both gathering places and conversations with people, as in moments of time, to engage in women’s issues. “There’s a perception that women can talk and talk, but we hear from them that they don’t have places or people to talk with,” Monica said. Monica has noted that in recent years, female students express one-on-one to her the need to talk about topics that have been traditionally viewed as male issues, such as addiction to porn or the pressure to achieve. The social events, small group talks, mentoring situations and awareness raising projects like Clothesline are all part of what the Women’s Center does to value women and value the things women care about. They emphasize holistic development of the self and not compartmentalizing

the female as separate or unimportant aspects of the self, whether it is as students live out their identities as academics or athletes, or as they pursue their hobbies and career plans. Monica said, “The ones who get stuck on one part of their identity, they seem to struggle because they’re never satisfied with the perspective of who they are.” She hopes that when students come in contact with Women’s Center staff and events, they see some of how to acknowledge the complexity of the self.

### *The Metaphor of Voice*

T-shirt texts from the clothesline:

“I am not the moment you took from me. Nor will I ever be. My voice will not be silent no longer.”

“If you feel trapped or isolated, talk to someone. My best therapy was sharing what happened to me!”

“It doesn’t matter if it doesn’t seem like a big deal. It is...don’t be afraid to talk about it.”

“For 13 years I kept it a secret as if I had done something wrong. Don’t tell me I am beautiful and expect me to forget. I have three years of guilt and I need time to forgive.”

Metaphoric and strikingly eerie, the shirts on the clothesline give voice to 95 women out of the larger group of the incoming freshman class on the campus who, according to statistics, will be sexually assaulted during their college experience. “The more moving stories we have being told, the more people will be moved by them to action,” one Women’s Center intern said. The connection between voice and audience is indivisible within this advocacy work. With a general goal to improve women’s lives, the Women’s Center staff says, “prompting the audience to act” is a major benefit of voicing personal stories. The staff points out that personal stories, more so than stats or research, are simply more inspiring and, most importantly, memorable.

Also, their main effort while staging the event goes into advertising the Clothesline Project in order to get an audience of readers to the clothesline. Without an audience, there's not the validation that the project is hoping to provide to women. "When we are available to listen to them, we validate them and let them know they are not ignored," Monica said. Rachel said about writing, that the sense of connection and communicating shared experiences are the motivations behind what writing means to her and why writing is a powerful part of this event. When an audience connects with what a person writes and validates where that person finds meaning, she says it is gratifying. The overlap between what she sees the goals of writing are and the goals of her women's advocacy are here: it is all for connection with others and finding meaning in experiences. Monica said the opposite of having a voice is feeling as though your story does not have a place in society or in whatever community you may be a part of, in her case, a school campus. To feel voiced is to know you can share your story and share the views that you have, including those that have formed because of your past and because of who you are as a woman. "We need to tell our stories," Monica said.

Along with the issue of audience and voice is the issue of space and voice. A dominant thread of discussion among Women's Center staff was women "having a way to talk about experience" and how this becomes a major factor in how to understand voice in advocacy and writing. Monica said, "Everyone doesn't need permission to speak or sit in a situation, but they need space to do it." The interviewees repeatedly said women need space to speak and to voice ideas and space for a woman to say or not to say what is on her mind. Students may be writing and expressing ideas day in and day out on campus, but the students the Women's Center works with ask again and again for programming and opportunities to talk about the topics that are

important to them. “Until you can talk about it, abuse or something that’s important to you, I don’t think you can really start to define your voice,” Rachel said.

### *Ideas about Writing*

“The power of what’s written on shirts, for so many it’s forgiveness and for so many others it’s anger. And, both are so powerful and they’re powerful to one another,” Rachel said.

Dissertation Journal, July 25, 2013

I keep running into truisms in my results, like “writing is powerful.” How do I analyze this in a scholarly way to break it down and make it useful? “Powerful” and “power” keep showing up in the Clothesline interviews. In this context, one staffer said the power is in the author’s willingness to interact with others. That gives her power. Power over her own story and power to speak. She needs an audience. Both the content on the t-shirts and the act of writing are powerful, power-giving. Maybe I should talk more with my writing students about the power writing has to move others and ask them if they get the sense their writing ever empowers them as authors. Maybe I should try to make sure they have an expanded audience or at least, a very attentive single reader in me.

As the Women’s Center intern in charge of staging the event, Rachel said it is the power of writing that makes the event effective—it makes experiences more real where needed and it provides a way of expressing what is going on inside the woman. “When you write, it becomes a reality no longer just in your head. Through this type of writing, we’re acknowledging what’s there,” one Women’s Center staff member said. “It gives women who write the shirts some power over the abuse. She can say, ‘I’m in control enough that I could write this.’” Rachel said, “It takes courage to write things down.” In this context, writing often documents a survival story or healing process. It provides victims of violence opportunities to write a different story amidst



their ongoing stories of surviving and hopefully healing. The Women's Center director said for her, this particular use of writing makes experiences more real, but the beauty of it is that it also sets some parameters on the emotions and thoughts that come with remembering. "It doesn't go on forever. It's discrete. You can write it down and say, 'here's the beginning and here's the end.'" In this way, writing about experiences with violence puts stakes down in the journey. The personal stories may describe how the woman is writing and talking about it for the first time or write something that expresses, "I have overcome," or "I'm not defined by this." And, the staff believes that part of acknowledging the importance of the stories, or "stakes in the journey," put down on the shirts is that every year, the shirts are carefully folded and stored to be displayed again the next year. The staff wants to metaphorically speak continuity of support and the validation of personal stories for any woman who writes on a shirt. The writing is never tossed aside, but instead, it has readers year after year.

T-shirt texts from the clothesline:

"He found and raped me when I was 14. God found me and healed me. For 3 years I walked passed the Clothesline terrified to even hint at my story, ashamed of the molestation and of the rape. But now I'm here and I refuse to let the abuse define me. Healing is possible."

The Clothesline Project interviews noticeably brought in ideas about audience and its role for writers. Although this was not a primary line of questioning, participants emphasized how an audience to read the shirts represents community, and that is a core need for humans. We need connection and we need to be acknowledged, they said. The staff works hard to promote the event and to bring an audience in to read the t-shirts. "Sharing writing educates others. The author gets to say, 'I'm not the only one,' and the reader gets to say, 'This stuff does happen to people I know,'" one staff member said. "I think the power of seeing the other stories goes a

long way for other victims to say, I can tell my story too.” The idea that people care about the content on the shirt emerged as important to the staff. When one graduate intern discussed her views about writing and how key an audience is, she noted that, in her academic writing, she wants professors to really engage with her ideas instead of providing simple formatting feedback. “I want you to care about the content,” she said of her readers. She said writing should provide a sense of connection and validate what the author finds meaningful. This kind of statement is one that threads together composition values and feminist advocacy. The writing that goes on at the clothesline gives an audience a chance to connect with the authors’ journeys in their stories of violence. In their effort to create a sacred space for the telling of stories and voicing of experience, the staff provides an example of how key acknowledgement is to humans. In this case, it is for the author/victim and her story/text as she acknowledges her story to herself in her willingness to write it and allow it to be read by others in her willingness to share it. The Women’s Center honors the courage it takes to write and the courage it takes to share personal, powerful stories with others. The director cautions educators to not disregard students when they share their stories in class and in writing assignments. “Be available to listen to them. Validate them and let them know they are not ignored,” she says when asked what she would share if she had the ear of professors who teach women.

Dissertation Journal July 15, 2013

Today a co-worker recounted her dissertation defense to me. Her dominant memory was how she wished someone from her committee had asked her to go to lunch after. She got a lot of critique and not a lot of relating. From what she said, she needed the relationship side of the academic exchange to be there so she would feel like it really happened. What was her biggest accomplishment in life took on the tone of a stoic business exchange and she was left wanting.

If women are socialized as relational creatures who prioritize human connection, in what ways should educators meet this need? Does a culture established by male communication patterns of bottom lines and productivity need to work to accommodate women's need for relationship, or does this request cast women as needy? One man's needy is another woman's human.

It reminds me of a conversation with a friend in my program. Her biggest obstacle in making progress toward her defense was her self-doubt and ball of negative emotions keeping her from writing. I suggested talking to her advisor. "Oh, he could never handle all this. I've got to work through this on my end and just turn in the work. He won't get it." There's this whole part of the writing process students in a writing program are keeping from their professors. The women deny their emotions space and make their performance fit the norms of the professional and competent workday. They apologize for crying. Any hints of vulnerability and incompetence have no place, even if it's swarming all around the dissertation and writing process.

#### Journal Talk-Back

In looking back on this journal entry, I wonder about the need for a sense of "fair play" when sharing narrative research. What would the professors from these stories say if they could chime in? Can narrative researchers let readers self-direct toward conclusions, or should the writer guide any reader to a conclusion or an implication of the narrative? I think it is important to note the risk in narrative that a storyteller takes because writers must give way to the fact that readers will bring their own experiences and identities to reading. It's debatable whether narrative researchers are obligated to a sense of fair play when telling education narratives. In this dissertation journal entry, I relate to both the professor and the student; I have often been both in the last fifteen years of my life. I have been too burdened by grading and classroom preparation to invest in students personally the way I wish I could. I have also been a student in

isolation, afraid to admit to a professor that I needed more engagement personally. It is possible the professors from this journal entry cared more than the students knew. Maybe he had to run off to another meeting or had a child at home who needed him immediately after the dissertation defense was over. Is it fair to tell the story without reporting all viewpoints? What I am calling attention to in this dissertation journal entry is the gap in expectations that some students may have regarding connection and support from professors, especially those in key mentoring roles such as a dissertation advisor. Maybe that extra bit of hospitality or personal connection needed that day could have been for the professor to tell his student, “I wish I could go to lunch.” And regarding the other silent professor mentioned in the journal entry, he could check in with the student to ask how she is doing finding her way in her dissertation. Workload issues are a real concern and relationships take time, but professors should invite open communication and official channels for students to approach them for help. I do not think women should get the impression they are to be self-sufficient in research projects at all times regarding any personal or emotional obstacles. Fair play or not in this particular narrative, the impression that there are “no emotions allowed” is all too common for the women in the journal entry stories and many students.

### *Feminist Principles*

I ask Monica what feminist values she thinks her Women’s Center embodies or upholds. She asks me to define feminism. I smile and say that’s kind of part of what I’m studying. Are women’s advocates using that label anymore? “It depends on who is here. If we feel like we’re in a safe place and we’re talking to faculty who work with feminist theory or women-focused classes, then we have a different way of embracing that language and talking about it, exploring it,” she explains. “But if we have other people who have not read as much or heard as much,

who have a view that if you say ‘feminist,’ then they can’t hear the rest of your conversation.”

In looking at the themes from interviews to draw out feminist traits, it is clear that representation is a key feminist value at work in the Women’s Center. They want to see women in positions of influence and they want to encourage young women with the belief that they can go anywhere and do anything. The staff also defines their feminism in context as not “bashing men.” They speak often of “balance” about how they talk about women’s issues and patriarchy concerns. “We don’t want to tear men down by building women up. We’re looking for balance,” one intern said of her staff. The director often defends the need for a Women’s Center by saying, “Men’s issues are women’s issue and women’s issues are men’s issues.” She wants to teach both men and women how to respect each other and to build understanding between genders and about gender issues. The staff’s goal is to create programming where people do not “attack men,” but instead share their experiences in order to have people come to a better understanding for both men and women. “I’ve seen angry girls. That doesn’t help either because they try to push down men,” the director said.

Considering the ideas shared during interviews with Women’s Center staff, it becomes evident that staff members are hyper-attentive to defying stereotypes about feminism. When feminism came up during interviews, most often the responses and discussion about feminism were their saying what they are *not* as feminists instead of what they *are*. Specifically, they are not angry and they are not pushing men down. One staffer did offer the office motto as her understanding of feminism: to affirm, celebrate, and restore women. The group gave little space to being angry in advocacy, and they framed key definitions and goals in positive terms. Any anger or clash was described as counter-productive in an effort to not embody negative stereotypes of feminism.

T-shirt texts from the clothesline:

“Feminism taught me that I DON’T HAVE TO PUT UP WITH YOUR SHIT.”

“I am tired of being valued as a woman only by what is between my legs! What happened to equality between genders? Virgin or not, there is so much more to me than the physical.”

“Rape has become normal. It is a symptom of a society that values violence as entertainment, porn, beauty as the measure of a woman, men as leaders and women as support, distinct gender roles. Why is half the population living in fear of the other half?”

The Women’s Center’s feminism could best be described as solidarity among women. They often say things like, “women need each other,” or “we encourage women to value other women.” One intern said that, generally, feminist literature focuses on the self or just on the poorest of women, but that she hoped the feminism they were doing at the center would decrease competition between all women and increase their appreciation for each other and for female friendships. One afternoon “talk time” event the center offered focused on the question, “Why do women like to tear up other women?” One senior event ended the school year with a panel emphasizing the importance of female friendships and networking in life beyond college. The staff’s structure emphasizes mentoring in its hierarchy, from the director to graduate interns and then toward undergraduate interns and students. The idea of “pouring into” other women was a staff cultural norm, and seeking out other women for advice and support is commonly encouraged. Female togetherness is key to their embodiment of feminism as they go about feminist advocacy, even if they do not identify as “feminist” in their literature or their languaging of their work.

## Themes from Clothesline T-shirt Texts

Reading over the compiled text of the t-shirts, it is evident that what Monica said about women is true—we should not make assumptions about their stories because they come from different experiences. Even with the common factor of abuse or assault compelling them to write on a shirt, their messages reveal varied perspectives about society and women's sexuality, the journeys toward healing (is it even possible?), and views of the self as victim. Still, there were noticeable recurring ideas and language that emerged on the shirts. Not surprising for those familiar with sexual assault statistics, many of the women wrote about best friends and family members as their abusers. They wrote about broken trust and role confusion regarding the men in their lives. The most prominent word across the clothesline was the word “broken.” “He robbed me of so much. What did I do wrong? When can I smile again? Why am I alone? Why do I live in this prison while he is free? I am so broken and so weak...” And, “You broke me. I hate this. Please I’m begging you. It’s always there. I want to know what real love is, but I’m so broken.” One writer displayed the message of being “broken” while also being OK when she wrote, “BR ok EN.” Another woman wrote one or two words on each line, “What was/ Broken/ Weak/ Hurt/ Forgotten/ Is/ Now/ Whole Strong Healed LOVED.” Much of what was written spoke of the journey of healing, as this shirt does. Another wrote, “Maybe this will be the year that I forgive,” and the author drew a broken heart on the chest. One shirt had a simple, honest, and sad thought: “12 years and it’s just getting easier.” One asked if it was even possible to heal or “get over” the abuse or assaults, while another, cited earlier, made a victorious proclamation: “I refuse to let this abuse define me. Healing is possible.” Another wrote of her journey: “Last year I hung a shirt of unforgiving resentment and pain. This year, I’ll hang one of redemption, forgiveness and above all, hope.”

Two points for consideration regarding women's issues emerge when the texts of the t-shirts are analyzed as a group: 1) the idea that suffering brings women strength and 2) the belief that a woman's sexuality is equated with her entire self, instead of a part. It seems as though a number of the authors make sense of their abuse or assault experiences in part by seeing it as experiences or hurt that made them stronger. After relaying a long story of being abused by her father, being back and forth between foster care and her home, and being beaten by past boyfriends, one writer closes her text by writing, "Pray not for easy lives, pray to be stronger women." Another shirt says she and her mother have taken all that happened to them to turn it into love for others and to let it make them stronger. One shirt says, "I am empowered by my scars," while another gives a lot of purposefulness to the abuse: "Everything is going to be alright. What's happening in my life right now will tie into the big picture. The moments I don't understand and the moments I hurt are shaping me more and more." And lastly on this point, "Thank you God for the pain and for the process. Without it, I wouldn't be who I am today..."

Women's advocates might reframe this narrative that "suffering brings strengths" or it is "just part of life" to instead say, you should never have experienced this abuse to begin with. One woman did write to her abuser and frame her experience as though to say, this abuse should have never happened in the first place: "You told me I was Worthless/ Stupid and/ Unloved./ Too bad you never told me I deserve much better." If women are socialized, or they choose, to give abuse or assault credit or simply a place in the grand narratives of what it means to be female, this type of license to abuse or purposefulness in abuse may only serve to normalize oppressive acts against women.

A disturbing trend in the writing was women who appear to equate their entire identity or worth with their sexuality, expressing the idea that they had "lost everything" when they lost



their virginity or might now be viewed as “used goods” after being assaulted. One woman writes, “He was my first boyfriend, he told me he loved me! Why would he take advantage of me!!! He took everything I had in one night.” The recurring use of the word broken, as discussed earlier, again and again pointed to a total ruin because of unwanted sexual encounters and assault. This assumption that a woman’s worth is wrapped up in her sexuality is also revealed in the strong assertions against this thinking when texts say, “I won’t be defined by this” or “I’m more than what’s between my legs.” Whether the authors are addressing their own internalized views on women or are speaking against typical views on women, their statements reveal assumptions that much of women’s worth lies in their sexuality, purity, and not being “used up” sexually. “I was raped when I was 14. I’m not sure why things like this happen or why people do things like this to others! Over the years I have been learning that it’s not my fault and I’m not ‘used goods’ in my fiancé’s eyes.” One feminist voice in the t-shirt texts writes, “I am not broken, guilty, dirty, or unwanted because of some sick man. I am beautiful and whole, and so is every other woman.”

The gendered experiences and gender tensions that many women journey through their college years and life with are told in snippets on these clothesline t-shirts. They speak clearly of the epidemic of violence against women and sexual assault realities women fear or face, and give and receive support about on campus and beyond. This public display of women’s stories embodies some of the goals of the Women’s Center’s programming—to raise awareness about very real, though often denied, women’s issues and to do so through writing and sharing with an audience. In passive programming like this where women are given space to express themselves but are not directly engaged (unless they choose to connect with the advertised resources at the event such as the counseling center), it is hard to know if the authors experience some of the

healing-freeing phenomena the Women's Center is hoping the Clothesline Project will provide. Two of the t-shirts on the line did encourage other women to share their stories: "If you feel trapped or isolated, talk to someone... YOU are never alone! Sharing my story lead me on my path of Healing!" And, "Silence is not the answer!" In this context, the use of the term "voice" can be understood as speaking for the first time about the abuse and not being defined by it. A data source such as the Clothesline Project can be a chilling and sad place from which to draw insights about women and the stories they carry with them into the classroom and into their writing. These t-shirts bear witness to the pervasiveness of violence and sexual abuse women deal with and the ways in which women are or are not valued beyond their sexuality (or how women internalize or address this belief), and then how they journey to overcome and make sense of this too-common oppression women face. The data suggests that these stories need space to be told. Implications for composition instructors and women's advocates will be discussed in the following and final chapter, drawing out ways in which composition instructors might respond to this study's findings. Campus educators are poised to engage critically with women's issues and to hopefully understand our students more as we pursue liberal arts values that help us all to live more humanely and more freely.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### FINDINGS

#### **Research Intentions**

This study examined how feminist non-profits use writing to support women and strengthen their voices. I gathered narratives from participants, and I described each of their ideas about women's issues, the metaphor of voice, ideas about writing, and feminist principles. I also shared from my dissertation journals about the struggles of voice in dissertation writing and the women's issues that emerged in my life and writing. Now, the implications to be reported in this final chapter will combine the ideas from each participating organization to discuss whether or not they claim the identity of "feminist," to re-examine voice as a metaphor for teaching and advocacy, and to look at relational writing coaching and hospitality in composition.

#### *Personal Standpoint: A CCCC Feminist Rhetoric Debate*

When I attended the CCCC feminist workshop "Why Feminisms Still Matter In The 21st Century: Mentoring, Community, Collaboration and Feminist Agency in Interdisciplinary Feminist Discourse," I was surprised to hear a debate about whether or not to move on from the term "feminist" since, as a loaded term, it may be hindering our work. I thought that of any gathering place for feminists, here our name would be uncontested. One panelist told the group that the bottom line was that claiming feminism could hurt the organization. Another speaker talked about the unfinished business of feminism. I found myself respectfully disagreeing with one of the scholars often quoted in this study as she stood on the panel encouraging us to move away from the label of feminist. I described to those in attendance an image I had in my mind of first wave and second wave feminists standing on the shoulders of the women who went before

them, and then imagining us in the room standing on their shoulders as a new generation. But then suddenly, we ungratefully jump off, with no regard for the support they've given us.

I'm not comfortable with making that leap in the name of rebranding. I choose not to give in to the media effects of how women are portrayed or how feminists are portrayed. I hope I will always choose education about the word and share my views with those who misunderstand feminisms, over leaping off the shoulders of those who invested in women's movement. Still, I wonder about how to integrate my research participants' view of feminism into my own, that it does not always have to be a "battle" in order to be rigorous feminism. Today, women can find an easier way around the mountain rather than going the uphill route, and it is still feminism. Instead of resistance to rally for the common good, it can also take shape for the individual's benefit and do so in her way.

How are some common traits of current feminism articulated? It certainly encourages individual women to define success for themselves. It continues to value a breakdown of hierarchy, and it invites even more voices and standpoints into academic pursuits via transnationalist scholarship and partnering with research participants or women outside the academy to co-author and co-construct knowledge. In the feminist contexts included in this study, it also engages with the messiness of life, a pursuit affirmed by Gesa Kirsch at the CCCC feminist workshop when she described the future of feminist research that will open up new spaces and places for feminist methodologies. Because sexual assault and intimate partner violence are epidemic, contemporary feminism continues to address these issues. A new approach to how violence against women is addressed, as seen in this study at the Clothesline Project, is to hyper-vigilantly avoid male-bashing and negative campaigns in order to brand women's issues with a pro-active tone. They are careful not to cast woman as victim, but as

fully human and one who can self direct. It also invites men to participate in awareness raising and educating other men. And finally, contemporary feminism emerged at BoldInk and The Good Enough Project as a movement that positions women to be together when encouragement and confidence-building is needed and to direct their own ways of doing this as individuals when needed. Feminism can be worked out as both collective and individual; it can be expressly named and claimed or implicitly lived out as a way of being. I guess the credit feminism gets is not always through explicitly labeling the good work it does. The recognition is embodied in the benefits women experience and the gains they make in their lives.

One tension in the midst of the feminist expressions at two of the sites should be noted regarding economics at play in women's advocacy. For women attending The Good Enough Project's workshop, they would need to be in a financial position to pay \$70 to attend a one-day workshop, and most likely have a financial status where the luxury to pursue a perfect appearance, home, and lifestyle is even an option-turned-problem. Many women who struggle to make a living wage and provide for their families would not fit the demographic of those in attendance a TGEF workshop. Some traits of battling corporate feminism that tell women to spend, lean in to capitalism, and buy their way to fulfillment were evident in the group. The discretionary income, diverse options to pursue careers and education, and a measure of free time so easily shift to become burdens for the women when misspent toward perfectionist pressures and tendencies. Is it a possibility that in resisting the superwoman syndrome of trying to do it all, women find a release valve in hiring other women for inexpensive labor to do the domestic work and provide childcare. This approach to relieving perfectionist tendencies or just reducing workload for some women often results in exploitation of others so that those with the economic status can relieve their pressured schedules and identities. Privileged women can hire working

class women to do much of their work so that women with the means do not need to be perfect or feel pressure “do it all.”

Likewise, at BoldInk, a telling statistic is that the workers there are overwhelmingly volunteer and the majority of the organization’s labor in the office and at writing workshops are unpaid hours put in by female volunteers. As one of the more recognized and award-winning non-profits in Los Angeles, it still positions itself as a place where women creatively, tirelessly, and sacrificially work on behalf of others without necessarily being valued as laborers with just compensation. In what ways does a volunteer workforce reinforce to women that they may not expect to get paid for the work they do? How much have we ordered our society to expect women to pitch in on behalf of women without being valued as workers? Feminism is often a class struggle in addition to being about gender justice. Some of the implicit feminism and disavowing of the term may also subtly disconnect women’s advocates from important feminist critiques and conversations. Without staying in the feminist camps, advocates may be ignorant of emerging obstacles for women’s advocacy, including corporate feminism and exploitive economic practices.

I recently met with two administrators at my university who do feminist research. We are forming a women’s network at our school. Much of our first planning meeting addressed whether or not, or to what extent, we should use the label “feminist” to identify our group. I shared how I started my dissertation with the question about how much I would position myself as a feminist scholar. Back then, I had taken the stance that much of my work in higher education would be to give credit to feminisms where it was due, and I would do my own work in the name of feminism. But lately, I had been questioning this effort because of my time spent with my research participants. None of them claimed feminism overtly, and most intentionally

chose to “do” feminism instead of labeling it and talking about it. If the goal is to make feminist values and methods mainstream, or the “best practices,” I am still uncertain of the ethic I will live by for claiming feminism always or not. It is both a misunderstood term that could end conversation quickly, and it identifies values and addresses power in useful ways. I also believe the world still needs women’s movement and feminisms to keep us connected to the sophisticated issues that impact women in a globalized and technologically advancing world. Feminist academics are in the habit of keeping their eyes wide open to ever-changing conditions and cultural shifts that impact women. I hope explicitly feminist scholars are not a dying breed, and I hope they will not be absorbed by other critical theory camps or implicit practices that do not claim the title “feminist.”

I know that as I wrap up this study, I have been emboldened to use the word more often in my classes this semester, and I do so without hesitation. In a Gender Communication course, I told students that I was a feminist far before I heard the term or started studying it. I knew there was a disconnect between the way things were and the way things ought to be for people because of gender issues, and feminism testified to my soul long before I had an academic understanding of it. The power in naming feminism and being on the lookout for it lit a fire in me as a scholar, teacher, and advocate, and I see it as primary to my work.

### **Voice in Feminist Non-Profits**

A way in which to understand the results for this study in regard to the metaphor of voice is to group the data into two elements of voice: the understanding that voice is “becoming” and that voice is to be “lived into.” The data that overlaps between the three participating organizations fall under these two ideas. The departures in how they expressed and used the

metaphor of voice lies in whether or not they framed voice primarily as an individual thing or to be worked out in community.

### *Voice as Becoming*

According to all three participants and their approach to developing voices, voice does not need to be found or discovered; they say it is hardwired and it can be drawn out. As Elbow points out, “the question is not just whether one *has* a strong or distinctive voice but whether that voice feels like ‘one’s own’” (27 *What Do We Mean...?*) After looking at the images and descriptions of voice that interviewees expressed, I suggest that voice in these advocacy contexts is best understood as action-oriented. Interviewees described it in these ways: listening to an internal wisdom that guides life and writing, testing others’ rules and messages to then choose for yourself, leading your own experiences, hearing from yourself and articulating that to others, acknowledging emotions and not ignoring them, getting what is in you out, making a move or shifting positions and owning that choice, taking risks where you want to and asking for help when you need it, and living out your values. All of these ways of naming “voice” call on women to act. In his article on voice and resistance, Freisinger writes, “At the heart of human agency is the ability to take action, sometimes in harmony with and sometimes against socially accepted values. Only when such action is possible is a theory of resistance feasible” (200). He argues that as teachers, we cannot force students to resist domination in their lives, but “if we can help them to recognize and voice their dominated condition, we will have served them well” (202). The interviews in my study all discussed resisting roles put on women and revealed that voice is not performing roles dictated by others, and it is not just speaking or expressing. According to BoldInk staff, when composing, an outcome of a strong voice is being willing to revisit tasks courageously to better reach intentions and purposes with a piece of writing. It is



not to simply speak but to speak from core self and concerns, not intellectualized, but still revisited and revised to better articulate a clear and connectable message delivered to your audience. A view of voice as “in action” addresses the limited view that voice is fixed. It is, as bell hooks writes in *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing*, “not unilateral, monologist, or static but rather multi-dimensional” (52). She says that too often a dominant way of discussing voice in educational settings is “finding one voice, one definitive style of writing” (52). Her descriptions of a feminist “coming to voice” discusses self-transformation that resists the notion that “women share a common speech or that all women have something meaningful to say at all times” (53). As subjects, women speak, hooks says, but as objects, “we remain voiceless” (53). hooks cites thinkers like Lorde, Romo-Carmona, and Anzaldua to remind us of the diverse aspects of women’s lives, and she observes that in voicing their liberation, women will have varied voices for varied stories and expressions of resistance. The expression “coming to voice” cannot be made cliché or be trivialized when oppressed women come to voice or speak with “the power of voices as a gesture of rebellion and resistance” (54).

BoldInk and Women’s Center staff suggest that this voice as self-efficacy can be drawn out, particularly by an audience that creates a space for the writer to be supported and for the message to be valued, where the writing coach and reader, when in contact with the writer, reflect back to the writer that she has worthy things to say and the reader is interested in hearing from her. Voice can also be drawn out by coaching writers and mentoring their confidence as authors. Mentors reflect back to the writer her intended purposes and ask supportive questions to help her connect with her reader. Viewing the writer as developing as a skill-builder often does not fit neatly into a syllabus schedule or gradable categories rolled out in a timetable, as BoldInk staff discussed during their interview. And according to all participants, the goal in writing

instruction as it pertains to voice should be to help a writer recognize her worth and the worth of her writing, and in the words of Sarah from The Good Enough Project, to “live into” that recognition. Doing so will promote confidence and more authentic expressions of voice and writing for developing writers.

### *Living into Voice*

Much of what Sarah at The Good Enough Project said about women’s voices had to do with becoming aware of why, as people in socially constructed settings, we do what we do and how we might increase conscious self-direction. She encourages the women she works with to approach their effort in writing journal entries in a way that prioritized being present over just getting through things, and if they can prioritize engaging over just surviving, they will be “living into,” as Sarah said, their experiences in writing and life. They would be closer to living into and voicing what they care about most, as opposed to roles or expectations from others, in their education contexts and, as BoldInk staff expressed, in all areas of a woman’s life. Heather Hewett describes similar ideas to “living into” as an “embodied voice” in her essay “In Search of an ‘I’: Embodied Voice and the Personal Essay.” She talks about learning to write the personal essay based on knowing that her life was worth writing about and she had something worth saying when she started “tapping into the authority derived from one’s lived experience” (725). This process gained momentum after having already written her dissertation in a detached and distant academic tone, even though her dissertation was about women’s bodies. She describes embodied voice this way:

A voice that draws its authority not from external sources but from my own life, from my own existence as a human being with experiential knowledge, emotions, sexual desire, and bodily aches and pains. A voice connected to a body that lives

in the world, a particular place and time within a global economy. A voice that suggests my willingness to look as clearly at myself as I can, even when my mirror is a little cracked, and even when I might prefer to cover my eyes—*especially* when I might like to cover my eyes. A voice that expresses willingness to share what I see, and attempts to make something relevant out of this chaos for the reader.

Too many women are practiced at performing roles and just getting through the day. This social construction is counter to drawing out voice and living into the story of their own lives as individuals. Hewitt recognizes this and the fact that the resonant voices she so admired in the women she researched had accessed the authority, as she said, “born wholly” of them. Each of the participants in my study emphasized the importance of what writers uniquely want to say and that they are free to self-direct rhetorical goals and ways of expressing ideas. They are free to use the “I,” whether directly or as a source of connection between her lived experiences and the ideas fueling her writing tasks.

Clothesline Project participants reported that too often women have the messages of female empowerment and “girl power,” but they are not actualizing this knowledge for themselves. Voice, in an advocacy context, also calls women to match actions with values, as Monica from the Clothesline Project pointed out, and to “live into” the knowledge they have. “Recognizing her own worth and living into that recognition can propel a writer to invest in her writing. When she knows she is worth investing in, any creative act she engages in and any work she does is worth investing in,” Sarah of The Good Enough Project said. All the participants pointed to lack of confidence as a problem that plagues women and that self-esteem issues have not gone away even though there are common clichés and messages about girl

power. Self-efficacy and self-worth are still areas for advocacy and education women need. The metaphor of voice can be employed to go well beyond putting ideas into words; it is most impactful when applied as action-oriented to draw out personal knowledge and values.

*In Her Own Way or in Community?*

A difference in opinion surfaced between two of the participants on the issue of whether or not voice is best understood in a sense of promoting individualism or if it is better drawn out in community. The BoldInk organization resisted terms such as “circles of women” or “vulnerability,” while The Good Enough Project identified both as key to strengthening women’s voices. Where Sarah of the Good Enough Project promotes vulnerability as dropping the effort to perform or produce an image of being very put together and in control, as many women feel pressure to do, the BoldInk staff does not promote sharing deep or personal things in public settings. Their writers can choose to do that, but the facilitators focus on the story or the writing content and do not analyze ideas on a personal level that could dip into therapy culture. But, by practice, BoldInk does programming that builds voices by creating an inviting community that says, “you’re with us and you’re supported,” according to Anna. In practice at events or mentoring, BoldInk uses the enjoyment of community and relationship to draw girls to write and participate. In their policy and programming, the staff emphasizes individualism over community-focused priorities. For The Good Enough Project, strengthening voices is done in community by women seeing who they are as what is reflected back to them by others, while BoldInk promotes women being their own source of creative confidence by acting individually. While both participants would tell writers to self-direct and enjoy the support of fellow writers, one emphasizes community first and the other, the individual as primary. At the Clothesline Project, the composing is a short and solitary part of the work, but during all the interviews with

Women's Center staff, the idea of audience emerged repeatedly. The power of the project comes from having an audience and the women being vulnerable to share with readers and to tell their stories. Without the audience and community of witnesses, the impact of the project would be lost, according to the staff. In their context, working out voice happens in community.

### *Voice for Writers*

During interviews, participants articulated ways in which their feminist advocate rendering of voice are evident in a writing context. The first idea from BoldInk is voice being a guide in the writing process, where a writer might listen to herself first and choose to write about what she cares about or is drawn to, and to then pursue those topics. According to The Good Enough Project, choices throughout her writing process are made by first relying on her own instincts and wisdom to make a next step before checking in with others' takes on how to write her piece. She writes toward her own questions and line of inquiry instead of writing toward what she thinks others want to hear or the way they want to hear it. Other times, voice is evident in moments of shifting a position in a paper and then owning that choice with confidence; voice in the sense of self-directing and hearing from herself are then evident. According to Sarah, a writer who writes with her own voice would invest in backing up what she has to say and having an answer to any "why" questions from readers because she moves with purpose to value herself and her writing. She knows what she writes matters. When the writer recognizes her own worth as an individual, she will be propelled to invest in her writing. These views on voice coupled well with insights about relational or "hospitable" writing instruction that came out of the interviews and observations with participants, and these points will be outlined next. This will provide an understanding of what the feminist non-profits who took part in this study are doing to support women via the vehicle of writing.

## **Insights about Relationship and Hospitality**

At the feminist organizations I observed, people are motivated by connectivity with who they are and with who others acknowledge they are. Writers are free to make themselves at home while they write and enjoy the company of others or the attention of an audience reading their work. And, they are encouraged to present their authentic selves in relationships and in writing. If women are socialized most often to be relational as a primary way of being, in what ways can our writing instruction provide the safe space for relationship in instruction and reading student-authors work?

Breaking down hierarchy, instructors being available throughout the writing process, and acknowledging the voicing of the self that writers do in any writing task are all key in the contexts of the feminist non-profit work studied here. Their missions and approaches to support women reveal a need for a hospitable writing environment that addresses, via relationship and safety, many of the writers' struggles. Not positioning women as needy, but instead, as free to make their own rules, hospitality in composition instruction says to writers, feel at ease when we gather to talk about writing, and feel supported knowing that your voice will be valued here.

### *Personal Standpoint: When I Host*

The truth is that while I feel at home in composition and in the classroom, many of my students are not familiar with my world. I can't remember a time when I didn't feel as though my classroom was a safe space for me. The autonomy this space affords me always upholds my freedom to self-direct and self-express. But, I'm the host here. I'm at ease in my familiar space. For students coming into school settings to be judged and assessed as those who need to perform and measure up, it may not initially be an inviting or safe space.

The many hours of interviewing and coding data have pointed me to a relational framework for understanding composition and teaching writing. For many people, writing is uninviting. It's hard and it can be personally and socially risky, and yet, these women's advocacy organizations put writing into their programming as a central vehicle for doing their work. The way they frame writing, though, builds from relationship and safe spaces. Anna from BoldInk noted how the spaces students write in at school often promote performance over authenticity. This is much like arriving at a party where people are sizing each other up and comparing more than they are enjoying being together. Students show up for class and they write, but are they really noticed and did anyone really hear what they said? Would they be missed if they weren't at the gathering?

#### *Hospitality in Composition Studies*

At each of the organizations in this study, those coaching writers and women were relational and hospitable. Haswell, Haswell, and Blalock wrote about hospitality as it connects to composition and writing classrooms, and noted that hospitality as a practice has been explored more so in education scholarship than in composition. They write how hospitality is an actual practice that "literally can be performed in writing classrooms" (709) and can "radically alter the interchange between composition teacher and writing student" (708). In their CCC article, "Hospitality in College Composition Courses," the authors make a case for hospitality as a necessary social exercise in a fearful era of "capitalism, counter-terrorism, counter-immigration, and concentrated affluence and influence," (708). They position hospitality as a retreat from typical power structures into the living and gathering spaces of the marginalized. Reviewing the data from this study, I see the idea of hospitality emerge. At first the word surfaced when Sarah from The Good Enough Project used the term to describe her vision for what writing classrooms

should be. Discussions with the Clothesline Project staff and the BoldInk staff also alluded to images of hospitality and promoting comfort and connection. Hospitality, as a framework for composition, draws into our work both relationship and connection with others as an important way of going about our learning and our work. The authors describe hospitality this way: “The essence is host and guest, strangers to one another who yet accept in good faith their equality in dignity, privilege, and value—a foundation that holds whether the host-guest relationship is determined by power, wealth, gender, age, knowledge, skill, or learning” (709). According to Haswell, Haswell, and Blalock, the success of hospitality in the writing classroom comes through when students are treated as “arrivants” who are “unknowns,” and “their essence resides not in being antagonistic to learning (perhaps in need of converting), nor being previously programmed or brainwashed (perhaps in need of debriefing or liberating), nor being uninitiated, outside the pale seeking to become expert inside it (perhaps in need of academic socialization)” (716). Escaping these common views of students, the authors suggest that to embody hospitality as more than a social grace, students are “offered learning or liberation or socialization but not obliged to take it” (716). Hospitality in composition parallels the values and constructs of the feminist non-profits in my study: instructor not seen as expert or advocate of a certain position, but as co-sharer; spaces not meant for judgment or rule following, but that instead reduce inhibitions and promote openness; and writing valued not as performance, but as offerings in a comfortable shared space (717).

### *Voice, Not Performance*

One of the primary ways noted in the interviews from BoldInk and The Good Enough Project to promote hospitality in teaching writing is to prioritize writer’s voice as self-advocate and author instead of any traditional education tendencies to have students perform for the



teacher or write the piece as the instructor would write it. Haswell, Haswell and Blalock describe the modes of hospitality in the writing classroom to include a “shared labor” that is not “text centered or student centered or teacher centered, but *interchange* centered” (716). The reciprocity between the instructor-host and student-guest means that the two can exchange roles at times and ensure that “writing and other discourse performance” is not used to measure the individual but to offer contributions in a working environment marked by “ease, tolerance, and mutual elbow-room” (717). Therefore, the writer is not performing for the instructor. The students are equals and the instructor is a co-learner who “offers ease—ease with the unique lives and beliefs of strangers” visiting for the weeks the course takes place.

In a hospitable and reciprocal relationship, students are free to self-direct toward their interests, values, and style of delivering the message. Instruction should emphasize rhetorical efficacy over following rules of writing or performing as a writer. In a hospitable classroom, writer-guests engage in expressing ideas and supporting them more than trying to impress others, as BoldInk demonstrated in their recurring words to girls to “just try it,” or when The Good Enough Project offered gentle reminders to women that “there’s no wrong way to do this activity.” Prioritizing voice over performance grants writers the freedom to research and write about what is important to them or engage with the course content with which they connect. It de-centralizes the professor and empowers the writer always, to not just get through an assignment or dread sharing about what she finds interesting, but to bring her whole self—interests, curiosity, questions, emotions, doubts, and challenges—to the task, and thrive in it more than just check it off dutifully or get through it begrudgingly.

## *Humanizing Research*

A second key trait of hospitality in our instruction could be to humanize the research and writing whenever possible. This part of hospitality that focuses on developing relationship in writing addresses the disconnect of traditional approaches to research that may seem detached or focused wholly on disengaged expert or scholarly sources written in inaccessible tones and language. My interviews with The Good Enough Project suggest that writing instructors should frame research and use of sources not as primary elements of lending credibility to a writer's composition, but instead viewing sources as "pulling others' voices," as Abigail said, from the shelves and into the conversation happening in a student's research. In a humanizing and relational framework for research, the instructor would model acknowledging the personhood of the scholar behind a published work composed by someone who invested many months or often years of their lives to report their research and who also shares in a curiosity for a topic with this student-writer. If connecting with others is a value for many women writers especially, prioritizing the relationship a writer can have with the voice that composed a source for citation may enliven research and make it more human. Academic writing tasks that can often seem sterile or removed from students' lives can be presented in more engaging ways when instructors emphasize the real life people infused in their research and their writing and the real life interest he or she took in the topic at hand. This approach to writing instruction is core to what BoldInk does at every event where professional writers share about their work and how they went about crafting it. The student writers make contact with other writers and see how returning to the hard work of writing can benefit the self and readers.

When students hear their composition can be an act of contributing to an academic conversation that matters in life and that others are taking part in, the connection with humanity

can serve to motivate writers to take themselves and their writing seriously, as Sarah from The Good Enough Project discussed. Hurlbert writes about composition instruction that encourages broader thinking by getting beyond our personal spheres to make contact with others:

For educators, the international challenge is to encourage ever more tangible contacts among people and to make the less visible contacts discernible and available for interpretation. We can help our students learn these lessons, and perhaps when we do, we will be teaching writing better than we ever did before. Why? Because we will be teaching students what writers actually do, we will be teaching them to make their writing a reason and an occasion for interacting with others. (*National Healing* 207)

This connection with others via research can go so far that others may even replicate or build on their inquiries in research studies, but this level of scholarship is often left out of undergraduate instruction or conversations about the relevance of research. The keys to the academic writing kingdom are sometimes limited to simple destinations of getting the works cited page formatted correctly or having three main points. If writing instructors have been lulled into school scripts with assignments that mostly talk about research in terms of “have this many sources and do not use websites,” but rarely talk about the excitement of human discovery and human contact in research, the classroom may be systematically disengaging writers because it becomes inhospitable. And this is especially true for women writers who are, on balance, interested in human relationship and connection with others. A sterile or impersonal research process and write-up does not appeal to her core self or ways of knowing if she is a person who prioritizes human connection and relating with others.

### *Instructor as Available Host*

A common call to action from all the participants in this study is for instructors and writing mentors to be available to students and to be acknowledged by an attentive audience. Each participant in this study emphasized a woman valuing herself and valuing her writing, and the other source for validation comes from an audience that also values the writer and the writing. No matter the workload for the host and no matter the system within which he or she labors, the guests are primary and need to feel connected and acknowledged. Monica from the Clothesline Project suggested that women are often testing to see if their ideas and their story have a place in society, and when a student “puts herself out there” in writing or in any expression of self, she will be strengthened by an audience that honors her voice. The feminist advocacy organizations in this study all prioritize providing that space and even being that space in one-on-one conversations and connections with the writer. The perception that women know how to talk and to connect with others may overshadow the need for designated spaces to act on their voices and to self direct their learning and composing. Messages such as “you’re ok as you are” and “you’re with us” from The Good Enough Project and BoldInk can also be expressed from an instructor-host to address the contemporary pressures for women to be all things and to look like striving is effortless. This kind of hospitable tone breaks down socially constructed behaviors that women are in competition with each other all the time and in all settings, whether it is for male attention or the position as the best and brightest student. The hospitable host acknowledges the guests, promotes an atmosphere of being okay with risk-taking and possible failure, and directs guests to be at ease with each other in order to collaborate with and support others. For Haswell, Haswell, and Blalock, they describe the “response” mode in the class where instructors give feedback to writers as the opportunity to “provide an inhibition-reduced space

where strangers can willingly and openly respond to each other” (717). The host interacts with a guest to help her see how her story is important and that everyone around her has an equally valuable story.

### **Composition Concerns Addressed**

In the months spent on site and with interview transcripts, a composition discipline-specific concern kept surfacing. The vehicle used by the non-profits to increase self-awareness and self-advocacy happened to also require a lot of work. Whether it was composing a powerful message in just a few lines on a t-shirt, or it was working to revise and refine a poem for publication, it is not easy to ask people to write and to put their minds, emotions, and bodies into the effort. What motivates women to write?

### *Motivation Needed*

Throughout the time spent with participants, many times the writing activities or discussions brought up a central and common truth in composition: writing is hard. In the feminist contexts I studied, it was sometimes hard because risky and painful topics can drain writers and make them hesitant to pause busy lives to face deep wounds, such as at Clothesline Project or The Good Enough Project. Other times, it was hard because the writers could not unwind or get into a flow to compose because of packed schedules and high achiever internal and external demands, such as at BoldInk workshops. Sometimes the writers’ ideas felt so much bigger and more important to them than they could express on the page after writing about them. Often, writers worried about getting it right and writing amazing things every time and all the time during BoldInk workshops.

The results in the data show that writers initiated difficult tasks and tenaciously composed often for the sake of the relationship. The relationships were made up of an audience

they knew cared. They didn't want to miss a rare opportunity to have a captive audience at the clothesline display or at the public readings for BoldInk. At The Good Enough Project, it was to hear from themselves during journal writing activities in that "wow, I didn't know I was thinking that" way. In the difficulty to face emotions that come with topics or even with facing the pressure to have writing product, the mentors and facilitators at both BoldInk and The Good Enough Project played a key role in reflecting back to the writers that the writers had the skills and the intellect for the challenge. Birthed from relationships with others, writers got the message that "the magic was in there" and the hard work would be worth it. It takes courage to return to a difficult writing task and to navigate the dark places and lulls, as many of the participants talked about when discussing aspects of composing.

### *The Self Populated by Others*

The writing going on at BoldInk offers a fresh angle on the concern within composition instruction of students' writing being self-centered or under-informed. BoldInk is positioned outside of an academic context, but they do not want to see their writers write only about themselves or not have skills that could translate to many writing tasks, including school. An interesting approach for connecting the benefits of self-expression and authorship to published research or product-oriented expectations emerged from the data. Because their experience was that writers want to write about themselves, BoldInk staff suggested starting a writing task with how the writer connects with the writing task or assignment, for interests and motivation, and to then move toward contact with others soon after. BoldInk embraces that undeniable starting point of the self. But, in writing journeys, they promote the movement toward sources and experiences for what I call "contactful" research. Instructors should nudge writers to read and make contact with other people and other people's ideas or research, to then circle back around

to the writer's personal story and note the connections with the writing task. Then the writer's personal vested interest in the topic will be "populated with the rich world" she lives in, as Anna from BoldInk said. Or, writers move from recognizing the value of their own story to seeing "the value of all the stories around them," as Sarah from The Good Enough Project said of developing thinkers who look outward and back inward. These feminist advocates who use writing to propel women toward self-advocacy embrace the nature of self-focused inquiry and writing, but they also discuss the value of connecting with audience and creating a product that "sells" to the reader. Even while writers explore their own interests and voice in writing, they make contact with others and with sources in order to learn, expand ideas, and reflect about who they are and what they value. This framework of circling back to the self after contact with others offers an approach to adapting to school contexts and expectations, while embodying feminist values for students' self-efficacy and composing. In this way, writers delay the audience's concerns at the start of a writing task and in their writing process in order to elevate the writer's personal investment and authorship during any writing task. The writing classroom could be enriched when people connect deeply on personal interests and forge new ideas in the midst of coming together with others' stories and writing.

### **Benefits of Relational Composition Instruction**

#### *Authoring Her Life*

The writing instruction or opportunities my participants provide promote writing where a woman can be well-practiced in hearing from an inner wisdom and personal voice. Strong voices, as understood in the data of this study, make the launch into any writing task more robust by connecting with the self and personal interests and questions, and by valuing herself despite social construction and limitations she will face. In the case of BoldInks' composing activities,

going back again to revise will be worth it when the writing is produced and expresses the core and unique self she embodies as the author. When pressures and self doubts mount, or messages from others dominate, the writer can tell herself truth and coach herself throughout, leaning into her inner wisdom and living into her own value and her connection with others, according to Sarah from The Good Enough Project.

When classes are completed and the degree is earned, the student-writer has only herself and her skills to help her navigate writing tasks and other life contexts that call on her voice. If her writing instruction often has focused on formatting, following directions, and getting it right, communication contexts and life's systems will not be as navigable for the woman who is not in tune with her voice and tools for self-advocacy. Both The Good Enough Project and BoldInk coached writers with statements like, "there's no wrong way to do this writing prompt," or answered writers' questions with, "what do you think you should do?" The participants in the study see their writing instruction or opportunities to write as opportunities to practice resisting roles and pressures women inevitably face. In this way, writing instruction is also life instruction. At Clothesline Project, women experience the power of naming abuse and telling their stories. They see that their writing matters and there are readers who want to honor the words they have written. All participants talked about providing the space for women to write and be supported, de-emphasizing the rules and pressures to get it right, promoting connection with others and collaboration. At BoldInk, where the writing results in publication, being available to celebrate her voice and revisit her message is key to using writing to support a young woman. Response does not come through critique, but through questions as to how to refine and sharpen what she intends to say, in order to increase connection with readers and to publish writing she can be proud of in years to come as a professional and adult woman.



### *Keeping the Liberal Arts Relevant*

Educators are increasingly pressured to demonstrate marketability of majors and a direct pathway to big paychecks for graduates. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and other education pundits continue to report how the academic sky is falling and will crash down most devastatingly on the humanities. Lawmakers increasingly look to only fund state education programs that measure learning outcomes and competencies by industry standards and employability. Liberal arts and humanities programs are now tasked with gathering quantified proof that their graduates are innovative thinkers and problem solvers with creative confidence and useful skills. Anna at BoldInk told the story of a graduate of their program going on to do international diplomatic work. When she later reported back to her writing mentor about an experience she had in using creativity to move forward at a diplomatic impasse with a group of diverse people, she gave credit to her writing mentor for her having learned to not only rely on logic but to hear from her creative self when problem-solving. This type of critical thinking is the badge of a liberally educated person. If higher education is to remain vital in an era that threatens its usefulness, creating space for breaking down hierarchy and elevating innovative thinking and creative voice will be part of what saves the liberal arts. Hospitality and relationship in composition help learners to skill-build along the lines of independent thinking and risk-taking that invites challenging old systems and forging new paths. When composition instructors use their strategic location in the academy to develop women to use their voices and to advocate for themselves and their scholarly research and proposed solutions, it ushers women into spaces of casting off old models of education and promoting their contributions in the classroom.

## **Limitations of the Study**

The limitations for this study include issues of having limited access to the writers and also the nature of the work the participants do being women-focused but not always writing-focused. For this study, the goal was to gather narratives from staffers and not writers directly about what the writing instruction means to the program and how they perceive the benefits to manifest for the writers. It would have provided another layer of data and insight to interview the writers themselves about what they perceived to be limitations they deal with regarding women's issues and their lived experiences, such as interviewing Abigail from The Good Enough Project. Also, it could have strengthened the findings to read more writing produced from the participants' programming. For the purposes of exploring new visions for "voice," this study looked to the organizations' mission statements to improve women's confidence and to the staff narratives and programming for data that reveals what ideas the feminist non-profits have about writing and writing instruction, while trusting that their outcomes to work on behalf of women are successful and, therefore, ripe for analysis.

Out of three participating organizations only one used writing as the primary thrust of their work. So, two of the participants were not as critically self-aware of how they used writing and audience, while one was thoroughly theorized in composition instruction and creative writing mentoring. The data from the BoldInk organization provided many connections between the writing classroom and their advocacy work, while the other two organizations connected more so through the use of the metaphor "voice" in writing and writing instruction. They also connected composition and advocacy through the common ground of working with girls and women who are living out contemporary women's issues and feminisms at their sites.

## **Further Research**

Looking for answers to the research questions for this study led me to more research questions. Specifically, I developed questions regarding motivation, creative confidence, service-learning, and workload.

### *Motivation*

If writing is hard—time consuming, vulnerable, ripe for misunderstanding—what are sources for motivation for all writers and especially women? My study theorizes that relation-driven instruction that promotes self-value and self-efficacy will result in more investment in writing, but studies to look at how to best motivate women students would be a useful line of inquiry. In the case of BoldInk, the things that motivate writers include relationship and interpersonal encouragement. What other motivators might women students need in the classroom? When staff or writers in my study talked about writing being “hard,” I wondered later while looking at data, in what ways was writing hard for them and did any gendered factors make writing hard? BoldInk staff talked about the struggle to return to their own writing because the task is so demanding and difficult, and they often spent their energy coaching writers instead of writing. They also observed that for the girls, writing is hard because it is difficult to unwind and set aside daily pressures in order to compose.

Each participant in my study talked about writing being a vulnerable act, from Clothesline messages to personal journal writing, so more research could be done to discover what makes writing hard for women and what unnamed motivations do writers have in a voluntary writing program setting that could be beneficial to introduce or develop in a classroom experience. As a writing instructor, I often try to “fan the flames,” as BoldInk staff said, to inspire student-writers to engage in writing and to face challenges of revision and reworking

pieces. I often admit I find writing to be hard. What can instructors offer their students to motivate them and equip them as writers who work at a difficult task that inevitably requires revision and reinvestment? It would be beneficial to conduct studies that hear from women writers about what motivates them to return to writing and in what ways are instructors intentionally motivating writers beyond grades and course units.

### *Creative Confidence*

Do writing instructors need training or space to develop their own creative confidence and become practiced in using their voices? Mentors at BoldInk conveyed needing the kind of experience in writing and voice that the girls received where they would have supportive and confidence-building instruction. Likewise, the BoldInk staff expressed how they did not have programming or spaces for increasing self-efficacy and voice when they were developing as writers and professionals, but I did not follow up on these comments during our interviews. Later I noticed that a theme throughout my researcher journal entries was confidence in writing. At times I said, “I want what they have” regarding the BoldInk girls’ confidence. During the Good Enough Project workshop, I listened to participants’ self-esteem issues and self-doubt resonate with others during discussion and when sharing their writing reflections. In coding the t-shirts from the Clothesline Project, women wrote repeatedly about losing their personal value and coaching themselves about their own worth. Research regarding women composition instructors’ confidence and how much they do or do not work to develop student-writers’ confidence would be beneficial. It would offer insights about in what ways or possibly to what degree confidence as a writer for writing instructors is linked to whether or not they intentionally teach or draw out confidence in their student-writers. Studies could focus on research questions such as, in what ways do women composition instructors address or not address their own

confidence issues amidst their work to support students' confidence and agency as writers? And for rhetoric and composition Ph.D. candidates, how did relationship and hospitality from advisors affect their confidence in the dissertation research and writing? The data would no doubt resonate with female academics and composition instructors who are mindful of gendered norms and expectations that impact the classroom and writing.

### *Service-Learning*

A narrative study such as mine could be duplicated in the context of composition courses that do service-learning projects in feminist non-profits or groups that specifically work to develop confidence and voice. My study makes the leap between using writing in advocacy work and writing instruction, but it would be beneficial to carry the research questions into a setting where a composition classroom and advocacy work is being done together. This would provide data and narratives about writing as a vehicle for change even more directly if the classroom and the non-profit were merged for interaction. What would happen when student-writers join a community like BoldInk, lead a workshop such as the Good Enough Project, or stage a public rhetorical event such as Clothesline Project to specifically observe ways in which the writers use writing to address social and personal issues? A specific line of inquiry for further research could look at the ways in which the participants talk about or develop an understanding of the metaphor of "voice" as writers amidst an advocacy setting.

### *Workload*

And finally, my study's findings about writing instruction fueled by relationship and hospitality leads to more research questions about how composition instructors can be available to students amidst demanding teaching, grading, and research loads? How do compositionists continue to develop strategies to connect with students and be an attentive audience? Workload

and compensation issues plague the field and threaten to continue dehumanizing the workforce and students. Generally speaking, scholarly inquiry that investigates how composition keeps liberal arts values and feminist methods vibrant will be something that maintains our reciprocity between instructors and students as a discipline, as well as our humanity as educators.

Hospitable acts by professors are often not recognized in workload and in promotion processes where teacher-mentor roles fall far behind the credit given to teacher-scholars. If the field does not attend to workload issues, hospitality values could actually increase the field's internal social justice issues.

*What I Will Do Differently or More of*

My study was an opportunity for me to go out and ask women I admire and who work to improve women's lives about new ways to be the teacher I want to be. They helped me in new ways to resist the school scripts that elevate the professor and train students to "get it right" more than direct them to use creativity and their own voices to guide them. One of my participants said writing comes in epiphanies and the flow doesn't come on demand. I learned this is true while drafting these dissertation chapters over the years. When I needed to get into the flow, pretty much on demand, I found that making contact with my interviewees, by listening to the interviews again, or reading over transcripts, reminded me that I cared deeply about this research and the people at the organizations. I was studying what I needed to learn, and my sources had a lot to say that would rekindle again and again my interest in this particular writing task. I learned to stay in contact with my wellspring for ideas, and in this case, it was my participants.

Their voices often echo in my mind when I'm in the classroom or when I'm sitting in front of a stack of papers to grade. Based on things they shared with me, I'm going to try new things and cast off my rule-following self. As Anna told me, if I take a pedagogical risk and it

does not work, I can always clean up the mess. And, I'm going to use my class sessions to "stoke the fire," as Christine said, in my students' writing more, instead of, most often, just talking about writing. I'm also going to remind my stressed and sometimes scared students that simply "they're ok," simply as they are, as Sarah said. I'm going to be available to them and take the time to write encouraging feedback even when I'm hard-pressed in my workload. This may be best achieved by making sure I am *responding* to students' ideas more than I'm evaluating or editing papers. That's a basic rhetoric and composition practice, but it's easy to slip back in unchallenged school scripts about assignments and grading instead of being hospitable to developing learners. I want to be a hospitable host to students.

I am going to use some class discussion time to talk about voice—the many ways it's understood or used to put pressure on writers to find one unique voice and style. When students use the metaphor, I'm going to ask them what they mean instead of just moving along or nodding in agreement as if I am sure of what they mean. I'm going to talk to students about my own coming to voice and effort to be a strong writer in a way that admits they are both things I'm still working on. I, as Heather Hewitt described, am working to "speak with a voice connected to my way of being-in-the-world, the self which loved words and ideas, yes, but also loved to walk outside, eat great food, and spend time with her partner; who got angry when she read the newspaper and watched the news; who spent a lot of time worrying about her ageing parents..." (731). And I could add, worrying about her dissertation on voice, her time away from her toddler while teaching, her wish to have more children and to have a career and advocate, ever advocate, for women. I use writing to find out what I want to say, and I am not always mindful of my intentions or writing with authority, and I will talk to my students about that. I fear the vulnerability of writing, but I know when I write with a resonant voice, as Elbow describes it,

that it most often comes from my lived experience and personal connections to the topic. I will encourage my students to write that way. Starting with the self is okay. I hope my students will always know that the self they start with is enough, that I value that person, and so should they.

I'm going to continue to develop my creative confidence as a compositionist, both writer and writing teacher. I appreciate, more than ever, the value of writing mentors like those at the heart of BoldInks' work, and I have joined a feminist research and writing group at my university. The embodied experiences of getting together in the same room like the women at The Good Enough Project is something I need to continue to seek out. I have also formed a women's network at my university where we gather once a month to discuss issues of work-life balance and navigating gendered issues as professors and higher education staff. I am visiting the Women's Resource Center more at my own campus, and I'm listening to the speakers and the students who gather there in order for me to stay in touch with women's experiences and issues on my campus. Those are the issues I am moved by and that I want to research and write about. My motivation to do feminist research and writing and the hard work of advocacy runs deep. I find inspiration in communities such as the ones my participants have created, where we help each other see our humanity and the humanity in others.



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