

# Braiding and Rhetorical Power Players: Transforming Academic Writing through Rhetorical Dialectic

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*ABSTRACT: In this article, I revisit the Elbow/Bartholomae debate, review recent scholarship on academic writing, and discuss the ways that the mandates of traditional academic writing can further disenfranchise already marginalized students. I suggest that, due to the double consciousness with which these students often live, they come into classrooms rhetorically adept. By asking student writers to employ braiding (the braiding of subjectivities, genres, or rhetorics in single texts), we enable students to theorize experience, to contest stereotypes of “student writing,” to contribute to academia via their own intellectual experimentation, and to consciously position themselves among various discourses as effective rhetorical power players. I offer the experience of one student writer (a lesbian and an Army cadet) as a case study.*

*KEYWORDS: academic writing; braiding; alt/dis; GLBTQ student writers; queer pedagogy.*

To deny the importance of subjectivity...is to admit the impossible: a world without human beings. This objectivist position is as ingenuous as that of subjectivism which postulates human beings without a world. (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 32)

Not that we want to, but if we had to choose two rhetoric and composition scholars to face off in a Steel Cage Death Match, we would have to choose, still, Elbow and Bartholomae, right? As he climbed through the ropes of the ring, Elbow would sport a billowing sateen cape with a big red heart sewn in the middle. Those sitting ringside would spy, as Bartholomae danced through the introductions, a glittering, silver brain stitched to the seat of his trunks. “Folks, we’re expecting a barnburner here tonight,” a tinny announcer’s voice would pour from the loudspeaker. Across the land, rhetoricians and compositionists would lean toward pay-per-view screens or (old school) bend their heads toward analogue radio dials and feel each blow.

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We would wince when Bartholomae landed “The ability to imagine privilege enable[s] writing” (641) with a roundhouse to Elbow’s chin. We would gasp when Elbow, at first playing rope-a-dope, delivered “It is possible to learn something and not be taught” (vii) to Bartholomae’s breadbasket. No matter how each of us might score the bout, this match may end in an eternal split decision or perhaps even a draw for basic writing and composition.

On the surface, Bartholomae has hoisted aloft the belt, “World Champion Academic Writer” inscribed in gold-plate. It is, after all, conventionalized academic discourse that we basic writing and first-year composition teachers put an awful lot of energy into: “thesis-driven argumentative essay based on sources—the type of writing espoused by Bartholomae—[is] the *default form of academic writing* in U.S. colleges and universities” (Mlynarczyk 22, emphasis added). Others echo Rebecca Mlynarczyk’s assessment. For instance, Jeffrey Maxson avers, “academic culture privileges scientific ways of knowing, and...this leads to a peculiar kind of writing: full of discipline-specific jargon and concepts, hedging of statements (to pre-empt attacks from critics), statistical rather than anecdotal evidence, an almost obsessive documentation (ostensibly so that readers may arrive at the same conclusions as the writer), etc.” (25). Sound familiar? It should. For forty years, one of the central projects of basic writing has been to empower or (depending on to whom you’re talking) to inculcate into basic writers the ability *to be* or at least *to pass* as academics. Other areas of rhetoric and composition scholarship—literacy, discourse and genre studies, Writing Across the Curriculum, style, error, English for Academic Purposes, and on and on—tangle with the conventions of academic writing that Mlynarczyk and Maxson describe and that students are so often asked to reproduce. And if composition textbooks, the faculty syllabi that I review each semester as a WPA, and even paper mills are any barometer, the current norms of academic writing aren’t in any danger of waning.

The implied rigor of the academic writing genre can, for some, contrast starkly when measured against the personal writing that Elbow has championed. Mlynarczyk notes that “Elbow would like [students]...to write well-told stories, effective narratives, drawing on their own experiences, developing their own ‘voices,’ finding power within their ‘own’ ideas” (11). For many compositionists, this expressivist approach rings provincial. In a review essay where he revisits the Elbow-Bartholomae debate and underscores Elbow’s continued significance to the field, Robert Yagelski writes, “...expressivism (as a ‘theory’ about writing and teaching) and the process movement (as a pedagogical manifestation of that theory) have long been critiqued

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within composition studies” (533). And outside composition studies, too. We increasingly work in university milieus where administrations assess our courses and their effectiveness in meeting, for instance, general education goals and outcomes or information literacy standards. Or we work on campuses where colleagues across the disciplines assume first-year composition and especially basic writing to be students’ Great Acculturator into academic discourse. And this is not even to plumb the social-epistemic turn in rhetoric and composition pedagogy. Many teachers find it difficult to justify focusing precious class-time on narratives, especially beyond more approachable first assignments. Academic writing, then, has become *doxa*. Mlynarczyk advocates expressive journal writing as a method for helping basic writers to become comfortable with ideas prior to attempting those ideas in more formalized writing and, thus, gaining proficiency in conventionalized academic prose. She stops short, however, of naming those expressive journal entries *academic* in and of themselves; in fact, she can appeal to little more than basic writing and first-year composition instructors’ collective common sense when she writes, “Although the forms are often blended or overlapping in college writing, most composition teachers would agree that there is a fundamental difference between a personal account of living through one’s parents’ divorce and an *academic essay* arguing to end the system of no-fault divorce in the United States” (5, emphasis added). While Mlynarczyk concedes that blending (of genres, perspectives) occurs in students’ academic writing and while she values student writers’ use of the personal, she does so only so that personal writing may serve students’ acquisition of *academese*.

Elbow, though, is still swinging. There has been no TKO. And rightly so. Though the contemporary field of rhetoric and composition can be accused of over-emphasizing Bartholomae and too easily dismissing Elbow, the Elbow-Bartholomae debate persists as “a kind of defining moment in composition studies” (Mlynarczyk 8), not only due to its status as historical watershed but because teachers, especially basic writing teachers, remain torn regarding the “relative merits of these two different types of writing” (Mlynarczyk 4). Competing demands on instruction spawn ambivalence that snakes through both the field and our classrooms, an ambivalence that can at times even pit some basic writing teachers against some of our first-year composition colleagues. On the one hand, we strive to assist basic writers in passing university writing exams and in honing the error-free, correctly formatted, linearly deductive critical thinking that will guarantee success in first-year composition and beyond; on the other hand, we seek

to heal the scars of red ink past and to believe that “The Students’ Right to Their Own Language” is more than a PDF on the NCTE website.

It seems to me, then, that composition as a field has much to gain by advocating for *mixed* academic discourses. As the epigram at the beginning of this essay notes, Paulo Freire insisted on “the indisputable unity between subjectivity and objectivity in the act of knowing” (*The Politics of Education* 51). For Freire, meaning is made through consciousness and intervention. Because knowledge requires a knower, knowledge is always imbued with subject/ivity and, thus, limitations. Therefore, *all* knowledge is partial (as in *not-whole* and also as in *partial-to*). However, academic genres have traditionally recognized some knowledges and rejected others. Even in basic writing, a student-centered field that practiced the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning long before it became fashionable to do so, we can sometimes focus too heavily on the intervention side of Freire’s dialectic. Whether because we as individual teachers ascribe to gate-keeping models of correctness versus appropriateness of language use, or we err on the side of academic conservatism and purported rigor due to concern for students’ ultimate success in the university, or course caps seem to be always increasing, we can too frequently ignore the consciousness(es) of the actual students in our classrooms.

As Mlynarczyk demonstrates, it’s possible to align Bartholomae’s academic writing to James Britton’s transactional writing and Elbow’s stories to Britton’s expressive and poetic writing. Art Young, also relying on Britton, states, “...poetic to transactional writing exists along a continuum where the writer’s stance toward language and audience changes the more one writes in either the spectator or the participant role” (476). Writing of Clemson University’s Poetry Across the Curriculum initiative, Young continues: “Students often attest to the ‘freedom’ of writing poetically once they develop trust that the teacher is encouraging creativity and risk taking...” (476). I draw two lessons here. Let me start with the second one first. Second, self-conscious creativity and risk-taking ought to be embraced as essential to students’ writing processes. First, writers’ positions toward discourse alter depending on whether they write as detached spectators (that is, less concerned with an audience’s response, as with Britton’s poetic writing) or as involved participants (where they might, for instance, attempt to persuade an audience, as in Britton’s transactional rhetoric).

I would extend Young here and offer that when we ask students to *braid together in the same text* the always already enmeshed subjective/objective—to weave, for instance, the mandates of academese with alternative

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discourses—we enable student writers to be both spectators and participants in the same document, thereby opening up academic writing by giving expression to both the subjectivities students bring into our classrooms and the interventions being made therein. Through this braiding (for instance, of memoir and argument, of narrative and criticism, of the tale of one’s parents’ divorce and of the depiction of no-fault divorce at the national level), student writers can make the most of the rhetorical savvy that they bring into our classrooms.

### **Minimizing the University**

Bartholomae’s arguments of the mid-80s arrived as a progressive response to some previous scholars’ reductionist essentialization of basic writers as cognitively deficient.<sup>1</sup> However, limitations did remain in his pedagogical approach, or at least in how that approach was often read and implemented.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the edict that students write only in academese is troubling. Patricia Bizzell has admitted, “inventing the university” was “fundamentally a one-way street. Students, it seemed, had to leave behind their home discourses and conform totally to the academic” (“Hybrid” 7).

While such assimilation may have helped a basic writer to pass (that university writing exam), what did she lose in the process? Academic conventions don’t only empower students to say some things. Their commands disallow students from saying other things. Linguistic codes are radically divergent, and not everything can be said in every code. I can tell you that “It will soon rain,” but if I do, I haven’t told you, “It’s fixin’ to come up a cloud.” I don’t know what you hear and see when I write either statement. With the latter, you probably don’t see the world through my four-year-old eyes, my head thrown back to reveal grandmamma beads of dirt in the creases of my neck, a clothesline, far above, slicing the plane of my vision. You don’t see on her hip my grandmother’s knuckles, raw from having scrubbed a load of clothes on a washboard in the backyard, her eyes studying the horizon and judging the distance between a dark sky and the still damp overalls that hang on the line. But neither of us will see that image if I use the former phrasing. Like the excesses of identity politics, Bartholomae’s injunction can bifurcate student writers’ lived experiences and “appropriate” academic subject matter (see Mlynarczyk’s divorce example), and Yagelski might point out that part of Elbow’s opposition to conventional academic writing hinges on the erasure of *epistemic knowledge* that coincides with the erasure of experience.

The field's overreliance on a narrowed conception of academic discourse erases, of course, some experiences and some epistemologies more than others. Too often, veins of not only sexism, classism, and racism but also heterosexism and regionalism run through our writing classes, and we don't even see them because they've donned the mask of academic writing, a *doxa* that has become naturalized, perhaps especially for those of us who make our living promulgating it. Bizzell concedes that, because the academic community is a human one, its language does change. However, "...at any given time its most standard or widely accepted features reflect the cultural preferences of the most powerful people in the community" ("The Intellectual Work" 1). In the academy, she notes, those people have usually been white, rich males ("The Intellectual Work" 1, "Hybrid" 11), and I would add that they have also been seeming-heterosexuals who speak the Midwestern dialect of the nightly news.

The demographics of the powers-that-be often stand in stark contrast, however, to the students-that-be in our classrooms. Mark T. Williams and Gladys Garcia, for instance, observe, "As writing teachers at California State University, Long Beach, where nearly 50% of composition students are the first in their families to attend a university and just 35% define themselves as 'White,' we frequently see many of them struggle with academic discourse" (93). Still too often, though, teachers, facing stacks of student drafts, cross out Black English Vernacular or hillbilly discourse, thinking perhaps of Horatio Alger economic mobility myths or simply faltering under grading fatigue.

What message are we sending, to students, to ourselves, and to the broader public, when we police linguistic legitimacy? Nobody comes out of her mama's womb hedging claims and citing precedents. It is trained into us. However, there is a pedagogical futility here. When an overly narrow academic discourse is prescribed, we end up creating parrots who excel in replication, not agents who can enter in, own, and alter the discourse at hand, academic and otherwise.

If we are not wary, writing pedagogy can morph into little more than teaching test-taking, a shortsighted and culturally regressive enterprise. When we mandate that students think only inside the curriculum, our writing programs—instead of the laboratories they ought to be—become little more than echo chambers for our students as we whitewash academia's picket fence (now topped with concertina wire) all over again. (I realize I'm mixing my metaphors, but I'm fired up now.) Not only do we sentence students to mime rather than become academics; we also rob the academy of the epistemic and evolving knowledges students hold and might make.

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Even if this training “works,” even if basic writers’ academese sails them through every class from first-year composition to senior year WID courses, by too narrowly focusing on stereotypical academic norms, we fail to foster the kind of reflective rhetorical savvy that we all need in order to grapple with larger social discourses. Kermit Campbell, for instance, argues:

...as writing teachers we cannot allow whiteness and middle-classness to go unchecked in the classroom. If we abandon the critical perspective here because we see the values of one group as superior to others’, as the principle aim of composition pedagogy, then we really aren’t preparing students to become—as many of my fair-skinned colleagues like to say—citizens, active participants in the shaping of our democracy. (339)

Campbell here speaks to the dulling of critical thinking that occurs when we hammer into students academic discourse [in his words, “normative boundaries in student speaking and writing” (335)]. Jeffrey Maxson goes even further, remarking on the material repercussions of our single-minded reliance on a strictly sanctioned linguistic code:

In the context of a writing class, the hegemony of formal language works as an aspect of racism and classism, making it more difficult for those who speak non-standard or non-prestige dialects to achieve success in education and careers, limiting their options in society. Further, it’s the discourse of education...that classifies non-standard dialects as incorrect and that positions non-standard dialect speakers as not competent, uneducated, wrong or even cognitively deficient. And this discourse is what employers and others rely on when making negative judgments of non-standard dialect speakers. (27)

Both on campus and beyond, students as writers and citizens will be asked to perform and are capable of completing myriad varieties of intellectual work. The “critical thinking” goal that we so often set for ourselves in our professional documents charges us with enabling students to do this work. However, a too narrowly conceived notion of academic writing can impede all but the most formulaic academic argumentation, disempowering intellectual experimentation, especially for students from counter-communities as they are the folks most often urged to adapt.

This is not to say that traditional academic discourse remains inaccessible to student writers of color or student writers from Woodbury, Tennessee, for example. Jacqueline Jones-Royster has reminded us that all of the voices in which she writes are her native tongues. However, strict demarcations that delimit ways of discursively being in academia are detrimental to many students (perhaps most students, perhaps especially basic writers), for this over-emphasis on a single code prohibits the linguistic richness that students bring into our writing classes, “the primary resource they bring with them to college” (Mlynarczyk 13). Ironically, students who either cannot or *will not* accept a restrictive pedagogy, one that requires checking (some) subjectivities at the classroom door, these are the very students often marked as failures while students who provide canned discourse with which they feel no connection might be labeled successful. Forcing many students to choose between academic success and home or chosen alternative cultures, we not only sever academia from whole fields of knowledge that marginalized students bring with them, but we end up further marginalizing these students who could be our most fluent rhetorical power players.

### **Challenging the University by Revising the Continuum**

If the personal is political, the personal is damn sure academic as well. That’s what’s always bothered me about James Britton’s continuum of language—well, really, about the continuum metaphor more generally. Continua imply that their subjects can’t be more than one thing. The mercury can’t read 85 degrees Fahrenheit and 55 degrees Fahrenheit at the same time. But why can’t writing be transactional and expressive concurrently? Why can’t it be both personal and academic? Or, better yet, in basic writing, how can it ever not be?

In composition we too often regard overtly personal essays as “gimme” assignments, easily accomplished projects that are frequently assigned early in the semester and are designed to increase students’ confidence and assist their transition into more difficult, more remote, more prestigious academic writing. Mlynarczyk acknowledges this bent: “Students first need to explore ideas encountered in academic work in language (whether spoken or written) that feels comfortable, not strained, in order to work toward the goal of being able to write convincingly about these ideas in more formal language” (5). What nags at me here, though, is whether Mlynarczyk is implying a hierarchy. Is the value of personal writing only that it facilitates more proficient use of academic writing? Is the essay on “no-fault divorce in the United



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States” a more inherently impressive paper, a more difficult and useful task than the “personal account of living through one’s parents’ divorce”? (5). More specifically, does the masking of the self and the adoption of (potentially) another’s language and mores make the work more valuable?

Britton speaks to the question: “Expressive language provides an essential starting point because it is language close to the self of the writer: and progress towards the transactional should be gradual enough to ensure that ‘the self’ is not lost on the way: that on arrival ‘the self’, though hidden, is still there. It is the self that provides the unseen point from which all is viewed” (179). I appreciate Britton’s reassurances about the persistent self. However, for me, there’s something of a contradiction here. On the one hand, Britton warns that a writer’s development from the expressive to the transactional should be gradual for fear that otherwise the writer’s self will be lost. On the other hand, for Britton, the self is “the unseen point from which all is viewed, always and forever.” (Okay, I added the “always and forever,” but it seems to me implied.) If the latter is the case, I ask how the self could ever be lost, no matter how fast the move from expressive to transactional writing. Or, more important still, if the self is the “unseen point from which all is viewed,” something with which compositionists (if with various and sundry tweakings) have increasingly concurred, then why must the attempt be made within first-year composition and basic writing to hide that self at all?

Deborah Mutnick points not to the fact but the facticity, not the objectivity but something-like-objectivity that academic writing enables:

The omission of the “I” in written discourses achieves *an effect of objectivity, omniscience, and authority*. Through the elimination of agency, statements assume a *facticity*, a presumption of truth, that more subjective discourse self-consciously calls into question. Although the use of “I” by no means necessarily alters the substance of an argument, it does foreground the interpretive, rhetorical dimension of all communicative acts. ...Together with psychoanalytic and deconstructive theories of self and multivocal (re)constructions of self by subaltern writers, the critique of objectivist discourse invites us to explore the parameters of “I” more closely. (82, emphases mine)

There is a common, fraudulent manipulation of discourse, then, in much academic writing and a challenge from Mutnick to re-examine the role of the personal in all rhetoric.

First, there is the mandated exclusion of the “I” [not the pronoun (though, now that I think of it, maybe that, too) but, more broadly, the seeing subject, the self]. This exclusion attempts to counterfeit objectivity (a copy itself, with no original). (And here I’m thinking not only of Freire, his interweaving of the subjective and the objective, his contention that objectivity alone is impossible, but also of Judith Butler’s performativity and its exposé of mandates that compel repetition of cultural commands as if they are natural.) Through the elimination of the “I” is won authority, a conservative directive in that it demands reproduction of a discourse that has marginalized many (including many of its own makers). This conservatism is especially stark in the face of changing enrollments over the last forty years (nowhere more famously than at City University of New York).<sup>3</sup>

I’m feeling defensive (perhaps one too many department meetings with Americanists explaining to me the shortcomings of Peter Elbow), so let me clarify that my point is not that we ought always, to infinity and beyond, privilege less formal registers or expressive narratives. Yagelski characterizes *Writing Without Teachers* as “an argument against academic convention” (537), and to the extent that that is true, I think Elbow gets it wrong. For one thing, in some instances, some writers’ subjectivities may *be* academic (mine, for instance, at least here and now, and Elbow’s, too, given the academic conventions he himself uses). Also, in educational and socioeconomic worlds where students can be failed and fired for sounding too hillbilly or too ghetto or too faggoty, strategic uses of academic discourse can be powerful, and though some would oversimplify his work, Elbow knows that. He clarified in the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Writing Without Teachers* that he wanted only to explore “the *limitations* of argument, doubt, debate, and criticism” (xxi), not eradicate them, and Yagelski himself notes the “high standards of intellectual engagement” (537) to which Elbow holds learners.

In composition, then, we should, alongside traditional academic mainstays, encourage a rigorous subjectivity and call for mixed discourses. By recognizing that knowledge necessitates a knower and that writing requires a writer and by asking students to foreground these facts in their writing, we can revise Britton’s continuum and thereby open up academic discourse in progressive ways. Instead of seeing writing as a gauge that slides back and forth on Britton’s continuum, trapped in a furrowed channel, we might envision the continuum as a slick surface along, around, and about which writing might skate. We can overlay on that continuum, whose gauge is now free to roam, the genre of academic writing, which will no longer contain only the transactional and a passing expressive but possibilities that

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were before constrained or, depending on the classroom, unimaginable. If we then zoom out and look at academic writing from space, we see an image appearing something like a knitting needle hidden in its own ball of yarn, the continuum part of the larger mass but not definitive of it.

It's not as if academic writing isn't already a tangle anyway. Chris Thaiss and Terry Myers Zawacki's *Engaged Writers, Dynamic Disciplines* has ably documented not only the differences in writing found across disciplines but differences in writing found within disciplines as well. Thaiss and Zawacki note, for instance, that many academics break disciplinary conventions; their "informant" sociologist Victoria Rader did so, for instance, so that her work on homelessness would reach a broader audience (45). This redrawing of intellectual lines no doubt encourages, in mathematician Daniele Struppa's assessment, "...traditional disciplines constantly [to] evolve towards a breaking of boundaries, towards an enlargement of their objects, and, essentially, towards a more interdisciplinary view" (43). The fragmentation of writing within disciplines is important for composition teachers to remember. Too often, for fear of churning out unprepared students and perhaps for fear of hearing complaints from colleagues across campus, we basic writing teachers invoke bogeymen from business and spectres from the sciences, trying sincerely yet reactively to ready our students for every possible writing scenario or instructor they might meet, knowing that some of our campus colleagues may feel that ours are the very students who do not belong at the university in the first place. However, of Thaiss and Zawacki's informants who *do* write strictly within disciplinary conventions, most of these faculty "...do not necessarily want undergraduates to learn to write within these conventions. Rather, for many, it is important for students to connect what they are learning in school with either their outside experience and/or ideas in the popular media and to write about these connections in a variety of forms" (46).

Patricia Bizzell has noted the variety of intellectual approaches within single disciplines, particularly the increasing appearance of mixed discourses (what Bizzell formerly tagged as "hybrid" discourse but now refers to as "alt/dis"). Bizzell attributes the growth of these alternative discourses to the growing diversity of the academy itself, a development that basic writing both spawned from and fosters: "With the diverse population, slowly but surely, come diverse discourses from people's various home communities. Previously non-academic discourses are blending with traditional academic discourses to form the new hybrids" ("Hybrid" 11). While Bizzell has focused on the alt/dis of scholars, like rhetoric and composition's Victor Villanueva

and historian Joel Williamson, others have explored alt/dis in composition classrooms. Hannah Ashley, for instance, invoking Mikhail Bakhtin's heteroglossia and Judith Butler's performativity, has argued for classroom practices that destabilize naturalized academic conventions, "poking at fixed categories, disputing them as they are performed" (8). In doing so, Ashley advances carmen kynard's multivocal essay "'New Life in This Dormant Creature': Notes on Social Consciousness, Language, and Learning in a College Classroom" as a prototype of how students might embrace play when using sources in their academic writing. According to Ashley, "Reported speech—bringing the voices of others into our own writing through quotation, citation, and paraphrase...—is, arguably, the convention most central to first-year students' classroom writing success" (9). kynard consciously plays with academic mores by elevating some of her own sources (for instance, through the use of metapragmatic verbs) while diminishing others by foregoing quotation marks, reversing nominalizations ("grammar" to "grammarizing," for example), and including ironic asides, thereby revising Britton's continuum to let the transactional and expressive skate together across the surface of her prose (12).

According to Bizzell, mixed discourses like kynard's are gaining scholarly acceptance not because they are "more comfortable or more congenial" but because they allow "their practitioners to do intellectual work in ways they could not if confined to traditional academic discourse" ("The Intellectual" 3). Bizzell cites Williamson, for instance, an eminent, senior historian whose scholarship focuses on the American South and race relations. Williamson confesses in a *Journal of American History* article his own willful ignorance of racial violence; that confession then enables him to point to the willful ignorance of the entire field of Southern history. When we encourage not just scholars but also basic writers to use alt/dis, not only in early "personal" essays or in writing journals but also in privileged academic writing, part of the intellectual work these student writers do is to revise academia itself. Donald McCrary has advocated the use of alt/dis in writing classrooms and asserts, "Using hybrid discourse would allow students to identify and reconcile their encounters with different languages, to shape them into a single utterance representative of their linguistic knowledge, to make a valuable *contribution* to academic discourse" (75, emphasis added). "Contribution" is key. No longer must students throw back their heads to glimpse academic discourse on a mile-high pedestal. Upending banking models of education that require students only to ape (and, thus, replicate and conserve) academesse creates space for students to call on the linguistic

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richness of the many cultures (including academic ones) that they always already inhabit and helps them develop a critical discursive consciousness to intervene in those cultures.

### **Braiding Rhetoric and Rhetorical Subjects**

*Rhetorical consciousness* and *rhetorical empowerment* (that is, cognizance of and facility with the creative power of discourse) can be achieved through the rhetorical strategy of braiding. If literacy is not just a storehouse of knowledge but a social action, then literacy instruction stands as a call to action; likewise, if our classrooms privilege a naturalized, narrowly defined academic discourse, then we effectively interpellate students into a status quo that re-marginalizes many (in- and outside the classroom). However, by embracing Freire's notion of becomingness, of "men and women as beings in the process of *becoming*—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality" (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 84), and by pairing this concept with Freire's call to dialogue, "that truth lies in the quest and not in the result, that it is a process, that knowledge is a process, and thus we should engage in it and achieve it through dialogue" (Freire and Faundez 32), we can ask student writers to engage in such dialogue with their own multiple selves on the pages of single academic papers. We can do so by asking students to braid selves, genres, writerly purposes. By inviting student writers to braid together in the same document their own perspectives and experiences, for instance, with academic discourse community mandates, a mutually informative dialectic is created, and academic writing can be expanded in ways that student writers may find exciting, battling what April Heaney has identified as the single most salient feature of basic writing: writers' *uninvestment* in the writing process (34).

When student writers maintain a multifocal perspective within single texts, academic writing as a genre is opened up; specifically, it is opened up to the theorization of experience. To separate students from their lived experiences, cultural intelligences, and counter rhetorics with only the promise that they will acquire power as they adopt the language and mores of the academy is short-sided, dishonest, unnecessary, and impossible. For instance, Min-Zhan Lu discusses Mike Rose's student, Lucia. Lucia had chosen to major in psychology due to her desire to help those with mental illness, like her brother who experienced a psychotic break, and she thus had great difficulty with academic readings that sought to deconstruct mental illness altogether (Lu 135). How would it even be possible for Lucia to read

her course texts only as an academic, not as the sister of a schizophrenic? Moreover, why would we want to ask her to do so? Why trap her inside a course's curriculum? Academic writing has never been as simple as constructing a thesis and locating evidence and incorporating sources. It's more often been about constructing the *correct* thesis or finding the *right* evidence or incorporating *appropriate* sources, so much so that the academy has become recursive, often walling itself off from new knowledge, particularly knowledge from cultural outsiders. Narratives, students' own and others', once theorized, have the power to pierce such myopias. Braiding challenges teachers to honor or at least cope with the tension of multiplicity on the page, and it also asks individual students and (eventually) academia as a whole to incorporate and contend with the new knowledge that is made.

For students from marginalized communities, this theorization of experience already happens. It is a matter of survival. Our students use cultural catch phrases—"driving while black," for instance, or "hasbian" (think Anne Heche)—that demonstrate that many of them have already theorized their own experiences and the lore of their communities and know what time it is. Expanding academic writing by asking students to theorize the personal reallocates power, and basic writers who are almost always more likely to be multivocal stand to become some of the most effective rhetorical power players in our classrooms. As Gloria Anzaldúa has stated, "The art of composition, whether you are composing a work of fiction or your life, or whether you are composing reality, always means pulling off fragmented pieces and putting them together into a whole that makes sense" (Ikas). Thus, students who know that to "pick up a room" and to "clean" it do and do not mean the same thing begin our classes rhetorically *advantaged*. Asking students, first, to bring to bear a critical lens on their cultures, subjectivities, and rhetorics and, second, to braid these together in their writing (of selves and of essays) empowers students and explodes stereotypical constructions of "student writing." For basic writers, academia becomes more relevant even as it is deconstructed. Students do not simply consume and replicate a mythically homogeneous and often foreign academic writing; instead, they tell a shifting story, their own shifting stories, of survival among the multiplicities and fragmentations of multiple discourses, many cultures. We end up with texts that quote the discourse of street gangs, "the first time the Buccaneers / let you pass; / now the Buccaneers / are gonna kick your ass," *and* the discourses of Cicero, Gramsci, and Burke (Villanueva 1).

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### **Laura's Story: Braiding Lesbian and Soldier**

"Please don't mention my name to anyone." Laura's<sup>4</sup> voice stopped her classmates cold. The zippers of book-bags fell silent, and the always-animated exodus of the students enrolled in my queer composition course hung there, suspended. "It could get back to my commander." It was a moment of vulnerability, not an easy place to be for a spitfire cadet from the heartland.

Laura wore her olive drab to our class every Thursday. A military scholarship recipient, she had agreed to join the Army upon completing her Bachelor's degree, a commitment she had made because she could not otherwise have afforded to attend the university. Laura participated in an arduous ROTC program; it was nothing, for instance, for her to have rappelled and visited the rifle range before our 9:30 a.m. class. Also spending many weekends in a program similar to the Reserves, Laura expected to be inducted as an Army officer upon her graduation, serving no less than four years.

During a time when abolishing the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy remained unthinkable to the military and the federal branch, I designed, proposed, advertised (prodigiously), and taught our university's first GLBTQ-themed composition class. With nearly all of the twenty-two students openly gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or queer-identified,<sup>5</sup> Laura's identity as a lesbian did not distinguish her in this writing class. Instead, her identity as a soldier did. Laura was a motivated, driven perfectionist who tried to uphold the military's expectations and mottoes. She frequently mentioned her "love of country" and "equality for all." Those declarations initially sounded canned to me. For Laura, though, patriotism was true, and it was also utilitarian, offering her a ticket out of a stifling, small-town future. Still, the risks that Laura knowingly took when registering for our course reveal the equally deep significance of her lesbian identity. Save this class, Laura squelched her lesbianism, and our classroom was, she acknowledged, "pretty much the only place I'm out," yet she chose to enroll, in the face of her own fears and serious potential material repercussions. Laura entered this class, then, in some ways bifurcated, an out Army cadet but a (generally) closeted lesbian. In retrospect, the course's design may initially have exacerbated her fragmentation, for I aimed to create a composition class where GLBTQ-identified student writers could, through the creation of braided texts (especially texts that directly addressed students' multiple subjectivities), pry open closed notions of "academic writing" and "student writer."

My primary impetus for developing this class was the continued incomprehensibility of *GLBTQ-student-writer*, a term that too often remains

an oxymoron. That oxymoron pivots at both hyphens. First, even in a world where Ellen DeGeneres can be a COVERGIRL and Chris Colfer can both be and play gay, too few opportunities exist on college campuses for students to (simultaneously, openly, and comfortably) be GLBTQ *and* student. In the first nationwide study of the campus climate for GLBTQ students, the Q Research Institute for Higher Education found “that nearly a quarter of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer students...had experienced harassment at their colleges, and more than half had observed...it” (Lipka). Specifically, dormitories remain unsafe (Robinson, Lipka), and the Greek system remains unwelcoming (Hall and La France). Homophobic graffiti litters campuses (Getz and Kirkley), and spectators at college sporting events yell homophobic epithets at opposing teams (Salkever and Worthington 194). GLBTQ student centers and pride symbols are vandalized (Lipka). Student affairs professionals *self-report* diminished skills in working with GLBTQ students (Croteau and Talbot), and faculty make homophobic jokes and comments in lecture halls (Iconis, Gortmaker and Brown, Renn). Freedom, then, for GLBTQ students to be GLBTQ and student is impeded across the campus.

That oxymoron, though, reads another way. Even when GLBTQ students are out to roommates and teammates, for example, or enroll in GLBTQ studies programs, they often continue to face difficulty foregrounding GLBTQ subjectivities when writing for mainstream courses, perhaps especially the general education courses taken early in their academic careers. This status quo has been amply documented by composition scholars. Pamela J. Olano writes of academia’s “system of monosexuality—if we are all assumed to be heterosexual, then we can eliminate that ‘constant’ and move to other ‘more important’ work” (77). Cynthia Nelson notes that her colleagues are “perturbed, by the idea that lesbian or gay identities could have any relevance to language learning. To them, gay-friendly teaching is...invasive, inserting a discourse of (homo)sex into a field in which that discourse is neither relevant nor appropriate” (373). Sarah Sloane documents one student writer’s experience of being forced to write on a topic of special interest to the gay community (people living with AIDS) but feeling unable to do so as an out gay man. According to this student, “I disappeared. I went into my room and locked the door” (34), the student eventually failing his composition course. Unwittingly heterosexist classrooms (via the use of tokenizing textbooks, for instance, or through unintentionally normative paper assignments) can erase the feasibility of GLBTQ students voicing these subjectivities in the writing they produce for our classes. More generally, if Bizzell must continue to sell us on the value of alt/dis for scholars (those with



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the letters after our names, those with the most power in academic writing communities), how hard must the sell remain before many of us encourage *students* to foreground subjectivity, particularly alternative subjectivities, and to use alt/dis in their *academic* writing? Not in personal narratives abandoned early in the semester or in journal entries where reflection is warehoused, but in academic writing where prized objectivity too often remains synonymous with heterosexism? As I designed this class, then, I kept as a touchstone the goal of providing GLBTQ student writers a space to effect those subjectivities in their academic writing.

Equally important was the aim to queer subjectivity more broadly. Queer theory provides a useful poststructuralist step away from the homogenizing excesses of identity politics. Pointing to the partial and contingent status of any identity, queer theory views all subjects as discursive and as recognizable only through representation. Thus, instead of advocating an inclusive politics (or pedagogy) that attends to a natural or even stable gay and lesbian community, queering identities emphasizes the multiple subjectivities inherent in any single subject, thereby rejecting totalization and instead allowing for conditional alliances. I hoped that a queered composition course would pry apart what have become reified, trite mainstays in some composition classes (e.g., “Should gays be allowed to marry?”) as well as disrupt composition’s common marginalization and erasure of actual GLBTQ students. I sought that this course instead allow these student writers to encounter in the reading list, to discuss in classroom conversations, and to investigate in their writing the divergent subjectivities, theories, experiences, representations, histories, sciences, legalities, and the like that both the students and leading GLBTQ thinkers found most pertinent to GLBTQ subjects and communities.

Thus, when hammering out the course’s calendar, I attempted first to queer our reading list. For instance, we read writers like Judy Grahn (who claims that everyone from Billie Jean King to Sappho shares a common gay heritage), Lillian Faderman (who claims lesbianism is but a twentieth century invention), and Kate Bornstein (who writes of her own male to female (MTF) sex change; her subsequent discovery of her own lesbianism; and her long-term relationship with a lesbian separatist who ultimately underwent her own FTM sex change only to come out as a gay man.) We read parts of Jonathan Ned Katz’ *Gay American History* in concert with selections from Carol Queen and Lawrence Schimel’s *Pomosexuals: Challenging Assumptions about Gender and Sexuality*. I was hoping, in other words, that every student would find parts of her- or himself reflected in some of the readings, all the

while knowing, indeed demanding, that those readings were not congruent. This reading list, in my mind, satisfied Patricia Bizzell's directives that, when encouraging alt/dis in student writing, course readings both "focus on a cultural crux of our day, the sort of vexed problem that professional academic scholarship grapples with" and that that same crux "be carefully derived from local conditions, in what the teacher's own students might be interested" ("Hybrid" 17). As these students had chosen to enroll in this GLBTQ-themed class, I felt confident that the readings' subject matter would speak to them, though not in identical ways, and that's just what happened. For instance, students chose when they would co-lead discussions based on their interests in the day's topics or genres. Philosophical treatises, historical accounts, and creative nonfiction drew some students while clips from a recent *Oprah Winfrey Show*, a transcript of a Jerry Falwell sermon, and the mission statement of the Human Rights Campaign Fund interested others. Common interest, however, in no way predicted that discussion leaders would agree in their interpretations or opinions of readings, and more often, they did not. Moreover, (contested) subjectivity consciously remained our lens for investigation throughout the semester, and not only the readings but students' comments in class were interrogated along those lines by all participants.

Two things emerged. First, ours was a queered classroom, *not* a classroom that mandated students' queerness. Instead, the course's structure allowed the GLBQ (and the three straight) students' voices to be heard but not at the cost of one another's. When reading, viewing, listening, speaking, and writing, students were asked to consider divergent identities, both within and between subjects, even as they might sometimes self-consciously foreground (one of) their own, doing so within a diverse (sometimes heatedly so) GLBTQ academic community. Second, the classroom encouraged but did not demand braided discourse. The students were provided, as Bizzell suggests, "generically diverse" texts that showcased "a lot of examples of discursive strategies" they might adopt in their own writing ("Hybrid" 19). Students also wrote multi-draft papers in which I encouraged them to "connect the materials with their own experience. They must cite these texts and engage them rigorously; but they must [in my classes, *might*] also talk about their own experience in ways that feel right to them" ("Hybrid" 19). I encouraged but did not compel students to attempt braided texts because, for me, much of the power of alt/dis is that it often materializes in very different ways, and I worried that a mandate for braided texts on an assignment sheet might diminish that power by requiring and unintentionally

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stabilizing these discourses. Also, I did not want to imply that students had a single authentic self that they should invoke; in fact, while many of the students originally registered for this class because they felt disenfranchised as GLBQ students in the rest of their curricula, once in the class, students' other subjectivities often became more important with divisions along race, gender, urban/rural, and especially political lines, for example, appearing in class discussions. Finally, I didn't want to force any student into self-revelation that might feel needless or threatening.

That Laura's multiple subjectivities were (perhaps frighteningly) difficult to negotiate emerged in her writing almost immediately. In her first responses, Laura carefully summarized the readings, only occasionally venturing a tentative evaluation as to whether an author provided "enough evidence." Meanwhile, her classmates (for good or ill) submitted viscerally surging responses. One student, for example, after we read historical accounts by John D'Emilio and George Chauncey, railed at his own "so-called General Education" history class that never mentioned GLBTQ folk. Laura's first writing of the course didn't necessarily strike me as problematic. Many young students initially have difficulty discerning summaries from responses, and I wondered if, perhaps due to her single-minded pursuit of excellence, she, like some of Hannah Ashley's students, might "hold quite foundationalist beliefs about everything from the five paragraph essay to standard English" (7).

This disparity between Laura's writing and her classmates' became especially clear when the first draft of an early, short paper came due. Students were given only skeletal instructions—due dates; a page minimum; the proviso that papers in some way explore the readings of the course or our class discussions. I also encouraged students to turn their "lens on their uses of 'I'—which of their I's are they using, to what end?" (Ashley 13), but I didn't require this rhetorical move. Most students submitted ardent essays. For instance, one African-American student, inspired by readings from Essex Hemphill's *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* and Kath Weston's *Families We Choose*, wrote of the greater importance of biological family for GLBTQ folk of color, given the racism in the white gay community, and he then reflected on his own family ties. Another student playfully argued that our campus's Women's Studies program should, per Marilyn Frye's suggestion, recruit straight women to become lesbians and then went on in a teasing daydream to imagine how her experience as a Women's Studies minor might change. Laura's first draft, however, skirted the course's theme, our readings, and our class discussions altogether. She

instead submitted a paper explaining why Zora Neale Hurston was her favorite writer, focusing on images of nature in Hurston's fiction. When I conferenced with Laura, I commended her on taking a chance and injecting herself into this draft. I worried, though, that the draft hadn't addressed, even minimally, our course's theme and asked how she planned to enter the conversation of our class in her next draft.

Two things surfaced during our conference. First, Laura clarified that she had sought to write a good academic paper, which she described as focusing "on a proper topic, you know, that didn't use 'I' and stuff." Gently, I responded that Laura actually had used first-person pronouns and that that writerly choice was fine, that it didn't make the paper less successful or less academic. Laura then confessed that she had known all along that her draft had "no real significance to the issues that we have been discussing in class," and she went on to say, "In essence, I was taking the easy way out of facing the hardships I have in dealing with GLBTQ topics." When I asked her to talk to me about those hardships, she simply repeated, "I don't know. It's just hard." I wanted to acknowledge Laura's passion for Hurston, but I also wanted to challenge both her "book report" approach to this draft and her evasion of the class's theme. Like Bizzell, I wanted Laura to "develop a range of experimental discourses," to cultivate "a sort of craft-person attitude toward writing, in which various tools are developed and students learn to deploy them with greater facility" ("Hybrid" 20). Laura and I sat over coffee for a solid hour and brainstormed lots of revision strategies. I offered, "Could you connect images of sexuality in Hurston's novels with her images of nature?" and "When you start to have difficulty in 'dealing with GLBTQ topics,' could you start to write about that difficulty within the draft itself?" The conversation seemed to go well, and I was excited to see what Laura would come up with in her first round of revision.

When I collected the next set of drafts, however, I was surprised to find that Laura was either unable or unwilling to attempt the experimentation we'd discussed, for she had completely discarded her Hurston draft and submitted an altogether new essay, this one about her uncle Scott. Therein, Laura recounted her family's rejection of Scott, a gay man who fled to San Francisco, only returning home to the rural Midwest when he knew his death from AIDS was near. In this new draft, though, while Laura could state the fact of Scott's gayness, she did not engage it. She writes, "[Scott] loved children, roller coasters, ice cream, raking up leaves and then playing in them.... This is the way I remember him, not as a gay man with AIDS." I could see that Laura struggled in this paper to frame her uncle within the

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scaffolds of the assignment and the class and to foreground her subjectivity even more fully than she had in the Hurston text. Throughout her paper, though, she seemed either to recount her uncle as a personification of his illness or as a loving person unconnected to that illness; she could have been describing two individuals instead of a single man who lived a complex reality. Her new essay, then, mirrored the same bifurcation of subjectivity that her inability or refusal to revise that first paper had revealed. Laura could talk about “gay issues” only by segregating them and removing herself from them, or she could talk about herself and her personal life only after she’d purged “homosexuality” from it, this even after she herself had registered for a GLBTQ writing class in which she sat as a self-identified lesbian.<sup>6</sup>

Probably due as much to her aspiration to remain an “A student” as anything else, Laura *was* attempting in these early pieces to braid discourses, but her writing seemed to me to remain less braided than still trapped in Britton’s furrowed channel, moving in some paragraphs toward the transactional and in others toward the expressive. I almost felt as if she could have formatted her writing into columns, symbolic of...her habit? her need? conventionalized academic mandates? She could admire Hurston but only if neither she nor the author’s characters were sexual beings. She and her family could love her uncle as a fun-loving, gentle soul but not as a dying gay man.

Overarchingly, Laura’s early writing struck me as waffling between a kind of unthinkability and a fallback on often conservative, potentially mimed positions. For instance, when she responded to portions of Randy Shilts’ *And The Band Played On*, Laura argued, “This country must work together, not against one another, so that some day we will have a cure to combat this deadly disease.” Early in our class, this seemed as penetrating as Laura was willing to be. Moreover, the tone of her language often rang similar to that of the military Code of Conduct that she quite seriously attempted to follow and that she quoted to me, saying, “I will never forget that I am an American, fighting for freedom, responsible for my actions, and dedicated to the principles which made my country free. I will trust in my God and in the United States of America.” Just as the military doesn’t encourage questioning of this code (for instance, problematizing what it means to be an American or just whose freedom is worth fighting for, at home or abroad), neither was Laura willing to pursue such inquiry. Thus, her closed conceptions of academic discourse; inherited, superficial rhetorics; and real-world, homophobic dictates seemed to amalgamate and create a block in Laura’s writing, at least initially. However, even though her subjectivities and their

discourses seemed early in the semester to regard one another with a kind of leprous untouchability, when I read her first writings collectively, I wondered if some of the work of braiding had not begun in that Laura as writer and subject embodied conflicting identities and beliefs and that conflict was seeping out onto the page. Perhaps students who claim subjectivities that have been overtly censured—gay students from conservative families or faiths, for instance, or rappers who can roll out social commentary in double-time triplets but who can't pass a placement exam—may particularly exhibit conflict in their writing when attempting to bring subjectivities and discourses into contact.

From my (granted, remote) perspective as her teacher, both Laura's lesbian subjectivity and her understanding of the complexity and partiality of language seemed to deepen as the semester went on. Perhaps because she was for the first time in her life publicly presenting herself as a lesbian and communing with other GLBTQ-identified folk in a challenging academic milieu, her classroom participation grew bolder. She became more likely to grapple publicly with our readings, to ask questions of other students, to challenge positions she didn't agree with, and to speak of changes in opinion that she began to experience.

This shift appeared in her writing as well. About nine weeks into our sixteen-week semester, Laura wrote a response to an interview with Marlon Riggs. Quoting Riggs, she noted the following:

In a discussion earlier in the semester, there were several of us students who arranged a "hierarchy of things that are virtuous in our character", [sic] I being one of those, saying I am female before I am lesbian. It seemed to me that my argument was sound until I read what Riggs had to say. Why should I have to put one character as more important than the other when *both* make up the person who I am?

Echoing the work of many GLBTQ writers of color, like Audre Lorde, who refuse hierarchy of, in Lorde's case, lesbian/black/feminist identities, this was the first of Laura's writings that pushed at what had before been stable boundaries. Here she began to reject the codification of her own subjectivities that she had previously abetted. Writing of real-world hegemony that ruled her, she lamented, "...I am supposed to be a soldier but that also means that I will have to hide my sexuality. Also, as a female, I have to work twice as hard because it is difficult for a woman to lead men who dislike

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the idea of being led by a female.” What before had been neat in Laura’s writing began to crumble, first, as she dropped the supposed objectivity of academese and began to interject into this reading response her own experiences and, second, as the rhetoric of the military is shown up as counterfeit and invested. It seemed to me that occurring within Laura was what Bakhtin calls a “critical interanimation of languages,” the language of queer studies clashing with military discourse (296). When that critical interanimation occurred, as Bakhtin predicts, Laura appeared to realize that “the ideological systems and approaches to the world that were indissolubly connected with these languages contradicted each other and in no way could live in peace and quiet with one another” (296). Thus followed “the necessity of actively choosing one’s orientation among them” (296). For Laura (as for all of us), this choosing between discourses and subjectivities was no simple task. Laura’s identities began to tumble into one another in this reading response, and, just as they did, her writing for the first time criticized the authoritative superstructures that sought to prevent them from doing so.

Here Laura began, fully and more successfully, to braid discourses, almost despite herself. Bringing her full attention to and becoming angry at the rhetorical and material double-binds that sought to regulate all parts of her life, Laura began to interrogate the discourse of equality and opportunity promulgated by the military. Using the methodology, first, of juxtaposition and, second, of increasing anger, Laura’s writing became more reflective, more piercing, and more vital, not just to me but to Laura herself.

Laura’s criticism, however, was cast not only on what might typically be viewed as conservative forces like the U.S. Army. Laura also criticized a gay and lesbian movement that would mandate proper lesbian comportment. Approximately three weeks after she wrote the response to Riggs, Laura complained, “...one should not have to necessarily ‘become involved’ in order to be a homosexual. There is just too much emphasis on becoming part of an organization if you are a GLBTQ individual.” This opinion would have been unpopular in our class as so many students entered the course heavily politically involved, became more politically involved after enrolling, or professed respect for their peers who did such work. For Laura, though, joining GLBTQ political or social groups could be dangerous as doing so could result not only in the end of her education but also in the end of a career in which she aspired to do well. For Laura, adopting (what she viewed as) a political identity within a GLBTQ community would be antithetical to who she considered herself to be. She maintained, “...defining oneself into a certain category or group is almost detrimental to the sense of identity one

has for himself or herself,” claiming that (some?) definitions of lesbianism (and other subjectivities) “only create barriers for an individual seeking to discover identity.” While Laura’s avowal (one she made early in the course) that she is innately lesbian was a position that I had pushed her to interrogate, even if she eventually maintained the belief, Laura ultimately insisted that innate lesbianism (what some might label an essentialist positionality) in the end exists as just one of many significations of *lesbian*, one that is ultimately as valid as *political lesbian*: “One should not feel that he or she must be in the political realm of sexual identity in order to take on that identity.” Herein, Laura continues to grapple with larger coercive discourses, and she demonstrates increasing facility in navigating these discourses, showcasing a more confident and more complex “self-conscious performance of ‘self’” in her writing (Ashley 5), demonstrating the kind of aware performance of subjectivity that so many basic writers could benefit from refining.

This increasing intricacy of her own subjectivity reveals that Laura is no more soldier than she is lesbian but perhaps no less so either. I began to rethink, then, what sounded to me as canned discourse earlier in the semester. Laura *does* love America, and she *does* want to be a good soldier, and if that discourse is inherited by her, it’s no more so than, say, a stereotypical example of lesbian-feminist rhetoric might be. However, Laura is also a lesbian, and braiding together those heretofore oppositional identities and discourses did allow her to fragment her prior unadulterated acceptance of a pro-military rhetoric that erases her.

The culmination of Laura’s writing came in her final paper, the longest of the semester, where she finally researched and wrote on the military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy. This last paper manifested as an attempt, if not to coalesce what had seemed to Laura and to me as oppositional soldier and lesbian subjectivities, then at least to refuse their inimical bifurcation as she braided them into a powerful dialogue. Laura began this draft by criticizing “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” as unconstitutional. Clinging to her belief in American ideals, she decried the policy as one that “does not ensure that a homosexual in the military will receive equal rights and respect as a soldier of his/her country.” Laura additionally cited the hypocrisy that permeates military procedure. After noting the secrecy, fear, and ostracism that the potential dishonorable discharge of gay soldiers inflicts on these members of the military, Laura noted that the military “swears to protect the very principles...which [it]...condemns, the Constitution of the United States.” Insisting on her respect for all soldiers who “serve their country with integrity, courage, and honor,” Laura condemned a policy that allows the military



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to investigate a suspected gay soldier based on as scanty evidence as “appearance, hearsay, or even unjustified suspicion.” Laura even went so far as to interview a career Army officer who, a lesbian herself, had been investigated purely because she was artificially inseminated. Noting that her colleague’s “family and many friends were called and harassed by military officials [who tried to convince them to] divulge her sexuality,” Laura protested that even this woman’s barracks were searched for some proof of lesbianism. While this investigation never produced enough evidence to discharge this officer, it did succeed in “hurting her family and her dignity as a soldier.” Laura reaffirmed that she takes seriously her sworn oath as stated in the military’s Code of Conduct, one that pledges her allegiance to America’s ideals, but she also here began to struggle on the pages of her text with the

hypocrisy of the foundations upon which our country is based, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.... One should not have to hide his or her sexuality because he/she has the right to liberty and happiness. In essence, this policy creates an atmosphere in which discrimination, harassment, and even physical abuse toward lesbians and gays is tolerated and, to some degree, encouraged.

Unable to reconcile easily her soldier and lesbian subjectivities and also her belief in American ideals and her witnessing of American hypocrisy, Laura’s indignation grew and crystallized in this paper, lesbian and soldier finally clashing (or perhaps merging) in her conclusion:

“I am an American, fighting for the forces which guard my country and OUR way of life. I am prepared to give my life in their defense”... is the pledge that all individuals of the military make, whether homosexual, heterosexual, black, or white. That pledge is the basis for every American soldier in the armed forces. In essence, all persons are soldiers fighting for a certain cause which they believe is moral and just. It is important that as soldiers for gay/lesbian rights, that... OUR way of life be protected and respected.

In fighting for what she deems to be moral and just, Laura has emerged a different kind of soldier here. She is, yes, a soldier who defends freedom, but now, instead of accepting the erasure of her own lesbian subjectivity, she fights for a freedom that the military would in fact oppose, the freedom for GLBTQ Americans to live in a milieu of safety, respect, and equality. She is

not just a soldier for America, and she is *not* no longer a soldier for America. She is instead a soldier for a queer America.

In this braided essay, Laura demonstrates many of the characteristics of hybrid texts outlined by Patricia Bizzell. In her explication of Villanueva's *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*, for instance, Bizzell points to Villanueva's "willingness to use a variant range of cultural references" ("Hybrid" 13) and his use of "personal experience which is absolutely taboo in traditional academic discourse" ("Hybrid" 14). Laura's essay foregrounds both of these rhetorical moves. She invokes the rhetoric of independence and freedom from elementary school history lessons even as she invokes the chants of Equality Now from gay rights marches. Using an all-caps, first-person plural possessive "OUR" in both instances, she demonstrates her own multiple subjectivities and her unwillingness to settle any longer for discourses that represent her only through the rhetorical amputation of part of her self(s). Bizzell also points to Villanueva's use of "offhand refutation" ("Hybrid" 14) and his use of humor, common moves in hybrid scholarship. While these two moves may indeed be counter to much published scholarship, Laura's use of direct confrontation and rage (in some ways the opposite of Villanueva's strategies) strikes me as counter to the genre of "student paper." Students so frequently hedge their claims for fear of "getting it wrong." Laura, however, by the end of our class, unleashes her anger and allows for no sacred discourses, refusing her obliteration whether it be for a conservative or progressive cause. Her story within this class points to, I think, the new kinds of intellectual work that Bizzell so lauds and the deep, thoughtful prose that students produce when they are asked to discern, within a single text, how they are indicted and privileged, erased and lauded by various cultural rhetorics.

### **When the Conflict Speaks: Gaining Power through the Queerness of Braiding**

Many student writers' multivocalism readily appears in our classrooms since students from some marginalized groups disproportionately place into basic writing in the first place; their prose leaves the taste of hayseed or corn tortilla or street grime in the mouths of standardized tests readers or admissions officers. While gay and lesbian students are often a less visible minority in basic writing classrooms, they, too, enter our classes steeped in exploration of subjectivities and the languages of counter-communities. By embracing the queerness of braiding—that is, braiding's

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rejection of inherent essentials and single truths (whether those be coming out of metanarratives or academia's objectivity imperative)—student writers can take advantage of their own rhetorical prowess and can challenge the heterocentrism (among other “isms”) of academic discourse even as braiding helps insure their facility with the dominant discourse.

In giving students the space to challenge and claim a new facility with the norms of dominant discourse, braided texts produce at least two immediate benefits. First, student writers can call on the multiple languages they speak. As Bizzell has pointed out, “Actual humans are usually acquainted with more than one discourse, without being essentially defined by any...” (“Hybrid” 10). Braiding enables students, particularly basic writers who are so often more likely to be multivocal rhetors (and to have been punished for it), to invoke the most significant asset they bring to the writing classroom, their facility with multiple rhetorics. Second, braiding “productively, practically, assist[s] students in studying the ideological character of language, without alleging that language and literacy are fixed, essential” (Ashley 8). By encouraging students to summon in the same text multiple discourses, student writers “understand the political, material, power-laden meanings attached to language choices” (Ashley 6), a reality that many basic writers have already spied, if not before coming to college, then often in the very news of their placement. In fully recognizing the power relations inherent in language, power relations that both reflect and create the larger culture(s), students become more aware, more deliberate rhetoricians, consciously choosing the subjectivities and the rhetorical strategies they foreground in their writing.

Braided texts are challenging for students. If braided texts are not throwaway “gimmee” narratives that appear early in the semester for students to move beyond, neither are they self-indulgent, anti-intellectual essays with more therapeutic than academic value. Just as some students can effortlessly mimic academese in clichéd academic arguments, other student writers can undoubtedly trot out (what too often reads to their teachers as) the hackneyed “winning touchdown” essay. The braided paper, though, encourages students to bring discourses and selves into dialogue in order to increase their agency as writers. With dialectic as the central project, heated discussions and disagreements appear, not only between students (for instance, in classroom conversations or in peer review activities) but also within students on the pages of single papers. In some ways, then, struggle and conflict are at the core of braiding—but the conflict is empowering, allowing students to challenge dominant mores that they previously

may have considered unassailable. Laura's story provides a "perfect storm" example—attempting to come out as a lesbian yet stay in the military, attempting to reconcile her innate lesbianism with the politicization of that identity, attempting to defend a country based on freedom that would deny her her own rights. Not every student will come into a class so bifurcated, but many basic writers will. What does it mean to have earned As in high school English classes only to place into basic writing? to be looked at with suspicion by one's family when one slips into academese at home? to study mental illness and have a schizophrenic brother? to consider no-fault divorce in the U.S. and to remember one's parents' split? By asking students to acknowledge the writer behind the writing *and* the larger discourse communities in play, we invite students within single texts to bring their multiple selves into dialogue and into academic discourse. Students bring their selves and the academy into dialectic, deepening their investment in their writing as they map new paths for their intellectual work.

In this way, braiding is a queer pedagogical move. As Ashley writes, "Queerness is not androgyny, a moderation between female and male, homo and hetero, depravity and prohibition. Queerness is an exposed both/and..." (16). The queerness of braiding, then, is that it allows students to be one thing and another in their writing. Braiding assists students in becoming critical academics (or at least in passing as them), but it also requires more than that. Just as Villanueva's *Bootstraps* is neither *only* "newyorican English" nor *only* "traditional academic discourse" but "a hybrid form that borrows from both and is greater than the sum of its parts, accomplishing intellectual work that could not be done in either of the parent discourses alone" (Bizzell, "Hybrid" 13), braided student texts replicate (in Laura's case) neither heterocentric, monosexual academic discourse nor monolithic gay rights discourses. And thereby, braiding offers a lens for revisiting the Elbow/Bartholomae debate and Britton's continuum. While Ashley notes that professors differ "fitfully" on whether to deconstruct academic discourse or to enforce it in hopes of students' "real world" success, braiding allows us to do both and neither.

I don't assume that braiding would work equally well for all student writers. When Laura entered our queered writing class on day one, unbeknownst to me, she was already in a frantic process of keeping rhetorical plates spinning. Those students, however, whose self-images are reflected back to them so seemingly "accurately" by mainstream culture might especially struggle with braided texts. According to Ashley, "One's thoughts, one's languages, are not one's own—an expression of self—they are imposed

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by the external exigencies of situation, convention, history, and politics” (5). Here, I concur with Ashley, and I don’t. On the one hand, I agree that all language is artifice. That some students arrive in our classes having already, as a discursive survival strategy, theorized their own experiences while others have never had to do so supports the contention that language is invested and offers dispensation for some and marginalization for others. On the other hand, all of us are prone to *experience* our thoughts and language as “an expression of self,” and students from mainstream communities may be less likely to recognize the multiplicity of discourse and their own multiple subjectivities. Of course, these may be the student writers who have the most to learn from braiding. Young writes, “For...students, who know the ‘formula’ when they are required to write a lab report or book review, composing a poem occasions disequilibrium because they have learned to mimic the prose of familiar ‘school’ discourse, and now to write poetry they must rethink form and content” (475). These students, then, when asked to create braided texts, may have to stretch heretofore atrophied rhetorical muscles, a useful if foreign task.

Writers, like McCrary’s students, who have “been told that their native language was forbidden in school because it was incorrect or ignorant” and, thus, have “difficulty legitimizing their native language, let alone infusing it in their writing” (86), may also struggle with braided texts. Certainly Laura seemed to begin our class with fundamentalist beliefs about what made for good academic writing. Braiding, then, isn’t only a queer move; it’s also a multicultural one, and not just for the students of color who disproportionately place into basic writing classes. Williams and Garcia assert:

Ideally, home languages would receive equal consideration in the classroom, allowing students traditionally *outside* of academic success to define their home culture in a meaningful way for readers on campus. ...The optimal result would be writers who can bring their *outsider* identity to an *insider’s* stance, a place where they can more effectively acknowledge the culturally plural nature of knowledge. Such positions are inherently multicultural because we must understand how the commonplaces of others help construe the discursive landscape we *cross* in the classroom and in the world. (109)

The multiculturalism of all discourse, then, emphasized in writing courses through braiding, fosters critical thinking, reading, and writing for all students.

By asking students to interweave rhetorics in which they are subjects and objects or to interweave genres that encourage one or the other of these positions (journal entries and research papers, for example), we get braided student texts that feature more complex student writing and explode stereotypes of “student essays.” We can thereby reject the balkanization of Elbow and Bartholomae and of the expressive and transactional altogether. *All* writing in our classes should aspire to be creative and academic, personal and social, foreign and familiar. Williams and Garcia worry that “...this complex discursive balance is perhaps *beyond* most basic writers...” (108), but how often do we invite it?

Braided texts ultimately profit from students’ rhetorical consciousness and also enhance their rhetorical prowess, enabling student writers to assimilate and resist various cultural rhetorics and to do so mindfully, with cognizance. By so doing, student writers become rhetorical arbiters. They serve as such, yes, for the academy, and thereby stand in stark contrast to the student writer whose primary task is to appropriate the professor’s language. But they also serve as rhetorical negotiators for themselves, in their own lives, “...students gaining flexibility, moving in and out of linguistic registers, weighing the social freight they carry” (Maxson 45). And because students’ discourse becomes altered, their consciousnesses will be, too, for it’s not as though linguistic codes are ever unchained from the social, but here at least with the *potential* for the rhetoric *and* the subject to become more heterogeneous, more contradictory, more always already in process—in short, *more*, not necessarily different. Particularly students who are now so frequently marginalized by academic discourse, who so often, by necessity, already theorize experience and play with language—these students stand to become the most savvy rhetorical power players of all, the hiphoppa with his ass in the library but still with his ear to the street, the drag queen knee-deep in her discipline and in double entendre, the basic writer who can write in the tradition of community *and* of campus and who can transform both as *she* sees fit.

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## Notes

1. For further discussion of deficit models used to describe basic writers, see Glenda Hull et al.'s "Remediation as Social Construct: Perspectives from an Analysis of Classroom Discourse" and Victor Villanueva's "Theory in the Basic Writing Classroom? A Practice."
2. Bartholomae, for instance, has puzzled:

It has been odd for me to hear myself described as someone who was advocating imitation or submission or indoctrination as desirable goals or as ends in themselves. ... I was trying to give teachers and students a sense of the landscape, of the real politics of institutional work. I hoped that in my attention to the students' prose I would show what I valued, and that I valued the work of the individual in such a setting—or at least certain forms of individual work in such a setting. ("Reconsiderations" 266)

It's the caveat, "certain forms of individual work," that has led many readers to contend that Bartholomae remains too focused on "the values and methods of the academy" ("The Tidy House" 7).
3. Prior to CUNY's 1970 adoption of open admissions, 96% of its students were white; by 1998, only 32% of CUNY's students were white (Harden). These figures would have proven the Open Admissions Policy successful to its drafters who explicitly sought "that students of color would be as well represented proportionately as white students in four-year colleges" (Gleason 488). And, of course, the adoption of open admissions at CUNY played no small part in establishing the scholarly field of basic writing and some of its early leaders, including Mina Shaughnessy. Ironic, then, framed by cries of standards and excellence, that basic writing has been phased out at CUNY's four-year colleges. To adopt incarnations of this conservatism in basic writing pedagogy is a misstep, for when we do so, we end up more closely resembling those who dismantle our programs versus those who founded them.
4. All names used in telling Laura's story are pseudonyms. I completed review by my university's Institutional Review Board and the Board's approval for this project is on file with that office.
5. None of the students were out to me as transgendered.
6. I couldn't help but be struck by the parallelism between Laura's contortions and the maneuvers that so many basic writers must undergo. Too often, basic writers succeed as academic writers only by segregating knowledges and shedding home or alternative epistemologies, and I wondered if that rhetorical move had been instilled in Laura by previous instructors.

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