

IT FEELS (W)RI(GH)T(E) TO ME:
FEMINIST IDENTITY AND ACADEMIC WRITING

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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This project examines the struggles many feminists encounter with traditional forms of academic writing and attempts to understand the work of Audre Lorde as offering a potential alternative mode of writing. The difficulties experienced include disciplinary conventions and expectations and the violent nature of argument as it is currently taught. Freedom of voice and the significance and role of audience also figure into this discussion. By focusing my close reading of Lorde's work on "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" and "Poetry is Not a Luxury," I examine her use of the erotic as a mode of writing which allows us to connect to ourselves and to one another. These connections enable us to eliminate difference, hatred and discrimination within the text, thus further enabling any feminist thesis or project within it. Finally, by way of offering some sort of a conclusion, I propose the following three tools as crucial to enacting an erotic mode of writing: multiple subjectivity, embodied knowledge and a rhizomatic understanding of knowledge production. While each feminist subject must inhabit hir writing in hir own way, by honoring each difference in the process and writing through love, we allow feminist work to not only articulate but also embody the fight to end all oppressions.

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Part 1: Introduction

For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us... [W]e rob ourselves of ourselves and each other.
 – Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”

And so, because I do not want to rob you (or me) of myself while I await my own fearlessness, I write to you now from the only place I can, steeped as it is in my history, experience and particular identities. For the past four years, I have found myself acutely focused on the intersection of feminism, academic writing and identity. Feminism, as I define it for myself, is the fight to end *all* oppression under the current predominant system of patriarchy (within America) that traditionally, though not exclusively, values the male-bodied, heterosexual, upper class, able-bodied members of society over others. Feminist scholars analyzing the struggles within this system have now celebrated over 30 years of greater inclusion in the academy within the fields of Women’s Studies, Gender Studies and Feminist Studies.¹ During this time, these thinkers have argued successfully for the evolution of academic *content* but have not demanded as adamantly that the *form* of their academic work undergo the same changes. I want to be careful here not to ignore those changes that have been made to traditional forms of academic inquiry, especially within the fields of Women’s and Gender Studies, Queer Studies and Sexuality Studies. Interviews, oral histories and other research methods have been created or adopted for feminist research or to feminist ends. I posit that, as a method, academic writing has not undergone the same interrogation. Furthermore, while societal change and policies such as affirmative action have changed the face of *some* student bodies within institutions of higher education in America, there remains slower change among faculty. The patriarchy

¹ Henceforth referred to as Women’s and Gender Studies or WGS.

I referred to still dominates, leaving predominantly straight white men in those positions of power most capable of regulating and controlling the nature of academic discourse. This thesis understands the struggles writers confront with the current dominant form of academic writing and how these struggles specifically silence feminist knowledge production within the confines of the American academy. Within this project, I am working with the following definition of academic writing: the expository, argument-based text created by novice students and seasoned academics alike. A form of writing defined by this alone does not necessarily present any problems for feminists (or other marginalized voices) to express themselves easily. Unfortunately, the aggressive and rigid nature of current academic writing has also resulted in the following, which prove more difficult to navigate for nontraditional voices: adherence to and performance of disciplinary conventions, argument defined by discursive violence, writing *to* an audience instead of *for* the self and the inability to incorporate the feeling self into the thinking self's text. For my purposes, this text is also defined by its ability to create knowledge in conjunction with others' work. The act of citing preexisting texts is just as integral to the task of academic writing as employing one's own thoughts and words. Imagining this work as engaging thinkers, past and present, in conversation with one another, how can we free the *form* of our work from the strictures of writing conventions while employing these ideas and texts of the past? There is a lot at stake in imagining a "new" form of feminist academic writing. As I envision it, this new form would not abandon all aspects of the existing form of academic writing but would allow for more flexibility to enable alternative uses for old tools. Not all arguments need to be violent, citation can feel generous instead of forced.

Because traditional research methods employ what Sandra Harding calls “[a]ndrocentric, economically advantaged, racist, Eurocentric, and heterosexist conceptual frameworks,” I have chosen to remove any sense that there exists a ‘perfect’ research method that might objectively *prove* anything in this project (Harding 5). The very desire to discover a method of academic writing that allows for the expression of feminist identity necessitates that I release the idea that there might be any standards of personal expression, learning or knowledge, as every feminist identity is unique unto itself. Perhaps Donna Haraway’s words help me most here when she claims “[f]eminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object” (Haraway 583). Therefore, I have limited my location of supposed expertise to myself and to the journey that brought me to this project; by recognizing my own particularities, I feel best equipped to recognize and understand others’.

In the spirit of practicing what I preach with regards to allowing feminist writers to express a fluid subjectivity, I employ gender-neutral pronouns when referencing the hypothetical writer. Understanding gender as a fluid, non-binary social construction, I find that, despite the bulk of the literature on writing voice being dedicated to the ‘female’ voice, other gender identities struggle to express themselves in academic writing. As feminist rhetorician Gesa E. Kirsch points out, “All of this is not to say that academic writing is easier or more ‘natural’ for men than for women. Obviously, men as well as women struggle with the production and reception of academic discourse, and it takes years to become comfortable with participating in professional conversations, speaking with authority, and reaching audiences successfully” (Kirsch 20). Dismantling a

strict gender binary is just one of the many ways we can open up academic writing to the expression of the feminist writer's subjectivity.

Thus, this project makes use of the gender-neutral pronouns *ze* and *hir* to refer to the hypothetical writing subject about whom I am so concerned, hoping to further include trans and gender queer identities in addition to the men and women previously considered. I find that using *he/she/his/her* (as opposed to *ze* and *hir*) limits the writer's gender to these twin poles of "man" and "woman," erasing other writers' identities. While these pronouns may read inelegantly at first and take time to get used to, I think even this awkwardness helps serve as a reminder that there are a multitude of identities that aren't represented within the confines of standard academic writing practices. As I would not assign any given race, ethnicity, sexuality or socioeconomic status to the student writer, I cannot assign *hir* a gender, even in hypothetical terms.

Admittedly, in its most infantile stages in my undergraduate work, this project was particularly concerned with my own difficulty finding my voice as a young woman writer and my experiences as a writing consultant in the Vassar College Writing Center. Most consultations with my fellow undergraduates there turned into therapy sessions about writing. Though some felt insecurities more than others, these students all shared the same concerns – "How can I best approach writing? What voice should I use? Are there conventions I should follow? What's the best way to incorporate other sources into my work?" Hovering over these anxieties was the figure of the professor, looming ever present in the background, angry red pen in hand. My job as a writing consultant always had me pushing to get to the heart of what the *writer* thought about the task at hand. Shifting the focus inward and away from what *hir* professor expected or what the writer

believed to be traits of “good” writing was difficult and uncomfortable for most. It was my favorite part of the job.

When the time came to continue further study, these consultations, alongside my Women’s and Gender Studies education, drove me to inquire more deeply into why female college students struggle to express themselves in academic writing. This chapter and the work that follows have evolved out of my undergraduate thesis, *An Essay of One’s Own: Making Academic Writing Personal*.² I would be remiss to exclude here a brief description of this prior experience, both personal and academic, which profoundly affects my approach to this work. In *An Essay of One’s Own*, I blended personal narrative with textual analysis to understand why women have difficulty incorporating their personal experiences into their academic work. In that project, I explored writing manuals, a sampling of the feminist texts that had defined my brief WGS education (including Betty Friedan, Adrienne Rich and Simone de Beauvoir) and some of the Rhetoric and Composition Studies work that appears in Part Two of this project. I paired this essay with an annotated freshman composition course syllabus, “Rewriting Conventions and Claiming Your Place: An Introduction to College Composition.” On a whole, this work made great strides toward answering many of the questions I had about how and why we write as students and understanding the many different influences under which we labor when we pick up a pen or sit down behind a keyboard. I was able to better understand many of the tensions the students I encountered in the Writing Center had revealed to me during our time together. Of course, *An Essay of One’s Own* was also very limited in its scope, so heavily defined as it was by my own academic challenges in that moment and my understanding of feminist scholarship at the time of writing it.

² The inspiration for this title came from Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*.

As I described in the opening of this section, I approach this work now as a feminist who employs that term to indicate a desire to end *all* oppressions. As such, I expand my current project to include understandings of how race, class and sexuality can come to play on writers' experiences where my undergraduate thesis mainly considered gender's effect. Audre Lorde's essay "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" in particular has helped me shape what I believe feminism can do for the community at large. In this essay, Lorde speaks to the power of shared pain and difference. She reminds us that "we all hurt in so many different ways, all the time, and pain will either change or end" (Lorde 41). By breaking our own silences, we are capable of transforming the pain and difference we feel isolates us into the very things that unite us. Although each of us feels our pain is unique and imagine our own difference is unexperienced by our neighbor or classmate or the woman behind us in line at the grocery store, as long as the notion of "different" continues to exist within our patriarchal society, we all experience a shared pain. What is especially poignant about this word "different" is the fact that patriarchy teaches us that we don't need an object provided in order to comprehend the phrase "This is different." "Different from what?" is not a question we need to ask ourselves (or our neighbor or classmate or woman behind us in line at the grocery store). We are different from the standard and that difference continues to bring pain as long as it is held up as a problem that divides us from one another and makes us unworthy of love, equal rights and respect. Some of us feel the pain of this difference and wear evidence of its existence more obviously than others – people of color, trans and gender queer subjects, the disabled, et cetera. What is important to me here, however, is that, in being universally shared, difference is not something that can be

eliminated but it is also not something only felt by society's most obvious outcasts. It was Virginia Woolf who told us, on her walk past the fictional Oxbridge campus library, that it is certainly "unpleasant...to be locked out...[but] it is worse perhaps to be locked in" ("A Room of One's Own" 24). Even those people whom we might think live quiet lives without the pain of difference suffer under the sway of patriarchy. As a feminist, I feel obliged to contribute what I can to imagine a world where no one feels locked in or locked out by virtue of their difference. Inserting hir's subjectivity and point of view into academic work is one of the most enduring tenants of feminist academic work and one way in which this work has diverged from other work being done in the academy. That including hir's subjectivity in hir's work makes it inherently feminist, however, is not what I mean to imply here. Rather, if we write from and through our specific position and name ourselves in our work, as Audre Lorde does, we are engaged in an act of feminist love. By claiming who we are, no matter how different, saying "Who I am is ok," we also assure our readers that who they are is ok, no matter how different. This act creates a space and experience in the reading and writing of the work that both imagines *and* embodies a world without pain, hatred or difference.

The example Lorde sets in the beginning of "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," originally a paper delivered at the Modern Language Association's "Lesbian and Literature Panel" in 1977, is to name her own difference, to transform her silence into language and action. The epigraph to this introduction considers the cost of our silences – the potential robbing ourselves of ourselves and each other. Lorde told her audience, "I am standing here as a Black lesbian poet" and I wish to tell you now that I am writing here as a queer, white, able-bodied, middle-class woman

writer, so that I might provide you in turn with space to name *yourself* (Lorde 40). *These* are my differences, some of which have allowed me inside of Woolf's library, some of which have kept me outside of it. All of them have contributed to this work. My queerness occupies a particular space here as I work to imagine texts and voices in the in-between and unseen spaces around those previously recognized methods. "Queer" helps me conceive of a mode *between* thinking and feeling, theory and practice, where feminist academic writing can find a place to make its most powerful contribution.

In addition to providing my own background, it is important to explore a few of the scholarly movements and moments with which my work is in conversation, namely *écriture féminine*, new formalism and the collection of lesbians, radical feminists and women of color who contributed to *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color*.³

As I imagine Lorde's work as a template for future writing, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva's work on *écriture féminine* and the particularities of women's writing in the 1970s is important here. Cixous opened the originative essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa," with the following:

I shall speak about women's writing: about *what it will do*. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement. (Cixous 875)

While my struggles and discomforts with the current standards of academic writing are in concert with those explored by the likes of Cixous and Kristeva, whose "Stabat Mater" provides physical proof that academic style and a more instinctive style of writing can not

³ Henceforth referred to simply as *Bridge*.

easily coexist within the same text, I am hesitant to build strictly upon their work and instead understand my project as diverging from it somewhat (Kristeva). Certainly, as these French feminists contended, patriarchal ways of knowing and use of language have dominated the academy, making it difficult for women's ideas and words to be given equal freedom as men's. That women *necessarily* have different forms of communication or ways of writing from men by virtue of their femaleness, or that indeed all men similarly share in the patriarchally accepted mode of discourse due to their shared maleness, however, alludes to a certain binarization and essentialization of gender. I hope that my own project on writing frees up the understandings of gender beyond this duality and that the previously explained use of ze and hir does this. I also recognize a certain tension between an understanding of gender (and other facets of identity) as constructed and the notion of "authentic" or "natural" expression. While broad categories such as "woman" may be largely defined by socially constructed characteristics, my understanding of myself as a woman, for example, is very real. As such, it is possible for me to say whether or not I feel I have been able to authentically express my gender identity. The word "authentic" here does not hope to allude to some one true form of a given identity but to acknowledge that such authenticity can only be identified by each individual; my expression of my authentic womanhood will surely be different from my mother's. Additionally, I aim to understand Lorde's use of the erotic, though decidedly *female* for her, as rich with potential to be employed by writers of any and all genders in their attempt to explore feminist ideas on paper.

In addition to *écriture féminine*, formalism also has a place in this project, especially the more recent moves to reconnect the study of form with an understanding of

a text's cultural and historical moment. In the introduction to *Reading for Form*, Susan J. Wolfson tells us that the “play of form in cultures of reading is nothing if not mobile, variable, unpredictable. Readers for form are joined only, but vitally, by a care for this, and our conviction that the forms of our attention will persist in ceaseless, lively transformation” (Wolfson 24). Understanding the form of a text as instrumental to its meaning allows us to examine Lorde's specific pronoun usage (“we”), for example, as significant in her move to create a community in her writing.

Lastly, understanding Lorde's work in relation to her place among the women writers featured in *Bridge* is of obvious import to the project currently in process. This group of women is in large part responsible for adding the dimensions of race and sexuality to the feminist conversation that straight, white women had previously dominated within the academy.

By giving voice to [their] experiences [as lesbian feminist women of color], each according to her style, the editors and contributors believed they were developing a theory of subjectivity and culture that would demonstrate the considerable differences between them and Anglo-American women, as well as between them and Anglo-European men and men of their own culture. As speaking subjects of a new discursive formation, many of *Bridge's* writers were aware of the displacement of their subjectivity across a multiplicity of discourses: feminist/lesbian, nationalist, racial, socioeconomic, historical, etc. The peculiarity of their displacement implies a multiplicity of positions from which they are driven to grasp or understand themselves. (Alarcón 356)

In other words, the radical women of color whose work appears in the original 1981 edition were already doing the work to not rob themselves or us of themselves. An awareness of their subjectivities helps make us aware of our own as we read and, for Alarcón, helps reveal the problems in a specifically Anglo-American feminism. Like Lorde, all of these women serve as good examples of reaching across difference by naming their own –Lorde's Black lesbian poet and now my queer white woman writer.

At the heart of my Master's thesis is a desire to pay back to the feminist academic community that which I feel I have received from Audre Lorde's writing. The love from and through which she writes – this very notion of an erotic – forces me to ask uncomfortable questions and reach outside of myself to understand feminist thought and action in new ways. In fact, it was an encounter with her essays “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” and “Poetry is Not A Luxury” last fall that sent me away from fruitless searches for a practicum project and back to my computer to write this thesis. In the latter essay, Lorde introduces the concept of “it feels right to me,” which figures largely into my concept of what is missing from the current mode of academic writing and from where this thesis takes name (Lorde 37). To do what “feels right” means to engage deeply in those thoughts, feeling, activities which help connect you with the truest part of yourself; it also means recognizing and honoring our own difference so that we may recognize and honor others', eliminating hatred and shared pain. The discomfort most students experience trying to convert this truest part into the form and language required of academic writing calls for change. The need for this change, this notion of “it feels right to me,” haunts the manner in which I reflect upon my previous academic work and writing.

It is a sticky reality that I am using the very medium I am interrogating in this project to work through it. Being committed to academic investigation, I see academic writing as a large part of knowledge production in Women's and Gender Studies. Thus, though some of the work I undertake here is poststructuralist and deconstructionist in nature, I cannot endorse abandoning this form altogether. Similar to the approach I took

in my freshman composition syllabus, I write now with the understanding that it is important to both know the rules and when to break them to best suit your needs and voice. As such, these pages are radically different from other Master's theses in some ways and just like them in others – the extent to which I insist upon conveying my own history and perspective may set me apart slightly but my syntax and grammar are unexceptional and conform quite neatly. Like bell hooks claiming her name for her own and eschewing capital letters, we are reminded that it is important sometimes to learn the rules in order to break them or mold them to our own use (hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody*). I look at this project as an exercise in determining the viability of a new type of academic writing, being that it is an exploration of both the theory *and* practice of this form. This thesis takes up the following questions: By holding feminist writers to a standard form, what is lost? What nuances and ideas are strangled out by the sterilization of language and content to fit a mold? How does the work of Audre Lorde help us envision a different form of academic writing? How can using the erotic allow us to create work that can embody the feminist cause of eliminating shared pain based on difference? Can we model a new form of academic writing upon her use of the erotic? I would like to engage in a connection to my own erotic knowledge in order to answer these questions and better understand how the written word can aid the feminist cause.

Part Two aims to incorporate the major issues tackled in Rhetoric and Composition Studies literature with theory on power and discourse to help elucidate some of the problems with current academic writing and bring to light *how* these problems came to exist and receive institutional support. The Composition Studies literature includes discussions of disciplinary conventions and expectations and the violent nature

of argument as it is currently taught. Freedom of voice and the significance and role of audience also figure into this discussion.

Part Three reads Lorde's work closely, focusing on "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" and "Poetry is Not a Luxury." In doing this close reading, I examine Lorde's use of the erotic as a mode of writing which allows us to connect to ourselves and to one another. These connections enable us to eliminate difference, hatred and discrimination within the text, thus further enabling any feminist thesis or project within it. Of course, it is understood that each feminist subject will enact the erotic in hir own way; Lorde's work does not offer a *template*, per se.

By way of offering some sort of a conclusion, Part Four considers the following three tools as crucial to enacting an erotic mode of writing: multiple subjectivity, embodied knowledge and a rhizomatic understanding of knowledge production. I will show how these tools provide us with the potential to provide the space for feminist writers to use the love that Lorde shows us to write what feels right to them. While each feminist subject must inhabit hir writing in hir own way, by honoring each difference in the process and writing through love, we allow feminist work to not only articulate but also embody the fight to end all oppressions.

Part 2: Struggles in Writing

When we view living in the european mode only as a problem to be solved, we rely solely upon our ideas to make us free, for those were what the white fathers told us were precious.

– Audre Lorde, “Poetry is Not a Luxury”

Few topics merit a truly interdisciplinary examination more than academic writing, the process by which we analyze anything in the academy. Given the broad nature of this task, it is both troubling but not surprising that there appear to be very little, if any, discussion of academic writing as a form,⁴ let alone the problems writers encounter. In fact, writing centers seem to be one of the few places where these thoughts and issues (brought in by students from History to English, Psychology to Jewish Studies) collect and coexist, which is how I found myself suddenly weighed down with the struggles of my fellow undergraduate writers at Vassar. Luckily, the field of Rhetoric and Composition Studies examines the problems that the visitors to the writing center voiced and explores how and why they come to exist. Major issues tackled in this literature include disciplinary conventions and professors’ expectations and the violent, reason-driven nature of argument and style as it is currently taught. Putting this literature in conversation with theory of a broader or more historical nature helps us understand how academic writing has come to take its present form and how that present form poses challenges to most of the writers who learn to use it, especially feminist writers.

Producing an academic paper is certainly not the same as being told to share one’s

⁴ I specify “as a form” here as there is an abundance of literature on academic writing as an industry and as an academic product. Writing and style manuals number in the hundreds, from classics like E.B. White and William Strunk Jr.’s *The Elements of Style* to more recent guides like Arthur Plotnik’s *Spunk and Bite: A Writer’s Guide to Punchier, More Engaging Language and Style*. These guides exist both for student writers hoping to learn a brand new skill and for professional academics seeking help in publishing their work. These texts do not take up the implications of the rules or guidelines they espouse regarding a writer’s habits of expression or desired mode of communication.

opinion, have a conversation, debate a given point to prove hir's stance is correct. Almost all novice writers who seek to produce academic writing experience challenges and discomforts due to the fact that there are many points of form and style, various invisible slights of hand, that the form currently demands, such as methodology, disciplinary jargon, format, et cetera. For the most part, the bottom line of academic writing can feel like being demanded to astutely prove hir's point without at all revealing who ze is in the process. Exploring this tension and discomfort at both the individual and institutional levels is an integral part of mapping out how to foster and create a more generous form that allows for the expression of feminist ideas.

David Bartholomae's "Inventing the University" takes the problem of academic conventions head on, explaining the task the novice writer encounters as it is set forth by hir professors – to fake knowledge of disciplinary conventions and academic discourse in order to satisfy expectations.

Every time a student sits down to write for us, [ze] has to invent the university for the occasion – invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like History or Anthropology or Economics or English. [Ze] has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community. (Bartholomae 403)

That is, there is an understanding of how hir's writing should sound, look, read to the reader and a demand that the product fit this description, regardless of whether or not the student writer feels prepared to produce it as such. Because the majority of writers do not naturally think within the disciplinary patterns set forth for them, they often experience a sense of being told that whatever feels right to them is inherently wrong. This is what I referred to when I mentioned that academic writing was not the same as being asked hir

opinion or stance; it is the craft of *molding* his argument to suit a particular form.

Already, a certain authenticity of ideas is lost, certain forms of knowledge production obscured when what comes naturally to the writer is obscured in lieu of preexisting conventions.

It is helpful here to turn to Michel Foucault for guidance on how discourse, specifically academic discourse, can produce the constraining effects of “inventing the university.” In his lecture, “The Discourse on Language,” he presupposes that “the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised [sic] and redistributed” (“The Discourse on Language” 216). Within the system of higher education, the hierarchy of established academics sustains this production and the nature of the work produced within it; all new entrants into this system, the students I refer to as novice writers, are expected to comprehend and continue the production of this discourse. We can understand the set of discourse-sustaining actions put forth by these writers as “inventing the university.” Academic discourse creates conflict in the stifling effect its controlling mechanisms have on students’ ability to freely access and employ the varying disciplines and knowledge that education is intended to grant them in the first place.

Education may well be, as of right, the instrument whereby every individual, in a society like our own, can gain access to any kind of discourse. But we well know that in its distribution, in what it permits and in what it prevents, it follows well-trodden battle-lines of social conflict. Every educational system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it. (“The Discourse on Language” 227)

Thus, within the very institution intended to educate and further produce knowledge, the constraints of the academy’s particular discourse can prevent genuine expressions of such knowledge or deny the veracity of any knowledge produced outside the bounds of the accepted traditions of the discourse. It is only the “right” knowledge produced in the

“right” way that garners recognition or, in the case of the student, good grades. Foucault uses the rejection of Gregor Mendel’s genetic theories by his peers as an example of the regulatory effect of academic discourse. “Mendel spoke the truth, but he was not *dens le vrai* (within the true) of contemporary biological discourse: it simply was not along such lines that objects and biological concepts were formed” (Foucault 224). Expressing his ideas in the form and mode most widely accepted proves to be essential to having the work recognized by his peers. This recognition is the life’s blood of academic life for writers; novice writers require the approval of their professors to succeed while established scholars labor under the “publish or perish” dictum.

Again we return to David Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University” to understand more fully how the requirement to conform impacts the writer. Written just a few years before Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, it alludes to some of the performance and construction that Butler employs in her discussion of gender. Of gender, Butler concludes

[G]ender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence, within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed... There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results. (Butler 34)

Thus, within what she refers to as the “heterosexual matrix,” one does not exist as a ‘boy’ until one has performed the required acts to meet those standards that conform to the collective concept ‘boy’ (Butler 6). An individual who speaks loudly, has sexual relationships with female-bodied women and plays sports, for example, could constitute a male gender identity in contemporary mainstream American society and would be *expected* to perform such if he were male-bodied. This individual, however, does not

possess this male gender identity prior to performing these acts; it is out of these acts that the gender identity exists and can continue to exist.

I posit that, like Butler's gender, academic style is not a natural expression of thought or argument inherent to the act of writing in the academy or of producing knowledge. It comes into being through the performance of academic style in writing, making the writer a part of this academic discourse (Bartholomae 403). That is, as explored via Foucault earlier, academic style and discourse are constituted by many actions, some of which take place within the confines of academic writing. Like the "violence...[of] gender norms" which Butler discusses as regulatory tools to maintain established gender roles in the heterosexual matrix, these actions take place under threat of punishment or, worse, exposure as a fraud (Butler xxv). Bartholomae reflects that students must "appropriate (*or be appropriated by*) a specialized discourse, and they have to do this as though they were easily and comfortably one with their audience, as though they were members of the academy," reminding us of the control that pre-existing academic discourse and the power structures within the academy exert upon the students under them (Bartholomae 403, emphasis mine). That we take part in these conventions or traditions willingly, that the writer *chooses* to employ a particular style, is largely an illusion and, unfortunately, not an illusion that has undergone the same interrogation as such constructs like language or the aforementioned gender. Certainly, abandoning all conventions or constructs is impossible but a heightened level of awareness about the conventions we employ is necessary to evolve our work. Our differences are greatly silenced and ridiculed by this process of inventing the university.

This task of inventing and conforming has profound effects on the writer, shaping the text ze produces. The performance of an academic self becomes the energy-sucking priority over the writer's thoughts and language. Of course, no performance occurs without an audience and the specific nature of the relationship between the writer-performer and reader-audience is important when considering writers' struggles to exist as independent selves within academic writing. What sort of relationship is developed between the writer and zir audience? Should questions of audience be pressing the writer as ze writes? Peter Elbow takes these questions up in "Closing My Eyes as I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience," proposing a solution of sorts to the problem Bartholomae, Foucault and Butler elucidate regarding the performance of academic style and discourse. Given that conforming to notions of academic style is necessary in order to be heard (or read, as it were), it's no wonder that "when we write, [even] alone in a room to an absent audience, there are occasions when we are struggling to figure something out and need to push aside awareness of those absent readers" (Elbow 50). Imagine again the professor lurking at the back of the Vassar students' minds as they talked to me about their papers. While endlessly focused upon who will *read* a writer's work and *how* to write it, the writer easily loses track of what brought zir to the page to begin with and becomes robbed of hirself in the process.

[Some] audiences...are powerfully *inhibiting* – so much so, in certain cases, that awareness of them as we write blocks writing altogether. There are certain people who always make us feel dumb when we try to speak to them: we can't find words or thoughts. As soon as we get out of their presence, all the things we wanted to say pop back into our minds. (Elbow 51)

This force cramping the mental capacities of writers (especially novice writers) takes the form of individual professors, who hold positions of significant power over their students,

and peers and larger institutions alike. Foucault's exploration of the regulatory effect of the panopticon elucidates Elbow's point about the power of an invisible audience.

In his work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault employs Jeremy Bentham's architectural structure, the panopticon, to evaluate the disciplinary uses of power.

At the periphery [of the panopticon is] an annular building; at the centre [sic], a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower, the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a *schoolboy*. ("Panopticism" 200, emphasis mine)

By virtue of the way the windows are placed in the tower and the outer building, respectively, those in the individual cells are incapable of seeing the watchman who observes them from the centrally located tower. Imagine the student writer alone in his room, ever aware of the professor he can't see. How does this professor, the academic watchman, exert such power while remaining invisible to his students?⁵ "[The] major effect of the [p]anopticon...is to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power...[T]he perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary" ("Panopticism" 201). In other words, because there *could* be a watchman in the tower, the prisoner will eventually come to act as though there always *were* a watchman; the very notion that he is being guarded regulates his behavior. Student writers' behavior could best be said to be modified and regulated by the red pen marks on their finished work. Eventually, the mere *anticipation* of his professor's comments, critiques, scrutiny of his work effectively disciplines the

⁵ The same could be asked, of course, of the peer reviewers more established academics encounter in their journey from the introductory paragraph to the publisher's final print.

writer to tailor his work. In Elbow's words, an "audience is a field of force" (Elbow 51). For those writers attempting to enact difference, this field of force is especially powerful and inhibiting.

In the writing center, it was always my task as the consultant to ask the writers to forget this audience (their professors) and return to the point of the paper between us: *their* ideas. Elbow proposes that such writer-based prose results in better writing than reader-based prose as it allows the writer to engage in ideas and arguments instead of expectations (Elbow 54). For many students, this feels like a selfish turn, especially in comparison to their consistent schooling in being ever mindful of their professor's desires or the expectations of academic discourse. Regrettably, even once the writer decides to turn inward, finding genuine modes of expressing his ideas can prove to be a real struggle. The nature of academic argument, as Jane Tompkins explores in "Fighting Words: Unlearning to Write the Critical Essay," is inherently violent. What she says of her experience at an academic conference becomes extrapolated to general paper writing – that we attack others and anticipate being attacked as well. We claim an older scholar got it wrong and we expect our conference audience/professor to think we, too, have faltered in our argument; Deborah Tannen refers to this as "agonism, that is, ritualized adversativeness" (Tannen 1651).

"In veiled language...we accuse one another of stupidity, ignorance, fear, envy, pride, malice, and hypocrisy...we hint that [those with whom we disagree] are insensitive, pompous, narrow, affected, shrill, exhibitionistic, and boring" (Tompkins 588). Violence is an inherent part of this writing; because of this, writing can lose its originality and voice, just as soldiers shed their patterned civilian clothing for fatigues.

What would writing look like if it weren't tasked with this sort of combative rhetoric? How would writers write differently if they weren't prepared to be attacked? While Foucault's "Panopticism" explained the effects of discipline on the writer, it is a section from *Discipline and Punish* regarding torture that takes Tompkins' observations regarding academic writing and violence further.

In "The Body of the Condemned," Foucault analyzes the political nature of punishment and the body as a part of the political mechanism that results in what we refer to as punishment and the penal system. The role of the body is inherently connected to dynamics of power and politics. "[T]he body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" ("The Body of the Condemned" 25). "Power relations" here mean both the more obvious dynamics between king and subject but also those between teacher and student, for example. Our bodies conform to the rules defined by the power dynamics of which we are a part. The power of the king makes the bodies of his subjects bend before him; the king need not enact any physical force upon said subjects. The power relation alone dictates the corporeal realities of the two parties in interaction. Because of this connection between politics (a realm not regarded as *necessarily* embodied) and the body, the body and punishment, understanding the *punished body* fully is to consider punishment as a political tool. Though this discussion of the body may seem irrelevant to a discussion of writers, it is necessary to understand the political investment in punishment as Foucault traces punishment's evolution away from the body and onto the soul and mind. It also grants us entry into the consideration of how the body has been lost from writing, how

embodied knowledge has become disregarded and how essential the reincorporation of the body into knowledge is in order for Lorde's example to take hold, all ideas that will be further explored in Parts Three and Four.

The clearest example of the move from punishing the body to punishing the soul is the shift from public torture and execution to confinement and the social shame of having spent time in jail. With this evolution, the deterring factor of punishment is no longer brutality or horror but the less visible marks it leaves on the punished. Sitting in the audience at the conference, the

sensation [Tompkins] felt was, fear. [She] was afraid that this woman might someday turn her attack on [her] – indeed, in one of her devastating sideswipes, [Tompkins] thought [she] had already been anonymously grazed by [the woman's] dagger – and [she] imagined the audience, which only the day before had enthusiastically applauded [Tompkins'] own presentation, turning on [her] like a pack of dogs. ("Fighting Words" 587-8)

Certainly, the woman at the podium poses no threat to Tompkins' body, but her soul, her mind, the integrity of her work is vulnerable to the same sort of punishment. An essay can be publicly whipped; for students, the torture is slightly less public (between only ze and hir professor) but no less punishing. It is the power dynamics between academic colleagues and between professors and students that allows for this kind of violence, akin to a Western movie, to exist (Tompkins 585).

Power relations as they pertain to students, surely, are obvious. Daily, they inhabit classrooms dominated by professors with greater intelligence, experience and clout than they, the students, possess. We must recall how Foucault himself names children at school among those upon whom power is exercised ("The Body of the Condemned" 29). Elbow took this further to demonstrate how presence in the classroom isn't even necessary in order for this power dynamic to exercise its strangling hold on

student writing. Tompkins' language also marries well with Foucault's arguments about the discipline and punishment of the body and soul. Violence need not be understood as purely *physical* – the academy, from Tompkins' position, punishes the souls of its writers. To understand punishment as a purely physical phenomenon is to deny the suffering of these writers, the pain of being ridiculed by a professor or colleague, the humiliation of having one's argument torn to shreds publicly as one's back may have previously split under a whip. While this pain is decidedly real, so too is the practice of pretending it doesn't exist. "Because agonism is *ritual* combat, attacks on colleagues' work are not supposed to be taken personally. We maintain this fiction even though everyone (at least everyone I have ever spoken to) is personally pained by having their work attacked" (Tannen 1663). In large part, it is anticipatory fear of these hurt feelings that robs writers of their selves and their difference or putting their personal experiences into their work.

In order to avoid the discursive violence of academic writing and the angry red pen, writers engage in the performance previously discussed; they silence their own voices in lieu of hearing what their audience. Perhaps most damaging, especially where feminist work is considered, this violence prevents writing from being able to engage with fellow scholars in an academic community. Tannen reminds us that when the "task of academic inquiry is seen primarily (or exclusively) to be exposing weaknesses and faults in another's scholarship," we are led, often astray, to the assumption that 'acknowledging others' contributions is...less important" than proving their work wrong (Tannen 1657). When battle is the only foreseeable mode of writing, it is impossible to form or experience any sense of community within our work. To return to Lorde's words,

we “rob ourselves of ourselves and each other” when we conceive of fellow academics solely as adversaries; with our swords and shields up, we leave no space for our true selves to converse with any other writer or reader’s true self (Lorde 44). This is of particular concern for feminist writers, as we cannot hope to connect across difference without first making ourselves open to the reality of difference in the first place. When hostility characterizes the writing itself so fundamentally, eliminating the social hierarchies among various subjects *outside* of this academic exercise becomes almost impossible to imagine.

In the definition of academic writing I employ in this work, I discussed the importance of citing prior work in the field. When this has to be done in a panic fueled environment, we use others’ work out of fear that we will be excoriated for the holes in our own or for overlooking obvious experts. As a result, writers can lean too heavily upon others’ words or simply insert them into text without fully engaging with them. In imagining a revolutionized type of academic writing, I envision a greater sense of conversation among the various voices in a given academic paper. Instead of going through the motions of a sycophantic homage to a given author or theorist or tearing him down like Tompkins and Tannen discuss, we can weave their words amongst our own, show how well their thoughts play off against another’s (as I have aimed to do here). Violence in writing style and in the reception of academic papers prevents this sort of intellectual kinship among scholars. I encountered the agonistic impulse myself to simply criticize *écriture féminine* instead of acknowledging the impact that thinkers like Cixous and Kristeva have had on the field of work to which this project contributes. It was only through concerted time and effort as a result of conversations with thoughtful colleagues

and mentors that I was able to recognize this work as an inheritance of mine and not something to which I needed to prove my superiority.

Tompkins continues her work on the unkind nature of the academic style of writing in her oft quoted “Me and My Shadow.” In this essay, she explores what type of voice, what level of intimacy, is accepted in professional, academic writing. Once again, I wonder, what does the academic community lose with these strictures? What secret thoughts and (Oh heavens, no! Don’t say it!) feelings that inform a writer’s argument are forced to the wings of the stage while strict reason takes up the spotlight? Tompkins’ personal reflection on the struggle between two modes, thinking and feeling, affects her ability to write. Significantly, Tompkins identifies her own two voices as a “critic” and a “person,” highlighting the important distinction that is forced upon academic writers – it seems that to succeed at expository, argument-based writing is to deny a writer’s own humanity, to oppress those things which make a writer full of idiosyncrasies, ideas and unique thoughts (“Me and My Shadow” 169).

The public-private dichotomy, which is to say the public-private *hierarchy*, is a founding condition of female oppression. I say to hell with it. The reason I feel embarrassed at my own attempts to speak personally in a professional context is that I have been conditioned to feel that way. That’s all there is to it. (“Me and My Shadow” 169)

This is important in conceptualizing the nature of oppression in academic writing and how conventions become shackles, not just for the women Tompkins mentions, but also for all identities of difference. Throughout her text, a “meditation on voice,” Tompkins calls upon the traditional male-female divide as evidence of her inability to welcome her feeling side into her thinking work (Miller 5). “To adhere to the conventions is to uphold a male standard of rationality that militates against women being recognized as culturally

legitimate sources of knowledge. To break with the conventions is to risk not being heard at all” (“Me and My Shadow” 170-1). Of course, like the push I made away from my own gender-focused undergraduate work, it is important to recognize that difficulty in expressing authenticity of self is experienced by any thinkers who do not fit a limited model, not just women (this is where I recognize that Cixous and Kristeva’s focus on femininity and binary gender has provided me with an interesting space to add race, class, gender queerness/trans identity, et cetera to their argument about writing). The limited model traditionally set forth within the academic community is that of the straight white, upper class male. This being the case, the large range of racial, socioeconomic, sexual and gender identities that populates the current academy struggles to find validation. Thus, where “male” and “female” appear in the above line of text from Tompkins, “cisgendered” and “trans” could also suitably fit, as could “white” and “people of color,” et cetera.

Not only is the standard identity of the academic writer entrenched in years of tradition, hindering genuine expression of the writer’s ideas, but so too is the elevation of reason over feeling. As what most will argue was the first text published regarding rhetoric and the art of forming a persuasive argument, Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* firmly establishes this now currently entrenched divide.

The arousing of prejudice, pity, anger, and similar emotions has nothing to do with the essential facts, but is merely a personal appeal to the man who is judging the case...It is not right to pervert the judge by moving him to anger or envy or pity – one might as well warp a carpenter’s rule before using it. (Aristotle 3)

Certainly the judge in our case is the fellow scholar or professor who reads the academic writing. The notion that appealing to the reader’s emotions, or employing the writer’s own, cheapens the persuasiveness of the argument causes uncomfortable tension for most

writers. “Can I insert my point of view here? What about my personal experience?” These questions haunted the Vassar undergraduates as they haunt Tompkins. She is plagued by a “shadow” of the feeling self she can’t access. “The thing I want to say is that I’ve been hiding a part of myself for a long time. I’ve known it was there but I couldn’t listen because there was no place for this person in literary criticism” (“Me and My Shadow” 173). Sitting to write a paper becomes a hugely repressive task where, once again, performance is encouraged. No living, breathing writer exists only in reasoned thoughts; feelings and emotions are woven throughout our intellectual thoughts as well. Our ability to think coexists with our ability to feel and the generation of a thought or argument for a paper undoubtedly relies on both, though each particular writer will have his own balance of the two. Of course, this doesn’t even begin to speak to the reality of the body and corporeal knowledge that also comes to bear on a writer’s experience, which will be discussed at greater length in the latter half of this project. Tompkins claims that in writing “Me and My Shadow” she has “taken off the straitjacket” of reason-only writing and that “it feels so good” (“Me and My Shadow” 178). We can only imagine what new thoughts would emerge if all writers could free themselves of the straitjackets academic discourse and the conventions of traditional academic writing have strapped upon them. To write so that it feels good, so that “it feels right to me” becomes essential to a feminist academic argument, for how best can we understand how to honor what is right for other people or their differences if we cannot do so for ourselves?

Together, this literature helps provide a framework for critiquing academic writing and the culture that surrounds it. In conversation with one another, these theorists

help illuminate the easily ignored realities of academic writing. As it generally appears on syllabi and in journals, academic writing presents itself as a value-free task necessary to engage in academic discourse. Bartholomae, Tompkins and Elbow, in conjunction with Foucault, Butler and Aristotle indicate how academic writing has actually become value laden, burdened with conventions, prejudices and oppressions. Academic writing is completely submerged, all but stuck, within rules, discipline and the uneven power dynamics between student and professor. In the next chapter, I employ the work of Audre Lorde to explore how non-traditional writing is still used in the academy and examine how she employs the erotic to make a feminist argument.

Part 3: Audre Lorde's Erotic as Mode of Feminist Writing

The erotic is not a question only of what we can do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing. – Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power"

By the time I started my Women's and Gender Studies education in the fall of 2005, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* had secured its spot in the canon of Women's and Gender Studies literature. It's important to note that I use the term "canon" here loosely as WGS pedagogically resists a strict canon like many other disciplines contain. English, for example, usually requires a certain number of courses focusing on specific time periods, et cetera, in order to obtain a degree. Despite the absence of such rigid requirements, there are certain key texts that are routinely revisited, especially on introductory syllabi in WGS. This is what I mean when I use the term "canon," recognizing its somewhat contentious nature. Though her official, institutionalized capacity as a member of the academy was limited, aside from her popularity as a poet, Lorde was best known as a feminist philosopher, "public intellectual, and an activist scholar" (Olson, "The Personal, the Political, and Others" 260). She was a frequent speaker at conferences, most notably the 1979 "The Second Sex - Thirty Years Later" conference in New York City, where she delivered her infamous "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" speech for the first time. Thus, while her writing is certainly unconventional with regards to academic tradition (of course, this is why I use it to imagine a new form), it is necessary to recognize her work for what it is and how contemporary scholars currently use it – as feminist theory. Through language and feeling, Lorde theorizes the impact and potential consequences of and reactions to the oppression of women, lesbians, the disabled, and people of color and lower socio-economic status in her attempts to imagine a world without this oppression.

Consequently, other feminist theorists have taken up Lorde's questions and ideas in the search for solutions to the problems of patriarchy. She serves as a helpful example⁶ of the importance of non-traditional writing⁷ in the promotion of a feminist agenda within the academy. While Lorde's writing does not contain many of those characteristics we have come to associate with academic writing (harsh argument, laundry lists of works cited without a sense of community between writers, reason free from emotion), her work is at the center of a rich abundance of feminist scholarship, having sparked conversations about lesbianism, sisterhood and the importance of feminists of color in the academy. The fact that Audre Lorde is used with canonical frequency in WGS classrooms is proof positive that one need not follow all of the rules to play the game, or become a key player, at that.

Within the *Sister Outsider* collection, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" is one of the better-known essays, exploring one of Lorde's recurring themes, the erotic. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines erotic as both a noun and an adjective, meaning "a 'doctrine' or 'science' of love" and "of or pertaining to the passion of love," respectively (Erotic). I turn to the OED here not because I find such ultimate "authorities" on the meanings or uses of words to be paramount to our understanding of how they might be used, but specifically to point out that from one meaning can spring forth another, that words can be twisted and perverted, to many different ends. One such perversion is the all too popular contemporary Western cultural conflation of the erotic

⁶ While I focus this thesis solely on Lorde and her use of the erotic, I conceive of this as one part of a larger project that includes the work of other feminist writers and the examples they too set for alternative forms of feminist academic writing, such as Virginia Woolf and Gloria Anzaldúa.

⁷ By 'non-traditional writing,' I refer to writing that diverges from the following standard characteristics, defined in greater detail in Part One of this project and further explored in Part Two, by either omitting them entirely or twisting them to suit the writer's needs: adherence to and performance of disciplinary conventions, argument defined by discursive violence, writing *to* an audience instead of *for* the self and inability to incorporate the feeling self into the thinking self's text

with the overtly sexual, the pornographic, against which Lorde cautions us. This particular understanding of the erotic undermines the uniquely feminine, lesbian origins of Lorde's erotic; she speaks of "an *eros* that is not part of a phallogocentric conceptual scheme" (Ginzberg 75). That is, the erotic's root in a "deeply female and spiritual plane" results in its misunderstanding by the dominant phallogocentric framework under which most of our lives are constructed (Lorde 53). (Right away, we can easily see the significant difference in Lorde's ideology from that of academics who have defined writing as we saw it in Part Two.) It is the specifically feminine and lesbian nature of Lorde's work that might have some readers skeptical of my intention for any and all feminist writers to employ this mode of writing; criticism of Lorde's work includes her constant return to the female body and the limitations that can have for broader use in the feminist community. In this project, however, the generosity of the notion "I am me and that is ok. You are you and that is ok" rehabilitates Lorde's work as a viable example of an alternative form of feminist academic writing. Lorde's erotic can be adopted and molded in the hands of each individual feminist writer.

Persistent fear of the oppressed categories "female" and "lesbian" results in the turning of the erotic back in on itself, cheapening it into a colloquial understanding of something driven by the quest for orgasm. "This [Lorde's] is a political claim, [however,] not a claim about hedonism or rights to pleasure," making the distinction between the erotic and the pornographic crucial to this discussion (Ginzberg 73). To understand Lorde's use of the erotic as pornographic robs her writing of its feminist potency. "There are frequent attempts to equate pornography and eroticism, two diametrically opposed uses of the sexual...But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it

represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling” (Lorde 55; 54). While the erotic and its power may at times encompass or employ the (physically) sexual, it also transcends the limitations of the romantic sexual dimension. The erotic can, Lorde would argue *should*, be felt and expressed in those moments that are far removed from any sort of romantic or sexual encounter. Trips to the doctor, cooking for family and, yes, taking up pen in hand to put down words, can all be imbued with the erotic as an expression of love and self entirely separate from sex (though perhaps still connected to the sensual).

Lorde explores the etymology of the word erotic but theorizes this definition one step further, providing us with a new understanding of how ‘love’ can function: “The very word *erotic* comes from the Greek word *eros*, the personification of love in all its aspects – born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony. When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce...the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge” (Lorde 55-56). Biographer Alexis De Veaux, who was granted unprecedented access to all of Lorde’s correspondence, family members and texts (published and not) claims that Lorde’s “eroticism became essential to [her] self-actualization” (Veaux xi). To read this again through Part One’s epigraph, the erotic helped prevent Lorde from robbing herself of her self by connecting her to the deepest parts of the feelings she experienced. We see, then, that Lorde’s own knowledge comes not just from a “black, lesbian, feminist, mother, poet and warrior” position, but also, always, deeply, from love and the desire to connect with others (Morris 168). It is this connection to others, her recognition of shared pain, which makes Lorde’s work, in form and function, feminist.

In this way, we can understand the use of erotic as a model of alternative writing for feminists beyond traditional expository academic writing, connecting writer and reader. Ruth Ginzberg's understanding of Lorde's concept of the erotic is helpful here: "a metaphysical yearning to integrate, or to connect, that which subjectively seems separate. She [Lorde] applies this not only to the creation of connections between and among individuals but also to the creation of connections between apparently different aspects of one's own life and work" (Ginzberg 74). Conceiving of feminism as the fight to end *all* oppressions as I defined it at the beginning of this piece, the desire to connect across difference is essential to feminist writers. By acknowledging shared difference, along with shared pain, we rob our oppressors of their supreme power over us; we, the oppressed, become too numerous to count. We see ourselves in our colleagues' faces, the eyes of the man who drives our bus to work. The erotic is "the bridge between the personal and the political...a way to encourage responsible action in social life. The erotic provides the energy to fight against oppression" (Calle 116). Drawing upon this energy, then, in the very *composing* of feminist text seems imperative. Just as we wouldn't consider a zine published by (and to the financial benefit of) a large publisher like Scholastic truly feminist, we must start recognizing how traditional methods of academic writing attempt to erase and do violence to our difference, making the crafting of a feminist thesis in our texts difficult. The authenticity of our identities is erased when we employ these traditional methods, while a feminist method of academic writing would enable us to express our identities authentically, without having any part of us silenced by violence or fear.

As such, we can think of “feminist pedagogy as always-already an engagement with the erotic” (Rowley 145). By understanding WGS as the institutionalization of the feminist movement, an institutionalization of feminist pedagogy and academic approaches is also imperative if social and political change is to be engendered within the academy. In this vein, we can also understand feminist pedagogy and feminist academic approaches as tools preventing the oppression of feminist ideas by hegemonic modes of teaching and learning. The academy is, after all, a space traditionally dominated by the white, straight, upper-middle class males who play perhaps the largest role in the patriarchy oppressing all others. Once again, I turn to Lorde’s “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Masters House” though must disagree with her slightly to urge us not to simply reject all of the master’s tools but to add additional tools of our own in the building of a new house that we might all share.

In one of the final chapters to her book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, bell hooks takes on how the erotic can serve as an invaluable tool in the education of critically conscious feminists:

Given that critical pedagogy seeks to transform consciousness, to provide students with ways of knowing that enable them to know themselves better and live in the world more fully, to some extent it must rely on the presence of the erotic in the classroom to aid the learning process...Understanding that eros is a force that enhances our overall effort to be self-actualizing, that it can provide an epistemological grounding informing how we know what we know, enables both professors and students to use such energy in a classroom setting in ways that invigorate discussion and excite the critical imagination. (hooks 194-195)

I propose a thoughtful extension of the necessary presence of the erotic in the classroom to its presence in writing. Because writing serves as both a method of acquiring knowledge *and* a method of sharing newly developed knowledge of our own, engaging the erotic in writing as hooks asks us to engage it in the classroom is vital to the efficacy

of the feminist academic project. Theory created out of the erotic informs practice that emanates from the erotic as well, promoting an agenda of love and community. As readers, both our minds and our emotions are engaged in Lorde's text; we react on multiple levels to the love we read. With feminism's continued intricate balance of theory and practice, academia and activism, engaging ourselves in a feminist method of knowledge production marries these two seemingly opposed fields; they are bridged, as Calle said, by the erotic. This love will be instrumental in the dismantling of the patriarchy responsible for the broadly felt oppression feminists seek to end; "the erotic becomes a center of energy and authority from which [we] could break open the constraints imposed by patriarchal society and could believe in a new future" (Lauter 401, qtd. in Calle 108). Drawing upon this erotic energy, instead of the impulses and directives of others who would ask that we mold our ideas to their forms, will give freer space to feminist ideas that strive to end oppression. In her much lauded *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Chela Sandoval claims that "[t]hird world writers... understand love as a 'breaking' through whatever controls in order to find 'understanding and community'; it is described as 'hope' and 'faith' in the potential goodness of some promised land... These writers who theorize social change understand 'love' as a hermeneutic, as a set of practices and procedures" (Sandoval 140). While Sandoval identifies the use of love to break free of oppression and controls as a tool for third world writers, Lorde's erotic leaves a great deal of space for each of us to find our self in it. By sharing herself with us, she invites us to give back of ourselves. In Lorde's own words from the first epigraph, we are not robbed of ourselves or each other when we employ her erotic in our

writing and from this shared recognition of all of our humanity comes our greatest escape from oppression and hate.

What Lorde does, significantly, is transform the *theory* of the erotic as the path to wholeness and employ it additionally as a *practice* of writing feminist theory. The erotic is both the message *and* the medium. As we read Lorde, we not only take in her words and theories of a world without oppression, but we experience the love from which and through which she constructs her argument. Lorde uses the erotic as a technique in the crafting of her texts. This love takes its clearest form in her forging of community with other women and her reader in her texts.

“Poetry is Not a Luxury” provides several examples of this writing love. In this essay, she argues for the healing and revolutionary potential of poetry. In her very asking us to get in touch with “those ideas which are – until the poem – nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt,” she loves her readers (Lorde 36). As Lorde’s readers, we are cared for; our own injuries attended to, enabling us to understand how to turn our ideas into actions that can free us from oppressive forces. The work Lorde asks us to do, as women, as feminists, as wounded subjects not white/straight/male/rich/able-bodied enough to feel safe, is hard. Through her writing, she holds our hands to guide us: “As we learn to bear the intimacy of scrutiny and to flourish within it, as we learn to use the products of that scrutiny for power within our living, those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their control over us” (Lorde 36). Lorde does not suggest that, though she might offer a theory-based solution to the problems feminists tackle, her recommended course of action is an easy one in practice. In offering us poetry

as a potential solution, Lorde boldly suggests we choose a non-mainstream mode of expression and argument. Her essay even incorporates her own poetry in an attempt to better describe the deep sense of self into which she asks us to tap:

For each of us as women, there is a dark place within, where hidden and growing our true spirit rises,
 beautiful
 and tough as chestnut
 stanchions against (y)our nightmare of weakness
 and of impotence.

These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through that darkness. (Lorde 36; excerpt from “Black Mother Woman,” first published in *From A Land Where Other People Live*; reformatted for emphasis)

Here she interrupts her own standard sentence structure to break open her description.

Prose and free verse blend well here in her explanation. This sentence comes two paragraphs into the four-page essay, standing apart as a paragraph on its own. Where Lorde could have continued the sentence structure set forth by the start of the piece, she instead opts to use the words as she had previously expressed them – in lines of already-published poetry. In order to impress the importance of poetry onto her readers, its status as a “non-luxury,” Lorde refuses to translate into rational argument that which she deemed better expressed in poetry. Feeling and rationality mix and intertwine, form follows function in a spread of erotic knowledge. Just as she enacts her full self as a writer, Lorde attends to all facets of her readers – no one here is reduced to merely a mind or an intellect. Each reader and individual becomes a part of Lorde’s community, employing the erotic as she does to connect across, through and in spite of difference.

Though prescriptive at times, Lorde is never didactic. She does not use her knowledge aggressively or argumentatively within these essays, though she does note the great feminist potential of anger in her essay “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to

Racism.” By acting and writing through her own love, Lorde produces writer-based prose that actually serves her readers quite well; her use of the erotic enables her to share her own ideas about healing and surviving oppression while inviting her readers into the conversation so that they might theorize their own feminist escape:

But women have survived. As poets. And there are no new pains. We have felt them all already. We have hidden that fact in the same place where we have hidden our power. They surface in our dreams, and it is our dreams that point the way to freedom. Those dreams are made realizable through our poems that give us the strength and courage to see, to feel, to speak, and to dare. (Lorde 39)

Here, she asks us to bring our own dreams out to help create new spaces, new knowledge that eradicates the pain to which she refers. While many offer their experience as a solution to others’ problems -- “Look, I did it this way and so can you.” – Lorde uses “we” more than she uses “I,” as we saw in the previous quote. This “we” is distinct from the royal “we” sometimes used by academics; in that use, the group of people included is indistinct from one another and from the writer. The royal “we” replaces the unique and different individuals within the group with one shared, faceless identity. Lorde’s “we” names her identity and permits her readers to name their own and still allows them to comprise the group. The reader has a voice already as Lorde puts us in chorus with herself. Lorde does not want to be the sole occupant of this particular spotlight; her words ask for a response. Women have survived through poetry, she claims, an argument I extend to all oppressed peoples (the subject of feminism as I laid it out) and Lorde asks that we use our “strength and courage” to create our poetry. Her readers are not expected to be silent witnesses to her work but active participants in her cause; she shares her self with us and asks us too to name and own our differences, our oppressions. We are not *instructed* to employ poetry as “the way [to] help give name to the nameless so it can be

thought,” but are *invited* to do so by a guide who already understands the pain we might attempt to voice (Lorde 37).

In her call to implore women to use poetry as a means of voicing their pain, their pleasure, their secret knowledge, Lorde addresses the suppression of feeling that prevents us from coupling it with our rationality.

For within living structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive. Kept around as unavoidable adjuncts or pleasant pastimes, feelings were expected to kneel to thought as women were expected to kneel to men. But women have survived. (Lorde 39)

Lorde’s struggle in the academy is a feminist one, against the old norms that dictate that predominantly male ways of knowing and creating knowledge are correct, pushing emotional intelligence outside of academic work. She addresses a problem felt by many but the love through which she writes calls us to action more invitingly than most of the other writing on the subject. Because our *lives* are addressed, not just our “professional work,” we feel safer answering back to “Poetry is Not a Luxury.” She invites us to explore our ideas and passions “on Sunday morning at 7 a.m., after brunch, during wild love, making war, giving birth, mourning our dead” so that we may always be engaged in what “feels right” to us; thus, we may *also* be in touch with it when we sit down to write (Lorde 39).

In Lorde’s text there is an ‘I’ (Lorde, the writer) and a ‘we.’ This ‘we’ is never explicitly defined (we might correctly assume she means ‘women’) but the reader is nonetheless welcomed into a community, perhaps the most explicit act of love on Lorde’s part. To answer Lorde’s call to “taste new possibilities and strengths...[even] while we suffer the old longings, battle the old warnings and fears of being silent and impotent and alone,” is made easier because, in fact, through her very text, we are *not* alone but loved

(Lorde 39). More importantly for feminist *academics*, this notion of community sets forth a new model for writing, understanding it now as a conversation.

“When we live outside ourselves, and by that I mean on external directives only rather than from our internal knowledge and needs, when we live away from those erotic guides from within ourselves, then our lives are limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual’s” (Lorde 58). Here we can see how Lorde’s work itself reflects this resistance to remain focused solely outward. Again, I point to her use of “we.” In setting forth a new path for a feminist world, Lorde’s text expresses her own needs.

Another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy. In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dance, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea. That self-connection shared is a measure of the joy which I know myself to be capable of feeling, a reminder of my capacity for feeling. And that deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for joy comes to demand from all of my life that it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible, and does not have to be called *marriage*, nor *god*, nor *an afterlife*. (Lorde 56-57)

And why should the experience of writing and thinking engage our capacity for joy any less than dancing or building a bookcase does? When Lorde sits down to write, she connects to her dancing self, her building self. Because feminists take up issues with very physical realities (rape, oppression, violence, et cetera), why can’t we answer these realities with equal parts embodied reality? Lorde’s writing shows us how to do this; we picture her lying with a notebook in the sun as she dreams up her next sentence, all parts of her equally engaged in her work.

Importantly, though, her writing also reflects her desire to work in concert with others and that the “need for sharing deep feeling is a human need” (Lorde 58). This need

is satisfied by her use of “we,” through which we can see she helps her readers remain in touch with their own wants even as they discover hers; she connects intimately to the shared pain she seeks to eliminate. Lorde’s use of the erotic uniquely allows both of these, seemingly conflicting, agendas to be served. As feminist scholars, seeking to eradicate oppressive forces, an engagement in the erotic in our writing provides the ideal form through which we can voice our own knowledge and also connect with others across difference, making our work serve as an example of the very equality and love we aim to create in place of the hatred and difference we often feel.

Part 4: Reimagining Academic Writing and Steps Forward for Women's and Gender Studies

The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized.

– Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury”

The final part of this project attempts to pinpoint those specific tools that might help contemporary feminist writers change the quality of the light by which they do their work in order to employ the erotic as Lorde does, freeing their text for greater feminist scholarship. Because I have been arguing specifically *against* a prescribed form or “right” mode of academic writing, I do not have my own version of a composition textbook or new essay template to propose by way of conclusion. I have aimed to write through the understanding that feminist work would benefit most from freeing the many different possibilities and great potential of academic writing as a form. The power of the erotic is in part derived from its ability to uniquely express each feminist writer’s own needs and personality. Being that the erotic would allow each writer to enact the love and express the difference(s) which feel right to them, I can only highlight those devices that, when employed, enable writers to be in touch with those things that might lead them to love as a mode of writing. In brief, these tools include: conceiving of the writer as a multiple (non-stable, non-singular) subject, employing embodied knowledge⁸ and reaching a new, anti-genealogical, rhizomatic⁹ understanding of knowledge and knowledge production.

Moya Lloyd gives us a most helpful definition of the multiple subject as

⁸ Further reading on embodied knowledge and the body includes Cherrie Moraga, Jane Gallop, Alison M. Jaggar and Susan Bordo.

⁹ Further reading on the rhizome includes Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Elizabeth Grosz, Jacques Derrida, Jasbir Puar and Karen Tongson.

a coalitional subject wherein various axes of identity (such as gender, race, age, psyche, [sexuality]) are perceived as always connected...All subjects are, that is, produced across, and positioned within, several (sometimes reinforcing, sometimes conflictual) axes. The subject is, thus, in a continual state of flux. This is aptly captured in the image...of the self as a combination of acetate transparencies: 'layers and layers of lines and directions that are figured together and in depth, only then to be rearranged again'...such selves are never fixed. (Lloyd 15)

Understanding that the self needn't, indeed *can't*, be arrested to one singular entity or description is perhaps one of the most freeing possibilities of a new feminist method of academic writing. In my undergraduate work, I referred to the writing self as "mercurial and in conflict;" my experiences as an undergraduate had left me frustrated and uncomfortable with the writing process (Coan 15). The students I saw in the Writing Center confirmed what I suspected – that we cannot flatten who we are in our work and feel right about our writing. To be certain, I was an English major but I was also white and a woman and middle-class; my ability to analyze the texts assigned to me was influenced by all of these facets of my subjectivity. And yet, when I came to the page, I was routinely expected to simply be the English major, the student, the *thinker*. Fundamentally robbed of myself, nothing I wrote felt right to me as an undergraduate until my senior thesis, when I was granted permission to insert my voice and experience and personal narrative into my work, allowing me to write from the multiple dimensions of my subject position. Perhaps what made these experiences especially frustrating was the complicated reality that we cannot say, "Oh yes, there is evidence here, in the semicolons and grammar, that a woman wrote this text." Indeed, one of the greatest challenges of this thesis has been writing as a woman and as middle class and as queer et cetera while knowing that I could not *prove* that I had done so. The notion of writing what "feels right to me" creates the space that allows for all aspects of myself to be felt

just as Lloyd describes, one on top of the other, shifting and changing which one is expressed more at a given time.

In her own work, Lorde regularly employs embodied knowledge and consistently reminds her readers of the importance of the multi-layered authorial subjectivity I championed in the preceding discussion. “Audre Lorde likes to refer to herself as black, lesbian, feminist, mother, poet and warrior,” introducing her readers to the many differing facets of her personhood that impact her experiences, ways of knowing and her ability to convey that knowledge to others (Morris 168). Lorde herself proclaimed,

My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition. Only then can I bring myself and my energies as a whole to the service of those struggles which I embrace as part of my living. (Lorde 120-121)

As a result, her work emanates directly from her specific, though varied, positionality, making it no small wonder that I turn to her as a helpful example of the possibilities of academic writing outside the confines of the norms and traditions currently defining this practice for most. There is no shying away from the ‘I’ or use of personal experience; the writer is a vital part of the argument and the knowledge produced here. Of course, for my project, the writer is essential to imagining a new academic writing that more productively engages in feminist issues – who the writer *is*, who *ze was* and how these experiences and subjectivities shape hir ability to produce knowledge. As I introduced myself in Part One, I come to this work, self-consciously, as a white, queer, able-bodied, middle-class, cisgendered woman.

Importantly, it isn’t possible to isolate or arrest a specific singular facet of this self as I am defined by being all of them. This comes to bear on my writing. I cannot write

out of my queerness without engaging my whiteness as well; I cannot engage my able-bodied-ness while ignoring my middle-class positionality. In Part Two, we saw the struggles writers encountered as a result of being treated as though their subjectivities were flat or non-existent. Writers are human subjects, after all, and complex ones at that; the knowledge produced by said human subjects must be recognized for the complexity of its origins. In order to produce written knowledge that can put in motion feminist action, feminist academics must be free to exist in their work as they do in real life. Like Tompkins complained in “Me and My Shadow,” the current models and standards all too often ask the feminist to forget who ze is when ze wakes up groggy on a Saturday morning or gets lost on a city street or travels somewhere new. Only by recognizing that feminist writers exist outside of their work can we allow them to live fully within it, as complex individuals.

One of the most important ways we have to understand and theorize this reality of a non-unified subject is to recognize the importance of embodied reality in an individual’s ability to see their own multiple identities. We might say ze must be able to *think* through hir body. In the introduction to her book *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Elizabeth Grosz helps us understand the history of the mind-body split in academia and the philosophical importance of transcending that divide. Significantly, Grosz takes up the project of reintegrating the forgotten or denigrated body into the philosophical tradition as a specifically feminist one¹⁰.

Feminists and philosophers seem to share a common view of the human subject as a being made up of two dichotomously opposed characteristics: mind and body, thought and extension, reason and passion, psychology and biology. This bifurcation

¹⁰ See also bell hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* and Jane Gallop’s *Thinking Through the Body* for thoughts on the importance of bridging the mind-body split to the feminist academic agenda.

of being is not simply a neutral division of an otherwise all-encompassing descriptive field...Body is thus what is not mind, what is distinct from and other than the privileged term...It is implicitly defined as unruly, disruptive, in need of direction and judgment, merely incidental to the defining characteristics of mind, reason, or personal identity through its opposition to consciousness, to the psyche and other privileged terms within philosophical thought. (Grosz 3)

Rescuing the body from its position as the cumbersome, unpredictable vessel of the soul and mind and reimagining it as an integral part of experiencing the world as a knowledge-producer allows for writing to take on multiple dimensions, as we see Lorde's writing reflected her corporeal reality (especially in later years when she battled breast cancer). To this point, Bronwyn Davies and Susan Gannon (whose work on collective autobiography heavily influenced this project) refer to the work they do not only as brainstorming but "body storming" as well. "This [work] is difficult, provocative, challenging, funny, sad and pleasurable, evoking laughter and tears and a lot of intense questioning about exactly what happened: how did it feel, how did it look, what were the embodied details of this remembered event" (Davies and Gannon10)? But after this difficult investigation into the self, when the writer is able to confront hir identity as it actually exists (not as the purely rational straight, white, upper class male that might be preferred), new resources of untapped knowledge surface. Lorde speaks to this importance of engaging other forms of knowledge in addition to the academically legitimate rational knowledge: "Rationality is not unnecessary. It serves the chaos of knowledge. It serves feeling. It serves to get from this place to that place. But if you don't honor those places, then the road is meaningless. Too often, that's what happens with the worship of rationality and that circular, academic, analytic thinking" (Lorde 110-101). In order to create knowledge that *does* more, engenders change, motivates readers into action as well as thought, the body must be called upon for its contributions to knowledge

production as well. In the effort to share ourselves and our differences with one another, connecting to and writing through those physical realities that are responsible, in part, for the pain we experience, is an important part of the feminist academic agenda.

In this way, it is helpful to imagine the body as pane of glass through which we can access our minds, the filter through which we experience the world, not as a vessel that *traps* the mind that might escape when we sit to work.

On the contrary, the very opposite is true. All day. All the night the body intervenes, blunts or sharpens, colours [sic] or discolours [sic], turns to wax in the warmth of June, hardens to tallow in the murk of February. The creature within can only gaze through the pane – smudged or rosy; it cannot separate off from the body like the sheath of a knife or the pod of a pea for a single instant. (“On Being III” 9-10)

The obvious fact that our bodies and minds cannot be separated points us toward the importance of a self-reflexive embodied self. “The fiction of the self is created when detailed embodied memories are only made relevant to the extent that they fit an essentialized unified (fictional) version of self that fits within and makes sense within hegemonic forms of meaning-making about individuals in the social world” (Davies and Gannon 98). This fiction of the self is especially damaging for those who find themselves categorized as most “different” among the difference we all share; our selves are recognized only to acknowledge that they are *wrong* and then we are told to hide these selves away in lieu of a less complicated writing identity. Freedom, then, to not only be a living body in one’s writing but also, *especially*, to incorporate the experiences of and through that body of non-hegemonic identities will open up new possibilities in writing as a form of knowledge production.

Embodying oneself in one’s discourse in order to identify one’s subject positions...empowers those traditionally without a voice to speak while calling upon

those with hegemonic connections to abandon unreflecting assumptions of centrality. The strength of this strategy lies in the challenge it poses to power structures within societies, for it exposes the destructive effects of oppression in material terms while revealing the positive effects of experience fully lived in opposition to destructiveness. (Morris 182-183)

Thus, there is truly no ideal candidate for this mode of writing – all subjects benefit, uniting us in a shared recognition of ourselves as complicated subjects. The figures locked inside Woolf’s Oxbridge library join those kept out somewhere new. Importantly, when *feminist* writers are able to engage both their minds and bodies in their work, readers also find both aspects of themselves engaged. This double impact results in a greater move towards action, coupled as it is with a greater understanding of the changes to be made to realize a feminist future without oppression. When our shared humanity, difference and pain is pulled to the forefront of a text, the feminist message within the text, the desire to recognize our pain as shared and end oppression based on difference, is more clearly understood by the reader. Employing embodied knowledge helps our medium match our message, especially when so many of the problems feminist seek to eradicate find their basis in physical experience (war, rape, et cetera).

Even as I moved from the “problems” I described in Part Two to the “solutions” I find in Audre Lorde’s work in Part Three, it is important for me to also explore the possibility of abandoning such binaries or dichotomies (as I abandoned some of the facets of *écriture féminine* because of its strict adherence to a gender binary). The struggles most of the students in the writing center divulged resulted almost directly from the discomfort of being pulled between two poles. “Do I think or do I feel? Should my argument be clinical and removed or can it be driven by personal experience? Am I in conversation with the scholars who came before me or am I aiming to fight their arguments with my own?” What emerges significantly out of these binaries is the shift

they inevitably make from opposite ends of a continuum to a more vertical ranking.

“Dichotomous thinking necessarily hierarchizes and ranks the two polarized terms so that one becomes the privileged term and the other its suppressed, subordinated, negative counterpart” (Grosz 3). Thus, we arrive at the deeply imbalanced hierarchy within the bounds of traditional modes of academic writing as a form of knowledge production (thinking good, feeling bad, rational good, embodied bad, et cetera).

Moving forward to understand alternatives to the strictures explored in Part Two, let us also explore alternatives to hierarchies and binaries as another tool in addition to multiple subjectivity and embodied knowledge.¹¹ To do so, I employ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of the rhizome from *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, with help from Bronwyn Davies and Susan Gannon’s work on writing as a communal project in *Doing Collective Biography*. Let us first reexamine the subject at hand: academic writing. This writing is the text that scholars are called upon to produce in the academy, which aims to produce *new* knowledge via fresh arguments engaging preexisting debates and arguments. In the dominant form explored in Part Two, this text evolves directly out of the traditions and knowledge that came before it. A direct genealogy of knowledge can be traced through ideas and practices, its evidence plain in the citations at the paper’s conclusion. “Thought A was derived from Thought B which allows Author A’s argument to coexist nicely with Author B’s.” This linear progression leaves little room for alternative modes of thinking or non-hegemonic identities. Like treading the grooves of a well-worn path, it can take willful and purposeful exploration to

¹¹ The following use of the rhizome was influenced by early discussions with A.B. Weil on his work on oppression without structure.

forge into a new direction, to argue or write differently or make known an othered identity. For feminist academics, this charting of new territory is no new task.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a genealogy as “an account of one's descent from an ancestor or ancestors, by enumeration of the intermediate persons; a pedigree...the line of development of an animal or plant from older forms...lineage,” making it easy to see how unidirectional this particular writing tradition, this genealogy of written thought, has become¹² (Genealogy). The rhizome, on the other hand,

operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots...A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb ‘to be,’ but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, ‘and...and...and...’ This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb ‘to be.’ (Deleuze and Guattari 21; 25)

Deleuze and Guattari’s juxtaposition of ‘and’ and ‘to be’ is especially helpful in the present contemplation of academic writing. If we consider the violence between thinkers within an academic paper, the striking down of another’s idea with our own, we can see the strict adherence to the verb ‘to be.’ I *am*. “I *am*. That other thinker *is*.” There is no community, no *alliance* within this model when each argument, each line of thought, is required to stand on its own along a genealogical sequence. This stark separation of thinkers prevents the kind of connection across difference that Lorde strives for with her use of the erotic; there is no sense here of the *shared* pain she refers to, that I strive to end with my conceptualization of feminism. In fact, little is shared between writers, or between the writer and the reader, in the current form of academic writing.

¹² Of course, Foucault defines genealogy differently, honoring that we do not inherit facts or traditions cleanly from one generation to the next and that many of the things we believe to be most “obviously” traceable are in fact complicated by undocumented changes and evolutions (Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”). I employ the OED definition here as it is more in the spirit of the genealogy against which Deleuze and Guattari pose their conceptualization of the rhizome.

The introduction of ‘and’ allows for shared knowledge and a multidirectional exchange of ideas – connections can easily be made, a community formed.

Where are you going? Where are you coming from? What are you heading for? These are totally useless questions. Making a clean slate, starting or beginning again from ground zero, seeking a beginning or a foundation – all imply a false conception of voyage and movement (a conception that is methodical, pedagogical, initiatory, symbolic...). (Deleuze and Guattari 25)

Deleuze and Guattari make the false movement suggested by this unidirectional, power-bound, disciplined writing clear. Because of the confines of this stasis, it is easy to understand how young writers confronting the traditions of academic writing feel stifled and trapped. There is little room for new ideas or new ways of thinking in this pattern, especially when paying homage to previous thinkers and adhering to disciplinary conventions is stressed above the writer’s point of view. But how can the rhizome’s multiple “lines...lines of segmentarity and stratification...line[s] of flight or deterritorialization” become useful to this project of a new way and form of academic writing (Deleuze and Guattari 21)?

An important turn here would be to refocus academic writing on the *process* of writing (the verb) instead of the *product* of writing (the noun) and to begin to recognize the theory embedded in feminist works of fiction, like poetry. We might ask ourselves now why it is that we write as feminists. Lorde suggests that we write in order give voice to those things that we already feel (Lorde 36). I would add that we write so that we might voice the changes we hope to see in the world and, perhaps most importantly, to *share* that vision with others. Current forms of academic writing often obscure those opportunities to share hir’s writing at many turns, instead offering only the singular, terminal sharing with the professor for a grade. The writing center is a superb example of

another venue where sharing writing, both process and product, can revolutionize a writer's experience of a paper. At Vassar, I would often take a student's paper and turn it over on the desk between us, asking them to tell me about the thesis and ideas within their text. Slight fear always crept into their eyes as they realized they were unsure of their words without the safety net of seeing them printed out before them. Most of the time, the stories students told about their papers were very different from what they had written the night before. This exercise usually highlighted for the student writer that ze had been disconnected from hir work during its writing. This allowed us to work together to determine not only where ze *really* stood on the issues at hand in the paper but also what changes could be made to improve their writing process. This exercise also revealed another reason why we write – to be understood by others. Upon learning that they had not conveyed in writing what they had in our oral conversation, they became suddenly reinvested in papers they were usually bored to death with by the time I saw them. In many ways, I feel like I often helped reintroduce the students to different aspects of their selves that they had lost in the process of writing a traditional academic essay, including wanting to be understood. Although Elbow's words should remain a cautionary warning about the relationship between writer and audience, the desire to be understood by those who read hir's work remains the same, whether ze wants to please hir audience or make them so angry/sad/inspired that they are moved to action or response.

Writing groups also provide another venue for sharing and focusing on writing process. In their work, *Doing Collective Biography*, Bronwyn Davies and Susan Gannon take up writing as a communal practice among a group of academic women, a project that reflects the anti-hierarchical analysis I believe has the potential to free up future practices

of writing for feminist academics. In the prologue to their text, for which they refuse sole authorship and only credit themselves as editors, they introduce their project:

We are a diverse group of women from Australia, Denmark, Germany, Norway, and Sweden. Our disciplines, our ages, our academic histories, the material circumstances and trajectories of our lives are vastly different from each other. We are postgraduate students, ex-students, friends, colleagues, and visiting scholars who have come to work...on furthering the method of collective biography...For four years we have gathered, in January and July, to work collectively on this task. (Davies and Gannon x)

From the outset, their project reflects the anti-hierarchical nature of collaborative (rhizomatic) analysis that I find so useful for my own work here. Despite their differences in identity, social and professional status and levels of experience, all of which we now understand as value-laden traits that come to bear on academic writing, the biographers in this group were all allowed equal space and time to explore their thoughts. Their very ability to each offer her own experience multiplies the potential for new knowledge; once again, connection across difference is made possible, eradicating the potential for oppression based upon those very differences, supporting the feminist cause to which I have referred throughout this piece. Davies and Gannon further ground their work in post-structuralist theory, which they tie to the rhizome's lines of flight. Here, I recognize the importance of post-structuralist work and thought to my project and am grateful to Davies and Gannon's self-conscious reflection on this theory in their own work. While I am influenced by work that challenges structure and desire to see knowledge produced in an anti-hierarchical manner, I find myself loyal to the structure of the university in general. Audre Lorde reminds us that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" and so too do I agree that to employ only the tools and practices provided by the academy and those who control it would not allow for any change in

academic writing. I want to suggest that my work, instead of seeking a post-structuralist reality, calls for the addition of a large number of new tools to the toolbox alongside the master's tools that currently lie there, worn with overuse and uncomfortable in many of our hands.

Post-structuralist theory is interested in the folding and unfolding of history, in the movement from one configuration to another, in the lines of flight that make new realities. The configurations of our academic work include: the divergent discourse of post-enlightenment ideas and ideals of expanding the boundaries of knowledge; the egalitarian ideas and ideals of inclusion; and more recently the neo-liberal regulation of auditing of academic work. (Davies and Gannon 81)

Most important for me is the origin of these “new realities.” How can they come to be? Where do they come from? How can we ensure that the movement of new thoughts, new writing is “not predictable, linear and contained [but i]nstead...focuses attention on process and on the accumulation of allied possibilities” (Davies and Gannon 81)?

It is here that I would like to briefly turn to two additional works of Audre Lorde's that prompt me to wonder what role other genres of writing might play in promoting connection across difference and expression of individual identity on behalf of a feminist agenda. Most obvious is Lorde's autobiographical text, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. This text, which Lorde calls a biomythography, traces her life story, focusing on the themes of lesbianism, racism and the importance of the mother figure. In this way, the work is able to inhabit the many subject positions Lorde routinely claimed – black, lesbian, woman. Ever the shifting subject, she opens the prologue by claiming her desire to be both man and woman. “I have always wanted to be both man and woman, to incorporate the strongest and richest parts of my mother and father within/into me – to share valleys and mountains upon my body the way the earth does in hills and peaks”

(Lorde, *Zami* 7). I encountered this text in a lesbian literature course at Vassar, the only course offered on non-canonical white men and women that I could find to fulfill the diversity requirement for my English major. By approaching the work as fiction, I believe we robbed *Zami* of some of its revolutionary potential as a queer text: though Lorde herself pointedly proclaimed its difference from traditional autobiographies, it *is* the story of her life and is not wholly a work of fiction. By creating and enhancing the role of story and myth in her own coming to self, Lorde makes us more self-conscious of this process of *creating* an identity. This creation helps us understand what it means to express the sort of authenticity of self that I've yearned for throughout this project.

While her biomythography helps us understand individual expression, I turn to her poem, "A Litany for Survival," to look at how she connects across difference in the fight to end oppression in her non-academic work.

when we are loved we are afraid
 love will vanish
 when we are alone we are afraid
 love will never return
 and when we speak we are afraid
 our words will not be heard
 nor welcomed
 but when we are silent
 we are still afraid.

So it is better to speak
 remembering
 we were never meant to survive. (Lorde, "A Litany for Survival")

Akin to the message of "Transforming Silence in Language and Action," Lorde highlights our shared pain and the fear that it creates. So too does she call for us to free ourselves from this fear so that we might all feel love without fearing that it will vanish. The poetic form is important here as Lorde is able to isolate the fears of the oppressed on

their own lines (love will vanish, love will never return, our words will not be heard), as she would be unable to within the confines of an academic essay. Additionally, isolating “remembering” helps reinforce the poem’s refrain, “we were never meant survive,” reminding us of the strength all people, even the oppressed, have. As in “Uses of the Erotic” and “Poetry is Not A Luxury,” Lorde’s use of “we” and focus on a desire for love creates a community united against oppression, in search of love.

These two texts are able to undertake much of the same feminist work as the essays I examined in Part Three but communicate with us differently as readers. The desire to be heard (read) and understood is shared by writers of poetry, fiction and academic writing and, as we can see, feminist messages can be expressed in all forms. It would seem that a biomythography or poem written in free verse would better convey an authentic sense of self or feminist agenda. I believe Lorde complicates this belief while prompting us to ask what purposes different genres may serve; she shows us that authenticity of self is a real a possibility in all types of writing. For me, it is essential that academic writing contain an intentional argument for or on behalf of something – it is this feature that makes it distinct from poetry or fiction. Similar ends can be achieved but different purposes are served, as the last two examples show us. Additionally, neither poetry nor other fiction contain the community of scholars and voices that the academic essay does, eliminating one of the most powerful features of this type of work. As has been my habit throughout this piece, I am happy to dip my toe in the deconstructionist or postmodernist pool to invite a blurring of the division between genres of writing so that tools and strategies may be shared but would still identify academic writing as distinct

from other modes of writing. It is perhaps the most frustrating of them all but continues to capture my attention as a feminist academic.

As secretly pleases me at the conclusion of my work, I am unconvinced that I have provided more answers than questions in this thesis. I remain unsure of what the “best” or “most feminist” academic writing might look like. What I do feel I have been able to do is serve my fellow students and feminists, most of whom I’ve heard lament the difficulties of expressing their ideas in their work. Though I have been exceptionally lucky to be surrounded by brilliant scholars throughout my undergraduate and graduate education, I have also been consistently reminded that intimidation and discomfort affect all of us who write. The past two years have revealed to me that perhaps WGS scholars may be especially impacted by the pressure to conform as we often labor under an undue pressure to prove ourselves more than our other colleagues in the humanities. This much I know is true: precious ideas, crucial strategies for ending hatred and oppression too rarely find their way to the page because their composers feel silenced.

I have endeavored here to transform my own silence into language and action and come to understand, as Audre Lorde would say, that “within the war we are all waging with the forces of death, subtle and otherwise, conscious or not – I am not only a casualty, I am also a warrior” (Lorde 41). If we use the tools discussed here in Part Four, we will all be able to take up our feminist cause in academic writing and bring that cause to the world around us. By honoring the truth of ourselves as writers, we greatly increase the impact of our work. Writing through the erotic and connecting across difference will

bring to academic writing what thirty years of feminist study has brought to other forms of academic inquiry – new voices healing old wounds.

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