Collective Compositions: From Spaces of Silence to Empowerment

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Abstract:

Feminist studies have demonstrated that co-education can be disempowering for young women. From the onset of puberty, male voices gain ascendency in classrooms, clubs, and co-curricular activities (Bell and Golombisky, 2004). This paper explores the techniques of discursive empowerment created by *Speak Out: Exploring Womanhood*, a student organization at Rutgers University created to help university women develop voice and agency. The group meets weekly to discuss events that affect the lives of college-aged women. Each meeting features a writing workshop through which members individually and collectively create poetry and prose, fiction and nonfiction. Emphasizing cultural production as a means to engage male/body/race privileges, *Speak Out* publishes a newsletter both in print and online. By analyzing a selection of these texts, I will examine how writing contributes to an "empowered" or "vocal" self, one which addresses race and gender-based restrictions and injustices, while reimagining and articulating her rightful place in the world.[1]

Author's Note

Ashley Garner is a recent Rutgers University graduate. She received her Bachelor's Degree in Comparative Literature and held minors in Public Policy and Social Justice. Her undergraduate career has centered around the rights, representation, and modes of cultural expression practiced by women of color. This work has included her involvement with the Rutgers University Violence Prevention, Victim Assistance office, directing the Vagina Monologues, and academic research including her honors thesis on economic abuse and safety strategies in the lives of Latina domestic workers. She will continue her academic career at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst as a Sociology doctoral candidate.

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[1] *Speak Out* publications feature fiction, nonfiction, and visual arts submissions, however in order to provide a structured, critical analysis of the extent to which self-generated writing contributes to the emergence of a women's "vocal" or "empowered" self, I focus only on fiction, specifically poetry, in this essay.

"My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences." Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*

Contemporary Context

Sexism, racism, and class-bias continue to haunt U.S. education institutions in the 21st century, but claims about a postfeminist, postracial era make it difficult to grapple with these phenomena (Lum, 2009). In the early 1980s, Roberta Hall and Bernice Sandler documented the existence of "chilly classrooms" and "chilly campus climates," and demonstrated the complex ways that subtle inequalities could hamper women's educational attainment. Examples of "chilly climate" include "calling on male students more often than female students; asking follow-up questions of men and not women; focusing more on a woman's appearance rather than her accomplishments; paying more attention when men speak; viewing marriage and parental status differently for men and women; and attributing women's achievements to something other than their abilities" (Hall and Sandler, 1982; Allan and Madden, 2006). Although women and individuals who identify outside the cis-gendered, Caucasian, heterosexual norm continue to grapple with campus climates that range from chilly to hostile, some recent research renders this experience invisible.

Some studies refute the existence of chilly climates, at least as far as higher education is concerned. Constantinople, Cornelius, and Gray (1988), for example, suggest other variables explain inconsistent class participation and success, such as class size and participation in majors or fields of study usually considered atypical for one sex, such as engineering for women (Serex and Townsend, 1999). While these studies acknowledge that female students may experience resistance when entering a male-dominated field of study, more weight is placed upon "women's disinterest in the

field" and lack of gender-relevant content (Somolu, 2007).[2] These studies overlook exclusionary practices that constitute evidence that "chilly climates" exist on a continuum. Women are less apt to be drawn towards sex-atypical majors or fields of study *because* of the lack of content produced for women or by women, and when women encounter resistance upon entering a male-dominated major, women may decide to choose another more "female-friendly" major.

Significantly, claims that women no longer face inequities in coeducational environments contribute to the disempowerment of young women by trivializing the reality of their experiences. For this reason, some students have created organizations to validate their experiences, using self-generated poetry and prose to "talk back" (hooks, 1989) to those who would negate their experiences. *Speak Out: Exploring Womanhood* is an all-women student organization created at Rutgers University to encourage women to write both individually and collectively to reposition themselves within society as a whole and, more specifically, within the University setting. It is through these writings that the women proffer insights of self-definition, agency, and empowerment   perspectives that are typically devalued or distorted within broader contexts and discourses. Self-generated writings allow young women to establish rhetorical strategies for self-representation. Writing is used to reclaim space and transform ideas of modern-day femininity, or what it means to be a college-aged woman. The writing and sharing of stories serve as a source of empowerment not only for the writer, but for women reading the stories as it helps enable these women to break silences about their own experiences as they draw strength and support in recognition of courage in the writers.

One popular way of staking claim within male-dominated fields is through blogging, which allows women to empower themselves by taking active roles in the production of knowledge, and literally rewriting what can be deemed "acceptable"

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[2] This study focused on the field of information and communication technologies, a male-dominated field, which had made some headway in recruiting women in the early 1990s, but which has reverted to very low numbers of women in the past decade.

spaces for women (Somolu, 2007).[3] Blogging has allowed women to redefine tropes of femininity and female sexuality by establishing safe-spaces (blogs) where the shame and stigmatization usually associated with sex-positivity is removed entirely. Sex blogging in particular, has allowed women to regain control over their sexuality, an area of women's lives that has historically been controlled by male guardians such as husbands and/or fathers (Wood, 2008). *Speak Out* is in the process of establishing a WordPress blogging website, which would allow participants to contribute more regularly than the current formal publication structure allows. At present, *Speak Out* utilizes an Isuu site, in which online versions of the newsletters are published.

To demonstrate the power of *Speak Out: Exploring Womanhood* in encouraging young women to cultivate sexual voice and agency, I will draw upon *Sister Outsider,* a collection of essays written by Audre Lorde, most notably, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," "Eye to Eye," and "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" (Sister Outsider, 1984).[4] I will also use an article, "Reading and Becoming Living Authors: Urban Girls Pursing a Poetry of Self-Definition," written by Kelly Wissman (2009). These essays provide a theoretical framework helpful in illuminating selections from *Speak Out.*   In "Reading and Becoming Living Authors: Urban Girls Pursing a Poetry of Self-Definition," Wissman's examines her experience teaching urban young women of color self-representation through poetry (Wissman, 2009). She suggests that writing can serve as a form of political activism insofar as writing seeks to insert the writer into what she has deemed her "rightful" place within society. The following close readings of narratives produced by the women involved in *Speak Out* will demonstrate the process by which young women move from the silencing experienced in "chilly" classroom settings, as well as in a racist, sexist world to self-

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[3] In the study conducted by Somolu, African women in particular are being referenced.

[4] Lorde's texts, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" especially, were selected for use as the theoretical framework of this paper since Lorde makes various concerted efforts to stress the necessity of inclusivity in that the teaching of black, white, disabled, able-bodied, and lesbian women's experiences are necessary and applicable to the lives of all women, despite whether or not those learning from these teaching have similar identities. Lorde's essays were originally delivered as speeches, and much of the writing reflects this mode of delivery.

recovery in the form of fictional exploits. I argue that throughout this process women learn to regain control in regard to how they are both remembered and defined.

Autobiography as a Mode of Self-Recovery

Clinical studies used to examine the usefulness of writing in family therapy have shown that the incorporation of a client's own fictional writing allows the client to deconstruct aspects of experience that he or she may have trouble coping with and reconstruct experiences in a more desirable way. Through writing, the client controls what experiences are either imbued with meaning or made meaningless (Mota and Blumer, 2013). As a discussion-based organization, *Speak Out* is a form of informal group therapy, providing a space where women can recover from their experiences of sexism, violence, and feelings of inferiority experienced both within and outside of the classroom setting.[5] The self-recovery process occurring within *Speak Out* mirrors what is described clinically. Women are given the opportunity to define their experiences free of input from outsiders. Just as the therapist allows the client to reconstruct experiences on his or her own terms without interference, in the same manner self-generated fiction writing does not involve a review process and cannot be deemed acceptable or unacceptable by anyone but the writer. The defining aspect of self-recovery is that the process to recovery is controlled by the individual, for the individual, and on his or her own terms. The experiences themselves are not held in high esteem; rather what bears weight in self-recovery is the way that an individual interacts with these experiences (hooks, 1993). In other words, differing perspectives can impact the meaning imparted to experiences, but in autobiographical writing, the writer imbues meaning where he or she sees fit. This is not to say that the way an individual experiences events should be discredited, rather that experiences are individualized and impact is both personal and varied.

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[5] *Speak Out* does not purport to be an adequate therapy resource, and all the women, but especially women seeking additional support, are referred to and given the information of on-campus counseling services and centers.

Another feature of discussion-based "group therapy" is what bell hooks names "collective unmasking," which is an act of resistance that requires collectives to see themselves as they truly are and to "speak the truth of [their] reality anyway" (1993, 26). Manifestations of this actualization of self that hooks writes of can be found within writing workshops, which require the women of *Speak Out* to build truths about their identities together while simultaneously embracing these truths and using them as spaces for empowerment. Working within a collective allows women to discover their individual voices in an effort to abandon silences. The writing is not a standalone feature of these workshops, rather writing builds bridges among women, which encourages them to seek and give voice to realities seldom discussed (Lorde,1984). In this unmasking, any desire to cover up identities or portions of identities typically regarded as shameful such as sexual voice/sexual agency and connection to various privileges (race/body) must be abandoned. In the absence of shame, the women are able to see and love themselves for their true selves. The ultimate goal of "collective unmasking" is more accurate self-representation; however there are limitations to such a feat which will be discussed later in the essay.

While abandoning shame is essential to truth-telling, it should also be noted that learning to free oneself of shame is an arduous process requiring an individual to "unlearn" much of what they have been socialized to accept. The dominant culture indoctrinates individuals to an ideology that simultaneously values truth-telling but requires individuals not to practice it as a mode of survival (hooks, 1994). Examples of this ideology are found both historically and in present day; the institution of slavery demanded that slaves both value honesty (this valuation stemming at least in part from deep-seeded Christian belief systems) and also recognize the necessity of lying to their master (hooks, 1994). A contemporary example can be found in child-rearing techniques whereby children are urged to be honest while also learning when to prioritize tact over truthfulness. For example, children are oftentimes discouraged from questioning authority as it is impolite and categorized as pestering rather than genuine inquiry. hooks names this tendency towards dishonesty the "practice of dissimulation." Women must learn to remove this practice from their lives when

attempting to compose writing that tells the truth about their realities. Women must also learn to recognize that these realities extend well-beyond lived experiences — the role of institutions and the ways in which sexism, racism, and classism are institutionalized contribute to this subjugation. If one cannot first identify these institutional forces of domination, then one cannot possibly resist them.

Analysis of Selections

Much of autobiographical writing can be viewed as rooted in reflections of past experiences and actions. While many may view the act of reflecting as passive, I argue that reflections, especially when captured in writing, are a form of resistance. The act of writing elevates the reflections to a state of permanence; memories are faint, and with time the individual may begin to recall less and less detail in regard to the specific memory relegating it to a state of uncertainty or "almost reality." However, writing allows an individual's reflections to be recorded as he or she recalls them and to remain vivid and unchanged. Furthermore, writing that is reflective in nature cannot be interpreted as passive when women are battling the constrictions imposed by a systematic silencing of women's issues. Therefore, finding language and discovering "the words you do not have yet" is an important step in moving from the spaces of silence and comfort that Lorde explores in her essays (1984). Reflection-based writing teaches women that simply choosing not to verbalize experiences will not serve as a shield from judgment or contempt usually associated with accompanying those who speak out on taboo issues. These "tyrannies" will continue to occur with or without acknowledgement (Lorde, 1984).

In examining the various poems submitted for publication, it becomes apparent that autobiographical/reflection-based writing seems to resonate more with the writers of *Speak Out* as these types of poems are the most common. Reflecting not only provides permanence to memories as mentioned above, but also serves to mitigate and assist in the process of understanding the intersections of experience and identities (Wissman, 2009). Such autobiographical reflections are not simply

exhibitions of various subjectivities, rather in standing out from the milieu of everyday or ordinary experience to be subjects of reflection, they resist social and historical discourses that have been ingrained into the societal fabric in an effort to challenge accepted behaviors (Hesford, 1999; Allan and Madden, 2006)[6].

Christina C., a third-year student and secretary of *Speak Out*, wrote a poem entitled "Thirteen Truths," which provides a chronological response to common areas of female subjectivity: exploitation, expression of both outrage and an undertone of helplessness, redefinition through self-assurance, love, compassion, and fortification of future generations. Her poem, reprinted with her permission reads:

i know of love that bends the skin.

i know that words are bullets and many of them rest inside of us longer than we care to admit.

i know that the public will smile at a full figure and scold it's edges when no one is looking./ bodies are built of fabric and eyes will weigh them down like they are nothing but condensed concrete.

i know that God is a craftsman and i am not made of paper.

i know of little girls that get touched like they are brittle stones. their curves get shoved into cracks of glass, situated into crooks of filthy mouths that will spend the rest of the night assuring them that they will always embody the weakest patches of nature's soil.

i know his jaw gets rough when he uses soft words and his hands are constructs of energy. they create and destroy and when he hits me, i think of thunder. i think of the different ways a father can plant blossoms on the face of his children, and how each strike in the sky births a bleeding corpse, and -

i know that pain is a companion to nasty burns and beautiful scars, and i take refuge in my hurt   for it's the only way i can ever hope to heal anyone else.

i know that i am not dainty sips of alcohol or seductive cheekbones. i am not the stem of a thong or the flavor of my pores. i am not seventy eight cents short and i am not

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[6] "Everyday or ordinary experiences" is used in here in an ideological sense, however a women's true everyday experiences may certainly be fraught with the types of aggression she chooses to reflect upon. The ideological meaning is used since it underscores that many women, despite the frequency of aggression in their lives, are still aware that their lives should not be riddled with these experiences.

the anchor or my actions. i am not a lullaby. this voice is pavement. the walls of my throat contain dusted thoughts and when i shout, entire cities will be kept awake at night.
i know that someday, if i have a daughter, her smile will be a variation of colors. i will teach her that books have the power to fill chest cavities, and that her compassion will be a barrier against dark shadows. she will be taught never to fight first, but always to fight back. above all else, she will be kind, and because of this, she will be beautiful.
i know that tomorrow is today, and that freedom may not be tangible but still, i hold it in my palms like it is the most honest treasure that i have ever known.

Christina matter-of-factly calls attention to the ways in which words can be as deadly as bullets, and often permeate deep into a woman's psyche serving as a source of shame. The second line of her poem calls attention to the importance of language and the long-standing effects language laced with or built upon sexism can have by being both off-putting to women and also causing them to internalize hierarchal structures of society.

The impact of language can be found in a study grounded in the examination of persuasion theory, which presented college-aged women with four varying advertisements, some using sexist language and others using inclusive language. The results of the study proved that sexist language such as male specific pronouns serve to inhibit persuasion in women, but these same feelings of inhibition were not experienced by men (Falk and Mills, 1996). This study is particularly relevant to the work *Collective Compositions* is attempting to accomplish because it illustrates the magnitude to which women are both negatively affected by sexist language while also being consistently accosted by such disabling images. This reaffirms the need to "create our own language" as feminist pioneers such as Virginia Woolf and countless others have demanded.[7]

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[7] The creation of our own language, in the way Virginia Woolf implores in her *A Room of One's Own*, does not call for a radical implementation of novel words and literary devices intended for use solely by women, rather a recognition that language and words carry a history   a history that is not necessarily representative of the needs and concerns of women, past or present.

Christina also goes on to address body privilege in terms of what types of women's bodies are favored within society. This acknowledgement of body privilege is particularly useful in this context because it is immediately followed by depictions of sexual abuse, which emphasizes that despite a women's possession or dispossession of the "privileged" body type, she is still, in overwhelming numbers, at risk for becoming a victim of sexual abuse. A memory that, much like the bullets Christina describes, will remain with the speaker of the poem for an extended period of time.

The Lordean framework established earlier in the paper reveals how Christina transforms "silence into language and action." Lorde, in reference to Kwanzaa, writes of the importance in no longer being content with being spoken for and how women must name themselves. Christina's unique methodology of naming began as addressing what she is not   in this way, Christina acknowledged some of the existing norms dictating the actions of women and rejected them, not as being inherently "wrong", but simply as not belonging to her identity. Her writing also revealed that somewhere along her poetic journey there was a shift in consciousness. Christina begins with depictions of violence and exploitation, and as the poem progresses she seems to consider the "visibility," the "harsh light of scrutiny and perhaps judgment," and concludes, as Lorde prompts, that suffering is not avoided by silence, by adopting the norms, or by "dainty sips of alcohol" (line 16 of Christina's poem). Your voice must not coo as if singing a lullaby, but must "cry to be heard," it must keep entire cities awake (Lorde, 1984; line 19 of Christina's poem).

"Thirteen Truths" by Christina C. is a direct form of resistance to discourses of body preferentialism, tropes of femininity and motherhood, sexist language, and taboos surrounding discussion of sexual abuse. The last line of her poem is a call to action, as described by Audre Lorde. There is a clear recognition that "freedom," read in this context as gender parity, may not be immediately or easily attainable, but this fact will not inhibit the speaker of the poem from choosing action through her writing. This line acknowledges that there is no more time for silence as tomorrow and today will meld and become indistinguishable from one another so long as one remains silent. Christina's poem establishes a deliberate sense of self, a space where society

can be indicted for the devaluation of women, as well as a textual space for healing and transformation into a woman no longer without feelings of authority and assertion.

A poem written by Ashley G., a second-year student, addresses racial disjuncture in her poem entitled "The Yellow Woman Speaks." She combats perceptions about her identity as a seemingly mixed race woman and complicates assumptions made in regard to her ethnic presentation by calling attention to feelings of dispossession that result from the intersection of her identities. She writes:

Lips do not fumble with my name
There are no micro-pauses where opportunity for offense and political correctness are considered
It just is and I cease to be in your exuberance over the known, well-charted

I have been imagined and reimagined
Fashioned and refashioned for ease of experience
Bits and pieces of me fit well into entire identities
Identities already barred from me

I am the presentation of the grotesque
The silhouette that dares challenge revelations made in the shadows
My words, when heard, are jumbled
Foolish expectation of comprehension

I can speak without assistance, I assure you
The dirt under my fingernails is not from desperately digging for my Africanness
The tan of my skin is no result from basking in the sun of my whiteness
I am a marriage of all of these things; let me judge my own disunions
Why is there no room for the yellow woman

You in your lofty glass tower, you shan't imagine me
Do not determine my existence
For I assure you, I can speak

Reflections from "The Yellow Woman Speaks" invoke almost a sense of discomfort for the reader as Ashley, similarly to Christina, uses her textual space as a means to hold the unnamed transgressor(s) accountable for placing her within ethnic parameters and robbing her of the opportunity to control how she is both perceived and defined. Her poem speaks to the ethnic-American experience—feeling neither entirely connected to one's respective ethnic identity nor to the American identity. The speaker of the poem addresses these disunions in identity and highlights society's need to deny intersections by creating dichotomies, in this case the black/white dichotomy, and the expectation of individuals to fit cleanly within the boundaries of these binaries. Ashley's poem both challenges the existence of racial binaries while seemingly offering a simplistic counter solution of self-definition. The final two stanzas appear to serve as a spatial reclamation, or a way for the "Yellow Woman" to stake claim to her own voice.

"The Yellow Woman Speaks" seems to be a direct attack on issues of representation. The speaker of the poem appears to writhe with anger because she lacks the ability to name herself, as Audre Lorde encourages women to do. Furthermore, this poem calls attention to exactly what Audre Lorde criticized women for and warned them against in her essay. Lorde urged women to discover the pertinence in the words of their sisters of varying identities. In other words, the white woman must not discount the words of "the yellow woman" simply because of presupposed differences. Lorde reminds us that these "differences" are merely institutions used to stall the unification of the "Sister Circle" (Lorde, 1984; Harris, 2012). The speaker of the poem has recognized the need for inclusivity that Lorde requests. She, in her recognition that her ethnic ambiguity is "grotesque" to the unnamed other, participates in the "unmasking" described by hooks (1994) and uses this confrontation with her reality to succinctly and authoritatively assert her ability to

"speak."[8] Ashley's writing in the final stanza moves from a space of refashioning language to action in the way she directly addresses the reader "You in your lofty glass tower, you shan't imagine me/ Do not determine my existence." She has not only discovered her "vocal self" through writing, but secured her future and its respective outcomes by dictating what actions are acceptable; Ashley has, through the speaker of the poem, achieved agency and an identity no longer tethered to the perceptions of others.

A writing technique integral to the functioning of *Speak Out* is the utilization of "I am…" poems. "I am…" poems are the basis of self-definition writing workshops. The women of *Speak Out* are given about five minutes to construct their "I am…" poems, and are initially provided with encouragement to incorporate metaphorical language as an effort to explore non-traditional intricacies. Members of *Speak Out*'s executive board suggest the time limits and provide activity instructions and support, however *Speak Out* views itself as constantly striving towards being a decolonized space so executive board members are careful not to be too domineering when suggesting time limitation and other specifics. The purpose of the activity prompting is to serve as a quick reminder to participants that one of the beauties of self-definition lies in the fact that an individual can construct their personhood from almost anything. "I am…" poems provide a great deal of insight into the self-recovery process as these poems chart all the spaces and experiences that contributed to how a woman presently views herself or has learned to view herself, both in negative and positive lights.

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[8] The "other" in this context is defined much in the same way that Frantz Fanon in his *Black Skin, White Masks* uses the other as integral in the defining of the self. In other words, an individual can only define her/himself insofar as an oppositional other exists. The context of this other is important because in self-recognition, especially as it pertains to marginalized groups, it is imperative that a definition of self that is independent from the usually "superior" other is established. For the purposes of the analysis of this poem, the "other" ascends to particular importance because the speaker of the poem is calling for an eradication of this type of other-ing to which she has been subjected. This call for a overhauling of societal norms is a key example of the empowerment derived from autobiographical/experience-based writing.

One "I am…" poem that emerged from one of the weekly writing workshops was written by third-year student, Lauren M.. Excerpts from her poem are as follows:

I am who I am.
I AM
A recovering Catholic
A multiracial maverick
A snorer in my sleep

I am a woman
And I prefer to be on top
I am a faithful friend
Unless I'm caught

I am a woman of color
But I "talk white"
I am a hip hop lover
I am erudite

Lauren's first three stanzas of her "I am…" poem stand out in that they present various pathways to personhood that women are ordinarily denied. Self-identification through sexual power is typically barred from women. Lauren's assertion of her preference to "be on top" or to assume the domineering sexual position cues the reader into her prioritization of sexual agency as a form of empowerment.[9] In "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Lorde writes that "oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives" (1984, 53). Using Lorde's words as a point of departure for analysis, Lauren's writing may illustrate her willingness to accept the erotic as a source of power. She rejects both the inferiority women are socialized to feel if they exist as a sexual being and the notion that true female power is rooted in the suppression of sexuality, and a sexuality that seeks to be

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[9] Since this is an "I am…" poem, the assumption is made that Lauren is the speaker of the poem.

self-serving. Lauren's demand for agency can even be seen in her use of poetic and literary device; Lauren writes "I am a woman/ And I prefer to be on top." Her use of "and" here seems to deliberately acknowledge that being woman and being sexually domineering are not usually associated with one another, therefore the usage of "and" seeks to defy female sexuality norms.

Lauren's third stanza addresses the illusion of binaries and how these binaries only serve to impede empowerment by causing policing of the self. Lauren boasts both her education and her identification as a woman of color, an association individuals are socialized not to make. It is this casual way of acknowledging the coexistence of these identities that Lauren, mocks the binaries that women are supposed to uphold. She refuses to question how her ethnic background and ability to "talk white," a phrase which mocks the black/white dichotomy in and of itself, equally contribute to her personhood. Lorde in her "Eye to Eye" urges women to shift their emphasis from perfection to fulfillment. Similarly, Lauren has moved from attempts to uphold perfection in her identity performance. Referencing herself as a "recovering Catholic" one can assume that the recovery points to a recognition of aspects of Catholicism that no longer coincide with the emerging empowered woman; a shift that must have been difficult to make hailing from an ethnic cultural background which heavily emphasizes the importance of religion.

Boundaries to Self-Definition

This paper has spoken of college-aged women as a whole. While the writers critically examined above have cited issues surrounding ethnic background, mental welfare, and body image, it must be acknowledged that differences between the women do exist that have the potential to serve as boundaries to self-definition and "collective unmasking." Women approach *Speak Out* with varying ideas about the necessity of truth-telling, to what extent it should be practiced, what truths are of value, and so on. While one of the purposes of practicing collective writing and open

discussion is to learn from the experiences of other women, it can sometimes be difficult to bring women to the same levels of understanding.

For example, in viewing social class as a boundary to self-actualization, one can analyze to what extent an individual's class and respective upbringing on allowing the public (discussion group, writing) to intermingle with the private space (lived experiences). Social etiquette has long been a means of dividing women and even delineating who in fact could access what was defined as womanhood, therefore, depending upon the setting and the social circle, women with the belief in speaking openly and women with the belief of remaining private and "polite" could both be, at different times, at a disadvantage (hooks, 1994). Women who are made to feel as though their respective belief is "incorrect" or "wrong" will more than likely be shuffled into places of shame or will be excluded, which then obviously inhibits any and all benefit that could have been derived from their involvement in such a discussion group.

In attempts to avoid this shaming, *Speak Out* meetings open with an informal boundary statement, which is said aloud by a different member each week. This statement varies slightly each week as there is no formal version and it is molded by the woman who chooses to express it for the week, however fundamentally the statement encompasses the same basic principles of the necessity for respect, inclusivity, a desire for enhanced knowledge and sisterhood, and acceptance. In addition, the need for discussion instead of debate is very intentional. *Speak Out* wants members to walk away with the understanding that when it comes to an individual's personal experiences and outlook on the world that has been shaped by these experiences, it is better to assume a listening position than a position of defense. Many of the experiences women write about are the ways in which they have been bombarded and accosted with structures that seek to belittle the experiences of women. Naturally, practicing that same sort of hostility would be counter-intuitive. It should also be noted that it takes practice to learn to respond in a much more productive manner to issues that, despite being integral to an individual's identity, are

still considered taboo or undesirable and thus are subconsciously rejected even by the possessor of such identities.

Finally, as mentioned briefly earlier on in the text, in reference to hooks' "practice of dissimulation," women are not immediately psychologically in a place where they possess the ability to be honest in the telling of their stories. Women are indoctrinated into these "social circles of deceit" where they become accustomed to withholding bits of information from other women in efforts to exert some form of power and control (hooks, 1994). Therefore, the road to truth-telling is multi-layered in that various aspects of the socialization process must be broken down before genuine truth-telling can occur. The shift from the appearance of reality to what a women's reality is actually comprised of, including negative events and experiences, is needed to move from spaces of dissimulation as women no longer have any reason to remain apologetic.

Conclusions

Moving from spaces of dissimulation and silence to empowerment requires the engagement and commitment to unveiling the truth of living as a college-aged woman. These truths must acknowledge the institutions that attempt to dictate the ways in which a woman is "allowed" to interact with and behave within her world. In regard to college-aged women specifically, this population faces a unique form of oppression in that it often goes unnoticed. The preferential treatment of men, especially in classroom settings, has become so commonplace and so ingrained within the structuring of communication that this inequity is oftentimes unacknowledged.

Fictional, autobiographical, or reflection-based can be viewed as a critical mode of empowerment, empowering both the writer and the reader in different ways. The call to writing enforces a need for permanence in the recollection of women's memories so that they may not be discredited or value reassigned within the experience. Moreover, writing allows a woman to define herself on her own terms by countering the existing gender paradigms. Fictional writing acknowledges the need to

create a language for women that is stripped of sexism, racism, classism, and all other systematic forms of oppression. In writing, women have the ability to reclaim not only aspects of their identities they have been forced to cast aside in efforts to uphold social and cultural norms, but also to establish new norms. Women's autobiographical writing is crucial in reestablishing the discourses that surround women, their desires, identities, and subjectivity.

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