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Min-Zhan Lu

Redefining the Literate Self: The Politics of Critical Affirmation

In these downbeat times, we need as much hope and courage as we do vision and analysis; we must accent the best of each other even as we point out the vicious effects of our racial divide and the pernicious consequences of our maldistribution of wealth and power. We simply cannot enter the twenty-first century at each other's throats, even as we acknowledge the weighty forces of racism, patriarchy, economic inequality, homophobia, and ecological abuse on our necks. We are at a crucial crossroad in the history of this nation—and we either hang together by combating these forces that divide and degrade us or we hang separately. Do we have the intelligence, humor, imagination, courage, tolerance, love, respect, and will to meet the challenge?

—Cornel West (159)

All too often our political desire for change is seen as separate from longings and passions that consume lots of time and energy in daily life.... there are many individuals with race, gender, and class privilege who are longing to see the kind of revolutionary change that will end domination and oppression even though their lives would be completely and utterly transformed. The shared space and feeling of "yearning" opens up the possibility of common ground where all these differences might meet and engage one another. It seemed appropriate then to speak this yearning.

—bell hooks (12–13)

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Scholars now recognize that literacy is a trope, the meaning of which is up for grabs. Defining literacy is thus a site of political struggle. Taking up such struggle, this paper poses a literate self in the interest of social justice. This ideal literate self uses reading and writing for the following goals: (1) To end oppression rather than to empower a particular form of self, group, or culture; (2) To grapple with one's privileges as well as one's experience of exclusion; (3) To approach more respectfully and responsibly those histories and experiences which appear different from what one calls one's own; and (4) To affirm a yearning for individual agency shared by individuals across social divisions without losing sight of the different material circumstances which shape this shared yearning and the different circumstances against which each of us must struggle when enacting such a yearning. This is a form of literacy which, following Cornel West, I want to call "critical affirmation" (30)—a literacy which might bring us hope and courage as well as vision and analysis for negotiating the crucial cross-road in the history of this nation.

In positing critical affirmation as a trope for literacy, I join others to mark writing, especially personal narratives, as a site for reflecting on and revising one's sense of self, one's relations with others, and the conditions of one's life. Through the years, I have argued in public forums about the need to promote one or another of the four goals of critical affirmation and to develop teaching strategies for helping students carry out such goals. But in my private thoughts, feelings, and visceral reactions, I have not always practiced critical affirmation when responding to others in the field. This is especially the case when I have tried to construe a writer's intentions in speaking against oppression. I suspect that this gap between my theoretical stance and actual practice, between my actions as a teacher and my actions during scholarly exchanges, between what I say in public and how I react in private, is a common one and can thus serve as a site for reflection and revision of the material realities of our professional life.

The four goals of the ideal literate self are best understood as an active response to various abuses of the political potential of the personal. I have particularly in mind abuses which limit our understanding of identity politics and encourage a politics of sectarianism. Let me sketch four such abuses to illustrate the institutional context of my personal interest in critical affirmation as well as my difficulties in practicing it.

Abuse One: Writing the Personal for Capital Investment

I have in mind here the tendency to produce only those genres of personal narratives for which there seems to be a guaranteed audience. This tendency treats personal narrative solely as a means of accruing cultural capital.

Particular versions of the personal (such as “the trials of border crossing”) have in turn served to legitimize certain members (of so-called minority writers) to speak in particular ways within given institutional sites and to exclude other versions of the personal (such as “the triumphs and exhilaration of border crossing” or “life in the ‘mainstream’”). In reaction, some of us have inadvertently resorted to inverse discrimination: automatically dismissing such writings as self-serving and trendy. Furthermore, we tend to forget that the dominant modes of “personal narrative” legitimized in composition scholarship and classrooms are not always a viable means of “empowerment” for all members of oppressed groups, but rather often promote values and practices which are counterproductive to definitions of “self” and “language” which some (publishing and student) writers view as critical to the well-being of their collectives.

Abuse Two: Using the Personal as a Mirror Reflection of a Self or Culture

Few in literacy studies and composition would dispute in theory that the individual self is an ongoing, complex, conflicted, and transformative process. Yet, in teaching and research, “personal experience” is often treated as a self-evident thing existing prior to and outside of discursive practices. Personal narratives are thus viewed as a direct reflection of the writing self and her culture. “Experience” is seldom explored as a process we can only have access to discursively, through the mediation of a complex network of power, desire, and interests. Nor is it usually treated as a possible site for critical intervention on the formation of one’s self and the material conditions of one’s life. Thus, recitation and revelation rather than revision remain the dominant modes of writing the personal.

Abuse Three: Slotting the Personal

Critical attention to the politics of representation has made us sensitive to issues of exclusion when organizing conferences, compiling anthologies, and selecting course materials. Yet, it remains a common practice to reduce the issues by slotting one another as Persons of Color, Gay and Lesbian Teachers, etc. This often involves equating a person’s social placement—how one is marked by a particular system of oppression—with that person’s political stance, her often conflicted attitudes and actions towards that system. A person’s experience of one system in one context (e.g., racism within a classroom) is used to stand in for that person’s experience of other systems in all contexts (e.g., racism on the street or sexism, homophobia, and class elitism within [or outside] the same classroom). We slot one another as having (or not having) certain experiences and thus having (or not having)

authority to speak against oppression. In some instances, this practice has led to a problematic distribution of duties in which speaking against oppression becomes the special responsibility of the oppressed. Played out in reverse, insightful arguments by White-appearing panelists at CCCC often receive little response beyond accusations of appropriation and exclusion. And so, the pressure to slot ourselves and others keeps us from rigorous reflection and revision of our complex and often conflicted relations with various systems of oppression in diverse contexts.

Abuse Four: Disembodying the Personal

I have in mind here the tendency to contain the lived experiences of individual agents within some dogmatic theory of cultural politics. All experiences which do not fit directly and neatly within simplistic notions of race, sex, class, and gender identity are then dismissed as private, non-political, and therefore irrelevant. Such critical attention disembodies the personal by privileging theory over lived experience, the “social” over the “private,” “politics” over “pleasure.” As a result, overt political analysis has often in effect worked to limit our efforts to make political use of lived experiences. In “The Nervous System,” for instance, Richard Miller shows the importance of attending to the social construction of our private, visceral reactions when reading and writing. In reaction to such abuses, some of us have simply reversed the hierarchy between theory and lived experience without challenging the dichotomy. Such a reversal could lead us to automatically dismiss as dogmatic and trite all personal writing that includes overt discussions of the politics of representation and employs such social categories as race, class, gender, and sex.

These abusive uses of the personal encourage us to oversimplify and fossilize individual selves and cultures. They also focus our energy on ranking various selves and cultures, putting each simply either on the pedestal or in the gutter. Such essentialist approaches breed distrust, indignation, and despair among readers and writers across institutional divisions even when we are joined in our yearning for individual agency and social justice. Reflecting on those instances when I feel most trapped by such sentiments, I have noticed two forms of illiteracy in my own reading and writing practices.

In theory, I understand the importance of grounding one’s authority in one’s ability to grapple with what Lindsay Pentolfe Aegerter has termed the “paradoxes of privilege” (901). I have developed teaching strategies for helping students to map the matrix of their identities in terms of the power differential in the different contexts they inhabit and to use that map to examine the complex network of power, interests, and desires shaping

their literacy practices. I have encouraged students to consider the possibility that the very system of oppression one deplors and has interests in fighting against often confers certain privileges upon oneself. And I have helped students explore ways of confronting their capacity to oppress others despite their experience of exclusion and their desire to end all forms of oppression. I can talk eloquently about how and why our chances of changing the particular system most immediately oppressive to each of us will remain limited until we learn to confront our own complicity with various systems of oppression. Yet, when conducting professional scholarly exchanges, I have not always been consistent in applying my pedagogy to myself.

In theory, I understand the need to ground authority in one's ability to accent a shared yearning for agency and social justice across institutional divisions. Yet, I have difficulty practicing this knowledge when responding to the work of writers historically and socially placed on the side of power, especially writers appearing to be white, heterosexual, male, and/or enjoying academic recognition. When reading their narratives of personal exclusion, I worry that attention to shared experiences of exclusion and yearning for individual agency is seldom accompanied by investigation into the different circumstances shaping such a yearning and the different circumstances in which each of us must struggle to enact it. Instead of actively engaging these writers to work against such potential oversights, however, I often react, especially in private, by suspecting the political motives and authority of the "privileged" writers. I am often quicker to spot others' lack of reflection on the paradox of their privileges than to confront the ways in which the paradox of my own privilege mediates my reaction to their work. In short, I am often more rigorous in wrestling with others' illiteracy about oppression than with my own.

In this paper, I use as points for revision three instances in my own literacy practice where I have experienced difficulty enacting the kind of critical affirmation I want most to promote. In the process, I hope to mark teacher-illiteracy as a crucial aspect of literacy studies and teacher self-education as a site of pedagogical research. In each of these instances, I focus my discussion on my paradoxical relations with racism. I have three motivations for this choice of focus. First, racism remains the most emotionally convoluted and volatile topic in critical exchanges among colleagues with different (socially labeled and/or self-named) racial identities. Second, in the United States, matters of racism are still often treated strictly in isolation from (rather than as different from but interlocked with) matters of economic inequality, sexism, homophobia, etc. Third, matters of racism are where I myself most struggle in confronting the paradox of my own privileges, a difficulty further complicated and intensified by my concern

to speak as, with, and for individuals labeled as persons of color. My personal need to develop fluency in confronting my paradoxical power relations in matters of racism, I hope, can serve as a case for exploring ways of combating this aspect of teacher illiteracy and its various forms of expression in critical exchanges.

Instance One: Re-Searching African American Voices

In “When the First Voice You Hear is Not Your Own,” Jacqueline Jones Royster recounts three scenes from her professional life to illustrate the importance of listening when approaching voice (30). She is unequivocal about why she is interested in listening. The goal, she argues, is to “exchange perspectives, negotiate meaning, and create understanding with the *intent* of being in a good position to *cooperate* when, like now, cooperation is *absolutely* necessary” (38, my italics). Three reactions to Royster’s use of the personal seem to come to me most “naturally” from what Richard Miller has described as “years of training in the nervous system of academic life” (“Response” 222). First, slotting both Royster and myself as Persons of Color, I might praise her for using her own experiences to call on White academics to listen more seriously to those of Us directly oppressed by racism. Or, second, I might use her status as a Chair of CCCC to question her authority to and motives for speaking about her experiences of having been silenced. Or, third, I might dismiss her writing as trite for merely echoing voices of other canonized Authors of Color, especially those most vocal in critiquing various forms of cultural imperialism and celebrating the hybridity of African American artistic and literary endeavors.

All three reactions could be used to deny a challenge Royster’s writing poses for readers like myself. Royster’s essay insists on reminding me that I am a “stranger” to African American experiences and voices in spite of my having been government certified as “of color.” As Pat Parker reminds me with great flare and humor in a poem titled “For the white person who wants to know how to be my friend”:

The first thing you do is to forget that i’m Black.

Second, you must never forget that i’m Black.

You should be able to dig Aretha,
but don’t play her every time i come over.

And if you decide to play Beethoven—don’t tell me
his life story. They made us take music appreciation too.

Eat soul food if you like it, but don’t expect me
to locate your restaurants
or cook it for you.

And if some Black person insults you,
 mugs you, rapes your sister, rapes you,
 rips your house or is just being an ass—
 please, do not apologize to me
 for wanting to do them bodily harm.
 It makes me wonder if you're foolish.

And even if you really believe Blacks are better lovers than
 whites—don't tell me. I start thinking of charging stud fees.

In other words—if you really want to be my friend—*don't*
 make a labor of it. I'm lazy. Remember.

Like Parker's poem, Royster's account makes me feel that, give or take a proper noun here or there, I have often experienced racism in the same way as the writer. At the same time, it also reminds me to both forget and never forget that the writer has been socially placed and chosen to name herself as "Black." It asks me to acknowledge the differences as well as the similarities between the writer's situations and mine, that friendship or deeper understanding across racism is something that can only grow out of shared refusal to essentialize one another and shared commitment to combat all systems of oppression.

Responding to these texts as a person of color, I need to keep in mind that although racism is at the heart of slavery, orientalism, and xenophobia, these institutions have not targeted "blacks" and "Asian immigrants" in the same way in U.S. history. Further, as bell hooks cogently points out, power has not been equally distributed across people labeled "blacks" and "third world elites" within the academy (21, 25). For instance, the experiences and voices of African Americans, and especially of female African Americans, have been consistently muted in postmodern critiques of essentialism (26). Therefore, we need to take care that the effort to de-essentialize individual and cultural identity is never separated from serious considerations of the collective experiences and visions of oppressed social groups. In other words, I need to re-read Royster's essay as someone placed "outside of the immediacy" (33) of the African American community and therefore, as someone not only desiring to but also needing to learn to listen more "respectfully and responsibly" to the experiences and voices she invokes (36).

The key here is "responsibly," which I interpret to mean to take up the responsibility of acknowledging that Royster addresses me as both a "stranger" and as someone who shares her commitment to advancing deeper understanding across cultural and institutional divides. It means that I need to confront the fact that, when reading Royster's critique of the

misconduct of “strangers,” I would find it easier to either deny entirely or dwell solely on my “outsider” status. Learning to listen responsibly also means that I take more seriously the fact that Royster spends the majority of her essay describing her effort to choose her actions, to look at what she can do, and to choose not to be distracted or consumed by the rage, fear, or frustration resulting from her experiences of being repeatedly not heard or believed. Part of the “litany of evidence” she forges out of her personal experience is the struggle involved in learning to separate what she calls “the sound of the genuine within” from “the distractions and permeating noise outside of myself” (36). Approaching the metaphor of within/outside in essentialist terms, I could interpret Royster to mean by “within” an essence automatically granted only to those born into her home culture. Thus, I could retreat to defensiveness. Reading responsibly, however, means that I examine the ways in which Royster’s essay contests essentialist notions of identity. This in turn tunes me in to the ways in which Royster re-searches her home culture for voices which testify to both the need for and possibility of acting in ways which are “genuine” to—remain “within”—the commitment to advancing deeper understanding across cultural and institutional divides.

I use the word “research” because Royster is both deliberate and rigorously principled when searching and re-searching for the sound of “the genuine within.” For instance, she invokes from the neighborhood where she grew up the concept of “home training” because it underscores the reality that point of view matters and that we must be trained to respect points of view other than our own (32). And she invokes African American philosophers, writers, critics, and musicians who inspire her to raise her voice in the interest of clarity and accuracy (34), to speak without clenching her teeth (36), and to move with dexterity across cultural boundaries (37). At the same time, she is critical of attitudes and behaviors among “community members” which might impede her effort to enact her commitment—she is vigilant toward the “noise outside” (36) potentially coming from within the community. For instance, Royster takes from her “home place” the teaching, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (33) to complicate her academic belief in “the principle of the right to inquiry and discovery” (31). And she is “deliberately reciprocal” when using this hybrid standard as “the sound of the genuine within.” She uses it to remind not only “strangers” to act more “respectfully and responsibly” but also “community members” to “get over our tendencies to be too possessive and to resist locking ourselves into the tunnels of our own visions and direct experience” (36).

Hers is a research procedure for what West calls “jazz freedom fighters” (150). It is a mode of improvisation sustained by the tension between a

protean, fluid, and flexible disposition towards reality and a suspicion of all either/or viewpoints, dogmatic pronouncements, or supremacist ideologies. It gives serious consideration to the collective experiences and visions of her home place but refuses to put that culture either on a pedestal or in the gutter. Rather, it subjects all policing of borders to continual questions and criticism. Royster calls the African American community “hers” not only because she was born into it, grew up in it, and cares deeply about it but also because it is the “historical place” from which she finds sustenance for enacting her commitment to advance deeper understanding across social and professional divisions. It is a historical place which offers experiences and voices on how to make this committed self the “genuine within” and to do so with perennial hope against hope in the face of the most unfair and inhumane circumstances. So one dimension of the “personal testimony” her article offers is the need to actively research those voices within the African American community which can help us combat “permeating noise” distracting us from our commitment.

Royster states at the beginning of her essay that one of her intentions for using “experiential data” she shares “with many” is to “build credibility” and offer “a litany of evidence from which to call for transformation in theory and practice” (30). In my vocabulary, “litany” stands either for that meaningless chant (in Latin) at the Catholic cathedral in Shanghai my mother attended when I was growing up, or for a style of presentation deemed monotonous and longwinded. To work against such an “instinctive” understanding of the term, I need to consider seriously why Royster has chosen to link her voice with a form of recitation, as the dictionary puts it, consisting of a number of invocations and responses which are the same in succession. Is this her way of reminding herself and us of the responsibility to reiterate those invocations and responses which are “absolutely necessary” if we are to achieve deeper understanding across divisions? Necessary because these are the very voices which have been consistently muted by racism and its interlocking divisions? Necessary because the history of the African American community bears witness to the fact that this “litany of evidence” against oppression could never be stopped and must never be allowed to be stopped? Necessary because it has sustained African American jazz freedom fighters through the past and the present, enabling the collective to speak out with hope and courage under the most horrific circumstances? Necessary because it can help black woman intellectuals like Royster “understand much more clearly the wisdom of” the tradition of African American women philosophers, theorists, and historians—and, thus, more actively confront the “deep disbelief” she and others continue to face in their efforts to build on that tradition (33–35, 36)? Litanies are never mere reproductions but always

improvisations because neither the contexts nor the participants involved stay the same. For what purpose is the person employing which form of “litany,” out of whose tradition, when, where, to invoke whom and to call on whom? Royster’s writing asks me to work on this question when responding to her voice and the voices she invokes in her essay.

Learning to focus on both the commitment I share with these voices and the differences in our worlds and experiences is the only way I can learn to understand more and make more useful connections with such a “litany of evidences.” Vigilance towards the possibility of my “touring”—“violating”—these texts is absolutely necessary for my own interest as well as that of the writers. It is an ongoing and often taxing process. But if my aim in listening is to end oppression rather than accrue cultural capital, then making myself subject to questioning and criticism is preferable to avoiding contact. These writers urge me to stay on the line and listen, respectfully and responsibly. For these are the sounds of the historical place I hope to reach. To get there, I must work harder to understand and connect with the hope and courage as well as vision and analysis they offer.

Instance Two: Critical Exchanges across Racial Divisions

In this section, I revise my initial reactions to an essay titled “The Nervous System” by Richard Miller, which appeared in *College English* within a month of the publication of Royster’s essay in *CCC*. In his essay, Miller uses moments of personal crisis to argue for the need to “excavat[e] bodily responses for material evidence of the ways culture is present in the writer’s very act of experiencing the composing process and in the reader’s responses to the writer’s text” (272–73). Like Royster, Miller argues for the importance of “learning how to listen better to others” (285) and he marks visceral reaction as a site for revising our professional and personal circumstances in the interest of constructing “a more humane and hospitable lifeworld” (285).

Miller offers rich insights and strategies on resisting various essentialist abuses of the personal. He introduces the “body” into discussions of language, power, and subjectivity. He insists on the fluidity and irreducible specificity of self and culture. He offers an elegant unpacking of Foucault and Bourdieu, a cogent critique of various trendy abuses of the personal in composition journals, conferences, and classrooms, and an intricate weaving of the professional and personal around moving accounts of his father’s struggle against self-annihilation and of his own effort to grasp the overwhelming grief he experienced when assigned to compose a poem about his past. His article reminds us to take more seriously the experiences and insights of people confronting “personal crises” which are not immediately

explicable through social categories, rendering a genuine *tour de force* on how to talk about differences and power without resorting to the litany of race, gender, class, and sex.

However, I have been reluctant to acknowledge the real contribution this article brings to conversations on the politics of the personal because I have had reservations about two rhetorical moves in the text. One move appears in Miller's reading of Cornel West's essay on "Nihilism in Black America." In that essay, West makes this statement: "If cultures are, in part, what human beings create (out of antecedent fragments of other cultures) in order to convince themselves not to commit suicide, then black foremothers and forefathers are to be applauded" (24). When citing this statement, Miller trims it down to read "cultures are, in part, what human beings create (out of antecedent fragments of other cultures) in order to convince themselves not to commit suicide" (283). Thus, a statement applauding the history of black America's success before the 1970s in maintaining "the lowest suicide rate in the United States" (West 24) becomes a "remarkable postulate" that "the threat of self-annihilation is ever-present and that the work of culture is to sustain an ongoing battle against this threat" (Miller 283). I have been troubled by this citation practice. For while it highlights a common challenge facing all human beings working to sustain a self and a culture, it risks losing sight of what "the history of black America" has to offer us on how to combat self-annihilation in a culture where deep economic, cultural, and political problems have been allowed to fester for decades (West 158). The second troubling rhetorical move in the essay is Miller's tendency to explicitly describe only those who are "black" as having racial identities, without similarly marking or considering his own racial identity.

I want to affirm Miller's effort to link our socially-constructed "nervous system" to the politics of the personal and to the revision process, but I also want to call into question these two rhetorical moves. To critically affirm Miller's work, I need to join his efforts to combat the conventions of attack/counter-strike ("Response" 222). One convention dominating critical exchange would be to treat the two rhetorical moves I've identified as indices of the writer's political intents—to use my knowledge of the writer's skin color and marital status to slot his motives as White, Heterosexual, and thus, automatically suspect. A second convention would be to treat these moves as evidence of the writer's intellectual limitations, of his failure to reflect on and revise his own culturally shaped reading and writing habits in ways he is calling on others to do. A third convention would be to keep my reservations private out of three related fears. There is the fear of intense rage, distrust, indignation, and defensiveness charging any critical exchanges over matters of racism between persons of different skin

colors. There is also the fear that my criticisms might be perceived as aiming to undercut Miller's work and be used as such by others in the field, damaging the very sort of coalition-building I am interested in promoting. And then there is the fear of exposing myself to retaliation from writers I admire because of the sharpness of their viewpoints and style.

The principles of critical affirmation ask me to get beyond these traps by considering my responsibility as a reader: What can I do other than authorizing or discrediting the writer's version? What can I do other than working from a fear of abuse or a fear of retaliation? One route is to accent the yearning I share with Miller for agency and for a more humane and hospitable life-world (285). Starting from this shared yearning can only increase our vigilance towards oversights in our practices. First, we might approach the two rhetorical moves in terms of not only our shared yearning but also, our need to confront the paradox of our privileges when enacting such yearning. Second, instead of treating each rhetorical move as simply a matter of good or bad political intentions, or of strong or weak intellectual capabilities, we might focus attention on the specific social, historical circumstances shaping our intentions and capacities and constraining our attempts to enact those intentions and capacities. And third, instead of springing either to the attack or defense, we might conduct honest discussions on the problems facing us and on helping one another live up to our announced goals. I'll point to two such problems to explore what such a discussion might look like.

Problem One: The Politics of Citation—that is, the Ways in which the Paradox of Privilege Mediates How We Interpret and Invoke the Words of Others

As Royster's essay suggests, the academic convention of citation is a means of not only choosing the voices one listens to and speaks in the company of but also an occasion for re-searching the experience and insights represented. Therefore, citations are always partial readings on at least two levels. A citation is subjective: It is subject to the material conditions of production, including such restrictions as the length or main focus of the article the person doing the citation is writing. And a citation is provisional: It marks one moment in that person's ongoing relation with a text and thus, a point of departure for continuing revision. Miller's article calls on us to work on this second level of partiality by promoting revision over recitation and reproduction and by linking that work to the nervous system. Royster's article calls on scholars like Miller and myself to revise our citation practices with the knowledge that racism has placed us "outside" the immediacy of "Black America" and with the knowledge that we yearn nevertheless to stay "within" a commitment to jazz freedom fighting. Instead of treating Miller's

citation of West as an “oversight” unique to Miller, I need to examine our shared need to confront that paradox when both of us attempt to read and write against the forces of racism. A Chinese saying comes to mind: “Those standing on the side enjoy a clearer vision of the situation than those caught in action.” Thus, I need to review not only Miller’s but also my own citation practice. And I need to explore alternatives to our citation practices as a person caught in action rather than as a mere bystander.

Looking back, it seems that Miller’s citation bothered me partially because it had turned what I took to be a statement concerning the history and reality of an oppressed social group into a general statement concerning all cultures and peoples. I was worried that such a move might keep us from looking, as West puts it, into “what *race* matters have meant to the American past and how... much *race* matters in the American present” (xvi). However, I had not turned the critical gaze on my own action. I had not gone on to examine the extent to which I might have substituted the word “racially oppressed social groups” for the word “black” when reading West’s statement. I too need to confront the extent to which the paradox of my own privileges in matters of racism mediates my reading of West.

One effort to address the partiality of my citation practices involves tackling my own discomfort with some of West’s wording in the paragraphs leading to the statement Miller cites from “Nihilism in Black America.” West applauds “the genius of our black foremothers and forefathers” for building “traditions for black surviving and thriving under usually adverse New World conditions” of exile and enslavement, traditions consisting of black religious and civic institutions of families, neighborhoods, schools, churches, mosques (23–24). West depicts these institutions as constituting ways of life and struggle that embodied values of “service and sacrifice, love and care, discipline and excellence” and sustaining “familial and communal networks of support” to preserve hope and meaning and thus, keep alive the possibility of overcoming oppression. Placing the current nihilistic threat to black America in the context of the shattering of such civil institutions, the hegemony of market-inspired corporate enterprise, and white supremacism, West calls for a “politics of conversion” sustained by “a love ethic” which proceeds from those institutions in civil society still vital enough to promote self-worth and self-affirmation (28).

In my previous reading of West’s article, I glossed over these statements because the language of “familial and communal networks” brought out my worst cynicism, leading me to tune out these parts of his argument as more relevant for someone in West’s position than a “writing teacher” like myself. While it is important for me to keep in mind, as Miller advises, that the values and the ways of life West invokes here “do not naturally or automatically translate into” meaningful pedagogical practices, it is equally

important, as he also urges, that I explore my discomfort “as a site where my own cultural assumptions express themselves as a naturally experienced sense of distaste” (283). Approaching my discomfort in terms of the paradox of my privilege, I might map the specificity of my own experiences of neighborhood, school, religious, and family institutions on both sides of the Pacific. When growing up in China, for instance, I had been exposed to “communal networks” such as neighborhood committees which used an ethic of love, service, and sacrifice to inculcate a sentimental celebration of uniformity, while over here, I often feel entrapped in a “familial” network promoting class elitism and Chinese xenophobia.

To confront the predispositions resulting from such experiences, I have reread West’s statements concerning the distinctive genius of black foremothers and forefathers. Instead of simply undercutting Miller’s citation practices, I use it as a point of departure for confronting oversights in my own reading of West’s argument. To revise Miller’s citation of West’s statement would therefore involve not only re-inserting West’s reference to the black foremothers and forefathers, but also combating my own tendency to conflate the history of all racially oppressed groups. I need to learn how to take seriously what seems to me the sometimes sentimental vocabulary of West’s discussions of how “humble freedom fighters” might invoke the history of black America’s struggle against nihilistic threat and for what purpose (31). Using Morrison’s *Beloved* as a point of reference, West calls for a “subversive memory” of “the *best* of one’s past without romantic nostalgia” (29–30, my italics). He defines the “best” in terms of a “loving and critical affirmation,” one which never loses sight of the structural conditions shaping the sufferings and lives of people but also openly confronts their self-destructive and inhumane actions. It aims to usher forth “humble freedom fighters” who stay on the ground among “the toiling everyday people” to generate a sense of agency among a downtrodden people (31).

With these statements in mind, I re-search the relevance for writing teachers like myself of the kind of “subversive memory,” “love ethics,” and institutional network of support West promotes. To begin with, a deep sense of meaninglessness, despair, and lovelessness prevails across the boundaries of class, gender, race, etc. in the present U.S., within and outside the academy. Even though and exactly because the threat of nihilism experienced by each of us is not informed by shared circumstances, the experiences and voices of black freedom fighters in the past and the present offer insights to the rest of us on how to sustain a self and a culture in the least humane and hospitable life-world. Secondly, these experiences and voices pose an alternative model of individual agency to counter two tendencies in certain versions of postmodern theory and discourse. The first is the tendency to conflate totality—collective political unity—with totalitarianism, where

uniformity and unanimity are imposed from above. The second is the tendency to overlook the radical difference between a repudiation of the idea that there is a black, feminine, gay, or working class “essence” and a recognition of the collective plight, experience, and history of individual oppressed social groups, and a need for freedom fighters to find the links between such collective histories (Allen, Elliott, hooks 29, Lunsford, Waugh 328–33, West 21). Re-searching the history of black America’s battle against nihilistic threat can help us better grasp the importance of experience and history in the struggle for individual agency. It can also yield insights on how to sustain a self-affirmation which is “fueled by the concern of others” (West 29) and thus, a subjectivity understood in relational, intersubjective terms and a voice whose authority does not depend on “mastery over” (hooks 25, Sedgwick 266, Waugh 338). It could help us to become “humble” jazz freedom fighters, teachers and students who promote individuality in order to sustain and increase the creative tension with the group, a tension grounded in the collective project of struggling against oppression.

Problem Two: The Poverty of Language Available for Capturing the Conflictual, Fluid, and Protean Nature of Individual Self with Accuracy, Precision, and Elegance

For instance, when I state “I am a female Chinese immigrant” and when I say “I am a heterosexual,” I know I don’t mean the same thing by using the same copula. With the first statement, I mean to indicate my social placement, my self-identification, and my ideological stance—my interest in fighting discrimination against all “Chinese immigrants.” The unity among these three levels of being is easily captured by the single verb *am*. When I say “I am heterosexual,” I intend to acknowledge my social placement and my self-identification. But the statement leaves ambiguous my ideological stance towards homophobia. It does not immediately make clear my concern to fight my own witting or unwitting complicity with it. As illustrated by my presentation of this example, I have difficulty describing my multiple and conflictual relations with various oppressive forces without sounding “clumsy” or “jargonistic.”

To absolve myself from the responsibility of creating jazzier representations of the social, structural dimensions of individual subjectivity, I often retreat behind the heard-this/done-that approach. Because I fear being labeled predictable, trite, and didactic, I find seductive the assumption that we do not need yet another attempt at grounding the individual and private in the social and historical. I am also hungry for a quick escape from a fatigue brought on by the fear that I have committed myself to a way of life—fighting oppression—in a culture structured to frustrate the slightest of such attempts. I feel overburdened by my responsibility to speak against

matters of racism and sexism. I have occasionally shared the anger Sucheng Chan expresses when stating: "After all, my accomplishments are many, yet I was not asked to write about any of them" other than about "being a physically handicapped Asian American woman" (162). When I try to follow the examples of writers like Chan and choose not to let such unfair distribution of duties distract me from my determination to use any opportunity and means to speak against such social forces, I nevertheless yearn for an immediate and absolute release from my own political commitments. Out of my experience along the racist and sexist divides, I dream of, live for the day when those of us wittingly or unwittingly benefiting from homophobia and economic injustice would not, could not, stop acting against these systems, so that those targeted by them could devote their energy to a whole range of other issues they are also interested in and qualified to address. But I get depressed thinking how unlikely it is that this dream will ever materialize. That is because I know my own fear of exposing my own inadequacy—lack of knowledge and self-reflexivity—and thus, my hesitance to speak about and against matters of homophobia and economic injustice. As a result, I enjoy assuming that in the current U.S. academy, there is indeed a pocket of readers and writers in English studies where, as some critics have maintained, opposition to oppression is something which can go without saying (see, for example, Levin's diatribe against "new political critics"). I would like to believe there is no longer a need to improvise on how we talk about matters of homophobia, economic inequality, racism, etc. when representing individual subjectivity.

I become most acutely aware of this problem—the need for improvisation and my urge to skirt around it—when trying to enact my commitment to open-ended revision of self and culture, a commitment I share with Miller. From the perspective of such a commitment, for Miller to identify himself as "white" and "heterosexual" could risk reinforcing the residual power of social determinism in our approaches to agency and social change and thus de-emphasize the will to and power of an "imaginative transformation of reality" Miller and I are intent on promoting (284). To identify some of the persons he represents in the article as "black," "poor," or "gay" is necessary if he is to acknowledge their social placements when speaking against systematic oppressions and also if he is to respect their self-identifications. To not do so would have been wrong. In fact, due to the automatic "outing" of my sexual and racial identifications by my wedding band and skin color and the "invisibility" of my privileges in matters of racism and homophobia, I have not always taken seriously the "labor of the body and the emotions" involved in the self-naming of gay and lesbian students and teachers (see Elliott 694). Like Miller, I see it as my responsibility to explicitly acknowledge their social placement as well as self-naming. At the same time,

given the privilege of normality—"invisibility"—already granted to heterosexuals in today's U.S., I worry that such a move could work to further mark these students and teachers as Others.

To confront this problem, I try to accompany my representation of gay and lesbian students and teachers with efforts to "out"—render visible and wrestle with—my own privileges and complicities in matters of homophobia and its interlocking systems of oppressions. I use the word "outing" self-consciously to call attention to the potential use and abuse of this type of discursive practice for jazz freedom fighting. In "The Nervous System," Miller tells of a seminar where two self-identified "gay teachers," a graduate instructor and a "veteran" brought in by Miller for the occasion, started a discussion on the benefits and dangers of "coming out" in the classroom (278–79). Then, a "number of instructors took the opportunity to deploy the structure of the coming out narrative to tell their own stories" (279). Finally, another instructor "highjacked the narrative structure and 'came out' to the class as a...Christian" (280). Miller uses this chain of stories to remind us that "the solicitation of one kind of personal narrative simultaneously prohibits the production of other kinds of narratives. To have the right kind of personal experience is what matters, for this is what allows one to accrue cultural capital within a given institutional context" (280). Given such a historical reality, we need to be very cautious about how, why, where, and when we out our privileges.

The emphasis has always to be on only using such outings to *accompany* our efforts to listen carefully and responsibly to others' stories of exclusion. I can imagine such a discussion following the chain of "coming out" stories Miller describes: All present share the responsibility to "out" themselves along lines of spirituality and sexuality. Those of us who view ourselves as non-religious and not-gay would take the responsibility to deliberate on how to present our sexuality and spirituality in the classroom, especially how to make visible the privilege of "invisibility" conferred on us by the different histories of homophobia and attitudes to religion within and outside the academy. All present would have to consider the paradox of one's privilege along other lines of division, including those caused by racism and economic injustice, even if and especially because these issues seem to appear peripheral, even irrelevant to our lived experience and to that discussion. Furthermore, we would remind one another that the goal of "coming out" with one's experiences of exclusion, inclusion, complicity, and resistance is to become jointly responsible for a critical investigation of and intervention in the historical realities represented by the chain of stories. In short, the why of story telling—jazz freedom fighting—must dictate our assessment of the how and the what of story telling, of who has the "right story" and "the right to speak." There is

no intrinsic, universal “good” to personal narrative, to either narratives of personal oppression or narratives of the paradox of one’s privilege. Rather, whether or how the genre might be used to advance the goal of ending oppression can and must only be explored within the contingencies of who is speaking beside whom, when, and where.

I highlight the motive to “accompany” because I agree with Miller that our training in the academic nervous system has better prepared us to vie for individual voice and authority at the expense of our collective interest in ending oppression than to rigorously sustain the tension between the two. Yet, the tension between individual agency and collective goals of ending oppression is at the heart of critical affirmation. Without that tension, reflection on one another’s paradox of privilege would turn into mere gripe sessions for and by the power full, where recitations of our privileged locations are used to displace rather than accompany responsible re-searching of the experiences and insights of the powerless. Worse yet, narratives of one’s Whiteness, Maleness, Middle Classness, or Heterosexuality could be used to justify rather than confront one’s ideological stances and to protect academic turf and privileges from (the perceived and feared) invasions of the Other. Attention to one another’s paradox of privilege could also be used by the power full to irresponsibly dismiss accounts of oppression and exclusion by the power less under the pretense that the Other has not sufficiently scrutinized her own complicity with various systems. In short, reflections and revisions of one’s privileged social placements must be used to bring to the foreground rather than push back and out of hearing the histories, experiences, and voices of oppressed social groups.

Instance Three: Representing Asian Immigrants

Confronting the paradox of my privilege can also help me revise how I understand and use my own experience as a government-certified Asian Immigrant. Here is a story I like to tell: It took place at the Des Moines airport a few years ago. I was dropping my teenaged nephew on a flight back to Seattle. I had brought along a friend visiting from China to give her a sense of the city’s physical layout. The security guard refused to let my nephew carry on a gift-wrapped, hand-carved, miniature oak slingshot he had purchased from a store which specializes in toys for corporate executives.

When recounting this incident, I have usually focused on the guard’s racism and xenophobia: he had my nephew pegged as an Asian gang youth and my friend as my nephew’s non-English-speaking immigrant mother. That is, I have treated it as yet another illustration of my lived experience as an Asian Immigrant. But I now think I need to also call attention to the fact that the security guard’s unfair treatment of my nephew stood out in my

memory partly because it jarred with my expectations. I had grown accustomed to and taken for granted the friendly smiles I had received from the same security guards, when my bags had also harbored scissors and gift-wrapped letter openers. This does not, however, mean I have not experienced the special treatment on reserve for Asian “foreigners”: being talked to in a slow and loud voice or having the answers to my questions addressed to my native-speaking companions rather than me. But, it does mean that because I appear “educated,” “professional,” and “well-assimilated”—which in Des Moines would make me not Vietnamese, Thai, or Laotian—I have been routinely exempted from all the prejudice on special reserve for Asian Refugees.

To practice critical affirmation, I need to confront my privileged class and ethnic ranking within the Asian immigrant community. My initial accounts of the airport incident focused on characteristics which marked my nephew and my friend as visible Others but overlooked the characteristics which marked me as “normal.” Class privilege is a consistent oversight in my self-representation, even though I have developed teaching strategies to help my students analyze the social sources and consequences of such oversights and to confront them when reading and writing. For instance, in my essay “From Silence to Words,” my class underprivilege is explored in terms of my “bourgeois” status at a school dominated by the official discourse of Chinese Communism. However, this experience of exclusion was not linked to my class privileges at home while growing up, where education had put my parents and me *upstairs*, over my nanny and other servants. As Pierre Bourdieu has argued, the fluency resulting from class privileges is often expressed as a way of being in one’s body—an expression which, I’d like to add, is much more difficult to revise because it can be more readily and invisibly transported across borders and contexts. Even though the specific institutional context in which I now work is drastically different from my family situation when growing up, this class fluency remains a part of my cultural capital in spite of my conscious commitment to resist class privilege. How to work against thoughts and embodied reactions shaped by my privileged class background remains a critical challenge.

This is further complicated since class matters in the U.S. are intricately interwoven with global power struggles. I am placed by birthright on the side of the powerful within the Asian immigrant community by both Chinese xenophobia and Western orientalism. To many in today’s United States, countries like Korea or Vietnam remain mere crossroads between the U.S. and the “major” Asian forces: China and Japan. As Elaine H. Kim points out, when Korean immigrants became the target of violence during the Los Angeles upheavals following Rodney King’s beating, the media solicited Chinese and Japanese but not Korean American views (522, 526). I

am also placed on the side of the powerful as a result of family and educational advantages. Asian women constitute 53% of all textile workers and apparel workers in the U.S., and these workers face daily increasing exposure to fiber particles, dyes, formaldehyde, and arsenic, leading to high rates of byssinosis and respiratory illness (Sze 92). However, this is a world and a body of experience outside my own. Furthermore, issues such as homophobia in Asian American communities and violence against Asian women—domestic violence, sexual harassment, sexual assault (see Chiang et al.)—often appear abstract and peripheral to me.

To speak with authority as an Asian Immigrant, I need not only to examine my attitudes towards the experiences and voices of the power less within my people but also, how I revise these attitudes in my day to day practices. This kind of revision has to begin at the most local and private level. For instance, one of the visceral reactions I have inherited from the racism and class elitism of home is an intense aversion towards hairdos or dress codes which would “make you look like someone from Chinatown” or “like a Korean grocery store owner!” I have been trying to fight against such prejudices when interacting with other Asian Immigrants, both those who appear to fit these stereotypes as well as those who act wittingly and unwittingly to perpetuate the prejudice. Yet, the process is extremely taxing because such prejudices are literate in the sense that they involve both language and reading/writing habits which have been internalized through years of home training and schooling. And, further, they are seldom publicly verbalized and thus rarely subjected to the kind of scrutiny which our training leads us to give to written texts. So they are prone to produce lapses in our literacy practices, creating what we often refer to as “unfortunate oversights” in how we pursue the goals of critical affirmation.

This challenge is further compounded by the fact that we live in a culture hungry for quick solutions and thirsty for overnight cures for deep economic, cultural, and political problems. Even though as a teacher and scholar, I have joined others in promoting a deliberative discourse when addressing these problems in everyday life, when confronted with my own and others’ prejudices towards other Asian Immigrants, I seldom take the time and energy to enact this discourse. For instance, in recent years there have been several gang-related shootings at two Asian food markets and an Asian restaurant in the Des Moines area. After the incidents, whenever I enter these businesses, I fear becoming the victim of both gang and police brutality—that is, I fear being mistaken either by the gang members for the Asians they’ve come to coerce or by the police for the gang members they’ve come to prosecute. Out of a concern to support the store owners caught in the crossfire, I have tried not to let that fear keep me from continuing my patronage. However, my necessary vigilance towards gang and

police brutality often works to impede my concern to combat my prejudice against the Chinatown-Korean-Grocery-Store-Owner look. I find myself constantly using such stereotypes to check on the other Asian Americans around me, especially the young males among them. And I catch myself using the stereotypes to “protect” myself and my young Asian American relatives and friends. That is, I silently censor our appearance to make sure that our educational and professional status remains immediately identifiable, clearly distinguishing Us from the Other Asian Immigrants.

In trying to put in writing this lapse in my effort to combat oppression, I hope to make the need to confront such lapses a central part of my work as a teacher and scholar. As Ball and Lardner have argued, teachers must learn to treat their personal experiences of crossing borders in “extra-professional” sites as “occasions for knowledge-making” of our own culturally influenced dispositions towards differences in literacy (482). We have developed writing and revision assignments to urge students to turn such personal experiences into occasions for knowledge-making. But we cannot ask our students to trust us to help them confront the paradox of their privilege if we cannot trust ourselves to do so with equal rigor. It is absolutely necessary that we engage in such writing and rewriting, utilizing in our own literacy practices the expertise and knowledge we apply to the literacy practices of our students.

Although for purposes of illustration I have been presenting this type of writing in a scholarly publication, I want to make it clear that I am not advocating this sort of forum as the only appropriate one for this type of exercise. Writing pedagogy has taught us a variety of forums for critically reflective and collaborative writing, such as private journals and electronic bulletin boards. What might be the appropriate forums for teachers and scholars to engage in such writing so that we might help one another revise our literacy practices in not only print form but also in our private thoughts and feelings during and outside the contexts of scholarly exchanges?

In writing this paper, I have maintained that the actual act of writing is an important means for reflecting and revising the paradox of one’s privileges. It helps to put one’s self—especially one’s private and day to day thoughts, feelings, and bodily reactions—on the line for personal and public scrutiny. It can initiate exchanges in which colleagues—bystanders and persons in action—could become coinvestigators of not only the problems needing to be posed but also how to go about addressing them. I have emphasized my sense that in spite of the rich insights emerging in the field on how to help our students practice fluency in critical affirmation, we cannot fully benefit from such insights in our teaching if we don’t also use these insights to rework the self in our own “scholarly” activities. We have to combat teacher illiteracy stemming from our own paradox of privilege.

We need self-education on how we read and write the personal when conducting critical exchanges.

Yet, I suspect that doing so will remain more difficult because we are more invested in it. Within the academic nervous system, scholarly activity remains the primary source of our cultural capital. Critical analysis of oversights in the work of others remains more lucrative than critical reflections on similar oversights in one's own work, on problems facing one another's work, and on how to help one another address these problems. At the same time, "we are at a crucial crossroad in the history of this nation—and we either hang together by combating these forces that divide and degrade us or we hang separately (West 159). One way of "hanging together" would be to practice ways of reading and writing, speaking and listening, in which one's authority comes from one's ability to confront one's own privileges rather than to merely confront the privileges of others.

At the same time, in spite of my conviction on the need for teacher self-education concerning teacher illiteracy on our own paradox of privileges, the question very much at the back of my mind when writing this piece is the specific, privileged, material conditions sustaining the type of reading and writing I am posing. I could afford the time and energy in part because it was first initiated by an invitation to speak at a national conference. I came back and reworked it for another conference and with the intent of placing it in a leading journal. So this essay needs to be scrutinized on not only the extent to which I am practicing the kind of critical affirmation I pose but also the usefulness of such a forum of self-education for teachers and scholars at different institutional locations and at different points of their professional and personal lives. To what extent are my convictions, suspicions, and self-knowledge indicative of the profession in general? What might be the limitations of using the self, and particularly this self, as a point of departure for a "deliberative discourse" on how to practice critical affirmation during scholarly exchange? I hope this essay puts my self on the line so that I might stay on line with voices that matter—that is, voices which can bring us the intelligence, humor, imagination, courage, tolerance, love, respect, and will to meet the challenge of hanging together as we work to end oppression in the twenty-first century.

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