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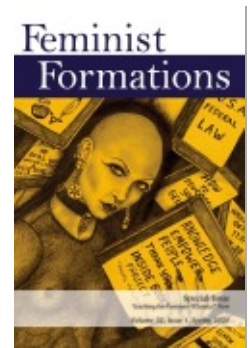
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The Politics of the Personal Essay: Reading Adrienne Rich in the Women's and Gender Studies Classroom

Lindsay Davis

This article explores Adrienne Rich's canonical 1984 speech-turned-essay "Notes toward a Politics of Location" and its utilization as a framework for a required writing assignment in a women's and gender studies introductory course. This essay traces a pedagogical approach to teaching and applying "the personal is political" approach and offers an appraisal of the practice, considering power dynamics surrounding race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and personal background. While Rich's essay remains an important part of the feminist canon, this article argues that it is vital to supplement the piece with more contemporary works that better reflect student experiences today, particularly as a means of interrogating racial and gender privileges. Finally, this article offers a broader exploration of the personal essay as an academic assignment by interrogating pedagogical assumptions, objectives, and methods of assessment.

Keywords: feminist theory / pedagogy / politics of location / Rich, Adrienne / whiteness

As a former adjunct professor at a state university in New England, I taught several sections of "Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies" (WGS 101) to a broad swath of undergraduate students. Like most introductory courses of this nature, it offered a general survey of core concepts, gender and women's history, and intersections with other categories of identity. While this Women's and Gender Studies (WGS) department did not graduate a large number of majors, the introductory course consistently maintained high enrollment numbers and attracted a variety of female, male, and nonbinary students from the humanities,

social science, and STEM fields. For better or worse, academic advisors often encouraged first-year students to register for WGS 101 because it fulfilled a social science and general education requirement. However, the course also acted as a recruitment tool, encouraging interested student to enroll in more advanced classes with topics ranging from feminist theory to queer identities to gender and the media. Unlike my experiences at previous institutions, the classroom was racially, ethnically, economically, and gender diverse, a testament to the diversity of the surrounding area as well as targeted efforts to recruit a range of students.¹

WGS 101 performed a number of functions: it was an accessible introductory class, a consistent academic offering, and, for some, a safe space to explore complex ideas about power and identity.² Across all sections of WGS 101, the course had one mandatory task: a “Politics of Location” essay, a piece of writing modeled after feminist poet and essayist Adrienne Rich’s 1984 academic talk-turned-essay titled “Notes Toward a Politics of Location.” Rich’s original remarks, delivered before an international audience at the Utrecht Summer School of Critical Semiotics, centered on the theme of “Women, Feminist Identity and Society in the 1980s,” attracted academics, writers, theorists, and activists. Conference contributors included Jamaican-American author Michelle Cliff, Chilean legal scholar Cecilia Medina, critical race and gender scholar Philomena Essed, and feminist theorist poet Myriam Díaz-Diocartez. According to organizer Iris Zavala, “the general objective is to present and discuss different modes of existence of women’s texts and feminist identity in political and poetic discourse on the one hand, and to analyse the factors which determine differing relationships between women and society, and which result in specific forms of identity on the other” (1985, 1). In response to criticism of the earlier years of second-wave feminism, a number of conference presenters addressed the problems with universalizing theories of “woman,” feminism, and radical politics and concentrated on topics including human rights in Latin America, everyday experiences with racism, and artistic expression. Though Rich’s piece began as a keynote speech, “Notes” has been memorialized as a foundational feminist essay, appearing in a number of edited collections often assigned in similar introductory courses.³

With this historical and genealogical context in mind, the assignment prompt asked students to write essays about their own politics of location and use Rich’s essay as a model. Drawing on the ways in which my colleagues framed this assignment, I incorporated similar language, asking, “Who are you (i.e., how do you identify yourself to others) and how did you become this person?” The prompt encouraged students to select a key issue (or set of issues) to address, such as class, race, or gender. The assignment also reminded students that Rich’s essay offered a model to draw upon as they constructed their own statements. Anonymized sample essays were later compiled by the department as a means of reviewing the course and students’ performances.

To provide a relevant and logical sequence of readings that would best “speak to” this cornerstone assignment, I perused sample syllabi from earlier iterations of the course and elected to use the suggested edited volume as the primary text. The book covered a number of familiar topics, including the body, sexuality, institutions, modes of violence, and women’s history. A mixture of “high-low” essays gave the tome an approachable feel by placing “classic” pieces by bell hooks, Betty Friedan, and Audre Lorde in conversation with writings by women’s studies students, lyrics from Ani DiFranco and india.arie songs, and forms of personal testimony from WGS students about matters of heterosexism, patriarchy, and racism. Most pieces were relatively short, allowing for multiple pairings and contrasting perspectives on similar topics. However, the text also routinely deployed obsolete terminology such as “transvestite,” lacked updated readings on the finer points of gender as a cultural construction, and failed to include pieces by (or even mere mention of) the originators of intersectional thought and method, such as Anna Julia Cooper, Deborah King, the Combahee River Collective, or Kimberlé Crenshaw (Nash 2019, 6–11). However, the text—if procured used and via an online vendor—was affordable and easily accessible. It may not have been perfect, but it appeared to be a good place to start.

Though newly hired and untenured, I had remarkable departmental support and pedagogical and disciplinary freedom to provide readings to supplement the textbook. I included speeches and essays by Sojourner Truth, Mary Church Terrell, and Ida B. Wells. In an effort to incorporate updated sources on theories of gender identity and construction, I added a definitional essay by Jack Halberstam titled “Gender” and a podcast hosted by the mother of transgender child. In class, I asked students to closely read Sam Killermann’s image of “the genderbread person” to parse out the differences between gender identity, gender expression, anatomical sex, romantic attraction, and sexual attraction.⁴ To combat the dearth of readings on intersectionality, I chose essays by Audre Lorde and Mari Matsuda from the course text that addressed intersectional concerns and leaned heavily on the scholarship of Crenshaw to give theoretical context to the concept. Finally, to introduce contemporary issues and concerns, I incorporated talks and interviews with feminist thinkers like Roxane Gay, Tricia Rose, and Cherríe Moraga, fiercely feminist articles from the recently rebranded *Teen Vogue*, and a variety of podcasts, short films, and newspaper and magazine articles. My pedagogical goals were interdisciplinary, aiming to provide a mix of classic texts, creative pieces, and sources that brought the discipline of WGS into the “real” world.

While this article will not offer a comprehensive critique of Rich’s essay, it will examine “Notes Toward a Politics of Location” as a reading assignment and a model for student writing. First, if the assignment asks students to understand personal experiences as inherently political, what happens when an instructor relies solely on Rich to guide students in this academic exercise? What are the rewards and the risks? I contend that it is not Rich’s argument or method that

creates the potential tension or disconnect; it is the decision to single out this essay in a way that prioritizes the white feminist voice. Moreover, this essay does not necessarily provide the clearest example of a “Politics of Location” essay, particularly in a diverse WGS classroom. The assignment benefits from incorporating a wider range of personal, positional, or “standpoint” texts.⁵ Though they may not be situated specifically as “Politics of Location” essays, a wider range of writing encourages students to see from multiple perspectives rather than pursue an approach that either aligns or opposes Rich’s objective.⁶ Second, this article questions the best way to evaluate personal essays of this nature. Traditional grading schemes and approaches quickly become tenuous, and processes of peer review and assessment have the potential to become uncomfortable. In the later part of the essay, I ask and unpack different ways in which instructors might approach evaluating assignments such as these.

Reading the Essay

In the opening lines of her keynote address, Rich (1994, 211) assured her audience that she offered only “notes without absolute conclusions. This is not a sign of loss of faith or hope. These notes are the marks of a struggle, to keep moving, a struggle for accountability.” Equal parts theoretical analysis and personal essay, Rich’s treatise represented an abstract reflection on the successes and failures of second-wave feminism and her own attempts to locate herself as an American, an activist, and a writer within an imperfect social movement and a complicated global order. She attended to her own privilege and called for a different form of inclusivity and representation in the feminist movement, defining her own politics of location by delving into her identity and experiences as a “a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist” (212). In keeping with her initial description of the lecture, the “plot” meandered, reflecting on topics ranging from her birth to the impact of heterosexism and patriarchy on women to explicit instances of violence perpetrated by the United States on foreign soil. She concluded with a specific reflection on the political, cultural, and literary work of black feminists including Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Lorraine Hansberry, prodding herself to “move outward from the base and center of my feelings, but with a corrective sense that my feelings are not *the* center of feminism” (231). After all, the feminism of 1984 was no longer necessarily concerned with the gender politics of the Miss America pageant, the editorial leadership of *The Ladies’ Home Journal*, or “the problem that has no name” (Dow 2003; Hunter 1990; Friedan 1963). A new set of questions and priorities had emerged for (some) white feminists.

As a rhetorical exercise, “Notes Toward a Politics of Location” offered a number of beneficial writing examples and tools. In keeping with the objective of the conference, Rich moved away from universalizing statements, attitudes, and assumptions. She wrote, “I wrote a sentence just now and x’d it out. In it

I said that women have always understood the struggle against free-floating abstraction even when they were intimidated by abstract ideas. I don't want to write that kind of sentence now, the sentence that begins 'Women have always . . . ' . . . If we have learned anything in these years of late twentieth-century feminism, it's that 'always' blots out what we really need to know" (1994, 214). Rich's revocation of the absolute offered a helpful pedagogical example, steering students away from the dreaded, universalizing statements of "Since the dawn of civilization" or "Scholars have always argued." This method also helped to frame the second part of the assignment: the revision. The physical description of "x-ing" something out and reconsidering an idea offered a tangible example of the need to rewrite and revise.

Rich's essay also refrained from leading with a central thesis or overarching argument, emphasized by her assertion that her words are "the marks of a struggle" (1994, 211). Though it may seem contrary to the argument-centric essays professors often assign across disciplines, this sentiment offered a great deal of potential for my students. Rather than requiring a particular version of a "thesis-based paper," the methodology utilized in "Notes" provided an alternative path to close reading, analysis, and personal examination. Though her essay may have lacked a traditional thesis statement, she imbedded clear markings and signposts in the body of her essay to elaborate on her own relationship to her own identities, often using languid lists to situate herself in real and imagined space. The utilization of simple lists created a rhythmic timbre to the essay, and Rich repeated this literacy device through the piece as a way to suggest a sense of fullness or being overwhelmed. Admittedly, this is often a difficult lesson to teach; students tend to be weary of statements such as "there's no right answer" or "perfect writing does not exist." In today's college classrooms, too often students become occupied with divining the "right" answer rather developing their own approaches to the materials. Rich performed an important kind of fallibility that is—at least in my mind—increasingly important in any type of classroom. Rich positioned her "essay as journey" and, to me, this showcased a strategy for students, a means of escaping the strictures of the five-paragraph essay (Foley 1989, 233). It was a lesson I wanted students to absorb rather than simply parrot—to take advantage of the personal essay format of the assignment to find some reprieve from more traditional schoolwork.

Though Rich could not sever her own ties to the colonial, racist, misogynistic, and violent legacies of her background and country of origin, she set out to acknowledge and work through these inheritances. Rich embarked on this process of recognition of an abstract form of personal location, again, with a number of lists and signposts. Gloria Anzaldúa framed a process like this as an "accounting" of privilege, an effort to de-invisibilize, in particular, her racial and class-based privilege (Anzaldúa 1987). A number of contemporary feminist scholars continue to express an appreciation for her remarks. For Donna Palmtree Pennee (2005, 44), Rich's essay represents "an eloquent, moving, and useful

confession of the limits of white liberal feminism as well as an honest and astute call to continued and differentiated action for a global good.” Indeed, the history of white feminism is littered with writing, scholarship, and activism that is, at best, ignorant of racial and class privilege and, at worse, openly racist (Ortega 2006). In preparation for class discussion, I asked students to list all of Rich’s moments of self-identification. Across sections, they compiled a detailed list: woman, American, white, Jewish, Marxist, (radical) feminist, mother, lesbian, friend, writer, and Western. From there, we discussed how these categories interacted (or did not) and the ways in which she unpacked them (or did not). Admittedly, students struggled to connect her personal markers to a more abstract understanding of her “politics of location.” Was her “location” the sum of her explicitly named identities? What would their own equations look like? Rich—indirectly—answered these questions most clearly when writing on the overlap between her whiteness and femaleness:

The politics of location. Even to begin with my body I have to say that from the outset that body had more than one identity. When I was carried out of the hospital into the world, I was viewed and treated as female, but also viewed and treated as white—by both Black and white people. I was located by color and sex as surely as a Black child was located by color and sex—though the implications of white identity were mystified by the presumption that white people are at the center of the universe. (Rich 1994, 215)

As a teaching tool, Rich’s acknowledgment of her racial, geographic, and academic privilege offered white audiences in particular a means to grapple with their own privilege, at least in theory. However, as described above, her attempted disentanglement was not wholly successful. For one, Rich’s list above does not include “white” as a primary identity category, though she would later identify her body as “[w]hite, female; or female, white. The first obvious, lifelong facts” (215). This interplay between race and gender is indeed a dynamic that Rich played with through the essay. Just two paragraphs later, Rich wrote, “To locate myself in my body means more than understanding what it has meant to me to have a vulva and clitoris and uterus and breasts. It means recognizing this white skin, the places it has taken me, the places it has not let me go” (215–16). Ideally, students are poised to note that Rich understands her gender and sex-assigned-at-birth as one and the same and identify the (contemporary) problems with that logic. Yet, it is the final phrase of the above quote that remains puzzling to me: “the places it has not let me go.” According to Rowe (2005, 19), Rich “constructs her identity as ‘Enlightened White Feminist’ as an *individualized location*. In her failure to interrogate the relational conditions out of which her seeing arises, Rich undercuts the coalitional affectivity of her self-reflexive gesture.” Rowe pushes instead for an approach based on a “feminist politics of relation,” defined as a “deep reflection about the selves we are creating as a function of where we place our bodies, and with whom we build our affective ties” (16).

Yet, for some scholars, this effort was diminished by a number of caveats. When unpacking the notion of “the body,” Rich recounted her own corporeal experiences: “white skin, marked and scarred by three pregnancies, an elected sterilization, progressive arthritis, four joint operations, calcium deposits, no rapes, no abortions, long hours at a typewriter—my own, not in a typing pool—and so forth” (1994, 215). Her word choice actively conflicts, placing words like “scarred” and “sterilization” in opposition to terms that imply more agency, such as “elected,” “no rapes,” and “no abortions.” Just a few paragraphs later, she concluded this section by reflecting on her “white skin, the places it has taken me, the places it has not let me go” (215–16). According to Rowe (2005, 21), “[T]he specificity through which she marks her body articulates its particularity in terms that the bodies of women of color are exposed, and yet reveals the privilege that its white particularity acquires: from her well nourished bones and strong teeth to the control she exercises over her body—from her choice to type to her freedom from rape and forced sterilization. Her speech thus ironically performs a double gesture of both asserting and displacing its own privilege.” This dynamic becomes clearer by drawing on the writing of Black Feminist scholars like Dorothy Roberts, who wrote that “black women’s childbearing in bondage was largely a product of oppression rather than an expression of self-definition and personhood” (1999, 23). In a different sense, the extended time that Rich spent at the helm of her own typewriter represented a multilayered form of privilege: the time, ability, and technology with which to write. Audre Lorde (2007, 116) understood this form of privilege as the result of “unacknowledged class differences.” Lorde painted an equally vibrant picture of the writing process, maintaining that “a room of one’s own may be a necessity for writing prose, but so are reams of paper, a typewriter, and plenty of time” (116).⁷ While Rich could not disentangle each thread of privilege, her attention to a variety of corporeal experiences could have been one place to spend additional time and consideration. In essence, though Rich intended to refrain from assuming a place “at the center,” Rowe looked beyond Rich’s self-critique of the power imbued in whiteness and argued that, in the end, Rich failed to “displace” her own privilege. Though I did not assign Rowe’s article, I did ask students about this tension in Rich’s writing and asked them to reflect on it in their own work.

Writing the Essay

On paper, the assignment appeared simple: write an essay that examines your self-identity. Each semester, approximately 180 students across six sections of WGS 101 completed this assignment. Submissions tended to range from two to three pages, though not all required Rich-specific citations. Though each instructor organized and framed the essay differently, it was generally worth 20 to 30 percent of the student’s final grade. The first iteration was due in the

middle of the semester, and the revised version was due toward the end of the term. According to sample syllabi, most instructors conducted a peer-review writing workshop for the “Politics of Location” essay and spent additional time discussing the scope of the assignment and strategies for revision.

To provide more structure to the prompt, I encouraged students to identify their own personal “lists,” a set of identity-based or experiential aspects that shaped their respective locations. Race, gender, and sexuality were obvious choices, and, in theory, students could utilize readings from the syllabus to inform this mode of analysis, drawing on selections from bell hooks’s *Feminism Is for Everybody*, Judith Lorber’s *Paradoxes of Gender*, and the invaluable anthology *But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*, edited by Akasha (Gloria T.), Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith. Essays were due twelve days after the “Politics of Location” unit, in theory offering ample time for absorption of the material, individual meetings, and the revision of drafts. As a second (and separate) assignment, the essay underwent a required revision at the end of the semester. In addition to the revision, students wrote a brief reflection on the changes made as a way to signal that thoughtful modifications had *actually* been made as well as to demonstrate the import of revision as an academic and personal practice.

At its heart, this type of assignment is not unique to my department or to the field of women’s and gender studies. Students are frequently asked to reflect on personal experiences and interpret how aspects of their identities have shaped their lives. According to Susan Stanford Friedman (2001, 22), essays like this reflect a type of “locational feminism” and can work to cultivate a form of feminist theory that “refer[s] to the *position* one occupies, the *standpoint* from which one speaks, and the *location* within which one’s agency negotiates.” In the natural and social sciences—and increasingly in literary theory—this approach is framed as standpoint theory, a method based in the assumption that “knowledge is socially constructed and, therefore, our positions in society produce understandings of the world similar to *and* different from the understandings of others” (John 2011, 95). The belief that “the personal is political” is built into feminist activism as well as the founding of women’s studies as a discipline. To give context and structure to the assignment, I spent significant time recounting the history of the founding of women’s studies as a discipline and provided examples of how scholars and activists used “the personal” as a tool of education, of solidarity, and of resistance. Examples included excerpts from (my mother’s original copy of) *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1973) by the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, Combahee River Collective’s “A Black Feminist Statement” (1977), Audre Lorde’s “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” (1984), and, of course, Carol Hanisch’s eponymous essay, “The Personal Is Political” (1970).

The first semester that I taught “Notes” and discussed the assignment with the class, I allowed the essay to stand alone and explicitly labeled the day’s

topic as “Politics of Location.” I envisioned the first weeks of the course as a preparation for reading Rich’s essay and writing the “Politics of Location” essay. Class discussions focused on the history of “the personal is political” approach and other methods of feminist consciousness raising, utilizing the readings cited above as well as essays by Akasha (Gloria T.) Hull and Barbara Smith, and another essay by Rich, titled “Claiming an Education.” I also introduced storytelling as a methodology intimately associated with Critical Race Theory (CRT) and drew on examples from the work of Patricia J. Williams and Cheryl I. Harris to illuminate this tactic. By providing a range of examples of personal anecdotes—and the relational analyses that accompanied those stories—I aimed to demonstrate the power of the overall approach while still relying on “Notes” to perform most of the heavy lifting.

In the “Politics of Location” lecture, I explained the political climate of the 1980s, discussing the rising antifeminist rhetoric of the era, spurred by the rise of the Moral Majority, the continued pushback surrounding the Equal Rights Amendment by Phyllis Schlafly and Jerry Falwell, and the election of Ronald Reagan (Critchlow 2005). The timing of Rich’s speech provided an interesting snapshot of this allegedly “awkward” moment in feminist history and likely represented a welcome shift in white feminist academic conversations during this time. Originally framed as a period of decline by scholars like Alice Echols, Ellen Willis, and Barbara Ryan, more recent scholarship, particularly the work of Becky Thompson (2010), frames the mid-1970s, 1980s, and 1990s as the “height” of second-wave feminism, thus reconfiguring our identification and understanding of what constitutes a “classic” feminist text of this particular movement (46–48). Yet, this reframing is not the result of the work of Rich *per se*, but rather a more concerted and intense recognition of the radical feminist and antiracist work of the era pursued by groups like the Combahee River Collective, Asian Sisters, Women of All Red Nations, National Black Feminist Organization, and Third World Women’s Alliance (Thompson 2010, 41–46). I situated Rich’s essay within the cultural context of the moment in an effort to reveal the larger questions with which Rich grappled, namely late Cold War concerns surrounding nuclear war, apartheid in South Africa, and a generation’s continued reckoning with effects of World War II and the Holocaust (224, 228). We also analyzed *TIME* magazine covers from the 1980s and 1990s, a publication that had long pronounced the risks and decline of feminism as a whole, notoriously asking “Is Feminism Dead?” on the cover of the June 29, 1998 issue (Bellafante 1998, 57).⁸ This content also provided context for the unit that would follow: histories of feminist activism, beginning in the late eighteenth century with the protofeminist writings of Mary Wollstonecraft and Olympe de Gouges, and ending with the mission statement of the 2017 Women’s March on Washington.

Beyond the historical and cultural context of the essay and the organization of my syllabus, I also thought about how I might tackle an assignment

such as this. For my own personal list, I identify as white, cisfemale, straight, middle-class, American, liberal, agnostic, and able-bodied. I was born in 1982, awkwardly straddling the line (depending on whom you ask) between “Gen-Xer” and Millennial. I spent the entirety of my childhood in a small town in New England, the child of two working parents and the eldest in a family of four children. I benefit from a host of identity-based privileges, yet I cannot say that I was fully aware of that as an undergraduate. If I had been asked to write an essay such as this, I am not sure if I would have been able to satisfactorily complete the assignment. Technically, I could have compiled my list and reflected on my upbringing, but I am all but certain that I would not have been able to interrogate my own privilege in a nuanced way.

If asked to write an essay such as this, I might first reflect on my relationship to the word “feminist.” One of my first memories of the term in fourth grade involved an encounter with a classmate. Upon returning from recess, he informed me that, instead of going to math class, I should go home because “women belong[ed] in the kitchen, barefoot and pregnant.” When I reflexively scoffed at his remark, the boy, nearly snarling, shot back, “You must be a *feminist*.” I may not have understood the exact nature of such a term, but it seemed bad. After all, it was the early 1990s, an era of complicated notions of feminism. Unbeknownst to my ten-year-old self, an alleged “backlash” was in full swing, embodied in legal policy, political rhetoric, and cultural representations as well as the casual deployment of terms like “man hater” and “feminazi” (Faludi 2006, x). The contributions of Rebecca Walker, Naomi Wolf, and *Thelma and Louise* were as yet unknown to my preteen brain. I have always remembered that comment. I remember the boy’s face, his expression, his body language. I was angry, but I was not sure why. At the same time, I had a working mother. My image of her—while it may have included being “barefoot and pregnant” at times—encompassed so many images: a nurse practitioner, a marathon runner, a carefree singer and dancer, a masterful baker of oatmeal bread, and a strong woman. Unlike my mother, I would never be dissuaded by a high-school guidance counselor for my career choice. Despite a few questionable results on “career aptitude tests,” I would not be offered the choice of “teacher or nurse?” during a college counseling session, apparently the only two options that existed for my mother, even in 1967. Like Adrienne Rich, I had the luxury of time, time to scribble in journals and read novels. I kept this anecdote with me as I taught the “Politics of Location” unit of WGS 101.

As I matured, my feminist education grew, and I came to embrace the term “feminist” along with the narratives of 1990s “girl power,” taking the messages of Ani DiFranco, Clair Huxtable on *The Cosby Show*, and, somewhat embarrassingly, *10 Things I Hate About You* as gospel. It was through the influence of teachers that I learned to understand, seek out, and interpret the teachings, work, contributions, and critique practiced by people like Harriet Robinson Scott, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett,

Rosa Parks, Recy Taylor, Patricia Hill Collins, Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Cheryl Harris, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Assata Shakur, Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, Patricia Williams, Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, and so on . . . and so on . . . and so on. This “syllabus” of sorts provided instruction in the relational part of my feminist and antiracist education.

Yet, the process of my antiracist learning has been different, and this fact reminded me that my students would likely have uneven learning curves and experiences. If I were to write my own “Politics of Location” essay, it would be vital to avoid Rich’s tendency to romanticize the oppression of women of color, particularly Black women (1994, 218–20). For example, Rich wrote, “Across the curve of the earth, there are women getting up before dawn, in the blackness before the point of light, in the twilight before sunrise; there are women rising earlier than men and children to break the ice, to start the stove, to put up the pap, the coffee, the rise, to iron the pants, to braid the hair, to pull the day’s water up from the well, to boil water for tea, to wash the children for school, to pull the vegetable and start the walk to the market, to run to catch the bus for the work that is paid. I don’t know where most women sleep” (229). A first reading suggests that this passage merely reflects yet another series of lists, an effort to represent—by way of space taken up on the page—the simultaneously magnitude and invisibility of women’s work. Rich opted to convey a universal—if generalizing—vision of Third World women without specific reference to geography or location.

Rich’s characterization of the work and oppression of women of color reminded me of the sentiments and anger expressed in Jo Carrillo’s poem “And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures with You.” One of many poems published in Gloria Anzaldúa’s and Cherríe Moraga’s *This Bridge Called My Back*, Carrillo (1983, 63) offered an indirect reply to the sentiments expressed by Rich in the excerpt above:

Our white sisters / radical friends / love to own pictures of us / walking to
the fields in hot sun / with straw hat on head if brown / bandana if black / in
bright embroidered shirts / holding brown yellow black red children / reading
books from literacy campaigns / smiling. / Our white sisters radical friends /
should think again. / No one smiles / at the beginning of a day spent / digging
for souvenir chunks of uranium / of cleaning up after / our white sisters /
radical friends.

This tendency of Rich forces me to undertake my own path of self-inquiry: do I perform the same romanticization in my own syllabi, teaching, or writing? How do I relate without sentimentalizing? How do I encourage my students to do the same? How might I incorporate additional readings or materials that give students the tools to address elements of their privilege without generalizing or romanticizing? Even before the first papers arrived in my inbox, I sensed that

several changes would need to be made to the syllabus, the course text, and the assignment itself.

Submission

During the fall semester, the first submissions of the “Politics of Location” essays represented a class with a variety of experiences, writing abilities, and academic interest in the course objectives. Like Rich, they reflected on the places of their birth, the languages they spoke, and the boxes they checked on forms. Because of the open parameters and inherently personal nature of the assignment, students also revealed their struggles with sexuality, racism, sexism, violence, poverty, migration and immigration, and gender identity. Yet, they also recounted moments of profound hope and youthful optimism and expressed ambitions of training to be doctors, writers, engineers, and nurses. The quality of writing, the utilization of Rich, and the overall organization of the essays varied significantly, yet this was likely a factor of time spent on the essay as well as a result of the relative informality of the assignment.

A significant number of students resonated with Rich’s metaphor of a bumble bee: “The movements of a huge early bumblebee which has somehow gotten inside this house and is reeling, bumping, stunning itself against windowpanes and sills” (1994, 211). They equated their own experiences internally, at work, at home, in the classroom with a similar sense of frustration or stalemate. Reflecting on her experience with mental illness, one student wrote, “I have suffered depression and anxiety at a young age. I couldn’t find my happiness and it led me to a state of failure. Rich uses a metaphor of herself and a bumblebee inside a house, trying to escape. She states, ‘It is looking for what it needs, just as I am, and, like me, it has gotten trapped in a place where it cannot fulfill its own life’ (211). This metaphor explained a challenging time in my life because I felt trapped with sadness, but wanted to escape to fulfill my life.” Approximately 20 percent of students in each section drew on this particular metaphor, yet it was not always clear how it helped them locate and interpret their identities.

For other students, the more general assertion that “the personal is political” provided a way to work through moments of tension and confrontation. For example, one white cisfemale writer described an interaction with a male professor. When she emailed to ask him a question about an upcoming test, she received a curt reply, offering her no assistance and citing her alleged general lack of interest in his class as his basis for such a response. While I was not privy to the details of her class performance, I did observe how shaken she appeared after this interaction. She included direct quotations from the email exchange in her paper and used this “evidence” to expand her analysis of her position as a woman and young person. While she took steps to avoid further interactions with that professor, she saved the emails. She met with the chair

of the department to register her complaint. The assignment provided her with a plan as well as space to work through the interaction.

While some students resonated with Rich's detailed list of her literal childhood location, finding the inclusion of "The Earth, The Solar System, The Universe" as part of her return address charming, this sense of belonging to a global order resonated differently for other students (1994, 212). A particularly gifted student described gazing out of her bedroom window in her mother's apartment in Boston, looking to the Bunker Hill monument as a source of inspiration for her legal career. She reflected on her political responsibility as a Latina, an older sister, and a first-generation college student. While she found the benefit of structure in Rich's essay, her application of the essay's finer points was minimal. Other students highlighted their Cape Verdean, Puerto Rican, Ghanaian, or Portuguese roots as evidence of their dual existences, as the children of immigrants and residents of the United States. These students did not necessarily regard their homes as "tiny fleck[s] on an ever-widening landscape, or as the center of it all from which the circles expanded into the infinite unknown" (212). They moved—sometimes smoothly, sometimes awkwardly, sometimes dangerously—between a number of geographic, cultural, and familial spheres. For many, there was simply no center.

A Black, cismale student vividly wrote of his childhood in one of the rougher neighborhoods of Providence. He described the weapons, drugs, and police presence on his streets, in his schools, surrounding his home. "I had to watch my back walking the streets knowing I can be beat down by a gang member even if I was not gang affiliated. It was even harder to walk the streets of my city knowing I can be beat down by a police officer for being a prime suspect. The most difficult part of my day was making sure I could make it back to my family at night and make it to school every morning. . . . I lived in the smallest state and city in the world but I've always had the biggest dreams and am always something I will continue to strive for until I reach success and happiness for myself and family." He wrote that a sense of belonging to a larger world escaped him and explicitly questioned Rich's applicability to his own physical location, preferring to deviate from her approach rather than use the text as a model. He also located his physical body in the city in which he grew up, reflecting specifically on his above-average height, its relationship to his race, and its impact on the way he moved through the world. He wrote, "There was a stigma to being a big black kid growing up. I wasn't as mobile as others and people automatically thought I was a bully or a creep. Walking the streets of my city, I witnessed people cross over to the other side because I was too frightening to be near. I witnessed people move seats on buses because I was too big to be near." I commented on the vividness of the imagery and careful selection of details, yet I did not respond to the obvious pain in the sentences or purport to offer any solutions. I also hesitated to encourage a deeper engagement with Rich's essay.

Despite Rich's uneven engagement with white privilege, white students struggled to name their privilege and unpack its meaning. One white, cisfemale student wrote, "I never realized until I left my small town, that I was treated differently because of my skin color and I unconsciously treated others differently because of theirs. Adrienne Rich said . . . that coming to terms with race issues means 'recognizing this white skin, the places it has taken me, the places it has not let me go' (215–16). Being white does not inherently make you evil but it does mean you must come to understand your privilege and you can either abuse it or use it as a platform to help those who are treated unfairly." Like Rich, this student named her racial privilege as an inherent quality, yet struggled to unpack what precisely that meant. Does defining one's "politics of location" require a student to "come to terms" with a particular privilege? In the pages of a short essay, is this even feasible? While Rich's exploration of her relationship to white privilege provided a jumping-off point for many white students, they struggled with unpacking what that meant. Another white, cisfemale student began his essay by stating, "I am a straight, cisgender, white male. In other words, I am the target of many of the writings we have explored so far this semester. However, while privileged in the eyes of society, my life has been far from privileged. This is why, when I was younger, I scoffed at the idea of a white privileged male-run society." The essence of this statement was inflected in a number of papers. Moreover, judging from a number of student's inability or unwillingness to engage with their relationships to privilege—whether it was based in race, class, gender, ability, or sexual orientation—"Notes Toward a Politics of Location" did not appear to provide the "push" white students needed to make such a leap.

Just as some students stumbled in writing about the ways in which they related to their whiteness, a number of students also struggled with their relationships to feminism (or at least what they conceived of as feminism). For example, one student wrote, "Although I don't consider myself a feminist, or an anti-feminist, I do support the opinions of both parties. However, in today's society and as a young, white female, it is hard not to side with the opinions of feminists. I have experienced many obstacles that have led me to the success I have now. And I know that I will continue to face such obstacles for the rest of my life. This is because I have always been perceived as just a hundred-pound, five-foot, four-inch, college girl." Binary statements such as this also provided a space to apply Rich's "notes without absolute conclusions" approach, and my comments on papers like this encouraged students to undertake an exploration of their relationships to their identities rather than land on one specific side.

Yet, there were also moments when students disengaged from or chafed against Rich's essay. When students expanded their interpretations of "location," writing about their experiences as immigrants, millennials, children of divorce, de facto translators for non-English speaking parents, first-generation college students, survivors of sexual assault, and caretakers of young children, connections to Rich—both her sentiments and her methods—were less clear.

When Rich described “a secondhand, faintly annotated student copy of Marx’s *The German Ideology*, which ‘happens’ to be lying on the table,” I—quite literally—saw their eyes glaze over. Or, perhaps, more simply, as colleague put it, “They just don’t want to read about another white lady.” Yet, the crux of the assignment required that they consider their personal background, experiences, and upbringing, and thus it was no surprise that this type of “inspirational” reading would not necessarily encourage connection, creativity, or an impetus to share their experiences. This is not to say that students should not regularly and rigorously read texts with which they have little enthusiastic connection. In retrospect, my conception of the assignment was remarkably one-dimensional. I encouraged and expected students to narrow in on their own experiences without equal attention to the broader, more relational possibilities of their essays. I also struggled with a fairly obvious dichotomy that emerged: students with certain forms of privilege (mostly white and/or male) and students without those identifications. The goal of the assignment was not to compete in any type of “Oppression Olympics,” but nor was it to ignore or explain away access to certain benefits. In retrospect, one goal should have been to orient all students to the ways in which we have historically talked and continue to talk about race, class, sex, gender, sexual orientation, age, ability, country of origin, and so on. Rather than simply ask, “Who are you (i.e. how do you identify yourself to others) and how did you become this person?” I should have also inquired as to how students might think from an alternative perspective.

To address some of these issues, after my first semester, I rethought the syllabus and abandoned the original course text. I replaced it with *The Essential Feminist Reader*, a short volume of chronologically-organized feminist writings edited by Estelle Freedman (2007), which allowed for the easy inclusion of foundational readings by W.E.B. Du Bois, Simone de Beauvoir, and Audre Lorde. Rich’s “Notes Toward a Politics of Location” appeared among the essays, sandwiched between Monique Wittig’s “One Is Not Born a Woman” and Gloria Anzaldúa’s “La Conciencia de la Mestiza: Toward a New Consciousness.” I supplemented the text with cultural think pieces, academic articles, podcasts, and music, ranging from Nina Simone’s “Four Women” to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TED talk titled “We Should All Be Feminists” to Lupita Nyong’o’s powerful 2017 *New York Times* essay describing her predatory encounters with Harvey Weinstein. Kimberlé Crenshaw’s TED talk on “The Urgency of Intersectionality” anchored our discussions of the introduction and evolution of intersectionality. My pedagogical objective was twofold. I sprinkled readings, articles, and podcast episodes that explicitly dealt with whiteness and white supremacy through the syllabus, including Barbara Smith’s “Racism and Women’s Studies,” Juan Perea’s “The Black/White Binary Paradigm of Race,” and Peggy McIntosh’s “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” as well as mainstream pieces on black motherhood, race-based medicine, and reproductive justice. I aimed to define the label of “white”—rather than remain a default or invisible category—and

consistently attend to structural, political, and cultural hierarchies and power dynamics. I also aimed to bring women's and gender studies into the current moment and teach students how to apply theoretical concepts and historical knowledge to their own studies. Though many students registered for the class in order to fulfill a degree requirement, I wanted to offer a series of tools and strategies for approaching any class, not just one focused on women and gender.

Yet, I also kept the "Politics of Location" assignment and revision at the forefront in my course preparations and intended that any of the texts from the syllabus could, if necessary, be incorporated into the essay. To expand the definition of what a "Politics of Location" essay might look like, I added two additional sources to the day's unit. First, I looked to *This Bridge Called My Back*. Though nearly any essay would have worked, I selected Cherríe Moraga's "La Güera" (1983) for the way that she located herself in the past, present, and future. She began with her mother, whom she remembered as a "fine story-teller, recalling every event of her life with the vividness of the present, noting each detail right down to the cut and color of her dress" (27). She wove together her identification with race, ethnicity, education, and sexuality while also calling to attention the significant rifts and weaknesses within the feminist movement. To round out the reading list and incorporate a contemporary source, I added Maysoon Zayid's 2013 TED talk, "I've Got 99 Problems . . . Palsy Is Just One." Zayid deployed a potent combination of humor and straightforward discussion about the nature of disability, ethnicity, religion, and geographic roots as a means of explicating her own politics of locations, focusing on how she enacted control over the ways in which she moves through the world. In defining her location, she stated, "If there was an Oppression Olympics, I would win the gold medal. I'm Palestinian, Muslim, I'm female, I'm disabled, and . . . I live in New Jersey" (Zayid 2013). By explicitly highlighting the "Oppression Olympics," Zayid achieved a different tone than Rich, thus making her arguments more accessible for many of the students. The inclusion of digital media appeared vital as a way to introduce new—and not necessarily academic—voices as well as adapt to a new moment in feminism, one almost entirely reliant on social media to spread its multiple messages. A student from the previous fall semester had recommended Zayid's talk; it seemed a fortuitous suggestion.

In the weeks leading up to the essay's due date, we moved more systematically through a series of concepts, including gender, race and racism, sexuality, and intersectionality, considering not only their individual definitions and histories but their relational aspects as well. For the "Politics of Location" lecture, I placed Rich, Moraga, and Zayid on equal footing and required students to cite only one of the three pieces in their initial essays. While I still asked students to reflect on at least three aspects of their own "Politics of Location," I gave no specifics, instead preferring (and encouraging) students to be creative and less attentive to a traditional structure of academic writing. Again, following Rowe's understanding a feminist politics of relation—a "deep reflection about

the selves we are creating as a function of where we place our bodies, and with whom we build our affective ties”—I encouraged students to consider how Rich, Moraga, and Zayid understood their relationships, their dynamics with others (Rowe 2005, 16). The union of these three readings—from different authors, eras, and mediums—demonstrated how these voices might relate to each other across time and space. I encouraged students to insert themselves into that type of imagined dialogue as they explored their own politics of location.⁹

Assessment

These essays, many poignantly and rawly written, made the “necessity” of a grade assignment and assessment difficult. What distinguishes an A from a B paper? Should the “spirit” of a paper rank higher than a technically perfect essay? As an instructor, how does one assess the success of an essay that recounts a moment of violence, confrontation, or internal struggle? Though I dutifully constructed a rubric, I felt uncomfortable—as a cisgender, straight, middle-class, white woman—about the problematic nature of my assessment of writings and experiences that are not my own, as my own perspective comes from a place—like Rich—of immense social and racial privilege. I used a qualitative rubric and assessed students on fulfillment of general requirements, argument construction, application of readings, and clarity of voice. I also provided personalized comments, taking care to highlight positive aspects (no matter how small) and provide concrete and constructive feedback. Common comments included “use specific examples to illustrate your main points,” “organize your paragraphs around one topic to improve organization of paper,” and “more directly and specifically define your politics of location through your thesis statement.” In the end, I graded liberally. Across two semesters and four sections, the average grade for the original “Politics of Location” essay calculated out to an eighty-five. The revision grade averaged out to an eighty-six. By and large, grades improved, but not because any serious revisions had been made.

In retrospect, I could have followed a number of alternative grading practices. For one, the essay could have been graded as “pass/fail.” This type of approach is rendered more rigorous by requiring several drafts over the course of the semester. Each draft is accompanied by a self-assessment, and students benefit from the practice of writing, rewriting, and reflecting on the changes they make. As such, the fulfillment of the assignment is determined by the quality of the changes made rather than the particular content of the essay. For each draft, a different rubric identifies the necessary processes and changes, thus providing students transparency and direction. However, this approach takes time, both in and outside of class. Multiple writing workshops are necessary to discuss different revision strategies and model modes of rewriting. This approach may have worked in opposition to the overall objective of the assignment for the department; the essays were designed to be examples during periods of curricular

assessment. In certain ways, there was pressure—on students, instructors, and administrators—for the essays to be “the best.”

Perhaps most importantly, these essays also brought a number of issues, concerns, and wounds for many of the students. In preparation for the rewrite, I scheduled an in-class, peer-writing workshop. Students met in small, self-selected groups and completed a short worksheet for each paper. The exercise included reverse outlining, suggestions for additional sources, and recommendations for changes and improvements. Yet, the content and tone of the essays made the task of peer revision tenuous, so I also provided a self-assessment option in which students could complete a similar worksheet and maintain their privacy. One-third of the students in each of my sections opted to complete the self-assessment. A key part of the writing process requires feedback, both positive and constructive, and the content of a number of these essays rendered this process relatively irrelevant.

“Without Absolute Conclusions”

Though the practice and pedagogy of women’s and gender studies have historically been invested in investigating the role of the “personal is political” and an informal sharing of information, the “Politics of Location” assignment did not always seem to check all of those boxes. As academics, we can perform the diligent work of reorienting the canon, centering and amplifying previously silenced voices, and doing our best to point students in the right direction. In this context, I did my best to broaden the scope of the assignment and its readings as well as provide tools and materials over the course of the semester that students could draw upon in service of the essay. Yet, it was often difficult to assess the content of the writing, and I made a conscious decision to overlook some of the awkward language of a number of the essays. I looked for the spirit of each essay and encouraged students to locate themselves within different *conversations* rather than simply drop a “pin” to locate their place in the world. A dialogue-based approach could well succeed in angling students away from finding their places in a set of hierarchies and, instead, understanding how access and restrictions to power change over time. In the end, the solution to such a conundrum may be simple: to give students ownership over their voices, their writing, and, yes, the construction of their own assignments.

Finally, though my evidence is only anecdotal in nature, I have found that, as professors, we are only marginally—if at all—qualified to assess, counsel, or assist students in times of crisis. And yet, I cannot count the number of times I have sat with students, in my office, in crowded hallways, in quiet corners, and heard stories of depression and anxiety, trouble at home, illness, and thoughts of suicide. It did not matter whether I was a teaching assistant at an Ivy League school, an adjunct lecturer at a public university, or a full-time faculty member at a Tier One institution; the struggles remain the same. I can

provide contact information for the counseling and health centers, though I know full well that such resources are overloaded, and it is difficult to receive timely appointments. As a result, I wondered about the responsibility involved in requiring and grading such an assignment. Yet, in the final days of the spring semester, I received an email from a student. A white, cisgender male biology major, he wrote and told me that the “Politics of Location” assignment had been one of the most valuable assignments of his college career. The scope of the class and the impact of the assignment surprised him. He expected to use the essay after graduation, perhaps as part of an application to graduate school or molded into a cover letter. I admit, this message surprised me. As complicated and loaded as the process had been, it was gratifying to know that at least one student found the exercise beneficial. This is another sentiment, however cliché, that I continue to hold onto each time I write a syllabus and design an assignment and, as such, “this is the end of these notes, but it is not an ending” (1994, 231).

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Notes

1. According to a recent study by College Factual, this university scored “well for racial diversity,” maintained a “balanced gender ratio,” and maintained “very good diversity overall.”

2. Though my evidence is only anecdotal, I have a strong suspicion that a significant number of introductory courses of this nature perform similar functions. And of course, the dedication of an academic space to conversations regarding women and gender is rooted in the establishment of women’s studies as a discipline in the late 1960s. See, for example, Stimpson (1973) for an “of-the-moment” accounting of the rise of such programs, disciplines, and departments. For a more contemporary reflection on the history of women’s studies as an academic field of inquiry, see Boxer 2002. Finally,

Wiegman (2012), chap. 1, provides a deft accounting of the investments of and changes made to women's studies and its academic institutions since the 1970s.

3. Collections that incorporate Rich's essay include Díaz-Diocaretz and Zavala (1985), McCann and Kim (2003), Freedman (2007), Gilbert and Gubar (2007), and, of course, Rich (1994).

4. I now utilize the "genderqueer unicorn," the preferred visualization of the Trans Student Union.

5. For an abridged list of more recent scholarship on standpoint theory, see Collins (2002), Harnois (2010), Intemann (2010), John (2011), Naidu (2010), Rolin (2009), Yuval-Davis (2012), and Wylie (2003).

6. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who encouraged me to think more deeply about this aspect of the article.

7. A 1979 interview of Lorde by Rich, published in *Sister Outsider*, dives deeper into the role of poetry in Lorde's life and career.

8. In more recent years, *TIME* has adopted a decidedly different approach. Its 2017 "Person of the Year" issue and cover featured "The Silence Breakers," a group of everyday, professional, anonymous, and famous women (and men) who spoke out against personal and systematic experiences with sexual harassment and violence.

9. I also encouraged this dialogical practice in another assignment during the spring semester of WGS 101 in the form of a dialogue essay. The prompt stated, "Imagine you are seated at a table with two of the scholars we have read this semester. What topics would arise? What disagreements would emerge? Write an essay that summarizes the scholars' respective positions and makes an argument about how they would interact with one another. Your voice (and thus your own arguments) must be included in the 'conversation.'" I envisioned this assignment as a different form of preparation for the "Politics of Location" revision essay, an alternative way to imagine a way of relating to writing, to scholarship, and to the world.

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