My best teaching takes place when I am most attentive to students, when I am fully engaged in listening to and learning from them, when I am talking with them, not at them. Unfortunately, I am not always capable of such deep listening. Students sense this immediately. They may not accuse me directly, as my son has on occasion—"Mom, you’re not paying attention!"—but their demeanor changes. It's a subtle thing, but palpable. Over the years, I have come to understand, primarily through the introspective practice of personal scholarship, that I am most attentive to students after first attending to my own needs. As I studied to become an English professor, one of my greatest needs was to integrate my past and present selves, my private and professional selves, my teacher and scholar-selves. I knew, before post-structuralists told me, that the notion of a unified self is an illusion; at the same time, I often experienced this fragmentation as debilitating rather than liberating. When I began graduate school in the late 1970s, I used a private journal to achieve some degree of coherence even as my private life was fragmented by my professional ambitions.

In time, however, my study of feminist theory prompted me to question the necessity of maintaining the boundaries between my journal and my academic essays. If I were to put into practice the feminist credo, the personal is the political, I would have to acknowledge that two topics central to my scholarship, sexual violation and motherhood, were also autobiographical. In order to change the world—along with other feminists—I would have to write transgressively, challenging public hierarchies and practices with stories of their often painful consequences in the realm of so-called “personal experience.” At the urging of feminist professors, I began to write such essays in the early 1980s. By early 1990, women students who had read my autobiographical scholarship began asking me to teach them how to use the personal in their academic essays. Initially, I was surprised by their interest in personal criticism; however, I soon recognized that they too felt the need to understand the mother-daughter relationship or, in some instances, recover from the painful effects of sexual violation. As a result, they sought out opportunities to read, reflect on, and write about these complex and sometimes traumatic experiences.
What these women students found—in studies of novels by Edith Wharton, Joyce Carol Oates, Jamaica Kincaid, Jane Smiley, Dorothy Allison, and Toni Morrison—is that autobiographical reading and writing is a complex creative process, at once emotional and analytical. Personal scholarship has also helped these students to heal from personal pain while, at the same time, changing their ways of understanding themselves and the world. I call this teaching/learning process “radical introspection.” As James Hill defines it, radical introspection challenges “individualist constructions of pedagogy” and has as its goal “insight toward social action” (18). As Hill says, the concept is rooted in the liberal feminist notion, “the personal is the political,” and in “the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s concept of the organic intellectual, and the African American tradition of prophetic Christianity” (Hill 5). Although some academics view the use of the personal in scholarship as a narcissistic, unreflective practice—Dale Bauer claims, for example, that “writing about the personal aims to recapture the immediacy of context and to suggest an authoritative experiential stance but which, no surprise here, seems only to reify the personal” (57)—the practice of radical introspection does not “reify the personal;” rather, it often enables reflective practitioners to move beyond what Maurice Natanson calls “egologic” (quoted in Bleich’s The Double Perspective 46).

I want to emphasize, however, that radical introspection requires emotional as well as intellectual honesty; without acknowledgment of emotions that many of us would rather disavow—envy, guilt, resentment, shame—the practice cannot succeed. Unfortunately, as Jane Tompkins points out in A Life in School, the academy does not encourage introspection. Higher education has failed, she says, to “focus on the inner lives of students or help them acquire the self-understanding that is the basis for a satisfying life. Nor, by and large, does it provide the safe and nurturing environment that people need in order to grow” (xii). Furthermore, as Tompkins argues in “Me and My Shadow,” many intellectuals, having been taught that emotions should have no part in the process of acquiring knowledge, fear and disparage emotions. “The strength of the taboo,” Tompkins says, “can be gauged by the academician’s inevitable recourse to name-calling when emotion, spirituality, and imagination are brought into the curricular conversation: ‘touchy-feely,’ ‘soft,’ ‘unrigorous,’ ‘mystical,’ ‘therapeutic,’ and ‘Mickey Mouse’ are the all-time favorites, with ‘psychobabble’ and ‘bullshit’ not far behind” (Life in School 214). Indeed, according to David Bleich, “There is an unacknowledged fantasy in the program of cognitive science that intellectual work must be separate from its feelings and passions, must be autonomous relative to its human and social contexts” (“Academic Ideology,” 573). Because many academics hold such views, I continue to feel vulnerable when using the personal in my scholarship and teaching; nevertheless, the practice of self-inclusion has
helped my students and me to resist and even transform debilitating ways of understanding the world.

In this essay I will give several examples of the process of radical introspection, a process from which the teacher learns as much as the students. The first example comes from my own autobiographical writing. After my mother’s death in August 1997, I decided that, rather than attempting to contain my grief, I would continue a project begun before her death: analyzing the effects of my mother’s limited education on her life and mine. In an effort to re-understand my mother’s so-called “personal” experience of schooling within a broader social, political, and historical context, I read Madeleine R. Grumet’s *Bitter Milk*, Carmen Luke’s *Pedagogies of Everyday Life*, and Wendy Luttrell’s *Schoolsmart and Motherwise: Working-Class and Women’s Identity and Schooling*, each of which gave me a new perspective on my mother’s education. Here is a brief excerpt from my essay, entitled “Weeping for the Mother”:

Like the stories of working-class women in Wendy Luttrell’s *Schoolsmart and Motherwise*, my story is one of “persistent sadness and regret, what Nancy Chodorow calls ‘weeping for the mother’” (97). I weep for my mother, a major figure in the story of my schooling, primarily because her life was severely limited by her lack of a formal education—specifically, a feminist education. I do not, however, mean to suggest that my mother was completely unschooled; despite the fact she did not complete high school, she did learn lessons outside the classroom—at home, at church, from television and magazines.

Because I wanted a better understanding of her education, I once asked her what she had read as a child. She answered, “I read little women when I was a teenager. I imagined myself as Jo. I’m going to read it again. Never was anything read to me [at home] as a child. I remember most vividly my Sunday School Pamphlets. I took them most seriously, and Mrs. Schultz, my teacher, made everything come alive for me” (letter, September 24, 1994). Following this brief narrative about her own reading, my mother quickly shifted focus, giving this account of her father as a reader: “I remember being impressed with my Daddy sitting uncomfortably on a kitchen chair, tilted back under a single light bulb—reading far into the nite.” Remarkably, when asked about her own reading, she puts the spotlight on her father, a man who, even at the age of 72, she called “Daddy.” She’s still daddy’s little girl,” one of my brothers recently observed, with bitter accuracy. Like the working-class women in Luttrell’s study, my mother tends to describe men—her father or husband—as school-smart, while discounting her own intelligence. My mother did not believe that the story of her schooling had value, probably because, unlike the subjects in Luttrell’s study, she had never had the opportunity to share her story in a classroom setting.

The sharing of such stories would be encouraged in some feminist classrooms while, ordinarily, it would not be allowed. Unfortunately, feminist
efforts to allow women to integrate their experiences and their schooling, their emotions and intellects, continue to be misconstrued and devalued by university and college administrators. For example, in Jill Ker Conway’s recent memoir *True North*, this former college president explains that she was opposed to the founding of Women’s Studies programs because, for one thing, they are based on “specious ideologies about ‘feminist’ or excessively nurturant teaching styles as a justification for less real research.” She continues, “Overly nurturant teaching, from which all overt criticism has been removed seemed to me to run the same danger for the young as permissive child rearing, because both obfuscate the nature of power and thus limit the possibility of rebellion” (218).

Why does Ker Conway assume that feminists would be “overly nurturant,” and why does she assume that feminists would “obfuscate the nature of power”? Perhaps some feminist professors do make this mistake; however, since my feminist professors have been both rigorous and nurturing, while also recognizing the need to analyze power relations, it is possible that Ker Conway’s view of feminist teaching is based on an unexamined, sentimental view of mothering. The best mothers are not overly-nurturant; instead, as Jessica Benjamin argues in *The Bonds of Love*, they maintain the tension between the demands of self and other rather than simply sacrificing their own needs, boundaries, or expectations. As redefined by Benjamin, the dialogic nature of maternal thinking has important pedagogical implications; nevertheless, we are just beginning to understand why many women experience “an epistemological revolution” (Belenky et al 34) when they become mothers. One’s world view alters dramatically when it becomes necessary to care for another person—and, at its best, teaching is caring for other people. Nevertheless, many higher education administrators remain suspicious of the goals of supposedly “overly nurturant” feminist pedagogy.1 Why? One answer can be found in the historical exclusion of maternal thinking from higher education, an exclusion that resulted from the “feminization” of primary and secondary education.

According to Madeleine Grumet, the feminization of teaching during the nineteenth century enabled more women to enter the profession; however, women teachers were discouraged from assuming administrative positions; instead, they were expected to control the children while they, in turn, submitted to (male) administrative control. But most important, schools were organized to encourage the child’s identification with the father through a gradual differentiation from maternal nurturance. As a result, higher education came to be defined by the absence of maternal values and practices. As Luttrell points out, “A sexual division of labor is built into the American educational system as its working assumption” (91-91). My mother’s acceptance of this sexual division of labor is evident in her assumption that men, such as her
father, are school-smart while she, having been a mother all her adult life, is not. Despite the intellectual challenges of nurturing children, my mother holds the view that her “instinctive” maternal practice must remain outside the bounds of formal schooling. So pervasive is this view of mothering—that it is an instinctive rather than a rational practice—that feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick began her book *Maternal Thinking* by asserting that, yes, mothering does require thought. Maternal thinking continues to be excluded from higher education as evident from the continuing exclusion of emotions from most university and college classrooms. As a result, women often experience schooling as a painful process of leaving their mothers behind.

My understanding of this painful loss of the maternal in the academy—and of my own need for radical introspection—was deepened by a former graduate student, DeRionne Pollard, who now teaches writing and literature at a community college in Illinois. In a conference paper Pollard presented at my invitation, she equates the loss of her mother with the loss of her personal voice in academic writing. In the following letter to Pollard, included here with her permission, I respond to her effort to integrate her personal and academic voices which, as she explains, remain segregated in two different papers, one academic, the other personal.

Dear DeRionne,

I am deeply moved by both your papers, the academic essay, “I Hear You, You Hear Me,” and the personal paper, “Mother-Hunger: A Struggle to Find My Voice,” which will, I hope, eventually become part of the academic paper. On hearing you say, at the conference here in the fall of 1997, that you had “come to hate writing,” I felt such grief and guilt: as your primary writing mentor, I had taught you to hate academic writing. You also said, “Yes, I know the academic language, but I really don’t like it. It is so hard for me to translate my voice to paper. Something always gets lost in the translation” (“I Hear” 3).

In fact, when DeRionne expressed frustration with academic writing, I had offered her the opportunity to write a more creative introduction to her thesis, but I did not allow any departure from academic conventions in the remaining three chapters because, I explained, she might wish to submit these chapters as writing samples in her applications to graduate schools. Despite such misgivings, I strive to listen attentively and respond respectfully as DeRionne continues to explain her feelings about academic writing. I reply:

Your conference paper on the use of personal narratives in the academy has caused me to reflect on and change my pedagogy. In that paper, you state, “This fear of writing has paralyzed me partially because I feel incompetent” (“I Hear” 3). At first, DeRionne, I resisted your harsh self-assessment; I wanted to point out that you are a
highly competent student who understands theoretical concepts and effectively incorporated them into your writing. In fact, I nominated your thesis for a department award because I felt you had become an excellent writer. How, then, did you came to feel “incompetent”? At the same time, I believe you felt incompetent, primarily because I have had similar feelings. Like you, I have sometimes felt that my own voice was “lost in translation” in an academic essay, and like you, I have often questioned my authority as a writer and teacher. Also, like you, I have wondered whether, after taking my courses, students are “better writers” (“I Hear” 2). As a result, I have begun to ask, as you have, “How do I foster a connection between my students’ personal and academic voices?” (“I Hear” 3).

As this dialogue illustrates, the practice of radical introspection does not simply “reify the personal,” but rather forces me to move beyond egologic: my perception of DeRionne’s experience as a student does not match her perception. Initially, I want to defend myself, silencing DeRionne’s experience of incompetence by insisting that she accept my view of her as highly competent with theory. After all, my intentions are good: if she accepts my view, she will feel better, won’t she? But, reminding myself that the practice of radical introspection must be emotionally as well as intellectually honest, I acknowledge that I too have sometimes felt a sense of loss and self-doubt. Through DeRionne’s honest analysis of her own pedagogy, as a community college teacher, I begin to reflect on my own teaching. My letter to her continues:

Now, as a teacher at a community college, you express fear that your students will lose their joy in writing, just as you did. Speaking of a bright student, you write, “I was so fearful of Cheyenne losing this joy for writing while she was in my class” (“I Hear” 6). But Cheyenne didn’t lose her joy for writing; in her final letter to you she wrote: “Our relationship helped me not only because it reassured me that this is what I’m meant to do, it made me feel like there were people out there that care as much about writing as I do. It made me think about my writing with a renewed sense of enthusiasm as well as in a realistic sense. That I shouldn’t put so much pressure on myself to be a huge success as a writer, but just to write. And probably the most important thing is to recognize my own voice and to know that I am in everything that I write” (“I Hear” 9). You succeeded, DeRionne: you gave Cheyenne a safe place, in an exchange of personal letters with you, to voice her concerns about your pedagogy, and—most important—her feelings about her relationship with you.

DeRionne has succeeded with her student Cheyenne, whereas I have failed with DeRionne. Nevertheless, because there is trust between us—DeRionne accepted my invitation to present this conference paper, and she is willing to speak the truth to me—I can learn from my past failures; that is, if I can listen and respond without becoming defensive:
At first, you explain, you adopted a pedagogy of distance because "If I wasn’t too connected to them personally, if I didn’t know enough about them to understand why and how they write, I would be able to maintain my distance which would allow for objective evaluation" ("I Hear" 7). At first you felt that, because you tended “to get too involved” with students, this distancing strategy would enable you to be “fair.” I too have felt the necessity of distancing myself from students in order to evaluate their work fairly. But when you say, “If I didn’t know them, I wouldn’t have to hear them” ("I Hear” 7), I must acknowledge what is lost with the adoption of this pedagogy of distance. Through your exchange of letters with Cheyenne, you came to understand that this distance was consistent with “valuing the academic writing and the academic voice” but at the same time you were “moving away from personal writing” ("I Hear” 7). Why, you began to wonder, were you doing this? To answer this question, you cite the theory of muted groups:

The theory of muted groups was developed to describe situations in which groups of people are in asymmetrical power relationships) e.g., blacks and whites; colonizers and the colonized). The theory proposes that language and the norms for its uses are controlled by the dominant group. Members of the muted group are disadvantaged in articulating their experience, since the language they use is derived largely from the perceptions of the dominant group. ... In order to be heard, muted group members must learn the dominant idiom and attempt to articulate within it, even though this attempt will inevitably lead to some loss of learning. The experiences “lost in translation” to the dominant idiom remain unvoiced, and perhaps unthought. (Crawford and Chaffin 21).

Recalling that DeRionne had read this essay on muted group theory in my seminar, “The American Canon Debate,” I felt some relief: at least she had learned something of value from me. But my relief was short-lived because I quickly recognized that by teaching only theory, I had forced her to mute her personal voice. I am unwilling to give up the theoretical; after all, DeRionne is using theory—the theory of muted groups—to explain why the muting of her personal voice in academic writing has caused her to feel “lost in translation.” At the same time, our dialogue has prompted me to reflect on my pedagogy. As my letter continues, I ask DeRionne how we might overcome our mother-hunger in the academy:

I wonder, DeRionne: if we devise a more self-inclusive pedagogy, will it be possible to overcome the mother-hunger we both feel? Do you think that by using the personal in our scholarly writing we might provide our students and ourselves with the emotional nurture for which we hunger? In “Mother-Hunger” you write, “My mother-hunger has immobilized my voice and has rendered me silent. It is like I have cut out my own tongue because I don’t want to speak of the pain I feel” (n.p.).

This insight, that the pain of mother-hunger had silenced your personal voice, is of great value. You have articulated a powerful argument for the use of the personal—the
emotional, the embodied, the poetic—in academic writing. By censoring this voice, the voice of the mother, academic discourses cut us off, as you point out, from our sustenance, from our linguistic and physical foundations. This, then, is yet another way that the mother—in all her guises—is censored in higher education. Like you, I have found that “mother-hunger is powerful and mysterious;” for example, after becoming a full professor in 1997 I was almost disabled by my disavowal of aspects of my identity associated with the maternal: my body, my emotions, my personal life. As you say, “Mother-hunger creeps up on you. You don’t feel her coming, although deep down you know you will have to face her someday” (n. p.). As you say, eventually she “sneaks up on you like a shadow” (n. p.).

After sharing some of my own experiences with this “shadow,” I conclude my letter to DeRionne by describing what her writing has taught me:

The repression of the personal voice in favor of the theoretical, as I learned from your beautiful essay, “Mother-Hunger,” is yet another way in which the academy devalues the maternal. However, I believe that the solution to this problem is not to disavow academic writing, but to integrate our personal and theoretical voices in our scholarship. We must also, as you have taught me, introduce this mixed mode of writing to our students. My failure to introduce you to personal criticism has taught me a valuable lesson: that students have a powerful need, not simply a desire, to integrate the personal voice into academic writing. But I wonder if I have fully understood your experience of being muted in the academy: because you are black and I am white, because you are a lesbian and I am a heterosexual, your experience is also different from mine. In order to continue this exploration of our differences, I am emulating the epistolary pedagogy you employed with your student, Cheyenne. Just as you felt that Cheyenne became your teacher, you have become my teacher. With your help, I hope that my future students will not “come to hate writing” (2), as you have.

With love,

Although I failed to introduce personal criticism to Ms. Pollard, I had begun to teach this transgressive mode of writing to other graduate students, but only upon request and only in tutorials. In the writing of these women students I saw a recurrence of two major topics, both traumatic—the loss of the mother and the experience of sexual violation. These women’s self-inclusive academic essays illustrate Shoshana Felman’s arguments that “every woman’s life contains, explicitly or in implicit ways, the story of a trauma” (16); they also illustrate Felman’s point that the lack of an autobiography is, in fact, the condition of all women. She says, 

In spite of the contemporary literary fashion of feminine confessions and of the recent critical fashion of ‘feminist confessions,’ I will suggest that none of us, as women, has
as yet, precisely, an autobiography. Trained to see ourselves as objects and positioned as the Other, estranged to ourselves, we have a story that by definition cannot be self-present to us, a story that, in other words, is not a story, but must become a story. (14)

Initially, I resisted the notion that all women are trauma victims because it does not take into account the fact that some women—holocaust or rape victims, for example—suffer much more severely than others. How, I wonder, is it possible to argue, as Felman does, that women, as women, do not have autobiographies? The answer, as feminists have been arguing for some time, is that male-dominated institutions continue to train women to see themselves as “Other.” If this training is not completely successful, if a woman’s psyche does not come to mirror the militaristic structure of the university, she experiences a sense of estrangement.

Fortunately, the militaristic ideology of universities is now being exposed and criticized. David Bleich argues, for example, that the current grading system enforces a hidden ideology—an ideology based on militarism—that requires the exclusion of feelings. Through hierarchical evaluation of both teachers and students, according to Bleich, the academy maintains its “unacknowledged fantasy . . . that intellectual work must be separate from its feelings and passions, must be autonomous relative to its human and social context” (“Academic Ideology” 573). The academy’s repression of feelings, along with its emphasis on individualism, creates a competitive atmosphere that makes it difficult for faculty and students to develop a sense of trust. Without trust and a sense of community, individuals feel embattled and isolated. Perhaps, through an exchange of our stories, faculty and students might put aside competitiveness, as DeRionne and I do. Unfortunately, such exchanges are often prevented by the conventions of academic writing. How, in such an intellectual warrior culture, are women students to become “storied selves”? Felman answers that women can do so only indirectly: “by conjugating literature, theory, and autobiography together through the act of reading and by reading, thus, into the texts of culture, at once our sexual difference and our autobiography as missing” (14). If Felman is right, the use of the personal in scholarship is not, at least for women, a self-indulgent practice but, rather, a necessity. In addition, as Felman emphasizes, this act of “conjugating” requires collective action—“together through the act of reading and by reading, thus, into the texts of culture”—of the kind in which my women students and I have engaged.

Unfortunately, traditional grading practices frequently undermine the establishment of trust between students and teachers, and without such trust it is difficult—through this conjugating of literature, theory and autobiography—to transform the texts of culture. Despite this obstacle, my students and I have sometimes managed to create islands of trust, although less often in formal
classroom settings, within a competitive university. When a student tells me her story, and I tell her mine—always in the privacy of my office—we are able to begin the work of conjugating, the work of radical introspection. Students often describe this conjugating of literature, theory, and autobiography as a means of “integrating” formerly disparate “voices” or selves. Such claims of self-integration may suggest, at the very least, a lack of awareness of post-structuralists challenges to the notion of a unitary subject; however, these students are not necessarily self-deluded. It is possible, for example, that poststructuralist notions of the self—or “subject”—simply do not apply to women. Political philosopher James Glass makes this argument in *Shattered Selves*, a study of women who suffer from multiple personality disorder, all victims of paternal sexual abuse. Glass concludes that it is irresponsible of post-structuralists to base their claims of fragmented identity on textual examples only; however, despite his commitment to the concept of a core self, he found Julia Kristeva’s theory of a “subject in process” compatible with the humane treatment of women suffering from multiple personality disorder. For me, and for my women students, writing personal criticism is a fluid process of integrating, not only texts, but also selves (or voices)—personal, social, political.

It was this need to integrate a range of texts and selves that prompted graduate student Sue Woods, after reading my personal essay in *The Intimate Critique*, to request an independent study in autobiographical reading and writing. Because Woods was a mature and intelligent student capable of understanding the risks of such writing, I agreed to mentor her. In the preface to her autobiographical thesis, Woods explains that she had never before “integrated” voices formerly used either in creative writing or literature courses—“the academic/authoritative and the personal/experiential” (29). Even though she found the writing process difficult—there was tension, she discovered, between narrative and analytical modes—she persisted through numerous revisions. Drawing on feminist and Bakhtinian theories of language, she analyzed her experiences of mothering and of sexual violation through their depiction in Edith Wharton’s *The Mother’s Recompense*. The results were remarkable: after presenting a portion of her thesis at a regional MLA conference, Woods submitted her essay to the editors of *Creating Safe Space: Violence and Women’s Writing*, who chose to publish it, along with an essay of mine. Through informal conversations with Woods, women graduate students learned of this new form of academic writing, and they too requested independent studies. Since I was not yet convinced that this transgressive form of writing was safe for students, I continued my practice of teaching personal criticism only at student request.

My next request came from graduate student Angela Larson who, like Woods, wished to explore issues of sexual abuse and motherhood. In the preface to her
thesis, Larson explains that she decided to write a personal-criticism after struggling with “intense emotional connections” to Joyce Carol Oates’s female protagonist in *Marya, A Life*. She says, “I will never feel complete or whole until I can integrate my abused, private self with my public one” (81). To achieve this integration, or conjugation, Larson analyzed Oates’s novel, along with her own experience, through the lenses of feminist and reader-response theories. She writes: “Reading Marya’s story has opened my eyes to unknown parts of myself, while using Jean Kennard’s bi-polar reading theory has allowed that self-discovery to have focus” (74). Larson regards the writing of her thesis as the first step, the finding of a “safe space” in which to tell her story, in a process of recovering from the trauma of sexual violation. Writing about the experience of abuse by a former boyfriend, Larson asserts, was the first step in saving her own life. Such a claim may seem exaggerated; however, according to psychologist Judith Lewis Herman, author of *Trauma and Recovery*, the act of writing or telling one’s story may heal those who have been traumatized by warfare, torture or rape, but only if certain conditions are met: the trauma victim must tell her story, complete with accompanying affect, and in the presence of an attentive and affirming audience. I tried to serve as that attentive and affirming audience for Larson while, at the same time, expecting her to revise in order to achieve the highest quality writing.

As more and more graduate students asked to study personal criticism with me, I gradually acknowledged that, despite the risks, this form of writing was beneficial, not only for women, but also for men. As a result, I began to offer graduate students the option of writing autobiographical academic essays. Creative writer Kim Munger was one of the first to choose this option. Having heard me read an excerpt from *Authoring a Life*, Munger knew that I would welcome an autobiographical-critical approach in my graduate methods course, English 521, “Teaching Literature and the Literature Curriculum.” In an abstract for her final paper in that course, Munger defines radical introspection in this way:

> This paper examines . . . the use of the technique of radical introspection to approach teaching Toni Morrison’s novel, *Beloved*. It begins with an examination of what it means . . . to cross the boundaries of academic discourse in the disciplines and to take a more personal, introspective approach to reading literature and writing about it. It calls into question the traditional modes of academic writing . . . and suggests the use of radical introspection, a combination of autobiography and reader-response criticism, as a way to de-center the privileged, distanced academic voice and to illustrate how literary texts may take on personal significance for the students who read them.

Munger began her paper by illustrating her own autobiographical reading of *Beloved*: As “the descendent of border-state slaveholders in Chariton County,
Missouri,” she announces, she will examine the similarities between the family stories she had been told and Morrison’s representation of the Garner family. Munger suggests that, before assigning the novel, teachers might also engage students in examining their own pasts: “Who are they descended from? Where did their ancestors come from, and when?” (25). She also recommends that teachers ask students to give examples of incidents of discrimination and ostracism in their own family histories, a process that for many becomes an interrogation of their own racial identities, including whiteness.

Following Munger’s example, I have also begun offering undergraduates the opportunity to include personal experiences in critical essays. This process began when an undergraduate named Laura Armstrong Randolph came to my office to inform me that she, like two of the sisters in Smiley’s novel A Thousand Acres, was also an incest survivor. Because of this personal background, she explained, she found it upsetting to discuss Smiley’s novel. After revealing that I too was a survivor of father-daughter incest, I asked Laura if she would be willing to a tutorial to study incest narratives. Our goal would be to determine which narratives, in her view, were most honest. Since up to one quarter of the women students in any given classroom are survivors of some form of sexual violation, I explained, I wanted to learn how to be more effective at choosing and teaching such narratives. She agreed to a tutorial in which we would study contemporary novels about father-daughter incest written by both male and female authors. We also agreed that our purpose was not to engage in personal therapy but to participate in a larger feminist project: the work of cultural change.

The results, as I explain in Authoring a Life, were even more educational than I had anticipated. Since Randolph was also enrolled in my seminar, “The American Canon Debate,” she began to speculate about the relationship between the canon and father-daughter incest. From Christine Froula she learned that, from a feminist perspective, the situation of literary daughters mirrors the relationship of daughters in the incestuous family. This insight prompted Randolph to write a paper arguing that

the traditional English curriculum has a dramatic effect upon which incest narratives will be considered acceptable. It is highly unlikely, for example, that a narrative of such force as Allison’s Bastard Out of Carolina, which depicts a working-class victim of paternal incest, will ever be included within the English curriculum. . . . However, the taboo of speaking about incest in the college classroom still exists; therefore, even though the incest narrative may be part of the plot, it is rarely the primary focus of classroom discussion. For example, The Bluest Eye is frequently taught; however, attending to other aspects of the narrative, such as its critique of racism, allows the instructor to dismiss, ignore, or make short shrift of the scene in which Cholly sexually violates his daughter, Pecola. (161-162)
In short, although some feminists teach father-daughter incest narratives, we are not always fully aware of how our own race and class identities influence our choices and our pedagogies. A white middle-class teacher might, for example, avoid a working class narrative such as *Bastard Out of Carolina* in favor of the middle-class narrative, *A Thousand Acres*, in which the act of sexual violation is not fully depicted. On the other hand, a middle-class white teacher might choose to teach *The Bluest Eye* so that, by focusing only on racism, it would be possible to avoid even discussing incest. Incest survivors are likely to experience such a pedagogy of avoidance as yet another betrayal by an authority figure.

Despite these and other pedagogical problems—including what now seem to be my own excessive fears about self-disclosure in the classroom—autobiographical reading, writing and teaching have been beneficial to my students and to me. The process of writing autobiographical scholarship has enabled me to externalize and analyze personal traumas, thereby overcoming most of their debilitating effects. In addition, to my surprise and pleasure, my autobiographical academic book, *Authoring a Life*, has attracted readers not only from outside my discipline—such as scholars in creative writing, education and family counselling—but also from outside the academy, such as survivors of childhood sexual abuse and the professionals who work with them in psychotherapy or in chemical dependency programs. This wider readership has given me a sense of community, a kinship that intensifies when survivors respond to *Authoring a Life* by telling me their own stories of trauma and recovery. Through these exchanges of stories, I have come to think of personal criticism as a new form of consciousness raising, a way of putting into practice the old but still important slogan: the personal is the political. Far from reifying the personal, this sharing of reflections about our personal experiences, allows us to participate in the ultimate goal of radical introspection: insight toward social action.

**NOTES**

1. For more on this topic, see Maher and Tetrault.
2. I began to feel the effects of this shadow during the summer of 1997. I was burned-out, joyless, and in constant physical pain from too many hours at my desk. This pain finally forced me to face my shadow-self: in the process of writing an essay called “Our Body Is Our School,” I came to understand that, in my personal quest for academic excellence I had, like the university itself, come to overvalue the intellect at the expense of my body and spirit.
Fortunately, through radical introspection, I have come to understand the damaging effects of our current construction of schooling. This essay is forthcoming from Heinemann/Boynton in a collection called *Facing the Shadow in Education*, edited by Regina Foehr.

3. In 1998, a number of male students signed up for my graduate seminar, “The Use of the Personal in Scholarship,” (a title borrowed from the *PMLA* forum on this topic in 1996). All responded positively to this transgressive mixed-genre form of writing.

4. On February 18, 1996, I read a portion of a personal essay “My Friend, Joyce Carol Oates,” in the *word up!* series sponsored by Iowa State University’s creative writing program. This essay, first published in *The Intimate Critique*, became a chapter in *Authoring a Life.*