Why was it so hard for Lynn Bloom to tell her stories of part-time instructor hell sitting on the floor with the kitty litter, of the “Gang of Four” who sought to eliminate her writing program administrator position so that she could not get tenure, and of telling her students that she ran naked into the hall of a Stockholm hostel to escape rape? Because she is a woman? No, we protest. Even in the early 1990s, English studies was beyond that kind of overt gender discrimination. Because she told women’s stories? This explanation hits closer to the mark. Bloom told stories that made her feminized status too real for us, stories that exposed the ways that trailing spouses were nearly always women, stories in which writing program directors were often also women managing the un-tenure-worthy task of overseeing composition instructors, stories that hinted she had to expose herself to us to stop English studies from doing figuratively to her and other women what a masked man attempted to do to her in the women’s bathroom of a Stockholm hostel.

We struggle to integrate these stories and their implications into our lives because they expose the privileges of male gender and middle-class academic professorships. We don’t know how to respond when those who have been victimized by the system get voice and use it to expose injustice. We fear those who are willing to be vulnerable, claiming the voice that academic discourse practices work so hard to avoid any suggestion that there’s a real human being addressing the subject—sometimes even with (gasp!) passion.

—Lynn Bloom, “Voices” (271)

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to deny them: the right to tell their stories, claim relevance for them, and, in doing so, challenge the notion that the privilege that we want to believe we earned by our intelligence, talent, and hard work may be based—at least in part—in maleness, whiteness, middle-class backgrounds, or other markers of privilege. Put another way, although we have taken the social turn in composition studies and have begun to address various kinds of identity issues, we struggle with the deeper implications of that turn, both for ourselves and for the beloved profession we have worked so hard to build.

My representation of Bloom’s story illustrates the complexities of taking the social turn deeper. For example, the “we” voice I use is problematic. I choose it because I want Bloom to know that I’ve heard her, that hers and other women’s stories have helped me begin to understand my male privilege and to change the way I interact with women, have prompted me to use the positions of authority that I inhabit to get living wages and benefits for those who teach first-year composition, and have motivated me to spend hot summer days hauling furniture into the offices I had renovated so that new instructors I hired would have decent places to meet with their students.

The “we” voice is also problematic because it divides; it makes me sound like I might only be talking to other men, and it does not reflect the affinity I feel with Bloom because I have also written unwelcome stories that were silenced until I found editors who understood why such stories needed telling. In some sense I feel trapped by the us/them nature of how I have cast the set of stories from Bloom’s groundbreaking 1992 College English article. This us/themness was necessary in her piece to bring women’s problematized status to the fore, but now we need more—we need to see how the problem has morphed and how it intersects with other aspects of identity, and if I’m completely honest, I want Bloom (and others) to think about what it means for me to be a gay man in this discipline.

In the 2003 article “Voices,” in which she tells the backstory of the writing and publishing of “Teaching College English as a Woman,” Bloom suggests that we must break the convention of person-less academic writing; she argues that women’s stories must be told by women. “Who will do it, if we don’t? The time has come to attach our names to our actions” (274). Attaching names and faces to our actions has not been easy for us as a discipline; the long-standing bias against the personal in academic writing discourages us from this kind of ownership. As Debra Journet notes, in composition research, narratives “are still being written against the grain of academic discourse” (14). Given this history and the complexity of the task before us, do we dare to take the next step in the social turn, and accept what it would mean for us to do so?

At the heart of my argument is that rhetoric and composition, as well as English studies more generally, needs unwelcome stories to progress along the trajectory set
up by the social turn. To be clear, I am not arguing that we need only unwelcome stories to move forward, nor, as Journet argues, that all narratives need to be personal to be valuable or that personal narratives are inherently more authentic than other kinds of genres (16–17). Instead, I contend that unwelcome stories are crucial because they can play an important role in exposing our individual and collective complicity in the ongoing systems of oppression and discrimination that marginalize many groups in our culture. Indeed, in arguing for the relevance and transformative power of stories, Malea Powell describes the continuing bias against narrative in general and personal narrative more specifically as the “biggest colonizing trick of them all—erasing real bodies in real conflict in the real world by separating mind from body, theory from practice to keep us toiling away in the service of a discourse that disadvantages almost every one of us” (“Stories” 401).

We need stories that disturb us so that we can begin to shift the fields of intelligibility in which we operate. Some of these stories need to be us/them stories in which a single difference issue is called out and brought into dramatic relief, and other stories need to expose the interconnected nature of identity—that very few of us are disenfranchised or privileged in all situations. And we need the means to understand these stories, to learn what we can from them, but also to take both our own and others’ stories seriously by scrutinizing them for what they omit. It is a difficult and delicate task that I recommend, but there is real hope that we can do it if we are willing to account for our own positioning within the discourses of power and marginalization, and if we are willing to work together to develop new understandings of what it means for us to do so individually and collectively.

In the body of this article, I seek to add to work that has engaged in the telling and teaching of unwelcome stories, in two ways. First, I argue that identity matters by telling an unwelcome story of my own. Then, I propose several strategies for engaging in responsible cross-boundary discourse through a queer reading of three important arguments made by African American scholars in our field: Jacqueline Jones Royster’s CCCC chair’s address, “When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own”; Vershawn Ashanti Young’s “Your Average Nigga”; and Vorris Nunley’s Keepin’ It Hushed.

**Identity Matters**

The incident that pushed me to be out as a gay man to my students occurred fifteen years ago. I was sitting at my desk grading papers and read the following lines in a student paper:

The first people I exclude from my circle [of humanity] are homosexuals. They have no right to be able to do those sick and impure actions. Not even the dumbest animal on earth performs these disgusting acts.
In my comments to this student, I asked him to think about the likely impact of his statement on any gay and lesbian readers of his paper, and I revealed to him that I was one of those readers, challenging him in his next revision to think about how to make a more nuanced argument. He chose not to accept my invitation for a more substantive discussion and simply removed the passage from his draft. His was not the only such paper I received that semester, so after a brave young lesbian outed herself in the class, I did the same.

At the time, I understood all too clearly how this personal revelation made me vulnerable to my students. As Susan Talburt observes, “For the gay or lesbian academic, the personal becomes the sexual; sexual identity becomes the political,” and “the rhetoric of identity politics and universities’ responses to it have had the social and academic effect of conflating identity with minority affiliation” (56). I also came to understand that my revelation to my student complicated his rhetorical situation. Some might argue that my response limited my student’s freedom of speech. However, I contend that his freedom of expression was limited by his own reluctance or inability to take responsibility for the likely effects of his statements—to engage in real dialogue with a real homosexual rather than to pronounce judgments on a class of people he previously saw as dismissible.

Did I do enough for this student? At the time I thought so, but now I wonder what it would have looked like if he had engaged in the hard task of taking responsibility for his statements, for his beliefs that people like me were sick and impure. Could he really have undergone such a radical transformation in my class? Should he have had to do so? Could I have designed the course to provide other means for him to own up to the consequences of his bigotry? Should it be my responsibility to do so? At the time, it really didn’t occur to me to think of this student as a bigot. Although I was shocked and offended by his statements, my response to him was guided primarily by the fact that he was my student, and it was my job to engage him as a writer, to try to help him develop as a writer. Being a real live homosexual with him seemed the best way to do that.

This young man continued to be engaged as a writer in my class, and he wrote several other papers that showed real growth as a writer. However, if all he learned from his paper that sought to exclude homosexuals from his circle of humanity is that homosexuals are real people who sometimes have positions of power, and that there may be consequences to taking potshots at such people, then that was not such a bad lesson. Yet we ought to aspire to more with our use of the personal in our teaching and research than just to shut down discourse that is homophobic, racist, sexist, classist, ableist, and otherwise intolerant.

My point in this story is to illustrate how identity is often (if not always) at stake in rhetoric and composition pedagogy, and that the attendant power issues may not be as simple as traditional approaches to pedagogy and research methods assume.
Certainly as the student’s teacher and as a scholar offering this story as part of our larger disciplinary conversation, I exercise considerable power in both contexts. However, that power is not absolute; in his paper, my student attempted to pathologize me and people like me, tapping into a dominant cultural value that continues to allow LGBT people to be socially, culturally, and legally marginalized. As I have argued elsewhere (“Informed Dissent”), the usual assumptions about power and responsibility gloss over the interactions of competing systems of power.1 Further, such situations are not anomalies; though the vast majority of my interactions with my students do not involve such dramatic identity negotiations, identity is always at issue in ways that are multiple and not always easy to sort out.

My second premise in this article is that the same is true for the field of rhetoric and composition: identity matters. We are always negotiating identity in our research, theory, and pedagogy, and to pretend that this is not the case is to exercise a version of privilege similar to the one my student tried to exercise in his paper—an unquestioning privilege that presumes the right to dismiss the experiences and perspectives that are not part of the usual dominant cultural values and the discursive practices that maintain them. However, how we understand and address identity also matters: just as we must be careful not to accept dominant, white, male, Christian values and discourse practices as natural, we must also not focus exclusively on the difference issue or issues that mark us as different from the presumed norm. Let me be clear about two things. I am proud to be part of a discipline that has learned much about what it means to manage the discourses of power in our theory, research, and pedagogy; however, there is a real danger in congratulating ourselves on what we have achieved and failing to continually attend to our complicity in maintaining the discourses of power.

The notion that identity matters is not new with me. I distill it from the work of more scholars than I can cite here. Indeed, a body of work has enthusiastically taken up the challenge of understanding what it means to reconceive of rhetoric and composition theory, practice, and pedagogy as negotiating discourses. Two aspects of this body of work are particularly important for my purposes: First, we have come to understand composition students and other writers as active users of language who bring varied home discourses to the project of engaging in what passes as academic and professional discourse (see Shaughnessy; Gee). Second, we have developed increasing sophisticated understandings of how the discourse practices of dominant culture are problematic for women (for example, Kirsch, Maor, Massey, Nickson-Massey, and Sheridan-Rabideau; Jarratt and Worsham), have marginalized the discourse practices of some people of color (LaBov; Smitherman; Royster), have erased indigenous rhetorical traditions (Anzaldúa; Bizzaro; Lyons; Nunley; Powell, “Blood and Scholarship”), have been problematic for working-class people (Bloom, “Freshman Composition”), have continued to erase or pathologize LGBT people...
and those seen as abled in other than the expected ways (Alexander and Wallace; Brueggemann, Feldmeier White, Dunn; Heifferon, and Cheu; Mossman), have erased religious beliefs in general (Goodburn; Rand), and have been hostile to spiritual practices that do not mesh well with the dominant Judeo-Christian traditions (Anzaldúa).

As I have argued elsewhere ("Shallow Literacy"), despite this laudable trajectory, we have been slow to embrace the notion that both our personhoods—as composition theorists, researchers, and teachers—and the identities of our students and other interlocutors matter in ways that make us responsible to each other beyond our conscious intentions. To explore what it means to take up the next challenge in the social turn, I focus on developing strategies for engaging in what Royster has called cross-boundary discourses. My purpose is to identify some specific strategies that we can use in our teaching, scholarship, and lives to get beyond the notion that identity does not matter, so that we can account for and address the very real differences that have the potential to divide us. However, I also want to illustrate what such efforts look like, to expose the hard issues that doing such work will entail; so, with some trepidation, I offer a queer reading of the work of three African American scholars of rhetoric and composition to tease out means for moving forward.

**Strategies for Engaging in Cross-Boundary Discourses**

I have been compelled on too many occasions to count to sit as a well-mannered Other, silently, in a state of tolerance that requires me to be as expressionless as I can manage, while colleagues who occupy a place of entitlement different from my own talk about the history and achievements of people from my ethnic group, or even about their perceptions of our struggles. (Royster 30)

I was worried that Cam would see me as a faggot and an Uncle Tom because in the ghetto where I grew up, school was construed as the ultimate site of middle class whiteness, likely because the mandated language variety is a reified White English Vernacular. (Young 699)

Blacks still speak differently in front of White folks and others in the public sphere: Black folks still wear the mask. The mask does more than grin and lie. It domesticates, disciplines, and commodifies African American rhetorics and African American subjectivities: the mask does not come free. (Nunley 1)

I begin my queer reading of the work of these three African American rhetoricians with their own words because I want to exercise care in how I discuss rhetorical theory based in experiences I have not lived. In Nunley’s terms, I am concerned that my whiteness has the real potential to domesticate and commodify the “other,” and in Royster’s terms I am keenly aware that I begin this discussion from a place of racial entitlement that has the potential to intrude into the discourses and lived experiences of those who are racialized as others in US society in problematic ways.
that must be read as systematic oppression. Such acts, as Royster argues, “are not random acts of unkindness” (31). In my queer reading of the work of these three scholars, I want to show engaged respect for wisdom drawn from experiences with marginalization that I have not lived; I want to seek out both what is common in our experiences in speaking and writing from the margins as well as what is different. However, I also want to encourage us all to move beyond discourse that is so centered in its own experience of marginalization that it does not pause to consider how it might marginalize others.

I begin this reading in the most critical place for me: as a gay man, I must ask Young what would have been so awful about his student thinking that Young might be a faggot. I recognize that I pose this question from a place of racial privilege; although claiming my queerness meant many difficult identity negotiations for me, those difficulties were not particularly related to my whiteness and were likely mitigated to some extent by my racial privilege.

In his article, Young makes the important point that race relations in American education can trap African Americans, particularly African American men, in places where they are not white enough for the educational establishment but also must continually prove their blackness. He illustrates this problem by telling the story of three jobs he lost because he was perceived either as too black because he taught readings about race that made white students uncomfortable, or as not masculine enough in an all-black school. So he tells his mother

that I had been fagged and sissied out, that the black female principal had said, “Some of the students think you’re not masculine enough. You got to change that. You got to act like a man,” it puzzled Momma that I didn’t just grin and bear it. (694)

After this, Young offers the story of his student Cam in a college composition course, problematizing his own reading of Cam:

It wasn’t Cam who called me a nigger to neutralize our differences. I called him one [not literally] to amplify them when he arrived to class on the first day about twenty minutes late, on what Momma used to call CPT (short for Colored People’s Time) [. . . .] I profiled him as a ghetto black man, like the ones I had grown up with and was trying to leave behind. That’s when I thought of him—I’m sorry to say—as a nigger. (698–99)

On issues of race, I appreciate Young’s vulnerability and nuance—particularly his laudable willingness to reveal how he used race to read Cam in a pejorative way. Young’s example reminds me that having experienced prejudice and discrimination because of a stigmatized identity does not inoculate one against participating in subtle forms of prejudice and discrimination toward others in one’s own identity group.

Given this insightful analysis of race in his interactions with Cam, what puzzles me is that although Young is careful to apologize for labeling Cam a “nigger,” he
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does not pause to consider how—intentionally or not—the stories he tells pathologize some forms of masculinity. As a gay reader of his article, I would like him to stop for a moment to acknowledge that the choice between race and masculinity was a false one, that it was based on a notion of masculinity that he now understands in a larger light. But I get no such acknowledgment, so I am not going to sit quietly, as a well-mannered other, while a colleague casually uses terms that have been spat at me in derision, and without so much as a passing reference to the problematic nature of those terms. Indeed, the casualness of Young’s references to being seen as a “faggot” and being “fagged and sissied out” strike me as disrespectful to those of us who are faggots and who embrace our gender-blending tendencies as central to our identities and as valuable contributions not only to society at large but also to our writing pedagogies.

I am acutely aware that Young’s stories are unwelcome to me, but not for the reasons that he might imagine them to be. I welcome the opportunity to learn how the conflict that I felt between my success in school and my masculinity was different from the racialized effect that he experienced. I hear Young when he says, “But the difference between black boys and white boys, however, is that black boys not only feel coerced to give up their masculinity if they do well in school, but they also feel forced to abandon their race—the ultimate impossibility” (700). Thus I choose to temper my disappointment with Young’s casual treatment of homosexuality because I hear Royster’s stories of white trespass into African American lived experience, and, even though I am disturbed by the homophobia and heteronormativity I see operating in his account, I must account for my whiteness as I read Young.

A second reason that I choose to temper my reading of the homophobia and heteronormativity I see here is that I hear Nunley’s argument for the continued importance of African American hush harbors (AAHH) as venues for escaping the overwhelming press of the dominant white culture and the need for black people to always screen and temper because of the ubiquitous presence of whiteness. Even though CCC hardly qualifies as a hush harbor, the last thing I want Young to do is put on a grinning mask for me when he writes in such venues. Yet I am also concerned about giving Young a pass on his casual use of terms that continue to carry homophobic and heteronormative connotations in our society. Although I take seriously my responsibility as a white person not to presume that my own perspectives or aesthetics should be the automatic standard for judging the value of Young’s contribution to our professional discourse, the analysis of the intersections of race and sexual identity in the examples he provides are hardly the most substantive discussions I have read about the complexities of these intersections. Young himself nods to Philip Brian Harper’s more nuanced discussion of the challenges faced by gay men of color, and the many gay men of color who have told me stories of isolation and double prejudice leave me wondering how Young cannot pause in the important point he is making.
How then do we move forward? How do we speak our versions of truth while respecting that others’ versions are grounded in lived experiences that may lead them to other kinds of truths? I have written about this problem from an explicitly queer perspective elsewhere (Compelled to Write). Here, I want to ground my answer in a queer reading of raced rhetoric, using work by Royster and Nunley that puts an edge on the widely accepted belief in our field that language and rhetoric are never neutral, but instead are discursive in that identity is always at stake to greater or lesser degrees. More specifically, I read Royster’s concept of cross-boundary discourse as making explicit that identity negotiations are not done innocently among people who inhabit the same kinds of subject positions. In one sense, I read Royster’s and Nunley’s work as continuing the challenges to flat notions of identity, agency, and language that our field has taken up in its use of postmodern theory in the last twenty years (see Faigley; Berlin). However, I also want to make it clear that Royster and Nunley, among other scholars, presume that identity matters in ways that are not simply based on idiosyncratic differences among people who have largely the same inherent positions of power in society. Instead, they challenge us to understand that identity, agency, and language are negotiated across boundaries created by systems of difference that have real consequences.

I read Nunley as one of a group of scholars in our field who press the postmodern problem of agency into new ground when he takes a slightly different tack in regard to Henry Giroux’s notion of rationalities as terrains in and through which subjectivities are constructed. Nunley argues that we need to see African American hush harbor rhetoric (AAHHR), and more broadly blackness itself, “as a field of intelligibility” (10). He further argues that we need not only to recognize whiteness as a sphere of rationality that has the potential to marginalize others, but to also acknowledge that AAHHR and other rationalities “resist the neoliberal tendency to reduce Blackness to an easily consumable commodity” (15).

The seeming conundrum that Nunley’s view of blackness as a rationality poses for me, as a white reader of Young’s piece, is that I must balance my need to critique Young for failing to engage with a queer rationality while always being mindful that he speaks and writes from a racialized rationality that I can never fully understand. How then do we speak to each other across such differences? How do we find ways, as Gloria Anzaldúa so tellingly describes, to keep from shouting across the river at each other? I ground my reading of Royster’s and Nunley’s answers to this question in feminist and queer theorist Judith Butler’s notion of opacity. Butler explains, “If we are formed in the context of relations that become partially irrecoverable to us, then that opacity seems built into our formation and follows from our status as beings who are formed in relations of dependency” (20).
As I read it, Butler’s point is that individual identity is formed by discourses that an individual cannot control and, to some extent, can never fully understand. Thus, we all must come to grips with the ends of our own understanding, with our own opacity. In the context of cross-boundary discourse, Butler’s notion of opacity has three important implications: (1) we have all been constructed by discourses that we do not fully understand; (2) we have all participated in discourses that have constructed others in ways that we do not fully understand; and (3) we are responsible for the implications of our participation in those discourses even if we do not fully understand them. Rather than see opacity as a reason to throw up one’s hands at the impossibility of the task of engaging in perfectly responsible discourse, I see opacity in general, and my own opacity in specific, as a generative place to engage with others, as a call to give up the false hope of the objective and embrace subjectivity, not as a necessary evil, but as the only path to whatever wider understanding can be achieved. To flesh out this principle, I turn to three concepts that I have extrapolated from Royster’s speech, and I flesh them out with a bit of queer critique to illustrate what can be gained from taking an explicitly intersectional perspective.

Concept 1: We are (nearly) always talking and writing across boundaries.

At first, this concept seems to run directly against the grain of queer critiques of identity-based notions of difference (see Kopelson) and even against my own argument that such boundaries are almost always multiple: Young is not just speaking from blackness to whiteness, but also from heteronormativity to homosexuality. However, both Nunley and Royster make arguments about the existence of racially identified places that have both physical presence and rhetorical consequences. For example, as I have already noted, Nunley argues that blackness exists as a rationality supported by real hush harbors that are more than just “background upon which people act and upon which subjectivities and identities are performed; they are a significant geography within a network of ontological terrains upon which Black subjectivity, meaning, and existence are constructed” (38). He argues that such rationalities serve as “lifeworlds” that provide the basis for meaningful actions and interactions: “Lifeworlds are the taken-for-granted bundles of beliefs, subjectivities, standpoints, and the language use that ordinary people engage in to create meaning” (37).

Royster provides an important example of conflict between a dominant lifeworld and a lifeworld that has been historically marginalized in American society when she critiques white people who have told her she should think about her lifeworld, proposing that such intrusions would be read as bad “home training”:

People in the neighborhood where I grew up would say, “Where is their home training?” Imbedded in the question is the idea that when you visit other people’s “home places,” especially when you have not been invited, you simply can not go tramping around the house like you own the place, no matter how smart you are, or how much imagination you can muster, or how much authority and entitlement outside that home
you may be privileged to hold. And you certainly can not go around name calling, saying things like, “You people are intellectually inferior and have a limited capacity to achieve,” without taking into account who the family is, what its living has been like, and what its history and achievements have been about. (32)

What I draw from Nunley’s and Royster’s work is that proposals that would sweep across such boundaries and attempt to sweep them away can too easily engage in a kind of cultural violence that erases what does not easily fit into dominant discourses and values. As I argue in Concept 2 that follows, if we do not explicitly work to value cultural experiences and rhetorical practices such as those in AAHH, then, as Nunley argues, we risk losing valuable parts of our collective heritage.

I have a queer suspicion, though, of this talk about lifeworlds, home discourses, and home training because it occurs to me that almost no one of my generation was born into an openly queer lifeworld. I am wary of any hint that we should valorize the lifeworlds into which we are born because I had to deconstruct the white, working-class, evangelical Christian lifeworld into which I was born to construct a queer understanding of my own identity. In this regard, I take seriously Royster’s call for real reciprocity in discourse that crosses the boundaries that continue to define us, and I applaud her warning against the dangers of myopia: “We need to get over our tendencies to be too possessive and to resist locking ourselves into the tunnels of our own vision and direct experience” (33). What I seek to add here are two things: The first is an explicit recognition that such tunnel vision can occur not just across lifeworlds but also within them. Even those of us who respond to clumsy intrusions into a lifeworld by those who inhabit dominant lifeworlds must recognize that the very lifeworlds we seek to protect and preserve may need to be resisted, even fractured, because few lifeworlds are equally welcoming to all who inhabit them. In Nunley’s terms, despite its often marginalized status, the rhetoric of hush harbors cannot be seen as sacrosanct, but must be held responsible for the ways that it represents and interacts with those who have experienced other versions of marginalization.

My second point is that some of the lifeworlds necessary for resisting systemic oppression and ongoing marginalization in our society must be actively constructed through resistance not only of dominant bourgeois culture but, at times, of lifeworlds that are themselves resisting the domination of bourgeois culture. In short, having experienced one form of systemic oppression does not automatically inoculate one against participating in systemic oppression along another axis of difference, or, as I noted earlier, from doing so even within an axis of difference.

Concept 2: Cross-boundary discourse must be reconceived as more than speaking from one unitary home place to another.

Here I want to affirm Royster’s point that many of us need to follow Audre Lorde’s lead and speak from positions that dominant culture would rather remain silent, because, as Royster says, “[D]espite whatever frustration and vulnerability I might feel,
Despite my fear that no one is listening to me or is curious enough to try to understand my voice, it is still better to speak” (36). Further, as Victor Villanueva reminds us, race continues to matter; pretending that we have achieved a color-blind society is treacherous as the ever-morphing tropes of racism become increasingly subtle.

I also want to amend Royster’s point in two ways. First, as I have already argued, we must understand that these home places are not unitary places free from participation in forms of systemic marginalization of others, nor are all such home places necessarily originary, inherited automatically from one’s early environment. Indeed, queer people often have to seek out new home places and create second families because openly claiming a queer identity often disrupts the presumed heteronormativity of a variety of relationships. Second, the need for respect and for educating oneself about the lived experiences of others is multiple. Royster, among others, has done our field a great service by calling out the arrogance of the dominant in presuming that it is normative and that it is the position from which all other lived experiences should be understood and valued. However, we must all press beyond this basic dominant-marginalized binary, and those of us who have experienced systemic marginalization bear the same responsibility to understand the lived experiences of others who have been othered as we demand of those who have othered us.

Nunley suggests one of the critical difficulties in taking up such a task: that the dominant perspective can too easily hollow out rhetorical practices and discursive traditions based in traditions that are seen as outside the mainstream. He says, “As with queer, womanist, and other so-called ethnic or cultural rhetorics that are often alluded to but rarely taken into account as theoretically substantive outside the concerns with identity and cultural AAHHR is rendered almost irrelevant to the production and manufacture of knowledge” (4). Nunley is specific that such an effect occurs within our own field, challenging the tethering of rhetorical nomenclature to neo-Aristotelian traditions to the exclusion of concepts and practices from other traditions: “African American improvisation remains tethered to African American culture with little or no migration into the general rhetorical nomenclature” (4). My point here is that Nunley helps us to understand the need for substantive engagement with rhetorical traditions that have been seen as outside the mainstream, and Royster warns us about the difficulties of engaging with those traditions. Real differences exist, and our collective understandings of rhetorical theory and practice suffer from not engaging in those differences. However, such engagement requires dealing with lifeworlds or rationalities that are not easily accessible to those who do not live within them, and we must be careful in such engagement not to simply appropriate what we do not fully understand. Yet, as Butler argues, we are responsible for what lies beyond our own experiences, our own lifeworlds.

At this point, I can picture the good-hearted people of our field throwing up their hands and exclaiming, “We’ve already done so much, how can we be expected
to do more? And we’re still so new, still so tenuous within the academy; how can we give up the caché of the 2,500-year Western rhetorical tradition?” I can also picture those who have fought so hard in our field to get a marginalized perspective onto the agenda wanting respite from the struggle. Indeed, I’ve sat in those CCCC ballrooms and listened to panels rightly celebrating all that has been achieved in regard to race and gender in our field, and I have felt unwelcome and uneasy in those ballrooms—too often hearing nothing that suggests those on the dais are pressing beyond their own perspectives or stopping to consider that they also need to learn more about other marginalized positions. It seems particularly unfair that those who have worked so hard to get a voice should now be asked to do more, particularly when so many who inhabit positions of privilege have not yet done so, but this is the road before us.

Concept 3: Engaging in responsible cross-boundary discourse requires reciprocal dialogue in our personal, professional, and pedagogical discourse.

One of the most concrete things we can do in rhetorical studies to move toward curriculum and pedagogy that engages in responsible cross-boundary discourse is to explicitly accept that the basic activity is no longer informing, persuading, or entertaining, but rather, as Royster argues, engaging in reciprocal dialogue (33). What does this mean, and how do we do this? Royster provides a hint about how to proceed on this front when she writes of feeling reduced by those occupying positions of racial privilege to one voice, her supposedly “authentic voice” based in what is perceived as African American rhetorical traditions (36). This is, of course, a version of what Nunley describes as the tethering of so-called ethnic or cultural rhetorics to issues of culture or identity rather than seeing them and the people who use them as contributing to the larger body of what counts as rhetoric theory and practice that is relevant to society more broadly. Yet how do we engage in such discussions given that we can never completely know the other? How do we avoid the kind of hollowing out and commodification that Nunley warns against? And how do we build curricula and create pedagogies that train others to engage in the tricky business of cross-boundary discourse?

As I have already suggested, each of us must engage in discourse knowing that multiple aspects of identity are nearly always in play in rhetorical exchanges, and recognizing the limits of our own understanding. However, such individual work, though necessary for progress, is not the end of our responsibility. Here I turn briefly to the work of indigenous scholars who have most directly challenged the presumption that rhetorical theory and practices should begin with the roots of the Western tradition in ancient Greek culture. For example, Powell has argued:

I believe that scholarship in America can never be staked forth on neutral ground. I believe that even as the marginalized and radical “anti-disciplinary” and/or “cross-disciplinary” discipline, rhetoric takes for granted its originary relationship to Greece
and Europe—its fundamental relationship to imperialism—and gives little critical thought at all to the geographical space in which it now exists. ("Blood" 11)

Powell and others raise the critical question of how we unpack such imperialism; how can those of us who are, at least to some extent, born into lifeworlds that do not immediately problematize these imperialist traditions substantively contribute to changing this presumed originary relationship? Scott Lyons suggests one useful starting place when he asks, “What do Indians want from writing?” and answers it, among other ways, with the concept of rhetorical sovereignty, which he defines as “the inherent right and ability of peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desire in this pursuit, to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse” (449–50). At first the concept of rhetorical sovereignty seems contrary to the notion that we are all responsible for the consequences of our interactions with those whose lifeworlds differ from our own. But as I have argued in this piece, we must begin thinking about such interactions by acknowledging that differences still exist and still have negative effects for many in our society. Obviously, such sovereignty could never be absolute, but we simply must do better than saying, After you master what we have historically found valuable, then you may add some multicultural spice.

If we hope to successfully engage in reciprocal discourse in our curricula and pedagogy, then we must imagine different goals and different means of achieving those goals. Further, we must recognize that doing so will mean that we will all, to some extent, be responsible for engaging in discourse that interacts with perspectives and lived experiences that are opaque to us, that, no matter how hard we work, can never be fully accessible to us. Rather than see this conundrum as the end of any possible definition of responsible discourse, I see it as the beginning place not only for responsible dialogue, but also for responsible curricula and pedagogy.

In practice, then, engaging in reciprocal discourse means that we should speak for or from things beyond our own lived experience only with great care, and then only with respect for those who know more and only after real attempts to educate ourselves. I have felt the need to observe this principle in discussions I have had with colleagues about building curriculum for an undergraduate major in writing studies. I want to propose a course in indigenous rhetorics, yet I know that I haven’t learned enough to teach such a course. Here I feel caught between the need to respect those who know more than I do—those whose personal lives and professional efforts give them deep and nuanced understandings of rhetorical practices that still, at times, puzzle me—and the need to do my part, to not accept my lack of knowledge and experience as a reason to do nothing, to fall back on the Western rhetorical traditions in which I was trained, in which I feel comfortable.
In addition to engaging with care with perspectives that fall outside our lived experience, a second important concept for engaging in reciprocal discourse is understanding that mastery should no longer be the presumed goal. Rather than presume that we have reached or can ever reach complete understanding of responsible discourse, we need to recognize that we are all on different journeys to understanding. Although we can never fully understand another’s unique journey, it may be useful to keep in mind that there are three basic types of trajectories for such journeys. One trajectory is from positions of relative privilege toward acknowledging and understanding the unearned advantages that such privileges provide. These journeys will likely require a newfound humility and a concerted effort to understand the other in substantive ways. Another trajectory is from positions of systematic marginalization and overt discrimination toward voices that decide how they will address those who have marginalized and discriminated against them. Here a primary issue is likely to be to what extent one chooses to assimilate to dominant cultural values and discursive practices, and what costs and benefits accrue to those choices. A third trajectory is from the problematic protection of closets toward identities that claim aspects of self that society has sought to make invisible. These kinds of journeys will likely entail negotiating changes in relationships when what was previously hidden or unacknowledged is brought to light.

No matter our own trajectory, we need to understand all three as best we can because we all have students, colleagues, friends, and family who move along these trajectories. Also, we need to be prepared to risk sharing our own unwelcome stories as well as considering what we have to learn from others’ stories. As Butler suggests, none of us will ever arrive at a perfect state of enlightenment, but we owe it to ourselves and to others to explore and expand the limits of our own perspectives and experiences.

Notes

1. Although I would prefer a more dialogic approach in using this story, allowing my former student the opportunity to respond to my reading of the situation, I have to respect his decision not to engage further with me about this issue.

Works Cited


