

# CRITICAL MEMOIR AND IDENTITY FORMATION: BEING, BELONGING, BECOMING

**Nancy Mack**

Wright State University

Critique can function as more than a scholarly pursuit; it can become a valued skill for surviving as an outsider within an academic context. Because universities are complex, largely reproductive systems, being a hard worker and following the rules does not necessarily lead to reward or even much notice. Increasing demands and multiple layers of political machinations foster disillusionment and alienation. Participating in programs, grants, and other initiatives only increases the perils, not to mention running the gauntlet of publishing and tenure. As egotistical as I may be, it is best to remember that the academic universe is not the only place fraught with crushing hegemonic pressures. Being a parent, teenager, or restaurant server all necessitate the ability to analyze the forces that impose limitations and subvert one's agency to author ethical, answerable acts. Fortunately, critique has long been expressed through many productive means such as music, cartoons, jokes, parodies, postings on social media, clothes, hair styles, body art, gestures, and of course, various types of composing and writing.

This chapter forwards memoir as a writing assignment that can be informed by a critical notion of subject formation. The heuristic activities that I describe were developed for courses on different levels: first year composition, English education writing pedagogy, and several graduate seminars. Recently, I incorporated a few of these generative strategies into an online graduate course about critical memoir. After commenting on the constraints of theoretical taxonomies, a series of heuristic strategies are outlined to increase awareness of identity as a conflicted representation that is always open to revision through writing.

## TROUBLING TAXONOMIES

Regretfully, labels reinforce power relations behind reified categories. Nevertheless, taxonomies may come in handy when trying to wrap one's head around a huge amount of information during an introductory course about composition theory (Mack, 2009). A disclaimer always needs to be fronted when using such

devices that taxonomies are cultural generalizations that in most cases rewrite history to benefit the reigning group. Fulkerson's (1979, 1990, 2005) serial glosses relate an overly dramatic, progress-narrative of the field. A people's oral history always varies from the official, printed versions, with some of the old timers choosing silence rather than the futility of constructing an alternative narrative. I merely wish to trouble the master narrative for the field by pointing out that the names commonly representing the theory camps in what is called Rhetoric and Composition should be contested. Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu (2010) astutely argue that these two words that represent the field itself deserve critique. We might question which term should come first and whether the "and" implies equality or mere addition. The names for individual theory groups did not precede the development of a particular perspective, nor did these labels emerge from individual scholars meeting as a group, voting on an identifier, and donning T-shirts with slogans to represent their mutual ideology. At the time that some of these camps supposedly came into being, I would have bet on totally different names as gaining popularity. For example, I would have suggested "transformative pedagogies" rather than the cumbersome "social epistemic rhetoric," but James Berlin never requested my advice.

History is far more complex than any taxonomy can represent. Most scholars have careers that span decades with their positions developing if not taking twists and turns related to forces that may not be fully revealed. Proffering a new position will always come with great political risk and may indeed necessitate the Foucauldian moment of labeling others to create a somewhat undeserved distinction. Maybe the academic desire to coin a new concept leads to the emphasis on difference so we can offer a new and improved concept. Yet such stress on difference also may lead to categories that imply binaries and warring factions, even when they may not exist. Raul Sanchez comments on the need for a progressive cause and effect claim when forwarding a new theory:

We might even say that process theory was invented by postprocess theory in the same way that, according to Susan Miller, current-traditional theory was invented by process theory .... In a sense then, to participate in a discussion about the relative merits of process and postprocess theories is to use the apparatus, to perform the same act of piety. More importantly, it is also to forego the opportunity to redefine the historical and theoretical terms by which writing will be studied. (2011, p. 187)

Even claims of members' alienation or affiliation may be political projections. These fossilized monikers are hardly accepted team names that rally

scholars under their banners to battle the opposition in disciplinary skirmishes. Taxonomies of theory groups are misrepresentations at best and divisive propaganda at worst. Our critiques should historicize such labels to make these groups more dynamic and even revisable.

Richard Weaver (1953) warns against an over-emphasis on theory god-terms. These potent terms are vague and therefore discount the complexities of the daily classroom experience. Patricia Harkin (1991) has forwarded a more grounded notion of teacher lore as employing multiple theoretical approaches in service of the teacher's many responsibilities. Thus, a theoretically informed teacher might devise a writing course that draws from multiple approaches: traditional skills, process procedures, expressive needs, cognitive development, academic initiation, critical concerns, rhetorical demands, logical argumentation, genre practices, civic responsibilities, disciplinary knowledge, local imperatives, postmodern alienation, and real-world communicative activities. To make such determinations in curriculum design is not eclectic but rather dynamic in which multiple theories must interplay in a changing, local context. As someone who might be labeled as a practitioner, I am advocating for more theory to complicate our practices, rather than pitting one mythologized theory group against the other.

## CRITICAL MEMOIR AND IDENTITY FORMATION

I am somewhat surprised that the personal narrative survives as a writing assignment. Although students favor it, the personal narrative has been critiqued for promoting a naive notion of a singular, static, authentic self. Abandoning the personal narrative in favor of the combative, polarizing argument assignment seems to be in fashion in first-year college writing courses and has trickled down into high school assignment initiatives and the Common Core standards. Some teachers will even say that the personal narrative is too easy for students to write because it is organized chronologically while others would counter that using a familiar structure makes it possible to focus on other more important skills. The personal narrative has been condemned as everything from too emotive to too culturally scripted. While examining her teaching in a personal essay course, Amy Robillard reveals her disciplinary guilt:

Personal essay assignments become subject to the same by now well-honed critiques of personal narrative assignments. The personal narrative is too easy, uncritical. We shouldn't assign personal narratives because we're only inviting students to confess their most embarrassing experiences to us. We're

not therapists, after all. (Sharp-Hoskins & Robillard, 2012, p. 324)

I respect Robillard's distinction between the personal narrative and the personal essay as a revision that comes from a more critical understanding of subject formation, including her own narrative of herself as the "good" teacher. From this article, both Sharp-Hoskins and Robillard model their critical reflection process: "We argue, then, that it is only by recognizing our own implication, our own attachments, in the economies of emotion that circumscribe us that we can begin to challenge the master narratives of the 'good teacher'" (2012, p. 333). Disciplinary critiques should motivate teacher scholars to interrogate and revise their assignments in an ongoing dialectic between theory and practice.

My revision of the personal narrative assignment derives from an eclectic mix of Russian cognitive psychology and critical theory. As a first generation college student, I cannot avoid thinking about students' motives for enrolling in college courses. Most enroll in degree programs to make a change in identity, be it from local high school student to a more cosmopolitan college student, from one career to another, or more hopefully from one economic stratum to another. In his textbook about educational psychology for teachers, Vygotsky's last sub-heading in the last chapter is entitled "Life as Creation" (1997). Vygotsky argues for a type of subject formation that is a social process throughout one's lifetime that requires active participation in its creation. Thus, it is no surprise that for Vygotsky, self-regulation is about the development of metacognitive thinking versus controlling discrete behaviors. Self-regulation is about self-formation and becoming the person one wants to be within a given social milieu. Certainly, enrolling in college can be an act of agency to change one's circumstances that implicates identity formation as a context for inquiry, reflection, and revision through writing.

To create what might be an artificial difference from the personal narrative, I have chosen to label this type of writing assignment a critical memoir. I started with Lucy Calkins' (1986) delineation of narrative as what happened, autobiography as when it happened, and memoir as who it happened to and how that experience represents an important theme in that person's life. As I became more versed in postmodern subjectivity, I started to think of memoir as constructed from multiple subject positions:

- The naive self who was present at the time of the experience.
- The subjective self who interprets the experience as the culture would suggest.
- The future self who imagines the person that the author wishes to become.

- The author self who negotiates among the other selves and constructs meaning (Mack, 2007).

Memoir encourages selectivity of experience, multiple interpretations, future orientation, and agency in representation. To push the memoir genre to become more critical, identity formation should be complicated further. Thus, writing activities should promote reflection about identity as being (Mack 2006)

- multiple in various cultural roles,
- conflicted by acts of accommodation, resistance, and opposition,
- temporal within larger historical and economic forces,
- materially situated in a local, dynamic space,
- embodied in emotionally-laden, lived experience,
- interpreted and co-created by society,
- mediated through language that is culturally ideological,
- developmental through continual maturation and education,
- revised by intentional and willful agency, and
- connected to literacies that are larger than the classroom.

This is indeed a tall order. In some regards a critical memoir approach asks the writer to continually reconsider one's own master narratives, questioning the who, what, when, where, and why of the potential ways that the stories could be told. More than questioning whether the story is true are the questions about how the story functions and how it could be actively re-interpreted and revised to represent a newly constructed, more ethical truth. The emphasis on reflection in composition studies informs my desire to include critical interpretation in all aspects of memoir writing. Kathleen Yancey (1998) and Donna Qualley (1997) are both scholars who have emphasized reflection as primary to the composing process.

## CRITICAL HEURISTICS IN PRACTICE

The ten-week graduate course in critical memoir was structured around reading, writing, and reflection in three units: being, belonging, and becoming. The name for the being section of the course was influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "being-as-event" that describes the individual's existence as an activity. In one of my favorite quotes about subjectivity Bakhtin makes the analogy to a rough draft in need of an ethically answerable deed to escape endless drafts in order to "rewrite one's life once and for all in the form of a fair copy" (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 44). Writing critical memoir has the potential to be part of a Bakhtinian answerable deed as the writer decides what the memory means by selecting, examining, reflecting, and finally assigning meaning to it.

To return to Vygotsky's notion of ontological development of life as a creation, adults often have moments when they dredge up the past in order to make sense of it. Perhaps the very moments when we do this are moments of identity crisis when we feel the need to revise our selves. Some may do this with a therapist who generally provides the interpretation while others will merely have an uncritical moment of nostalgia. For a memoir writing course, assigning meaning to memory can engage students in critical reflection. Although the teacher plays a powerful role in this reflection, we should not assume the therapist's role of primary interpreter. Consequently, I did not micromanage students' insights by commenting extensively on drafts or in lengthy individual conferences or emails. These strategies, although potentially effective, were not realistic for my intent or workload. My influence was primarily through the selection of the readings and the creation of a series of heuristics. These careful curricular decisions were my means for fostering the students' reflections. My role as a reader was more one of praising their insights rather than forwarding my reflections on their experiences.

The critical reflection required for a re-interpretation of experience benefits from a stance of inquiry similar to ethnographic research in which patterns emerge from a process that is rich in phenomenological details and data. This ongoing hermeneutic inquiry should ideally happen before, during, and after each memoir writing experience. One student explained the inquiry into memoir this way:

As a writer, memoirs feel deeply personal, almost as if something that could exist without a reader. My understanding of the memoir has been challenged and expanded. Not only do I further appreciate the genre, but the process that must occur in the writing process. Unlike the academic writing process, the memoir writing process is much more an inner experience, requiring the writer to travel through remembrances, trying to find that which real memory is. Victor Villanueva first made me aware of the distinction between memory and remembrances. Memory requires more of a person, and is a process driven activity. It is not until more details and dialogue have surfaced from musing on a remembrance that a memory really begins to shape. Memories are the remembrances that we actually relive, nearly re-creating the experience. True memoir writing comes when that memory is recreated for the reader. I am still working to develop my memoir writing into reader-based prose. It can be emotionally

exhausting to relive remembrances enough to actually meet real memory.

Activities not included here also focused on writing crafts such as details, characters, dialogue, and inner thoughts.

The “being” unit encompassed a wider notion of literacy. Students initially journaled in response to literacy memoirs with a working class focus by Laurel Johnson Black (1995) and Linda Brodkey (1994). Any selection of readings comes with a political agenda. I chose several readings that had a social class theme because class is a major issue for my students; however, I made it clear that students were not required to write about class issues. Also, I wanted readings that did not present tidy, simplistic literacy narratives like those that Jane Greer refers to as “conversion narratives” (2012) or Ishmael Reed critiques as “redemption” narratives (2012). In particular, Black presents a complex understanding of literacy through her value of working class language and the disconnect that her education has caused with her sister. As Patrick Berry proposes, the use of literacy narratives should “move beyond a singular focus on either hope or critique in order to identify the transformative potential of literacy in particular circumstances” (2012, iii). So, the question for the writer becomes how should the literacy narrative function within the individual’s unique identity formation.

I assigned a series of brainstorming prompts that first required students to itemize a wide range of literacy experiences throughout their lives both inside and outside of school. The prompts continued with questions about more complex functions of literacy for purposes of escape, friendship, entertainment, peace-making, status, curiosity, and rebellion against authority. Students were to note themes in their development as well as how literacy functioned for their families, friends, and multiple identity groups. Finally, students considered conflicts related to their literacy, including occasions when they were intentionally silent, refused to communicate, or chose not to become literate about something for a strong reason. Students also responded to other working-class academic memoirs from Dews and Law’s *This Fine Place So Far From Home* (1995). From the prompts and journaling students developed two ideas, drafted, and revised a literacy memoir about experiences that varied from childhood through adulthood. One student’s powerful memoir related the experience of being betrayed by a hate-filled, adolescent diary entry when it was discovered by an abusive stepfather.

The “belonging” unit was named from an article by psychologist Barbara Jensen (2012) in which she characterizes the difference between working and middle classes as “belonging” versus “becoming.” Jensen characterizes the working class sense of self as developing from childhood in close relation to others, as

including or affiliating others whereas the middle class self emerges as separation from others, as negotiating or competing with others. Although I wanted students to consider class conflicts, I opened the heuristics to other types of identity groups.

This unit took longer to implement and involved many more heuristics than the previous unit. Multiple definitions of memoir, culled from several scholars, were presented. In addition to more readings from *This Fine Place So Far From Home* (Dews & Law, 1995), students read selections from Zandy's *Liberating Memory* (1995) and from Rick Bragg (1997) and Paule Marshall (1983). After modeling my own overlapping identity circles related to gender, class, family, relationships, education, location, generation, health, interests, responsibilities, and career, students made their own webs. Another series of prompts invited students to record experiences with language and identity, such as feeling like an insider or outsider, taking a stand or making peace, being offended or offensive, and defending or inspiring others. Students answered a lengthy questionnaire that identified working class markers related to food, clothing, purchases, childhood, home, work, and school; and viewed a hidden class rules chart (Payne, 1996). Students placed life experiences on a graphic organizer, ranking them as accommodating, resisting, or opposing cultural norms. During revision students also read bell hooks (2012), Frank Dobson (2002), and Victor Villanueva (2004). Students had no problems with selecting topics from diverse identity groups and consequently wrote memoirs about race, music, alcoholism, religion, gender, and disability with only one student selecting social class. These memoirs were more complex than earlier ones. Accordingly, the previously mentioned student observed that social class is "a complex system with many layers and much ambiguity."

The third unit about "becoming" springs from Freire's use of "becoming" as a trope in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1973) for creating a critically conscious, future-oriented, literate identity. In a previous critical pedagogy seminar, I created an activity based on Friere's concept of limit situation that guided students to trace moments of frustration to the larger social forces of oppression. Students frequently connected their procrastination in completing assignments with forces inherent to graduate education.

A positive and negative graph activity (Rief, 1992) assigned students to draw and annotate a time line of experiences in order to analyze critical patterns in their lives. Readings included Jacqueline Jones Royster (1996), Janet Bean (2003), and one of my articles (2007). An expanded limit situation heuristic engaged students in listing personal, professional, and writing goals. Students then selected one goal from each category and critically analyzed the forces that thwarted their progress. Limit situations were described as "physical needs, time

constraints, financial problems, power obstacles (permission), social pressures (other people), institutional constraints (rules), historical patterns, and cultural biases.” Next, students imagined impractical and practical solutions for each goal and one small, immediate step that could be taken. The next activity, “Emotional Indicators of Stress,” requested that students think about social systems in which they had been unrewarded, ignored, given extra duties, trivialized, uninformed, left behind, rated poorly, given misleading information, or told lies. After some explanation of who benefits from this type of cultural hegemony, students tracked their recent negative emotions (rage, anger, passive-aggressive desires, frustration, silence, procrastination, fear, guilt, self-loathing, or despair) as a barometer for subtle forms of oppression. Next, a comparison was made to circumstances that elicit the opposite emotions. Finally, students proposed things that could be changed or that they did have power or control over such as their own reactions. This activity was influenced by my interest in economies of emotion, particularly the scholarship of Lynn Worsham (1998), Julie Lindquist (2004), Donna LeCourt (2004), Laura Micciche (2007), and Michalinos Zembylas (2005). Reading explications of emotional labor has helped me to acknowledge that feelings can be connected to agency in subject formation and pedagogy. In other words, critical analysis of emotion brings the potential “to think, feel, and act differently” (Mack, 2007, p. 22). The critical analysis process can begin with an awareness of a bothersome or intense emotion. Feminist scholar Alison Jaggar defines troubling emotions as “outlaw emotions.”

As well as motivating critical research, outlaw emotions may also enable us to perceive the world differently from its portrayal in conventional descriptions. They may provide the first indications that something is wrong with how things are. Conventionally unexpected or inappropriate emotions may precede our conscious recognition that accepted descriptions and justifications often conceal as much as reveal the prevailing site of affairs. Only when we reflect on our initially puzzling irritability, revulsion, anger, or fear may we bring to consciousness our “gut-level” awareness that we are in a situation of coercion, cruelty, injustice, or danger (Mack, 2007, p. 161).

To some extent I wanted students to view their outlaw emotions as an early warning system that alerts them to examine the oppressive forces that may be connected to these emotions.

After drafting a limit situation memoir, students completed a pronoun revision activity based on a presentation by Karen Hollis in which a paragraph is selected that contains the singular pronouns of I, me, or my that are revised to plural pronouns of we, us, and our. Students then pondered how their individual limit situation might be connected to the experiences of a larger group of people. The diversity of memoir topics seemed to widen as the term progressed.

For the limit situation memoir, topics addressed family member's rejection of educated vocabulary, deciding to leaving seminary, dealing with negative comments from a professor, accepting polygamy, financial problems with meeting social obligations, and negative comments about weight.

As part of the final portfolio reflection process, I shared my writing manifest to list and asked students to create one of their own, an activity I hoped would help students reflect on what they wanted their writing to be in the future.

When the only writing you do is school writing, the teacher controls all the assignments, topics, and deadlines. Finding the time, motivation, and support necessary to keep writing outside of school is incredibly difficult. It is as if every other part of our lives conspires to prevent writing. Many other parts of our lives cannot be delayed to give us time to write. What we can control is our attitude. A negative attitude can block all possibilities to write. If the writer cannot believe in the importance of his or her own writing, then nothing will get done. It is time to claim your writing for yourself, for your own projects, for your own purposes, desires and dreams.

In addition to reflective journal entries after each of the three essays, the portfolio cover essay assignment requested that students contemplate insights gained from writing their memoirs as well as themes that connected the individual pieces and their readings. Here are two excerpts from different students:

Both memoirs make a strong case for the claim that we must constantly reinvent ourselves while fighting against the societal forces that want us to adhere to dominant rules that may not benefit us.

Bell wrote about the price of an education. She argued that those who are less fortunate will be challenged with having to forget where they came from, wipe their memories clean of anything that is not fit for the educated elite. Unconsciously, I had already done this. If I was going to be successful in the world of academia, I had to learn to cover up my roots with the soil of the high-class. I had to forget that I came from a less than worthy background. I had to accept that education wasn't a right for me, but a privilege. I had to come to terms with being neither black nor white, but instead the grey area that goes mostly neglected; the grey area that the minds of logic detest because it challenges their neatly organized world. I had to forget everything that brought me to where I was if I was going to continue to persevere myself and make my mark in the world.

## AGENCY AND THE CRITICAL MEMOIR

Regardless of the mode or genre, the teacher must create writing assignments that critically connect literacy to the student's agency in identity formation. The traits that differentiate critical memoir from the personal narrative are primarily that the writing is more subtly nuanced and critically complex. The writing should open the author to the possibility of agency through the interpretation and representation of memory. The meaning of the memoir is revised from the student's current vantage point of an increased critical awareness and projected towards a hopeful future, thus giving the author some degree of agency in shaping identity.

Discounting that the student has any agency in subject formation relegates literacy to functioning only in a most dismal manner. Vygotskian scholars Dorothy Holland and William Lachicotte make room for agency in identity formation that might open up discursive spaces to new variants:

People have to create selves that (in the metaphor of residence) inhabit the (social) structures and spaces (cultural imaginaries) that collectivities create, but they produce selves that inhabit these structures and imaginaries in creative, variant, and often oppositional, ways . . . . And, in the circuits of emerging communities of practice, innovation may play out and regularize the semiotic means for new identities and activities that lie beyond existing structures of power. (2007, p. 135)

This notion of creative variants is similar to Victor Turner's discussion of liminal or in-between spaces in social structures that permit resistance and revision (1977). However, unlike essays, identities take a great deal of time and emotional energy to be revised.

Hope is important, but agency should not be located only within the writing itself. To make the larger connection between writing critical memoir and civic literacy might be too grand a claim. I do important work in the writing classroom, but my goal is more that of increasing critical thought rather than liberating anyone's identity. I agree with Rochelle Harris' insistence that emergent moments of critical thought can happen in students' personal essays, autobiographies, and memoirs:

Before institutional, community, national, and/or global transformation come the personal commitments and experiences that motivate one to claim the agency necessary to begin social critique. The most important critical work emerges

as students write about the places they have been, the experiences they have had, the books they have read, and the ideas they have pondered. This is one of the most revolutionary of critical acts—to transform and empower one’s own words as they are embedded in that most difficult of intertextual histories to negotiate, the history of one’s own life. (2004, p. 417)

I must remember that Freire cautioned that the classroom is dominated by the hegemony of the larger society and not really the “lever of revolutionary transformation” (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 33). Education may not be the great equalizer for my students (or for me, for that matter), but it can help us to compose a more thoughtful draft in the endless revisions of ourselves and our lives.

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