

CHAPTER 14.

CENTERING POSITIONALITY IN
LIFESPAN WRITING RESEARCH
THROUGH INSTITUTIONAL
AND AUTO/ETHNOGRAPHIC
METHODOLOGIES

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In this chapter I re-analyze a descriptive study on students' writing conceptions using institutional ethnography (IE) and autoethnography (AE). However, this is a very different chapter than I would have written six years ago, just after completing the study. Reframing that study through IE, as I initially proposed for this volume, became challenging for reasons beyond the horrors of the pandemic, pre-tenure administrative workload, caregiving, and burnout. The spark of excitement I felt about making connections between IE and lifespan writing research (LWR) gave way to frustrated writing episodes of cycling through sentence-level work, second-guessing my ideas and conceptual grasp of others' ideas, sometimes looping on the same sentence for *hours*, typing, backspacing, retyping, deleting, over and over again: I get stuck in a rut, constructing sentences that don't foreground my contributions or feature "my voice,"—however that term signifies to you—a rut that is all too familiar. . . .

"You're skilled with synthesizing scholarship," a dissertation committee member says as we review practice preliminary exam responses. "But it's difficult to tell what *your* contribution is." As this statement washes over me, I remember advice from a thesis committee member several years prior—to succeed in a literature Ph.D. program, I will need to change my *way of being in the world*, come out of my shell, speak up, stake out a claim, defend it; otherwise, they'll eat me alive.

I don't reply, "I've spent *years* making myself small and quiet out of necessity, tiptoeing and whispering, peering cautiously around corners, hypervigilant for early signs of danger in a gesture or heavy footfall, concerned about drawing attention, about getting 'it' wrong, about *being* wrong."

Either way, assertive or not, my being feels wrong. I don't yet know the psychiatric discourse that frames this symptomatology as "autonomic overactivation manifested by chronic anxiety, irritability, and startle responses" (Chu, 2011, p. 36). All I know is I'm anxious all the time, prone to freeze rather than fight or take flight, and filled with so much self-doubt that asserting *anything* with any level of confidence can be an emotionally exhausting task.

Having "jumped ship," as my MA advisor put it, to rhetoric and composition, I'd managed to get through doctoral coursework without transforming myself into Erin 2.0 Extrovert Extraordinaire, but as I sit reviewing practice exam responses and taking in this familiar assessment of my strengths and weaknesses, I find myself confronted again with the imperative to not only stake out a claim but to make a *contribution*.

Seven years later, I'm stuck again, performing rhetorical gymnastics to efface myself from my writing, more through habit than intention, autonomically cutting up and stitching together bits of others' words in a way that, as the coeditors of this collection helpfully observed, "takes a real toll on a reader's energy" as they try "to hold on to a larger point or argument when you're doing that much work in each sentence." Despite forcing my way into a previous draft by way of autoethnography, dense thickets of quotations remained, calling out for "that old paraphrasing trick of reading what you have now and then rewriting it from memory to see if that results in a simpler style," much like Marjorie DeVault's (2019) observation that "using simple, concrete language" in institutional ethnographies is "useful for recognizing and avoiding institutional concepts and categories that too often erase or obscure people's active construction of the social" (p. 98).

Yet, I still struggle to write outside of institutional categories and concepts, partially because disciplinarity opened a path for me, a way to keep climbing, an assurance that I'll never have to go back home. Erasing myself from my writing—as I've discovered through a collaborative autoethnography on navigating academe with psychosocial disabilities (Larowe & Workman, 2022)—is a self-protective habit to cope with the entanglement of my writing and lived experience of complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD). Characterized by severe and ongoing trauma, CPTSD has "a profound effect on cognitive, affective, and psychosocial developments, leading to an inadequate sense of self, impaired schemas, [and] deficits in affect regulation and impulse control" (Korn, 2009, p. 264). Those of us with CPTSD are "frequently overwhelmed with intense feelings," and, "unable to tolerate such intense affects, may resort to a variety of dysfunctional behaviors, such as self-destructive acts [and] repetitive self-injury as a form of tension release" (Chu, 2011, p. 36).

As Jesse Rice-Evans and Andréa Stella (2021) write about their experiences as doctoral students with CPTSD, we “have emerged from our worlds with scars: many metaphorical and literal” (p. 20). Whether in flesh or on screen, inscriptions mediate affect and trauma.

Beginning with positionality is crucial to the ethnographic methodologies I explore in this chapter. As Trude Klevan (Klevan & Grant, 2022) observes about her dissertation, “parallel to the development of knowledge, there is also another story that has been unfolding . . . the story of *my becoming a researcher*” (p. 3). Like Klevan, I recognize that my *becoming a researcher* is inseparable from the data I collect and analyze, the findings I construct, and the discourses I engage along the way. Taking up auto- and institutional ethnography, I consider how my education in “damn-near-all-white graduate programs” in “damn-near-all-white institutions” (Kynard, 2021, p. 188), my engagement with disciplinary discourses, and my positionality as a neurodivergent white woman with a psychosocial disability contoured my research design, reinscribing “writing normativities” without my realizing it (Dippre & Phillips, 2020, p. 7). As Dorothy Smith and Alison Griffith (2022) observe about their early IE work, “[o]nce we could recognize how we participated in [the mothering discourse], we could see that we had taken it for granted and built it into how we organized our interviews” with participants (p. 38). Similarly, I approached my study on students’ writing conceptions thinking that the survey and interview protocols adapted from transfer research (Yancey et al., 2014; Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011) would, as Eric Darnell Pritchard (2016) writes of his own well-defined methods, “cente[r] the meanings that research participants give to literacy”—or, in my case, to writing (p. 35). However, I didn’t recognize the ways in which my positionality and research design imposed disciplinary concepts onto participants’ responses, thereby obscuring their “active construction of the social” (DeVault, 2019, p. 98). As I discuss below, this process illustrates how writing normativities persist.

To make this argument and model the affordances of AE and IE for lifespan writing research, I define core methodological concepts, foregrounding their use for social justice-oriented research. After situating these methodologies in relation to Ryan Dippre’s (2019) approach to literate action research, I turn to my earlier study (Workman, 2020), briefly describing the research design and re-analyzing data from one participant, Imani, for hooks and traces of disciplinary discourses, illustrating how my study reinscribed writing normativities I sought to avoid and revealing how these persist regardless of intentionality. I conclude by reiterating the methodological affordances for lifespan writing research and identifying lines of inquiry for which AE and IE are well-suited.

DEFINING AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Ethnography has been prevalent in composition studies since 1981, but the crisis of representation in the social sciences problematized its accuracy in depicting participants' lived experience, necessitating participant-centered approaches such as autoethnography (AE) and institutional ethnography (IE). AE, first enacted by Zora Neale Hurston (Maraj, 2021), and IE, developed by Smith (2005), are social justice-oriented methodologies that center participants' perspectives, adapt qualitative methods to pursue open-ended projects of discovery, and seek to intervene in dominant cultural narratives (AE) or reveal the invisible social relations coordinating participants' work (IE). These similarities, however, give way to different analytical foci, with AE taking up "autobiographical, phenomenological concerns" and IE attending to "critical, social concerns" (Jubas & Seidel, 2016, p. 62).

AE is written from and about the researcher's personal experiences, not "to make an argument a priori," but rather to "pose a question, collect relevant data, and listen . . . to see what findings emerge" (Jackson & McKinney, 2021, p. 11). AEers collect data systematically through traditional qualitative methods like "interviews, artifacts, fieldnotes, photographs, or videos," and less typical methods, such as "memories, diaries, self-interviews, and systematic introspection" (p. 7). Autoethnography also refers to a written product that can take different forms, such as analytic AE, which is "characterized by the genre conventions . . . social science writing," and evocative AE, which "takes the form of 'stories that fuse ethnography with literary art'" (p. 8). Because "evocative autoethnography is a blended, bended genre that . . . transgresses traditional conventions and categories of expressing or 'representing events that really occurred,'" researchers composing evocative autoethnographies might encounter resistance from publication venues (p. 8). Louis Maraj (2021) recounts submitting an autoethnographic manuscript "that not only tells various stories about im/migrant Blackness but also carefully plots a Black/feminist tradition of autoethnographic work in rhetoric, writing, and literacy studies" to "a largely traditional writing studies venue," only to receive a desk rejection "detail[ing] the very aspects of disciplinary anti-Blackness that the essay pushes against" (p. 175). Summarizing the white woman editor's "demeaning letter," Maraj reveals how these "marginalizing moves" reproduce the status quo:

From the editor's assumption about the ethics of my data collection, to their proposed alternative between creative nonfiction and analytical research essay in revision, to the

insinuation that a Black im/migrant remains unaware of the precut formulas for research writing that still form the basis of dominant pedagogies, we can see the distinct hegemonic circumstances autoethnography—and particularly Black and Black feminist autoethnography—faces in finding validation in our fields. (p. 176)

Like Maraj, Venus Evans-Winters (2019) centers “the standpoint of Black women and other women of color,” describing how disciplinary approbation of qualitative methodologies is contingent upon positionality, such that “Black women’s ways of knowing, cultural and spiritual beliefs continue to be marginalized, suppressed, or bastardized and propagated as trite or esoteric” while methodological conversations remain “dominated and policed by those of the White educated elite” whose scholarship is “more reflective of White middle class culture, or a limited worldview, than representative of the richness and dynamism of those of us who live and exist on the margins of society” (p. 2). As Maraj and Evans-Winters illustrate, the marginalizing moves and anti-Blackness pervasive in our disciplines and institutions persist through “ordinary working practices,” necessitating methodologies like AE and IE that are attuned to embodiment, material texts, routine practices, disciplinary discourses, and institutional regimes.

Like AE, institutional ethnography “remain[s] always with actual people and what they do,” but IE aims to uncover “*for people’s use* how people are active in the objectified (or ruling) relations that exist independently of us and overpower our lives” (Smith & Griffith, 2022, p. 23). IE has gained disciplinary currency following Michelle LaFrance and Melissa Nicolas’s (2012) call for “more institutional ethnographies in our field” (p. 145) and LaFrance’s (2019) subsequent monograph outlining and modeling IE for writing studies research. For researchers interested in writing program administration, institutional policies and procedures, diversity work, and local instantiations of professional statements of best practices, IE offers concepts to flexibly pursue inquiry, starting with an embodied *standpoint* from which the direction of research—what Smith refers to as a *problematic*—is discovered. Starting with her standpoint as a white single mother working in institutions and professional discourses that “had almost nothing to say about” her lived experience, Smith (1999) used this disjuncture to develop IE as an alternative sociology informed by Marxist materialism, feminist consciousness-raising practices, and ethnomethodology (p. 11). Unlike sociological research that samples populations and generalizes from “prescriptive categories of . . . social order” (Kynard, 2013, p. 235), IE seeks to “lear[n] from actual people in their everyday lives and how what they do coordinates with the

actions of others” (Smith & Griffith, 2022, p. 5).

Using traditional qualitative methods, the IEer listens and looks for disjunctions when individuals interface with institutions, taking note of “connections, links, hookups, and various forms of coordination that tie people’s work and work processes into those of others” (Smith, 2005, p. 144). *Work* is conceptualized as “whatever people are doing that is intentional, takes time and effort, and is getting done at a particular time and in a particular place,” such that students are understood as working much like faculty, and, as I illustrate below, attending to what students do as *work* reveals much that would otherwise remain hidden (Griffith & Smith, 2014, p. 10). Documenting people’s work processes involves mapping *institutional circuits*—“sequences of text-coordinated action making people’s actualities representable and hence actionable within the institutional frames that authorize institutional action” (Smith & Turner, 2014, p. 10). For example, Imani, like many new admits at our R1 institution in 2015, thought she earned credit for both required FYW courses through AP and dual enrollment, and had she started college in 2014, she would have been right. However, to mitigate the impact of declining FYW enrollments on the number of graduate teaching assistantships the English department could offer, the second required course was moved to the sophomore level, ensuring that all students would enroll because comparable 2000-level composition courses were rare. Even though Imani’s “actualities” did not change, how they were framed and the institutional action they authorized certainly did.

Ultimately, IE “traces the ways in which texts stitch together smaller social groupings into larger institutional contexts, which in turn leads to even larger power structures,” or *ruling relations* (Taber, 2010, p. 11). Though integral to IE, the *ruling relations* construct can be opaque, but Nancy Taber’s metaphor is illuminative: “IE tends to show us the trees that were hidden in the forest; once we can see the trees (ruling relations), they can never again recede. And once we can see the ruling relations, we can begin to interrogate and challenge them” (p. 20). While an IE project begins with standpoint, entry-level data analysis will move beyond the individual to “second level data [like] texts and policies and/or interviews with policy makers, to explore how participants’ lives are socially organized,” opening opportunities for intervention and change (p. 11).

Writing studies IEs have focused on connections between professional discourses and local institutional complexes, such as writing centers (e.g., Miley, 2018; Crozier & Workman, 2022), writing programs (LaFrance, 2019), and university writing sites (Workman et al., 2023) rather than on “the experience of the person performing . . . literate action” (Dippre, 2019, p. 5), as autoethnographic research might do. Given their complementary affordances, AE and IE can be productively used together, as Taber exemplifies by using AE “to

foreground [her] own experiences” as a woman in the military and IE to “investigate policies and social practices” hooking her into ruling relations of the military and institutional regimes (p. 9). Since Taber argued for incorporating AE and IE, researchers across disciplines have taken up her call (Jubas and Seidel, 2016; Fixsen et al., 2022), but none have used these methodologies for studying lifespan writing development, as I do here.

Next, I place AE and IE in conversation with Dippre’s approach to lifespan literate action research, but first, I define each methodology in Table 14.1.

Table 14.1. Definitions of Autoethnography and Institutional Ethnography

Methodology	Definition for Writing Studies
Autoethnography	a method of inquiry and a written product in which the researcher: writes from personal experiences within writing/writing studies uses an inductive, qualitative approach for project design, data collection, and analysis; writes in conversation with other texts; and writes back or intervenes in a cultural narrative or conversation (Jackson & McKinney, p.11).
Institutional Ethnography	a theory of institutional organization, a set of analytic moves that allow for a distinctive approach to analyzing and understanding a site and the people who carry out their work within that site, and a practical tool that aids writing researchers interested in how writing constitutes our work” (LaFrance, 2019, p. 18).

AUTO- AND INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODOLOGIES FOR LIFESPAN WRITING RESEARCH

For lifespan writing researchers who understand that “writers develop in relation to the changing social needs, opportunities, resources, and technologies of their time and place” (Bazerman et al., 2018, p. 28, p. 31), autoethnography likely registers as a productive methodology. Indeed, James Zebroski (2020) takes up AE for lifespan writing research (LWR) to make sense of his transition to retirement. Well-suited to LWR, AE affords the researcher:

unlimited access without temporal and spatial constraints, possibly even access to a lifetime of time ‘in the field,’ . . . the ability to ask the hard questions, . . . and press themselves to think, feel, and remember things they might not press others to remember. [AE creates] a dual role . . . as

both subject and researcher, [which] means they both produce and analyze the data, thus closing the gap in interpretation between a subject's and researcher's perspective (Jackson & Grutsch McKinney, p. 8).

Alternatively, IE's institutional emphasis may seem counterintuitive; however, like Dippre's (2019) "logic-in-use" for literate action research, IE is adapted from ethnomethodology, or "the study of how people work together to create social order through interaction" (p. 13). Consequently, IE and Dippre's logic-in-use focus on "the ways in which individuals construct and are constructed by situations via *material interactions* with talk, tools, and *texts activated* in those situations" (p. 25; emphasis added).

Though both focus on material texts, practices, and individuals' activation of texts in the ongoing co-production of social reality, each approach directs inquiry differently, with the IE zooming out to discover ruling relations "beyond our practical and direct knowledge" that invisibly constrain knowledge and action (Smith, 1999, p. 44) and the logic-in-use zooming in on individuals' practices as they develop and transform over time. Just as IE begins with standpoint and traces individuals' activation of material texts in the trans-locally coordinated work processes that hook them into ruling relations beyond their view, Dippre's logic-in-use likewise focuses on "individuated actors, participants in producing social order with unique footings in the social space that they are co-constructing" through material practices (p. 34). Offering a case study of seventh-grade student Alice, Dippre highlights "moments that serve as a 'microscope of Nature' (Merton, 1987, p. 11) for seeing literate action *in action*," illustrating how the material practice of writing unfolds in real time as Alice, her peers, and their teacher engage in the ongoing co-production of social order in the classroom. An IE project would ask how classroom work happens as it does, perhaps by interviewing Alice's teacher and locating documents and policies constraining her work to discover the hidden ruling relations of the educational industrial complex.

For IE and the logic-in-use, disjunction and disruption are generative for directing inquiry into individuated actors' situated practices as they interface with institutional discourses or as their practices transform and endure throughout the lifespan. Smith's (2005) experience of disjunction between her lived experience as a single mother and her work as an academic led her to develop IE as an alternative sociology for "mak[ing] visible what is ordinarily taken for granted, that the very organization of the everyday is permeated with connections that extend beyond it" (p. 40). Just as tension and disruption signify an emerging problematic and warrant careful consideration in

IE, Dippre observes that “[t]here are opportunities for complication that can disrupt a given instantiation of a practice and, in doing so, perhaps provide an opportunity for further literate action development by transforming such a practice” (p. 161). Development and transformation are catalyzed by failures of routine practice, making disjunction and disruption integral to (the study of) institutions *and* individuals; otherwise, “ordinary working practices” continue to operate “below the level of consciousness,” thereby “ensuring that . . . whatever knowledge is produced is not oriented to the needs and interests of the mass of people, but to the needs and interests of ruling” (Smith, 1999, p. 40, p. 16). This perspective exposes how the marginalizing moves documented by Maraj and Evans-Winters are continuously reenacted through mundane, material practices and habitual work processes.

Considering IE alongside Dippre’s logic-in-use reveals how their ethno-methodological heritage orients them similarly to individuals’ material practices of co-constructing social order through “recurrent . . . intersubjective accomplishment” (Dippre, p. 17). Both approaches set out from *a lived reality perspective* to pursue inquiry into individuated actors’ literate action development, or to “mak[e] visible how we are connected into extended social relations of ruling and economy” (Smith, 2005, p. 29). Autoethnography can complement both approaches by offering unlimited access to participants’ material texts, closing the subject-researcher gap, and surfacing tensions between lived experience and institutional discourses and ideologies (Jackson & Grutsch McKinney, p. 3). The methodological differences enacted through AE, IE, and the logic-in-use open ways of studying individual development in relation to institutional reproduction and transformation, most crucially for “those who do not quite inhabit norms” or fit neatly within institutional categories (Ahmed, 2017, p. 115).

DIVERSIFYING ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACHES TO INDIVIDUAL AND INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES

Much like Black feminist traditions of autoethnography, institutional ethnography is a descriptive and activist project premised on the assumption that “problematic institutional practices lying within practicable reach can be identified, creating possibilities of change from within” (Smith, 2005, p. 32). IE starts with a rupture between lived experience and institutional discourses, a phenomenon that Sara Ahmed (2021), drawing from Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, calls “misfitting”: “You have a fit when an environment is built to accommodate you. When you are accommodated, you don’t even have to notice that environment.

You are a misfit when there is an incongruous relation of your body to thing or body to world” (p. 140). Rice-Evans and Stella (2021) describe the visceral experience of misfitting within academe using language that resonates with my experiences of CPTSD: “I feel wrong all. of. the. time. I have acted wrong, I’ve spoken out of turn, I’ve taken a risk I shouldn’t have, I’ve offended, I haven’t followed the simple rules. *And this wrongness is that I, me as a person, is actually wrong*” (p. 27; emphasis added). When my professor said I would need to change my way of being, they were explicitly saying that *I am wrong*, that I will assuredly *misfit* within the combative social order of a literature Ph.D. program. The problem is me, not the institution.

Yet, as Dejah Carter (2020) contends, “[h]igher education institutions were created to center heteronormativity, white supremacy, patriarchy, and classism” (p. 26-27), not to mention able-bodiedness and able-mindedness (Dolmage, 2017; Price, 2011), white linguistic supremacy and Anti-Black Linguistic Racism (Baker-Bell, 2020), and literacy normativity (Pritchard, 2016). This scholarship reveals how “some more than others will be at home in institutions that assume certain bodies [and minds] as their norm” (Ahmed, 2012, p. 3). However, as Ahmed’s research demonstrates, experiences of misfitting can teach us much about institutional mechanics because “[i]t is from difficult experiences, of being bruised by structures that are not even revealed to others, that we gain the energy to rebel. It is from what we come up against that we gain new angles on what we are against” (2017, p. 255).

Students for whom the university wasn’t made, students with rich arrays of literacies, languages, and discursive resources that are not valued within disciplinary and institutional discourses often hit a wall in FYW courses, and when students hit a wall in FYW, *FYW is a wall*, one that excludes some while allowing others to easily pass through or skip the requirement altogether. This barrier is well-documented by Black composition-literacy scholars like Elaine Richardson (2004), who writes of her college experience, “[i]t wasn’t long before I figured out that I could succeed by relinquishing my language variety and my history, experience, culture, and perspective for theirs. All I had to do was let them Whitenize my papers” (p. 2). “Consequently,” she continues, “most African American Vernacular English-speaking students become further indoctrinated in the precepts of White dominant discourse in the process. What the student brings to the classroom is not valued or recognized; no transcultural dialogism takes place” (2). Richardson describes what Pritchard (2016) has termed “literacy normativity,” or “the use of literacy to create and impose normative standards and beliefs onto people who are labeled alien or other through textscapes that are experienced as painful because they do damage or inflict harm” (p. 28).

Deficit-based perspectives of student writers persist, inscribed in institutional documents, learning outcomes, writing requirements, and professional statements of best practices (e.g., WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition) such that our routine activation of these texts in our local contexts can enact marginalizing moves and perpetuate writing normativities. For instance, Yancey et al. (2014) report that every student in their study “when asked to define writing, used a single word: *expression*,” and they frame this finding as an “*absence* of prior knowledge,” specifically “in two important areas: (1) key writing concepts and (2) nonfiction texts that serve as models” (p. 111, p. 108). When students “see writing principally as a *vehicle for authorial expression*,” they struggle to develop foundational rhetorical knowledge necessary for writing effectively across contexts (111). Yet, Sheila Carter-Tod (2021) problematizes this “singular” and “generally Aristotelian” conception of rhetoric, describing her struggle “to figure out ways to merge my professional administrative practices with what I know is a more inclusive approach to writing instruction and writing program curricular development.” Drawing from African American rhetorics, Carter-Tod proposes “expand[ing] the traditional rhetorical triangle to a star that includes *language, style, discourse, perspective, community* and *suasion*.” Retrospectively, I recognize how this expansive rhetorical approach could have better served my student-research-participants. With this framework, I turn to my study on students’ writing conceptions, offering some context before re-reading data for hooks and traces of the institutional and disciplinary discourses coordinating writers and their work of writing *through* lifeworlds.

UNCOVERING AND STUDYING CONCEPTIONS OF WRITING

Conducted over nine months at a large, southeastern R1 university, my descriptive study (Workman, 2020) aimed to document and trace changes in first-year college students’ representations of their conceptual writing knowledge. Participants were recruited from a new 2000-level transfer-focused composition course that engaged students in developing theories of writing informed by rhetorical concepts and composed iteratively through sustained reflective activities (Yancey et al., 2014). Students defined writing, identified key terms important for that definition, and visually depicted connections among terms through a process that I call *visual mapping*, and, once grades were posted, eight participants completed an exit survey and interview, during which they reflected on three visual maps and writing assignments from the course. Participants completed two additional document-based interviews the

following semester, creating a new visual map each time and, for the final interview, sharing self-selected samples of academic and non-academic writing to anchor reflection on how their conceptions of writing and writing practices had changed or stabilized over time.

When I began the study in 2015, I was engrossed with writing transfer scholarship and understood transfer-focused writing instruction to be grounded in empirical research and responsive to disciplinary best practices. Although I intentionally modeled my course and research design on Yancey et al.'s (2014), I failed to recognize how immersed I was in Teaching for Transfer (TFT) discourse—much like Smith and Griffith (2022) discovered about the mothering discourse—and how I was imposing TFT concepts on data before I even collected them. To use the parlance of IE, my research was *institutionally captured*, “regulated by the institutional procedures of text-reader conversations, through which institutional discourse overrides and reconstructs experiential talk and writing” (Smith, 2005, p. 119). My use of TFT key terms, which represent dominant discourses of postsecondary writing pedagogy (Brown, 2020), precluded any possibility of attending to linguistic diversity, cultural rhetorics, Black language, and Black rhetorical traditions (Kynard, 2013; Carter-Tod, 2021).

Having been hooked into writing studies via scholarship on Writing about Writing (WAW), transfer, and reflection, I lost sight of how *I* had been disciplined, how these were just some of the *many* discourses circulating within writing studies. Unlike Tessa Brown (2020), who experienced the kind of productive disjuncture that would direct an IE project when moving from her MA program, with its focus on Students Rights to Their Own Language (SRTOL) and Hip Hop Literacies, to her Ph.D. program, with its focus on threshold concepts for writing studies outlined in *Naming What We Know (NWWK)* (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015), I felt no such tension when transitioning to my doctoral program, even though my MA coursework included sustained engagement with SRTOL and linguistic diversity. When *NWWK* was published, I failed to consider how racially, culturally, and linguistically exclusive that *we* and *what we know* actually was—in part because my faculty mentors made multiple contributions to the crowdsourced collection, and in part because my disciplinary engagement during graduate study was primarily with white scholars and faculty, studying mostly white students and unmarked white racialized discourses that continually reconstitute the discipline and higher education institutions across the US. However, despite the disciplinary discourses *capturing* my study, the visual mapping method that I designed to elicit participants' conceptions of writing enabled them to language in ways that were meaningful to them in that moment, especially as they moved into their second semester of college.

RE-READING DATA TO SURFACE TENSIONS IN CONCEPTIONS OF WRITING

“I would love to love writing again since my high school writing experience wasn’t something I enjoyed.”

– Imani, course goals reflection

Having outlined the affordances of IE for studying individual development in relation to institutional reproduction and transformation, I turn now to modeling these affordances for lifespan writing research. To do so, I follow Rebecca Lund’s (2020) model of “re-engag[ing] critically” with my earlier study, “drawing on the conceptual resources of IE . . . to examine, with hindsight,” missed opportunities for disrupting writing normativities (p. 103). Rereading data from Imani, an 18-year-old, self-identified middle-class Black woman majoring in pre-med biology, I demonstrate how an IE approach to analysis “helps the ethnographer to uncover the disjunctions, divergences, and distinctions experienced by individuals” as they engage in daily work processes and co-construct social reality (LaFrance, p. 35). This analysis surfaces lines of inquiry into Imani’s writing development and tensions Imani felt as institutional and ideological discourses shaped and constrained her ways of writing and making meaning. I highlight moments when Imani indicated “elevated levels of uncertainty” about writing and examine the socially and culturally situated practices Imani engaged to address the tension she felt between personal and institutional writing tasks (Dippre, p. 65).

Returning to Yancey et al.’s (2014) observation that all student participants in their study defined writing as expression—a finding replicated by my study—we can think about this commonality across students and institutional contexts as indicative of the ruling relations of secondary and postsecondary educational discourses. Imani speaks to this directly in her final course reflection when she states, “I think [expression] describes *everyone’s* idea of writing *prior to taking a college level English course*. It is somewhat of the basis of *the idea of writing that most students grew up on*” (3; emphasis mine). Imani is right, yet, as indicated above, some teacher-researchers, including me, perceive this conception as a barrier to developing and enacting writing knowledge and practices “appropriate” for postsecondary learning contexts. Describing the link between students’ conceptions of writing and writing practices, Mar Mateos and Isabel Solé (2012) explain that “personal conceptions are constructed within the framework of scientific and popular conceptions about writing as well as within the writing practices promoted by these conceptions” (p. 53). Reframing this observation through IE reveals how scientific and popular discourses about writing can invisibly constrain students’ instantiation of writing conceptions as they engage in writing practices promoted

by these conceptions. It's this effect on writing practice that seems implicit in the move against *expression*: you can express yourself, but there's a time and place for doing so, and the time and place for doing so is not in the college-writing classroom. Correcting students' *misconceptions*, or expanding limited and limiting conceptions, of writing is one goal of curricular models like TFT and WAW; however, these and related approaches to writing pedagogy have been critiqued for perpetuating whiteness and white language supremacy.

As the epigraph for this section illustrates, Imani and others in my study who reported positive early childhood experiences with writing would experience a change as they moved through secondary schooling. In Imani's reflection on her prior writing experiences, she contrasts writing she enjoys with academic writing that comes with critical, even harmful, responses from others:

I mostly enjoy writing lyrics, writing in a journal, and sometimes short stories. This type of writing is more enjoyable because I have the opportunity to write as I please with no specific restrictions and I can write at anytime I feel with no guideline or restrictions on time. . . . Usually, I write in a journal at home (well in my dorm now) *because it is my own space and others can't criticize me in my own comfort zone*. I do not enjoy writing essays because there is usually a specific topic or certain criteria to complete while writing and I usually overthink or overanalyze what actually needs to be said in the essay. Although I do write essays at home, *most essays I have written have been at school, and usually have had to face the opinion of others who may have criticized more than critiqued*. (emphasis added)

Imani discloses her strong affective response to academic writing based on prior experiences when others "may have criticized more than critiqued," and although she doesn't explicitly name those others here, in subsequent interviews all references to negative writing experiences are linked exclusively to teachers. As indicated on her first visual map (see Figure 14.1) where she begins with *freedom* and *expression* in the top and bottom left corners, Imani does not believe that successful writing is contingent upon having others agree with her, explaining that "getting a point across through communication is successful" and "expressing is a success as long as you say what you feel, even if others disagree." For Imani, being passionate and expressive is not at odds with communicating effectively because "any type of expression is a way of communicating."

This emerging tension between having freedom to creatively express herself using the genres, materials, and practices of her choosing and feeling constrained to produce whatever "different teachers like" is evident throughout

Imani's dataset, beginning with her own goal of learning to love writing again, and continuing through reflections and interviews in which Imani discloses the damaging impact of these lessons on her relationship to and conception of writing. As noted previously, within the pedagogical model guiding my teaching and the disciplinary scholarship shaping my research, to express is *not* to write rhetorically, but rather to reify a problematic construct from literature and creative writing—the exclusion of which “limit[s] contributions and theorizations from writers of color” and further perpetuates writing normativities (Brown, p. 607). This discourse suggests that students shouldn't (only) express themselves; they should learn how to communicate effectively for institutionally mandated purposes. However, as Imani's second visual map (see Figure 14.2) illustrates, she understands expressive writing to have rhetorical power, to make an impact and spark conversation among her audience(s):

[A]s a writer, I feel that is important for my writing to make people ask questions and to talk to others about what their take on the topic would have been. I want people to be intrigued and inquisitive about what I write. I think that making buzz and making people question and have conversations about my writing is what makes it successful” (5).



Figure 14.1. Imani's First Visual Map

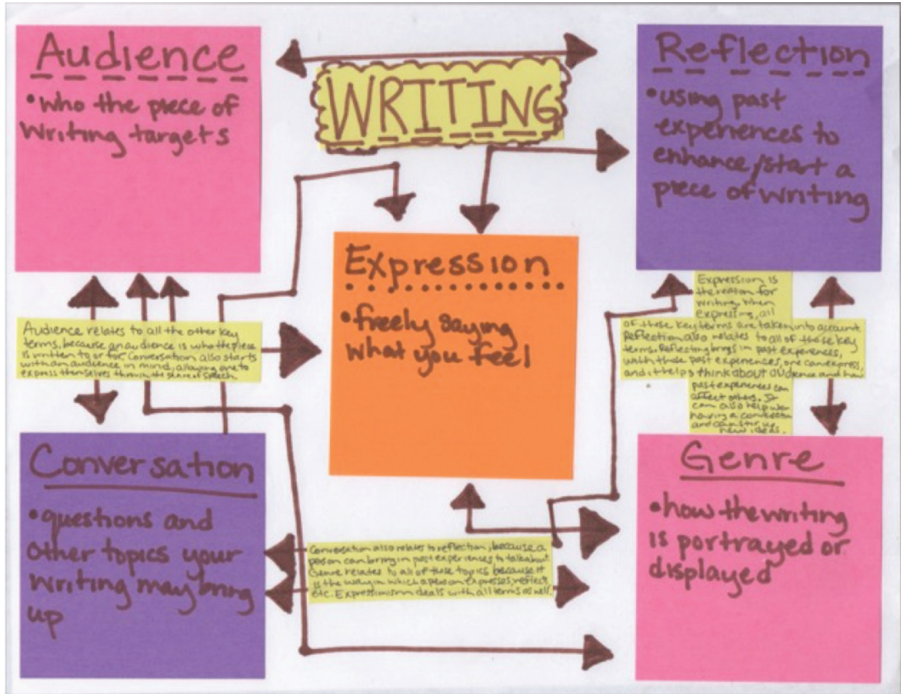


Figure 14.2. Imani's Second Visual Map

Rereading Imani's words now, I'm struck by her focus on perspective and sparking conversation through writing, and the resonance of her conception with Afrocentric rhetoric attentive to "language, style, discourse, perspective, community and suasion" (Carter-Tod, 2021). I'm also struck by the limitations of my earlier analysis, the lines of inquiry I missed by engaging Imani's dataset exclusively through an Aristotelian model, and what comes into view when expanding this "traditional rhetorical triangle to a star" and reframing the data via IE concepts (Carter-Tod, 2021).

Attending to Imani's *work* as conceptualized by IE reveals potential lines of inquiry into her writing development that were previously invisible. In our first interview, Imani noted that she "had been helping" a friend who is a "senior in high school back home" with her writing for AP literature and dual-enrollment composition classes. Reflecting on the differences between the writing Imani was doing in college and the writing her friend was doing in high school, she explains:

In high school, it's all about length and sounding good, but I think she is understanding that audiences are different. That's one thing that I talk to her about, that audiences are different,

and it's important for you to know what type of audience you're writing to. *And right now, of course, she knows that her purpose in writing is just to get done so she gets a good grade* [laughs], but I tell her to think about exactly what she wants you to know. So, with her taking dual enrollment and AP classes, of course she has different teachers. Her having to understand what teachers likes what, like figuring them out—I think that's helping her to think more about purpose.

As Imani describes how writing is conceptualized in high school, she acknowledges how formative the work of helping her friend has been for her own conception of writing: “I actually realized now that I've been helping her with her essays that *instead of me just writing about my personal work*, I feel like me actually helping her I feel like she's understanding what I'm trying to get her to understand, I guess, by using those terms, and her writing is improving as well.” Juxtaposed with “me just writing about my personal work” like she had done in the 2000-level writing course, this process of “actually helping her” is generative not only for her friend, but for herself.

Reflecting on the writing from her spring semester songwriting course, Imani explained, “I've thought a lot about my audience being a group of people who have a lot of different opinions and I'm still working on how to write for that type of audience.” Unlike writing for biology lab where she understood her audience as people in the same discourse community, Imani was “still working on” how to approach the more diverse audiences she wanted to reach through songwriting:

[Y]ou have a lot of songs that are classics, like everyone knows the song. And what makes those lyrics touch a variety of different people? like people that wouldn't normally be on the same track, I guess? or same train of thought or whatever. I've kind of been looking into that kind of thing. Because there's a lot of different songs that everybody knows. You can play any word and it doesn't matter who you are, you're going to know what that song is. So that's what I'm trying to do . . . still trying to figure it out [laughs].

As Imani continued writing for her biology lab peers and professor and concurrently exploring ways of reaching diverse audiences through songwriting, she started thinking about writing strategies for turning her freewriting into song lyrics that would resonate with embodied listeners:

I just kind of freewrite a lot, so I'm not really thinking about a different audience at the time. I'm really writing because I

need to get out stuff. And then later on I'm like, "okay well let me go back and reword this a little bit so it fits like a certain group of people that I want to fit." *I always try to make my writing connect with people*, I guess. That's one of my goals, but I do that *after* I already have written it to go back and see, and then if it's not something I *like* like, I usually take the pieces and just rewrite.

Interestingly, *community* and *perspective* are implicit in Imani's discussion of where and how she does her most generative freewriting:

Friday nights, they have Freestyle Friday, like outside in front of [the library] at like 9 o'clock at night. From like 9-12. And I'll go up there about 10 or so, and I just like the vibe, so I'll just go and they're playing music. And I'm just sitting and it'll all just flow. I just write. I don't write what they say, but I write my own thoughts and things.

For Imani, spoken word pieces performed on Freestyle Friday are like "experienced journaling," where "it's more like experience- and reality-driven . . . Spoken word is kind of like a deep kind of writing, and so bringing in *reflection*, it actually lets you bring in *real life experience* and things that you've *actually been through*, or you've *heard* or *seen*. It actually makes your writing more visual for the audience." Here, Imani talks about writing as an epistemological act grounded in lived experience, a way of clarifying one's perspective and effectively communicating that perspective for embodied others, both those with whom one shares community and those whose different perspectives require cunning linguistic and suasive styles. I'm struck again by the knowledge that Imani and I could have co-created had my own conceptions of writing and rhetoric been as expansive and attentive to embodied knowledge and lived experience as Imani's were.

IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE LIFESPAN RESEARCH

The methodologies I have explored in this chapter—institutional ethnography, autoethnography, and Dippre's logic-in-use—share a focus on embodiment, material texts, and routine practices, offering concepts and tools to study individuated writers' co-production of social reality. These approaches foreground the generativity of disjunction, tension, and rupture for (researching) individual and institutional development and transformation, even as individuals' embodied experiences of misfitting within academe are disproportionately felt by marginalized students

and faculty “who do not quite inhabit norms” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 115). The marginalizing moves that Maraj, Evans-Winters, Richardson, Carter-Tod, Pritchard, and Imani address are pervasive in our institutions, perpetuated through routine material practices that are contoured by disciplinary discourses and ruling relations, those “structures [that] are not visible or tangible unless you come up against them,” much like individual trees not visible in the forest (Ahmed, 2017, p. 214). Even as a queer, neurodivergent, disabled white woman from a rural Southern working-class background who often misfits, I am white and grew up so steeped in white supremacy that I “learn[ed] not to see it” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 157). However, “once we can see the ruling relations, we can begin to interrogate and challenge them,” but bringing those ruling relations into view requires methodologies keenly attuned to the intersections among embodiment, material texts, routine practices, social coordination, and institutional regimes (Taber, 2010, p. 20). And, as I have illustrated through autoethnographic snapshots of consequential moments in my becoming-researcher, keeping individuals *and* institutions in view can be difficult with a single method of inquiry.

I opened this chapter with my own positionality because starting elsewhere was getting me nowhere. Even though standpoint, embodiment, and lived experience are integral to IE, it was only through concurrent collaborative autoethnographic research that I found the footing to move forward. The story of how I came to the discipline is inseparable from my (then) unexamined trauma-related coping mechanisms, including the act of “splitting,” or seeing something in absolute terms within a good/bad binary. I began my MA program intending to continue studying literature, as I had done as an undergraduate English major with a creative writing minor—two disciplines entangled with traumatic and *literally* bloody writing experiences that, nonetheless, had driven me to graduate study because, with some exceptions, the academic trauma felt endurable as long it took me physically and metaphorically away from the trauma of my childhood and teenage years. Once I became hooked into writing studies, I unknowingly positioned (my understanding of) it as *good* in opposition to the *bad* of literature and creative writing so that what began as skepticism about a discipline that seemed to eschew creativity quickly transformed into absolute certainty that teaching anything other than writing studies concepts in FYW was a disservice to students. Splitting disciplines in this way precluded the possibility of my experiencing the kind of productive tension that enabled Brown to recognize what was missing from WAW and NWWK.

Even as I compose this conclusion, I’m aware of how much I’m leaving out, of nuances that blur the clean splitting of disciplines, of moments that opened space for thinking and imagining otherwise, even if only briefly. Sitting with and attending to these moments of disjuncture, I find my way into the standpoint from

which I can finally pursue institutional ethnographic research into writing development through the lifespan, my own becoming-researcher, and the disciplinary discourses and ruling relations contouring my teaching and research, guiding practices that, left unexamined, reproduced the marginalizing moves and disciplinary anti-Blackness that result in writers like Imani no longer enjoying writing for fear of exposing something so personally meaningful to criticism by those for whom non-normative writing is something to be corrected, improved, and standardized. If one goal of LWR is disrupting writing normativities by bringing into view not just development, but also *change*, *stasis*, and *decline*, we need methodologies like AE and IE that center positionality, magnify individuals' practices and activation of material texts, and map social coordination and ruling relations to counter marginalizing moves and reveal opportunities for change.

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