WHY FEMINISTS CAN’T STOP TALKING ABOUT VOICE

When I was on the job market for the first time (roughly five years ago), I had an experience so impressive that it continues to influence the ways I think about teaching and writing. It occurred during an interview with members of a small communications department. Seated in an uncomfortable hotel desk chair with queen-sized beds behind me and a tenth-story view of a gray Toronto city-scape in front of me, I was discussing my dissertation project (an ethnographic study of a feminist writing course) and highlighting the importance of the voice metaphor for the (mostly female) students I had observed. Suddenly, one of the interviewers (a well-known rhetorician whose work I knew and admired) exclaimed, “Voice?! I thought we had stopped talking about that years ago. Are people still talking about voice?” I remember blushing, stammering something akin to “yes,” and rattling off (in no particular order) names like Elbow, Bartholomae, and Anzaldúa to save what felt like my rapidly sinking ship. I remember then outlining, carefully and calmly, the various ways the metaphor seemed to help students understand their struggles with writing and speaking and to, in the end, express themselves better and more confidently both in and outside of class. Finally, I remember the glazed faces of the interviewers, the uncomfortable shifting of chairs, how quickly we moved on to the next question.

Later, I realized that while I had interpreted my interviewer’s question about voice quite literally, he probably had other intentions. More than likely, he wanted not so much an accounting of current scholars who discussed or employed the voice metaphor in their work, but rather to convey his doubts about any serious, up-to-date scholar talking about a concept that was popular in the 1970’s. Whatever the case, I recognized that if I wanted to keep talking about voice, I would not only need to continue

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reading others who were interested in the subject (for personal confirmation and professional support); I would need to think more carefully about why voice was something that academics—especially feminist academics—should keep talking about.

When I considered my own experience with voice—particularly as it permeated my graduate studies in the late 1980’s and early 90’s—it seemed an illustration of both the metaphor’s historical importance to the academy and its variability. As an MA student, I pursued three areas of concentration: poetry writing, women’s literature, and composition theory. I remember that in my poetry workshops voice had much to do with style. Poets were credited with having strong voices when they used words or rhythms in a manner that was “fresh,” innovative. The promotional “blurbs” on the backs of the books we read reinforced this conception of voice. Carolyn Forche’s second collection, The Country Between Us, for example, was promoted by Margaret Atwood as “poetry of courage and passion, which manages to be tender and achingly sensual and what is often called ‘political’ at the same time.” “This is a major new voice,” Atwood concluded. Similarly, Jorie Graham celebrated Jane Miller’s work in American Odalisque with back-cover passages like the following:

She has developed a means by which to make chance contend with narrative; lyricism with cacophony and seriality. One of her instruments is an astoundingly supple voice, capable of shifting registers of diction and tone at a speed I’d call that of the fast lane. A voice as much song as scream, as much brazen as lusting for silence. A voice that, in fact, lets silence override it often enough—and with sufficient weight—as to make us hear silence again as if from scratch.

As I listened in class, read poetry, and worked hard at writing it, I remember wondering, along with some of the other less-experienced poets, when and how I would recognize my poetic voice. The consensus at the time seemed to be that we would know it when we found it; something would click between head and heart, between hand and page. Of course, it helped to write a lot. But it also helped to read widely and well, to develop what T. S. Eliot referred to as an “historical sense” (4)—an awareness that “the most individual parts” of any writer’s work (e.g., Jane Miller’s unique mingling of “lyricism” and “cacophony”) are infused with the creative efforts of all the writers that came before him or her. As one of my professors explained it, “You find your own voice by reading and absorbing the work of others.”

In women’s literature courses (particularly those taught from an explicit feminist perspective), voice took on another meaning. Although it had something to do with individual style, with innovation, it had even more to do with expression of identity—and not just artistic identity, but gendered
identity, too. Approaching women’s literature as feminists, we were less interested in how writers might situate their work within a tradition, and more concerned with how they asserted themselves by subverting or revising tradition. Works like *The Awakening* or “The Yellow Wallpaper,” for example, were important—not for how they “conformed” to literary history (Eliot 5), but for how they didn’t. *Voice* was used as a metaphor to capture the disruptions, the differences: the textual expressions of female authors’ intent on shaping their own creative destinies. Once again, our use of the metaphor in the classroom seemed reinforced by the reading we did outside of class. Commenting on early twentieth-century literature, critic Elaine Showalter, for instance, persuaded us to see women writers’ rejections of traditional “aesthetic techniques and narrative strategies” as a means of resisting “the pressures to abandon their own visions and voices” (125). With respect to *The Awakening*, in particular, Showalter discussed Kate Chopin’s desire to revise not only masculine literary tradition, but the “didactic” feminist conventions of her day—“to record, in her own way and in her own voice, the *terra incognita* of a woman’s ‘inward life’ in all its ‘vague, tangled, chaotic’ tumult” (71). Indeed, because of the effort on the part of Chopin and others (e.g., Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Zora Neale Hurston, Virginia Woolf) to link textual experiments with explorations of female psychology, *voice* seemed a convenient way to represent yearnings that were both artistic and emotional. And because artistic and emotional life was, for women writers, so inextricably linked to physical reality, it made sense that *voice* (a word defined in terms of physicality) would expand its metaphorical boundaries even further to encompass embodied experience—the physical isolation, illicit sexual attractions, post-partum depressions, and domestic abuses encountered by authors and characters alike. It made sense that critics like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar would compare the artistic silencing of nineteenth-century women to chronic illness, anorexia, self mutilation, and physical disability. A “lively” or “imaginative” girl of this period was especially “likely to experience her education in docility, submissiveness, selflessness as in some sense sickening,” they write. “To be trained in renunciation is almost necessarily to be trained to ill health, since the human animal’s first and strongest urge is to his/her own survival, pleasure, assertion” (54).

The composition theory courses offered another layer to *voice*, as here we talked not only in terms of style, self-expression, social and political critique, but of how teachers inspire all of this. As a young feminist, I was especially attracted to feminist work in composition. I quickly found that, just as *voice* had been an important metaphor for feminist literary critics, so it was among feminists in composition—particularly those who conducted classroom research. Joan Bolker, for example, had this to say about two of
the women students she encountered at Ivy League schools in the late 70’s: “Each of these women describes a lack of personality in her papers, and her sense of non-ownership, and of disappointment at not being able to make herself heard. . . . While [they] have both learned how to write papers, they have not yet learned to write—that is, to be able to communicate by expressing their own ideas, feelings, and voices on paper . . . .” (906). Drawing upon feminist work in linguistics and psychology, respectively, Pamela Annas and Elizabeth Flynn asked us to consider the relationship between discourse form and gender identity—something that Bolker had hinted at in her earlier essay. In “Style as Politics,” Annas highlighted the need for women students to “discover their own voices in an expression [or] assertion” and to study “the stylistic strategies that various women essayists have used to deal with the problem of writing as women in an authentic female voice in a context that often does not value what women have to say . . . .” (362). Similarly, in “Composing as a Woman,” Flynn introduced us to students like Kathy, for whom “other voices and external truths were more powerful than her own.” Flynn writes, “She was clearly moving toward the development of an authentic voice and a way of knowing that integrates intuition with authoritative knowledge” (429). As these articles suggested, attention to voice in writing seemed to be a way that teachers could help students (especially women students) feel authoritative, empowered—“integrated.”

While my personal experience with voice certainly isn’t everyone’s, I do know that many academics have had similar encounters with the metaphor. Through conversations with other composition specialists over the years, for example, I’ve learned that many write fiction and poetry; those who identify themselves as feminists often have strong backgrounds or interests in women’s literature. For many of these scholars, voice (its meaning, pedagogical applications, and perceived usefulness) is necessarily multifaceted. Further, like mine, their experiences suggest how thoroughly voice has permeated academic culture. With respect to feminists, in particular, it’s not just composition experts who have embraced voice as a metaphor; feminists in literature, law, linguistics, and psychology have employed the term, too. In fact, the metaphorical power of voice, highlighted by such well-known academic titles as Carol Gilligan’s In a Different Voice, has been recognized throughout the feminist community, as discourse aimed at wider, more popular female audiences suggests. I’m thinking here of Nancy Miller’s Voice Lessons, which links the pursuit of a “writing voice” to explorations of gender and able-bodiedness, and Marlene Schiwy’s A Voice of Her Own: Women and the Journal Writing Journey, composed “with the belief that journal writing can help us . . . hear ourselves and each other into speech; and to discover, to express, and to embody this
voice on the individual and cultural levels” (23). Finally, I want to suggest that voice has been embraced by so many women, in so many areas, because it makes sense to so many of us. There is no other metaphor that seems to capture the connections between speaking, writing, bodily expression, and subjectivity so well.

Of course, tradition and prevalence are not good reasons to keep doing anything, which is why our use of voice has been challenged in recent years. Because of its connection with self-expression, with genres that have been labeled self-expressive, and with words like identity, ownership, authentic, real, true, “voice” has been thoroughly implicated in postmodern critiques of humanism. From a postmodern perspective, using words that have been associated with a unified, stable self, identifiable outside of language and community, is naive at best, dangerous at worst. Indeed, according to Darsie Bowden, it is also highly un-feminist. About voice as a metaphor, she has this to say:

[V]oice is a pivotal metaphor for a tradition that has systematically privileged what is Western, what is white, and what is male, and . . . in using voice to articulate a struggle for the accretion of status and authority, marginalized groups, including women, are subscribing not only to the same language as the patriarchal system that they have struggled against but, as a necessary consequence, to the same value systems and ideology as well. (100)

Rather ironically (in light of postmodern thought) voice has fallen out of metaphorical favor for another reason: its own identity is shifting, unstable. As my historical account shows, voice means something different in different contexts. Within composition and rhetoric alone it has taken on a variety of meanings—some more text-based (e.g., style, tone); some more reader-based (e.g., resonance); some more writer-based (e.g., identity, subjectivity, ownership, confidence, muse). Carl Leggo’s essay on the concept offers 99 questions about voice and 26 possible definitions. At one point in the essay, Leggo explains:

As a poet and a teacher, I am constantly reminded that language is a slippery affair. So often (most of the time? all of the time?) I am only partially successful in using words to understand and make sense and communicate. Still I continue to try. Again and again I have advised my students in both high school and university classes: Write in your own voices, your personal, authentic, sincere voices. But I am not at all sure that I know what I mean by voice. (145)

Peter Elbow’s treatment of the term is similarly complex in “What Do We Mean When We Talk about Voice in Texts?” As a preface to his multi-
layered discussion of *voice*, Elbow writes, "The term has been used in such a loose and celebratory way as to mean almost anything. It's become a kind of warm fuzzy word: people say that writing has voice if they like it or think it is good or has some virtue that is hard to pin down" (2). The slipperiness suggested by Leggo and Elbow is reflected in more recent essays in which writers use the term *voice* only after painstakingly defining it for readers. "What kind of voice are we talking about here?" Jane Danielewicz asks in the introduction of her recent exploration of how to best "empower" student writers. Outlining and then drawing upon categories developed by Elbow, she writes, "[T]he resonant voice I wish to talk about here—voice linked to self, the kind of voice [bell] hooks describes as "talking back"" (25). Importantly, instead of celebrating the multiplicity, many scholars have lamented it. As a colleague of mine said recently, "No one knows what it means anymore; that's a real problem."

Because *voice* as a metaphor has been called into question, many of us have grown reluctant to use it. This is especially the case, I think, for those of us who are just beginning our academic careers (e.g., TAs, assistant professors) and are nervous about sounding too uninformed, romantic, or essentialist. We fall back on tidier terms like *style*, *tone*, and *ethos* that preceded *voice*—or we try out other terms that seem more theoretically, more politically sound. In her book, for instance, Bowden offers a few alternatives, including *dance*, *embrace*, and *web*. By using other words in place of *voice*—words that are more familiar, more current, more apparently appropriate—we gain quite a bit. We avoid the headache of messy definitions; we give patriarchy a momentary slip; we side-step (again, just for a moment, I think) challenges over self, identity, and authority. But I'd like to suggest that by abandoning *voice* as a metaphor we lose some things, too. And what we lose is of no little importance to our students and to feminism.

First, because *voice* is a patriarchal metaphor (and I would agree with Bowden that it is), it brings with it a certain amount of cultural clout, a certain degree of power—just as words like *author* and *owner* bring. Women who employ the metaphor—who "speak up" in class discussions, who "talk back" in their writing, who proclaim, after years of struggling to express themselves, "Now I have found my voice"—these women take part in that power to some extent, experiencing, as bell hooks suggests, a "rite of passage where one moves from being an object to a subject" within the culture (12). I have seen it happen countless times in my classes and in classes I have observed. During the dissertation study mentioned in my introduction, for example, women students regularly and quite explicitly connected the concept of *voice* to personal and social power. One young woman, Carrie, had this to say about her paper recounting events leading up
to her decision to be a vegetarian: "The voice I describe [in the paper] is the one that enables me to be confident in my writing and successful in life." In the paper itself, after illustrating struggles with parents, friends, and a track coach over her decision, she proclaims, "Yes, I AM A VEGETARIAN, A VEGAN. I'll announce it to the world. Call it whatever you want. I am proud of my choice, my voice" (my emphasis). Perhaps more importantly, during a subsequent class conversation about feminism, Carrie described how opportunities to express her voice in class discussions and papers prompted her to be more assertive outside of class. Instead of putting up with condescending comments from customers at the bar she tended, for instance, she began to challenge them. As she explained, "Everyone calls me cutie or sweetie. And I tell them, my name's not sweetie; it's Carrie. I tell them all the time. And so now I've started calling them sweetie back!"

Certainly, the multiple meanings associated with voice make communication with students, with one another, more challenging. When I encourage students to "trust your voices" as they pursue a research project, for example, I cannot guarantee that they will automatically know what I mean in this instance: that they should be wary of abandoning their own opinions and ideas in favor of published insights. Yet, postructuralist theory suggests that, no matter what words I use to convey my intentions, I cannot be sure that what I mean will match up with the meaning formed in my listener/reader's mind. As Terry Eagleton depicts this theoretical perspective, "[M]eaning is not immediately present in a sign... [I]t cannot be easily nailed down..." (128). Like postructuralist thought more generally, feminist theories have encouraged me to resist the urge to "nail down" meaning or to simplify my discourse by abandoning complex, polymorphous forms. In fact, as a young feminist I was compelled by feminist scholars across the disciplines to reject tidy definitions, neat distinctions, little boxes that we, as a patriarchal society, tend to want to fit things into. With respect to language, for instance, theologian Mary Daly highlighted for me the inherent complexity in words and how such complexity (the "deep resonances") is ironed out to perpetuate "patriarchal patterns" (3-4). Concerned by the drive among contemporary scientists (and some feminist theorists) for theoretical and methodological coherence, philosopher Sandra Harding showed me that "stable and coherent theories are not always the ones to be most highly desired," that "instabilities and incoherences" can lead to important "understandings" (244). And, in response to historical suggestions that biological sex can be easily delineated, linguist/philosopher Luce Irigaray illustrated the "multiplicity" of women's selves and their "desire." So, in important ways, the voice metaphor reflects the flux and fluidity that poststructuralism has presumed—and feminists have embraced—for years.
Of course, some might argue—and rightly so—that theories about language and knowledge do not always translate well to the practical, everyday realm. What makes sense, theoretically, may not help us live our increasingly complicated lives, may not help us help our students deal with complexities they face as students and citizens. In addition, as composition theorists such as Lester Faigley and Andrea Lunsford have pointed out, the cultural and institutional values that shape our teaching contexts are, in many ways, at odds with the postmodern values we may embrace as theorists. Indeed, Lunsford prompts us to wonder if accommodating notions of multiplicity and fluidity are even possible when “our institutions are so firmly committed” (71) to individuality, unification, and stability. I would like to suggest, though, that if we offer space for our students to think outside of familiar structures, we will see that they can develop and articulate a sense that meanings shift according to context, that the match between signified and signifier is, at best, inexact. Further, with a little encouragement, they will become comfortable moving back and forth from one meaning to another—and in so doing will gain a fuller appreciation for the creative power of language and the many possibilities for themselves as language users.

In the class I studied, for instance, students demonstrated this kind of flexibility. Tracy typically used voice as a marker for group identity (women), yet at times she used the term to refer to something more personal, individual. Similarly, Jane alternated between a more singular, unified idea of voice and a more multifaceted conception. In a class discussion exploring the meaning of academic discourse, for example, Jane used voice to represent her “real self”: “There’s this format we have and I have my ideas and they’re not going into that form, so I try to fit them into that form and it snowballs…. I produce something that I know I can write better, but I don’t know how to do it because it’s not in my voice…. It’s not me.” Though Jane further pursued a connection between voice and self in a paper on alternative academic forms, she complicated the connection by presenting her self as one of many selves (daughter, student, wait person)—all of which were “her,” but some of which seemed more “real,” depending on the circumstance. As she ponders toward the end of the paper, “I cannot find any voice that would/can fully express myself… So, is language deceiving?” Importantly, while the professor used the term voice at different times throughout the semester, she was careful not to define or present it in absolute terms. Instead, she assigned texts that employed voice in various ways, hoping that students would feel free to use the metaphor in a manner that made sense to them personally.

In similar fashion, many students in my recent graduate seminar in composition theory appeared to recognize, if not appreciate, the slipperiness
of the voice metaphor. Before moving into a discussion of voice as a “key word” in composition (Harris ix), I asked students to spend some time free-writing definitions of the term. Kathy wrote about how some of her professors teach that voice “is malleable, that it changes to suit situations,” while others offer a more static notion of voice: “that we all have a voice, and that this voice is a unique part of our own writing.” She went on to explain, “I have always thought that there must be a little of both of these viewpoints involved with what voice is.” Capturing the “both/and” flavor of Kathy’s definition, Brenda employed the metaphor of a quilt to illustrate how voice can have both cultural and individual resonances:

Although [the writer] is influenced by everything she has ever read, seen and heard, her voice is what she thinks about what she knows expressed in a way she has developed herself from pieces of all that input from other sources and experiences. Voice can be compared to a scrap quilt I might make from a collection of tiny pieces of fabric saved over time and gathered from other people’s collections of fabric, I did not personally choose all these fabrics, but I can put them together in a pattern that is uniquely mine.

And Cheryl, revealing a comparable sense of complexity, offered that voice “has the quality of being elusive and intrusive” at the same time. “When it’s there, it’s there. And, when you try to place it, it avoids you like the plague.” Indeed, in contrast to many professional scholars I have known, these students seemed entirely at ease with the prospect of using voice in multiple ways and, thus, imagining their relationship with writing and reading (those media that allow for the expression of voice) variously. Practicing poststructuralists in their own right, what these students didn’t need was a lecture on how voice is no longer a useful metaphor because it conjures up images of real selves and unified truths. What they needed was to be made conscious of the ways they were employing the term, for the multiple meanings they had already encountered to be highlighted, explicated, and analyzed—through free-writing exercises like the one mentioned earlier, as well as published discussions depicting its many potentialities.

Finally, in addition to giving up the cultural power and linguistic possibilities associated with voice, by abandoning the metaphor, we lose an important link between speaking and other forms of expression. Other words, other metaphors, simply don’t highlight the connection between the silencing of women’s public (and private) speech and constraints on their written words and bodily expression or movement. And such connections have been the hallmark of feminism and the concern of countless individual feminists—from Tillie Olson, who characterized artistic constraints on women with the phrase “Shut up, you’re only a girl” (27); to Adrienne Rich, who urged us to remember that “every mind resides in a body” (245); to
Helene Cixous, who warned in her treatise on women’s writing, “Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time” (880). Many of us know deeply, personally, how our physical, bodily experiences have everything to do with our ability to speak and write. We understand how often the women who have trouble expressing themselves in our classes are the same women who write about physical restrictions or abuse, rape, anorexia, and suicide. Discussing the writing blocks she has witnessed among her students, for example, Pamela Annas tells of the woman “stuck for two weeks on the same assignment,” who submitted “a powerfully written account of how her father had molested her from age eleven to fourteen and had beaten her up when she tried to speak about it to her mother.” Annas goes on to explain how the student traced “her particular form of silence—a polished, distant, ironic style”—to that time in her life (367). More recently, a young woman in a developmental writing course I taught last fall drew an especially strong connection between silence and physical and emotional abuse. In a literacy narrative designed to help students explore their particular writing histories, this student related her deep fear of writing to an episode in her life when an abusive step-father found her journal documenting the abuse. She explains how, upon discovering the journal, he went into a violent rage: “He tried to suffocate me. He ripped my journal, threw it in the garbage and said I was never allowed to write in a journal again.” In fact, the physical consequences of women’s speech have a long history, as Susan Brownmiller illustrates in her 1984 bestseller, *Femininity*. In a section depicting common punishments for women who “disrupted the peace of the neighborhood” in earlier times, she describes the use of ducking stools, iron muzzles, and whipping posts. Of the muzzle, in particular, she writes: “An iron muzzle with a triangular bit that fitted the mouth . . . was another device to silence an idle tongue during the Middle Ages. Locked into the branks, an offender was chained to a post or led through town for all to witness her shame” (112-13).

While some of the alternative metaphors forwarded by theorists like Bowden (e.g., *dance, embrace*) emphasize a bodily connection, they seem restrictive in other ways. Most obviously, they don’t capture the connections between speaking and writing that are so crucial. In Bowden’s case, the limitation is intentional. Her claim that *voice* is a worn-out metaphor rests, in large part, on its associations with oral literacy traditions. From her perspective, *voice* as a metaphor is problematic because, historically, it has reflected a cultural emphasis on *presence* (of author, of self), which, as theorists like Jacques Derrida point out, is only a convenient “illusion” (34). Of course, *presence*—as it has been reflected in historical “master narratives” that focus on men’s experiences and perspectives—has been the focus of feminist critiques as well. Still, many feminists wonder if
discarding the notion of presence altogether is helpful to the countless number of people whose values, voices, and bodies have been ignored, whose worth and potential have been discounted, whose only hope for more equitable treatment is to vigorously assert their presence in spheres where they have been too-long absent. Seyla Benhabib asks, for example, how we can even contemplate the idea of “female emancipation” without concepts such as “selfhood,” “agency,” and “autonomy”—all of which rest on the foundation of “presence” (21). Discussing women of color specifically, Gloria Anzaldúa suggests that absence is just what a patriarchal culture wants: “The white man speaks: Perhaps if you scrape the dark off your face. Maybe if you bleach your bones. Stop speaking in tongues, stop writing left-handed. Don’t cultivate your colored skins nor tongues of fire if you want to make it in a right-handed world” (166).

Further, these alternative metaphors seem incapable of capturing the range of emotions and experiences that many women desperately need to express. Expressing one’s identity or desire often involves a deep release of anger that the terms dance and embrace simply cannot fully accommodate, in our culture, at the present time. Unlike the word voice, which has come to signify expression of a range of attitudes and emotions, dance and embrace carry everyday connotations that are quite positive. Though Bowden rightly suggests that these terms are etymologically complex, that they can involve distance, “move[s] apart” as well as connection (117), for most people they imply a unity, a reaching out, a desire to connect with someone toward some positive end. Many women have been attempting such unity and connection too willingly, far too often throughout their lives—and that, I would argue, is their problem.

The critiques of presence, of authenticity and truth that underlie recent dissatisfaction with voice as a metaphor have been crucial to feminism—and to rhetoric and composition, as a whole. From them, we have learned to be less quick to generalize, to speak for others, to assume that the self presented in a student’s paper, in a colleague’s presentation, in a friend’s letter is the only self there is, that one person’s story is everyone’s. Yet, uncritical application of postmodern ideas may undercut our ability to offer the experience of freedom and power (as limited as it may be) to our students. Speaking of the concept of a generalizable “female experience,” for example, Diana Fuss suggests that although we (as theorists, researchers, teachers) understand that “truth clearly does not equate with experience,” the “fiction that they are the same” can inspire otherwise reticent students to speak, to feel “empowered” (117-19). Surely, many of us have, like Fuss, witnessed the power of shared experience in our classrooms—those moments when students tell their stories as if they are expressing the thoughts and feelings of all eighteen-year-olds, all women, all African
Americans, as if they are part of something much larger than themselves, a
group of people who experience the world the same way they do, who
understand them immediately, who speak their language. Though we may
want to stop our students and explain the dangers of generalizing, of
"speaking for"—and sometimes do—there are times when the theories that
make sense to us outside the classroom just don’t seem appropriate or useful.
As Lad Tobin writes about critiques of more “positivist” notions of literacy
and learning, “As a product of contemporary critical theory, these critiques
make some sense to me. As a classroom teacher, though, I have my doubts,
for while positivist notions of agency, authorship, voice, and self may be
philosophically naive, they can still be pedagogically powerful” (15).

Like Fuss and Tobin, I think we can hold on to all that we’ve learned
from postmodern theory without discarding concepts and metaphors that
have been helpful to so many of us, to so many of our students. There are
ways that we can use voice responsibly, by celebrating and highlighting its
multiple meanings, by using it to imply a sense of ownership or identity
without denying the influence of culture on the development of this sense.
In fact, many scholars within composition and rhetoric have already taken
on the challenging work of re-defining voice in ways that acknowledge both
the liberating potential of expressing one’s “true self” and the empowering
effect of recognizing multiple discursive “selves.” Utilizing the “both/and”
logic informing much contemporary feminist work, Randall Freisinger, for
example, encourages us to see a “dialogic” relationship between romantic
and postmodern perspectives on truth, self, and voice. “We find our voice,”
he explains, “among the voices of others, in a dialogic relation with them”
(271). Similarly, Frank Farmer relies on Vygotsky and Bakhtin to illustrate
how seemingly incompatible theoretical standpoints on voice can be
negotiated “from a dialogic perspective” (305). Rather than seeing voice as
something singular found within the self, for instance, we might more
profitably view it as an effect of the self’s orchestration of the many voices,
the many perspectives encountered in daily life (308). And Jaqueline Jones
Royster suggests that while we may at times identify ourselves in “singular”
ways (e.g., as an African American scholar, as a woman), we nonetheless
have many voices, each of which is “authentic.” Perhaps more importantly,
she suggests that voice is not just a visual or oral “phenomenon” but a “thing
heard, perceived, and reconstructed” (30), thus highlighting the role or
responsibility of another party in what appears to be an individual
expression or articulation.

The metaphors we use, whether for teaching, writing, or living, are
necessarily complex. As linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson
explain, metaphors, by their very nature, “highlight” some aspects of a
concept and “hide” others. Further, what is highlighted or hidden at any
given time is dependent on context. This is why a metaphor like *voice* can successfully imply *both* the stable, enduring qualities *and* the endlessly changing nature of the self(s) and truth(s) we experience. And this is why *voice* can be used to restrict (e.g., to reinforce the notions of essentialism, the emphases on "presence" that have constrained women) or to liberate (e.g., to suggest a stable subject position from which to assert one's opinions, desires). Maybe this is the true power of *voice*—that it reveals the hazy boundary between constraint and freedom for us and our students. Maybe this—instead of the word itself—is the source of our discomfort.

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**NOTES**

1 In the fall of 1997, I observed an upper-level composition course called Feminist Expository Writing at the University of Louisville, where I completed my doctoral work. The study was the subject of my dissertation, *Re-Writing the Academy: Issues of Voice, Identity, and Authority in the Feminist Composition Class.*

2 *Carrie* is a pseudonym, as are all other names used to refer to students in this essay. All quoted material is used by permission of students. Carrie's description of her paper comes from a reflective memo submitted with her revision.


**WORKS CITED**


