DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 371 383 CS 214 387

AUTHOR Gould, Christopher
TITLE Effective Communication in the Autobiographical Narratives of Two Women.
PUB DATE Mar 94
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (45th, Nashville, TN, March 16-19, 1994).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Autobiographies; Blacks; College Students; Comparative Analysis; *Diaries; Females; Higher Education; *Literacy; Personal Narratives; Self Concept; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS African Americans; *Authorship; *Author Text Relationship; Composition Theory

ABSTRACT

For a composition teacher--comparing a passage from his Caucasian grandmother's (May Blossom Gould's) diary with the autobiographical narrative dictated by an African-American student's great-great grandmother (Violet McNeil) to a literate member of her family--racial politics and the privileges afforded by literacy irrevocably separate the two narratives. The similarities between these two narratives are that both women lived a hundred years or so and both viewed the world devoutly through the lenses of Protestant theology and thus regarded life as a struggle that culminated in triumph. Additionally, each woman constructed an identity through narrative and was eager to preserve it in writing. The occasion for Mrs. Gould's narrative was her trip from New York to New Orleans. Mrs. Gould's diary should be read as the writer's effort to negotiate among her various roles and identities. Some theorists have begun to view writing as a form of "identity negotiation." This suggests, for example, that much of what happens in a first-year composition course is a sorting out of overlapping, sometimes conflicting roles. Mrs. McNeil's text exhibits a more or less univocal resistance to an identity mediated by a dominant white male culture, yet her autobiographical narrative is itself mediated by the literate family member who recorded it. Certainly, Mrs. Gould's race, as well as her scribal literacy, allowed her to engage in a more far-reaching type of self-creation than Violet McNeil. (Excerpts of both narratives are attached.) (SAM)

Effective Communication in the Autobiographical Narratives of Two Women

Christopher Gould

University of North Carolina at Wilmington

The idea for this paper arose from an assignment I gave two summers ago in advanced composition. I remember the circumstance partly because my reading of student papers was delayed by my grandmother's death. More to the present point, though, I remember it because the assignment brought forth a remarkable piece of writing--one that has complicated and enriched my understanding of literacy, autobiography, and family and has influenced me as a teacher, a writer, a father, and a son.

The assignment, borrowed from what was once considered an innovative textbook, no longer seems unusual or ingenious. Prompting students to convince a skeptical friend that writing is worth taking seriously, it elicits some predictable arguments: that writing contributes to worldly success, that it provides an outlet for creative self-expression. Indeed, discussion of the assignment that summer hovered around such platitudes until one member of the class declared that writing was important to her because it was withheld from her African American ancestors. She developed this thought by referring to a great-great grandmother, Violet McNeil, who had dictated an autobiographical narrative to literate members of her family. Mrs. McNeil, whose lifetime extended from the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment to the enactment of civil rights legislation a century later, was a person with a story that she wanted to preserve, but without the scribal proficiencies that most college students take for granted.

I later persuaded my student, Jennifer Barfield, to let me print Mrs. McNeil's narrative in *North Carolina English Teacher*, where it appeared last fall with commentaries by a

linguist, a scholar of speech communication, and Jennifer herself, now a fifth-grade teacher (It is also reprinted here as Appendix A.)

Mrs McNeil's narrative was on my mind that summer as I drove to my grandmother's funeral in New Jersey Differences between the two women are evident and important; I don't mean to brush them aside. My grandmother, having grown up poor in rural Appalachia, graduated from a state teacher's college, then married a wealthy cousin who owned a textile mill in the North. Thereafter, much of her imagination and ingenuity was employed in an elaborate denial of her regional and class origins, for which she substituted a more gratifying fiction It's important to note that these efforts were made feasible by social assets--whiteness and literacy--that Violet McNeil did not possess My grandmother muted her regional dialect, left the Baptist Church, affiliated herself with a more prestigious denomination, and became active in ladies' clubs, where she reviewed literary fiction and participated in other "cultural activities"

Profound as these differences are, however, similarities between the two women are evident Each lived a hundred years more or less, both viewed the world devoutly through the lenses of Protestant theology, regarding life as a struggle culminating in triumph. More importantly, though, each constructed an identity through narrative, and each was eager to preserve it in writing I was reminded of this a few months ago, when I recovered a diary from 1939, passages of which I've duplicated (see Appendix B) The immediate occasion for the diary was a trip from New York to New Orleans undertaken in late fall, about the time World War II precluded European travel for American tourists

A traditionalist might read the diary as a derivative text, reflecting the conventions of travel literature It catalogs minute particulars of climate, topography, agriculture, commerce,

transportation, and economy It regards features of landscape from a self-conscious, at times melodramatic, pose--that of the astute observer whose discriminating appraisal of noteworthy sights bespeaks sophisticated sensibility (Note, for example, the appreciative glimpses of various engineering achievements rail yards, train stations, and skyscrapers) Other sights occasion blasé indifference, as in the remark ("just so much and no more") aroused by an eternal flame of sorts, discerningly dismissed as a bogus point of interest. The most haunting scenes--those revealing the poverty and other indignities brought on by the Depression--provoke melancholy disillusionment ("I would not care to live here The misery distresses me.") These features of the diary recall the persona adopted by British travel writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, authors whose sophistication and tender feelings are proclaimed in the titles of their popular narratives *The Man of the World*, *A Sentimental Journey*, *The Man of Feeling*.

The problem with this reading of my grandmother's diary is the tacit assumption that, like many other texts written by women, it can be dismissed as a more or less unsuccessful imitation of some canonical male prototype. A more sensitive reading might therefore examine the diary in light of certain defining features of women's narratives, such as those identified by Elizabeth Flynn and Geoffrey Sirc Sirc's categories, in particular, seem to offer a perfect fit my grandmother's narrative reveals "realistic" agency, incidents are "banal" and "anticlimactic" rather than "epic", tone is "caring" or "nurturing," not "apocalyptic", the text is framed as a sequence of anecdotes rather than a "quest" or "mission", it reveals "confusion" more than "control", it makes frequent reference to the opposite sex

While this may be a more sensitive reading of the diary, it is nonetheless a restricted one Its chief limitation, suggested by Don Kraemer's critique of Sirc and Flynn, is that it

overlooks "contradictions and inconsistencies" through which writers often contest conventional formulations of gender (327-31) This concern seems particularly warranted in both cases at hand. Mrs. McNeil's narrative, composed in the 1950s, can be read as a deliberate rejection of a mediated identity--that of a passive, illiterate, disempowered black woman Viewed in the same light, my grandmother's diary becomes a complex negotiation of two conflicting identities (those of rural, working-class school teacher and well-to-do, cultured Protestant lady) that resists attributes commonly assigned to each The occasion of the narrative--a tour not of the European Continent, but of Appalachia and the Mississippi Delta in the comfort of a Pullman coach--makes these contradictions all the more conspicuous The diary's cultured, literary voice (which indeed may echo the travelogues of Sterne and Boswell) jars with the poignancy of the scene Put another way, the narrative's studied voice demands an aesthetic distance between writer and persona that is severely complicated by my grandmother's regional and class origins.

These matters in mind, I suggest that my grandmother's diary should be read not as an imperfect echo of some canonical literary text, nor as the acting out of a gender-determined script, but rather as the writer's effort to construct identity through narrative Specifically, I see my grandmother's appropriation of travel narrative--a genre through which, says Dennis Porter, "our knowledge of things foreign has been mediated" (3)--as a way of *making* foreign those aspects of personal history that this unglamorous journey brought painfully to the surface Porter explains how such a process might operate

> Since the narrative of a journey gives an author great freedom to focus on whatever it is in an unfamiliar land that "strikes his fancy," it invites a form of self-disclosure that is only partially conscious As a result, in their

> writings travelers put their fantasies on display often in spite of themselves In one way or another, they are always writing about lives they want or do not want to live, the lost objects of their desire or the phobias that threaten to disable them (13)

Porter concludes that travel narratives "are always concerned with the question of place and of placing, of situating oneself once and for all vis-à-vis an Other or others" (20)

My grandmother's efforts to situate herself are revealed in the tension between two contrasting themes--the wonders of technology and the dark underside of American capitalism The third paragraph, for example, starts by extolling the efficiency of railroads ("We reached Columbus on record time"), proceeds to lament the plight of the CCC recruits, offers a prayer ("Oh God! be merciful to all these boys"), then returns abruptly to appreciative observations about the "hundreds of freight cars from all over the United States." This tension amounts to a good deal more than grappling with ambivalent feelings (though such feelings must have been aroused), it also brings to the surface an uneasy balance between conflicting allegiances

On the one hand, the writer casts her native culture, transfigured as the Other, in terms of helpless misery The travel narrative provides a convenient template for this process, and the view from a Pullman car frames the tableaux "A trainload of boys passed under my window", "the tops of the telephone lines were way down beneath the tracks " Were this the whole story, one might dismiss the writer as a traitor to her cultural origins However, the contradictions and inconsistencies of which Kraemer speaks complicate such an assessment First of all, despite the "female topic features" (realistic stance, nurturing tone, and so forth) of this particular text, the travel narrative in general has been categorized as a "masculine" genre (Porter 17) In *The Adventurous Male*, Martin Green describes the "psychological

expansion" experienced by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travelers who, when writing, felt "creative and divine, or at least legendary and heroic" (51-52) My grandmother's narrative, resisting this virile theme of adventure, conquest, and heroism, accentuates helplessness: the writer is unable to leave the train in Columbus or the station in Cincinnati, unable to help the poor "boys" or the injured woman from California, unable to alleviate "the misery [that] distresses me," and finally unable even to continue writing because of the bouncing train Green also mentions the tendency of travel writers to revel in "the physical and moral exuberance that . went with exploring" (53). The only such detail in my grandmother's diary is the reference to her husband's "tremendous breakfast." The writer herself feels depressed, restless, cold, and hungry, but never exuberant.

I wish to draw two connections between this last reading of my grandmother's diary and recent studies of autobiography and the teaching of literacy The first, and most evident, involves the role of autobiographical writing in the shaping of identity A social view of literacy is now less likely to stress inititiation into discourse communities Instead, theorists like Robert Brooke have begun to view writing, especially academic writing, as a form of "identity negotiation " This suggests, for example, that much of what happens in a first-year composition course is a sorting out of overlapping, sometimes conflicting, roles, as students begin to examine the ways that they satisfy and resist expectations implicit in those roles The stakes of these identity negotiations may well be proportional to the degree of cultural adjustment with which a writer contends, whether it be a transition from high school to college or from one social class to another And these negotiations may arouse particular interest whenever a writer contends with incompatible roles and expectations

Take, for example, the case of Winifred Eaton, a popular twentieth-century author who concealed her Chinese ancestry by constructing a fraudulent biography. Through an elaborate hoax, eventually exposed after her death, Eaton presented herself as a Japanese American, managing even to be listed in *Who's Who* as a native of Nagasaki. Amy Ling, who revealed the hoax, says of Eaton, "in a very literal way, [she] created herself, drawing no distinctions between her books and her life." Ling characterizes this self-transformation as a mercenary ploy, since Eaton understood that many of her contemporaries would take a Chinese American author less seriously. Her reasoning was sound, though the artistic consequences of this tactic may have been detrimental. Says Ling: "Her sense of the importance of ethnic validity . . . , however, was so strong that it overshadowed her belief in her imagination and storytelling powers, both of which were considerable" (310).

The second connection I wish to draw involves the recent interest in adventure and travel writing. Studies of the essay have introduced cartography as a metaphor through which to explore the writer's relationship to her subject. This trend has been accompanied by new interest in the travel narrative, especially in view of the attention now given to the ideology of adventure in "masculinist studies." Furthermore, travel narrative presents a convergence of the aesthetic, the psychological, and the political. As Porter notes, "It is an effort both to put something alien into the words of a shared language for someone else at home and to put oneself in the Other's place abroad in order to speak on its behalf"(14). The politics of this stance is revealed in Said's well-known formulation of "Orientalism," an oppressive, self-justifying concept that allows Westerners to speak for others.

As I noted at the start, it is politics that irrevocably separates the narratives of Violet McNeil and May Gould. Though not without internal contradictions, Mrs. McNeil's text is a

more or less univocal resistance to an identity mediated by a dominant white male culture My grandmother's text, on the other hand, is complicated not just by the contradictions inherent to travel narrative, but also by the writer's attempts to romanticize domestic travel through the idiom of discovery and adventure (a popular agenda from 1939 to 1941, as the well-healed were learning to "see America first"). Furthermore, the effort to view the landscape as a foreign observer--to adopt the stance of an anthropologist--is complicated still further by my grandmother's divided cultural allegiances

Consequently, I return to the point that it was my grandmother's race, as well as her scribal literacy, that allowed her to engage in a more far-reaching type of self-creation than Violet McNeil However, as the example of Winifred Eaton suggests, the results of that endeavor are troubled

Works Cited

Brooke, Robert E. *Writing and Sense of Self: Identity Negotiation in Writing Workshops*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1991.

Flynn, Elizabeth A. "Composing as a Woman." *College Composition and Communication* 39 (1988): 423-35.

Green, Martin. *The Adventurous Male: Chapters in the History of the White Male Mind*. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1993.

Kraemer, Don J., Jr. "Gender and the Autobiographical Essay: A Critical Extension of the Research." *College Composition and Communication* 43 (1992): 323-39.

Ling, Amy. "Creating One's Self: The Eaton Sisters." *Reading the Literatures of Asian America*. Ed. Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Amy Ling. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1992. 305-18.

Porter, Dennis. *Haunted Journeys: Desire and Transgression in European Travel Writing*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991.

Sirc, Geoffrey. "Gender and 'Writing Formation' in First-Year Narratives." *Freshman English News* 18.2 (1989): 4-11.

Appendix A
The Autobiography of Violet McNeil

Most of my close relatives who are near me in age are dead, but I thank the Lord to still be among the living even tho I can't get around now I have been here a long time, way past the three score and ten years promised to us. It has not been flowery beds of ease either. I worked hard, I dug ditches, chipped boxes, cleaned off ditch banks and worked just like a man I did not mind. I enjoyed good health. You see I was bom down on the Seashore in Zion Hill Section, my mother and father were Mary Fariby Pickett Green and Jake Green When I was bom Aunt Violet Monroe named me Violet after herself. My whole name was Violet Ann Rebecca Green. My father and his brothers were owned by different families of white peoples who gave them their names, that is why some were Green, Monroe and Fullwood. Fullwood was the first last name for all of them. I was born right after slavery and some [of] the colored people had not even left the white families, because they were good to them and also they had no place to go. My parents were living for a long time where I was born in the home of Mag Clarida. I had an older brother who was old enough to be taken as a slave but my uncle Jack Fullwood took him with him, that was papas' brother My oldest brother died of pneumonia at 15 years of age. After that my mother and Father moved to Mr. Sunny Galloway's plantation, near the old Empry Swamp. His wife was named Mrs Mary Ann Galloway They were good people, my mother helped her milk, my father was a hard worker there, but he kept moving it seems because he moved us from the Galloway plantation to Mr George Swain's plantation Mr Swain had a lot of colored people on his place and after a time there my father leflt us there. I wondered why but I was not allowed to ask questions

I was getting to be a big size girl by then My mother stayed on and we worked, I was young and strong and I was hired all of the time I heard that my Father had married some one else Soon after I heard that news my mother married Pompey Nixon he bought a piece of land from Mr David Ward builded a house and took my mother and I there We were living there quite a while before Henry Sparrow brought his wife and family out back from the Seashore Henry Sparrow bought a tract of land joining my stepfather's land I got aquinted with the Sparrows then, in Smithville Township

My mother died there in her home with her last husband, when my father heard that my mother was dead he sent for me to go to him back [to thel Seashore at Zion Hill section He was then living in the old Fullwood house That was the house where the white Fullwoods use to live when they owned slaves

After being there for a long time one of my great aunts Susie Ann Wilson who lived in Southport was sick, and sent for me to live with her and take care of her I did until she died Then I lived with my uncle Jackson Clemmons and his family and helped raise his older children He taught school and I stayed there until he moved to Wilmington His wife was named Alice Clemmons Through it all I did not learn to read and write I wanted to but I worked so hard that at night I was sleepy

After Uncle Jackson left Southport I worked on sleep-in jobs and spent my time off with my sister Lester Nixon Hankins Isaac was calling on me and when I realized I was in family way, I was ashame to tell him but I had to tell him He got Rev J H Rhoe who went around marr[y]ing people, preaching funerals and preaching to save souls to marry us at my sister Lester's house Her husband was named Henry Hankins Isaac brought his sister

Lettice with him when we got married Rev. Rhoe married Isaac and I, Violet and the marriage was witenessed by my sister Lester Hankins, her husband Henry Hankins, Isaac's sister Lettice Sparrow No I do not know the date but we were married some time before Christmas When I got a little heavier Isaac and Lettice came for me in mule an[d] cart and moved me and my things to his mother & fathers house. I was back out in the section where my mother had died. I was in the Sparrow home a few months before Isaac's & my baby was born She was born May 19, 1898. I learned the date later because of Mr. Henry Price keeping records of babies born. Isaac went to Florida to work in terpentine before Mary was born but he got his mother to wait on me at that tima. She was a granny. She was a good mother in law. My father in law was a fine old man. They were Henry Sparrow and Harriet Sparrow. Isaac had some sisters home at that time too, they were Lettice, Henrietta, Rachel, & Rebecca. When Mary was born, Mrs. Mary Jane Ward, wife of Mr. David Ward sent me some pretty clothes, dress up clothes for the baby and asked me to name her Mary Jane after her. I did. It was alright with Isaac, I felt like. because we all loved the Wards.

I was supposed to stay with my in laws until my husband came back but some of his sisters and I had differences and I took Mary and moved to Sister Mag's (Isaac's older sister) and stayed there trying to wait for Isaac Mag Brinson was Isaac's halfsister, She was married to Ceasar Evans. After living there a while Rachel Sparrow got married to John Rutland and moved over the swamp, I went to live with her. Isaac came back while I was there. He bought a piece of land next to his father and builded a house on it but we just could not make a go of it After we could not make it he wanted to take Mary from me. I got word to papa who was then living in Wilmington that I wanted to go to him (Jake Green), he made arrangements for me to go to Wilmington. Papa fell in love with Mary and helped me to keep away from Isaac, but Isaac kept on hunting until he found me and Mary He would try to see Mary and he would send his sister Henrietta to take things to her After Mary got married than I could not keep her from her father anymore Then Son (Giles H Lane) met Isaac and helped them to know each other. Isaac loved Mary and me also but he was hot-tempered and so was I After Mother died I felt that people took advantage of me or maybe I did not see some things right I am glad [he] did enjoy his daughter and his grand children and great grands and great-great grands Isaac and I were blessed He was married again and I was too

Appendix B
The Diary of May Blossom Gould

Hillside, a redish winding river and bare mountains, then the town [Pittsburgh] and the Pittsburg river Harry ate a tremendous breakfast and the train was on its way. The next stop was Steubenville [Ohio], just the usual small town, miles and miles of desolate country, cow lands with stubs, we passed a little cottage with a flame emerging from a rod or so it seemed I asked the Porter and he told me it was gas and had not gone out for 35 years. Just so much and no more Bus to S Louis was at crossroads near by--and then we entered a little village (Uhrichsville). Long rows of poor houses, no yards, no paint Coal trucks passed with huge blocks of coal in it (channel coal) This town was also built on a hillside.

Snow still falling at Newcomersville yet I imagine we will be moving out of the storm area soon. These little villages seem poor indeed and the country between the villages sparsely settled . Columbus in another hour and hope the weather permits our getting out as we have 20 minutes wait there. We had our first glimpse of oil.

Columbus Penna. R R Shops--Freight yards & roundhouses We reached Columbus Ohio on record time but as our coach was some distance 1/2 possibly from station we could not get out We did stretch our legs The porter brought in ice water A trainload of boys from -- passed under my window Porter said they were going to camp. W.P.A boys I felt so depressed They were only boys Some carried small valises--others immense big cardboard or synthetic leather suitcases Some dirty, some clean, some in fair physical condition others undernourished Oh God! be merciful to all these boys. In Columbus we saw hundreds of freight cars from all over the United States. This was the terminal evidently One was marked Apple Blossom Express .

The train stopped for a couple of minutes just before we reached the Junction. The track was much higher than the surrounding country. The tops of the telephone wires were way down beneath the tracks We passed thru London and had our first glimpse of the cattle being unloaded and the cars ready for shipment. Near the tracks here was an immense grain-drier We are nearing the grain section. It seems the boys were loaded in a car attached to our train and were left off at Xenia to a C.C.C. Camp At last we reached Cincinnati at 5 15 and had a two hour wait I was much disappointed that I couldn't go down in the town I could see it was a grand big city It seemed incredible to sit in the station for two hours but we had had nothing to eat since morning and the station was a mile out by bus It was nasty and cold and wet The snow had reached Cincinnati One of the waiters in the restaurant said it sometimes went to 10° below zero We had our dinner in a beautiful restaurant in the Union Station It was the finest station I had ever been in.

I would not care to live here The misery distresses me We passed through Coldwater [Mississippi], Winona and many other towns A[t] Jackson Miss. we stopped for several minutes A woman, hurt in a bad accident was being placed on the train in a stretcher She had been in the hospital for 3 weeks and was being sent home to California Jackson is a big city with many modern skyscraper buildings I noted Hotel Heidelberg and Robert E Lee Hotel from the distance both many stories high but there were still higher buildings One looked like N Y (Singer Bldg) The country now seems firmer in spots, yet we passed much swampy land after leaving Jackson

I can not hardly write, the train bounces so much Of course we passed many cotton fields but it was the wrong season to see the cotton out Following the railroad tracks and close to the road were the negro shacks