

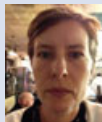
Reconceptualizing Vulnerability in Personal Narrative Writing With Youths

Elisabeth Johnson

A high-profile shooting spree sparks teacher fear and surveillance of youths' writing. The author illustrates how adults can draw on discomfort to reshape limited understandings of youth and adulthood.

It seems impossibly naïve to think that there can be anything like a genuine sharing of voices in the classroom. What does seem possible, on the other hand, is an attempt to recognize the power differentials present and to understand how they impinge upon what is sayable and doable in that specific context. (Orner, 1992, p. 81)

This article is about a yearlong writing project in a big-city Title I public school that was led by a teacher who took risks to craft curriculum for a group of 10th graders not always in love with in-school writing. Although some youths in Room 323 were successful writers by normative academic standards, many in the inclusive sophomore English class struggled when writing for a teacher audience. The Young Writer's Project (YWP) discussed in this article yielded a student publication bound in a glossy cover, celebrated, and distributed to the young authors and



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adults who supported their writing process. It was also marketed as a handbook to high school advisories, that is, courses in small learning communities where teachers take up roles traditionally afforded to school counselors who support students' social and academic wellbeing. Advisory curricula typically address youth issues and college preparation. But this article is not a simple celebration of this writing project. Rather, it serves as a reminder of the power dynamics that English teachers and youths live when they negotiate writing from personal experience in school.

The story of personal narrative writing in English curricula began after generations of students had slogged their way through "assignments that begin 'Write a five-paragraph paper...'" and include such dictums as 'Avoid first person,'...a peculiar subgenre of writing, the school essay, in which personal interest and student choice rarely have a place" (Furr, 2003, p. 519). Freire (1970), Calkins (1983), and Atwell (1998) responded with reading and writing pedagogies and curricula that centered student "voice(s)." Calkins and Atwell argued that milking detail out of "small moments" in students' personal narratives would make English curricula engaging and authentic. Critical pedagogues like Freire, skeptical of teacher-centric formal schooling, cast students'

personal narrative writing as evidence of student empowerment.

However, Orner's (1992) words at the article's start remind us that critical feminist and poststructural thinkers have historically countered romantic concepts of voice and authenticity, arguing that classrooms are never safe spaces for free expression. Concepts of authentic voice and teachers empowering students rely on tenuous understandings of stable identities and monarchical power relations (Orner, 1992). Classrooms must be conceptualized as places where power relations are always present and productive (Soep, 2006). Although people *perform* lived and felt identities in words, gestures, and dress (Bettie, 2003), these identities are always partial, discursive productions expressed in a time and place for a particular audience and purpose (Davies & Harré, 1990). Individuals draw on universalizing discourses (i.e., taken-for-granted systems of knowledge) to recognize and categorize identities. Identities are *produced* when they are recognized, located, and stabilized (Hagood, 2002). But identities are also partial, for they can be unsettled through variations across past, present, and future performances (Blackburn, 2003). This means that teachers working with personal narratives of youths inhabit a precarious position: They *produce* student "voice" throughout the writing process (Snaza & Lensmire, 2006), editing and recognizing some writerly identities over others while remaining attuned to variations across student performances.

In this article, I explore the discursive production of student writers as *vulnerable*. I look closely at a conflict over meaning that arose between a student, Rukiya (all names are pseudonyms) and a teacher, Ms. Phagan, during the writing process of a student-authored book. Tight focus on one conflict, one teacher's experiences and one student's responses, allows me to highlight some discourses that circulated around this student-authored book project, identities the teacher and student performed, identities they produced for each other, and some possibilities made available through the conflict. I argue that conflicts like these are critical moments when students and teachers are unsettling identity categories in small but

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impactful ways. As such, classroom conflicts during the writing process warrant close consideration for the discursive ideologies they surface and the unsettling possibilities they illuminate.

To begin, I provide an overview of the larger study that frames this article; outline theoretical concepts of invitation, production, and interrogation; and follow up with putting theoretical concepts into practice. Specifically, I explain how Ms. Phagan *invited* her students to perform vulnerability in personal narrative writing, a vulnerability that changed as local and national media events occurred, and school adults *produced* youth writers as vulnerable to government interrogation and their writing in need of additional edits. As students *interrogated* ways that media outlets and adults produce youths as vulnerable, Ms. Phagan recognized these variations in student performances and interrogated the role *she* played in producing student vulnerability. I close with Butler's (2004) reconceptualization of vulnerability as an active performance that embraces rather than erases the discomfort we experience in fear, loss, shame, or confusion. Students and teachers must draw on classroom moments of discomfort and variation to reshape limited understandings of youth and adulthood.

Classroom Conflicts Over Textual Meaning: The Larger Study

Throughout the academic year of this student-authored book project, I was a participant observer in Ms. Phagan's first period English classroom. There I explored how students and their teacher negotiated meanings for pop culture texts important to them (i.e., texts *participants* deemed popular such as films, music, clothing, accessories, hairstyles, and the student-authored book discussed here). Little research portrayed the complexity of classroom pop culture text work between students and their teachers over time. I believed that moments when teachers and students negotiated meanings for pop culture texts had implications for identity performance (ways they wanted to be recognized in the classroom) and production (how they understood one another to be). I was dually interested in viewing pop culture texts through participant lenses, rather than universalizing my own white, middle-class, teacher-turned-researcher definition. This meant I spent 2006–2007 in Ms. Phagan's first (block) period English classroom, where I audio-recorded and composed daily field notes, collected artifacts of teacher and student

work (including participant-authored photoethnographies of pop culture), and conducted multiple in-depth interviews with Ms. Phagan and five sophomores in the class.

Data analysis was ongoing and iterative. I first coded for pop culture texts important across participants' lives and wrote memos about ways participants made sense of themselves with these texts. Then I pinpointed classroom literacy events with meaning conflicts over those texts and identities. Later, I followed up with participant interviews about these events. Finally, I reread data referencing this event and referenced in this event; coded for universalizing discourses and variation in participant identity performances; read contemporary research and theory about vulnerability, adolescence, and personal narrative writing; and wrote memos about data throughout. This article centers a literacy event when the student-authored YWP book (a text all considered popular and important) seemed mired in different ideas of what it meant to be a young writer with a personal story and how such stories should be told. Below I outline how concepts of invitation, production, and interrogation support rethinking what it means to be vulnerable and respond to vulnerability in student writing.

Inviting, Producing, and Interrogating "Vulnerability"

Protectionist discourses circulate in a range of domains where people and groups are positioned in need (e.g., fetuses, school children, people suffering from AIDS in Africa, etc.). For decades, fields of medicine, sociology, psychology, and law have defined adolescence as a "less than" category, othered, out of time, perpetually in a state of "will be," hormone-raging, identity-seeking, and in the writing project profiled here, vulnerable to adult victimization (Lesko, 1996).

In therapeutic arenas, such as social work and mental health, youth are viewed as victims/patients: of sexual assault, of dysfunctional families, or of addictive patterns, such as alcoholism....A conception of youth as victim highlights their vulnerability and needs for self-esteem, talk therapy, and protection from abusers. (Lesko, 1996, p. 454)

Individuals, policies, and institutions draw on protectionist discourses of youthful vulnerability to

justify interventions and, in this case, to frame writing projects. The project here (a student-authored advisory handbook) worked within and against this protectionist discourse, locating youths as experts in adolescence, positioned to identify "real" teen issues for adolescents in advisories nationwide and naive writers unwittingly writing for a scrupulous adult audience. Although protection is neither unnecessary nor blameworthy, I aim to explore the process through which what it means to be vulnerable is constituted and used to justify protective action and, in this case, preemptive action in a high school writing project.

When teachers craft personal narrative writing assignments, they prepare to *produce* vulnerable writers because they *invite* students to make personal disclosures about life in and beyond school (Ansbach, 2007). Students write toward the assigned task, and teachers recognize particular writing performances as personal narrative. To illustrate, the act of making a "hidden" personal story visible to outside readers is often one of the main criteria for a personal narrative writing assignment. However, youths' personal disclosures can prompt protective responses from school adults (Miller, 1998) who might read the personal as a cry for help or a confessional. In the project profiled here, current media events, teacher upbringing, and administrative pressure propelled Ms. Phagan to produce particular writing performances as vulnerable to adult scrutiny and in need of editing.

Teachers cannot avoid serving as producers (Fleetwood, 2005), but they can interrogate social forces that contribute to producing adolescents as vulnerable (Lewis & Ketter, 2008), especially when production forecloses or fetishizes particular varieties of personal disclosure. It is this act of interrogating vulnerability (i.e., identifying fears, teasing apart social forces that produce them, and countering constraining identity categories) that Butler (2004) recommends if adults and youths are to disrupt discourses of vulnerability and the protectionist responses they provoke.

Butler (2004) turns the protectionist response to vulnerability upside-down, asking readers to conceive of vulnerability and "exposure" as moves toward deeper understanding of self and other. She argues that we are stronger when we eschew protective autonomy and acknowledge how our actions can affect others and the ways theirs might affect us. So, vulnerability moves from passive response to an active performance that may bring us closer. Through the project discussed here, Ms. Phagan turned her fearful response to one student's (Rukiya's) personal

disclosure into an opportunity to engage more deeply with that student's family and her own teacherly past with shame and personal disclosure.

Inviting Vulnerability: The Assignment

When teachers prepare lessons, frame units, identify goals, or select mentor texts, they are inviting students to perform in particular ways, that is, conveying what they will recognize as writing in a lesson or unit (Lewis & Petrone, 2010). Teachers invested in motivating writers to compose texts with "voice" often invite students' personal experiences and life stories into writing assignments on topics they select (Alvermann, 2002; Atwell, 1997; Calkins, 1983; Potter, McCormick, & Busching, 2001). Similarly, Ms. Phagan's project invited students to incorporate their personal narratives and the narratives of others into essays on self-selected topics.

From 2006 to 2007, Ms. Phagan partnered with a nonprofit organization dedicated to publishing students' writing. She began the year with the concept of a book for high school advisories, filled with topics that students thought were crucial but were absent in advisory curriculum. To select topics, 10th graders brainstormed ideas and polled school peers. Once votes were tallied, sections were planned, and two critical questions were developed for each topic. Each section housed two questions and multiple student essays addressing the questions from distinct stakeholders' perspectives. Some essays would be written around personal interviews students conducted with people who had first-hand experience on the topic, some would be written based on print-text research, some would center students' own personal experiences, and many would include a mix of all three.

For example, a section titled "Teen Parenting" asked: How does having a child at a young age impact someone's life? and How can people support teen mothers? The section included an essay authored by a student who interviewed his mother who'd had her first child in her teens, an essay by a student whose cousin bore a child while in high school, and an essay by a

young woman whose friend raised a baby from a young age. Other representative book sections included

- Navigating dynamics such as sex in peer relationships
- Romance and conflict
- Thinking toward a future of college and/or work
- Living with or amid depression
- Suicide and abuse (sexual, physical, and psychoemotional)

At the heart of this book was Ms. Phagan's invitation to write on topics students and teachers *don't* talk about in order to get these stakeholders talking. For example, in Ms. Phagan's written summary of the project for students she explained, "You are the ones who know what students need and want to talk about. Your voices need to be heard. It is up to you to provide the writing as well as the questions that will provoke inquiry and empower individuals in classrooms to begin to talk about the issues that really matter. (I smell a revolution!)" (artifact, October 24, 2006). Here Ms. Phagan invited students to perform as experts on youth needs and talk topics, suggesting they select topics, create content, and compose questions to "provoke inquiry and empower individuals in classrooms to talk about the issues that really matter." Producing student-selected issues as "the issues that really matter" prioritized student concerns over those selected by school adults. But questions about powers that produced and maintained sanitary norms for advisory handbooks seemed absent from the assignment, save Ms. Phagan's closing parenthetical, "I smell a revolution!" Here Ms. Phagan imbued students' personal narrative writing with revolutionary significance, implying that marginalized voices would be centered and published. The act of composing material for advisories was produced as revolutionary, a naive move that veiled the more complicated politics that would later constrain student voices.

Inviting students to author essays from their own and others' personal experiences about topics for teen advisories encouraged students to perform as advisors to youths needing counseling, help, advice, or life lessons. Doing so meant that interviews, statistics, and students' own personal stories would *teach* on a taboo topic. For example, in one December writing workshop, when students were drafting collaborative chapters, Ms. Phagan presented a project overview that

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reemphasized its narrative dimensions. Students were to “explore and present one person’s experience and perspective” (artifact, 12/18/2006). Classroom handouts guided students to structure essays with “experiences and opinions to illustrate this perspective,” a “personal & casual” tone, and a “short story showing your connection to this topic.” Though print text research was woven into assignment requirements, constructing and reflecting on a personal experience, whether one’s own or that of another, was essential for the project.

Personal disclosure was not mandated, but the mentor text Ms. Phagan selected for the essay template centered a young African American male’s experience contemplating and researching to compose “The Truth About Black Teen Suicide” (Carter, 2002). In the mentor text, a young man, provoked by a white teacher’s ignorant comment about the low rates of black teen suicide, researched statistics and interviewed the director of a suicide prevention organization. His writing served to correct his white teacher, address silence around racialized dimensions of teen suicide, and educate himself about an issue rarely portrayed in mainstream media or home conversations as a “black” teen issue. The piece served as a powerful invitation to Ms. Phagan’s student authors (who were primarily black, Latino and Chinese American) to engage in frank discussions of teacher ignorance about issues of race, but the essay’s focus remained black teen *vulnerability* to suicide.

Simultaneously, student authors were encouraged to convey what they *learned* while interviewing and conducting print research on their topic. Students would perform as teacher *and* student. This dual position was underscored in an essay template: “Conclusion: You reflect briefly upon the perspective he/she [interviewee] has just presented. How has this influenced your own perspective?” (artifact, 2/2/2007). All three student essay templates invited students to share their personal take, learning, and opinion about the issue, presupposing that personal growth and student advisement were goals for the handbook’s student audience and student writers. The following section illustrates how the invitation to perform naivete grew increasingly durable and necessary when media events occurred.

Producing Vulnerable Youth Writers

As the book manuscript moved to the copyeditor’s desk, the Virginia Tech shootings took place. On April 16, 2007, Seung-Hui Cho, a Virginia Tech

college student, killed 32 students and faculty and wounded another 25 in a shooting spree that drew national attention. Days after the shootings, the high school newspaper (a separate publication) came under fire. An edition had published a lunchtime poll asking what students would do if they had only 24 hours to live. One young man had expressed a desire to kill the then-current president, George W. Bush. As the school newspaper hit the halls, the story launched into local media, precipitating the young man’s removal from school and a Secret Service interrogation. Under increased pressure from school administration, and in a contemporary panoptical culture that surveils educators through disciplinary practices (e.g., publishing school report cards and student test scores in newspapers), Ms. Phagan returned students’ manuscripts and asked them to make additional edits.

Although the project was founded on youths writing an advisory handbook for *youths*, the *adult* audience that would purchase the book, bring it into schools, and write about it in the local media got centered as Ms. Phagan explained the new changes she needed students to make. Ms. Phagan detailed audiences she perceived students to have written for and audiences *she* needed *them* to imagine would read their work. In the process, she produced students as naive adolescent writers for a school adult audience. Any “for us, by us” mentality became secondary to surveillers looking to critique the publication or bring the school principal under fire.

We have a publication that is actually going to be read by probably more people than the newspaper was intended for...Your book will be read by a lot more people than that though - including a lot of college students, some other students in other schools, other teachers. And because of the situation in the press, we’re feeling a lot of pressure right now...because our school is in the headlines. (classroom transcript, 5/1/2007)

Ms. Phagan emphasized the widening adult audience for students’ essays, an audience beyond school, beyond those familiar with them (e.g., “college students,” “students in other schools,” and “other teachers”). Beginning with college students, Ms. Phagan emphasized the age, formal academic training, and perhaps race or class status of the book’s readership. Ms. Phagan’s repeated emphasis of “other” portrayed the audience as unfamiliar, that is, not teachers and students who knew them and their writing. These

“others” were readers whose scrutiny concerned Ms. Phagan and whose scrutiny she considered that students were unaware of.

Recognizing vulnerability “has the power to change the meaning and structure of the vulnerability itself” (Butler, 2004, p. 43). In recognizing students’ vulnerability to this outside scrutiny, Ms. Phagan had the opportunity to protect them and their writing. Although protection did not have to translate to edits, it did. Student writers were produced as vulnerable to public scrutiny and detention by law enforcement officials. Following the book’s publication, Ms. Phagan underscored students’ struggle to perceive or prioritize an adult audience: “With the kids, it took them forever to acknowledge that adults would be reading this and that a teacher would be reading this....They were all about, ‘Oh my God, maybe white students will read this, maybe non [our city] students will read this’” (interview, 5/16/2007). Here Ms. Phagan produced student writers focused on a youth audience beyond their own raced (black, Chinese, Latino) identities and geographic (large city center) locations, challenged by conceptualizing the adult audience for their writing. Below I illustrate how Ms. Phagan performed two contradictory identities, student advocate and adult protector, seemingly empowered to give and take student voices.

Before soliciting student responses, Ms. Phagan spoke, performing as students’ advocate and illustrating forces that constrained her teacherly actions:

I am your advocate. I am there fighting for your voices. I am fighting with Dr. Mooney....I represent you guys. I’m not in there wanting to change anything. I wanna keep everything.... .But there is a reality, a force that’s going kind of against us right now with this newspaper thing that happened. That is, we have to be willing to compromise as well in some way, so that we’re giving you guys voice, but we’re still protecting you. (classroom transcript, 5/1/2007)

Here Ms. Phagan again produced student authors as teenagers needing adult advocacy and protection,

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drawing on protectionist discourses in her “fight” for their voices—“giving” voice while “protecting” students. Though Ms. Phagan worked to separate giving voice and protection, the two were interdependent. Giving voice implied that students did not have voice in this process unless granted to them from an outside authority. In this case, the authority was invested in protecting students *and* teachers from government scrutiny or administrative discipline.

Ms. Phagan performed amid her desire to center students’ personal experiences in writing, pressure from a principal under district-level orders to foster school improvement, and a federal government eager to punish “terrorism.” Ms. Phagan outlined compromises for students to make: changes in grammatical construction, the deletion of curse words, and removal of references to films with questionable ratings. But variation between past and present identity performances emerged as students failed to perform as vulnerable writers. Instead, several students interrogated the vulnerable identity that Ms. Phagan produced for them (Schultz, 2001).

Interrogating Vulnerability on a Friday Afternoon

During the event, Ms. Phagan solicited students’ input. Four students interrogated the vulnerable identity Ms. Phagan proffered, offering four distinct critiques of the reediting process. Santo cited the fear and censorship inspired by the recent reinstatement of the Patriot Act and decried the edits as a removal of his freedom of speech. Corey illustrated the futility of the editing process in a digital age, arguing that people would always be able to snip and recontextualize words online. Simone highlighted that when writing, students had been aware of a teacherly audience, not telling “the 100% truth” in the first place. And Rukiya muttered, “This is bullshit.” Ms. Phagan invited Rukiya to rewrite her essay about drug abuse without identifying her personal relationship to the essay’s central character, her grandmother. The final rewrite of Rukiya’s essay about her grandmother is the response I explore below.

When I returned to interview Ms. Phagan about the event, when she’d asked students to reedit their pieces after the school newspaper incident, she recounted her experience with Rukiya, who had penned an essay recounting the impact of her grandmother’s drug addiction on her family. Rukiya’s story about her grandmother dominated an essay framed in statistics quantifying the prevalence and dangers of teen drug

abuse. The story of her grandmother, who began using drugs legally as an adult, countered traditional discourses of drug use (i.e., illegal use that begins during vulnerable teen years) employed at the essay's start:

My grandmother started using drugs when she was hospitalized in her early twenties. She became dependent on painkillers. But it didn't stop there. In her thirties, she started using crack cocaine, too....It wasn't until one of her children got a hold of the painkillers and ate them and was in a coma for several days that she finally stopped using crack and cocaine. But to this day she still uses painkillers. (artifact, 11/20/2007)

Rukiya detailed the ways drugs had eroded her grandmother's body, mind, and Rukiya's interactions with her: "She gets cranky and vomits....Being with her is no fun. She nods off when she's outside or when she's eating, drinking, or doing her hair and nails" (artifact, 11/20/2007).

Ms. Phagan thought Rukiya was unaware of some audiences for the student publication, but learned otherwise.

We [Ms. Phagan, Tom the principal, and Jill, a staff developer] were doing final copy edits and we realized she [Rukiya] talked about her grandmother who's a drug addict....I had a conversation with her [Rukiya] and she didn't want it to be changed....Even Tom had a private conversation with her and called and talked to her mother and she said, "Yep. Totally fine." (interview transcript, 2008)

As Ms. Phagan explained, concerning the audiences she thought Rukiya was unaware of and the issues she thought her family would prefer to hide, in fact Rukiya and her family were grossly aware of and eager to convey as nothing to be ashamed of. As Ms. Phagan counseled Rukiya to edit her writing, she produced Rukiya as vulnerable. Instead of performing to Ms. Phagan's expectations, Rukiya interrogated protectionist discourses undergirding adult justifications for the essay edits.

Before the book's publication, Ms. Phagan requested that Rukiya remove references to her grandmother. A year after the handbook's publication, Rukiya explained that she was still frustrated about this request:

It was frustrating because I'm not ashamed of anything that happens to me that goes on in my

life...and for some reason, like, everyone thought it was weird when I was talking about my grandmother and then they, like, made a big deal about calling my mother to make sure that it was okay and sent letters to my house saying Miss Phagan wants to take out certain things that I was talking about, and I'm like, "But if I'm okay with it, why you all so worried about it, you know?"...I still don't understand it to this day. (interview transcript, 6/2008)

Ultimately, Rukiya's essay changed little and references to her grandmother remained, but a year after publication Rukiya's "frustration" was still palpable. She was "happy" with her published piece but refused to "understand" the request to edit the story. In the quote above, she performed an author proud of her family's experience surviving her grandmother's drug abuse, refusing to perform the ashamed vulnerability that Ms. Phagan's recommended edits may have produced for her, her family, and her writing.

As we continued to talk, Rukiya performed a critical awareness of the audience for the book, the assignment, and the genre conventions they were working with, understandings that made performing vulnerability and accommodating recommended edits incomprehensible:

You know, I have a topic on drugs and abuse. One [of us] has a topic to talk about drugs and abuse statistics. One [of us] had to interview someone who had a personal experience. I chose my topic and now I'm writing about it and now it's such a big problem. You know, if that was the case then y'all should have been specific, like don't use a family member, you know?...I didn't see what was inappropriate. That's why I didn't understand it. That's why I *still* don't understand it....When you use drugs, everybody, it has an effect on everybody. I describe the effect, and it's inappropriate? I didn't use curse words. I didn't use any slang, so, like, why's it inappropriate? (interview transcript, 6/2008)

As Rukiya detailed her understanding of the assignment and its constraints (e.g., topic, interview of someone with personal experience, no slang, no cursing), she performed the diligent student, following directions, performing the invited personal narrative on a topic of interest and expertise. Highlighting adults' failure to recognize her performance implied that it was more about adult sensitivities to "personal" content than genre or assignment criteria. In her eyes, it was less about the assignment and more about

teacher taste: “I still felt like Miss Phagan herself thought it wasn’t right.”

When we discussed the events that precipitated more edits, Rukiya recalled that “everyone was just like so scared, so afraid that, like, they decided to edit out everything because they didn’t want anything that we said to get us in trouble or for whoever published the book to get in trouble because of the quote or the comment that the boy made in our school” (interview, 2008). Rukiya highlighted the ways adults used fear about student safety to produce students as vulnerable and justify edits to their writing. In the same breath, Rukiya pinpointed adult self-interests, that is, protecting the adult publisher from “get[ting] in trouble.” Adults argued for edits to protect youths from misrepresentation or government scrutiny, but Rukiya exposed the interdependence between adult and

student interests—interdependence that adults must acknowledge, forefront, and explore in (school) work with youths.

Becoming Vulnerable: Reclaiming Vulnerability to Different Ends

To ask for recognition, or to offer it, is precisely not to ask for recognition for what one already is. It is to solicit a **becoming** [emphasis mine], to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other. (Butler, 2004, p. 44)

When educators invite youths to share their narratives with a broader audience, they have the opportunity to examine the variety of identities they invite youths to perform. But as Ms. Phagan and Rukiya demonstrated, teachers must wonder about the ways young people perform that don’t mirror those invited, that seem to break assignment rules or template frames. Ms. Phagan invited young people to demonstrate learning from personal experiences and to share that learning with a broad audience. Butler reminds us that it is crucial to see performances as more than what we thought we would see, to recognize the potential for something new, surprising, and unrecognizable to emerge.

A year after the project’s close, Ms. Phagan shared that a lot of the learning was her learning about her own vulnerability and the ways her protective responses were steeped in desire to protect herself from learning the “whole truth” about students’ lives:

How have I been brought up culturally in what’s proper and what’s not? And how’s that different from the way Rukiya’s been brought up?...I think the teacher’s role should be the absolute advocate for their kids. At least that’s my philosophy. Be truthful and don’t lie to them about how people are going to perceive this. But I have to keep reminding myself that that’s for *me*, from *my* experience that’s taught me that. I think something sounds really aaah! But to them it doesn’t; it’s just life. And I’ll be honest. A lot of this experience was *me* getting over how much I sometimes think maybe I have not wanted to know the whole truth about them. That was a huge part of it. (interview transcript, 2008)

Ms. Phagan underscored the connections between her own learning about the limits of personal

Take Action!

STEPS FOR IMMEDIATE IMPLEMENTATION

1. Read personal writing assignments and consider the question, “Who are student writers invited to look or sound like?” Offer more than one mentor text so that students see a variety of identities in motion.
2. Kinloch, V. (2012). Politicizing, placing, and performing narratives of gentrification in an urban community. In D. Journet, C.E. Ball, & R. Trauman (Eds.), *The new work of composing*. Provo, UT: Computers and Composition Digital Press/Utah State University Press. Retrieved from ccdigitalpress.org/nwc/chapters/kinloch Watch and wonder: How might student narrative projects shift with context, interest, and need?
3. TED Talks (Producer). (2010, June). *Brene Brown: The power of living with vulnerability* [Video file]. Retrieved from www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability.html Watch and wonder: What are the relationships between uncomfortable feelings that arise from student writing and teacher vulnerability?
4. “Usable Knowledge: Sometimes, Pictures Speak Louder Than Words”: www.uknow.gse.harvard.edu/decisions/DD2-3-507.html Watch and wonder: How can personal narrative projects invite youths to represent their lives in multiple modes *and* interpret their representations?

disclosure, ways she mapped this framework onto her students' narratives, and explicitly named her own desire to remain ignorant about students' personal lives. What is important is that Ms. Phagan refused to remain ignorant (Dutro, 2009). She heard Rukiya interrogate the protectionist discourses that adults were using to produce student writers as vulnerable and rethought her editorial response, ultimately publishing Rukiya's narrative as written.

In closing, I am not arguing for less personal narrative writing in the English classroom. I advocate a closer look at the ways adults respond to moments when students share things we think ought not to be shared or when their writing makes us feel uncomfortable for them. These are moments when youths and school adults might feel vulnerable—feel fear, sadness, pain, loneliness, anguish, melancholy, or violation. Butler (2004) described human desire to bring reason and closure to discombobulating feelings, to erase memory of pain and loss, to steel ourselves against vulnerable feelings that emerge when we experience uncomfortable events like death of a loved one or the death of many people recounted in publicized events. Vulnerability of others illuminates our own vulnerability. In the loss of one life, we see our own life or loved ones lost. We feel vulnerable just as those lost and loved were. Like Butler, I encourage school adults to lean into these feelings. Vulnerable, we acknowledge our interdependence and leave open the possibility to engage with one another in unrecognizable ways.

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CONNECTED CONTENT-BASED RESOURCES

- ✓ Chavez, V., & Soep, E. (2005). Youth radio and the pedagogy of collegiality. *Harvard Educational Review*, 75(4), 409–434.
- ✓ Christensen, L. (2000). *Reading, writing and rising up: Teaching about social justice and the power of the written word*. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools.
- ✓ Lesko, N. (2012). *Act your age! A cultural construction of adolescence*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- ✓ Radio rookies: WNYC. (2013). Retrieved from www.wnyc.org/shows/rookies

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