

# Reclaiming the Work of Wendy Bishop as Rhetorical Feminist Mentoring: A Cluster Conversation

Mary Ann Cain and Melissa A. Goldthwaite

**Mary Ann Cain's** publications have appeared in national and international literary and scholarly journals, diverse in their subject matter and genres, ranging from scholarly work in rhetoric and composition theory to literary works, including fiction, nonfiction essays, and poetry. Her five books include a poetry collection, *How Small the Sky Really Dreams* (Dos Madres Press, 2021), a biography, *South Side Venus: The Legacy of Margaret Burroughs* (Northwestern University Press, 2018), a novel, *Down from Moonshine* (Thirteenth Moon Press, 2009), and two scholarly books, *Composing Public Space: Teaching Writing in the Face of Private Interests* (Heinemann 2010) and *Revisioning Writers' Talk: Gender and Culture in Acts of Composing* (SUNY Press 1995). Dozens of her scholarly essays on writing theory and praxis have been published in scholarly journals, along with many national and international publications of her literary work. She is Professor Emerita of English at Purdue University Fort Wayne and lives with her husband, poet George Kalamaras, and their beloved beagle, Blaisie. They spend time living in both Fort Wayne and Livermore, Colorado.

**Melissa A. Goldthwaite**, professor of English, teaches rhetorical theory and creative writing (poetry, creative nonfiction, food writing, nature writing) at Saint Joseph's University. Her books include *The St. Martin's Guide to Teaching Writing*, editions five, six, and seven (with Cheryl Glenn); *Surveying the Literary Landscapes of Terry Tempest Williams* (with Katherine Chandler); *The Norton Pocket Book of Writing by Students; The Norton Reader*, thirteenth through sixteenth editions (with Bizup and Fernald); *Books That Cook: The Making of a Literary Meal* (Jennifer Cognard-Black), *The Little Norton Reader: 50 Essays from the First Fifty Years; Food, Feminisms, Rhetorics*; and *Good Eats: 32 Writers on Eating Ethically* (with Jennifer Cognard-Black). Goldthwaite's work has also been published in journals such as *College English, Reader*, and *Writing on the Edge* and in numerous books. She earned her MFA in creative writing (1997) and her PhD. (2001) from The Ohio State University.

**Keywords::** mentoring, teaching writing, legacy, collaboration, relationships, rhetorical feminism

"I do have something to add to this conversation because I'm a woman and a creative writer and part of a different generation of compositionists, perhaps because I may experience fewer disharmonies and dichotomies . . . since I don't find my academic and writing lives so disparate although they are often desperate."

—Wendy Bishop, "If Winston Weathers Would Just Write to Me on E-Mail"

Wendy Bishop was one of the most engaged, prolific, and profoundly influential writers-scholars-teachers-researchers that the fields of Rhetoric and Composition, as well as Creative Writing, have ever known. When Bishop died twenty years ago in November of 2003, she was just fifty years old, but she had accomplished more than many people do in much longer careers. She authored or edited more than twenty books, crossed organizational borders (CCCC, AWP, MLA, WPA), often holding leadership positions, and she advocated for this very border crossing and intradisciplinary cross pollination within English Studies and beyond. Bishop transformed the binary of outsider/insider into a more inclusive, multivocal, multidisciplinary approach. As contributors to this Cluster Conversation, we find in this more fluid and flexible understanding of academic work hope for the future of our fields. We need hope, we need examples and mentors, we need to find sustainable ways of working and being that enrich rather than drain us.

As this Cluster Conversation illustrates, Wendy Bishop's influence and legacy—profound, prolific, and persistent—continue long after her passing, and yet much of what she did often falls within the largely undocumented, relatively invisible, and ultimately devalued work of the academy—sometimes seen as “women’s” (or these days, “gendered”) work. In her essay “Places to Stand,” Bishop describes the fear of openly identifying as writers and writing teachers within the profession, a fear that may have “to do with our own concerns about authorizing ourselves as writers-who-teach-a-subject: writing” (12). What Bishop later acknowledges in an endnote is just how profoundly gendered this “pressure to be professional” is: “I also have not entered the larger discussions of feminism and writing style though I’m aware of it and sympathetic to problems like these” (30).

Her concerns about the marginalization of writing-as-subject, along with the marginalization of writing teachers who must choose between being seen as professional versus writing as a writing teacher, writer, and (what she implies) a woman, echo the broader scholarly conversation about “women’s/gendered work”—both within and beyond the academy. Elizabeth Flynn’s 1988 groundbreaking essay in *College Composition and Communication* “Composing as a Woman” generated conversations in the field that point to what keeps Wendy Bishop’s influence both relatively undocumented and thus invisible but also vitally important—because it is still regarded as “women’s work.” It’s not simply whether or not she is remembered—she most certainly is; it’s more a matter of *how*. The *how* is very much in line with what Amy Hodges Hamilton and Micaela Cuellar identify, citing Cheryl Glenn, as the embodied practices of rhetorical feminism. But that *how* is still on the margins of a hierarchical structure at work in the academy.

## Beyond Binaries and Hierarchies

“A polyphony. A bouquet of voices.” –Carole Maso, *Break Every Rule*

In reclaiming the work of Wendy Bishop as rhetorical feminist mentoring, we seek—in this

cluster conversation—to value the kind of writing that sustains us and our work but doesn't always find a prominent place in academic publications: personal, pedagogical, dialogical, reflective, and collaborative. As this Cluster Conversation amply demonstrates, Wendy's work remains vibrantly alive and embodied by those who worked with her and/or read her texts. Very visible in some ways yet invisible in others, Wendy's legacy has given us a way to understand, argue for, enact, reflect upon, embody, and value work that can too readily be written off as “not professional.”

Melissa A. Goldthwaite's “Correspondences,” first written in 2004 and revisited for this cluster conversation, reflects upon a deeply personal and also intensely writerly and teacherly relationship that sustained both of them for many years, a sustenance that illustrates the power of what Wendy advocated, finding a clear passage to that safe harbor of connection and relationship, of the community so often written and spoken about but so little understood.

In “Inspiring Collegiality: A Roundtable on Intergenerational Mentoring,” Lynée Lewis Gaillet, Sarah Bramblett, Don Gamill Jr., Tiffany Gray, Cantice Greene, Letizia Guglielmo, Mary Lamb, Renee Love, Alice Johnston Myatt, Kristen Ruccio, Matthew Sansbury, Lara Smith-Sitton, and Nathan Wagner continue Wendy's legacy of refiguring mentoring as less hierarchical and more dialogical, more mutually engaging and sustaining, more about shared, “intergenerational” learning and less about what Paulo Freire critiqued as “the banking model of education”: “This journey [through academia] is enhanced in life- and career-changing ways through recursive mentoring and collegiality, collaboration, and accompaniment characterized as fluid, liminal, and asynchronous” (Gaillet).

Meg Scott-Copses, in “Creative Composing,” offers a course plan inspired by and based upon Wendy's writing and pedagogy, illustrating how relevant Wendy's work remains. Despite the fact that Wendy's boundary-busting practices and theories preceded much of the current theoretical language that describes them, Meg highlights how much in line Wendy's work is with current rhetorical feminism in her current iteration of a course, one assignment, and its outcomes.

Amy Hodges-Hamilton and Micaela Cuellar exemplify Wendy's embrace of the margins-as-center approach to refiguring roles, genres, and dichotomies of personal/political, individual/collective, creative/critical, exploring and interrogating existing boundaries for new possibilities. Their essay both shows and tells the story of how Wendy's “rhetorical feminism” shaped their collaborations: Amy with Wendy, Micaela with Amy. Their narratives, both collaborative and individual, break generic boundaries to weave their stories and research into a collaborative whole.

In “Writing With and After Wendy,” Doug Hesse describes how mutual efforts in writing program administration dovetailed with Wendy's genre-busting impulses to write and teach across generic, but also other, boundaries imposed by the academy as well as the culture at large. He also shares some of Wendy's prompts, writing in response.

“In Dialoguing with Wendy,” first written in 2003-2004, Mary Ann Cain revisits Wendy Bishop’s legacy 20 years later. She considers how Wendy’s work as “writer-teacher-writer” (Bishop, “Places to Stand”) enacts rhetorical feminism while predating the theoretical language that now helps describe and further illuminate that work. She also, like other contributors to this Cluster Conversation, considers how Wendy’s work has influenced and continues to influence her own, including after her retirement from teaching.

Through the lens of a 20-year retrospective, we discover just how current and relevant Wendy Bishop’s legacy still is, and, in turn, consider just how (often quietly) revolutionary it was in her time. Wendy’s work insisted that we break down binary understandings of identity—in her case teacher-student, master-apprentice, insider-outsider, mentor-mentee, researcher-subject, academic-creative, and so forth—in relation to the academy. While she did not have the theoretical language available to her at the time of her greatest productivity in the 1990s, diversity, equity, and inclusion were, indeed, central to her understandings and commitments. She did not specifically claim to be a feminist, or anti-racist, or an ally to the LGBTQ+ community. She simply was. She understood and enacted what legal scholar and Critical Race Theorist Kimberley Crenshaw first named “intersectionality” before she had a name for it, mapping the complexities of navigating the university as a multiply-identified entity (“writer-who-teaches teacher-who-writes”). She understood how multiple identification also applied, albeit in different terms, to her students. As Amy and Micaela point out in their contribution to this Cluster Conversation, “One way Bishop pushed against these boundaries was to include the voices of students in her scholarship, particularly those we might not have heard from previously.”

We the editors also note how Wendy’s genre-bending and blurring has prompted some of the contributors to migrate between genres within their individual pieces, and as a result, to break some discursive conventions. In particular, Wendy is named in more personal contexts as “Wendy” while referred to as “Wendy Bishop” or “Bishop” in more conventionally academic contexts. Instead of insisting on consistency within each contributor’s piece, we put the question to ourselves and those authors who were not consistent and decided that strategic “inconsistency” was appropriate, especially when navigating shifting relationships: student/teacher, mentor/mentee, colleague, friend, reader and scholar.

## Toil, Toll, and Joy

“We must work. The earth of writing. To the point of becoming the earth. Humble work. Without reward. Except joy.” –Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*

Wendy fought hard to make way for a margins-as-center approach aimed at valuing teaching and student writers and their work and knowledge. Even when she entered public debates about what writing studies should be, she quoted students, acknowledging that her goal was not

just that students would continue writing after her course but that she would “become more aware and respectful of how much and how well they compose themselves before [her class], in what varied media, with what full lives, acknowledging that they are part of the ‘weight’ of the community” as much as she was; “I have power,” she acknowledged, “but when I write with them I tap into their powers” (“If Winston Weathers” 102). To consistently value what and those whom others dismiss, however, can take a toll. Doug Hesse’s poignant reflection captures the toll such work likely took:

Conversation that started in animation dwindled to near silence as we neared the airport, Wendy slumping lower in the corner of backseat and door. She’d just led her last meeting as CCCC chair, and she was exhausted. I was chastened to realize that I’d failed to register the personal costs of her commitments and dedication, seeing instead only the torrent of her talent.

When it came to institutional change, Wendy was not quiet, was not measured, but instead labored, full-throttle, through her own department and college, as well as through a head-spinning roster of professional organizations, including WPA, CCCC, AWP, and MLA within about a decade.

In this regard, her legacy is also sobering; the effort and exhaustion of taking on such professional and academic entities was Sisyphean. Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed describes it this way: “The brick wall is what you come against when you are involved in the practical project of opening worlds to bodies that have historically been excluded from those worlds” (Ahmed). Ahmed goes on to describe how “brick wall” as a metaphor is not simply an idea to those who hit it, over and over. Instead “a metaphor (something is like something) of the wall matters precisely to convey how these institutional processes become something *that can be touched*. A wall is what you come up against. It is a physical contact, a visceral encounter” (Ahmed). Wendy hit those institutional walls over and over: the invisible work of the teacher-writer-WPA. In its invisibility, working the margins, hitting those walls, can sometimes be a lonely task. Such work can also make one hungry, even starved, for connection: “The wall: something tangible to some, that can be perceived by touch, by contact, is not even there for others. What one body experiences as solid, for another might simply be air. There; nothing there” (Ahmed).

The bodies Wendy wanted to open to the world of academia were writer-teachers and teacher-writers who wrote, read, and researched in collaboration with their students. And that is where the joy of Wendy’s legacy comes in. Because she refused to think, act, write, teach, *feel* in binary terms, she found connection everywhere:

Diversity work requires world making; finding spaces to withdraw into, places that are less hard to inhabit. Fragments, those pieces that have shattered: we find each other. We find those who have been shattered; who recognise what we are up

against. What and even who. This is hard, but who too. (Ahmed)

Those kinds of connections were documented more than a decade ago in *Composing Ourselves as Writer-Teacher Writers: Starting with Wendy Bishop*; they were strengthened in “Wendy Bishop’s Legacy: A Tradition of Mentoring, A Call to Collaboration”; we seek to reinforce and invite new connections in this Cluster Conversation.

In the sometimes invisible, gendered work of making connections, of refusing binaries, of speaking up and hitting one brick wall after another, Wendy Bishop nonetheless inspired others to work and think and write and play and find connection along the way: “We become inventive: to survive what we have come to know. And we have come to know. We know from what we come up against even if we have only scratched the surface” (Ahmed).

It is up to us to continue to remember who she was, what she did, said, and wrote, to keep inscribing her life, work, and legacy, so that this invisibility, i.e. what is simply “air” to some, is seen, felt, and understood as something “solid,” something “tangible” and thus a shared experience that can lead to something else, something new, including places where we truly can “find each other.”

## Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. “Hard.” *feministkilljoys*, 10 June 2014, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/06/10/hard>. Accessed 30 July 2023.

Bishop, Wendy. “If Winston Weathers Would Just Write to Me on E-Mail.” CCC 46 (February 1993): 97-103.

----- . “Places to Stand: The Reflective Writer-Teacher-Writer in Composition.” CCC 51:1 (September 1999): 9-31.

Bizzaro, Patrick, Alys Culhane, and Devan Cook, eds. *Composing Ourselves as Writer-Teacher Writers: Starting with Wendy Bishop*. Hampton Press, 2011.

Flynn, Elizabeth. “Composing as a Woman.” CCC 39.4 (December 1988): 423-35.

Leahy, Anna, Stephanie Vanderslice, Kelli Custer, Jennifer Wells, Carol Ellis, Meredith Kate Brown, Dorinda Fox, and Amy Hodges Hamilton. “Wendy Bishop’s Legacy: A Tradition of Mentoring, A Call to Collaboration.” *Stories of Mentoring: Theory and Praxis*, edited by Michelle Eble and Lynée Lewis Gaillet, Parlor Press, 2008: 67-81.

Cixous, Hélène. *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*. Columbia University Press, 1993.

Maso, Carole. *Break Every Rule*. Counterpoint Press, 2000.