Sample Student Essay and Prompt

Directions for applicant: Imagine that you are teaching a class in academic writing for first-year college students. In your class, drafts are not graded. Instead, you give students feedback and allow them to revise their essays before submitting them for grades. In response to your first essay assignment (given below), you have received the following draft from Jaime X., one of your students. Write a brief end comment (250 words max.) in which you offer advice to Jaime X. about how she might revise her essay. You do not need to submit a marked version of the sample student paper itself. We will be considering only your end comment.

Jaime X.’s Assignment: Find a problem, tension, or complication that emerges from your textual analysis of a particular aspect of the essay, “In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life” by bell hooks, and craft an argument about your textual analysis so that it helps a reader understand hooks’ essay in a more nuanced way.

Student: Jaime X.
University Writing

Verbal Images: Names as Representation

With “In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life”, bell hooks details the importance of finding a way to “empower ourselves through representation” (60). She stresses how self-representation can effectively show how a person wants to be viewed. She bolsters this statement throughout the essay by using personal evidence to show the impact photographs have had on her and people she references. The people in her essay are all represented by pictures, but hooks names each of them differently. She gives a clue as to why she does this by defining “field of representation (how we see ourselves, how others see us)” (57). Under this statement, names are an important part of the field of representation. By choosing a name for themselves a person chooses how others will see and speak of them. The inconsistency in bell hooks’ use of names could correlate to the varying degrees of self-representation each relative in the essay achieves through photographs.

bell hooks is an un-capitalized nom de plume. By refusing to identify her writing with her birth name, bell hooks puts a sense of anonymity over the text. Though it is her writing on the pages, because her name is not attached to it, neither is she. The pseudonym mirrors the way she doesn’t fully achieve self-representation through photos. For example, bell hooks’ most personal anecdote in the essay was about a picture of herself she lost long ago, “the only image available to me [bell hooks] that gave me a sense of presence” (56). Accompanying the loss of this image
was a lost “proof of my [bell hooks] worthiness...the proof that there was a ‘me of me’” (57). The anonymity that is a result of her pseudonym is exceedingly appropriate as bell first places herself in this essay as a girl who lost her “presence”. Later, as an adult, she says she was someone who “did not wish to document my [her] life, the changes, the presence of different places, people, and so on,” (61). She talks about how she regrets her refusal to be photographed when she says “I can confess that those walls of photographs empowered me, and that I feel their absence in my life” (61). In this essay, hooks tells us that her favorite photograph from her youth is lost, and that she feels empty due to the lack of pictures and representation. So the only times bell hooks mentions how she is represented, the self-representation is not fully achieved. The author in this essay presents herself as one who has not been represented, and by using a name that does not identify her, she reflects that.

V. and G., hooks’ sisters, do not share the same total invisibility in the text as hooks’ pseudonym grants herself, but still, they have only a letter. This is interesting because her sisters are also the only people mentions directly speaking to (55). Why are the people hooks mentions personally interacting with named so impersonally? hooks may be emphasizing her sisters’ avoidance of self-representation. For example, V. is introduced with the opening sentence “Always a daddy’s girl” (54). She is the very first topic of the essay and immediately, she is defined not as herself, but in terms of her father. V. is further defined by the fact that “the only family photograph V. displays in her house is a picture of our dad” (54). V. doesn’t have walls of photographs. The only picture she keeps is one of her father and so, she is only partially presenting herself. She hasn’t taken it upon herself to project the image she wants through photographs and by refusing to do so, she has given up representation. Restricting her name in this essay to an initial further emphasizes the tie between self-representation and identity.

G. is mentioned as a contrast to V. She, unlike V., has no interest in the photograph of their father. According to hooks, G. had the “the same shine of glory and pride” (55) as their father, but turned away from the photograph. So G. avoids the photograph because in the picture of her father she sees something of her own past. While V. gave up a piece of herself by embracing only the photograph of her father and no others, G. has restricted her identity by refusing to accept the photo. From hooks’ point of view, G. has declined to fully accept her past, and as a result hooks’ does not fully name her.

Of course, there is the representation of the man in the picture himself, their father. “Veodis Watkins, our father, sometimes called Ned or Leakey” (56), unlike hooks and her sisters, Veodis’ whole name is used, along with two nicknames, to a total of three names. bell hooks did not include an example of how Veodis represented himself, we are left with how three of his daughters viewed him through a photograph. His three different names mentioned are representative of the three different identities he took on in his daughters eyes, but none of those names are self-representation, which reflects the way hooks says he treated his past,
“as though remembering hurt” (54). His identity is created only through others’ minds.

Throughout the essay hooks’ places emphasis on images, in her closing sentence she sums up the power they have “using images, we connect ourselves to a recuperative, redemptive memory that enables us to construct radical identities, images of ourselves that transcend the limits of the colonizing eye” (64). While the word “images” at face value here means photographs, examination of the ties she makes between pictures of people and their names in the rest of the essay shows that in a way, names are images. Images that, like literal images, can be used to build “radical identities” or self-represent.

Works Cited