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### The politics of the personal : storying our lives against the grain.

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# The Politics of the Personal: Storying Our Lives against the Grain

## Symposium Collective

**T**his symposium began with a series of conversations among the participants concerning our excitement as well as frustrations over the ways in which current work in composition and literacy studies has explored the politics of the personal. Our hope was to generate a multivocal conversation in a written form, a sort of roundtable discussion that could engage a broader audience than the kind one might expect from a conference panel, and that would generate a more deliberate, extensive discussion than the kind resulting from aural/oral exchanges. To

**Deborah Brandt** is professor of English at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where she teaches undergraduate writing and graduate courses in literacy and composition studies. Her latest book is *Literacy in American Lives* (Cambridge University Press, 2001). **Ellen Cushman** is assistant professor of English at Michigan State University. This reflection was based upon an activist ethnography on inner city community literacies that was published by SUNY Press in 1998 (*The Struggle and the Tools: Oral and Literate Strategies in an Inner City Community*). **Anne Ruggles Gere**, the current president of NCTE, teaches at the University of Michigan, where she directs the Joint Ph.D. Program in English and Education. Her ventures into writing “the personal” have been published in *Writing and Healing: Toward an Informed Practice* and *The Michigan Quarterly Review*. She is still working on a memoir with her daughter. **Anne Herrington** is professor and chair of English at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where she teaches undergraduate writing courses and graduate seminars in writing research methodologies and composition theory. Her current interests are reflected in recent publications: *Persons in Process: Four Stories of Writing and Personal Development in College* (NCTE 2000), coauthored with Marcia Curtis, and “What Happens When Machines Read Our Students’ Writing?” in the March issue of *CE*, coauthored with Charles Moran. **Richard E. Miller** is associate director of the Writing Program and associate professor of English at Rutgers University. The author of *As If Learning Mattered: Reforming Higher Education* (Cornell 1998) and a frequent contributor to *College English*, Miller is currently at work on *The Hope Machine: Essays on the Future of Higher Education*. **Victor Villanueva** is Professor and Chair of the Department of English at Washington State University, where he also teaches the histories and theories of rhetoric and composition studies. His *Bootstraps* was the first book-length publication to incorporate the personal and the analytic in rhetoric and composition studies. **Min-Zhan Lu** is professor of English at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. Her teaching and research interests include literary criticism, life writing, and the uses of cultural dissonance in composition. Her work has appeared in *College Composition and Communication*, *College English*, *JAC*, *Journal of Basic Writing* and elsewhere. She is coauthor, with Bruce Horner, of *Representing the “Other”: Basic Writers and the Teaching of Basic Writing* (NCTE, 1999), and coeditor, with Richard Haswell, of *Comp Tales: An Introduction to College Composition through Its Stories* (Longman, 2000). **Gesa Kirsch** is professor of English at Bentley College. Her teaching and research interests include ethics, feminism, qualitative research, and women’s roles in higher education. Her work has been published in *College Composition and Communication*; *College English*, *JAC*, and other journals. Her most recent book is *Ethical Dilemmas in Feminist Research* (SUNY 1999).

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start the conversation, Gesa Kirsch and Min-Zhan Lu posted a note in which they tried to articulate their sense of what was at stake:

As more of us are beginning to bring the personal into theory, research, teaching, and scholarship, we think it is important to reflect on the politics of such efforts. In particular, we are interested in exploring the extent to which and the reasons for why diverse members of the profession have responded differently to current professional pressures/invitations to live and narrate the personal within the norms of personal narrative.

We are concerned about some of the uncritical celebration of personal narrative in recent years and the concomitant critical scrutiny given to those of us who do not wish to represent/live the personal in our work. It seems too simplistic to use a single genre to label as either liberal/radical or conservative the diverse ways individual members of the profession have negotiated the dichotomy of public versus private or of personal versus professional in their day-to-day actions as well as their discursive practices. Uncritical celebrations of personal narrative can risk equating a person's reluctance to shape and talk about the personal within the limits of the genre with that person's failure to recognize and/or acknowledge the personal as political. (See, for example, Jane Maher's criticism of Mina Shaughnessy's "failure" to organize her private life and to share its details in ways we have come to expect of feminists such as Shaughnessy's friend Adrienne Rich.) In fact, expectations to story our lives within the personal narrative have often led us to dismiss the oppositional political content and potential of a whole range of other ways of living and (not) narrating the personal.

To jump start a conversation on the topic, we offer the following questions as a shared point of departure. What conceptions and representations of the personal are currently expected/invited, given recent increases of the personal narrative in our professional forums? How are such expectations conveyed and perceived? To what extent does each expectation open up or delimit how you go about storying your personal life in day-to-day actions as well as in discursive practices? Why? To what extent have your racial, gender, ethnic, sexual, religious, or class alignments complicated your response to the pressure/invitations to live and represent the personal within the confines of personal narrative? Have you lived and/or narrated the personal in ways which contest the boundaries of Personal Narrative? How? Why? How would you discuss the politics of such seemingly conservative moves?

## REFLECTIONS

*Protecting the Personal*

*Deborah Brandt*

When is personal disclosure in the public interest? Research for me is a public interest enterprise. A lot of my person goes into this work, obviously, but my person does not matter. What matters are the ideas or knowledge that research yields for public use. What matters is what can be done publicly with what we write. If subjectivity, situation, partiality infuse all forms of knowing—and, of course, they do—disclosure

is less important to me than inclusiveness. We need to have many, many different kinds of persons naming and working on the issues of public interest. In my view, that is the corrective that counts.

While many people have been trying to figure out how to get the personal more responsibly into their published work, I have been trying to figure out how responsibly to get it out. I collect life history accounts as a means to theorize the history of literacy. It is my way of trying to ground that theory in many points of view. In the course of doing this work, complete strangers disclose their personal lives to me in generous and unguarded ways. When does the public right to theorize literacy become an invasion of privacy? When I first started presenting this research, I was surprised at audience interest in the stories of these individuals. They would ask to hear more about this person or that person. In their questions to me, some would refer to the interviewees familiarly, using only their first (fictitious) names. A few of my friends thought I should just publish the raw interviews verbatim, and one predicted that I would eventually interview somebody so interesting, so compelling, that I would end up writing a book about only that one person. These reactions made me nervous, as Richard Miller might say. For one thing, I was annoyed that audiences were finding the interviewees more interesting than my ideas about literacy. "This isn't about them," I said. "It's about me." But beyond that I felt that I somehow was inviting audiences to psychologize the interviewees, to see them as characters to be analyzed or wondered about. My anxiety level rose even further when, in a graduate course, I decided to juxtapose a raw interview script with some theoretical arguments about literacy that we had been reading. The interview was perfect, I thought, for problematizing some of the assumptions in the texts, and I looked forward to a probing discussion. To my chagrin, the discussion began with some class members discussing their displeasure with some offhand remarks the interviewee had made about his wife. Was this man a sexist, they wanted to know? I had not thought so. But maybe he was. I stopped introducing the raw interviews into the class. I had opened a personal life to unfair scrutiny and was making too little progress on my theory of literacy.

My solution, not altogether realized, was to find a methodology that is based in personal testimonies by ordinary people who live the real business of literacy but about whose lives we have no real business knowing. The first thing I now do with an interview script once I transcribe it is to pulverize it, to transform it from a conversation with another whole human being into empirical evidence of how literacy works. I break the interview apart, changing it into scores and often hundreds of facts about the social structures and processes that bear on literacy. I try to put descriptions of events and thoughts into historical currents of literacy, and from that I try to build a theory of literacy worthy of the public interest. Maybe you would say that I dehumanize the words people give me, but I think it would be more accurate

to say that I try to de-psychologize them. I try to empty them of their personal significance and understand their historical significance. I try, in short, to objectify, even ultra-objectify the material. Now, when I write up the analysis, the material goes back into semblances of extended cases written in biographical narratives, but when I do it right, I hope to subvert readers' psychologizing tendencies and get them to judge my ideas instead of the personal lives of the people who have informed them. One of the highest ethical achievements in some brands of ethnography is to render a representation so entirely accurate that the people in the study would be able to see themselves, to say, "That's me." I would consider the highest ethical achievement of my research procedure to be a representation so pulverized, so objectified by the concerns of the public interest, that people in my study would not recognize themselves or might say, "Well, that's a really different way of considering me."

I find much of the recent autobiographical writing—some of it composed by members of this symposium—to be in the public interest. What such disclosures yield and what they contribute to the larger public causes are what count for me.

*The Butterfly Fix(at)ion*

*Ellen Cushman*

Butterflies. Orange and black. Iridescent blue. Yellow and red. White with dots. They make flight look so effortless, easy even, unpredictable heres and theres, leaps and sags, alighting on flowers. Once a bright gold one landed on the Red Delicious I was eating. It unrolled its proboscis and helped itself to the sweet juice of my apple. While I may wonder about the aerodynamics of its flight, how it maintains that seemingly tenuous relation to air currents, I did not need to know why it chose my apple, what authority it thought it had to enter my lunch space, and how it identified with me, if it did. Others take a different tack with butterflies that they may exoticize, or just have tremendous curiosity about. They might actively seek them out, net them, force their wings open and pin them onto a black-felt display case where they can admire them all they want whenever they want. They may line them up against other butterflies they've caught, comparing, distinguishing between them and the moths. To position the butterfly, one must invade its space, capture it, and reduce it to a unidimensional and bloodless representation of what was once its relation to the world.

Researchers and butterflies have things in common. Much intellectual work fixates on the positionality of researchers and for a number of good reasons, as numerous authors have pointed out (Mortensen and Kirsch 1996, Lather 1992). While the ethics of representation have admirable goals, the incessant focus on the personal as political has led scholars to ask invasive and troublesome questions about a researcher's background and identity, resulting in flat, or worse, narcissistic disclo-

asures about the researcher's positionality. For instance, scholars have asked me the intrusive, "What is it about *you* that facilitated your access into an inner city neighborhood?"; the exoticizing, "So you share a similar background to the participants?"; the racist and classist, "Weren't you afraid of going into the inner city?"; and the sensational, "What was the most frightening experience you had in your study?" (Similar sorts of questions are asked about participants, but because Deborah Brandt covered this point in her comments, I'll limit my discussion to the researcher's positionality.)

When a researcher's personal life becomes the object of intense scrutiny, s/he becomes the butterfly that has been exoticized and chased after. In many cultures, particularly some Native American cultures, the direct inspection of another person not only causes a great deal of self-consciousness and unease, but is considered threatening as well (Basso 1979, Cushman and Quinsatao Monberg 1998). The cultural belief that the individual is not as important as the family, community, and tribe flies in the face of current calls for self-reflexivity. Self-reflexivity often isolates and extricates the individual from the relations that define him/her. In their attempts to be culturally sensitive to those researched, butterfly collectors risk being culturally insensitive to and in violation of the researcher's sense of self.

Fixating on the butterfly does only part of the damage, though. The other part comes when the butterfly is fixed on paper and displayed, when positionality is disclosed and the researcher has his/her wings pinned open for viewing. When I am asked to justify the ways in which I gained access to the inner city community in upstate New York where I did an activist ethnography (Cushman 1996, 1998, 1999), I list all the ways in which community members and I identified with each other: same gender, similar mixed race, similar class backgrounds, close in age, but then I feel sick. Compromised. Naked. On display. This fixation of the self that I've created, pinned wings and all, presents an easy story that scholars want to hear about the researcher. Yet it tells precious little about the social relations that actually positioned researchers and participants. Self-reflexivity is the problem here because it inevitably leads to a simplification of what Sim Chiang calls the discursive present, "how we inscribe, transcribe, and transform texts [and people] because of who and what we are" (159). Because self-reflexivity focuses on the individual researcher as the center of the research experience, we are left with lifeless character sketches, like the one above (or with guilt-ridden, scab-picking, self-explorations).

In "Building Bridges: Reflexivity and Composition Research," Terese Quinsatao Monberg and I "take composition scholarship beyond the theoretical exploration of reflexivity, beyond self-reflexivity, and toward a more socially responsible reflexive research" (167). If self-reflexivity lays open the *distinctions* between researchers and participants, social reflexivity uses self-reflection and active nostalgia in order to establish, maintain, and develop *relationships* between participants and researchers.

Social reflexivity brings differences and similarities to the foreground in order to facilitate the development of new relations. In short, the personal narrative of self-reflexivity should be less about the individual and more about the relations between the researchers and participants. Instead of a butterfly fix(at)ion, the field needs to ask how butterflies, air currents, and apples all relate to each other.

*Articles of Faith*

*Anne Ruggles Gere*

“Don’t discuss religion,” my mother admonished me, “if you want to keep your friends.” She did not mention keeping my job, but I learned early in my career that it was better to keep some things to myself, especially religion. The first time I mentioned that I shared my life with a Presbyterian minister, a colleague did a double take and quickly changed the subject. As a new assistant professor, I wanted to ingratiate myself with senior professors in the department, so I stopped mentioning that I am a practicing Christian. Over the years this became a habit, and I contributed to what George Marsden describes as the “near exclusion of religious perspectives from dominant academic life” (6). I created a barrier, a DMZ zone, between my own faith and the academy. My stories about ordinary people who emulate Jesus remained safely distant from my scholarly writing, and I adhered to what James Turner calls the “surrogate religion of taste” (192).

Difficulties arose, however, when I began writing *Woman of the King Salmon*, a double-voiced memoir, with my daughter Cindy. An Athabaskan from the Yukon who joined our family when she was three, Cindy initiated me into Native American spirituality as she moved into womanhood. My understanding of religion broadened as I followed her into talking circles, autumn moon ceremonies, women’s sweats, and other sacred rites. Writing our lives together, I soon realized, required some attention to religion. Just as quickly, I realized two other things: the available language for talking about religious faith is impoverished; expressions of spirituality that fall outside traditional norms risk being exoticized. Because discussions of religion have been essentially off-limits in higher education, we have failed to develop sophisticated and nuanced theoretical discourses to articulate spirituality. Religion is frequently taken to mean a limited range of Protestant denominations. When Christopher Lasch writes about the declining intellectualism of religion, for example, he refers to the ministry, not the priesthood, rabbinate, or patriarchy, to say nothing of mullahs, ayatollahs, or shamans. The paucity of our language for religious experience makes it easy to exoticize even the slightly untraditional. And, it seems to me, categorizing religious experience as exotic moves it into an aesthetic realm where it can be easily consumed by our secular culture.

Furthermore, I realized that current norms of personal writing, shaped as they have been by the values of the academy, militate against writing about religious



experience. It is much more acceptable to detail the trauma of rape or abuse than to recount a moment of religious inspiration. Coming out as a Christian or an observant member of any faith can be as dangerous as making public one's sexual orientation because the academy has so completely conflated the disestablishment of religion (which opened the way for Jews, Catholics, and agnostics) with secularizing (banishing religion altogether) higher education. Those who wish to write about religion not only lack the highly complex and compelling language of, say, queer theory, but they confront an implacable secularism. "They" actually includes me because it was my own difficulty with describing Cindy's and my religious experiences that made me see how current norms for personal narratives written by academics militate against religion.

I am just beginning to untangle the politics that underlie the insistence upon secular to the exclusion of sacred, but it seems clear that gender plays a role. Over the past quarter century a number of theorists have explored the feminization of American religion (see Welter, Douglas, Schuyler, and Reynolds for representative statements), and the equation of feminine and religious has, I think, legitimized and energized the academy's deprecation of things religious. Feminist theory has opened many new ways of expressing experience, but it has only begun to create spaces for discourses of religion. The work of Simone Weil offers an interesting example, and poet Anne Carson is looking at some of the silenced voices of religious women to help develop a language. Until these discourses are more fully developed, it will remain difficult to include articles of faith in personal narratives that issue from the academy.

*When Is My Business Your Business?*

*Anne Herrington*

What is "personal" or private is not self-evident. It is as much defined by what we feel will be judged by others to be deviant or different from social norms/values and what we feel will be self-revealing in ways that make us feel vulnerable, lesser in some way, or too exposed. In other words, what is personal is at once socially, culturally and personally defined.

When is it that what feels like personal matters should be made public in professional venues? A simple answer is when they connect with professional matters. But is there an imperative or expectation that we should be outing ourselves about all manner of personal things?

I want to say that we have to make our own choices about what of our personal backgrounds, identities, life details we will make public in professional venues. Still, in some instances, there is a methodological imperative to write of what we might view as private. I accept as valid that our background, identities, and interests shape in some ways the scholarly projects we pursue and the arguments and findings we

create. In accepting this claim, do I believe we need to include a personal inventory or positioning for all we write? Tough question. I just wrote an article on assessment and did not include anything of, for instance, my past experiences taking tests or my home background and schooling. Yes, I believe they contribute to the position I took, but I also believe my interests were sufficiently evident that readers would be able to develop a position in relation to my argument without commentary on my background. For me, the imperative is different for qualitative research where other people are the subjects of inquiry. If we are going to be interpreting others' lives, we need to be public about how we understand we are implicated in the telling. While I did not follow this principle in my earliest studies, I now accept it as a methodological imperative and, yes, perceive it as a professional expectation among others I respect.

In other instances, we should make the choice as to what of our personal lives we feel should be made public on the basis of our own sense of professional and political purposes. Recently, I was asked to contribute a short "tale" to a collection entitled *Comp Tales*. Here the genre was storytelling, narration. I took the occasion to retell a tale I had told on past occasions when leading workshops for teachers. For those previous tellings, I purposely veiled something about myself that at the time I *wished* to keep private and felt that doing so did not affect the purpose of the workshops. For *Comp Tales*, I took the occasion to "correct" the story: at this time, it did not feel like a risk, and I felt I had a purpose. At this time, in this country—don't ask, don't tell—it is important to be visible as a lesbian. The personal is political. Also, that story came to mind as a way to reinforce two intertwined points about our storying: (1) When we compose stories of our lives we are making choices as to how we will fashion and refashion aspects of our experience and identities; (2) Those choices are shaped not only by our reading of a particular situation and ourselves, but also by narratives that dominate our minds and world at the time, including for me both times of telling.

Is there a pressure now—a politics?—in our professional forums for telling more than one feels is professionally called for? To make public what seems should be private? I do not know. I do not feel that pressure myself, or perhaps I am just choosing to resist it. I do sense a valorization of personal narratives of teaching and literacy. Perhaps it is our continuing postmodern angst over Identity: "Yes, I'm multiple and shifting, but I'm still here!" And, admittedly, for *Comp Tales*, I composed a short form of this genre. I also know that I have read a number of personal essays, memoirs, and research studies that include personal information for professional purposes and that have helped further my own thinking: pieces by Brodkey, Lu, Kirsch, Villanueva, Gilyard, to name a few. They strike me as pieces that use personal background, experiences, and perceptions—sometimes via narratives—in criti-

cal ways, making public what could be taken as private for professional purposes. I aim to make that way of thinking and writing open to my students and want room for it in our professional journals.

Two closing thoughts: We should try to bring “the personal” into our thinking in conscious and critical ways and then decide for ourselves whether and how to include it in our public writing, whatever the genre.

Personal narrative does not have a special purchase on insight or knowledge.

*Why Bother with Writing?*

*Richard E. Miller*

Why bother with writing? And I do not just mean why bother writing about “the personal,” I mean why bother writing about anything at all? The fiction that there ever was writing that provided privileged access to some foundational truth has been shattered by a host of compelling arguments about the arbitrariness of the canon and of literary taste more generally. What remains after this liberating revelation, though, is a world where all writing—from the aching personal confession to the finely tuned literary exercise to the resolutely indifferent bureaucratic memo—competes on a level playing field for our attention. For those who have placed all their hopes for fame or truth or clarity on the activity of writing, the flattening of the literate genres is bound to be experienced as a devastating blow. But, however painful it may be to admit this, there can be no doubt that those of us who remain committed to reading and writing with care are part of a residual culture whose days are numbered. The world is now awash with writing that no one reads, with last year’s blockbusters ending up in the dump next to this year’s most insightful critiques. The fetishization of the written word is coming to an end, replaced now by a fascination with the commodification of knowledge, with moving what is known from here to there in the shortest amount of time, with being forever on the cutting edge. Accompanying this development, there is, as well, a haunting sense of disconnection, evidenced in the proliferation of senseless acts of violence, as one tightly wound individual after another hatches a plot to make others pay for the ambient feelings of placelessness that characterize life at the end of the twentieth century.

As a culture, we have a lot invested in writing and we have generated many stories about its transformative powers. For these reasons, it is to be expected that raising questions about the future of writing and reading will generate a felt sense of nervousness in all those who have committed themselves to these activities. But if learning itself is the endless process of confronting and managing one’s own ignorance, then a nervous response to an unanticipated set of questions must itself be understood as the sign of an internalized epistemology that is simultaneously at work and in crisis. In other words, when we are feeling nervous, what we are feeling

in the clash of unmet expectations is our education at work inside our bodies. For this reason, as an educator, I am interested in writing that emerges out of nervous states, writing that produces such states, writing that demonstrates that learning is under way. My sense is that writing that has such disturbing powers is a valuable and relatively unexplored resource for those who wish to study how cultural training makes itself known in individual experience.

I am interested, as well, in calmer, less agitated modes of composition. Thus, while it is clear enough that writing can be used to articulate and extend one's sense of despair and discomfort, I cannot help but wonder what a writing practice concerned with constructing a sense of hope would look like. Is it possible to produce writing that generates a greater sense of connection to the world and its inhabitants? Writing that moves out from the mundane, tragic events that mark any life into history, culture, and the impersonal institutions that surround us all? The predictable states of nervousness that are produced when one speaks of hope in an academic context particularly warrant attention, I would argue, because these states give us direct access to the ways in which what is felt internally as "personal experience" is intimately connected to the institutions outside the self that foster and promote such feelings. I am interested, in other words, in using emotional states of discomfort and yearning visions of relief as ways to a better understanding of the institutions that have most affected all our lives, regardless of our race, class, or gender. By this, I mean, of course, the family and the educational and religious institutions which together have shared primary responsibility for nurturing (and thwarting) both a sense of self and a sense of connection between self and society in us all. Or to put this another way, I am as interested in the expectations that we bring to the activity of writing as I am in the writing we produce to meet those expectations.

*The Personal*

*Victor Villanueva*

A woman writing from Caguas in Puerto Rico, writes to NCTE. She says that I am a non-person who does not know what people should strive for in life, and by implication, that I see colors instead of flesh-and-blood persons in my classroom. She says I do not represent all Puerto Ricans.

Another writes, a former student, now a third-grade teacher. She says she does not think in terms of color, so why do people of color? Thinking in those terms is divisive, she says, renders the trivial into the grandly racist.

A non-teaching day. Mazing about the library. I cross paths with a co-worker. He says, "I didn't think your kind of writing required the library."

It is risky business, writing and publishing the critical autobiography—in a lot of ways. There is the risk that autobiography will not be taken seriously. There is the risk of being ostracized by those who fear being seen as somehow racist; the risk of

condescension for much the same reason; the risk of disapproval from those from within one's race or ethnicity who do not wish to be associated with the autobiographer's politics; the risk of disapproval, self-exposure, an indulgence not approved of by many cultures. So, given all this, why would a professional of color venture to publish the autobiographical?

Well, there are two answers. One: I do not advocate the straight autobiography. The second comes from my now overworn quote from Antonio Gramsci. He says that

autobiography can be conceived "politically." One knows that one's life is similar to that of a thousand others, but through "chance" it has had opportunities that the thousand others in reality could not or did not have. By narrating it, one creates this possibility, suggests the process, indicates the opening (132).

He is pointing to the possibility in recognizing the analogous. That's it. There are, of course, ways to place the mixed-genre, the theoretical-autobiographical mix in very current Grand Theoretical terms: heterogeneity and hybridity. Interesting stuff. But for me there is Gramsci. There is Gramsci because there is a clearer sense of similarity and difference, even within various collectivities. What I mean is that I am, like all of us in the profession who are of color and of poverty, one of the exceptions who proves the rule, one who fell through one of the fissures in the current hegemony's historic bloc. It is a strange position, living in this nice place so far from home (the title of a book on class among academics).

I am among that 70 percent of Puerto Ricans who drop out. Not many of us in the academy. I am still the only one I know. That is what prompted *Bootstraps*, in some sense conceived when I entered community college, when a teacher described a poem by Ishmael Reed as carrying no meaning, though I saw it replete with meaning. And that conception grew as I read theory after theory built on unacceptable foundations, foundations someone given a particular background would recognize as sand. . . . Yet for all that, I am always pulled by the struggle not to reveal. There was—and in some lesser way, there still is—the desire within to silence the differences between those I come in contact with and myself, to give voice to the similarities only, to internalize the tension, the fires of the melting pot, stay private and make public a display of the dispassionate, the intellectually known. But I find it hard to reconcile a theoretical position that argues that ways of seeing the world are contextually constituted and linguistically mediated, even linguistically formulated, with a methodological position that strives for—and most often claims to achieve—objectivity. There must be room for elements of autobiography, not as confession and errant self-indulgence, not as the measure on which to assess theory, not as a replacement for rigor, but as a way of knowing our predispositions to see things certain ways, of understanding what it is that guides our intuitions in certain ways. This is the autobiographical as critique.

One bares the epistemological base—the experiences of how one has come to know, and that includes experiences with text, the things read, then elaborates, not confines, those experiences through theory and through research.

I keep reducing all this to Gramsci. But there is another way to look at this. It is also Freire. The autobiographical mixed with the theoretical: lived experience and theory; theory and general—a “problematizing of the existential.” And in rendering the problematic as written text, we are perforce made to address the rhetorical: a political, Gramscian, Freireian Aristotle with a dash of Kinneavy: someone saying something to someone from a particular view of reality that seeks to make that reality known. The personal cannot be ignored, even if it can be denied.

Another letter. The writer says in complimenting my attempt in *Bootstraps*:

I think racism carries too heavy a load of guilt with it. People waste all their energy denying racism and have no energy left over to make changes. There needs to be a way around the denial.

Making the lived live might be one way around the denial.

And so we try. The autobiographical essay is ubiquitous. But it sometimes seems we have the reverse of the wolf in sheep’s clothing: Elbow in Freireskin—expressionism with a social and political rationale. The result is that the familiar linear progression from personal to public, subjective to objective, intuitive to intellectual is maintained, as is the implicit hierarchy which denigrates the personal. I believe that Susan Welsh, responding to the Bartholomae-Elbow debate some years back, phrased the matter well in saying that “the open writer in the open classroom brings into view neither a deeper self nor a discoursing subject but a more complex lived world, saturated with virtualities of reading and meaning and intention that an expressivist or discourse community orientation would not equip students to generate or manage” (106).

Welsh points to the problems in polarities, like the academic versus the writer, authentic versus academic voices, autobiography versus academic discourse, the private and the public. Binary oppositions. We must remain conscious of tendencies to polarize, continue to refigure our notions of voice and autobiography, separate the notion of authenticity from writing about the self (or at least as the exclusive property of writing about the self), separate writing about the self from hierarchical notions of genres.

*Reading the Personal: Critical Trajectories*  
Min-Zhan Lu

Lately, I have been thinking a lot about the political responsibility of the reader. Therefore I have read the preceding reflective essays to get a sense of the position of each on not only what a writer might do when reading and writing about one’s own

and/or others' lived experiences but also what a reader might do when reading a text produced by such a writer. The one grain I see all six essays working against is the tendency to polarize, to rely strictly on conjunctions such as "either . . . or" when thinking, reading, and writing. Herrington asks that we think of the personal as "at once" socially, culturally, and personally defined. When making choices concerning what of one's background, identities, and life details to make public, her writer attends at once to her own sense of professional and political purpose and to her sense of the situation, including the kind of selves and narratives likely to be expected and accepted. The conjunction key to Miller's response is "as." He states that he is "as" interested in the expectations that we bring to the activity of writing "as" in the writing we produce to meet those expectations. He is interested in writing emerging out of nervous states and, "as well," in calmer modes of composition, in writing that articulates one's sense of despair and disconnection as in writing concerned with constructing a sense of hope and connection to the world and its inhabitants. And he is interested as well in writers who use these emotional states (felt internally as "personal experience") to understand the "impersonal" institutions affecting "all" our lives, "regardless" of race, class, or gender. Villanueva uses a series of verbs and conjunctions to counter "the tendencies to polarize." He posits a writer who "mixed" the autobiographical with the theoretical and strove for a clearer sense of similarity "and" difference "even" within various collectives. To make "the lived live," this writer at once "bares" the experiences of how one has come to know ("including" experiences with text) and "elaborates" those experiences through theory and research. Cushman likewise poses alternative conjunctions to take writers "beyond" the effort to produce a unidimensional and bloodless representation of what was once an individual's relation to the world and to lay open the "distinctions" between researchers and participants. She argues that personal narrative should be "less" about the individual and "more" about the relations that make the person. She posits a writer who uses self-reflection and active nostalgia and who foregrounds differences "and" similarities "in order" to establish, maintain, and develop new relations. Together, the essays pose a set of alternative conjunctions for guiding our thinking when reading and writing, conjunctions which might help us to move at once diachronically and synchronically when trying to break down the polarities dictating our understanding of our lives in relation to the people, history, culture, and institutions around us. They pose these critical routes to move our thinking beyond a mere fixation on the "what's" of the lived experience to also explore the "how's" and "why's" to our lived experiences. Anne Gere calls attention to the "paucity of our language for religious experience." Using her own experience as a practicing Christian and a writer of a double-voiced memoir, Gere examines the resistance to religion in current norms for personal narrative in terms of not only the exclusion of religious perspectives from dominant academic life but also the equation of "religion" with

“Protestant denominations” and of “feminine” with “religious.” Gere thus urges us to develop a discourse which attends at once to issues of spirituality, the academy, gender and the colonization of Native Americans. Deborah Brandt is concerned with using personal disclosure as a means to serve public interest, to understand the historical significance of the personal testimonies by ordinary people by theorizing literacy practices. She further reminds us of the responsibility of the researcher and the reader to work against current grains of institutional nervous systems, which have better trained us to “psychologize” the authors of personal accounts—the researcher and the interviewees. She thus joins others in placing the politics of the personal within the social and historical, in terms of the writer’s effort to contest dominant modes of using the personal and the dichotomies resulting from various dominant modes.

It seems to me that these alternative trajectories are critical not only for the writers of lived experiences but also for the readers when making sense of the texts writers produce via these routes. This is because the discourse of “either . . . or” has often been just as effective in nurturing (and thwarting) the reader as the writer of such texts. As readers, we need to be equally vigilant towards the ways in which the either/or mentality sets us in motion, urging us to operate as butterfly collectors fixated on reducing and displaying the position of the writer at the cost of ignoring the writer’s often complex and alternative textual moves as well as the writer’s complex, dynamic relations to the world. (The need for such vigilance is attested to by some of the letters Villanueva received for his critical autobiography.) To support the kind of writing posed by the essays, we need to struggle for a different kind of nervous system when reading the writings produced through alternative routes. This struggle might include among others the reader’s efforts to (1) pay more specific attention to instances in a text where the writer appears to be thinking in terms of “as . . . as,” “at once,” “moreover,” “not only . . . but also,” “as well,” or “to an extent”; (2) follow more deliberately those “detours” taken by the writer that challenge our habitual way of viewing the self in relation to the world; (3) become as interested in the act of writing as in its content: that is, to be as attentive to what the writer is trying to do—how does the writer go about approaching certain lived experiences and why—as in what the writer finds to say about those experiences; (4) demand of ourselves the same rigorous reflexivity we ask of qualitative researchers: that is, take the same critical routes when approaching the subject of our inquiry—the words of the writer—as we require of the researchers in their interaction with their research subjects, the participants. As readers, we need to be more vigilant towards the values and expectations we bring to the texts. Instead of using “our” norm—“traditional” or “radical”—to evaluate a writer’s decision to bring in or not bring in certain aspects of the personal and that writer’s decision to write or not write the personal, we need to treat these decisions as political acts by examining



them in relation to the social, historical contexts of their production and reception. There is nothing intrinsically traditional or radical about personal narrative or about a particular type of personal narrative. Uncritical celebration of both can be as dangerous as uncritical resistance. It is crucial that we combat the “either . . . or” mentality when reading. Instead, the politics of writing needs to be explored through the questions of who, about whom, to whom, when, where, why, and how.

*Negotiating the Personal, the Private, and the Professional*  
Gesa Kirsch

The voices in this symposium illustrate for me the tensions surrounding the politics of the personal. As the authors make abundantly clear, what counts as the personal is very much defined and delimited by current academic as well as Western cultural norms, norms that exclude as much as they include. As Anne Gere suggests, talking about religious experience remains untenable in academic circles; and as Cushman notes, experiences that validate community values over individual experience make an author suspect. What the symposium contributors seem to share is the desire to write “the autobiographical as critique,” so that readers can find a “place to talk back,” to write in ways that bring about the possibility of change, that explore, as Miller suggests, “emotional states of discomfort” at the same time that they bring about hope—“yearning visions of relief.” The common project among these authors seems to be the “denaturalizing” of what we perceive and experience as “natural,” the creation of a space where we can interrogate why some experiences seem more “real, personal, natural” than others.

When Min and I discussed this symposium, I found myself on at least two sides of the personal: I have argued (in publications) both for the importance of attending to the personal in our work and for being cautious and selective in using the personal. Thus, I am interested in the tensions that arise when scholars (myself included) attempt to use the personal in their writing. I hear these tensions in the remarks by symposium contributors—Anne Herrington’s choices about what stories to narrate in what contexts, when to reveal and when to conceal aspects of her life; I hear them in Victor Villanueva’s account of writing “critical autobiography,” in the different responses he receives, the different assumptions readers (and colleagues) make. I also find the tensions surrounding the politics of the personal in my own life.

February 1999. I find my future plans announced on several listservs, broadcast to the profession without my permission or consent. Yes, part of my plans had to do with leaving my place of employment, so yes, it was in the realm of the professional, but the other part had to do with my private life, how I wished to spend some of my personal time (and with whom)—not a professional matter at all. Yet the details of where and with whom I was planning to spend my time were posted on the Internet,

and forwarded in various directions with the touch of a single button. As I write these thoughts today, I still meet strangers who ask me about my personal, but no-longer-private, plans. What stays with me long after the e-mail posting is the sense of privacy invaded, of the personal turned into professional spectacle. I wonder where to draw the line between parts of my life that are private—not for professional consumption—and parts that are personal but important in situating my professional work. I also wonder why it is that authors who do not live and narrate the personal in professional discourse are often seen as taking a conservative stance.

May 1999. I attend a meeting of the American Council of Learned Societies. The speaker laments that it is getting more and more difficult to award residential humanities fellowships because even serious scholars are now part of dual-career couples, want to (or have to) share parental and domestic duties, or care for their elderly parents. Thus, he concludes, all the benefits that accrue from working in a close-knit community of residential fellows for a prolonged period of time are missed by those who cannot commit to a full year of residency. The audience nods in agreement until a woman in the back speaks up, suggesting that scholars who have rich personal lives, including children and spouses with academic careers, might produce richer, more diverse scholarship. The problem, she suggests, might not be the difficulty of awarding residential fellowships, but the “ideal” academic career path, modeled on the figure of the solitary scholar who has his/her domestic needs taken care of, who can establish a year-long residency at a moment’s (or at least a semester’s) notice. This career path no longer really exists, she suggests, but it still remains embedded in our institutional structures, including fellowship programs, tenure-track positions, and hiring processes.

What stays with me long after the meeting has adjourned is the tension between the professional and the personal that still permeates academic culture and institutions. We may have admitted the personal into our scholarship, perhaps even put pressure on our colleagues to “situate themselves” in their publications, to represent their experiences, their background, and their values, but we have yet to affect the structures in which we work and live. Yes, there are more dual-career couples, and some institutions even hire a twosome, but it is always a gesture of accommodation. The language used to describe these hires makes this abundantly clear: there is talk of the “star hire” and the “trailing spouse”; the couple is generally considered to be “lucky” and expected to be “grateful.” No room for “ungrateful receivers” here (see Min-Zhan Lu’s recent discussion of this term in *JAC* 1999), no sense that perhaps the institution should consider itself “lucky and grateful” to have scholars with rich personal lives on campus.

October 1999. A speaker at the Feminism(s) and Rhetoric(s) conference in Minneapolis responds to a recent publication in which the author uses the personal to

reflect on trends in the profession. The speaker feels she has no “place to talk back” to the author, to interrogate the issues raised in the article. “How do you respond to personal experience?” she asks. “What happens to knowledge-making? What grounds are there for me to disagree when the article uses the personal as evidence?” These questions reveal the tension readers often experience when they encounter the personal in academic discourse. How can we respond without denying the personal? How can we be critical without dismissing personal experiences? Here, the personal becomes problematic, problematic because it can silence rather than enable response. Victor Villanueva proposes one way to respond to the critical autobiography that allows the reader to enter the discourse.

These moments illustrate for me the tensions surrounding the personal, the private, and the professional: the desire to reveal and the desire to conceal, the difficulty of integrating the personal and professional dimensions of one’s life. They also illustrate the importance of making visible the fissures, the gaps, and the compromises that shape academic discourse and academic lives. Only by making visible these tensions can we hope to change academic cultures and institutions (institutions that seem to have an inordinate ability to absorb—rather than respond to challenges) and to change the personal, the private, and the professional dimensions of our lives.

## RESPONSES

*Ellen Cushman*

The authors in this symposium have helped me name what has been troubling me about personal narrative in research methodologies and scholarship: the politics of self-disclosure often undermine the good intentions of the personal-as-political movement. The politics of self-disclosure center around the social and cultural forces that press certain individuals to “bare all” and press other individuals to closet themselves, all because their stories are or are not valued as consumable “goods.” The politics of self-disclosure both facilitate and mitigate against particular types of agency in personal narratives by saturating these narratives with greater or lesser economic, moral, and cultural worth.

Social and institutional pressures to self-disclose often compromise scholars’ agency, especially when scholars do not have the luxury of a secure position from which to write. And while Victor Villanueva’s critical autobiography may be a tool for demystifying the institution, I strongly disagree with the ways in which self-disclosures like his are consumed and commodified by readers. Readers’ values drive up demand for more self-disclosure if the story is sensational, or suppress self-disclosures if the story is not a hot commodity.

*Anne Herrington*

Reading these pieces is like turning a kaleidoscope: with each turn I see new images, new issues, as the crystals fall into different configurations. Some intentions for writing: Writing to understand “the institutions that have shaped our lives . . . family, educational and religious institutions” (Miller)—and discourses that have shaped us as well? Writing critical autobiography as “a way of knowing our predispositions to see things certain ways” (Villanueva). Writing to claim a public place for a shared identity, both for affirmation and action (Gere, Villanueva, Herrington). Research considerations: I wonder about the transformation that occurs in the research process Deborah Brandt describes. While I can see aiming for an objectified or structural view with historical and other cultural projects, I also, and not surprisingly, value case study research that includes the personal, showing how individuals negotiate their social and cultural worlds. Anne Gere’s piece shows me the importance of distinguishing between the relative acceptance or fashionableness of particular theories/discourses and the relative acceptance of people’s lived identities. The two do not always intersect.

*Deborah Brandt*

Ellen Cushman’s response made me wonder about the fickle politics of the personal. (Or is it the intractable politics of tenure?) Not too long ago, it was only the institutionally secure who got to write about themselves. Now, it seems, it is only the institutionally secure who do not have to.

Reading these contributions made me realize that the aim for me is not eliminating the personal but transforming it, turning subjective experience into an objective resource for use in public deliberations on issues that matter to everybody. That is what I try to do with the “lives” of the people I interview, and that is what I try to do with my own life. In my research, my life experience winds up mostly in perspective and method. That is where it is disclosed—not in its psychological detail but in the slant it offers (both its glimpse of truth and its bias of untruth). I turn the slant of my life into an investigative resource. From this slant, I report out. I understand that sometimes (and for some people) talking about the slants is more important than talking about the reports. But for me, not usually.

*Anne Ruggles Gere*

Reading Min’s comments about the reader sent me back to all the other pieces in this symposium. Although she is concerned with how we behave as readers, she reminded me that in our discussions readers have remained simultaneously monolithic and vague. At least three actors contribute to personal writing—the one who tells the story, the person or institution that elicits the account, and the reader or consumer of it. Much of our discussion has focused on the first two. We have con-

sidered, as Anne Herrington says, “the choice of what of our personal lives” we reveal or as Richard Miller puts it, “the expectations that we bring” to our writing. We have also considered how we as researchers deal with the stories we get from others. Deborah Brandt’s term “pulverizing” and Ellen Cushman’s image of the butterfly pinned down raise interesting questions about the eliciting of personal accounts.

But we do not consider readers in the same kind of detail. Victor Villanueva offers excerpts from a few individual readers on the way to explaining his reasons for writing autobiographically, but the rest of us (including me) seem to see readers as an undifferentiated mass. We refer to “scholars,” “public,” “the public interest,” “others,” and “the world” without delineating who might fall into such groups or how they differ from one another. Rhetoricians do not agree on a single theory of audience, but their thinking on audiences implied or invoked might enrich our thinking about the readers who consume personal narratives.

Does a given selection of personal writing address an imaginary reader, such as Anne Frank’s Kitty? A universal one, such as John Q. Public? One intimately acquainted with a specific field of inquiry, such as readers of *CCC*? A specific population, such as Frederick Douglass’s white northerners? How does our conception of specific readers affect the “truth” that we tell? How does it interact with the roles we assume as writers or elicitors of narratives? How does it affect agency—both ours and that of whom we write? How does it shape and become shaped by the material sites and conditions of our writing?

As Gesa Kirsch reminds us, we need to make visible more of the fissures, gaps, and compromises of our discourse, and readers surely play a part in these. I end this discussion with more questions than when I began, but that is, no doubt, a sign of a good symposium.

*Richard E. Miller*

When asked in a recent debate to name his favorite political philosopher, George W. Bush caught his interlocutor off guard. “Christ,” Mr. Bush answered, “because he changed my heart.” For many, that would be a real show-stopping response. In this case, though, when pressed by his interlocutor to explain, Bush was happy enough to keep talking: “When you turn your heart and your life over to Christ, when you accept Christ as the Savior, it changes your heart. It changes your life. And that’s what happened to me.” Was this a personal moment or a political one? Was it both? Whatever Bush’s intentions may have been, his words are no longer under his control: to his detractors, his banal account is just more grist for the mill and, for his supporters, his courageous stand is yet more evidence of his integrity.

When I was an undergraduate, we used to joke about the trouble we were having making it through our philosophy assignments. “The unexamined life may not

be worth living,” we would say, “but the examined life is rarely worth reading.” In the public arena, invoking the personal is inevitably a strategic move: it buys laughs or votes or credibility or the aura of authenticity or outsider status or tenure and promotion—or even, on rare occasions, a felt sense of genuine intimacy. What “the personal” cannot do is generate a unified response on the reception end, as my colleagues’ remarks have amply illustrated: there are always going to be those who are suspicious of your motives for revealing seemingly personal information, and there are always going to be those who insist that you always, in every venue and in every moment, front what they consider to be vitally important personal information. Given the dependability of such fractured responses, what then can we expect from writing, from words released into the public arena? We can learn about the writer’s ways of organizing information, about the movement of the mind across the page. What we cannot learn—and can never know—is the degree to which the writer is being truthful, honest, or sincere. That is a personal matter of a different order.

*Victor Villanueva*

The funny thing in reading the others in this symposium is how much I learned about the things I discovered. Not a tautology. I mean that there were things that happened since I wrote *Bootstraps* and earlier mixed-genre, critical autobiographical pieces that I had not quite reflected on until I read these various accounts.

Readers have analyzed and if I really did own the discourse I produced (Foucault or Bakhtin notwithstanding) have other-read what I had written (Jonathan Culler going around in my head saying that all readings are misreadings, so saying that readers had misread would not be quite right, but they surely had not read what I had hoped to convey). I have even sat on a panel where the topic was the Rhetorics of Color, with my text as the subject under analysis. Talk about a pinned butterfly! (Though I did walk onto the panel knowing this was going to happen, but not realizing how awkward that would be.) And there are parts of my life that remain my own. I have never, for example, written about Vietnam. It does my profession no good to write of those events, as I see it.

And Anne Gere’s discourse of religion resonated as well. Our having known each other so long, I knew of her religious context, but it was a part of the natural landscape that she would not discuss religion within the larger context of publication. My own public discourses of religion have been to render the deeply spiritual as a kind of self-deprecating (or culture-deprecating) humor, stating that I had tried agnosticism but just felt guilty, that 500 years of Catholicism cannot be swept away so quickly. Yet my research must necessarily confront my politics on race and colonies with my spirituality, finding in Freire and in Dussell and in many others of the South (and further south than the southern states) a mix that situates; in the words of a Sandinista pamphlet: Jesus would not want us to live this way.

But what resonated most with me was Richard Miller's notion of the nervous and composed composer of public discourse.

The 1958 gray-primed Chevy truck that a friend had arranged for us to get on credit (\$500, \$50 a month) had blown a head gasket. I walk to work, snow blowing, around zero, seven miles (not a story I tell my children; too easy to ridicule). I get to work. Snow-cruled beard and overcoat. Soaked Payless boots: "Was that you I saw walking on Butler?"

"Yeah, man! Why didn't you stop!?"

"I thought you were working out" (no sound of irony, earnest). He just didn't get it.

Another time, a professional group, a social event. Folks were to be in costume. Most of the folks of color couldn't. Couldn't. I explained that we don't. Which we? I had to explain cultural difference again. And again. And again. They just didn't get it.

Yet another time (several times over time, really). There is consternation at people of color eating together during a break, not mingling appropriately. But we were all isolated in our home institutions. And we were all sensitive to anti-congregation laws of the past. A member of the group explained.

I cannot speak for others who have written critical autobiography—Keith Gilyard, bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa, and the many others of color. But I can say that there is a need to stop explaining to a decidedly white discourse community, a need to get it down once and for all (although it never is once and for all), a need to explain. This is Richard's nervousness. And there is a need to explain in a way that symbolizes (in that Burkean sense) differences and similarities, to compose with composure, and a word that gets at it best for me that has been suggested (most by Anne Herrington) but never said—*compulsion*.

#### SYMPOSIUM COLLECTIVE

We offer our thoughts for the purpose of starting a conversation rather than offering the last words concerning the topic. Our main goal is to illustrate the full scope and weight of work yet to be done. We hope that both the content and the format of this symposium will spark further discussions on not only how we best go about reading and writing the personal but also how we go about exchanging our thoughts on the topic in a variety of venues.

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