Getting Personal

TEACHING PERSONAL WRITING
IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Edited by

Laura Gray-Rosendale

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SUNY
P R E S S

Thanks, as always, to Steve

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Introduction

Laura Gray-Rosendale

A thickish, liquid smell of pine pollen and pitch fills the air. Tall ponderosa pine tops sway against the gusty breezes above me. A Northern Flicker with a buff, spotted belly sits on the edge of one birdbath. A Steller's Jay with a flippy-strange mohawk, blue-black plumage, and eerie pale-blue eyes makes squawking noises in a juniper next to me. Several Pygmy Nuthatches inexplicably walk down the ponderosa trunks. A mass of twittering yellow Pine Siskins circles the long bird feeder filled with Niger seed. A Rufus Hummingbird alights on one of the red feeders filled with sugar water, takes a long sip, and then zips off to a treetop nearby, carefully watching the food stash that he has just claimed.

I HAVE JUST GLANCED UP FOR A BRIEF MOMENT. To look at me here in my backyard in the sun with my worn flip-flops, ratty shorts, T-shirt, and humungous floppy hat, you might not know what I'm doing. This computer on my lap is the only giveaway. I'm teaching one of my summer graduate classes in narrative and creative rhetorics titled Adventures in Memoir. Right now, I am running several discussion groups simultaneously. I am grading blog entries and response papers. And I am answering e-mails related to my teaching.

Though I still regularly teach face-to-face and have very happily directed a face-to-face writing program for "at-risk" students for the last twenty years, quite a few of the other classes I now teach are online. These online courses afford me an altogether different, though just as valuable, teaching experience. It used to be that I always taught in a classroom with a white board and audiovisual equipment. My students sat in a circle at their desks. When I graded their work, I did so all at once and always at my desk, in my office, and sometimes if the weather was conducive, with an open window and light breezes whooshing through. But with my laptop and my online classes, I can also be found teaching while sitting in my

backyard as I am right now or, when summer fades and the weather grows colder, while walking on my treadmill and typing on my makeshift treadmill desk. There was a time when I always wore either dresses, or skirts or dress slacks with blouses, when I taught. Now, when I teach online, I am just as likely to be found in these shorts or in yoga pants. My teaching and grading often happen around the clock now—in the very early hours of the morning, deep into the night, and in the spaces in between. And, during my waking hours, there is rarely a time when I am completely off-line and not, in some sense, available to my students. Though we are not in the same room together, there is a way in which I am with them even more in online classes than I would be in a face-to-face class. My students now have similar educational experiences, ones that were scarcely imaginable let alone available in the past. In their online classes, they have ready and constant access to like-minded intellectual communities. And they can and often do live in places where no educational experiences such as those which I can provide for them are available. They live on ships. They live in foreign countries. They hold down full-time jobs. They raise families. They travel constantly for work or for pleasure.

How we educate our students—and, more specifically, teach writing—has changed radically in recent years. Online teaching is just one small part of this. Social media has also impacted the ways in which we teach writing. So have mobile phones—our ready access to photos, video, texting, e-mail, and the web. So has Twitter. So has Instagram. So have blogs and vlogs. And the list goes on and on. The way in which students perceive their own identities has shifted radically as well. While our students might be exploring multiple, diverse, and distinctly fluid identities online at any given particular moment, as John Palfrey and Urs Gasser indicate in their book, *Born Digital*: *How Children Grow Up in a Digital Age*, "the net effect of the digital age—paradoxically—is a potential *decrease* in a person's ability to control her social identity and how others perceive her" (20).

The idea for this book first occurred to me after I published my memoir *College Girl*. I was traveling around the country and talking with various students and faculty. We spoke about many things related to writing and teaching while we visited, and among them was how exactly we can and do teach personal writing of all forms (an increasingly popular genre of writing)—including the memoir—in the digital age. I began to see that those of us who teach personal writing these days find ourselves in very similar situations. We are forced to contend with a whole new range of

issues and questions. Among them are the following: How do we approach teaching the personal essay in an era in which the personal has become so overexposed on the Internet, so large a part of people's lives, and yet our face-to-face interactions have dwindled and altered so much? What kinds of valuable personal writing are we doing now within our classrooms and communities? How can and do we bring multiple literacies and voices as well as multimodality and digital media effectively into the arena of teaching personal writing? How might we best understand as well as politicize the landscape of personal writing in the digital age?

I began considering what various thinkers had to say about these issues. While there are many excellent books written on personal writing and many more written about the effects of digital technology, there are as yet very few texts that have brought these two arenas together. When they do so, they often look at theories and practices around online identity, but rarely examine such things in light of the kinds of specific multimodal exercises we are utilizing with our students. I dreamed of a book that did so. As a result, that became the main purpose of this project.

But, before I get to that, it is important to mention just a few of the texts in these areas that have shaped my own thinking on these issues as well as the approach that this volume takes.

Personal Writing as a Genre

The squirrels chase each other round and round the ponderosa pine trunks, their claws scrabbling against the bark, as I look up from my computer. My Doberman dog, D'Artagnan, circles the bottom of the trunks, trying to keep up with their looping paths, leaping and whimpering and barking, his small tail wiggling furiously. If only. If only he could fly.

There are many useful texts about personal writing as a genre that continue to impact my own perspectives. Some examine personal writing as a fairly wide-reaching genre. I have found Phillip Lopate's *To Show and to Tell*: *The Craft of Literary Nonfiction* to be invaluable. Though some thinkers have separated the personal and digital technology, in foregrounding the personal essay, Lopate does not relay that personal writing which utilizes digital technology is necessarily problematic. It does, however, sometimes raise questions of exposure and relative value.

> I do not want to represent Facebook as some sort of opponent to the personal essay when it could well be an ally . . . With the paucity of publishing outlets for personal essays, we should welcome the bloggers or Facebook writers who are trying out their ideas without necessarily getting paid for them. (Some of them have already figured out a way to get paid, the lucky devils.) Eventually, quality will sort itself out: that is already happening to some extent. (130)

Rather, using digital technology to write the personal is itself a viable option, even though it may utilize different forms, reach different audiences, and have different effects.

When teaching the personal essay, no one should be without Dinty W. Moore's *Crafting the Personal Essay*: *A Guide for Writing and Publishing Creative Nonfiction*. It offers our students ways to approach the essay in its many forms. Moore covers how to write many sorts of personal essays, with chapters on everything from the memoir to the travel essay. He also has a chapter on blogging. As he writes, "Combine discrete sensibilities with the endless possibilities of meaning and connection and extremes of playfulness and flexibility, and you are pretty accurately describing what some of the best bloggers do" (208). Increasingly, Moore urges that digital technology and the personal can and must work together. And Carl Vandermeulen's *New Writing Viewpoints*: *Negotiating the Personal in Creative Writing* makes abundantly evident how critical personal writing can be within courses that take up writing creatively. He writes that not only should such classes fundamentally focus on navigating the personal but that "Because students become writers largely through relationships with and responses from both teachers and peers, and because the writing our students do matters to them, to teach creative writing is also to negotiate the interpersonal" (xi). Social interaction, then, in all of its forms, is a key part of writing the personal as well.

Some see the genre of personal writing as a crucial place for viewing both differences in ourselves as well as how our relationships to one another operate. Vivian Gornick's *The Situation and the Story*: *The Art of Personal Narrative* has been another essential text for my own understanding of the personal narrative, and the memoir in particular. She notes that

> In nonfiction, the writer has only the singular self to work with. So it is the other in oneself that the writer must seek

and find to create movement, achieve a dynamic. Inevitably,
the piece builds only when the narrator is involved not in
confession but in this kind of self-investigation, the kind that
means to provide motion, purpose, and dramatic tension. (35)

As Gornick indicates, the best of memoir becomes about the discovery and
tracing of the other in the self. To do this is to also recognize the many
ways in which our multiple selves are always operating simultaneously and
sometimes in conflict with one another.

I have also been drawn for a long time to William Zinsser's edited
collection *Inventing the Truth*: *The Art and Craft of Memoir.* In his intro-
duction, he notes that "Good memoirs are a careful art of construction," and
that "Memoir writers must manufacture a text, imposing narrative order
on a jumble of half-remembered events. With that feat of manipulation
they arrive at a truth that is theirs alone, not quite like that of anybody who
was present at the same events," and that simultaneously there is "multiple
ownership of the same past" (6). Memoir writing is always about multi-
ple players and multiple pasts. When we write the personal, we are never
just writing about ourselves and our own experiences. We are always also
writing about others and must understand the extent to which we are con-
structing their experiences as well.

Some see the genre of personal writing as a reflection of our current
historical moment. I have also found Thomas Larson's *The Memoir and the
Memoirist*: *Reading and Writing Personal Narrative* to be quite helpful for
my own teaching and research. He notes that memoir's mainstream pop-
ularity can be attributed at least in part to the following:

What's fallen from our lives—at least from the lives of those
who have left the patriarchal behind—is our parents' rectitude,
its belief in an authoritarian center. In its place is personal
inquiry, individual knowing, moral relativism. This is not a new
endeavor; there's a long tradition of using literary forms to press
social inquiry. Memoir is judging the paradoxes of private and
public truth-telling in our time much as the essay inquired into
the claims of science and philosophy during the Enlightenment,
the novel critiqued the expanding bourgeois class in Europe in
the early nineteenth century, and the slave narrative demon-
strated the ghastliness of African bondage before the Civil
War. (190)

Within personal writing—and the memoir genre specifically—we are seeing crucial insights being made about our culture. This kind of writing is also necessarily being shaped in very significant ways by our culture and the accelerating changes within it.[1]

Writing the Personal and Identity

> *A new Black-Chinned Hummingbird approaches the feeder. He has not noticed the bold Rufus above on the end of a pine branch, watching, waiting. The new hummingbird takes a perch and then a long, slow drink. He has been flitting from feeder to feeder, flower to flower all day. He can finally rest his wings. But before he can anticipate, before he can imagine, a whir of wings screams down on him, beats him off the feeder. He zooms away to another tree nearby. The original Rufus flies back to the feeder, sits on his perch. But he does not drink. He is watching, waiting, claiming anew this feeder that is his and his alone.*

There are also many superb books out there specifically on personal writing, the history of autobiography, and constructions of identity. I think especially about Leigh Gilmore's *The Limits of Autobiography*: *Trauma and Testimony*, a book that has long influenced my thinking about personal writing. As Gilmore writes, in autobiographical writing, we are always already dealing with the concept of multiple selves.

> This is a strange and absolutely characteristic feature of auto-biography: the self becomes oddly multiple just at the time one might think it was most organized and coherent—the moment of telling its own story. It is precisely this organizational task of autobiography—the effort to set it all out in writing—that reveals how the self can never be quite where it ought, or where it is expected, or where it wants to be. (36)

Selfhood is itself infinitely complex, always changing and shifting even as we seek—particularly in writing the personal—to capture it and render it somewhat stable.

I think, too, about Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's important *Reading Autobiography*: *A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, a text I have taught through several editions in my graduate classes on memoir for many

years. They write that "the teller of his or her own story becomes, in the act of narration, both the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance, and contemplation. We might best approach life narrative, then, as a moving target, a set of shifting self-referential practices that, in engaging the past, reflect on identity in the present" (1). The "I" is never, ever one thing. It is always already many and varied. It slides into and out of the past and the present, the subjective and the objective—and inhabits all of the spaces in between. And the self is not something that can be discussed outside of context either. It needs to be continually contextualized—socially, politically, historically, and culturally. We cannot consider personal writing as a genre without recognizing this.

And I often consider Barbara Kamler's valuable *Relocating the Personal*: *A Critical Writing Pedagogy*, as well. She turns to various theories such as postmodern geography and poststructuralist feminism as she scrutinizes the various instantiations, functions, and operations of identity. As Kamler reveals, "writing about the self becomes an invitation to identify, analyse and critique, to understand the discursive practices that construct the self—which in turn offer possibilities for social change" (3). Once again, we cannot understand how to write the personal without seeing the self as itself quite complicated and as discursively constituted. To make sense of this complex self is to necessarily engage in crucial social and political inquiry as well.

Some try to bring the personal and the scholarly together—to recognize that the two are powerfully and inextricably connected. I have also greatly appreciated the work of Robert J. Nash in *Liberating Scholarly Writing*: *The Power of Personal Narrative*, in which he asserts the value of teaching personal writing for scholarly purposes with our students. More recently he has taken up the issue again, this time with Sydnee Viray, in *Our Stories Matter*: *Liberating the Voices of Marginalized Students through Scholarly Personal Writing*. Here the authors make an argument for the importance of teaching Scholarly Personal Narrative, especially to those many students who have been oppressed or marginalized students historically. Scholarly personal narrative "teaches them that their stories matter and, what is more, that their stories can be important to others. No longer do disenfranchised students feel the guilt, shame, and judgment of being 'the Other.' Now underrepresented students can position themselves at the center of scholarly discourse rather than always at the edges" (3). As part of this work, students are encouraged to look at "social location, social situation and social construction, under-representation, marginalization,

counter-narratives, individual stories of resistance and resilience, liberation and transformation, and academic memoirs" (7). They are taught concepts such as "'counterstorytelling,' 'naming one's own reality,' the 'multiple lenses of gender,' essentialism, White privilege, microaggression, performativity, heteronormativity, and the empathic fallacy" (35) as ways to create careful, scholarly personal narratives of their own. Looked at from such an angle, no longer are the personal and the scholarly rendered easily distinguishable, separable. Instead, they frequently shape and change one another. At their very best, they work together.

The Digital Age

> *The Black-Headed Grosbeak family has arrived for the season. There are five or maybe six of them now. It's hard to get their numbers straight as they swoop around, nestle against one another, jostle for sunflower seeds. They sit together on the middle birdbath, a mess of orange and white and black. One dips in, shakes around, while water goes splashing up on the others. The Western Tanagers will arrive in a few days, their bright yellow-and-orange parrot-like plumage seeming to make a temporary jungle of these piney woods. They will seemingly travel together with the Grosbeaks, move in and out of the whispering treetops.*

Having examined some key texts that have impacted my own ideas in the realm of personal writing, I now want to turn our attention to how we might characterize the digital age in which we are working and writing. There are some terrific books out there about working with and living within this time, our time, dominated by all sorts of forms of participatory media. There is, for example, Henry Jenkins's *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. He argues that we are inhabiting what he calls an "age of convergence," in which there is a constant "flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kind of entertainment experiences they want" (2–3). Since writing *Convergence Culture*, of course, Jenkins joined forces with Mizuko Ito and danah boyd for the publication of *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era: A Conversation on Youth, Learning, Commerce, and Politics*. They take Jenkins's argument further. In this text, they contend that "if we

are going to make meaningful interventions" in comprehending as well as utilizing the relative functions of a participatory culture,

> we have to go well beyond the myth of the digital native, which tends to flatten diversity and mask inequality. We need to engage more closely with the very different ways that young people encounter new media in the contexts of their lives that are defined around different expectations and norms, different resources and constraints, from those encountered by youth raised under more privileged circumstances. (59)

While participatory media is part of one's daily (hourly? half-hourly? moment-to-moment?) routine in our culture for many young people, participants simply do not participate equally within social media or in the exact same ways. Looking at why this is in fact the case is critical.

John P. McHale's *Convergent Media Writing*: *Telling a Good Story Well* is a book that is very well designed for students to help them "develop a critical understanding of quality print, radio, television, public relations, Internet, documentary, television and dramatic feature film writing" (vii). Much like Jenkins, McHale understands us to be living in a culture where media forms are constantly coming together, recasting and re-informing one another, where we are always already working intimately within a multimodal environment, one increasingly controlled by fewer and fewer corporate entities. McHale gives this example: "Convergence means that several modes of communication may be used together to impart mass media messages to the audience. When I am watching NFL, I can be online on NFL.com and I can get texts from my bookie about how much money I owe on a previous game." We don't just participate in various media forms at the same time within the digital age. One form necessarily leads to another form that leads to another form and so on.

There is also Frank Rose's important *The Art of Immersion*: *How the Digital Generation Is Remaking Hollywood*, *Madison Avenue*, *and the Way We Tell Stories*. He suggests that within our media forms a

> new type of narrative is emerging—one that's told through many media at once in a way that's nonlinear, that's participatory and often gamelike, and that's designed above all to be immersive. This is 'deep media': stories that are not just entertaining

> but immersive, taking you deeper than an hour-long TV drama
> or a two-hour movie or a 30-second spot will permit. This
> new mode of storytelling is transforming not just entertain-
> ment (the stories that are offered to us for enjoyment) but also
> advertising (the stories marketers tell us about their products)
> and autobiography (the stories we tell about ourselves). (3)

And at the very same time that our culture is becoming ever more highly
mediated and this new form of narrative is operating—one that plunges
us into the worlds it creates for us, we are also gaining a more boundless
thirst for the "real," "the Truth," and "the personal." As Rose puts it, "People
today are experiencing an authenticity crisis, and with good reason. Value is
a function of scarcity, and in a time of scripted reality TV and Photoshop
everywhere, authenticity is a scarce commodity" (315). The major turn
toward the personal at this time is not simply incidental, then. It's a direct
result of our contemporary media conditions.

We might also turn to *Media Criticism in a Digital Age*: *Professional
and Consumer Considerations* by Peter B. Orlik. In this book, he outlines
crucial methods and approaches for students to enact contemporary media
criticism—looking at everything from television to social media—while
also encompassing the consumer and business aspects of working within
the digital age. As Orlik argues, his book indicates that "radio, television,
and online content can all be analyzed both as definitive texts and as art.
Therefore, the material heard and seen over digital media is worthy of seri-
ous critical consideration by industry professionals, the consumers they
seek to serve, as well as serious students of the general discipline of crit-
icism" (xviii). Having the critical skills to examine contemporary media
representations and their effects on us is increasingly important. Doing so
fully, though, will require that we not only look at textual productions but
also their receptions and the institutional structures that produce them.

There is Jane Utell's *Engagements with Narrative* and her valuable
chapter "Stories beyond the Page, Stories on the Screen." Utell notes that

> In some cases, we're engaging with narrative through several
> different media at once. This *multimodal* engagement can be
> listening to the soundtrack of a movie or game as you watch or
> play; it can be thinking about how the words and images go
> together in a comic book; it can be interacting with friends
> in the digital world by clicking a thumbs-up, a heart, or

>a retweet button; it can be using a game console or swiping
>an iPad to keep the story moving and make choices that lead
>to different possible resolutions. (83)

For Utell as well, in the digital age multimodal interaction is not some anomaly—it is our common condition. And it constantly impacts the various stories or narratives that we are exposed to on a minute-by-minute basis as well as the very ones that we can tell and the specific ways in which we can tell them.

Joanna Thornborrow's valuable *The Discourse of Public Participation Media*: *From Talk Show to Twitter* examines this issue of storytelling in detail from another angle. She particularly emphasizes the troubling nature of various forms of social interaction in the digital age. Thornborrow argues that "ordinary identity is increasingly being 'authored' by the media, rather than 'mediated,' giving broadcasters a powerful role in the constitution of participant identities for their own ends—that is, the proliferation of profitable formats in what is now a global market" (2). In this media-saturated landscape, we don't choose our identities, or how they are deployed or received. Rather, they are continually constructed and disseminated for us. It seems that people are simply no longer operating as "public citizens" in the world, but rather as "public spectacle" (15). Reality formats "now put stories into the hands of the media professionals rather than into the voices of 'ordinary' people" (188). She contends that participants are now involved more often in a detailed process of "evaluation, rather than of narration." And, as Thornborrow notes, increasingly reality formats are fora "for commenting and judging, not for storytelling" (189). So, even at those moments when we may think we are in control of the narratives we are producing about ourselves or the narratives we are using, we are not. They are constituted for us, giving us less and less authority over them, less and less room to move.

Some other authors are examining the far-reaching effects of this new media on our contemporary society. In Alec Charles's *Interactivity 2*: *New Media*, *Politics and Society*, he indicates that these technologies have provided us with many things, including "an almost inexhaustible supply of ill-informed opinion, hardcore pornography, pictures of kittens, adverts for products and services nobody needs or wants, and video recordings of people doing things at which they are a lot less talented than they seem to think they are" (3). This is the rather humorous side of digital technology's ubiquity. However, according to Charles, the new forms of media also have

other potentials, some of the same ones that concern Rose. As Charles asserts, "it is increasingly difficult to tell what is real and what is not—insofar as the real itself is defined by those processes of mediation . . . Having appropriated and shifted the benchmarks for normative reality, reality television programme formats and practices have, in their attempts to court audiences immune to the appeal of the merely ordinarily extraordinary, grown ever more eccentric" (20). Much as Rose suggests that "reality" is ever more scarce in this highly mediated world and therefore there is an ever-greater need for it, Charles contends that even what is considered "reality" is itself never "real" enough somehow. We want to get back to some authentic reality, as if that were possible. We keep searching for it. And it keeps eluding us.

Digital Studies, Multimodality, and Teaching Writing

> *An unkindness (yet they seem plenty kind enough) of Common*
> *Ravens descend on the suet. There are two. Then three. Then five.*
> *It's late afternoon now and the light is crawling up the hill toward*
> *Buffalo Park, leaving only scattered patches of sun coming through*
> *the treetops. This is their time. The rest of the yard clears out. They*
> *leap up on the suet with their claws and rip out big chunks of fat,*
> *gobble them down. They carry pieces of stale bread and muffin*
> *from our neighbor's yard and dunk them in the birdbaths.*

Living in this digital age as we do, there has also been an ever-greater focus on the importance of teaching multimodal composing in our Rhetoric and Composition classes especially. For example, in Tracey Bowen and Carl Whithaus's edited collection *Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres*, the contributors "consider how understandings of genre and media can be used in classrooms to help facilitate students' development" (3). The editors and authors are concerned that student writing that takes a multimodal stance is itself "reshaping genre boundaries and changing what counts as academic knowledge. Faculty, students, and writing program administrators are responding to these new forms of literacy by creating in them, by writing in them, by pushing concepts and practices of what is possible to accomplish and create in a college writing course" (4). It is not simply that we are adopting multimodal approaches. These very approaches are changing how we write, how we conduct research, and even how we imagine ourselves.

Likewise, in Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes's *On Multimodality*: *New Media in Composition Studies* the authors assert, too, that not everything in media studies is happening within strictly written approaches or modes, that we need to increasingly account for this fact, and that "any approach to new and multimedia must become cognizant of the rich rhetorical capabilities of new media so that students' work with those media is enlivened, provoked, and made substantive" (19). They specifically draw on "histories of queer and avant-garde media" to show "one way to expand our sense of the rhetorical capabilities of media" (21). Their book represents a valuable turn in the research around multimodal composing and teaching.

There is Adam Banks's crucial *Digital Griots*: *African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age*, a text that makes the very important argument for bringing African American and digital rhetorics together in the persona of the "digital griot," often mingling together a variety of digital, oral, as well as print methodologies. According to Banks, this will entail "building assignments that invite students not only to work across modalities but also to link those multiple modalities, individual assignments, and assignment cycles and in critical examination of the power relations and material conditions inscribed in technological tools, networks, and discourses" (165). If we are to engage in multimodal work, then, this must be done while also looking at how issues of oppression and marginalization shape and are shaped by what we do.

Finally, I appreciate Jody Shipka's *Toward a Composition Made Whole*, too. She wants to interrogate and to expand the concept of multimodality itself. As she contends, "A composition made whole recognizes that whether or not a particular classroom or group of students are wired, students may still be afforded opportunities to consider how they are continually positioned in ways that require them to read, respond to, align with—in short to negotiate—a streaming interplay of words, images, sounds, scents, and movements" (21). According to Shipka, "composition and rhetoric scholars must resist equating multimodality with screen-mediated texts" (84) alone. Instead, we also need to incorporate those other technologies—ones outside the screened sphere—that we too often leave behind.

There are also a range of quite teaching-focused contributions to this conversation. In Cynthia L. Selfe's edited collection *Multimodal Composition*: *Resources for Teachers* she includes a useful DVD that contains both audio and video essays, samples of multimodal compositions that teachers can readily utilize that will inform their teaching. In their chapter 1, "Thinking

about Multimodality," Pamela Takayoshi and Cynthia L. Selfe argue for the importance of students' need to continually compose various multimodal texts and not just to simply passively consume them as they may do in their day-to-day lives. They also contend that our understandings and conceptions of literacy practices themselves need to greatly increase and expand, encouraging use of "still images, animations, video, and audio" (4). The book is truly a critical tool for all teachers teaching writing in the digital age. Similarly, *Writing New Media: Theory and Applications for Expanding the Teaching of Composition* by Anne Frances Wysocki, Johndan Johnson-Eilola, Cynthia L. Selfe, and Geoffrey Sirc advances detailed methods for utilizing new media within all of our writing courses. They too outline specific activities that teachers can try out with their students in their classrooms. Finally, Kristin L. Arola, Jennifer Sheppard, and Cheryl E. Ball's hands-on *Writer/Designer*: *A Guide to Making Multimodal Projects* teaches students how to use various modes in their work, including "the linguistic, the visual, the aural, the spatial, and the gestural" (5–13). The book takes students through a series of crucial stages, including how to take up various technologies, designing and creating their own projects, the process of drafting them, and then getting these projects out into the larger world.

Writing the Personal in the Digital Age

> *The ravens have gone. And the Eurasian Collared-Dove couple whoo-shes in, a flapping of pale gray wings. They coo and call to one another. They sit on the edge of the bird bath, preening their feathers. They arrive at about the same time every evening, their nightly tradition. I don a light jacket, close my computer for the day. Enough teaching for now. It still sits on my lap like a fat cat, warm and whirring.*

I have mentioned key texts that have focused on personal writing, key texts that have focused on the digital age, and key texts that have focused on teaching writing in the digital age. But there are far fewer books and journals that have traced the connections within and between the concepts of the personal and the digital age.

Nancy K. Baym's *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* importantly notes that "One of the most exciting elements of new media is that they allow us to communicate personally within what used to be prohibitively

large groups. This blurs the boundary between mass and interpersonal communication in ways that disrupt both" (4). She describes that the digital era has ushered in new identity categories such as "disembodied identities" and "disembodied audiences" (118−23). Increasingly "self-presentation" and "the influence of platforms" also become issues (124−40). Still, within this new digital universe, not all is lost for personal interaction and personal writing. As Baym writes,

> We develop and appropriate technologies as means of fostering meaningful personal connection. Along the way there are diversions, distractions, disasters, and delights. What kinds of connections we foster with what kinds of people evolves. Like everyone who's come before us, we don't know what the future holds for our relationships. But when I look at how quickly and effectively people took over networks of digital signals that were never meant for sociability in the service of our need to connect, I am optimistic that we will navigate our way through innovation without losing hold of one another. (179)

Baym does not want to see the personal and the digital as distinct from one another. Instead, over time, and as technologies continue shift within the digital age, one will necessarily change and impact the other.

There is also Anna Poletti and Julie Rak's wonderful edited collection *Identity Technologies*: *Constructing the Self Online*. They note that

> Self-representation online challenges the tendency to read for narrative, which has been a hallmark of auto/biography studies, and demands a consideration of how researching identity online causes us to rethink the basic assumption that has animated the field to date. One example of this tendency is the persistence of narrative as a frame for understanding how online identity is formed. (7)

Instead, of relying on narrative only as the key way to read and understand digital texts, they take up Smith and Watson's focus on "'autobiographical acts' to describe non-narrative or even just commonly circulating ways of self-representation." In this way, they hope to examine "how the disruptive features of identity-formation and attempts to normalize these disruptions operate in digital media" (10). For Poletti and Rak, we must see identity

construction online as always necessarily embodying a series of shifting autobiographical identifications and look to those moments when identities challenge their very constructions.

There is also the important edited collection *Metawritings*: *Toward a Theory of Nonfiction* by Jill Talbot, in which the writers reveal the extent to which increasingly our digital world demands that the personal itself be taken up and achieved performatively and extremely swiftly. For Talbot, metawriting is a particularly compelling by-product of this new world. As she states in her introduction, "the current fascination with documenting and sharing, with self-awareness, may perhaps be linked with the influx of metawriting and the dissolving barriers between experience and the representation of that experience . . . Everyone now, not just writers, creates a written, published persona on a daily (hourly) basis" (xxvi). The personal—and the continual reinforcement of the representation of the personal—has become essential to how we think of ourselves not only as writers but as people in the global sphere.

Finally, the Spring 2015 issue of the journal *Biography* "Online Lives 2.0," edited by Laurie McNeill and John Zuern, has also been an important contribution to my thinking about issues of identity and personal writing in the digital age. In this issue writers revisited an earlier 2003 journal issue about online identity and carefully considered how people are now, many years later, "mobilizing online media to represent their own lives and the lives of others on the Internet" (v). McNeill and Zuern argue that with the appearance of Web 2.0, the

> boundaries between online and offline life—and as a consequence, the boundaries between private and public life—have become even harder to discern than they were in the early days of the Internet, and that this conflation of private and public space has created a climate of exposure and risk in which identity becomes not only something we are constantly compelled to construct but also something we are constantly compelled to safeguard against threats to its integrity and security. (vi)

They note that the various contributions to their special issue examine "practices of shaming and norming in response to online lives," while also revealing "other stories of social media and its benefits" (x). Many of the pieces in the journal take up issues associated with the auto/biographical, exposing how certain issues concerning "preserving and sharing material

about a life for (self-)reflection, remain in place, but on a scale impossible to manage" (xiv). Essays examine such concerns as living virtual lives in video games, online stalking and identity, blogging and adopting fake identities, identity and Wikipedia, YouTube and online testimony, online diaries and constructing the self, life-writing on-line, and constructions of selfhood on personal web pages.

The Chapters

> *And then the doves fly off to their roost for the night. I take my laptop under my arm and walk inside, slide the screen door closed behind me. Tomorrow it will begin again for us all. I will be out here once more teaching my class and grading my students' work. The birds will come back, one by one. And I will be but a witness to their lives, their comings and goings—myself living within and between the digital world and this other world.*

Until now, however, no books have specifically examined the impacts, effects, and issues associated with personal writing in the digital age. No books have specifically brought together theories about personal writing and digital media with suggestions for classroom and community applications. No books have so fully featured students' and community members' own work in this vein. And no books about such subjects have included pieces that in their very compositions deliberately challenge the idea that creative work and scholarly work are distinct or separable. And, this book aims to make these contributions.

The book begins with "Part I: Personal Essays, Digital Compositions, and Literacy Narratives." Chapter 1 is written by Ned Stuckey-French and titled "Teaching the Personal Essay in the Digital Age." He leads readers through an exciting course he teaches within the Editing, Writing, and Media track of the English degree at Florida State University, touching on critical concepts, key readings, and video components. In the course, his students learn both about elements of the genre of the personal essay, as well as crucial aspects of the history of the digital age, creating pieces that utilize various forms of new media. For their final projects, Stuckey-French's students produce a wide range of texts. As his syllabus states, a student's final project "might be a video essay, a multi-media piece created with InDesign, a Google Maps essay, a contribution to a digital archive,

some kind of remediation of one of your blog posts, or anything inspired by the pieces we'll be studying during the course" (10). Stuckey-French also provides numerous ways for readers to access what his students have accomplished so that they can try out his strategies within their own classrooms.

Chapter 2, "Writing the Way Home: Creative Nonfiction and Digital Circulation in a Veterans' Writing Group," is composed by Eileen Schell. She describes a thriving community writing group she cofounded with Ivy Kleinbart that aims to serve both military veterans and their family members. Schell is careful to suggest that veterans utilize the group for many distinct and different reasons—not all of them simply "therapeutic." Using both face-to-face interactions and Facebook posts (as well as their group website), veterans consider why they feel compelled to write (or to not write) and/or to relay their military experiences to one another as well as to others outside the group. Employing a "creative writing workshop method," veterans also come to discover both the various problems and possibilities of "going public" with their experiences (25). Through the frameworks of both community literacy scholarship as well as digital rhetorics, Schell thoughtfully addresses exactly what a community writing group can accomplish on both personal and political levels.

Chapter 3 is "Essaying to Understand Violence" by Amy Robillard. Robillard's insightful piece examines the value of teaching, reading, and writing the personal essay in an age marked by otherwise rather impersonal interactions, impersonal interactions that often include and/or result in various forms of violence. Weaving together more traditional scholarly writing with creative writing in her essay, Robillard contends that the personal essay genre is essential in the digital age because it invites us to re-understand some crucial issues for our students and ourselves, especially the true importance of being fully regarded by and regarding one another. As she writes, "students' appreciation for courses on the personal essay evidences a desire to understand the ways we are all trained not to see one another, not to say the things that might make us seem vulnerable, not to hear others' confessions of vulnerability" (46). The personal essay as a genre and the classes we teach about it, then, have the capability of enabling us to embrace our common humanity at a time when this is what is most needed.

In chapter 4, "Digital Portraits: Engaging Students in Personal Essay Writing through Video Composition," Michael Neal investigates how the personal essay has worked historically both as a writing genre and within our writing classrooms. As part of moving this history into the digital

age, Neal encourages his students in his three workshop courses—"Visual Rhetoric," "Advanced Writing and Editing Workshop," and "Rhetorical Theory and Practice"—to conduct their essay projects using varied multi-modal approaches. In his chapter, Neal takes us into a number of students' projects for these classes. He then analyzes in detail how they negotiate their own personal writing situations in particularly intriguing ways through employing forms of digital video composition. For Neal, the digital video essay assignment is especially important because it helps students to "connect the personal with audiences they can both imagine and experience in online, networked communities" (62).

Chapter 5, "Stories within Stories: Three Reflections on Working with the DALN," is cowritten by Ben McCorkle, PD Arrington, and Michael Harker. This chapter explains the various impressive ways in which the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN) has been used to foster greater understanding and awareness about literacy issues as well as other concerns related to personal writing. The DALN is often referenced these days to aid in our teaching, to promote innovative research, and to foster community engagement. The authors also explore the ways in which the DALN has made publicly available not only the personal narratives of everyday people but also those of various notable figures, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter among them. As the authors express toward the end of their chapter, "The stories we've shared here demonstrate different ways of working our way through the archive: we've re-seen ourselves and others in terms of where we've come from, how we've worked our various ways through the world, and the legacies we can help leave behind for others" (89).

"Part Two: Blogging, Tweeting, Texting, and Online Classes" begins with chapter 6, "Living the Expressivists' Dream: Writing Meets Blogging as Theory Meets Practice" by Bonnie Sunstein. Sunstein's intriguing essay traces her own initial suspicion of using blogs in her teaching and then how she came to employ them with students who hoped to become teachers of writing in a course called Approaches to Teaching Writing. As Sunstein notes, "The course is what educators like to call 'praxis-driven': students study the theories of teaching writing by being both writers and teachers, by acknowledging and documenting what they do, by recognizing who helps them and what they do to help others, and by identifying how they understand as they revise" (97). She also started being a blog participant in the class herself. Throughout her chapter, Sunstein shows just how much insightful reflective work she and her students accomplished through using

blogs. In the end, Sunstein argues that blogging is itself a certain form of "expressivist" writing, a form that is reminiscent of ancient work in rhetoric as well as crucial aspects of the essay genre.

In chapter 7, Brian Oliu writes about "Rapid Organicness: Using Twitter to Expand Young Writers' Creativity and Their Sense of Community." Oliu describes the many interesting ways in which he has come to utilize Twitter within his creative writing classrooms. As he writes about his students, "it allows them to realize that there is an active writing world beyond their classroom, it fosters community within the classroom as well as the literary world, it allows for creative expression and experimentation without the pressure to craft perfect work, and it gives writers an extended sense of their writing audience which helps form good artistic habits" (109). Using Twitter, a crucial format for personal writing that he believes encourages equality, Oliu asserts, helps him to professionalize his students, to encourage them to understand themselves as valuable writers in the world, and to create new kinds of writing and knowledge for other writers.

Chapter 8, "Old Pond: 127 Ways to Look at Texts with Tweets" by Michael Martone, is a creative piece that also makes a series of scholarly suppositions about the role of texting in our own and our students' lives. As he writes, "The new instruments of writing are so handy. They're so hand-held. These new devices have, perhaps, defamiliarized the hand, the hand-made" (129). Told as a series of beautifully written tweets, Martone explains how his students use texting in their daily lives, how he utilizes texting with audiences when he gives readings of his work, and how his students employ texting in his classes. He also encourages students to use their phones to write poems to other people around the globe. And Martone asks students to take something that is relatively odd to them—like postcards—and to use them to convey distinctly new meanings about what might be construed as old or familiar environments.

Chapter 9 is "#Because Social Media: Personal Writing and the Brave New World of Digital Style" by Paul Butler. Beginning his essay with a rich, creative piece about his time spent as a student in France, Butler then turns toward a thoughtful investigation of the connections between the personal and how new media can operate in a variety of different contexts. As he writes about his chapter, Butler first turns to "classroom settings, in the form of video, and the 'Concept in 60' assignment developed at Ohio State University." Here Butler takes us through how he rethinks and then re-presents the set of experiences he had in France for a multimodal

assignment. Then he turns to Twitter, considering the role of "social media in rendering the personal in different ways." He describes how Twitter is changing the ways in which we communicate with one another and their effects. Finally, he examines the "*Harper's* Index as a place where such traditional textual features as juxtaposition and ellipsis intersect with digital affordances" (135). Butler traces the specific rhetorical effects of the index as well as how he encourages students to construct their own indexes in a personal writing class.

Laura Gray-Rosendale contributes chapter 10, "Teaching the History of Life Writing and Memoir Online." Gray-Rosendale describes one online graduate class she teaches as part of Northern Arizona University's master's program in Rhetoric, Writing, and Digital Media Studies—The History of Life Writing. The students write both creative and analytic responses and blog posts and discussions as well as create a final project for the class. She finds that in spite of the seemingly impersonal nature of the online environment compared to a typical face-to-face environment, students themselves claim that they are able to more readily engage with personal topics than they might otherwise. Drawing on various scholarship about online teaching, Gray-Rosendale then shares three compelling projects that her graduate students created within the course, ones that take up the history of life writing while also employing various multimodal elements. As Gray-Rosendale notes, she chooses to "leave this assignment open and full of possibilities because these are advanced graduate students," and she hopes "to give them the chance to explore topics of their own choosing relative to the class topic" (151).

Chapter 11 is Aimée Morrison's "Students Tell Me Things: Personal Writing in New Media Studies." In this chapter Morrison shares how she teaches various topics in contemporary online media to her graduate students. In the first part of her essay, she takes us through one key assignment she has used with her students—the "Auto/Biography and Analysis Assignment"—and shares some of their responses with us. This assignment is an online life writing assignment that asks students to create what she calls "digital self-representations." They need to consider things such as which "self" they are foregrounding, what name they will use, what platform they will use, what genre they will write within, what audience they are seeking, and how they will court this audience (164). They then write a paper that explains their choices within their projects. In the second part of her essay, Morrison makes the important case for why we increasingly need to

have students engage in such assignments. As she argues, "when we draw our personal stories into public spaces such as the classroom—as much as we wish to share, and no more—we build spaces for empathy, connection, and a new model of scholarship that makes space for the acknowledgement and nurturing of the subjective aspects of the work that have been driving us all along, in one way or another" (176).

"Part III: Voice Lessons, Multimodal Genres, and Digital Stylings" begins with chapter 12, Lynn Z. Bloom's piece titled "Voice Lessons: Hearing and Constructing Personal Voices in a Digital Age." In this humorous piece, Bloom examines the many ways in which voice—and our failure to really understand exactly how it works—impacts us in our writing and thinking within the digital age. Examining a number of master writers at work in detail, she contends that "in any medium, voice conveys the authorial persona, a mind and character in reflection, animation, interrogation, even if the work at hand reveals nothing personal about the author" (181). Bloom also looks at some of the problems of voice operating within today's digital texts. Finally, she explains how teachers can help students develop a personal voice through a series of innovative assignments ranging from blog posts to public service announcements.

In chapter 13, "When Research Goes Personal: Incorporating the Digital Multimodal Research Project in a First-Year Writing Course," Christine Martorana argues forcefully that a false dichotomy has been set up historically between personal and research/academic writing. Revealing how she teaches what she terms a Digital Multimodal Research Project (DMRP), she effectively disrupts the binary. Martorana encourages "students to research a topic of personal significance, one with an explicit connection to their past, present, or future lives, and then to present their research on a digital platform such as Wix, Weebly, or WordPress." Her chapter includes overviews of and visual images from several students' multimodal projects, exposing the ways in which these projects help them to conduct research that is truly meaningful. For Martorana, "the digital is not one or the other, either personal or research. It is both, and it is this very quality of the digital that makes it ideal for blurring the personal/research binary" (205).

Zarah Moeggenberg contributes chapter 14, "A Queer Challenge to Repronormativity in the Digital Classroom." Moeggenberg insightfully reveals that what J. Jack Halberstam in *In a Queer Place and Time* calls "reproductive temporality" or "repro time" too often dominates our writing classrooms (4–5). Moeggenberg suggests that a queer classroom that honors personal writing will not just involve including queer texts or queer authors

but also interrupt "the normative production of single-authored alphabetic writing" (220). It will involve students being able to create more projects that fully "integrate the digital, the multimodal, the collaborative, the play, and the personal" (233). Looking at Basic Writing classrooms in particular, she reveals the extent to which research in the various writing disciplines has failed to account for this new kind of teaching. She reveals exactly what such a new classroom would look like and explains how she asks her students to build a Digital Scholarship Workspace. Taking us through her own teaching practices, Moeggenberg also exposes her struggles in creating such a classroom space and some of the key problems we may encounter along the way.

The book closes with chapter 15, "The Pleasure of the Voice: Speakerly Writing in the Digital Age," by Jeff Porter. Porter's innovative essay suggests that when we write about "voice" in personal writing, too often we focus on the written word and forget about the importance of aurality. In order to teach his students about this element of voice, Porter invites them to listen to the different voices of twentieth-century film and radio. It is in this way—through introducing students to spoken narration—that Porter feels his students can best come to find their authentic, embodied voices. One of the assignments he has his students do is what he terms a "Sound Walk," "listening to and recording everything they hear, a task they find surprisingly hard" (248). In the end Porter argues that since "for students in the writing classroom, the process of composing tends to be about the arrangement of visually perceived words on the page, while sound is repressed," in the digital age we must continually teach them how to listen anew (241).

Each of these contributions shares something important about the crucial effects of personal writing in the digital age. Each chapter makes thoughtful arguments about the value that personal writing can still have for our students. And each chapter provides us with detailed suggestions for how we can apply what the authors are sharing with us to our classrooms and communities. In the end, all of the chapters point us toward a positive future in which personal writing will be at the forefront of our teaching and scholarship.

Notes

1. An exciting development is beginning to occur. Some thinkers are starting to view creative writing more in terms of digital technologies. There is the edited collection by Michael Dean Clark, Trent Hergenrader, and

Joseph Rein, *Creative Writing in the Digital Age*. As the editors contend, "creative writing has been hesitant to join other writing disciplines, such as rhetoric and composition and professional writing, that have recognized the importance of digital influences and have theorized how these technologies impact their writing classrooms" (2). There is also Adam Koehler's *Composition, Creative Writing Studies, and the Digital Humanities*. He suggests that we need to search for the various connections between creative writing work and the histories of composition. As Koehler puts it, "this book examines an emerging digital turn within that borderland scholarship" (26).

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Part One

Personal Essays, Digital Compositions, and Literacy Narratives

1 Teaching the Personal Essay in the Digital Age

Ned Stuckey-French

FOUR YEARS AGO I served on a committee at Florida State University that was charged with reforming the university's liberal studies program. We identified several problems, some of which stemmed from the decline of first-year composition. The recent transfer of first-year writing to high school AP courses meant fewer students were taking freshman composition on campus.

This change had two big consequences. First, because the training students were getting in high school was uneven and a score of just 3 on the AP exam enabled them to test out of a semester of our two-course sequence, many of them didn't have the writing skills they needed for college or, more generally, for life in the Digital Age. Second, first-year writing had been the one course all freshmen took, and without it students missed out on the socialization and introduction to college life the course provided. First-year writing had been a place where these students met each other, shared their personal writing, learned research and writing skills, and ended up talking to each about possible majors. Our solution to this problem was to require two new courses: a one-semester 2000-level writing course (which students cannot test out of and must complete by the end of their second year) and a one-semester interdisciplinary course organized around a single "big idea." This second course is geared mainly for first-year students but is open to others. My work on this university committee left me especially committed to these reforms, and I decided to propose one of these "big idea" courses.

Prior to my work on this committee, several of my English Department colleagues and I had been thinking more and more about how we might reform our departmental curriculum to better reflect the needs of our students in the dawning Digital Age. During the 2007–08 school year I was part of a departmental committee that conceived and designed a new track for our undergrad English majors, an alternative to our existing literature or creative writing tracks. We called this third track "Editing, Writing, and Media" (EWM), and summed up its mission with the tag line "Writing

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for 21st Century." EWM was launched in the fall of 2009. It was meant to be a pilot project with a "soft rollout," but students loved it and within two years it was the most popular of our three tracks. EWM majors take a core set of traditional literature and writing courses but supplement those with courses (some required, some electives) in areas such as visual rhetoric, digital design, line editing, and the history of text technologies. Most EWM students also do an internship. The EWM track is currently home for more than half of our 1,400 undergraduate English majors.[1]

Within the EWM track I taught a course on the history of publishing, which included units on book, magazine, and digital publishing. Each year the unit on digital publishing grew until the three units in the course were about equal in size. I also began to include a unit on digital and video essays in my essay-writing workshops, wrote a review essay for the *American Book Review* on film and video essays, and organized panels at conferences. For almost thirty years, I had taught mainly upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses, but I was committed to our liberal studies curriculum reforms. I saw the new interdisciplinary courses for freshmen as an opportunity to get reacquainted with first-year students and to teach a course focused exclusively on new media and multimodal composition. I titled it Reading, Writing, and Speaking in the Digital Age.

The Course

I have now taught two iterations of this course and am currently revamping it as an upper-level EWM course for the upcoming school year. The first two versions of the course were different in many ways. The first year the course met three times a week for fifty-minute periods, sixty-seven students were enrolled, and I was assigned a very capable teaching assistant. The second year the course met once a week for three hours, twenty-three students were enrolled, and I had no teaching assistant. These different logistics meant for some changes in the readings and assignments, such as more discussion and less reliance on lectures during the second year, but all in all it was the same class.

My interdisciplinary course for freshmen explores what the Digital Revolution means for books, magazines, copyright, and libraries as well as for publishers, readers, writers, and society as a whole. Because my area of specialization is creative nonfiction, I decided to focus on the personal essay as a way to organize the course. I went into this course confident

I knew more about the personal essay and the history of text technologies than my students did, but just as sure that my students, all of whom were digital natives, would be more experienced and adept at composing in new media than I. It seemed likely that some of these students had been blogging since eighth grade, made their own music videos, built websites, and experimented with animation software. My goals in this course would be teach my students how to read, write, and speak as essayists, and how to assess what the Digital Revolution might mean for the essay and for our culture and society, but also to learn from them about how to create exciting new multimodal compositions.

Day One and the Readings for the First Eight Weeks

I realized later that in pursuing these several goals I created a course that in a sense took on the form of a braided essay, for we moved constantly between content-driven readings about big issues and readings that offered more personal expressions of the self. I tried to help students study the Digital Revolution but also learn how to express themselves in multimodal compositions. They became knowledgeable about issues such as copyright and the digital divide, and they became twenty-first-century essayists. These two approaches were not, I found, mutually exclusive at all. As Scott Russell Sanders famously remarked, the essay "is an amateur's raid in the world of specialists" (660). With Sanders's comment as my mantra, I tried whenever possible to find readings in which a popularizer was synthesizing the work of specialists and making that work accessible, or alternately, readings by experts who were trying to write more personally and in a familiar style so as to reach a general audience. To put it another way, we were often reading the work of public intellectuals. This seemed appropriate for an interdisciplinary, "big idea" class geared to first-year students, many of whom were still looking for their major, but it also seemed to me strategic for a course in which I wanted to introduce students to the personal essay. The readings for the course pushed my students to think of themselves both as researchers who were acquiring real expertise and as individuals who had something worthwhile and important to say. All this is not to say that the readings did not vary considerably in their registers. They did—sometimes perhaps neck-snappingly so—but I explained to my students that this was because most of our readings would be what I call essays and the essay is a diverse genre. The word *essay*, I said, has been preceded over the years by all

kinds of adjectives, including *personal, formal, informal, humorous, descriptive, expository, reflective, nature, critical, lyric, narrative, review, periodical, romantic, scholarly,* and *genteel.* I explained, however, that in addition to essays we would also be reading articles, and in so doing raised the question of what the difference is.

On Day One, after I introduce the syllabus and go over course policies and procedures, I pass out our first readings, two short essays on the essay: Edward Hoagland's "What I Think, What I Am" and E. B. White's foreword to his collected essays. After reading these aloud in class, we discuss them in order to find a definition of a personal essay. In his essay Hoagland compares the essay to both the article and the short story. His comparison suggests that essay exists on a spectrum somewhere between these two forms. It is akin to the article in that is a short piece of nonfiction that relies on memory and research, but shares with the short story a willingness to employ narrative and to supplement memory with imagination. Of articles and essays Hoagland writes:

> Though more wayward or informal than an article or treatise, somewhere it [the essay] contains a point which is its real center, even if the point couldn't be uttered in fewer words than the essayist has used. Essays don't usually boil down to a summary, as articles do, and the style of the writer has a "nap" to it, a combination of personality and originality and energetic loose ends that stand up like the nap on a piece of wool and can't be brushed flat. (102)

Hoagland goes on to complicate the story/article spectrum by proposing a second spectrum. He says that the essay hangs "somewhere on a line between two sturdy poles: this is what I think, and this is what I am" (102). At this point, I turn to Montaigne to up the ante a bit. Montaigne, I reveal, continually asked himself not just "What do I think?" but also "What do I know?" (In a few days students will be reading Montaigne's "Of Repentance" and Sarah Bakewell's "What Bloggers Owe Montaigne.") After asking the students what differences they see between these two questions and talking about the skepticism that lies at the heart of the essay, we move on to Hoagland's second pole (or, to put it another way, we move from epistemology to identity). *What I am* is at the heart of White's essay on the essay in which he advances the apparently contradictory argument that

while the essayist must strive for Montaigne's "natural candor" and never "indulge himself in deceit or in concealment," he must also be one who

> arises in the morning and, if he has work to do, selects his garb from an unusually extensive wardrobe: he can pull on any sort of shirt, be any sort of person, according to his mood or his subject matter—philosopher, scold, jester, raconteur, confidant, pundit, devil's advocate, enthusiast. (104)

After some discussion of persona as a kind of mask and what constitutes authenticity, our first class comes to a close and I remind the students to begin reading Gabriel Zaid's *So Many Books*: *Reading and Publishing in an Age of Abundance* for our next meeting.[2] This short, accessible book was published in 2003, about a year after Amazon turned its first profit but before the arrival of the iPhone, iPad, Kindle, Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, Pinterest, and Snapchat. Zaid provides a sweeping history of the book, discussing everything from Socrates's distrust of the printed word to the arrival of print on demand and eBooks. *So Many Books* presents an argument for the book as the main and continuing engine of human culture and conversation despite the fact that we now live in an age when many publishers have been swallowed by multinational entertainment conglomerates.

We continue this warp and woof, tacking back-and-forth between our studies of the digital age and explorations of the self, throughout the semester. During the first half of the semester, we cover such topics as

- » The History of Text Technologies from Gutenberg to Google
- » Reading on Paper, Reading on Screens
- » The Evolution of Television from Tubes to Cable to Digital
- » Blogging
- » Social Media and Social Activism
- » Digital Editing
- » The Globalization of Media
- » Copyright
- » Privacy
- » Digital Technology and Disability
- » The Digital Divide and Democracy
- » The Digital Public Library of America
- » Online Book Clubs

The readings for these units included articles by academic experts, often, but not always, written for general readership magazines such *The New Yorker* or the *New York Review of Books*. The authors of these articles included writers such as Shakespeare scholar Gary Taylor (on digital editing), cultural historian Robert Darnton (on libraries), and historian Anthony Grafton (on the future of reading). Students also read articles by journalists from online magazines such as *Salon* and *Inside Higher Education*, as well as pieces that appeared first in print journals such as *Scientific American*, the *Nation*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. They also read blog posts from former *New Republic* editor Andrew Sullivan's *The Dish* and Syracuse University poet, professor, and activist Stephen Kuusisto's *Planet of the Blind*. Finally, students explore websites such as Jeremy Norman's massive history of text technology timeline, HistoryofInformation.com, and Patrick Madden's wonderfully curated digital archive of essays, *Quotidiana*, as well as *TED Talks* and the *RSA Animates* series. Finally, they view several videos during this part of the course, including film critic Tony Zhou's *A Brief Look at Texting and the Internet in Film* and Bucknell Professor Eric Faden's hilarious sampling masterpiece about Disney and copyright law, *A Fair(y) Use Tale*. These and other readings take us through the first eight weeks of our fifteen-week semester. These readings introduce students to the Digital Age conceptually and historically, but also model multimodal approaches that they might use in their own work for the course, including sampling, hyperlinks, remediation, mash-ups, audio, and embedded video.

First Assignments
(Reading Responses, Group Presentation, Blog)

Students are required to post reading responses on a discussion board prior to class ten times throughout the semester. Because the class met three times a week the first year, students had thirty-one opportunities to post their ten responses. They were allowed to post whenever they wanted, as long as they posted at least five times during the first half of the semester. My teaching assistant and I decided to limit the posts to ten so we were not overwhelmed with grading and so posting the responses did not become tedious for the students. The second year, because the class met only once a week, there were only ten discussion board forums and so students had to post each time. These reading responses were designed to make sure the

students did the readings and came to class prepared for discussion. I told the students I wanted it to be a *discussion* board forum so I would reward reading responses that also responded to at least some of their classmates' responses on the forum. Students were also expected to refer to and quote specific passages from the readings and were graded on the specificity of their responses. I tried to design my discussion board prompts so that students focused not only on the content of the readings but also on their formal aspects (especially essay form). Finally, students were given a couple of reading quizzes during the semester and at the end of the semester they took a final exam that included objective (multiple choice and true/false) and essay questions.

Students were also assigned with four or five other students to a small group. Job one for each group was to visit our reading-writing center and digital studio to meet with a tutor and learn what resources are offered there. During Weeks Six through Ten of the semester groups presented on topics featured in the syllabus (e.g., privacy, the digital divide, digital technology and disability, copyright, etc.). These presentations were to be twenty to twenty-five minutes long and followed by a short discussion (10 to 15 minutes) that the group helped launch with discussion questions and then lead. Each group member was responsible for presenting four to five minutes of the initial presentation and for participating in the discussion/Q&A period. Groups accompanied their presentations with a PowerPoint or Prezi slide show and a one-page handout. I gave each group a group grade on the presentation, and in addition, each member of the group submitted a self-evaluation as well as evaluations of the contributions of the other group members, utilizing an evaluation form and rubric I provided.

Their first individual project called on students to keep a blog for four weeks (Weeks Six through Nine of the course). In this blog they explored some aspect of new media that intrigued them. Their four posts presented an opportunity to refine their thinking about new media, experiment with multimodal composition, and begin the search for a form and subject for their final project. I assessed each post along the way on the basis of a rubric I provided to the students. We also projected and viewed some of their blog posts and discussed them in class. I encouraged, but didn't require, students to work with their small group to develop ideas for and get feedback on their blog posts, and to use their blog posts as a place to begin assembling a piece that they might be able to revise and repurpose for their final project. I defined "blog" quite loosely. Students were expected to make

some use of media (e.g., illustrations, embedded video, hyperlinks, etc.) and the written component of their posts had to total at least 1,500 words, but other than that I left the assignment pretty open, knowing that some might have little or no experience creating a website. They were encouraged, however, to stretch themselves and visit the digital studio for some personal instruction. Wix was by far the platform of choice. A few students used Tumblr or WordPress; others did not venture (for at least the first couple of posts) beyond Prezi or PowerPoint. Students investigated topics ranging from gender in video games to the evolution of online travel sites such as Expedia and Travelocity, from what makes for a popular YouTube channel to the development of streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu Plus, and Amazon Prime. The blogs proved to be a good way for students to begin working with illustrations, animation, sampling, social media, audio, hyperlinks, embedded video, found footage, and new applications, or in some cases extend their already considerable skills as multimodal composers.

The Scaffold to the Final Project

At Week Nine, as students were finishing up their blogs, I began to steer the class more directly toward the final project, which I billed as a "new media essay." I said, and here I will quote from the syllabus, that this project "might be a video essay, a multi-media piece created with InDesign, a Google Maps essay, a contribution to a digital archive, some kind of remediation of one of your blog posts, or anything inspired by the pieces we'll be studying during the course." I wanted to leave the project wide open and see what they would come up with. I did stipulate that it must include a total of at least 1,500 words of copy, and that the copy had to include a short "About" section at the opening (i.e., on the landing page), in which the students introduced who they were, the goal of their projects, their methodology, and any tips or directions on how we might best read and view the essay.

The scaffolding that led to this project included a prospectus (due in Week Ten), deposit of a first draft of the project (beginning of Week Thirteen), and an oral presentation of the project in class (Weeks Thirteen and Fourteen) before final deposit at the end of Week Fifteen.

For the prospectus I gave students a one-page form to complete. On this form they offered a tentative title; described their topic in a single sentence; offered a one-sentence research question and a one-sentence

answer to that question; described the significance of their project in a few sentences; identified their intended audience, what questions they might have, and how they planned to reach that audience; and, finally, explained the format of their project and how they would be using new media (e.g., video, hyperlinks, images, applications, InDesign, Google Maps, etc.).

After the students had posted a link to the first draft of their final project on the course Blackboard site and we had all had a chance to look at those drafts, each student presented his or her draft in class. (The first year each student presented to his or her small group with my teaching assistant and I splitting the ten groups between us; the second year each student presented to the entire class.) Each presentation was four to five minutes long and was followed by a short discussion during which the student took questions and received feedback about the project from their peers and me. Again, I evaluated the presentation utilizing a rubric that was distributed to the students. Students then had about ten days to revise their project before final deposit. They were encouraged to meet with a tutor in the Reading/Writing Lab and/or Digital Studio during that time or e-mail me if they had any final questions.

Readings Leading to the Final Project
(Weeks Nine through Twelve)

During the four weeks when the students were completing the scaffold of assignments leading to their final project, our readings focused on essays about and examples of digital and video essays. The key background and theoretical pieces were Phillip Lopate's "In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film" (1992) and John Bresland's "On the Origin of the Video Essay" (2010). In his seminal piece Lopate offered a tentative definition of the essay-film, arguing that it should present the singular voice of its creator; have a text, whether in the form of a script, intertitles, dialogue, epigraph, or voiceover; and attempt to understand a problem, while at the same time differentiating itself from a documentary film by doing more than imparting information. He also tried to explain why there were so few essay films. He attributed this scarcity to production and distribution costs; the need for a team of cinematographers, editors, and a sound crew; the preference of the general audience for feature films that emphasized fiction and narrative; and finally, what he called the "intractable nature of the camera,"

which tends to capture more in the frame than the filmmaker anticipated or perhaps wants (22). Lopate acknowledged the limitations of his approach and reminded readers he was a literary essayist and "not a film theorist," but his admissions did not stop film critics from criticizing Lopate's criteria as subjective and logocentric (19). Paul Arthur pointed out, for instance, that because "film operates simultaneously on multiple discursive levels—image, speech, titles, music—the literary essay's single determining voice is dispersed into cinema's multi-channel stew" (59).

John Bresland's 2010 essay, "On the Origins of the Video Essay," reminded us (though by this point in the semester my students hardly needed reminding) that a digital revolution had occurred in the eighteen years since Lopate had written his piece. Bresland went on to discuss how this revolution had solved most of the problems of production and distribution that had concerned Lopate. The advent of the smartphone, YouTube, and free and easy-to-use editing software meant that millions of people could make video essays. In class we watched Bresland's video *Mangoes*, an exploration of parenthood, gender, and class. Of his video he has written: "My own modest obstruction in 'Mangoes,' self-imposed, was to acquire video, record sound, and compose a score using only a cell phone. In the end, I cheated. But just a bit. For the most part, 'Mangoes' is authored on an iPhone" ("Mangoes").

We screened several other videos as well and soon discovered that in a new and emerging genre such as the video essay, one problem that arises (just as it had for Lopate before us) is the problem of definition. This question—"What is a video essay?"—proved to be a fruitful one. Students questioned whether all of the pieces we viewed were really video essays, but agreed that all of them used techniques that one might borrow if you were trying to make a video essay. Students very much liked Ron Charles's funny video book reviews for the *Washington Post* website, for instance, but they wondered whether they were essays or reviews. Most agreed that the stunning book trailer that Tucker Capps made for Sarabande Books to promote Ryan Van Meter's essay collection *If You Knew Then What I Know Now*, though described as merely "inspired by" Van Meter's essay "First," was really a video adaptation of that essay. This led to a discussion about the production problems inherent in the creating a native essay for the screen as opposed to a video adaptation of a print essay.

Many of the students were already familiar with sampling and remixes, and we considered several video compositions that made use of

these techniques, most of which we decided were probably video essays. One that students found to be both exasperating and affecting was John Lucas and Claudia Rankine's *Zidane*, in which this husband-and-wife team slow down footage in the manner of super slo-mo instant reply. Some students found it confusing and too slow; others could not get enough of it. The five-minute-and-twenty-eight-second video focuses on a single moment in the 2006 World Cup final when the great French soccer player, Zinedine Zidane, fed up with the constant racist attacks heaped on him by one of the Italian players, chooses to head-butt the Italian. As a consequence, Zidane was given a red card and ejected in the 110th minute of the game, which would be his last game before retiring. Italy went on to win on penalty kicks when the match finished one-to-one after extra time. The text of this video along with screen shots from it are featured in Rankine's National Book Critics Circle Award−winning volume *Citizen*: *An American Lyric*, which, in 2014, became the first book ever to be a finalist for a NBCC award in both poetry and criticism (it won in poetry). Rankine does not narrate with her own words, but in the manner of a mash-up, uses the words of others, including Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Homi Bhabha, Frederick Douglass, and Maurice Blanchot.

We also considered the use of reenactments, voice-over, special effects, and animation. An important tool of the print essayist is retrospection. Video essayists also use retrospection. Most often, voice-over offers a retrospective take on the images, but in at least one instance we studied the opposite was true: the images supplemented and interpreted the soundtrack. In 1969, Josh Raskin, who was then fourteen years old, snuck past security and made his way up to John Lennon's hotel suite in Toronto with a bulky reel-to-reel tape recorder. He knocked on the door and convinced Lennon to do an interview with him. Thirty-eight years later, Raskin, working with producer Jerry Levitan and animators James Braithwaite and Alex Kurina, created a video called *I Met the Walrus* that uses *Yellow Submarine*−style animation to look back on and comment on that 1969 interview. In 2008 *I Met the Walrus* won best short animation from the American Film Institute, and was nominated for an Academy Award in 2008. With my help students picked up on the fact that a copy of a Paul McCartney and Wings album cover flies by at one point in a move that is at once anachronistic, retrospective, and illuminating.

In addition to video essays, we also viewed and discussed Jeff Sharlet's Instagram essays, which offer serialized essays that are composed over several

weeks and illustrated with arresting photographs. We also looked at and played with Eric LeMay's whimsical, interactive digital creations. One is called *The Montaigne Machine*. It asks the viewer to pick a topic from a list and write a single line about that topic, out of which the "machine" will the create a kind of moving graphic "essay" that puts your words together with Montaigne's. Another is "Losing the Lottery," where you arrive at a landing page of forty-nine numbered balls bouncing around in a kind of Brownian motion. The instructions tell you to click on six of these balls. As you do, each ball disappears. Once you have clicked on six, you are sent to another page where your six numbers are posted above headings that say "Match 3," "Match 4," "Match 5," and "Match 6." Each of these possible matches corresponds to a dollar amount ranging from $2 for Match 3 up to $24.6 million for Match 6. There is also a kind of slide show with forty-nine one-paragraph essays about lotteries and chance. As you scroll through the mini-essays (or are they each part of one big essay?) and read them, you can see "winning" numbers flying by and matching (or not) with your six picks. As you read the forty-nine entries, your "winnings" accumulate very, very, very slowly. This essay is not just an attempt; it is also a lesson.

Finally, we looked at Dinty Moore's now-classic Google Maps essay, "Mr. Plimpton's Revenge." Moore uses Google Maps and fifteen episodes to tell the story of the three (or is it four?) times over the course of twenty-six years when he ran into (or met or stalked) the author George Plimpton. This essay uses Google Maps and a funny, self-deprecating tone to roam over space and through time in search of Plimpton and the writing life. Moore's essay was very popular with students and prompted many of them to try their hand at a Google Maps essay.

Other popular video essay subgenres included whiteboard, stop-action videos patterned after the RSA Animates videos; self-interviews of the type that are popular on YouTube channels, in which the subject breaks the fourth wall, addresses the viewer directly, and often cracks wise (Jenna Marbles, who has almost 16 million subscribers, was a favorite); and music videos where the lyrics are written line-by-line in advance on several pieces of poster board, and then dropped one-by-one as the song plays over the video (the classic example has Bob Dylan doing this to "Subterranean Homesick Blues" in a clip from D. A. Pennebaker's documentary *Don't Look Back*, a version of which has Pennebaker and Bob Neuwirth commenting and is available on YouTube). The relative (or apparent) simplicity of these kinds of videos seemed to be their main draw, but students did use them to interesting ends.

Final Projects

The final projects were excellent and fascinating, but one of the best I cannot share with you because it was a moving and honest coming-out video. The young man was ready to come out to my teaching assistant and me, but not ready to come out to his family, and so the video is not yet on YouTube.

Another student, Spencer Owen, created a video essay that is a technically sophisticated and heartbreakingly beautiful eulogy for his older brother who died of a drug overdose. It makes use of samples from video games, voice-over, a soundtrack, family photos, and reenactments, and is now available on YouTube.

Several of the other final projects are available at the Florida State University Digital Studio's site. Just Google the key words *fsu digital studio digital symposium* and search the courses under the sixth and seventh symposia for my course, Reading, Writing, and Speaking in the Digital Age. You will find a total of sixteen projects. They include high-culture obsessions, such as Emily Scott's fascination with how Shakespeare has been portrayed in the media and Rebecca Norton's imagining of Vincent van Gogh's Twitter account, but there are also popular culture obsessions, such as Jacob Rosuck's amazing archive of Batman images from comics, television, film, and video games, and Breanna White's beautiful celebration of the films of Christopher Nolan. Among the Google Maps essays inspired by Dinty Moore are two that make especially smart use of photography hobbies: Madeleine Molenda's tour of her native Hawaii and Jacquelyn Ianni's crisscrossing of North America and the Caribbean. James Novello sticks closer to home in his essay, in which he cleverly makes use of the restaurant review application Yelp! James takes the viewer along to the many restaurants around Orlando where he and his friends met to discuss their futures during their senior year of high school.

My students may have had difficulty figuring out what a digital or video essay really is, but they had no trouble plumbing the examples I gave them in order to create their own amazing projects. I was inspired not just by their accomplishments, but also by the fearless and exuberant plunge they took into the process of creating them. They clearly enjoyed working on their essays, spending extra hours at the digital studio learning to use new applications and revising their work. In creating their projects many of them went well beyond the models that I offered them. They found their own models, sampled from those models and mine, played with existing techniques, and discovered new ones. Their projects added to this new

genre, extending its boundaries. Their video and digital essays as well as the groundbreaking work that is appearing regularly at sites such as Fandor and *TriQuarterly* makes our problem of theorizing and defining digital essays that much more complicated and interesting. The promise of this new genre prompted me to organize, with the support of my department's literature program, a colloquium on the film and video essay that featured nonfiction and film studies scholars Phillip Lopate of Columbia University, Tim Corrigan of the University of Pennsylvania, and Nora Alter of Temple University. I also participated in a three-day international seminar on the future of the essay at the American Comparative Literature Association.

I have also been inspired by the successes of my students, as well as their bravery and enthusiasm, to try my own hand at some video and online compositions. My teaching has also changed. I decided to add a unit on digital and video essays to my graduate essay-writing workshop last spring. I gave the students in that workshop the option of composing a digital or video essay as one of the two essays they created in the course. They all opted to do that. One of the students, Jie Liu, has already placed her video essay in the online magazine *Assay*: *A Journal of Nonfiction Studies*. I will be doing another version of that course this fall. The future of the essay is exciting, and I am convinced it will be unfolding both in print and online.

Notes

1. For a recent update on the EWM program and its evolution, see Fleckenstein et al.

2. After the first meeting but before the second, I sent the students a link to my own essay on the essay, titled "Our Queer Little Hybrid Thing," in which I engage with Hoagland, White, Montaigne, and others about what constitutes an essay. I also posted the link in the course library of our class Blackboard site. Because the piece is an online, illustrated essay with hyperlinks, it also serves as a first introduction to the digital essay.

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2 Writing the Way Home
Creative Nonfiction and Digital Circulation in a Veterans' Writing Group

Eileen E. Schell

MY E-MAIL IN-BOX PINGS. It's a reporter, one of many I've been contacted by in recent years, eager to talk about the veterans writing group I cofounded with my colleague Ivy Kleinbart in 2010. She tells me that she is excited to learn that local veterans are writing about their experiences in the military and serving in combat zones. We schedule a phone interview.

Once on the phone, I find that the usual questions ensue about why I, as a civilian and a college professor, started the group. How does the group work? What veterans participate, what generations, branches of the service, wars/conflicts? What do veterans write about? Then comes the main question that she is hoping will anchor her article. You see, she has already written the lead to her article before the interview even happened:

"So this is a therapy, right?"

"It must be therapeutic for these writers to write about war and combat experiences."

"How is this—the writing the veterans do—therapeutic?"

I pause, a stutter-step in an otherwise flowing conversation. Writing, unruly and ungovernable as it often is, has already been pinned down and defined. In this reporter's mind, writing for veterans constitutes therapy; writing is healing, and it helps veterans process trauma, "recover from" and "move on" from combat and military experiences. While I agree that writing may have healing effects for veterans, I am always surprised when I hear this singular perspective on the purpose and function of writing.

"Yes and no," I say. "Writing can be therapeutic, but it's also much more than that, and sometimes it's not therapeutic at all." A key part of therapy, of course, is the relationship with a therapist, which is absent in our community writing group (Murray para 19), a group led by Ivy and me, two civilian-academics who have no clinical credentials.

I also mention to this reporter James Pennebaker and Joseph Smyth's studies of the healing effects of writing, pointing out that expressive writing,

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without a reflective or clinical component, can actually have a reverse heal-ing effect or no effect at all (Murray pars. 11–12). I say that what veterans do with writing depends on their own rhetorical aims and purposes: Are these writers writing to reconstruct, writing to understand, writing to heal, writing to complete a school assignment, writing to publish and influence public dialogue on war and military service, or some combination of all of these motivations? I also note that it matters when and where veterans write. What changes when veterans write in the presence of other veterans in a writing group versus writing alone or writing blog or Facebook posts or in an academic classroom or writing with a therapist in a clinical set-ting? How are their acts of literacy as veteran writers both individual and social/communal? How can veteran writers form networks, both face-to-face and digital?

I can hear the reporter on the other end of the line start to shift around nervously; clearly, she doesn't want to listen to an academic deflat-ing an otherwise fabulous lead. Usually, at this point, I am politely thanked for my time and reassured that the article will come out soon.

As I conclude the interview, I reflect on how I can tell a better story about the varied benefits and challenges of veterans engaging in the act of writing about war and military service. Drawing on the scholarship on community literacy, digital rhetorics and literacies, and also on the scholar-ship on military-affiliated writers, this essay seeks to understand the varied meanings, challenges, and experiences that "getting personal" about war and military service may pose for veterans from the vantage point of one community writing group, both in our face-to-face meetings and in the online networked spaces that the group inhabits.

Community Writing Groups and Community Literacy for Military-Affiliated Writers

When I established the intergenerational Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group (SVWG) with my colleague Ivy Kleinbart in March of 2010, we hoped to create space, both face-to-face and online, for veterans, active duty service members, and military family members to write about military service and war and what moral philosopher Nancy Sherman has referred to as the "afterwar," the space of reflection, questioning, analysis, and, potentially, of understanding and communication between veterans and civilians about the outcomes and consequences of war (1–2). Since 2010, our group has

met once a month on Saturdays in the Syracuse University[1] Writing Center to workshop group members' drafts of creative nonfiction exploring life in and out of the military.

Veterans of all ages, branches of the military, and conflicts are welcome at our meetings. Participants have included veterans who have served in wars ranging from the Korean War to Vietnam to Desert Storm to the more recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Military parents, spouses, and family members have attended our meetings as well. Some writing group members are university alumni; some are student veterans at Syracuse University or nearby campuses, and others have no affiliation with the university.

As we have discovered over the past seven years of coleading this group, community writing groups and arts expression programs can serve as spaces where veterans can talk back to a culture that relies on—yet is ultimately ambivalent about—their military service. Writing groups—whether they are national nonprofits like Warrior Writers, the Veterans Writing Project, Words after War or local community-based writing groups like ours or Maxine Hong Kingston's long-running Bay Area writing group—are spaces for literary expression, reflection, healing, stress release, and places for comfort and solidarity as well as the development of a public voice. These writing groups serve as "literacy sponsors," which Deborah Brandt in "Sponsors of Literacy" refers to as "agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way" (166). The sponsors in this case are not only me and my colleague Ivy, but other veterans in the writing group who encourage their "brothers" and "sisters" to keep writing and exploring their experiences. While individual community writing groups vary in content, scope, genres, instructional techniques, and motivations, the chief goals are the same: (1) encouraging veterans to write and reflect about their military and wartime experiences, as well as the "afterwar" that follows; and (2) potentially go public with those experiences if they choose to do so.

To go public with the work of the group, we sponsor annual Veterans' Day readings, schedule periodic writing retreats or events with public reading components, and respond to public invitations to read and share knowledge in a variety of venues. We also are publishing our first anthology of group members' work and plan to do readings on invitation. We also circulate our group members' writing and writing assignments via our web page and our Facebook group, building an online ethos and networked presence for the group, which I will address at a later point in this chapter.

This "going public" dimension of the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group connects the work of veterans' writing groups to the growing field of community literacy. As Elenore Long argues in *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Local Publics*, community literacy is organized around the question "*how it is that ordinary people go public*?" (5; emphasis in original). Community literacy involves ordinary people engaged in literacy work aimed at local publics "that are situated in time and place" and between "private and institutional lives" (5). At the same time, a first layer before going public is figuring out what writing and literacy means for an individual veteran and how that understanding might evolve and be shared over the course of the work.

In our writing group, my colleague and I balance a focus on crafting the genre of creative nonfiction—writing scenes, constructing dialogue, engaging characterization, undertaking musing and reflection, incorporating research and factual information through exposition—with the challenges veterans face chronicling their experiences serving in the military and surviving war. In group meetings, Ivy and I, as rhetoric and writing teachers, do not define writing group members' purposes or aims for writing; however, we are interested in actively exploring our group members' intended audiences and purposes. We ask the following:

» Why should veterans write?
» What perspectives and experiences can they/we bring to the group and to their families and loved ones about the meaning and nature of military experiences and surviving war/combat?
» Who are the audiences that they want to address? How can we, as a writing group, engage the public in a searching and honest dialogue about the benefits, costs, and consequences of military service?

In doing this work, we have adjusted to teaching in a community setting versus an academic setting, adapting our practices to fit the rhetorical situation. One of the key differences between a community writing group and an academic/college writing classroom is the fact that writers in a community group choose to be there voluntarily. Our writing group isn't school, although we meet in the Writing Center on our university campus. In our group, we do not deploy the carrots and sticks that academics use to keep writers engaged and working: grades, credits, requirements, attendance policies, or formal student learning outcomes. Community writing group members may take up the monthly writing prompts we provide

them or engage their own ideas. Another difference is the age span and varied levels of writing experience that we encounter in our intergenerational writing group. Almost everyone in our writing group is over the age of twenty-five, and the oldest member of our group is well into his eighties. These writers have varied experiences and competencies with writing. Some haven't written anything personal or nonfiction-related in decades—if at all. Others keep journals or personal diaries; write fiction, poetry, letters, or blogs; write academic essays for college classrooms or memos and business correspondence or work-related communication. Many of the veterans have a history with writing military-related correspondence and reports, among other genres.

Although there are key differences between a community space and a college writing space, there are some aspects that are the same: the commitment to writing as a process of discovery and knowledge-making, the use of a creative writing workshop method focused on the revision of student work, and a commitment to listening/turn-taking and sharing. Perhaps the most challenging issue we dealt with when we initially set up the group was feeling that we were not qualified to lead it because we were not veterans. Although I come from a family where military service has been part of my family history (my late uncle was a Vietnam Veteran and an inspiration for me starting this group, my father was an Air Force veteran, and other male family members have served), neither Ivy nor I were experts or particularly knowledgeable about military culture. I had worked with World War II and Korean War veterans in another writing group I have run since 1999 at a senior living community, but I had not run a writing group exclusively focused on military-affiliated writers.

We realized early on that we had a lot to learn about the jargon, acronyms, rituals, and assumptions of military life. We had to listen carefully and ask questions when we didn't understand what the writers were saying or the significance of it. We would be in for a learning experience, and we would have to learn how to respond to specific situations that would arise in a military-themed writing group—the themes and experiences of death, loss, killing, civilian casualties, weapons, military strategy, physical and moral wounds, PTSD, prostitution, and other topics.

Even though we were often uneasy about the role we were playing as civilian leaders, we eventually learned that we were better equipped for this work than we initially thought we were. Our commitment to the genre of creative nonfiction, our experiences of leading writing classes and nonfiction workshops, and our commitment to creating a community

of veteran writers carried us a long way. We also shared with our group members our sense of a public mission—that we hoped that they would be able to bring their truths about war, military service, and "afterwar" to larger publics. The role of the veteran as societal "witness" is one that Dr. Edward Tick, founder of the nonprofit organization Soldier's Heart, says must come with a society taking responsibility for the "soul wounds," the psychological and spiritual costs that war exacts (also referred to as Moral Injury):

> [i]nstead of having a parade and going shopping, we could use our veterans' holidays as an occasion for storytelling. Open the churches and temples and synagogues and mosques and community centers and libraries across the country, and invite the veterans in to tell their stories. Purification ceremonies and storytelling events are also opportunities for the community to speak to veterans and take some of the burden of guilt off them and declare our oneness with them: 'You killed in our name, because we ordered you to, so we take responsibility for it, too.' (qtd. in Kupfer)

Tick argues that we are all complicit with sending military personnel to war. We elected the leaders that sent them to war, and, by extension, we, in a secondary fashion, "ordered" troops to go to war. As Tick puts it,

> Our society must accept responsibility for its war-making. To the returning veteran, our leaders and people must say, 'You did this in our name and because you were subject to our orders. We lift the burden of actions from you and take it onto our shoulders. We are responsible for you, for what you did, and for the consequences.' (237)

This acknowledgment of civilian culpability in war stands in contrast to the ways that many of us think of war and the service members who have fought or are fighting our recent wars. Many of us do not feel connected to the wars our nation is fighting or has fought; we may, in fact, have actively opposed these wars, as Ivy and I did. We may see veterans as victims of the poverty draft or as pawns used by our government. We also may suffer from "war amnesia," forgetting that our nation is even at war in Afghanistan.

Some of us may take part in nationalistic displays—gestures of support the troops with airport applause and "Thank you for your service" maxims and posting Facebook photos of military relatives on Veterans Day and Memorial Day. My hope, though, is that we engage much more deeply with veterans' stories and narratives and what they can teach us about the aftermath of war—that we start listening to and stop ignoring our societal witnesses to our nation's war-making.

Maxine Hong Kingston, acclaimed writer and founder of the Bay Area–writing group Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace, contends in the introduction to *Veterans of War*, *Veterans of Peace* that writing allows veterans to speak truths, to "write the unspeakable."

> As Odysseus, the archetypical warrior, made his way home, he narrated his journey—setting off to war, waging the long war, coming home—to listener after listener. The story grew until, finally home, he could tell the whole tale and become whole. We tell stories and we listen to stories in order to live. To stay conscious. To connect one with another. To understand consequences. To keep history. To rebuild civilization. (1)

These larger arguments about why veterans need writing and storytelling, though, do not capture all of the nuances of the motivations and purposes for veterans' writing, nor do they capture all the barriers and challenges we've seen veterans experience as they begin to write.

Writing for Varied Purposes and with Varied Challenges

It goes without saying that writing group members are in a writing group to write, right? Well, yes and no. In a community writing group, absent the carrots and sticks mentioned earlier of grades and graduation requirements, veterans are free to choose, or not, whether they will attend the group again, if and when they will write, and how and when, if at all, they will revise with input from others. They are also free to choose *not* to write and just listen or participate in other ways. A key example of this occurred early on in our writing group. One group member, an Air Force veteran, attended our meetings faithfully and enjoyed the group process, participating with his own brief verbal memories and asides, but did not write. He

wrote outlines or came up with what he called the word of the day. At one "breakthrough" meeting, a year or so into his attendance, he wrote a paragraph and in other meetings he extended that paragraph into a few pages. He now has written over a half-dozen pieces that he has shared with our group and his family members. In a regular classroom setting, this stance toward writing would surely result in a student's failure to pass the course. In a community writing group setting, such a response is acceptable and even understandable. As we learned from his pieces, war trauma and PTSD came into his life early on in the form of a family member who had been traumatized by World War II. In many ways, he had to work through those memories in order to gain access to his own story.

In addition to not writing and being slow to warm up to writing, some of our group members have found revisiting their wartime experiences in writing to be too traumatic to continue with after initial attempts. Writing about war, revisiting the experiences that involve dead comrades and battles can trigger PTSD, bring on nightmares, give veterans panic attacks, make them want to run away or make it tough to proceed apace with their lives. One veteran in our writing group said he couldn't write at home unless he was wearing a sidearm, a holstered .45; he felt he had to be "suited" up to write. He also told us that writing and attending our group were shaking him up too much—reverberations of writing about serving in Iraq and his dead comrades were too difficult to cope with in his current life situation. He quit attending the group, although he still stays in touch with me via Facebook and e-mail. Another veteran attended a meeting, listened to others and shared some of his stories, and told us later that he ended up in the emergency room with a panic attack, a by-product of attending our meeting.

As I have reflected on this situation and that of others who have reported similar challenges, I think of Judith Herman's significant book *Trauma and Recovery* and her discussion of difficulty that trauma survivors have in putting traumatic experiences into language. In many cases, the trauma survivor has no words to describe that trauma, or there is no time or space or mental headroom to process the trauma. With respect to veterans, post-9/11 vets are often dealing with the "get on with it" syndrome—the idea that every generation of veterans deals with—that they should return from war and just get on with their lives and not look back. They should just get an education, job, start or tend to a family, reintegrate into the civilian world, and "move on." "Don't stay with the life you had

before and don't let it define you" seems to be the main mantra here. The assumption behind that mantra is that war/military service is just a slice of one's life like other phases like college or adolescence, but this point of view is limited. War marks the body, soul, and the psyche in specific ways; it is present in the lives of those who fight the war and those who love and live with them, whether the veteran dealing with that trauma realizes it or not. While there may be periods in which "war life" and memories recede, such memories seem to emerge in distinct ways at other points, triggered by external stimuli or through conversations and encounters with others, including veterans. The process is unpredictable, personal, ongoing, and should be devoid of the very American pronouncement of "getting over," "moving on," or "outgrowing" something. Thus, writing about war-trauma might be another layer of stress and may actually be counterproductive at the time if a veteran writing about his or her experiences has no clinical practitioner or support group to assist with processing the trauma and issues that might bubble up and become more visible in the act of writing. Again, this is where the clinical component of writing about trauma is important. In these situations, my coleader and I do what we can to provide support; we also encourage the writer to take a break or seek out other forms of support, whether therapeutic, medical, spiritual or comradeship, as needed, but we acknowledge that walking away from writing might be the healthiest option for awhile.

For other writers, addressing these memories in writing is a relief and cathartic; writing may provide answers to questions that they have been wondering about for years and even for decades. Vietnam veteran and Special Forces Green Beret medic Pete McShane sees his writing as a way to reflect on his experiences and make sense of them. In a prose piece titled "Why I Write" that he published on our writing group website, he argues that he writes because he wants "to know why" his life turned out the way it did and how his war memories have affected him throughout his life.

> I was a money changer with the empty suits and charlatans, the social and economic elite, the pinky rings and silver spoons; we had nothing in common. They never served. Their sons and daughters never served. They went to the Country Club, flew to Monaco and St. Moritz, managed their investments, traveled to homes in the mountains and on the seacoast. They'd court a customer in good times and kick them out when times

were tough. I held them in contempt for turning their backs and was fired for insubordination. If not for my VA pension, I'd be travelling from park bench to cardboard box. I want to know why; why didn't I play the game?

When I left the service, I put my military memorabilia in a box and stored it away, out of sight. I wanted no part of that memory to cloud my future. I would see the box every time we moved and try to leave it behind, but the box followed me everywhere, and the memories caught up with me. They came to me in nightmares; they came to me while having dinner with my wife; they came to me while in the passing lane on the Interstate; they came to me while walking in the forest. I want to know why; why I felt remorse, fear, anger?

I want to know why our CO [Commanding Officer] grandstanded and got us shot; why I saved his life, but couldn't save others more worthy; why they napalmed the camp while Tommy was still there; why I chose not to return to my team; why I trusted no one; why I pushed the people away who cared for me; why I compromised my humanity; why we had to pay the price for others' cowardice; why the bullet merely grazed my heart and why I'm still alive? I want to know why, so I parried with the memory fragments.

I wrote, and I parried. I wrote, and it hurt. I wrote, and I cried. I wrote, and soon the pain diminished. (1–2)

In parallel fashion, Ginger Peterman, an Iraq War army veteran, sees writing as a release from the stress she experienced in the military and in her upbringing. As a single mother and full-time doctoral student at Syracuse University, Ginger also sees her writing as a way to educate others about the experiences of women veterans who have undergone sexist discrimination and also military sexual trauma (MST), a theme she explores in several of her pieces, including one she published online in Gary Trudeau's famed Sandbox blog for 9/11 service members, a space where service members and veterans can tell their stories to other military personnel and also with a wider civilian public. In her published blog posting "Mastering PTSD," Ginger explores her trajectory coming out of an attempted sexual assault by a commanding officer and the aftermath of PTSD she experiences to this day. She concludes the piece with these powerful lines: "He [my attacker] can no longer harness the power I give him. I must get it back. I must achieve

my potential to the precise maximum. I am an American soldier. I've been to Hell, and I'm not going back." Responses from eight readers were posted in response to Ginger's piece, including some of our group members and one woman, a fellow survivor, named Connie who wrote: "Ginger—you have been so terribly wronged by so many, I can only hope you can take this pain and use it. Your writing is very strong—can you use it to your benefit and to the benefit of others? You are not alone and thank you for the courage of sharing your ordeal—you have already helped others. It is one day at a time—and with each day—do try to find a little joy—even if it is the joy of breathing and screaming out loud. Good luck!"

In publishing her piece on this military-themed blog, Ginger finds a sense of community and encouragement as a veteran writer and a survivor of military sexual trauma. In recent months, she has composed a piece about the misperceptions and missteps people make when they see and distract her service dog who is there to help her cope with PTSD.

Another Iraq War veteran in our group, Ralph Willsey, also finds solace in writing and community with other veterans. In an account he wrote on the sixth anniversary of our writing group and posted to our Facebook group, he credits the writing group with getting him out of a bad place after returning from two tours of duty in Iraq.

> Five years ago, I was a mess. A part-time job. Fighting for a disability rating. Jacked-up sleep cycle. Sedentary. Stagnant. Angry. Trying to adjust and failing.
>
> My sister Emily told me about a veteran writing group at SU. I waffled and hemmed and hawed about going. She finally brow beat me enough to get to a meeting.
>
> I was up until 5 or 6 AM that morning, battling insomnia and listlessness. I woke up to my phone ringing and the angry cry of, "You're late! Where are you?!" I scrambled out of bed, struggled into clothes, grabbed an energy drink, and bolted out the door.
>
> I sped the whole way to that first meeting, 15–20 over the limit. Got lost and confused looking for parking and the building. I hadn't been to the Syracuse campus in at least seven years, and then only to the Carrier Dome.
>
> When I finally made it to the meeting, I walked in on someone reading. I sat down next to my sister and looked around. A handful of older men, Emily, two women leading

the group. This wasn't what I thought it would be at all. When I thought vets, I thought my generation: Iraq, Afghanistan, Kuwait. Not Korea, Vietnam, and the Cold War. I thought about walking out and not coming back. Didn't care for the prompts. Didn't know anyone. I wanted to go back to my cocoon of anger and dysfunction.

I stuck it out. I'm glad I did. I didn't realize how similar my experiences were to Frank's in Korea, Bob's and Pete's in Vietnam, Dawson's and David's and Lee's in the Cold War. I didn't know that the eras changed but the bullshit was the same.

I didn't know that Eileen and Ivy would drag out creativity from me. Didn't know I had any left. That they'd get me to look at old and painful memories in a new light. To realize that sharing the experience gives it meaning instead of weakening it. They made me realize that a notebook is better therapy than just dwelling and rehashing and drinking.

I'm still a mess. That won't ever change. But I'm a damn sight better than I was. I don't know where I'd be without this group, but I know I'd rather be here.

Ralph refers to writing directly as therapy, a different strategy for coping with trauma than "dwelling and rehashing and drinking." In response to his posting of this essay (requested by a group member who wanted to read it again), group members wrote varied comments welcoming him home and acknowledging the truths expressed, encouraging him to keep writing.

As these brief examples demonstrate, the meaning and purpose veterans in our group draw from writing and writing creative nonfiction, in particular, are highly varied and rhetorically situated, not monolithic. Even as writing has the potential to help veterans grapple with their experiences serving in the military and being deployed to war, such writing also raises questions of ambiguity and uncertainty. As Vietnam veteran and acclaimed author Tim O'Brien notes, ambiguity is at the heart of a war story.

For the common soldier, at least, war has the feel—the spiritual texture—of a great ghostly fog, thick and permanent. There is no clarity. Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true. Right spills over into

>wrong. Order blends into chaos, love into hate, ugliness into
>beauty, law into anarchy, civility into savagery. The vapors
>suck you in. You can't tell where you are, or why you're there,
>and the only certainty is absolute ambiguity. (78)

Much of the writing produced in our group explores that ambiguity around difficult topics such as combat trauma/PTSD, moral injury, civilian deaths, military sexual trauma, relationships affected by war, and family and health challenges. Our group members have increasingly gone public (Long 5–6), both in public readings and through posting their work online and publishing their work, with those challenges and ambiguities. What is perhaps as powerful as the act of writing itself is writing *with* a community of veterans, being able to process and be listened to by other veterans, those who can understand and relate in a way that the larger society or family members may not be able to do (Shay 198).

At the same time that we've seen veterans write and communicate successfully about their experiences at war and in military service, we've also learned that some veterans simply do not want to engage in writing or are challenged by taking it up at certain points in their lives. For many veteran writers, writing holds negative associations with school, with scrutiny of one's grammar and language abilities. Writing also means sharing and divulging life experiences and emotions and going against masculinist, patriarchal norms that are the basis of military culture. The culture of "silence," "stoicism," or "manning up" is widely reinforced in the military as well as in many other parts of our society; writing goes against the injunction to keep one's thoughts to oneself and to preserve a culture of silence. Moreover, there can be serious consequences for veterans who divulge their wartime experiences; there may be repercussions and judgments from civilians or other military personnel or questions of security breaches. The stakes can be high if veterans share their honest thoughts about what they saw, experienced, and did while at war. A case in point is the community college student and army infantry veteran Charles Whittington, who wrote about being addicted to war and killing, an essay that resulted in his expulsion from the Community College of Baltimore County for its difficult and chilling truths about war. After articulating his truths in a composition class assignment and being encouraged to send them to the school newspaper, Whittington, partly due to officials being skittish in wake of the Virginia Tech shootings, was suspended from the Community College of Baltimore County. In an interview

with the *Baltimore Sun*, Whittington stated in an article authored by Gould: "It took me three years to write something or say something. And when I got comfortable enough to actually talk about it, I get disciplined for it and get suspended" (par. 10). In other words, veterans like Whittington, trained and ordered to kill by the military, may be shunned into silence or viewed as threats when their truths about killing and war's addictive properties are too difficult and too ugly for civilians to handle.

Another deterrent to writing for veterans are the myths about writing and writers. Writers and writing communities are often perceived as exclusive, elitist and insular. There is also the gender and race bias by the publication industry. The major published and acclaimed veteran writers of fiction and nonfiction are mostly white male veterans; few women and minority veterans have had their work command critical attention in spite of members of these groups publishing their work. The "boys club" of veterans' writing is in plain view in Lea Carpenter's 2014 *Vanity Fair* article "The Words of War." Maurice Decaul, a playwright, is the only black veteran of six veteran writers depicted in the photograph accompanying the article (n.p.). And no women veterans/writers appear in the photo, even though several women vets had published major memoirs when the story ran.

Finally, veteran writers who hope to address public audiences have to believe that someone will listen to them and someone will care about their stories. All too often, civilians and the larger public have proven that they do not care beyond immediate or surface responses. War amnesia persists in our society about past wars and current wars even as the drumbeat goes on to involve military personnel in future military actions. Even with all of these reasons why writing may fail veterans or veterans may fail to write, it's still important to create communities were veterans have the opportunity to write and go public with their writing if they choose to do so.

An increasingly important component of our writing group is our digital footprint achieved through our website and our Facebook page. While a community writing group is about face-to-face interaction, there are many ways in which our group's online networked presence, whether through our web page or our Facebook group, has become an important site for "going public" and sponsoring literacy in other veterans. I have found that online networked writing is an important way that community literacy is built and a way that relationships, both face-to-face and online, are forged and maintained, and ideas disseminated and shared beyond the small circle of our monthly meetings.

Digital Circulation and Community Literacies

David Dadurka and Stacey Pigg argue that online networked writing, specifically social media, allows for "locations where meaningful community literacies can be developed and observed" (10). Dadurka and Pigg highlight the turn in research to analyzing social media as a communal, rather than an individual, site for building specific strategies for community engagement and participation, urging scholars in community literacy to better understand "how digital networked writing affects other facets of individual and community life" (10). Summarizing recent scholars working on social media and civic participation such as Clay Shirky, author of two oft-cited books on social media, they highlight how social media may foster actual community building, creating "interdependence and reinforc[ing] a sense of capacity" (12). Thus, the digital is an important component for shaping the community literacies perpetuated by specific groups that meet and interact in real life (IRL).

Social media use by military personnel has become a way to stay in touch with family and friends while deployed and still stay connected with unit members once they are separated from the military. Members of military units that deployed together and are now separated or retired from the military often maintain contact through not only friending one another on Facebook, but also through joining specific private Facebook groups where members check in with each other, network about jobs, plan reunions, and offer emotional resources and support. "Buddy Check 22" has become a slogan for veterans checking on each other to make sure that all members are safe and not considering suicide. The number twenty-two holds significance in that it refers to the Department of Veterans Affairs statistic that twenty-two veterans a day commit suicide, and twenty-two also is the day of the month when some unit members check in with each other via Facebook. As *New York Times* reporter Christine Hauser puts it, "to thousands of veterans and active-duty soldiers, the 22nd of every month is a reminder to make a suicide prevention spot-check on former comrades" (par. 3). Unit members will check in one by one, and follow-up is done to make sure all are accounted for, and, if not, to communicate what help is available. Thus, social media becomes a source of social support and bonding, but also a "lifeline," a suicide prevention measure and a measure for health and well-being. As Army veteran Robert Bennett puts it, "It's me letting everyone know that I am there for them, and everyone letting me know they are there for me" (qtd. in Hauser, par. 10).

While our social media presence for the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group is not the same as a unit-related buddy groups, the group has become an important space for sharing of resources and information on veterans' writing, announcements, and invitations to group meetings and events, and circulation of our group members' reading and writing practices. The Syracuse Veterans' Writing Facebook group is a restricted access or "membership only" group, which currently has 150 members, whereas our face-to-face membership of regular attendees at group meetings ranges from twelve to twenty members each month. On the Facebook group wall, group members post photos and updates about group meetings, upcoming events, and celebrate group members' accomplishments. They post their writing (as happened with Ralph Willsey's writing addressed earlier) and post links to articles about veterans' issues, and they recommend and briefly discuss articles and books recently emerging on veterans' writing and issues of concern to veterans and military families.

The membership of our Facebook group is much larger than the actual face-to-face membership of our writing group. Some of the Facebook group members have never attended our meetings in person; many are local veterans with an interest in our writing group, but who, for various reasons, cannot make it to our face-to-face meetings. Others are local community members who work with veterans through nonprofit organizations or medical or psychological services. They appear to consider our group one of many veteran groups that they network with and are informed by. Some members appear to be military spouses or family members who are simply interested in what we do without having a direct investment in attending our group. Other members are attracted to the group as a space for promoting their own publications, causes, and work, often promoting their own writing and events, which we allow unless they are not directly relevant. In the case of promoting publications, some of our group members have benefited directly from journal editors joining our Facebook group and circulating military-related calls for papers and calls for online and print journal contributions, as well as writing contest notifications. Prior to digital platforms like Facebook, such immediate access to veteran writers by journal editors or publishers would have been impossible without face-to-face contact or print circulation.

As the Facebook group administrator, I generate content on a monthly and sometimes weekly basis and address postings that are political diatribes or advertisements for questionable fund-raisers or off-topic or inappropriate

personal asides. I also deal with tensions that might spill over from face-to-face encounters between group members into the digital world and vice versa, what Dadurka and Pigg refer to as the way the digital might affect face-to-face spaces and vice versa. For instance, one Facebook group member, also a veteran, who had never attended a single meeting of the group in person was incensed that group members he met at our public Veterans Day reading were not more antiwar. Some had refused to take the bumper stickers and literature he distributed at the reading, thus he interpreted that as a sign of direct hostility or a lack of political will. In subsequent Facebook postings to our group, he lectured me and other members about our problematic lack of peacemaking in spite of not knowing much about anyone's politics and that several group members, including my coleader and I, are actively antiwar. At least one group member wrote him a private message on Facebook and told him to back off with his confrontational stance; others posted responses saying the same. He eventually left the group of his own volition, unsatisfied that his politics were not better represented and received among our group members and accusing group members and me of unthinkingly supporting the war machine. Such moments of tension and challenge are ongoing in the Facebook group, as many see such groups as a space for proselytizing about politics, reinforcing political orthodoxies, or selling products, rather than a space for perpetuating the kinds of community literacies that we are interested in fostering in our writing group: an open and inquiring atmosphere, information exchange, support and understanding, humor and camaraderie, and respectful interaction.

What we have realized as we established our online presence is that our notions of how our group's writing circulates digitally have been complicated by encounters and queries with networked others that we didn't know were paying attention to our group's work. As Jenny Edbauer argues in her seminal article on rhetorical circulation, public rhetoric involves a "circulating ecology of effects, enactments, and events" (9). Edbauer shifts the focus from Lloyd Bitzer's notion of rhetorical situation to rhetorical ecologies, bringing heightened attention to notions of production and circulation, factors that we've learned to pay closer attention to over the years in our group's online presence both on the web and in social media.

Initially, when we mounted our website, I saw the site in merely functional ways—as a place for our group members to access our monthly writing assignments; a place for prospective members to learn about us, and read group member biographies and sample pieces of writing; and a

platform for self-publication and announcement-making. What we didn't understand were the publics we were reaching through the website and how that writing might circulate beyond the confines of the website. My first inkling of the circulation and reach of our digital presence came when I was contacted by other academics, student veterans, veterans, and psychologists seeking to set up writing groups across the country. They wrote asking for advice about group models and asked if they could use our writing assignments. When we had posted these assignments, we had thought of them as mostly tools and resources for our own group members, not grasping that when someone undertakes a Google search for veterans' writing groups, our group is usually in the first five hits—a clickable link and source of information. With our website up and running, I began to receive a few e-mail queries each month from other academics, therapists, and veterans asking for advice about how to start a veterans' writing group. In fact, eventually I received so many e-mails that I wrote and published an article that addresses different models for veterans' writing groups and advice about how to get one going. Thus, I became aware of how the writing group's website was enmeshed in Edbauer's notion of a "circulating ecology of effects, enactments, and events" (9). A second understanding of the effects and enactments took place when I was contacted by various reporters seeking to interview me and group members about veterans' writing as a topic, as I indicate at the beginning of the piece.

My understanding of the networking effects of our group's online presence crystallized further at a literary reading we were invited to give at Fort Drum in 2013, home of the Army's 10th Mountain Division, where we learned that some of the therapists connected to the military base were using our writing assignments and group members' writings gleaned from our website in their therapy sessions. One of the members of the therapy group attended our writing group for awhile and also did readings with us. Two leaders of writing groups that were set up in other university/community locations also indicated to me that they were using our assignments on a regular basis. These are, of course, only the known effects of our group's digital circulation, but these examples indicate the presence of a larger public who wishes to engage in veterans' writing and who is regularly searching for information and resources.

As I consider the digital circulation and networked presence of our group, I am increasingly aware of how we can do more to expand the reach and influence of our group through digital means. While we are fortunate

to have a staff colleague at Syracuse University maintain and update our website with content that members generate, our Facebook group is administered and largely updated by me. Posting links, writing effective posts, taking photos and posting them to the Facebook group involves time and labor—unpaid time and labor that happens on top of the considerable work I already do as academic and a university administrator. There is no social media or communications manager to run the show. Thus, the affordances of the digital are also limited by the human labor it requires to have a meaningful and up-to-date online presence and to arbitrate any disputes that might arise in networked spaces. Thus, even as the Veterans' Writing Group has clearly been advantaged by digital technologies in communicating our group's work and presence, we spend the majority of our time preparing for our face-to-face meetings. Increasingly, though, we are mindful of and aware of the way our digital presence interacts with and effects the material spaces of the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group.

Conclusion

We are almost seven years into the veteran's writing group and weeks from releasing our first published anthology of group members' writing, a hard-won achievement. It has been a long journey from the cold spring morning in March of 2010, when my colleague and I walked into the room to start the group, not knowing who we would find or what, exactly, we were doing. The writing group now has a life of its own and a network of relationships, friendships, stories, and publications that demonstrate its life in much broader terms. By "getting personal" with veterans and their stories, my colleague and I have been transformed as well, a story line that I want to convey to reporters like the one I mentioned at the beginning of this piece. It's not just veterans who are changed by the act of "getting personal" in nonfiction writing; we will all be profoundly changed if we listen to veterans' stories and understand the human suffering and trauma that war causes. Perhaps one of the effects will be that we resist our political leaders' continuous deployment of military personnel in service of war and imperialism across the globe. Perhaps another of the effects will be that instead of thanking veterans for their service and passing them by, we will actively engage them in conversation about what their experiences have been, what they mean, and what we can learn from them.

Note

1. The greater Syracuse region is an area that hosts a number of military installations, including the Army base Fort Drum, home of the 10th Mountain Division. Syracuse University, where our group meets and where we teach, also has a rich military tradition, welcoming many troops after World War II and currently welcoming over three hundred student veterans and military family members. The university hosts a well-established Veterans Resource Center and is also home to the nationally recognized Institute for Veterans and Military Family Members.

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3 Essaying to Understand Violence

Amy E. Robillard

> Darkness is generative, and generation, biological and artistic
> both, requires this amorous engagement with the unknown,
> this entry into the realm where you do not quite know what you
> are doing and what will happen next. Creation is always in the
> dark because you can only do the work of making by not quite
> knowing what you're doing, by walking into the darkness, not
> staying in the light. Ideas emerge from the edges and shadows
> to arrive in the light, and though that's where they may be seen
> by others, that's not where they're born.
>
> —Rebecca Solnit, *The Faraway Nearby*

> To essay is to attempt, to test, to make a run at something with-
> out knowing whether you will succeed.
>
> —Phillip Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay*

I AM THE YOUNGEST OF FIVE SIBLINGS, and I was raised in a home marked
by abuse and neglect, early death, depression, and a refusal to acknowl-
edge the existence of—never mind abide the expression of—emotions other
than anger. Though we never went without food in our bellies or clothing
on our backs and we walked to school in shoes that fit carrying full lunch
boxes, ours was a home characterized primarily by what it lacked: money,
love, affection, kindness, ease, comfort, stories. I've written over the years
about these various lacks, and in this essay I want to focus on one that
I haven't yet considered but that becomes so crucial once I direct my atten-
tion to it. It is a lack on which so many of the others depend. I grew up in
a home whose inhabitants rarely made eye contact.

We walked past each other on our way to the kitchen and out the
back door, never raising our heads to acknowledge each other. We isolated

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ourselves in our own rooms, I with my books, my siblings with who-knows-what. Our mother lay on the couch, drifting off to sleep as her soap operas droned on and we came and went without notice. We didn't see each other. We didn't hear each other. Because we didn't trust each other, we couldn't make ourselves vulnerable to one another. And so always, we looked away.

Perhaps this is why I write: to be seen, to be heard—but safely, at a distance.

Perhaps this is why we all write.

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The classroom in which I typically teach my undergraduate course on the personal essay used to be two: at some point before my time at Illinois State, a wall was torn down to create one relatively large classroom. On one-half of the room are rows of computers and on the other, empty space. It is to this empty part of the room that I ask students to bring their wheeled chairs each class meeting to discuss that day's essay. We sit in a circle, exposed and vulnerable. No desks or laptops to hide behind. No smartphones to look at. Only the essays and each other. On the first day of class, when I ask students to arrange themselves in this circle, I tell them that one of the hallmarks of the personal essay is the essayist's willingness to explore his or her vulnerabilities, and that the chairs in a circle are meant to mimic that vulnerability in a physical way.

The psychologist Silvan Tomkins wrote that the face is the site of all affects. Of Tomkins's work, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank write, "More than the place where affects are *expressed*, Tomkins shows the face to be the main place in the body—though by no means the only one—where affect *happens*" (30; emphasis in original). In *Shame and Its Sisters*, Sedgwick and Frank quote Tomkins's fascinating discussion of facial nurture.

> The centrality of the face in affective experience may also be seen in the relationship between the hand and the face. The hand acts as if the face is the site of feeling. Thus when one is tired or sleepy, the hand commonly either nurtures the face, in trying to hold it up, to remain awake, or attempts counteractive therapy by rubbing the forehead and eyes as if to wipe away the fatigue or sleepiness. . . . (30)

I ask students to sit in a circle with no desks and no laptops, just their chairs and their essays, when we discuss personal essays, because one of the things I love about the personal essay is the way it makes evident what Arlie Russell Hochschild in *The Managed Heart* calls the feeling rules we all live by. What are we supposed to feel in which situations? For how long? With how much intensity? What does it mean to feel entitled to feel something toward somebody? Or to feel that somebody owes you a particular feeling? Because the face is the site of affects and few of us have perfected the art of the poker face, our discussions of personal essays become discussions, too, of how we have been disciplined to feel.

One of the easiest—because most pervasive—sets of feeling rules to point to as an example involves how we are disciplined to respond to the death of loved ones. In her stunning essay, "The Love of My Life," Cheryl Strayed writes of her crushing grief following the loss of her mother to cancer at the age of forty-five. Strayed was just twenty-two, a college student, at the time. At every turn, the essay calls attention to the feeling rules we are asked to live by, the ways they constrain and contain us, the ways they deny our full humanity. I'll share just one example here that nearly every student who has read the essay in my personal essay course could understand immediately.

> She died on a Monday during spring break of our senior year. After her funeral, I immediately went back to school because she had begged me to do so. It was the beginning of a new quarter. In most of my classes, we were asked to introduce ourselves and say what we had done over the break. "My name is Cheryl," I said. "I went to Mexico."
>
> I lied not to protect myself, but because it would have been rude not to. To express loss on that level is to cross a boundary, to violate personal space, to impose emotion in a nonemotional place. (299)

The personal essay insists that we look at the things we'd so often rather not look at in our own lives. When we would rather just look down at our fingernails or study the complex weave of our shoelaces, we're asked instead to look at each other, if not in person then at least on the page.

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I have never been particularly close to any of my siblings, but if I had to choose one to whom I was closest growing up, I would have to choose my brother Guy, three years older than me. For Christmas, the year I was nine or ten, I got a hand-held Pac-Man video game, and I remember the two of us would sit on the floor together taking turns playing, each with our shoulders scrunched up, our heads leaning in toward the black screen, as one of us frantically jostled the joystick to get Pac-Man safely around the screen before being killed by a ghost. We'd spend hours doing this, not saying much, not looking at each other, just being together.

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Take a look down any hallway in any college or university in America and what you're likely to see is groups of students sitting together staring at their smartphones.

Take a look at the recent national news and what you're likely to see is a report of another school shooting followed by explanations couched in stories of mental illness.

I wonder to what extent these two phenomena are related.

I wonder this because I have come to believe, having taught the course on the personal essay for ten years now, that students' appreciation for courses on the personal essay evidences a desire to understand the ways we are all trained not to see one another, not to say the things that might make us seem vulnerable, not to hear others' confessions of vulnerability. Though they stare at the smartphones in their hands, students are not, as hyperbolic stories in the press would have us believe, coddled or disconnected, distracted or inept at conversation. They are, rather, actively working to navigate the new feeling rules, the ones that suggest it is better to look at one's phone than to look at a stranger in the hallway or that it is better to look at one's phone than to do *nothing* because only losers do nothing. They are, more than ever, anxious, and while the personal essay is certainly no panacea for all that ails our increasingly digitized culture, I do believe that its insistence that we slow down, that we pay attention to our human vulnerabilities, and that we work to see what we have for so long been trained not to see can make us feel more connected to one another.

As my title indicates, I believe that a course on the personal essay, especially in a culture in which our electronic devices make it easier to avoid eye contact, can encourage habits of mind that make all of us, teachers

and students alike, more attuned to the ways daily life disciplines us to see and not see, to hear and not hear, and ultimately to shatter ideological beliefs about violence in ways that explicit teaching about ideology cannot necessarily do.

What follows is not a traditional academic argument, but an essay that attempts to assemble ideas in a way that will lead to insights—both specific to my experience and generalizable to the experience of others. For that is the aim of every essay: to examine the specific in an attempt to help others see themselves and their situation more clearly. It's never just about me. It is, always, about all of us.

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The hallway is an in-between space, a space of microsocialization, of quick hellos and promises to engage more fully later, or of quick dismissals or refusals to see. The hallway is one of the most obvious spaces where eye contact is either engaged or refused, where social encounters are most obviously welcomed or rejected. It is in the hallway, approaching someone with whom we'd rather not engage, that our strategies for refusing eye contact become both practiced and painfully obvious. The hallway is also the space where our emotional disciplining can become evident as we think about how far away one must be in order to first acknowledge the other, who acknowledges whom first and with how much enthusiasm, and how soon is too soon to end a hallway exchange.

The hallway is like an essay in that you never know what you'll find or to whom or what ideas it might lead you. You never quite know what lies at its other end. The possibilities can be exciting or frightening, as is the case with any situation couched in uncertainty.

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Last spring I cut out a *New Yorker* cartoon and distributed photocopies of it to my personal essay class. We had recently finished reading Miah Arnold's essay, "You Owe Me," whose first sentence reads, "The children I write with die, no matter how much I love them, no matter how many poems they have written or how much they want to live." Arnold teaches writing to children at the MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, and in the essay she struggles to come to terms with her reasons for continually

coming back to a place where she knows she will witness children she loves dying. She recognizes that we all have defense mechanisms for dealing with the death of children: "People don't mind being reminded that ten-year-olds die so long as they get to hear the story of that child's life, so long as it is a story of resilience, a story about a soul raging on long after the funeral because it touched so many people's lives and changed them for the better" (31). Even as she critiques this conventional thinking, she understands it, and she tells herself her own stories to get by. "I say: If Khalil dies, I won't be able to continue working here. Since I have known him since he was seven and he's twelve now, his death is the line over which my presence in this institution cannot cross. Khalil is too full of life" (32). Khalil, like so many of the children Arnold works with, dies, and she continues to work at MD Anderson.

At the end of her essay, Arnold comes to understand the difference between how adults and children respond to the suffering of others. She writes:

> When I worked at a food bank for people with AIDS, as a teenager, friends thought that was cool. It was edgy, the disease was still new, its backstory involved sex, drugs, homosexuality—maybe even adultery. There is a hierarchy of the dying created by the world at large—and people won't talk about stories that don't have apparent moral meaning. Even with AIDS, the patients who got it through transfusions were often the least acknowledged, or at the least, the least memorialized by our culture at large. The tragedy was harder to name.
>
> We prefer to assign morality to death: we prefer a world in which we take risks—we rebel, we resist, we transgress, we love, we gamble—and sometimes we lose. That makes sense; that is tragedy. One of the reasons I can't stop going to the hospital: the kids don't avert their eyes when they see each other. (41–42)

In class, students and I discussed this last line at length, noting the ways that children have not yet been disciplined to experience shame when looking at one another, and the discomfort so many of us adults feel simply making eye contact when it's so much easier to look down at our phones instead. I shared with them excerpts from Silvan Tompkins's work on the interocular taboo. Specifically, I shared the following experiment as laid out by Tomkins:

> Ask the members of any group to turn toward each other and look directly and deeply into each others' eyes. It then becomes apparent that to exact compliance with this instruction is all but impossible. It is similar in its impact, to the fundamental rule of Psychoanalysis, to associate freely, to say whatever comes to mind. One can not realize the extent of censorship until one tries to suspend it. When the individual is asked to stare directly into the eyes of another person, he does so if at all only briefly and then looks away. He looks away, however, in a rather subtle way. He stares at the top of the nose or the tip of the nose, or at one eye, or at the forehead, or he fixates on the face as a whole, and his partner will ordinarily reciprocate in so attenuating the interocular intimacy. And this is how in daily interpersonal contacts, intimacy is attenuated and the taboo on the look-look is maintained.

Students generally nod their heads or chuckle as I read this, for they recognize these elisions in the service of the taboo on the look-look. Tomkins continues:

> . . . the taboo on the interocular interaction is ordinarily a secret one, which is maintained by a defense against a too obvious defense against looking into each other's eyes. One may not defend oneself against looking into one another's eyes by looking away or hiding one's face. The expression of shame or shyness is quite as shameful as shameless looking. This is why, under the conditions of our experiment, we rarely encounter subjects who hide their face in their hands, or grossly look away from their partner. They are caught between the shame of looking and the shame of being ashamed of doing so. (qtd. in Sedgwick and Frank 146)

Were this experiment to be conducted in the age of the smartphone, however, there would likely be almost no shame in looking down at the phone in one's hand. Which brings me back to the point I began this section with, the cartoon from the *New Yorker* that I photocopied and handed out to students in my personal essay class. Two teenage girls lie stomach-down on a bed, legs casually in the air behind them, elbows supporting their hands

holding phones that they look into. One says to the other, "When I make eye contact for the first time, I want it to be with the right person."

The cartoon substitutes that most intimate of firsts—sexual intercourse—with eye contact for an easy laugh. But eye contact *is* intimate, as everyday refusals of it demonstrate. Tomkins's work on shame and looking helps here, too. On intimacy and looking he writes,

> Since the face and particularly the eyes are the primary communicators and receivers of all affects, the linkage of shame to the whole spectrum of affect expression may result in an exaggerated self-consciousness, because the self is then made ashamed of all its feelings and must therefore hide the eyes lest the eyes meet. We may then not look too closely at each other, because we cannot be sure how we might feel if we were to do so. Indeed, many of us fall in love with those into whose eyes we have permitted ourselves to look and by whose eyes we have let ourselves be seen. This love is romantic because it is continuous with the period before the individual lovers knew shame. They not only return to baby talk, but even more important they return to baby looking. (qtd. in Sedgwick and Frank 147)

"*We may then not look too closely at each other, because we cannot be sure how we might feel if we were to do so.*" The course I teach on the personal essay is designed to encourage students to look closely at themselves and at each other indirectly, by way first of looking at the experiences of others.

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Jo Ann Beard's much-loved essay, "The Fourth State of Matter," has received a great deal of attention for its beauty, its craft, its startling attention to, in one essay, a dying dog, a crumbling marriage, squirrels scrambling around in a room upstairs, and a workplace shooting at the University of Iowa on November 1, 1991. Beard weaves together these narratives, beginning with the dying dog, and leading, finally, to the shooting in the last quarter of the essay. I learned recently that the essay was originally going to be called "The History of Dogs," and that the events unfolded in life as they do in the essay, that the horrific violence that left Beard's coworkers dead was as

unexpected to her as it is to her readers. At the same time, however, Beard provides hints along the way, hints that most of us, on a first reading, likely do not notice. On a second reading, however, once we know what has happened, we cannot help but see these hints as they stand apart from the rest of the essay, challenging the desire so many of us have to believe that *we* would be able to see such a thing coming.

These hints, which I will detail below, together with what I argue is Beard's theory of the cause of Gang Lu's violence, make the essay about what we can and cannot see and the extent to which we allow ourselves to recognize that there are things we cannot see—central among them the most fundamental of human needs: being seen. Because there is a danger that comes with seeing something we'd rather not see: if we do not look away quickly enough, if we allow ourselves to understand, we may fall prey to what James Gilligan calls the "bogeyman of every effort to understand violence." The bogeyman is "the mistaken conclusion that to understand violent behavior is to excuse it." In his book, *Violence*: *Reflections on a National Epidemic*, Gilligan explains that this belief, like a bogeyman, "hovers in the wings, ready to be brought out whenever an attempt is made to learn what causes violence so that we can prevent it, rather than being limited to punishing it" (24). Personal essayists write to figure out something about themselves that they know others can benefit from; they work to make themselves visible so that readers might be able to recognize themselves in the essayist's vulnerabilities. As Phillip Lopate puts it, "So often the 'plot' of a personal essay, its drama, its suspense, consists in watching how far the essayist can drop past his or her psychic defenses toward deeper levels of honesty." If the essayist is unable to do this, Lopate writes, if the essayist "stays at the same flat level of self-disclosure and understanding throughout, the piece may be pleasantly smooth, but it will not awaken that shiver of self-recognition . . . which all lovers of the personal essay await as a reward" (xxv–xxvi). Even—or especially—twenty-five years later, "The Fourth State of Matter," with its subtle hints of what is to come and its theory of what causes violence, shows us what we are unable to see about ourselves, about our inability or refusal to see what might be said to be right in front of us, about why it matters that we recognize one another.

The hints Beard provides readers become, on a second or third reading of the essay, so very obvious, right there in plain sight, that it becomes difficult to believe that we missed them on our first reading. But I'm willing to bet that most first-time readers *did* miss them, and that any protestations

that we didn't become evidence of our desire to believe that we are able to see violence coming, that our everyday vision carries the same acuity with which hindsight is so often credited.

Hint 1: One page into the essay, Jo Ann refers to the guys she works with as "guys whose own lives are ticking like alarm clocks ready to go off, although none of us is aware of it yet" (75).

Hint 2: Ten pages into the essay, Jo Ann is describing her coworker Bob, when she writes:

> Unimaginable, really, that less than two months from now one of his colleagues from abroad, a woman with delicate, birdlike features, will appear at the door to my office and identify herself as a friend of Bob's. When she asks, I'll take her down the hall to the room with the long table and then to his empty office. I do this without saying anything because there's nothing to say, and she takes it all in with small, serious nods until the moment she sees his blackboard covered with scribbles and arrows and equations. At that point her face loosens and she starts to cry in long ragged sobs. An hour later I go back and the office is empty. When I erase the blackboard finally, I can see where she laid her hands carefully, where the numbers are ghostly and blurred. (85–86)

Hint 3: Fifteen pages into the essay, Beard names the date as she's leaving the office midday. "It's November 1, 1991, the last day of the first part of my life."

Hint 4: Same page. The hints are closer together now. Beard shifts perspectives by dictating the thought process and suicide note of Gang Lu, a physics graduate student of the men she works with. Gang Lu addresses the letter to his sister.

> Modern physics is self-delusion and all my life I have been honest and straightforward, and I have most of all detested cunning, fawning sycophants and dishonest bureaucrats who think they are always right in everything. Delicate Chinese characters all over a page. She was a kind and gentle sister, and he thanks her for that. He's going to kill himself. You yourself

should not be too sad about it, for at least I have found a few traveling companions to accompany me to the grave. Inside the coat on the back of his chair are a .38-caliber handgun and a .22-caliber revolver. They're heavier than they look and weigh the pockets down. My beloved elder sister, I take my eternal leave of you. (88–89)

The point of view immediately switches back to Jo Ann's for about a quarter of a page before a section break. Following the section break we are introduced to the boring Friday afternoon seminar at which the shooting happens.

Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe there are readers of this essay who *did* see these hints and recognize them for what they were. Students in my classes often claim that they did. The problem is that once we know about the shooting, we can never read those lines the same way again. We can never see them the way a first-time reader might. I'm pretty certain that the first time I read this essay I skimmed right past these hints, far more concerned with Jo Ann's dying collie, her deadbeat husband, her ex–beauty queen friend rescuing the squirrels from the upstairs bedroom, and her close relationship with Chris at work.

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Does everybody have those one or two people they see in the hallway at work, the people with whom they seem to have an unspoken agreement not to engage, not to say hello, and certainly not to make eye contact? Or is it just me?

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In 1996 Richard E. Miller aimed in "The Nervous System" to imagine academic scenes "where the expression of a desire to be seen elicit[ed] a response other than revulsion," a desire I share twenty years later (42).

We are not supposed to want to be seen. This is one of the feeling rules we all live by. But we need to be seen. And the tension between what our culture tells us is okay and the fulfillment of our basic human needs is one that is rarely made explicit in the academy.

As the youngest of the five siblings, I was for most of my life, unsurprisingly, known as the one who got away with everything, who always got

what she wanted, the one it was easiest to write into just about any narrative in which the narrator figured as hero and I figured as victim or loser or wrongdoer. As anybody with siblings knows, such subject positions are difficult to break out of when siblings gather together even as adults. Thus, when my mother died in 2014, and my husband and I traveled to Massachusetts for her funeral, I wasn't surprised that my oldest sister Sue still treated me like the baby of the family, actually calling me a brat more than once. Steve was surprised, to be sure, but I wasn't. Steve is an only child. I had tried to explain to him that when I had seen Sue over the summer, she seemed unwilling to accept that I was an adult, but such things are hard to explain. Perhaps they need to be witnessed.

One day Steve and I went to lunch with my brother Tim, Sue, and her grown daughter Crystal. The conversation turned to TV. Steve happened to remark on how long it takes us to watch a show that we've recorded because I pause it so many times. Sue interrupted excitedly and said in a mocking tone, "So Amy can say, 'Look at me! Look at me! Look at me!' Right?"

Steve, dumbfounded by Sue's outburst, said, "No. Because she has to use the bathroom or get another drink or get a snack."

Look at me. Look at me. Look at me. Revulsion at the expression of the desire to be seen. Except this was entirely imaginary. I was being shamed for what my sister imagined was my desire to be seen. And in the process Sue was expressing her own desire to be seen as somebody who gets it, who understands Steve's frustration with my bottomless need to be seen.

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In 1991 workplace shootings were not a part of the national consciousness. We were not concerned with understanding why they happened, what motivated the shooters, or how we might prevent them, largely because they were not as frequent, or commonplace, as, sadly, they are today. Perhaps this relative rarity can account for Beard's understated yet insightful treatment of Gang Lu, the shooter in the University of Iowa incident. "The Fourth State of Matter" forwards a theory of what caused Gang Lu's violence, one that is consistent with psychiatrist James Gilligan's theory of violence, developed from his twenty-five years' experience working with violent men in maximum-security prisons in Massachusetts.

Gang Lu first appears about halfway into the essay, and Beard's introduction of him makes clear that Gang Lu is a student who is granted little respect. Earlier on the page, Beard lets us know that "We're all smoking

illegally in the journal office with the door closed and the window open. We're having a plasma party." Just a couple paragraphs later,

> Someone knocks on the door and we put our cigarettes out. Bob hides his pipe in the palm of his hand and opens the door.
>
> It's Gang Lu, one of their students. Everyone lights up again. Gang Lu stands stiffly talking to Chris while Bob holds a match to his pipe and puffs fiercely; nose daggers waft up and out, right in my direction. I give him a sugary smile and he gives me one back. (85)

Later during the same meeting, "Another Chinese student named Shan lets himself in after knocking lightly. He nods and smiles at me and then stands at a respectful distance, waiting to talk to Chris" (86). And finally, during that same meeting, Beard subtly switches from Jo Ann's perspective to Gang Lu's, and the motivation for his shooting becomes all too clear: a distinct lack of respect.

> Gang Lu looks around the room idly with expressionless eyes. He's sick of physics and sick of the buffoons who practice it. The tall glacial German, Chris, who tells him what to do; the crass idiot Bob who talks to him like he is a dog; the student Shan whose ideas about plasma physics are treated with reverence and praised at every meeting. The woman who puts her feet on the desk and dismisses him with her eyes. Gang Lu no longer spends his evenings in the computer lab, running simulations and thinking about magnetic forces and invisible particles; he now spends them at the firing range, learning to hit a moving target with the gun he purchased last spring. He pictures himself holding the gun with both hands, arms straight out and steady; Clint Eastwood, only smarter. Clint Eastwood as a rocket scientist.
>
> He stares at each person in turn, trying to gauge how much respect each of them has for him. One by one. Behind black-rimmed glassed, he counts with his eyes. In each case the verdict is clear: not enough. (86–87)

Particularly noteworthy about this passage is Beard's reference to herself in the third person as "the woman who puts her feet on her desk and dismisses

him with her eyes," for in this way she recognizes that she, too, partici-
pated in the culture of disrespect just as so many of her readers surely do.
We need to be able to recognize ourselves in this description as easily as
we are able to recognize ourselves in descriptions of Jo Ann's despair and
grief later in the essay.

Jo Ann sees Gang Lu one more time that day. She leaves work early
to care for her ailing collie. "Before I leave the building I pass Gang Lu in
the hallway and say hello. He has a letter in his hand and he's wearing his
coat. He doesn't answer and I don't expect him to. At the end of the hall-
way are the double doors leading to the rest of my life. I push them open
and walk through" (89).

The hallway: a space of microsocialization either accepted or refused.

Gilligan's work in *Violence*: *Reflections on a National Epidemic* is
detailed, thorough, nuanced, and far more extensive than the treatment
I can give it in this essay. What I want to note here is simply that Beard's
understanding of Gang Lu's motivation for killing his colleagues is entirely
consistent with Gilligan's understanding of violence, an understanding that
holds so much possibility for preventing mass shootings, if only we could
get past what he characterizes as the bogeyman, the fear that understand-
ing violence is akin to condoning it. This mind-set holds that refusing to
look at violence will somehow protect us.

I want to highlight two points from Gilligan's work. First, that for
the shooter, violence *makes sense*. It is not senseless. It is, instead, an attempt
to secure justice. Gilligan writes,

> The first lesson that tragedy teaches us (and that morality
> plays miss) is that *all violence is an attempt to achieve justice*,
> or what the violent person perceives as justice, for himself or
> for whomever it is on whose behalf he is being violent, so as
> to receive whatever retribution or compensation the violent
> person feels is "due" him or "owed" to him, or to those on
> whose behalf he is acting, whatever he or they are "entitled" to
> or have a "right" to; or so as to prevent those whom one loves
> or identifies with from being subjected to injustice. Thus, *the
> attempt to achieve and maintain justice, or to undo or prevent
> injustice, is the one and only universal cause of violence*. (11–12)

The second part of Gilligan's theory of violence that I want to highlight
has to do with shame and humiliation. The injustice to which the men

Gilligan worked with in maximum-security prisons pointed as the cause of their violence was the experience of being dishonored or disrespected. Here, again, is Gilligan:

> I have yet to see a serious act of violence that was not provoked by the experience of feeling shamed and humiliated, disrespected and ridiculed, and that did not represent the attempt to prevent or undo this "loss of face"—no matter how severe the punishment, even if it includes death. For we misunderstand these men, at our peril, if we do not realize that they mean it literally when they say they would rather kill or mutilate others, than live without pride, dignity, and self-respect. They literally prefer death to dishonor. . . . Perhaps the lesson of all this for society is that when men feel sufficiently impotent and humiliated, the usual assumptions one makes about human behavior and motivation, such as the wish to eat when starving, the wish to live or stay out of prison at all costs, no longer hold. (110)

In a hypermasculine culture like ours that glorifies violence, the easiest way for some men to win back that respect, to balance the scales of justice, is to get their hands on a gun. Gilligan quotes the men he talked with as saying things like, "You wouldn't believe how much respect you get when you have a gun pointed at some dude's face" (109). Beard understood this when she gave her essay over to Gang Lu's perspective. I wonder how many readers can see this, though, in a culture in which mass shootings have become ubiquitous and mental illness is understood to be the primary cause. It's much easier this way, of course. If mental illness causes violence, then I don't have to worry about my own role as part of a culture that perpetuates the social habits of mind contributing to the disrespect and dismissiveness, the refusal to see, some of the people around me.

In his 2015 article, "Why Mass Shootings Keep Happening," Tom Junod profiles Trunk, a young man whose prison nickname was Trunk Full of Guns, earned for his having been caught, on his way to commit a mass shooting, with "a military-grade rifle slung on his back, a .22-caliber pistol in his belt, a machete, and two thousand rounds of ammunition. He was dressed in black and so were his two accomplices, who were similarly armed." Because Trunk was stopped just before he committed violence and he has emerged from prison ten years later reflective and willing to talk

with journalists and threat assessors interested in preventing violence, we are made privy to Trunk's perspective. Looking back on the time when he was planning violence, Trunk says, "I wanted attention. If someone would have come up to me and said, 'You don't have to do this, you don't have to have this strange strength, we accept you,' I would have broken down and given up" (n.p.).

I have focused much attention on the personal essay's potential to change what and how we see—as well as on the ways the personal essay itself is a genre that helps us see ourselves in ways we perhaps haven't been able to yet. But the personal essay also changes the things we are able to *say*, for once we look at ourselves, once we see ourselves and those around us differently, I think, we become more willing, to rethink the things we thought we knew.

Maybe it's not all about seeing. Maybe I've only been able to see vision metaphors because I've been reading Silvan Tomkins and I've been so fascinated by eye contact—who makes it, who doesn't make it, who looks away, how we look away—that I've been unable to see that in at least two of the instances I've provided of people *not* making eye contact, I've described them as being *together*. My brother Guy and I weren't making eye contact when we played Pac-Man together, but we played companionably and we were content to be side-by-side. And most students, while standing in the hallways at school staring at their cell phones, are standing in groups, sometimes shoulder-to-shoulder, often companionably. There is understanding and respect in that companionship.

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All any of us wants is to be known, to feel like we're understood. In a recent conversation with students about what they have come to call millennial bashing—the constant stream of critiques of their generation as lazy, oversensitive, anxious, and demanding—it occurred to me that when an older generation shames the next generation for having all of the things they never had ("In *my* day, we typed on word processors! We didn't have fancy computers!"), perhaps what they're really doing is asking for a little bit of validation. "*Am I okay*? *Am I still relevant*?" But to ask for such validation, to suggest that we feel even the least bit insecure in our grasp of technology or what-have-you, would be to risk shame. So instead we shame them.

The personal essay is a genre that reminds us that we are both singular and part of a collective, that we have experiences we need to understand,

but that our understanding can only come through dialogue and identification with cultural commonplaces, feeling rules, and each other. When we deny the personal, we forget the humanity in the humanities. Essayist Charles D'Ambrosio asks, "What kind of damage is done to our ability to love or understand and thus fully judge one another when daily we're encouraged to forget that people are people and view them instead as so much pasteboard, scenery, clutter, generalized instances (of murder, of rape, of embezzlement, etc.)?" (288). Let's encourage students instead to see the ways in which we are, all of us, implicated in the lives of each other.

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Paradoxically, sometimes it is in the dark that we see the clearest. In my first epigraph to this essay, Rebecca Solnit observes that "creation is always in the dark because you can only do the work of making by not quite knowing what you're doing." So much of this essay came to me in the dark, as I hovered in that in-between space between waking and sleeping. It was there that the image of my brother and me first materialized after so many years, and it was there that I realized that there are moments of togetherness in this essay that could easily pass by unnoticed.

Look at me. Look at me looking at us. Look at me, in the dark, not knowing where I am going or quite what I am doing, looking at us.

This is the work the personal essay asks of us. Though it may be uncomfortable, the alternative is far too easy.

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4 Digital Portraits
Engaging Students in Personal Essay Writing through Video Composition

Michael Neal

PERSONAL WRITING has long been a marker of contemporary composition pedagogy, even though the form itself is over four hundred years old. Much has been made about the history of the personal essay, some dating it as far back as the Roman rhetorician Seneca's "On Noise," a personal account of the human search for peace of mind amid the noise of everyday life (Lopate 3). This begs the question of what constitutes the personal essay and how it compares to other, similar forms and genres of writing. In the introduction to the 1997 edition of *The Norton Book of Personal Essays*, editor Joseph Epstein writes, "The personal essay is, in my experience, a form of discovery. What one discovers in writing such essays is where one stands on complex issues, problems, questions, subjects. In writing the essay, one tests one's feelings, instincts, thoughts in the crucible of composition" (11). This opportunity to discover and situate one's voice within larger conversations about ideas and topics appeals to many who teach contemporary composition.

The essay writ large, and personal essays more specifically, aren't beholden to fully fleshed out positions and arguments. Again, much is made of the term *essay* coming from the French infinitive *essayer*, which means "to try or to attempt." Thus, even the linguistic origins of the term suggest that essays can be experimental investigations into ideas that the authors have not fully fleshed out. This experimental nature is advantageous for academic writing that often happens within the artificial time constraints of semesters or quarters and often doesn't allow students the full opportunity to investigate and develop rich, thorough arguments. In developing these attempts or tries, Epstein suggests that there are two ways the composer can write convincing essays: "first, by telling readers things they already know in their hearts but have never been able to formulate for themselves; and, second, by telling them things they do not know and perhaps have never even imagined" (20). In both cases writers work to

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anticipate and connect with the audience in compelling ways. One of the ways this is possible is through evoking the personal, whether that be narrative, anecdotes, insights, autobiography, experiences, opinions, or other forms of more personalized writing.

Phillip Lopate in *The Art of the Personal Essay* distinguishes memoir from the personal essay.

> [T]he essay form allows the writer to circle around one particular autobiographical piece, squeezing all possible meaning out of it while leaving the greater part of his life story available for later milking. It may even be that the personal essayist is more temperamentally suited to this circling procedure, diving into the volcano of self and extracting a single hot coal to consider and shape, either because of laziness or because of an aesthetic impulse to control a smaller frame. (xxix)

Distinctions like these are thoughtful, but they rarely help me make meaningful distinctions between similar genres. Thus, in my own use of the personal writing in this chapter, it may at times overlap with features of autobiography and/or memoir because I don't fully recognize differences between them or find the distinctions meaningful.

Having a voice and entering these conversations is a kind of rite of passage into the academy. Paul Kameen in his award-winning book *Writing/Teaching* suggests that it is "not enough, really, just to authorize [students] to speak. [They] need to have something that [they] genuinely want to say, and [they] need to be able to enter the conversation with the prospect of actually being heard" (162). This is where I see the value of students composing digital video essays in which they connect the personal with audiences they can both imagine and experience in online, networked communities. This chapter, then, presents three examples of students who have composed personal video essays, specifically honing in on how they use multiple modalities to shape their experiences, ideas, and positions about topics for authentic audiences outside of the class. These new media texts were all composed by upper-level undergraduate students in different classes within an English major track we call Editing, Writing, and Media (EWM). Students in this popular major take three core courses—rhetoric, book history, and media writing—as well as a number of upper-level electives and a writing and editing internship. The three classes represented

in this essay—Visual Rhetoric, Advanced Writing and Editing Workshop, and Rhetorical Theory and Practice—all fulfill elective credit in the EWM major. Each course, however, has its own set of goals and outcomes that are unique, and the digital composing projects, of course, are contextualized within a larger sequence of readings, topics, and assignments. So while the students and projects share some similarities, they are not produced in response to identical prompts, nor do they necessarily fulfill the same course objectives.

While many in the composition community might see personal writing as introductory, often situated as first assignments or in a first semester course because they are understood as being more accessible than researched writing, personal writing in academic settings can be confusing because students may not understand how to assert their voices and contribute their ideas into larger conversations. This can be intimidating especially when there is a significant power differential between writers. Students may find that simply writing about topics or developing an argument supported by sources is far easier than personalizing and situating themselves within a larger dialogue. To further complicate matters, students are often unable to imagine an authentic audience for much of their school-based writing, let alone construct them in such a way that might examine how their ideas would be received by outside readers. Who is the audience? What are their beliefs about the topic? What do they already know? How might they be predisposed toward or against an author or her ideas? Why would they care about her experiences, beliefs, or position? With student writers facing difficult questions like these, I don't assume that personal writing is more accessible simply because it comes from the individual writer.

In fact, I'm curious to explore how these three students in the following cases negotiate what I believe to be a challenging rhetorical situation. Through analyzing their multimodal texts individually, I hope to identify when and how these students position their experiences, values, and beliefs within larger contexts and conversations. Do they cite outside sources? How will they introduce or differentiate their ideas from those of others? What larger issues or topics do they address through their own personal writing? What conclusions do they attempt to draw? On what do they base these conclusions? The purpose of these three examples is not to make sweeping, general statements about personal writing but rather to describe the texts in such a way that might provide insights into how these students navigate writing that is both personal and digital.

Alexandra: iFriend

Alexandra was an upper-level undergraduate student in Visual Rhetoric when she composed a video essay called "iFriend Think Different" (currently located at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oet8mgmegUY). The essay assignment was relatively straightforward: to create a digital essay that used multiple modalities (e.g., written, visual, audio, gestural, spatial, etc.) to explore a contemporary idea of the students' choosing. It's important to note here that I did not assign a personal essay or a video project. Alexandra made these decisions as she developed her project. In fact, choosing the medium and the platform were part of the rhetorical process we discussed in the class that considered audiences, purposes, and genres. Her video essay begins with the Beatles' "Revolution" playing quietly in the background with the camera panning down a larger-than-full-screen Apple logo, and then the voice-over begins.

> It must have started sometime back in grade school. You had a long day. You're tired, stressed, and really not in the mood to talk. Unfortunately, the kid behind you in the bus didn't get the memo and can't take a hint when you try to look out the window to make him stop talking. He won't stop talking.

This last sentence is reinforced by a moving, linguistic text with that statement written out, breaking away from a stream of still images of buses and kids on buses. The narrative continues, "You groan in agony and come up with a brilliant idea: music plus headphones plus high decibels of high-frequency sound equals a silenced blabbermouth and a peaceful bus ride home."

The opening narrative of Alexandra's essay situates both her and her topic. Since she uses the second-person pronouns (e.g., "You had a long day," "You're tired," etc.), the anecdote may or may not be a real event, but it's honest or true in the sense that Epstein describes in his introduction to personal essays.

> What the personal essayist must do straightaway is establish his honesty. Honesty for a writer is rather different from honesty for others. Honesty, outside literature, means not lying, establishing trust through honorable conduct, absolute reliability in personal and professional dealings. In writing, honesty implies something rather different: it implies the

accurate, altogether truthful, reporting of feelings, for in lit-
erature only the truth is finally persuasive and persuasiveness
is at the same time the measure of truth. (13)

According to Epstein, then, whether or not Alexandra wrote about a specific
day from her past matters less than that she wrote an accurate reporting of
her feelings. In fact, perhaps she uses the second person to distance herself
from that particular narrative. Or perhaps she uses the second person to
connect with the readers and invite us to relate to or participate with her.
Whatever the case, Alexandra uses multiple modalities to enter into a con-
versation and connect with the audience in ways that move beyond what
she might have done in a written essay. This level or engagement and con-
nectivity with the topic and audience continues throughout the video.

   After a short history of mobile music technologies leading up to the
ultimate delivery system for mobile music listeners—the iPod—Alexandra
returns to her point, again situating her own experience as the central evi-
dence for claims. She has shifted now to first person: "I am 21-years-old
now, and a senior in college. You'd think that after two decades of speaking
and hand shaking etiquette I would be able to brag about my popularity
and tell you about how many friends I have." As she begins this portion of
the narrative, she pans down an image of herself in a playful pose, smiling
and looking over her shoulder at what we might assume are some friends.
This happy, fun self-portrait clearly situates her as a figure in her essay,
which she includes before cutting to an image of NBC's *Friends* television
sitcom. This sequence is capped off by a short clip from the movie *Mean
Girls*, showing a self-absorbed character attempting a trust fall into a group
of peers who all, except one, back away and let her crash to the ground.

   I find the inclusions of popular culture images and movie clips jux-
taposed with Alexandra's own image interesting for a number of reasons.
That Alexandra would, even if just for a moment, place herself into the
essay shows a level of personalization and ownership that goes beyond the
use of pronouns. She enters the social critique as an example to illustrate
her claims about friendship in the age of digital music. The pop culture
references are equally significant because they show Alexandra negotiat-
ing herself within the societal structures established through the media.
Friends presents the ideal, a group of several good friends that Alexandra
contrasts with her own reality. That sentiment is contrasted with the *Mean
Girls* clip, representing the lack of such friends. It's this latter example that
Alexandra associates with her own experiences. So even though she isn't

citing outside research, the personal essay helps situate her within larger cultural conversations about what friendship is and isn't supposed to look like that provides a measure for her own relationships.

After her initial foray into the topic of contemporary friendship, Alexandra is ready to reveal her own position even more overtly. She does so by referring back to the opening statement she makes about the boy on the bus.

> But like so many of my surrounding peers, who all seem to half joke about having no friends—well seriously, I only have a couple good friends—and as backward as that is, I have a theory that it may be due to the day I chose headphones over bus kid's blabbing. Apple made perhaps the most incredible product for the individual person, yet perhaps possibly the most damaging product for the masses of people. iPod. iBook. iMic. iInstrument. iType. iTeach. iHelp. iDog. iFriend. With all the iHype that skyrocketed production for thousands of companies such as Apple and other knock-off brands, it became evident that all you really need in life is me, myself, and iTechnology.

Alexandra returns to the personal experience in order to pivot toward the larger cultural phenomenon on which she is commenting. The choices she made to shut herself off from the social world around her through antisocial technologies are finally catching up to her, and she observes and comments on the consequences of those decisions.

Even though Alexandra's video essay is personal and narrative-driven, she continues to make connections outward as well as inward. She starts this section by noting that she isn't alone. Her peers are experiencing the same realities of being cut off from others via technology, which establishes that the topic is bigger than just her experience. Alexandra explores a larger cultural phenomenon through the lens of her own experience, all the while connecting with her audience who she hopes might have a relatable story. This attention to her own experiences, the experiences of others, and to a larger cultural phenomenon is evidence of her seeing this as a topic with a wide appeal to audiences beyond the classroom.

Another interesting section of this part of the video essay is her list of Apple products, most of which aren't real. She starts with the iPod, which has been the subject of her narrative thus far, but then she moves to a largely fictitious list: "iBook, iMic, iInstrument, iType, iTeach, iHelp, iDog, and iFriend." Her speculative move into these faux products shows her view

about the latent danger of technologies not yet developed that might take over other areas of life, including musical performance, education, and even her most personal relationships: her dog and friends. These more intimate connections represent again a personal truth for her and the fear she has of the technologies continuing to disconnect her from the world around her.

Finally, in Alexandra's video essay we see the tempered nature of her larger claims, which positions this as an essayistic "try" or "attempt." The video isn't a fully developed argument with thoroughly researched sources and established points. Rather, it's speculative, driven by narrative and anecdote, and where Alexandra is reticent about making confident claims beyond her experiences. At the same time, it is not disconnected from larger cultural conversations. In the essay we see qualifying words that moderate the claim, making it more tentative (e.g., "I have a theory," "perhaps the most incredible product," and "perhaps possibly the most damaging product"). These qualifiers signal her cautiousness in making larger, universal claims about iProducts, which again fulfills an exploratory purpose of essay writing compared with other academic genres that might call for more confident assertions. It also invites her audience to develop their own perspectives on the topic. If she relates well enough to us, we may find her beliefs and claims more convincing.

Alexandra's video essay navigates a complex rhetorical situation in which she situates her personal voice and experiences into a larger conversation about technology and social interaction. Her main point—that certain technologies isolate rather than connect people to others around them—isn't particularly novel or sophisticated. However, it's her voice and experiences that drive the essay. She weaves her own experiences into the essay alongside images, sounds, and video clips that either help situate or lend support to her ideas. Ultimately, she has a chance of being heard and entering the conversation. While 136 views (at the time of writing this chapter) doesn't exactly make it a viral video on YouTube, Alexandra has an audience, one that is larger than she might have had if this were a traditional classroom paper. Therefore, her narrative is in a public space where others can read/listen/view and respond with their own voices and experiences.

Katherine: Mapping

Katherine's video essay "On the Map" features contemporary uses of maps and digital directions (located at www.youtube.com/watch?

v=GW25PO9dwPI&feature=youtu.be). She completed this assignment for Rhetorical Theory and Practice, an upper-level course in an Editing, Writing, and Media major, where she was required to compose a digital, multimodal text that took into account the affordances and constraints of the modes and media used (McCullough, 200). In this assignment, as in the last, I didn't require students to write a personal narrative or develop a video, but instead left it up to them to determine how and where to assemble their multimedia texts. Katherine's video differs from Alexandra's in some interesting ways, especially in relationship to her less direct use of the personal. Katherine's video starts with a montage of clips from well-known movies where characters are lost or trying to find their way: *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, *Finding Nemo*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and so on. It isn't until forty-eight seconds into the video that we hear Katherine's voice for the first time. When it comes in, she provides impersonal statements about mapping and how people find things. A little later in the video essay in making a point about the ubiquity of maps, she finally uses a personal anecdote—the "placemats I used as a child"—to briefly situate her own experience with maps. However, after this personal reference, she adopts a more distant position to establish her claim. Like a more traditional academic essay, she looks to outside sources for credibility: "According to Simon Garfield, the author of *On the Map*, every map tells a story." At the same time we are hearing these lines, she shows images of a man, presumably Garfield, holding a small globe up next to his head, but then an even more telling visual: a map of the United States color coded according to how each state voted in the 2012 presidential campaign between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. If every map tells a story, we are implicitly asked what story is being told through this political mapping representation.

The argument continues in the same manner, a third-person account using outside sources and voices to establish claims and provide support. But this voice changes abruptly at the five-minute mark in the video, when Katherine drops the academic voice and shifts to a personal narrative, which lasts almost exactly one minute.

> I have always been so dependent on my phone to get to a place, even if I'm pretty sure of its general location. [Video footage of her driving her car.] That's why studying abroad in the larger city of Sydney, Australia, without a smartphone was a such a huge change for me. Half way through the semester, I was supposed to meet friends for a festival in the city. I had never

been into the city by public transportation alone before, so I was nervous. But I had a fear of missing out on the Friday night festivities. My local neighbor told me what bus stop to go to, what bus to take, and what spot to get off at. That was easy enough. But then which way did I go? Sydney being a densely populated city, I asked many people around how to get to my final destination and ended up making friends with a fun group of people going to the same place. Usually this would be a difficult and awkward experience for me, but the wine I drank and the smile I projected helped my voyage be much more positive than it would have been if I pasted my location and buried my face in my phone. I also felt more confident for future solo trips into the city.

In the middle of a video essay that I wouldn't have classified as being personal, Katherine inserts this narrative that connects her own experience to the topic on which she is writing and places her now within a kind of dialogue with the "experts" she has cited in the piece up until this point. Like Alexandra's more consistently personal essay, she includes self-portraits at this point in the essay. She includes still images from her study abroad experience in Australia, and she has video footage of her driving a car with the help of digital maps. Thus, she inserts her own narrative and personal images to place herself into the action of her essay. There is only one other time in the video that she mentions herself directly. At the 8:45 mark in the video, she provides this one sentence, which is simply a lead in to another outside voice: "I went into Jimmy John's to see what methods they used to uphold their freakishly fast delivery." This personal statement was simply about the process she used to collect a separate outside voice to support her claims.

So while the personal did not represent the majority of this essay, it was an important inclusion for various reasons. Since her personal account was different from the rest of the essay, I'm curious about this minute-long interlude in the midst of what is otherwise not a personal essay. What role did it serve? What does it allow her to do? Is there any indication as to why she might have included it? I believe this personal narrative is an important moment in the video and establishes a personal connection with both the topic and the audience. While this video is inviting due to the use of cultural icons, humor, and accessible language, the narrative also provides the opportunity for Katherine to personally relate to the topic and thus position herself in relationship to it. Up until this point, I would say that

she was writing about a topic: mapping and new ways of navigating with smart technologies. But she didn't situate herself with the topic. She didn't have a clear focus or angle, which is an essential part of essay writing that separates it from other more topic-based reports or descriptions.

Immediately following her narrative, though, she shifts tone again and includes a much clearer position about the issue from her perspective.

> Digital maps have had an effect on the way *we* learn to see things. When *we* look at maps on *our* dashboards or on *our* phones, *we* tend not to look around or up so much. It is now entirely possible to travel many hundreds of miles without having the faintest clue about how *we* got there. A victory for GPS. A loss for geography, history, navigation, maps, human communication, and the sense of being connected to the world all around *us*. (emphasis mine)

At this moment, more clearly than in the rest of the essay, Katherine situates her voice and ideas into the larger conversations of mapping in the rest of the essay. Not only does she establish her position relative to the topic, she also connects with the audience as evidenced by the pronouns highlighted in the transcription above. I believe it took this personal writing to help her take a position on the topic and place herself in relationship with her reader. Even though her personal narrative is only a minute out of a longer ten-minute video, it becomes a centerpiece of her essay. Without it, the essay would have remained distant and about a technological phenomenon rather than her experience with and position on it, which is what I expect from the personal essay.

Jackie: Dodgertown

The third example I want to use is different from the other two because the linguistic text for the project isn't personal; however, as a whole I would consider this a personal, multimodal video essay. Jackie's video was produced for an Advanced Article and Essay workshop where the assignment was to remediate a print text composed in the first half of the semester. Jackie's original text was a memoir with several vignettes about childhood trips with her family to Vero Beach, FL, colloquially known as Dodgertown during spring training for the Los Angeles Dodgers. Her original memoir

included memories of her family's drive from New Jersey to Florida, and her childhood interactions with the players. Upon remediating the assignment, Jackie chose to make a video with a voice-over narration. In that transition she shifted the focus of the project from a personal memoir to an essay about the end of Dodgertown, writing the narration in the third person and not including any of her experiences in the written/spoken text. She begins her unpublished video essay this way.

> Once upon a time, there was a place called Dodgertown. Dedicated fans, town locals, and many senior citizens—or snowbirds—went to Dodgertown for years to reunite with old friends, eat a Dodger dog, and watch their team play baseball. In this town there stands a stadium with roofless dugouts and intimate seating for sixty-four hundred. It is a stadium that might be empty in 2009, when the Dodgers move their spring training to Arizona after sixty years at Vero Beach.

In this text we see Jackie taking a distinctly distant stance toward the subject. She's writing about the town, the history, the context, and the future of spring training for the Los Angeles Dodgers, though it's not a great leap to assume that she is a Dodger fan and a proponent of the team staying in Vero Beach for spring training (e.g., "dedicated fans," "old friends," "roofless dugouts and intimate seating," etc.).

While the narrative text isn't personal, the images throughout the video are. Within the first few seconds, Jackie places herself visually into the essay, a move that she continues throughout the video. We see images of her as a toddler standing in front of a Dodgertown sign and posing with famous players. Not only are these self-portraits, as we saw with Alexandra and Katherine, but they are nostalgic photos of her and her family from multiple childhood trips, something we can determine because of her age in the pictures. After the toddler pictures, we see her as an elementary school–age girl getting a kiss on the cheek from Steve Garvey, who has also signed the picture with a personal note to her, further exemplifying her claims about the accessibility of the athletes. She also has pictures of her family members with players, close-up shots of players on the field that show she must have been in or close to the front row during practice, and pictures of her dad in a Dodger uniform during a camp for fans.

These images and many more like them, appear on the screen during her narration of the third-person essay. At no point does her narrative

reference or acknowledge them, and the images become a parallel, personalized essay that complements the argument, connecting her with the content of her otherwise distant argument. In fact her images become personalized evidence for her argument about the value of keeping the Dodgers in Vero Beach for spring training, or at least what the fans will miss out on if the team moves. The essay continues,

> No other spring training site so epitomizes the spring baseball experience like Dodgertown. Highly paid superstars rub shoulders with new rookies hoping for their big breaks. Fans in the stands are close enough to overhear dugout conversations. Players are happy to make themselves accessible to fans for autographs and photo opportunities.
>   Without having to provide any more evidence than her personal experience and the pictures taken in her youth, she demonstrates her argument and confirms the claims she makes through the narrative expressed in the images.

Halfway through the essay, Jackie shifts to what spring training would be like if the Dodgers left Vero Beach to play at more contemporary spring training stadiums. She transitions to this with the following voice-over:

> Take, for example, Cracker Jack stadium in Orlando. It's a beautiful stadium built by Disney, but bigger is not necessarily better considering the players are in dugouts and the fans no longer have easy access, if any access, to them . . . besides the fact that a ticket for a seat costs $32, where at Dodgertown it's only $12. It seems to be all about making money rather than making the fans who love this game happy.

The images that she uses for this part of the essay are still personal in that they are mostly photographs from her travel and perspective, but now they are distant, illustrating perfectly the degraded experience of the fans. The images she has at this point are taken from the larger, more commercial stadium. The players are so small in the images that the viewer can't tell who they are. They are small and distant, and they stand in stark contrast to the earlier, intimate close-up pictures of the players with the fans. Again, she doesn't need to explain her personal experiences in this section

of the essay. The images function to show her experience and support her argument without any need for direct, personal reference in the narration.

One might conclude that Jackie's essay is less personal than those of Alexandra or Katherine, but I would argue that the essay is as personal—if not more so—because of the way Jackie inserts herself into the conversation by demonstrating the intimacy of Dodgertown, in contrast with the distance of Cracker Jack Stadium. While she doesn't have a single personal pronoun in her entire video essay, the images supply the personal accounts and connections in ways that words alone could not. So while Jackie shifted from a personal to distant voice, her video essay engages the audience in a larger conversation about spring training facilities for Major League Baseball in ways that her memoir never did. And the essay is still highly personal because of the visual narratives. This connection to her audience and engagement with a larger conversation fulfills the essayistic nature of the personal writing assignment.

Conclusion

Alexandra's video essay is personal from the outset, framing her own use of mobile music devices within a larger cultural phenomenon where people are disconnected from others because they are plugged into the machine. Her narrative is never far from the argument, and she establishes connections with a very present audience through highly recognizable images and video clips from popular television and movies, Beatles' music in the background that many will connect to Apple's commercials, and, most importantly, her own story that she unfolds from the past to the present. She asserts a tentative position on the role of music technologies and the unintended consequences they have had on her social life and invites the reader to connect with her through shared stories and perspectives.

Katherine makes an argument about how maps and finding locations have radically changed with new, digital technologies. While her essay is more formal in the sense that she references outside sources as authority figures, the key moment in the project is the personal narrative about her study abroad experience and learning to navigate a strange city without the help of her smartphone. While her essay is specific to her situation, she uses it as a springboard to connect with her reader and establish her position on the topic she had been largely only describing up to this point.

While the audience might not have had the same experience in Sydney, we are invited to insert our own experiences of being lost or finding out how to get somewhere "the old-fashioned way," which then connects us to Katherine and her topic.

Jackie's video essay laments the loss of something that she valued in treasured childhood experiences. In her remediation from a personal memoir to a video essay, she develops a more distant, third-person voice to argue that the new spring training facilities don't offer fans the same kinds of experiences as the traditional venues. Through the use of personal images, she ties the conversation about spring training facilities to her own experiences and uses them to demonstrate the points she makes through her words. Because the images in the old and new photographs validate her points, Jackie's personal experience and perspectives are central to the essay, and thus make it personal writing.

All three video essays use popular television, movies, photographs, and music to situate the authors' voices within larger cultural conversations about these contemporary issues. The audience is invited to connect with these references and thus makes strong bonds with the authors. But it is perhaps in the authors' own self-representations—though audio, video, image, and word—where they connect most with the audience, which is more real and authentic since it is often circulated beyond the class through sites that can be accessed by larger publics. Through multiple modalities, the functions and characteristics of the personal essay are met and even to some extent exceeded. This harkens back to how Epstein explains the personal essay as a form of discovery: "What one discovers in writing such essays is where one stands on complex issues, problems, questions, subjects. In writing the essay, one tests one's feelings, instincts, and thoughts in the crucible of composition." These videos are such a crucible where the students try or attempt to assert their voices and perspectives into larger conversations about issues relevant to them and others around them. The personal video essay is an opportunity to engage students in personal writing that teaches them some of the essential moves composers make with ideas and audiences in the digital age.

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5 Stories within Stories
Three Reflections on Working with the DALN

Ben McCorkle, Paige Arrington, and Michael Harker

"WOULD YOU LIKE TO TELL ME A STORY?"

This question is potentially one of the most meaningful invitations to human interaction. It invites a display of creativity, of connection, of shared vulnerability on the part of the asker and the asked alike. It's also a question that we here at the DALN are fond of asking on a regular basis. The DALN, or Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (daln.osu.edu), is a publicly available online archive of over 7,000 personal literacy narratives that has international reach in terms of both submitters and end users. The archive consists of a variety of files and media formats. Stories that people have told us directly in interviews and conversations. Stories that they have written themselves in the privacy of their own homes. Stories that they have recorded and edited, incorporating musical performance or hand-drawn illustration or digital media production or whatever surprise talents they possess. But whatever the medium a submitter chooses, whatever the means by which he or she gives us these gifts, the point is this: they have chosen to share their stories, not only with us, but with a potentially greater public audience.

In that selfsame spirit, the three of us have decided to step up and tell our own stories about working with the DALN, sharing our own personally significant memories, high points, and poignant insights related to the building and sustaining of the project over the past decade. For the many of us who have worked with the project during this period—whether that be as directors, partners, individual contributors, volunteers, and more—we have taken away important and *personally relevant* stories that inform our investment in the mission of the DALN. First, Codirector Michael Harker discusses some of the challenges researchers face when collecting literacy narratives for the DALN. He also describes how an experience with an illness changed the way he listens to contributors who share stories with the archive. Next, Codirector Ben McCorkle recounts the positive impact

that working with the archival materials as a researcher had on one multi-lingual student's sense of identity and place within her university culture. Finally, DALN Fellow Paige Arrington relates her own incredible experience working to acquire the literacy narrative of former President Jimmy Carter. Taken together, these three stories exemplify what makes the DALN so important for so many of us: it is a resource with multiple points of entry that encourages and empowers us to reflect deeply and critically on the impact that literacy has had on each of our lives—as teachers, scholars, and as human beings. As literacy scholar Deborah Brandt reminds us, the study, promotion of, and participation in practices of literacy constitutes nothing short of a civil rights issue; she writes, "It favors the richer over the poorer, the freer over the jailed, the well connected over the newly arrived or left out" (169).

The DALN: A Bit of Background

First of all, for the uninitiated, we should probably tell you a little more about the DALN. Initially conceived around 2006, this project grew out of a conversation among academics from a handful of institutions (Ohio State University, University of Illinois, Michigan State, among others) that identified a real need in the field of literacy studies: basically, we wanted a place where people could share their literacy stories. A place that was relatively easy to get to. A place where scholars studying this stuff could go so that they could have access to firsthand accounts of how people learn, what motivates them, what discourages them, which childhood memories linger long into adulthood, and so on. So we decided to build that place ourselves, and after some initial powwows in person and over e-mail, we set off to do just that. We won't bore you with the technical details (okay, just a little bit: the project currently runs on an older instance of DSpace, which is an open-source, customizable repository program used to manage library collections, commercial inventories, and the like), but suffice it to say, after a period of development, internal testing, a preliminary phase where we seeded the archive with internal narratives, bureaucratic rigmarole, the whole enterprise went public in 2009.

People who contribute narratives to the DALN come from all over the globe. Narratives represent six of the seven continents (no one from Antarctica . . . yet!), all major regions of the United States, and refer to more

than ninety individual countries, territories, or distinct ethnic regions. The DALN has attracted nearly thirty thousand unique visitors as of this writing. By and large, most of them come from the United States (20K), but we also have visitors from China (498), the Russian Federation (279), and Sweden (267), among other places.

Even at this relatively early stage of the project's development, we're already seeing its benefit to the profession in teaching and scholarly contexts, as the resource allows us to reconceptualize how we participate in the making of a more vibrant rhetorical tradition and a living history of literacy (Cf. Strandjord). In addition to one edited collection exclusively focused on the archive, several other journal articles, dissertations, and chapters referencing the DALN have been published, with even more in the works. Additionally, teachers at several institutions regularly use the DALN in their classes.

Don't Just Do Something, Sit There: Mindful Listening and the DALN

> For things to reveal themselves to us, we need to be ready to abandon our views about them.
>
> —Thích Nhất Hạnh

> We think that the point is to pass the test or to overcome the problem, but the truth is that things don't really get solved. They come together and they fall apart.
>
> —Pema Chödrön

DALN volunteers are often called on to collect stories at convention meetings, literacy-related festivals like NCTE's National Day on Writing, and other special events. In these busy environments, people often feel like they don't have the time to stop and share a story with the archive. Without a doubt, the biggest challenge DALN volunteers face when collecting narratives for the archive is persuading potential contributors to take a moment, sit in a chair, and tell a story.

Over time I've changed the way I ask people to share stories with the archive. When I first started volunteering for the DALN, I would approach people and say something like, "Have you told us your literacy narrative

yet?" or "Tell me your story!" or "Have you heard about the DALN?" Although these questions would usually lead to meaningful conversations about the definition of literacy or the purpose of the DALN, it was rare that someone would actually accompany me to the DALN station to tell a story. Looking back, I'm not at all surprised I came up short with this approach. It took an unexpected experience to teach me why these initial questions weren't working and why making some fundamental changes in my everyday life could help me be a better colleague, happier person, and in the end, a more effective DALN volunteer.

The expression, "Don't Just Do Something, Sit There," is linked to the increasingly popular mindfulness movement, whose practitioners seek to bring greater awareness to the present moment through meditation, yoga, sitting, and other contemplative practices. I've practiced mindfulness off and on and in various forms for a few years now, but it hasn't been easy for me, and for good reason. The sentiment behind the expression "Don't Just Do Something, Sit There" can have unsettling implications for our daily lives, especially in an age when our fear of missing out, compulsion for action of any sort, and our desire for approval from others outweighs the awareness required to simply let some things be. With so much going on in our lives, it can seem counterintuitive to do less—or to stop doing entirely—to sit mindfully, breathe, listen, or meditate. Critics of contemplative practices associate mindfulness with wasting time, laziness, even ethical relativism. Gil Fronsdal, a teacher with the Insight Meditation Center, has another view. He characterizes sitting "as the essence of not doing . . . of simply being aware." I wish I could say that I learned about the essence and benefits of not doing through some uplifting experience at a yoga studio or a guided meditation app, but that's not how it happened for me.

Much of the awareness I now bring to practicing mindfulness in my everyday life, and especially in my work collecting narratives for the DALN, stems from an experience I had with a case of pneumonia in the summer of 2012. To make long story short, a lung infection left me mostly bedridden and unable to walk even the shortest distances. Because breathing became extremely difficult, seemingly ordinary tasks, like getting a glass of water, making a meal, or walking my dog, became risk/reward decisions. For a while, something as fundamental as sleeping became more of an act of faith, of trusting my body and lungs to do the right thing—to breathe in spite of the fact that I was trying to rest my mind. Like most people, I wasn't the type of person to sit still, especially when I was sick. As a graduate student

and newly minted PhD, I was that annoying colleague who would boast about juggling multiple projects at the same time. And while I was making progress professionally, I wasn't paying attention to how my approach to research and teaching was affecting my relationships with some of the most important people in my life. Simply put, I wasn't living with much intention, and while I was *doing* as much as I could, I was *just barely* getting by.

I share this story because it was during a few of these mostly sleepless nights that I was forced, in a sense, to bring awareness and focus to each passing breath. In doing so I found myself, for the first time in a long time, very much in the present moment. And as uncomfortable as those moments were, paying mindful attention to each breath helped me cultivate the type of awareness, openness, and listening practices that teachers like Pema Chödrön, Thích Nhất Hạnh, and Jon Kabat-Zinn describe as keys to living mindfully. A number of scholars in English studies have taken up mindfulness and consequences that stem from these activities. For some time, Gesa E. Kirsch has published articles, and led workshops and symposia aimed at encouraging our students to listen to one another and encouraging us to listen to ourselves, especially to our breathing. Her study, "From Introspection to Action," published in *College Composition Communication*, proposes that the field take up "contemplative practices—mindfulness, reflection, and introspection," because these practices "have the potential to foster writing development, intellectual growth, and civic engagement." An important part of fostering this growth relates to storytelling. "The sacredness of storytelling," she writes, "is a basic human need—the need to be heard, to make sense of the world, to connect with others, to survive" (W4). Cynthia Selfe, a cofounder of the DALN, also reminds us of the importance of the breath in storytelling. In "The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning," Selfe explains how the breath is inextricably linked with aurality, a neglected modality in our understanding of the meaning-making processes of our pedagogy. Taken together, Kirsch and Selfe throw into relief the visceral significance and importance of the embodied nature of storytelling. Collecting literacy narratives for the DALN, then, helps preserve the "sacredness of storytelling" in a variety of modalities (aural, video, and text) and underscores how listening to others with enhanced awareness allows us to acknowledge the complexity and relevance of literacy in our everyday lives.

Collecting literacy narratives for the DALN has provided many opportunities for practicing mindful listening. As a result of the new

perspective I bring to this process, I have shifted my approach when talking with potential contributors. I try to avoid asking questions I already know the answers to, like, "Have you told us your literacy narrative?" And I realize now that the command, "Tell us your story!" isn't nearly as convincing as sharing a story of my own, especially the one about the origins and purposes of the DALN, which is really a story about using technology to listen to and preserve the stories of as many people as possible. Sharing this story with potential contributors is important because two strengths of the DALN—its "digital" and "archive" functions—may discourage some from contributing to the DALN. Thus, a standard practice, for me, involves explaining the origins and purpose of the DALN and expressing a sincere willingness to listen to and talk through concerns about digitally archiving personal stories.

At a time when the pace of wisdom can't seem to keep up with the velocity of judgment and violence in this world, I can't imagine a better time to embrace lessons that come from listening with awareness and openness to the stories of the DALN. In my case, I wish it hadn't taken such a serious illness to shift my habits of listening, thinking, and living. After all, many of these lessons were ever-present in the scholarship of my chosen field of study. For decades now, teacher-researchers in English studies have emphasized the value of deep listening, reflection, and introspection to our students. For me, working to grow the DALN is a powerful and meaningful way of heeding these lessons. Every new political and cultural moment requires a particular type of literacy of its citizens. If this is the case, we would do well to meditate together on the idea that listening—listening with everything—with every sense and breath, and especially with our hearts, may very well be the crucial new action for literacy in our current moment.

Shouting from the Borderlands:
A New Mestiza Finds Her Voice

> Why am I compelled to write? . . . Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetites and anger . . . To become more intimate with myself and you. To

discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy. To dispel the myths that I am a mad prophet or a poor suffering soul. To convince myself that I am worthy and that what I have to say is not a pile of shit . . . Finally I write because I'm scared of writing, but I'm more scared of not writing.

—Gloria E. Anzaldúa

I'm going to tell you a story about how the DALN helped empower one woman as she struggled to find her sense of self—as a student, a multi-anguage learner, and a citizen. Last year, I taught a course called Digital Media and English Studies, which I thematically centered around the workflow of the DALN. In a nutshell, the course included several main assignments: I asked students to compose their own multimodal literacy narratives for potential submission to the site; I also asked them to go out in small teams to do the yeoman's work of field collection, gathering narratives from targeted demographics such as veterans, nontraditional students, or musicians; finally, I asked them to do the work of archival scholars, using the DALN's contents to create analyses of a thematic grouping. As I liked to joke to the class, by the time all was said and done, I will have run the students through the DALN meat grinder.

But as I just mentioned, this is a story about one student in particular, whom I'll call G. Initially reticent, shy, reluctant to weigh in on class discussion, G stood out in a class full of students who were all too eager to share their childhood experiences learning to read and write. After privately encouraging G to contribute more to discussions, I discovered that her family was originally from Mexico. She was the oldest of three children, and the first in the family to learn to read and write in English (her parents are strictly Spanish speakers, and G often served as the household translator for things such as phone calls, bills, and the like). She felt, as she put it, "stuck in between." Consequently, she confessed to feeling a little insecure about her English skills, this despite what I personally took to be a pretty solid handle on her second language. I tried to reassure her of this, but what kind of reassurance could I, a middle-aged white man, be able to offer her with any sort of legitimacy? I encouraged her to talk more, but in the back of my mind, I couldn't help but feel like she thought maybe I was picking on her a little bit—consequently, I didn't push too hard.

A couple of weeks later, and we were elbows-deep into the first assignment, the multimodal personal literacy narrative (with an emphasis

on *multimodal*). Here, G started off writing a traditional essay, and during the course of its development, I reminded her of the multimodal component. G took this direction with some trepidation, expressing a bit of reluctance at the idea of including audio or video recording that included her speaking. I assured her that she didn't need to include any footage she was uncomfortable with, and that an essay that incorporated still imagery, for example, could be extremely effective. G seemed somewhat relieved to hear this. Her final version ended up being *okay*. It pushed a thesis—growing up is hard in a bilingual home—without much in the way of sharing concrete examples, plus the images used were mostly generic clip art. Overall, though, it felt distant—self-protection masquerading as artificiality. To borrow G's phrase, the narrative felt stuck in-between. In my follow-up feedback, I suggested that G seek out additional submissions in the DALN with keywords such as *bilingual*, *ESL*, and the like. I explained that those shared experiences might come in handy as we worked our way through the rest of the course . . . and they might be fun to look at, too.

As we moved into the field collection phase of the course, G saw that there were other narratives by multilanguage learners in the archive—people with similar experiences to her own. I distinctly recall having a conversation with her where she exclaimed, "I guess I'm not a total outsider after all!" She went on to explain that she didn't feel isolated because of her experience, but rather part of a group with lots of shared overlap: feeling "exotic" in a class full of native speakers, serving as the household's go-between to interact with the broader world, the weird, dislocated feeling associated with thinking, speaking, and writing in two separate tongues. G mentioned how important it was for her to have seen and read those other accounts, testimonies of people's lives that, just by virtue of telling them, validated her own—this was an epiphany she wanted to help bring about in others. This assignment, then, became a chance for G to make an intervention by collecting even more narratives of multilanguage learners, more perspectives, more experiences.

By the time I sent teams out into the field to collect narratives, G was a woman on a mission. Again, she found herself in between, an intermediary between the DALN and the multilanguage learners whose stories she sought to collect. As she explained to me, she personally saw value in both the similarities *and* the differences in these experiences. As she put it to me, "The ones that sound like you make you feel like you belong; the ones that don't give you other ways of looking at your own situation that maybe you haven't even thought about before." Incidentally, G's team ended

up winning the DALN "Put a Bird on it" trophy (an incredibly tacky home decor statue of a pair of birds on a branch), awarded to the field collection team bringing in the most narratives. G's momentum helped bring it home, and, more important, she helped bring valuable narratives to our archives. I'll add that as an instructor personally invested in the success of the DALN, I was touched by how earnest, how *authentic*, G's motives were during this assignment—she wasn't simply performing for her grade, she was legitimately interested in leaving her mark on the site.

As the class turned its collective attention to the third assignment (the comparative analysis project), G wanted to continue studying the multilingual presence in the DALN. Partly because this assignment required additional research, and partly because I wanted to challenge G with some theory, I introduced her to *Borderlands*, the book by radical cultural critic Gloria Anzaldúa. This introduction led to critical insights on G's part about language, power, and the political act of labeling illiteracy (in one way or another, we're all illiterate—not knowing unfamiliar languages, or the codes associated with specific skills or activities). Here, G found that the in-between can be a place of power, of wonder, even, and really took Anzaldúa's words to heart. Her final project was a fairly savvy Prezi that deftly incorporated text, video, and still images: she studied narratives from multilingual learners from across the globe to make the argument that cultural friction is one of the biggest impediments to learning. It was one of the two best projects in the class, and to my mind, it demonstrated striking originality in terms of its research contribution.

By the time the course was over, G seemed much more outgoing and outspoken; she even wrote to me after the class was over about how she had shown the DALN to a local schoolteacher she knew who works with multilingual learners (we got six narratives from them!). More recently, she's served as a mentor for a local elementary-school student, also bilingual. In these instances, G has taken initiative as a citizen to make positive changes in her local community, initiative I'm not sure she would have felt empowered to take at the start of that semester. Now, I'm not suggesting that the DALN is single-handedly responsible for transforming this student's sense of self for the better . . . but I'm not *not* suggesting that, either. In all seriousness, though, being exposed to others telling their own stories, their own travails and triumphs associated with learning a new language, this student came to know that her experience wasn't necessarily as lonely and isolating as she had initially thought. As G came to realize this potential, she didn't

just internalize the knowledge and file it away for safekeeping—she actually used it for social good, too, by reaching out into her community to help spread the DALN mission, potentially helping younger students share their own stories and reclaim some autonomy in the process.

iPads and Orange Slices:
The Search for a President's Literacy Narrative

> Reading has always been a lie, a promise of fun . . . That was truly how I felt . . . until the day . . . I discovered . . .
>
> —Christina Schaeffers

> The reason I decided to get the tattoo "Off with her head" was because in the story . . .
>
> —Summer Leigh

> One summer she signed us up for . . . a summer reading program at the local library. And they had a giant map on the wall and each child got a whale with her name on it, a little paper cut-out whale, and the idea was . . . every book you read you got to advance your whale further in a trip around the world . . .
>
> —Natalie Podnar

After I got home from school, I sat at the table with my mom to practice that word. I just couldn't get it. I practiced and practiced, but nothing helped. My mom tried to help, but even she thought the word "arithmetic" was pretty hard to spell for a second grader . . . so she called my teacher. I waited as they talked, which seemed to go on for hours. Finally, my mom hung up the phone and said, "arithmetic: a rat in the house might eat the ice cream." I just looked at her with confusion. Her words made no sense. She grabbed a pen and a piece of paper and then wrote: "a rat in the house might eat the ice cream." It was a mnemonic device; I finally understood. I practiced the saying over and over in my head in order to help me spell the word.

I walked into the classroom the next day with confidence. I no longer had to be nervous or frustrated about taking spelling

tests. That was the first time that I was ever actually excited to go to school. When we came back from lunch, we pulled out our privacy folders and waited anxiously to begin our spelling test. Miss Chambers, our teacher, read through all twenty words, saving the best for last: arithmetic. I thought to myself, "a rat in the house might eat the ice cream," as I wrote the corresponding first letters on my paper. I was so proud of myself for remembering how to spell each and every word that week.

—Emily Weyl

The power of a story is not so much in its ability to entertain or even to move us, though we often get that wrong. The power lies in a story's expansion of what we can imagine for ourselves, and for our world.

This is the challenge and the beauty of the DALN. Rarely do we perceive the stories it asks from us as valuable. They aren't often entertaining in any conventional way, or extraordinary-seeming. Seldom do they resonate with meaning to us. For those of us who know the stories so intimately putting crafted words to them feels difficult. These are the stories of how we learned to read and write, to code and design. Built on foundations of the quotidian, these are our literacy narratives.

Perhaps the first gift of the DALN is in the question it inspires: what *is* a literacy narrative? When I first set out to acquire Jimmy Carter's my thoughts turned to a familiar question: How do we define the DALN? "Literacy" itself proves such a slippery term, and so familiar. Particularly for those of us in the businesses of writing, reading and teaching, we hear "literacy" enough that, like the very practices it delineates, we take the term's definition for granted. In my experience aggregating narratives for the DALN, confusion over the definition of "literacy narrative" holds for English professors and established children's literature authors as well as retired accountants and social studies teachers; when I mention the DALN people ask, "What is a literacy narrative?" I had no reason to believe Jimmy Carter's initial thinking would be different, so I fashioned an approach that had worked for me before.

In my letter I described the DALN "like StoryCorps for reading and writing." I wrote that the DALN is "an awesome project, archiving the personal stories people share about how they learned to read or write, what they remember of their early experiences with books and other technologies." "The idea," I continued later, "is to build a data set of real people's

experiences with literacy in order that we might temper, with facts, myths about literacy that often inform public attitudes and policy." Carter must have seen the value in such an archive, for his response to me, via a neatly typewritten letter, seems to fight itself, to push back against the common instinct that the literacy story, even that of a Nobel Peace Prize winner and former president of the United States, doesn't much matter.

Carter's DALN entry is titled, "I'm afraid I don't have a very good story." It is the first line of his narrative and set apart as its own paragraph. It is, in linguistic form, the initial shrug I usually get when I ask people for their literacy narratives. I continue to be amazed by this common first reaction. Yet these stories also tend to take shape quickly in the minds and hearts of their speakers. This, too, is illustrated in Carter's letter. In spite of his initial apology, Carter unfolds three paragraphs—263 words, of packed, compelling prose from which we can imagine many things: a boy of a family of modest means, sitting at a table during dinner in the 1920s American South, his father thumbing free a section of a succulent orange, reward for the next child to read an "entire page in one of the children's books." Or the boy in school sitting among classmates, all concentrating on the "constant practice" of cursive writing.

Toward the end Carter boasts, "I can still write and even sign my name legibly." How this made me laugh! Because of course he did, at the end of the letter, sign his name "legibly." I felt sure I had ended my letter to him with a signature, too, an utterly illegible one. But then, we are of different generations, having experienced the influence of education philosophies and approaches that shape our values, attitudes, and competencies throughout our lives, even seventy years after that classroom cursive-drill, or thirty-three years after sitting in seventh-grade biology, practicing my signature in the margins of a notebook, seeking a particular pattern of flourishes with the power of *suggesting* my name and my personality all at once.

So much can be gleaned by exploring the answers to the questions: How did you come to learn to read and write? How did you come to learn how to use a computer? Most likely you've forgotten. Until you hear the questions, the memories stay buried. But breathing life into them can shape the way someone else lives, sometimes profoundly, and there is no way you can know who will be so affected by your story and how.

My son is three years old. He deftly uses an iPad, swiping from one screen to the next, scrolling up and down to view eBook options. Like many, we have a "no electronics at the dinner table" rule in the house. Lately I've been thinking about Carter's literacy narrative, wondering what Carter

would have been like had his parents not encouraged reading so much, had they banned it from the dinner table and the natural rewards present there. It makes me rethink our rule in many ways (although it hasn't changed yet). What might I be encouraging by allowing my son to read on the iPad at the dinner table, or look at pictures? Would it be different to allow him to read at the dinner table? Is it somehow less appropriate these days to enforce such a rule than it would have been in the 1920s, when Carter's family—none of whom possessed a college degree—encouraged reading, even at the dinner table. The DALN inspires this kind of thinking. . . .

Some Parting Thoughts

The DALN has already proven to be a valuable site of research for scholars in literacy studies, covering literacy-related topics ranging from disability, ethnic and racial identity, workplace cultures, and more. But more than that, even, it's a repository of human experience. It opens up space for interaction, sometimes in surprising ways. They are, as Kara Wittman characterizes (as she reframes instructors' marginal comments on student writing as themselves a miniature literacy narrative based on creating dialogue with student writing), a kind of writing-as-gift (682).

The stories we've shared here demonstrate different ways of working our way through the archive: we've reseen ourselves and others in terms of where we've come from, how we've worked our various ways through the world, and the legacies we can help leave behind for others.

Who we are not only determines the stories we tell, but how we receive them as listeners, readers, or viewers. Consequently, who tells stories—not to mention who *hears* stories—is critically important. It doesn't necessarily matter if you're well known or not, either. As long as someone speaks to a relatable experience, that's the important thing: to inspire, to caution, to encourage, to commiserate, to offer a new way of seeing an overly familiar situation. Recognizing this capacity is reason enough to keep the project up, running, and growing for as long as we're able.

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Part Two

Blogging, Tweeting, Texting, and Online Classes

6 Living the Expressivists' Dream

Writing Meets Blogging as Theory Meets Practice

Bonnie Sunstein

NOT FAR INTO THE NEW MILLENNIUM, I found myself making a decision about blogs when a colleague looked at my syllabus, then at me, and rolled her eyes. "Don't you think it's about time you consider *blogs* in your Teaching of Writing course?"

"Ohhhhh, nooooo, not blogs." I exhaled a hefty breath, barely stopping to think. "There's no rigor in blogs," I answered. "They're private, like journals. Well . . . they're not really like journals. They're not like first drafts, either. They're not even like letters. Well . . . they're more immediate, more exploratory. And they expect response. And you can't revise what you write." My neck stiffened as I babbled, and then I admitted, "Truth is . . . I don't know much about blogs. But don't ask me to do it. I'm serious, I can't stuff one more assignment into this course. It's *just fine* the way it is."

"With all due respect, Professor Sunstein," she said. "Sounds more like *your* problem than a problem with blogs."

She was right, of course. Was the problem with the course or the students, or was it me? Why fix something if it's not broken? If you deny something's existence, how do you know it's broken at all? In fact, "it" was indeed my problem. At the time, I was neither a blog-maker nor a blog-follower. The word alone made me want to laugh. Is that the full word, *weblog*? A robotic techno-strategy that keeps track of itself? Is it a verb: like "to slog?" Something tedious about the "og" at the end of the word. Or is it a noun: like that roly-poly seventies toy, the Weeble? No. Web. Log. Oh. A "log" you can keep on the web. A journal or a diary, focused as it explores a thought, like a personal essay, but for a single self or an undetermined audience? Self-indulgent? Narcissistic? Interiority externalized? I didn't want to buy it for my course.

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I heard myself as a stiff, inflexible curmudgeon making judgments about peoples' writing choices, my very own field of scholarship, unwilling simply because I hadn't tried it. And no surprise; once I tried it, I began to see the blog as an entire, vast, unexamined new register of discourse, one that has special qualities, even beauty, and grace. It is at once private and public, at once personal and professional. We don't yet have fixed rules for blogs, but the blog has a sturdy family tree of discursive and philosophical ancestors and is, in fact, both relevant and complicated to use in a writing classroom. For the rest of this chapter, I'll tell you what I mean.

Teacher-Writers Meet Blogs

I met blogs with people who want to become teachers of writing. Some were already bloggers; some barely knew the word. Over five years, under pressure, across departments, against my own resistance, inside one course already packed with writing assignments, I began to require them. I wanted all of us to grapple with our culture's evolving definitions of "writing" and "writer," think about what those definitions mean for writing in schools, and simultaneously reinforce what decades of research and centuries of theory teach us about them. Although I didn't want to do it at all, I believed we needed to base our conversation in actual experience. And so we took to blogs, twenty-five students per semester, two semesters a year, three years. I kept a blog, too, tried to attach grades to our activities, even graded myself, shared what I did, and wrote about how I did it. "Write one entry per week, and respond to at least three people," I concluded after first thinking everyone could respond to everyone each week. I envisioned a slick, articulated record-keeping system in which I'd read all blogs, all responses, and record everyone's activity. Did I have one? No. I did keep careful records, but that was as far as it went. Here is the text of the original assignment:

> *Your Blog*
>
> We all know that community is crucial to developing writers and to this statement, I'd add also that community is crucial to developing writing TEACHERS! Here, in *Approaches to Teaching Writing*, our community takes the form of classroom discussions, peer workshops, one-pagers, formal readings, final papers, and weekly blogs. Yes, that's right. Blogs.

For this semester, you will each create a blog, from www.wordpress.com (free, and internally compatible) in which you reflect as writers, as teachers of writers, and as students of teaching and writing. You may discuss your course readings, your confusion and thoughts about them. You may discuss your drafts, your frustrations and successes. You may discuss who you are as a writer, as a teacher, as a teacher of other writers while you read, discuss, and learn more about this beautiful, inspiring, and oftentimes challenging profession.

In other words, you may blog about anything related to yourself as a writer and developing writing teacher. Let the blog help you self-assess your growth; let it be an *online* part of your writing portfolio. Our ideas constantly evolve. Let the blog be that space in which you might see (and interpret) that transformation. Here are some guidelines:

1. Start your blog, and write your first post by Wednesday, September 25. E-mail the URL for your blog to me, and I'll make a class list for us all to share.
2. Post at least one new entry per week (by Monday morning 10 a.m.).
3. Comment on at least 3 of your colleagues' entries per week, making a conscious effort to read beyond your friends or your writing group.
4. Keep your blogs appropriate to English education; feel free to post links to relevant articles, videos, other blogs, etc. But keep the focus of this blog for this class.
5. Write a second post and comment on at least THREE of your classmates' blog entries before Monday, October 1, at noon.
6. Then keep it going, weekly, and seek out at least three others' blogs each week.

Will it require risk and reflection and rigor to write and read that much and that personally? You bet. In a famous 1963 lecture, long before blogs, author James Baldwin said of writing and reading, "It is not a day at the bargain counter. It is a total risk of everything, of you and who you think you are, who you think you'd like to be, where you think you'd like

> to go—everything, and this forever, forever . . . ." (251). I'm
> hoping we'll learn from our blog space why it is we want to
> take these risks as writers, readers, and teachers. I'm hoping
> we'll see whether keeping blogs will help us do that.
>
> And no, I won't evaluate and grade your ideas. I can't.
> They're yours! But I can keep track of whether you do them.
> I will devote an overall percentage of your final grade attached
> to the presence of your blog.

For this one class alone, there would be 25 x 14 weeks = 336 weekly blogs; then three per student per week: 25 x 3 = 75 responses x 14 = 1050. Was I willing to snoop into 1,386 blogs that semester? No. I knew my slick dream for a record-keeping system and a promise to read them all would paralyze me. Instead, I decided to simply be an interested blogger with my students, to read according to the time and interest available to me each week, and respond as I was asking them to do. I exceeded my minimum in responses, but did not meet my minimum in entries. I gave myself a C. I was, in fact, pretty average.

"You end up writing about yourself," writes Andrew Sullivan (2008) in an *Atlantic* essay called "Why I Blog," "since you are a relatively fixed point in this constant interaction with the ideas and facts of the exterior world. . . . Even the most careful and self-aware blogger will reveal more about himself than he wants to in a few unguarded sentences and publish them before he has the sense to hit Delete." My students and I probably did have the sense to delete, but we felt unguarded enough to establish collegial conversation. Over three years and six courses, we did reveal much about ourselves in relationship to the teaching of writing.

The results revealed a staggering difference in discourses from any I'd ever seen in this course, meditations about ideas and classroom observations, responses to readings, sharing of peripheral but relevant ideas, and a "trying on" of thoughts. Each blog's limited public readership came alive each week with nuances that led to clearer thinking for the more formal writing and teaching the course required. It's offered my graduate students and me much new knowledge for our work with preservice teachers (Ohlmann and Sunstein, 2012 and 2013). Those who continued to blog after the class was over, now in schools themselves, have observed how it became part of their writing practice—not only for them but for their students.

Approaches to Teaching Writing runs every semester. It is a course that attracts students from many "word" departments: journalism,

communications studies, fiction, poetry, nonfiction, rhetoric, literacy studies, and library studies. I've been lucky to have taught it for over twenty years. It's an elective, but students for whom it is a nonnegotiable requirement are those who will become high school and middle school writing teachers. They write a lot. They read theory and pedagogy. They form permanent writing groups, try varieties of conferences and responses, and watch themselves as they do each task. They learn about reflection and revision by keeping track of every move they make, and then they analyze their revisions. They change sentences, refine whole thoughts, add paragraphs of exposition, and watch the drafting process. They experiment with grammar, syntax, and sentence structures. They consider essay genres, traditional genres, multi-genres, blended genres. Every semester, they coach student writers who are very different from themselves. The course is what educators like to call "praxis-driven": students study the theories of teaching writing by being both writers and teachers, by acknowledging and documenting what they do, by recognizing who helps them and what they do to help others, and by identifying how they understand as they revise. They can choose to present their composing digitally or traditionally. I change the content each semester with new choices of books and articles, new exercises and assignments, new partnerships, but I let myself keep my favorite "old chestnuts," and try to do the assignments with them.

My own blog held the personal inside the professional, and I surprised myself about how political it became. I didn't rant exactly; I summarized. Over a long career, I've accumulated many colleagues across the country from conferences, projects, and publications, and am grateful to have almost daily cyber-side-conversations about teaching, teachers, articles, books, and current events having to do with schools and literacy. Here was a place I found I could share elements of those conversations with my students, without compromising the weekly focus of my course, and meditate on how those issues reappear in different forms over time. It felt like a midday escape into a coffee shop.

Here is one entry from November 2013, which I titled: "Treat'em Like Robots, Work'em Like Robots, Test'em Like Robots. . . . We Get Robots."

> I know some of you are currently studying with my colleague Blaine Greteman in a Shakespeare course, and I know you're overwhelmed with the work of becoming an English teacher yourself, but just in case you didn't know about this, here's a great piece he did for the *New Republic*, and thank goodness,

it's getting lots and lots of national attention. He explores the "results" of schools using the "Lexile," an insidious measuring algorithm that measures sentence length and vocabulary, and POOF, attaches numbers to "reading levels." This is not a new practice: the idea of "reading levels" is a result, I think, of the industrial revolution a few centuries ago—linking ideas of parts-to-whole with mastery of "product," somehow, and then applying it to humans. In the early seventies, I remember "T-Units," a measurement for people's writing that counted dependent and independent clauses and then assigned a value to a piece of writing. Think of Faulkner and Hemingway. I remember thinking that all those years ago. Faulkner (and Henry James as well as his philosopher bro William) would have been labeled stars of the T-Unit, and people like Hemingway, Conrad, cummings, Kerouac, Vonnegut, Cather might not have even been allowed to write a word. Nothing in there about writing for a reader; nothing in there about reading as a writer . . . the very stuff that marks us as literate humans. It's only about measuring word production. You'll see when we have our read-around tomorrow night what kinds of differences we'll find—what poignant and complicated and unmeasurable ideas—we will generate in one short evening of reading our work. Watch! You won't feel like a robot, and no one will even BEGIN to think which one of us DESERVES to read because of what kind of Lexile "level" we happen to have written.

And speaking of robotic achievement, here's an insider NPR piece that just aired on Friday about the SAT and how it's scored. I've known lots of people who've been scorers in the summer (a great way to make some extra $$ for a teacher, by the way), but when you hear the esteemed Ann Ruggles Gere, professor of English Ed at U Mich, describe the process, you probably won't be as shocked as the NPR reporter. . . . or maybe you will. (Gere interview, 2008)

So . . . to summarize . . . let's remember, if it feels like a robot, acts like a robot, measures like a robot, it probably is. And . . . treat 'em like robots, work 'em like robots, test 'em like robots, and poof! We have robots!!

I had many responses, including this reaction from one student, Nicole:

> Wow, thanks for sharing this information. I had never heard of "T-Units" before reading your post, and I also had no idea that the people who score SAT essays are expected to read 20 essays an hour! Are you sure? That is outrageous! As a part of my current practicum experience, I have been helping my cooperating teacher with grading students' essays. Granted, I'm new to the whole grading shtick—but there's no way that I'd be able to do justice to their work in three minutes!

In another entry which I called "About Conferences," I began by talking about our visiting English teacher from rural China, who'd remarked that he was most shocked and touched by our writing conferences. We'd had a group conference with two volunteer freshman writers; all of us having read both of their papers, and practicing responses together. He'd never seen anything like it; people talking one-on-one about each others' writing, en masse. I said I wasn't surprised. I wrote,

> I've always thought the value of a writing conference is so overlooked and under-studied, probably because we don't do them enough—or we think we're too busy. I hate the term "conferencing"; it cracks me up. Not a word at all, but a verbal suggestion of the threat of turning a good idea into a bad habit—or another requirement. We were *conferring*, deeply, together, and with focus. They knew it and we knew it. We listened to them, we read their papers carefully, we asked great questions to help their independence and effectiveness as writers. And we all enjoyed it.
>
> Since my days as a graduate student, I've had a few people on my own private list who can read my drafts and ask the kinds of questions I need to move myself along as a writer—and a thinker. For me, I've learned I can write beautifully about something I haven't thought through. My problem is ALWAYS that I haven't thought something out enough—so I need good thinkers to be my readers. I don't ever trust my thinking, like even now as I write to you about conferences. So . . . I'm just getting the conversation going about this in

hopes someone might want to add to it. Anyone? Do you think while you write? I do. In fact, I think *because* I write. Would I think if I didn't write? I don't, um, think so.

Within a scant few hours, seven people had reactions to my meditation about how conferring with a trusted reader about your writing leads to thinking, at least for me.

Scott: There are a few times when I've found myself in situations where I'm not ready to write. I think this usually happens when I've been assigned a topic to write about: I just haven't lived long enough with the subject or material, haven't turned it around enough or poked and prodded at it enough to find my way in. I agree with Breana that sometimes a lot of prewriting is done in the head, though for me it's never very concrete; that is, I usually can't just write it in my head and "transcribe" it later. If I try to do that I'll forget what it was I'd "written." But when it's not ready to come out, it's almost something that can be felt in the body: it's just not there and there's no use forcing it. Perl spoke of having these bodily sensations while we write and I've noticed it quite a bit in myself. Facial expressions, head bopping, arm gestures all show up . . . I know I'm in fifth gear and cruising when I've crossed my legs at the keyboard. It's kind of funny to think of this and observe myself. Talking and learning about these kinds of subjects has been my favorite part of this class. What I've always enjoyed about writing was my ability to surprise myself when writing, and as I was taught in the more "traditional" way it's been nice to learn the validity of my own personal experiences.

And then Michelle chimed in with an extension of Scott's thoughts about feeling his thinking, finding fluency, and achieving "fifth gear" as he writes. Michelle recognizes that her interest in the sound of the words gets in the way of her fluency, and it takes revision for her to really understand what she's thinking.

Michelle: Good question, and I had honestly never, ever thought about this before. Here is what I am afraid the true

answer is for me: I DON'T think when I write. I think that when I write, what I am mostly doing is LISTENING. For me, the first and primary focus seems to be on how the words SOUND, if they are flowing, if they match up, if there is repetition and intention in the way the words are heard. I think that what the words MEAN is sometimes the secondary focus for me, and if the meaning is secondary, then, to me, that means the THINKING must be secondary. Do you see what I mean? Oftentimes the thinking comes in for me at the revision or review stage, where I'm trying to match my sounds up and make sense of what I blurted onto the page. And sometimes I am conscious of an awareness that I am becoming tangled in my words, that my desire to maintain the sound is impinging on my ability to make sense. This is an excellent distinction you've made, a real eye-opener, as it makes me realize that my best critical readers, those sneak-peekers that you foist your first drafts upon, are also great thinkers. In fact, my "usual suspects" are both people whom I have often called "Think-y."

I was thrilled to read this discussion, and very conscious that I might have needed to stop it during a regular weekly class, thinking about "coverage." I was thrilled, too, to be able to write back.

Wow, Michelle, Scott, Randi, Madella, and Breana! You've really got me THINKING, even more, about this. Don Murray used the phrase "The Listening Eye," as Michelle's note reminds me. For me as a writer, the act of thinking REQUIRES a listener (not me, your teacher), someone with whom I've conferred—who's checking to see if I make sense. Sound without sense (like two of my favorite poems, "Jabberwocky" and "The Owl and the Pussycat") are full of great sound—and great metaphorical possibilities, but not every reader can make sense of them. Not everyone cares about how words sound. I do. Michelle does. But lots of good writers don't have it high on their list. Thanks for helping me see why my meditation on conferences was really all about how we need to THINK about HOW WE THINK when we write.

The Personal Inside the Professional

All writing is personal, whether it's an account of formal research, a five-paragraph essay, a legal brief, a fictional narrative, a journalistic portrait, a letter to an insurance company, a police report. We know that by now. Composition researchers, theorists, and teachers have studied forms of writing for millennia. When the audience is clear, the narrator can be clear, too. As a reader and a teacher of writing, I believe that author-evacuated text is never okay. Neither Plato nor Aristotle thought so, either.

We don't often get that message in school. Student writers and new teachers arrive in our classrooms bruised by ironclad requirements and rules for the five-paragraph essay, argumentative essay, college admissions essay, outcomes assessments, common core standards initiatives and requirements. Their beliefs are rigid and sure: that the passive voice signals "objectivity," that a narrator belongs only in fiction, that multisyllabic words and complex sentences hold more value than simple ones. Teachers' institutional boundaries echo those bruises in the cyber-boxes into which we "upload evidence of student outcomes," and the convoluted language of rubrics we're required to stack on spreadsheets (one student told me a rubric reminded him of a jail). Why condemn students and teachers to Rubric Jail when we know better, when we know so much more?

And so we have a dilemma. Contemporary student writing is too often a formulaic essay inside a preordained rubric under a curriculum mandate. But it's also a meditative, memoiristic status statement on a Facebook page. Composition theory, nonfiction writing, and plain commonsense remind us that writing behavior cannot be so binary. How do writing teachers understand, work with, and reconcile this conflict? As I worked my way through this assignment, I hoped that we'd see these ways to teach writing are not simply a "sign of the times," but a "sign" pointing to what is most unique and classic about the act of writing itself: a person having an idea, exploring it, and shaping it for another person. Consider the ways human technology has transformed the very act of writing and revising: from wax tablet to pencil and eraser to typewriter with correction tape to computer with delete key to notebooks on our laps to small tablet computers to small phones and watches. But concurrently in time, writing remains fluid and dependent on social expectations.

"I'll wager that the major challenge of twenty-first century writing instruction," writes Thomas Newkirk, "will be similar to the challenge of

twentieth-century writing instruction or first century writing instruction—that is, to resist the forces that pull us away from genuinely helping students to engage in writing" (3–4). We've always had conflict about human expression—and teaching it.

Andrew Sullivan draws a direct connection for the contemporary blogger.

> Alone in front of a computer, at any moment, are two people: a blogger and a reader. The proximity is palpable, the moment human—whatever authority a blogger has is derived not from the institution he works for but from the humanness he conveys. This is writing with emotion not just under but always breaking through the surface. It renders a writer and a reader not just connected but linked in a visceral, personal way. The only term that really describes this is *friendship*. And it is a relatively new thing to write for thousands and thousands of friends. The blogosphere has added a whole new idiom to the act of writing and has introduced an entirely new generation to nonfiction. It has enabled writers to write out loud in ways never seen or understood before.

Write out loud indeed. The idea of trying on a thought, trying out an audience. I think we have enough connections to reexamine what was once called "Expressivism," and see how it fits with our contemporary online habits.

Are Blogs an Expressivist's Dream Genre?

For me, "expressivist" writing meant rigor, independence, and discipline, not wimpiness or fluff. It was, as James Britton showed, an early step in drafting thinking, a way to sketch ideas before one moving one's expressive text to more formal "transactional" or "poetic" writing. I think allowing students to do that kind of sketching is what keeps us out of school Rubric Jail. Teaching Writing means paying attention to words—each time, each person, each page—whether those words are yours or your students.' No computer program or rubric can record or evaluate such unique human processes. Ever. Not for authentic writing or creative thinking.

"There are no rules, no absolutes; just alternatives," writes Donald Murray (1972). . . . "All writing is experimental." In the fifth edition his popular text *The Craft of Revision*, at eighty, he writes to an undefined but almost bloglike reader, "Happily irresponsible, I do not reread what I have written in previous editions until I have scratched down the topics I want to explore in the latest edition . . . recording the answers, questions, doubts, contradictions, insights, and instructive failures that have made my mind itch" (xi). Like a master blogger, Murray invites his reader into his head and next to his desk, into his fifth edition, illustrating triumphs and instructional failures on the page. He offers students and teachers guidance but not rules, details about habits, strategies for saving and deleting. And each edition, he announces the simple message that writing *is* revision.

Our legacy in composition theory—and the blogging generations who've benefited from it—is worthy of attention. For years, critics maligned the term *expressivism* in the teaching of writing. But the theorists, researchers, and practitioners most often under attack (Janet Emig, Peter Elbow, James Britton, Ann Berthoff, Ken Macrorie, Donald Murray, and Sondra Perl) were simply trying to describe the internal act of thinking on the page: "shaping at the point of utterance" (Britton), "freewriting" (Elbow), "making meaning" (Berthoff), "incubation" (Emig), "felt sense" and "retrospective structuring" (Perl).

None of these theorists had blogs at the time they were theorizing, or even dreamed of them. I wish they had. The more time that passes, the more I think about how blogging plays out the intended purposes of expressive writing. "Blogging is . . . to writing what extreme sports are to athletics," writes Sullivan, "more free-form, more accident-prone, less formal, more alive. It is, in many ways, writing out loud." Murray, one of my teachers, wrote often about working toward the "instructive failure," told us often to "expect the unexpected." He lived by an ancient phrase from Horace that hung over his computer "Nulla sine dies linea" ("never a day without a line"), and delighted in handing out laminated copies of it for our computers. Mine is framed and hanging within eye's reach, as I write this. For Murray, a blog would have saved the cost of the rolls of stamps and boxes of business envelopes he used to mail his current drafts to many of us from the post office every day. He felt it important to share his thinking with colleagues, friends, and students nonetheless. He never lost sight of why it was important to do so, as my students reminded me in the "conference" conversation above.

The blog, I think, goes further than just an act of sharing. For me, it now becomes a point of discussion as "expressive writing," a contribution to writing theory that's already embedded in our history.

Without the notion of expressive writing (and what we've learned from teaching it), contemporary bloggers would have fewer options as they craft. We wouldn't understand our concepts of audience or exchange. Even James Berlin (1982), a harsh critic of "expressivism," noted its reliance on dialogue, "getting rid of what's untrue to the writer's private vision," understanding that writers in process move their text and ideas toward an audience—sometimes specified, sometimes not. Sometimes fixed, sometimes growing.

For theorists of writing in Western thought since Plato, Aristotle, and Quintilian, writing's basic principles remain constant across modes, media, and millennia: writing is a social act, writing is a tool for thinking, writing is recursive, writing involves collaboration, and a writing community makes the concept of audience more visible. Blogging allows safe experiments, a public audience limited to your followers, and followers limited to your public voice.

For essayists, the very form illustrates why we want to blog. Montaigne's notion of "essai" (to try out) might as well imply the "trying out" of articulating thoughts: "The tone and inflection of my voice help to express the meaning of my words; it is for me to regulate it in such a way as to make myself understood. . . . There is a voice for teaching, a voice for flattery, and a voice for scolding. I would have my voice not only reach my listener, but perhaps strike him and pierce him through" (372).

Eighteenth-century essayist Joseph Addison might as well have been a blogger about teaching writing. In his "On the Essay Form," he issues a dictum about concision and voice: "give the Virtue of a full Draught in a few Drops. . . . Were all Books reduced thus to their Quintessence, many a bulky Author would make his Appearance in a Penny-Paper. . . ." (1711)

Three hundred and five years later, my colleague and student, Ethan Madore, in a description of his nonfiction course writes, "This class will explore the boundaries of personal writing, chasing the self through what is obviously personal, memoir and personal essays, to where its presence is most unexpected. All the while, we'll be asking: What makes us interesting? How can we use ourselves as windows into the universal? How can we find deeply personal revelations in the world external?"

Chasing the self, indeed, toward windows into the universal, as Ethan writes to his students, is what essayists have done for millennia and what blogs can do for us without our even knowing they're doing it. We test our ideas, mash up our experience, our reading, our talking, in a safe space with safe readers, and we try it on.

At the end of her "The Essayification of Everything" (2013), in the *New York Times*, Christy Wampole writes, "The essay, like this one, is a form for trying out the heretofore untried. Its spirit resists closed-ended, hierarchical thinking and encourages both writer and reader to postpone their verdict on life. It is an invitation to maintain the elasticity of mind and to get comfortable with the world's inherent ambivalence. And, most importantly, it is an imaginative rehearsal of what isn't but could be."

What yet "isn't but could be" is exactly where prospective writing teachers are, and, despite my resistance, I saw the same kind of "trying on" in their blogs, and I could see their blogs as safe, mini-essays ready for further exploration (or not), in the tradition of expressivist intention and the historical roots of the essay itself.

Rodesiler and Pace's analysis of English teachers' blogs suggests that their writerly identities are an escape from having to be critics of student writing. They extend the work to prospective teachers as well. "Too often the prospective teachers we meet see these web activities as assignments for students and not as literacy practices that might inform their own thinking and development (375). They illustrate English teachers who participate online, finding connections with like-minded educators, and beginning to view themselves as both worthy teachers and worthy writers.

So, free from the confines of set expectations (and in this case grades), my student-teacher bloggers and I use the space as an open forum to express ideas, ask questions, seek response, disclose frustration, test ideas, share materials, and display writing. One student wrote, "we could interact a bit more freely and on our own terms without having the presence of a teacher over our shoulders, however helpful or encouraging that teacher may be." Encouraging, I hope, a gentle over-the-shoulder presence. I was wrong. What I see in our blogs is, in fact, rigor inside a long, studied tradition of what we might still call "expressivist." A dream turned real, indeed, hiding inside the behavior of one course's collective blogs.

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7 Rapid Organicness
Using Twitter to Expand Young Writers' Creativity and Their Sense of Community

Brian Oliu

ONE OF THE MAIN THINGS that I stress in my creative writing classroom is that I think of my students as writers, rather than simply students. I attempt to drive home the concept that we are a writing community—that instead of viewing the class as a course with various due dates and writing assignments, the course should serve as a space where a small community of authors discuss their common goals. While I find it is important to affirm for my students that they are writers, it isn't simply enough to bestow on them that title—besides, who am I to determine who is a writer or not? Instead, I attempt to demonstrate the fact that successful writers are constantly creating: the key is in the process of writing, rather than the finished product. I also encourage my students to think critically about audience: that unlike the majority of their coursework in other classes, writing is not simply meant for their professor and their classmates—successful writing is both aware and engages with a multitude of readers. One of the ways that I attempt to break down these preconceived notions of "writing for class" is embracing the notion of rapid organicness for writing—to have students generate as much creative work as possible from a place that is genuine and natural, instead of being concerned with the parameters of an assignment, or whether something is perfect and polished. I have turned to utilizing Twitter in the classroom, as I have found that the microblogging social networking platform is a perfect medium for young writers: it allows them to realize that there is an active writing world beyond their classroom, it fosters community within the classroom as well as the literary world, it allows for creative expression and experimentation without the pressure to craft perfect work, and it gives writers an extended sense of their writing audience that helps form good artistic habits.

I am obsessed with Twitter: I receive all of my news through the medium, as well as tell jokes, watch NBA vines, and find myself mindlessly

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scrolling through the three thousand–plus accounts that I follow. I also have connected with many fellow writers and publishers on Twitter—I've been introduced to the work of Cheryl Strayed when she tweeted under @DearSugar, and I have followed the #AWP hashtag religiously when it is conference time. I have retweeted and championed great writing and, in return, I have been fortunate enough to receive retweets and #follow-fridays directed at my own work. A goal for my students is to make them recognize that the writing world is an active community that they are welcome to join. The poet Gina Myers in an interview with *NPM Daily* says,

> I do not believe in the writer alone in his or her room. I believe in exchange, dialogue, and community, even when the community fails us or when I fail my community, even when we are tasked with the hard and necessary work of challenging and improving our communities and ourselves. I believe in growth. I don't know that I believe in answers, but I believe in searching for answers.

This quote is one of the main reasons why on the first day of classes, I make my students create a Twitter account. I am a firm believer that everyone needs to have a digital "homepage"—a place that comes up in search engines that can direct researchers toward one's work. While I also suggest that my students create some sort of an author website, I have a bit more difficulty having them respond to that particular prompt, as a result of it being more "passive" than "active"—there have been many blogs that go silent after they have run their course, leaving the content (and the people who have created the content) to appear static. This is also why I suggest that my students who already have a Twitter account that they use for their own personal tweets use that same account for their tweets for my course. This also is a nice reminder to students to clean up their social media presence—that if they are expected to be respected as authors and professionals, they need to present themselves as such. To me, a writer's life is not necessarily separate from one's actual life, and I find it beneficial to think of the personal and the professional as symbiotic entities. Not only do I want to show that, yes, there is an active writing community, but that writers are also people as well: I try to be as transparent as possible when discussing my own writing with my students. I discuss my process (Late afternoon writer! Not every day! Sound is incredibly distracting!) in hopes of having

students recognize their own process—a way to make writers seem like authorities in their own craft, even if they don't necessarily "feel" like they are real writers. Therefore, it is comforting for students to see writers like Roxane Gay and Augusten Burroughs live tweet watching HGTV television shows, or videos of their dogs sunning on the porch. It reminds me of the tabloids you see at supermarket checkout counters: *Check out these random celebrities buying catfood*! *They are just like us*! However, students can interact with these authors in meaningful ways: that instead of coming across photographs that were shot days prior in a vista far, far away, we can see these authors operate in real time. It is important to me for students to recognize writers are *people*: that they too struggle with writing, that they order pizza, that they watch sporting events. They also just so happen to produce beautiful and important work. I encourage my students to look up the writers that we read in class to see if they have Twitter accounts (hint: most of them do!) and encourage them to follow them, and even interact with them if they enjoyed the author's work. Studies show that a camaraderie and understanding appears when authors use Twitter as an informal tool in a formal setting. A 2015 study by Megan McPherson, Kylie Budge, and Narelle Lemon refers to the concept of "flattening": meaning that when on Twitter, everyone is viewed as an equal—from teachers, to students, to established writers. At the conclusion of McPherson, Budge, and Lemon's study, published in *International Journal for Academic Development*, they note,

> There has developed within Twitter a community of practice where it is possible for all within the constraints and norms of Twitter, no matter level, status, or institution, to engage with one another rather than being guided by identified roles and status within the community. Authority in terms of status is removed. Rather authority is comprised in terms of accurate content, information, and pedagogy for all to access. In this way, Twitter allows for social and cognitive engagement including technologically-based approaches to resources, people, and ideas. This enhances the practice of academic development through the use and extension of the informal and social. Networks are opened, and communication travels swiftly and effectively. New and often unexpected relationships are created and established, thus improving our work in academic development. (134)

Having my students create a Twitter account goes a long way in achieving my goal of having my students feel like we are all equals in that we are all writers. Of course, it is not enough to simply have my students follow other writers on Twitter; to have them lurk in the shadows would not be overly conducive to making students feel like they are a part of a larger literary community. Instead, I build small assignments into the course that not only require students to generate their own content, but also to interact with writers and literary entities that they admire.

I teach a course on Literary Citizenship, which was a term coined by Cathy Day, a professor of Creative Writing at Ball State University. One of the things she has in her Literary Citizenship syllabus is a section on network building that is directly inspired by Carolyn See's *Living a Literary Life*. See encourages writers to send one "charming note" a day to someone in the literary field: a publisher, an editor, a writer—a simple interaction that is less about the self and more about celebrating someone else. This book was released in the early 2000s, in the pre-microblogging era, and See, at the time, did not use e-mail. Instead, as she documents in an interview with B. Lynn Goodwin in *WriterAdvice*, See would send editors and publishers handwritten notes, stating,

> I realized early on as a magazine writer that notes were a pleasing alternative to phone calls where sometimes you can't keep your voice from trembling. And that editors appreciated thank yous from writers, since there's often so much friction between them. And that queries were apt to be turned down, because a query makes it easy for an editor to say no, but if you form a proposal in the declarative mode, they're often too torpid to say no. I bought the finest stationery I couldn't afford, and it's been a constant and very good investment for me. Now, I do about three notes a day, often answering notes that are sent to me.

Students, when reading See's suggestion to send out these notes five times a week balk, as did Susan Isaacs, in a review of *Making a Literary Life* for the *Washington Post*.

> Even if a potential novelist can suppress ego long enough to pen such a letter, to be either a devoted fan, sycophant or cunning networker, that sort of writing dissipates psychic

energy better devoted to fiction. Also, it is difficult to imagine coming up with 260 icons a year, much less thousands in a lifetime, and being charming precludes salutations such as "Dear Infelicitous Poet."

While I tend to agree with Isaacs, this process is perfect for the world of Twitter, where not only are writers more accessible, but they are also constantly generating and championing work. The Internet has made both writers and their creative endeavors more accessible to students, giving them a seemingly endless stream of content, and, hopefully, a large variety of literary influences. The accessibility to these writers, as well as online literary journals consistently releasing new material, only stand to benefit young writers. Having access to this information proves that excellent work exists outside of the traditional canon and encourages students to see the literary world as an active scene. Day's suggestion, which I also follow, encourages students to commit a certain number of "passive acts" of literary citizenship per week: to follow a literary journal or a favorite author or to retweet someone's work. Also, students are required to commit one "active act," which entails sending a note to a favorite author, or commenting on a particular story. I feel like this allows students to feel less like "students" and more like active writers in a thriving literary community. I have a "Twitter List" of my class, so I am able to keep track of all of their tweets, as well as retweet some of their interactions if I find that they have produced particularly thoughtful and excellent work. My intention in doing this is not only to showcase the student's work to their classmates, but also to share their work with my larger network of writers, in hopes of exposing them to a whole new circle of possible connections. Furthermore, I set up a shared Google Doc for the class, where students are required to send links to all of their weekly Twitter interactions, not only so I can keep tabs on them and provide them a grade, but also so fellow students can see what their classmates are up to, as well as use them for inspiration. This also allows students to introduce each other to different writers that they wouldn't have otherwise come across, including authors and genres that might have fallen into my teaching blind-spot. This allows students to foster a sense of community with each other. Even though the class is focused on integrating students into the writing community at-large, it is important not to lose focus that their own private community within our classroom is an extremely valuable asset. In a study by Theresa B. Clarke and C. Leigh Nelson titled "Classroom Community, Pedagogical Effectiveness, and Learning Outcomes

Associated with Twitter Use in Undergraduate Marketing Classes," Clarke and Nelson make the correlation that student learning is directly influenced by whether or not students feel like they are a part of a community. Clarke and Nelson find parallels between the makeup of Twitter and those who share common academic goals. They state,

> It is believed there is potential for community to form because some of the unique characteristics of the Twitter environment (e.g., connection, interaction, boundaries, communication) are similar to what is observed in successful learning communities . . . feelings of membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection contribute to a sense of community. Because Twitter is a social media technology that is community-driven and information-centric it represents an ideal setting to purposefully create learning communities to exchange knowledge. (31)

Clarke and Nelson's study demonstrates that the use of Twitter to exchange knowledge between classmates leads to a greater sense of community between each other as well as allows a sort of "natural networking" to occur. Students share their larger networking circles with our smaller group, to everyone's benefit.

While having students create a Twitter account and having them interact with fellow writers and influencers is a good start, it is simply not enough to have an account that seems to exist only for the purpose of networking. In an interview with Laura van den Berg in *Ploughshares*, the novelist Matt Bell, when asked about how to obtain "buzz" while being an emerging author offers this advice:

> I think the big mistake most writers make is thinking that becoming involved in your community is something you do *after* your book is published. Instead, I urge writers to become involved as early as possible, in a genuine, non-book-related way. It's always a little off-putting when a person suddenly becomes interested in book review venues only once they have their own book. In a similar way, it seems false to only be interested in independent bookstores when you're trying to get your own book stocked. The better solution is, as a part of your daily work as a writer, support the communities you

wish to be a part of, by reading books, writing reviews, promoting other writers or bookstores or whatever in your social network. It's a small but old truth, but the more you give, the more you will receive. And this isn't any kind of slimy networking. This is every writer's responsibility, and the writers who create the most buzz for the good work of others will find that same energy waiting for them, when their own excellent book finally comes out.

I feel like this sense of awareness makes for better authors and better writers—it is unfair of us to consider our students as "amateurs"—who should be aware of all resources that are available to them. Of course, Bell brings up a good point—even though the students are crafting "charming notes" and interacting with writers, a glance at one of their Twitter accounts (especially if a student is not a particularly active Twitter user) would look, in his words, "slimy." The whole thing would look disingenuous. I tell a story to my students about this when we go over the parameters of the course: during my final year of graduate school, I took a linguistics course where we were planning on distributing a survey via the Internet as well as in person to see how people would respond, as well as the language that they would use. We distributed our Internet surveys naturally. In other words, we did not want to let people know that they were taking a survey for a course. Instead, we used a certain type of framing language to get users to take the survey, often resorting to "Check out this fun quiz!" or "You should take this survey!" which, in retrospect was an absolute failure, as we had dipped into the world of digital noise and somehow our desperation read as spam to our anticipated audience.

In the introduction to his revised 2006 book *Language and the Internet*, David Crystal, a proponent of Internet linguistics, addresses some of the fears linguists have with regard to the evolution of the English language by stating that it is not simply an issue of the widespread use of the Internet, but of the emergence of communications technology as a whole; something that has been at the forefront of society for hundreds of years. He states,

> In the fifteenth century, the arrival of printing was widely perceived by the Church as an invention of Satan, the hierarchy fearing that the dissemination of uncensored ideas would lead to a breakdown of social order and put innumerable souls at risk of damnation . . . the telegraph would destroy the

family and promote crime. The telephone would undermine
society . . . the anxiety generated specifically linguistic con-
troversy . . . when broadcasting enabled selected voices to be
heard by millions, there was an immediate debate over which
norms to use as correct pronunciation, how to achieve clarity
and intelligibility, and whether to permit local accents and
dialects, which remains as lively a debate in the twenty-first
century as it was in the twentieth. (4)

Crystal brings up an interesting point: what is our responsibility to our
audience when we are presenting information? As a result of these advances
in communications technology, we are more aware of how we present
ourselves: this is apparent in providing background information before pre-
senting one's work into a workshop setting, as one needs to evoke a feeling
of ethos insofar as how one presents him- or herself. Each person needs to
prove that the work he or she has brought to class is both important and
well thought out. However, what makes interaction over the Internet dif-
ferent is its reliance on language, and most specifically, the written word.
So, when a student Twitter account is littered with only awkward language
and pandering to journals as well as writers, it sets off alarms. Therefore,
my goal is to have students generate more content so that not only does
the Twitter account appear organic, but the process through which stu-
dents create this material becomes organic as well. While I want to make
it clear to my students that interacting with the literary world at large is
an important part of being a writer and can only help in their own craft,
I also want them to remain aware, again, that the main goal of writing is
not the end product—while having students think about the publishing
world is important, all the connections in the world don't mean anything
if they aren't writing.

There is always a danger in becoming so wrapped up in "being a
writer," that many writers forget to actually "write." This can be a pitfall
of Twitter as well: sometimes my students focus so much on the interac-
tions with fellow writers, or the fact that one of their tweets was favorited
by a famous author, that they forget that they should be writing. I attempt
to battle this concept by assigning as many writing prompts as possible
for my students: I want them to be so consistently writing and thinking
about their craft that it becomes natural to them—that instead of feeling
as if everything I ask of them is to fulfill a learning outcome initiative in a
course, it is something that they would do on their own outside the realm

of academia. I tend to ask a lot out of my students: I ask multiple questions a week that I expect to be answered, as well as have them do a good amount of in-class writing: all assignments I encourage them to send out into the world one Tweet at a time. This methodology was inspired by Michael Martone, whom I was fortunate enough to study under while receiving my Master of Fine Arts at the University of Alabama. Martone conducts what he refers to as "hypoxic workshops," where students are expected to create as much as possible in hopes of breaking this idea of perfection that we build up in ourselves and what we choose to submit out into the world. In a craft essay for *TriQuarterly*, Martone explains,

> The hypoxic workshop looks at all twelve stories each session, and each story is discussed in eight- to ten-minute intervals (I use a Michael Graves–designed egg timer to keep time; the bell dings, we move on), with the writer of the story under discussion participating in the discussion. At the end of the semester the writer has produced fourteen or fifteen prose pieces instead of the more typical two or three. The critique under these conditions is curious, responsive, descriptive, and collaborative, and it does not focus on what is good or bad or what euphemistically "works" or "doesn't work." The writer speaks as a writer, not a critic of writing, and often identifies the writer's own intent, the problems and challenges posed for the writer him- or herself, and some attempted solutions. The critique is led by the writer under discussion and uses the other writers in the room collaboratively to better understand where the writer and the story want to go. The critique is not interested in norming, fixing, or making something better or even good.

While I don't make my students generate as much content as Martone does in his workshops, I have a tendency to give my students a high number of writing prompts over the course of a week in order to get them more into a writing rhythm that makes writing seem like a part of their everyday occurrences. It becomes extremely easy for students to view their writing assignments as "homework," which should never be a goal in creative writing—we don't wish that our students are simply writing as a means to an end, or to get a good grade in a course. Instead, I try to make my students as active as possible within the realm of writing so that all of the

work that they do fulfills some semblance of what it is to be a successful writer—that by presenting them with tasks that exist beyond the parameters that come with taking an advanced level creative writing class.

These assignments are perfect for the Twitter medium: they are often short and can be done at anytime. I encourage my students to not just have a moment in their day where they sit down to do their "writing homework," but to Tweet their fulfilment of the assignment during their daily routine: to complete their work while riding the bus, or while they are in line to get a sandwich. One of the assignments that I have students fulfill on a daily basis throughout the semester is something I like to refer to as "Lines of Awesomeness." These are tweets that are, unequivocally, awesome. It is entirely up to the students as to what "awesome" is—it could be a short story project, a series of daily haikus, bits of overheard randomness, a food blog, anything that makes their Twitter account more alive and gives it a purpose as well as a theme. They are required to tweet one line of awesomeness a day throughout the course of the semester. This keeps them thinking creatively in a class where we talk so much about the practical measures in creative writing—it allows them to remember why it is they write—to relieve some of the pressures of marketing and what it means to "be a writer" and gives them an outlet to produce whatever they so desire. It also makes their Twitter account seem much more alive and gets students out of the habit of crafting things solely for class or for an assignment, which can make things incredibly sterile. I also fully encourage them to talk about what we discussed in class that day: discussions about craft, about process, bizarre quotes that I somehow come up with during my teaching rambles, joking hashtags about writing (a couple of favorites: #oliuarmy, #slashpinechronicles, #imlit). I run an internship where students create and hand-stitch books and I encourage them to photograph our activities, whether that is the process of binding a book, or simply photographs of their classmates going on a walk through campus in order to find interesting spaces to hold poetry readings. We create lists of favorite words and observations inspired by the process of Ray Bradbury. We provide links to our influences (both literary and "lowbrow"). We address campuswide issues. Also, the act of tweeting is cathartic in a way—since each piece is so small and sometimes gets blasted out into a voiceless audience, there is room for play, as well as room for error. Not every tweet is going to be perfect. Some will be reactionary, say, in the case of tweets that occur during a big moment in a football game. Others will be carefully crafted. I also encourage my students to tweet out random lines from the stories that they

bring into workshop. This allows some informality to writing and moves us away from the workshop model where everything we put out into the world must be close to perfection. This is my way of integrating Martone's theory about hypoxic writing and attempting to break the secretive mythos of our own work.

These assignments also allow students to experiment with the concept of audience. Many students have been programmed to "write for the void" as Elisabeth de Mariaffi puts it in an interview with the *Humber Literary Review*. Writing is an incredibly private act: one that involves many hours by oneself in front of a laptop or scrawling away in a notebook. It is a creative endeavor that is very lonely and personal: we are alone with our thoughts when we craft, and our relationship with these works are deeply rooted in how we view ourselves. However, in order to be successful in writing, or, to view one's self as a "writer" we are expected to share these works with others—whether that is in a workshop setting in hopes of bettering our stories, essays, and poems, or ideally in a published journal or our own book. Many young writers are at a crossroads with this notion—I know from personal experience that I never thought about writing as a viable option in regards to getting things published, or even making it a career. All I knew was that I loved to write and had loved to write for a long period of time. In my own personal experience, the notion of writing toward an audience never entered my mind—the only audience that I was aware of was the few friends with whom I chose to share my work. I wrote for myself and no one else—something that quickly shifted when I was entered my first creative writing workshop. It was at that point that I had a brand new audience to impress: my peers. I would write to make them laugh, to elicit the most positive reactions out of the select few within my small group: often referring to things extremely topical or local—shared cultural experiences, loosely fictionalized accounts of college life. Now that I have taught at the college level for a number of years, I have found this same trend occurring with my students: many students write specifically for their workshop: the audience is myself and their classmates—the eleven other creative writing students who are also crafting their work in hopes of impressing the writers that share that cramped space twice a week during the semester. As a result, there is sometimes a lack of honesty when creating work—there is a posturing that occurs in the classroom for those writers who believe that they are of the upper echelon of writers that comes off extremely inauthentic. On the other side of the spectrum, many of the less confident writers, when it comes time to share their work with the class, will hedge their

language, stating that their work "isn't very good" or that they "wrote it in a hurry." However, when students use Twitter, there is simultaneously an honesty in their work due to the public, yet anonymous nature of the audience. In "Researching Social Media Literacies as Emergent Practice" by Stacey Pigg, Pigg follows the Twitter posting trends of Chloe, a young college graduate. In her studies, she notes,

> Chloe thus began using Twitter for emotional expression, which aligned with other uses for literacy from her personal history (i.e., keeping a personal journal "in middle school"). In a situation where other expressive media lacked efficiency or persistence, Twitter appeared as a personal, affective resource that at once seemed private ("absolutely nobody was reading my tweets") but also offered a pleasing feeling of publicity. (12)

This demonstrates that by using Twitter, students will be more open in their writing, perhaps taking more risks with their content and their style than they would in a traditional workshop setting. Furthermore, Twitter appears to be a natural way of storytelling that seems to evoke memories of students' literacy narratives, which in turn, lead to more honest and personal work.

While I do have a major focus on Twitter and confining students' constant fluid stream of work to 140 characters, the students are also expected to complete longer and more complete assignments on our class blog, which is also linked to via their Twitter accounts. My hope is that while Twitter fulfills one part of their assignment, the collected brainstorming and content that they generate will allow them to consolidate ideas into more formal essays in the form of blogposts. The posts are hosted on their own personal medium, giving them ownership over their work, but are also "republished" by our class blog. Many students have kept "class blogs" for their other courses, but I express that the intention of our blog is not just for us, but for all readers that might stumble across their work. Therefore, the majority of the assignments are thinking outward: I have them interview an established literary figure from a list of volunteers that I have assembled. They are encouraged to post quotes from their interviews, as well as direct others to their work. This is another example of being a good "literary citizen" and also crafting one long and detailed "charming note" toward a writer that they admire. I also have students review literary magazines—both those that are online and those that are in print. In this case, I bring in a multitude of back issues of journals that I have collected

over the years. We discuss how literary journals operate: some of them are peer reviewed and others are typically run by a group of editors that make all of decisions about what to include. I encourage them to discuss the literary journal as both an object as well as how its content adheres to the mission statement of the journal. I want them to interact as much as possible with a text, as they would an author. Other examples of larger works include reflections upon their tweets—reviewing community events, posting quotes from their greatest influences, discussing their five-year goals as an artist, as well as crafting an ars poetica discussing what it is they write and why they write in that particular style. I feel as if these assignments are things that we constantly ask ourselves as writers and by assigning these prompts I am giving my students permission to think of themselves as writers. This, coupled with the fact that they have used Twitter as a part of their writing process, allows them to be prepared to craft more succinct and compelling blogposts that take the form of a stand-alone essay, rather than just a simple fulfillment of an assignment. This also ties into the concept of wanting my students to look "outward" with their writing—that their words have an audience and therefore a purpose, which I hope they find empowering.

Overall, my goal for my students is for them to feel like they are part of the active writing community. I fully anticipate on graduation that my students will become my peers—there is nothing more rewarding than helping a student get a piece published, or hearing that a student has been accepted into the MFA program of his or her dreams. It is important to me to foster these concepts early. If students have felt like they are writers working in the natural and digital worlds during their undergraduate experience, they will certainly flourish in their next stage of their literary lives, whether that be working in publishing, teaching, as an editor, or simply just taking what they have learned through creative literacy and applying it to their everyday lives. There is also a hope that perhaps Twitter will become a medium that students become extremely comfortable with and excited by: more and more, creative agencies are relying on multiplatform storytelling as well as communication strategies and searching for innovative ways to advertise and market themselves and their clients. I hope that by allowing the worlds of the public and private, the micro and the macro, the classroom and the digital landscape, all realms will be opened up to my students through their artistry. It is my goal to ensure that this combination of unique and sometimes strange assignments is something that sticks with students: if my overarching intent in regard to my pedagogy is for creative writing students to think of being writers outside of the

physical confines of the classroom, then it is only natural that I wish for their thinking, productivity, and success to expand to the outside world long after their credit hours have been completed.

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8 Old Pond
127 Ways to Look at Texts with Tweets

Michael Martone

We now live in, move through an electro-magnetic soup. We steep in this invisible stew. Weightless text all around. An atomistic atmosphere.

We hold these devices, these slim slabs of veneered plastic nestled in our palms. Effortlessly, these inert boxes suck up text. Osmotically.

We walk. We leave the classroom. We write on our hand-held devices, mobile by definition. As we walk, I remind them to look. I re-mind them.

As we walk, we attempt to see the things we overlook each day as we walk to the classroom where this walk began. Time to underlook, to see.

In Alabama, below the bug line, we go outside, exit the classroom, roam. The bug line? Insects do not freeze in winter. Crickets in January.

The university promotes itself, publishes pamphlets with pictures of professors and their classes on the great green lawn of the Quad. Lies.

Lies. We're alone, staked-out, the only squad on the Quad. We lie about, taking notice of other students, heads down, noses in their phones.

Tuscaloosa's also known as Druid City. It's all the oak trees. The campus is rife with old growth, boughs bare in winter, but not bare bare.

There, in the uppermost reaches, clouds of leaves caught up in the branches. I ask, "Have you noticed those?" No? Green thought balloons.

We speculate. What could they be? Squirrels' nests? Last season's persistence? They've never noticed this green scribble on the scaly limbs.

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They've noticed that they've never noticed this patch of leaves before. They walk beneath this canopy each day. That's the point as I point.

It's mistletoe. The kissing you've been missing, clueless as you understory daily. A parasite. Seeds planted by perching birds. "Dung twig."

Mistletoe. Now seen, we talk about the Golden Bough, connect it to the Druids (we are in Druid City, remember), the power of the puny plant.

The power to kill an oak, mistletoe. The tree's green soul. Druids used a gold sickle to harvest each solstice. In Alabama? A shotgun blast.

We stand, a copse of a class, point our phones up at the tree within a tree, take pictures, link, branching, root through the nets of roots.

I ask them, why we think we can text and drive. They think about this. They think they shouldn't do it. They think they shouldn't think it.

I think, I say to them, we think we can text and drive because we seem to have an ability to filter, to sort, all the incoming stimulations.

It makes sense. Our senses would be overwhelmed, flooded by incoming information. Almost biological, this sense to notice this and not that.

I drive to here. It is routine. I think of the class. I listen to music. I remember something. Or not. There is nothing out of the ordinary.

I'm an automaton in an automobile. It's automatic, this drive. I can text. If something emerges. If there's an emergency. If there is an if

We say we "focus" our attention because most of our experience is a blur. We also "pay" attention to something, a transaction that delivers.

See, most of the time, however, we delete without seeing. We edit. We gloss the world's goings on. Vision is revised before we begin to see.

We see our seeing compromised, our algorithmic blindnesses, our machinations to sort the feed to (like tweets in Twitter) trend. We trend. #

Now, we get familiar with these Russians who confronted the all-too-familiar world made out of habit, making it a habit to get out of habit.

To create is not godlike, creating something out of nothing. To create is to reorder the things we know well in order to create new order.

Tonight at the cocktail party, you will talk about the Russians, the idea of defamiliarization, the active eye-opening intervention of art.

A cocktail party! An act of defamiliarization. I task the students to imagine my trivia hubbubed at a cocktail party's imaginary crossroads.

Back to the Russians. Writing works at dismantling that biological sense sieve sanding smooth the world. For both the reader and the writer.

The class is defamiliarization. Defamiliarize the classroom. Defamiliarize the class. Defamiliarize the campus. Defamiliarize their phones.

Defamiliarize the phones they carry, devolve those devices. Defamiliarize the writing they already do on their phones, the text and twitter.

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It happens, that moment, a word (say, *the*) you write, you read goes south, goes sideways, goes strange when you no longer can make it mean.

I ask if they know what a combine is? What is a combine? One, two report a vague memory. A farm machine, they guess. Yes! But why "combine"?

Here's the way the mind works. When we harvested grain by hand we did so in three steps. First, we cut it. Second, we bound it. Third, we threshed it.

Here's the way the mind works. In the nineteenth century when we mechanized the harvest, we built three machines: a cutter, a binder, and a thresher.

Here's the way the mind works. Time passes. Wait one second, we don't have to harvest grain in three steps with three machines. We can *combine* them.

Here's the way the mind works. There once were machines, analog machines, named a telephone, a fax, a camera, a record player, a typewriter.

Here's the way the mind works. When the machines were digitalized they made individual machines: a telephone, a fax, a camera, a typewriter.

Here's the way the mind works. Time passes. Wait one second, we don't need all of these. We can *combine* them. And there it is in your hands.

Every day, I arrive early, wait by the door, greet my students as they enter. "Welcome! I'm Michael Martone. I'll be your instructor today."

Waiting in the doorway for the students to arrive, I borrowed this from Montessori. "Hello, I'm Michael Martone, your instructor for today."

When a student arrives, I not only greet them and introduce myself (every day is a new day!) but also ask, "What would you like to do today?"

Standing in the hallway, I wait for my students. I share the space with other students (on benches, on the floors). They mine their devices.

The waiting students "mine" their devices. I dig the pun. "Hey!" I say to the closest one, her thumbs digging in, "Are you writing a poem?"

It's unfair to think, I think, that the devices have transformed their users into mindless zombies. It is quiet. But mining is not mindless.

The hallway is dim, deep. Light, generated by the devices, bounces off the blank faces. No, not blank, concentrated faces, pools reflecting.

No, not zombies, more like ghosts. The hallway is haunted. The students, waiting for their classes to begin, are here but they are not here.

I haunt this haunted hallway. I am alone, deviceless, my hands not folded in this new gesture of prayer. Hey, I say, are you writing a poem?

"A poem?" She's alive! Not a Texting Dead. Called back from elsewhere. Here, now, she thinks, "poem," thinks what kind of text she's texted.

This is just to say . . . Poems are their frames, the occasions of their writing and reading. The polycarbonate windowpane. The refrigerator door.

It all started at Penn State, Altoona. I gave a reading there. Many confused freshman had been forced to attend. Not the best idea. I began.

Altoona, before smartphones. I look up as I read. They don't think I can see them. They're freshman, hunched over. "Are you texting?" "Yes!"

You're texting? Yes, they shout. They're freshman. I've stopped reading. Who are you texting? They point to each other in the room. So cute.

"Hey," I say, "I want in on this." I'm reminded that we're living now in a vast electromagnetic soup, swimming with schools of digital text.

I give them my cell number. Text me, I tell them as I start to read my own texts. Text me. How am I doing? Or text each other. The number is

They do text me as I read. My clamshell phone, turned off in my pocket. Someone loves my bow tie, I learn later. Another thinks I'm funny.

That night in Altoona after the reading, I graze the text messages, electronic marginalia. It's reader response critique, impulse and pulse.

The phone's transformed. Distraction to attraction. It is a record of attentive back-channeling. They listened with their prehensile thumbs.

Every public reading after, I hope the host commands, at the intro's end, to turn off your phones so I can say, as I start, to turn them on.

Now, as I give out my number, I beg their pardon. I'll answer but later, after. I am not like you kids, I say, who can answer while reading.

I try to respond to the cache of texts waiting for me after I read. I have a keyboard keyed to numbers. These are essays on the tiny screen.

Close, close readings. I squint at the worried responses, sometimes retrieved in three or four bursts. The questions I'm at pains to answer.

In the end, I do answer them, the texts swept up through the evening of reading. At times, the conversation continues. My number remembered.

I give a reading. I give out my number. That number lodged in the phone's memory. That story I read that night lodged in that user's brain.

My son knows my number is out there. At the AWP, he tweets followers that my number lurks on their phones, suggests they "drunk dial Dad."

At the convention, the texts home. Fragments of fragments the writers retain, what has stuck from a reading long gone, from who knows where.

They're anonymous, these texts from the past. My phone is ancient, no way to ID. The text and the texter present with brief sweet intimacy.

I carry on conversations still, folded in my phone in my pocket, commenced, a pulsar blurted at an event, braided with words I floated then.

In class, the phones are always "on." They have my number. Like freshman in Altoona, they think I cannot see them. They can't not not stop.

Komboloi, Greek "worry" beads. Transitional object. Comfort object. That string of beads manipulated. Fiddled with. Thumbed. Toyed. Worried.

I watch them address the screens of their phones, write, and I'm reminded of komboloi, those beads. I like their worry of words, of letters.

They are on a loop, the beads of the komboloi. The words on the cellphones too. Logostatic, feeding back. Cybernetic. A worry and a comfort.

Donald Barthelme: "The principle of collage is one of the central principles of art in this century." My class is collaged, one big collage.

Colleagues eye collages warily, suggest that student writers will find such formal compositions too difficult & frustrating & foreign & and.

"Really?" I say to those who think collage is too "experimental" or too "advanced" for "beginning" writers. "Have you seen how they see TV?"

Right now, writing this, I have a dozen tabs open in my browser. One is for a Wikipedia entry on komboloi, another on Barthelme and collage.

Collage. My writing exercises are varieties of collage. A commonplace book. A taxonomy (fictional or not). Exercises in style after Queneau.

Collage is about accumulation, a coral reefing of words, sentences, paragraphs. A little writing each day, a week. Don't try to connect them

now, I tell them. What do you want to worry? We worry about association, about juxtaposition, the synaptic leap that white space represents.

One student loved guns, wrote one piece a week. His first firearm described. A fiction of another. Hunting with his father. Technical specs.

All of these individual subjects blogged, feeding an electronic feed, even collected into an analog handmade book, bullets and billet-doux.

We consider cuts. *The Great Train Robbery.* The first time in film. A cut to simultaneous action. How that cut. Could not be. Processed. Cut.

The mind and combines again. Film. Time. It took time to see that a film was not simply a recorded play, time to see this new way of seeing.

Now, you, my students, I process hundreds of cuts easily in our reading, our writing. We're more arrangers than writers. We stutter and cut.

The material nature of texts. How is it physical? Collage insists we handle that text. Collage resists writing that insists on transparency.

The new instruments of writing are so handy. They're so hand-held. These new devices have, perhaps, defamiliarized the hand, the handmade.

I go beyond. The postcard, analog tweet. I hand out cards to the class. Postcards don't need to be defamiliarized. They're not even familiar.

The postcard. They hold them in their hands. A remarkable piece of technology, I say. The picture side pictures the campus we walk each day.

You use this piece of paper, address it, attach to it this special, smaller, adhesive-backed piece of paper purchased in an official office.

We'll then search the city for specially constructed blue metal boxes equipped with a clever slot into which we'll place the prepared cards.

From the blue box, the stamped postcard will be hand delivered to the addressee, carried by a uniformed officer of the federal government.

There's nervous twitter. They're vaguely familiar with the post office and the mail, but such an alien description warps them even further.

Those students who have written postcards have written postcards on vacation. I suggest we write about this campus as if we are on vacation.

Can they get their minds around it? See the campus in this other way and write about it as if it's all new. They'll send them to themselves.

They never get mail. And now the mail they will get will be from this strange place that actually occupies the same space as this here here.

There are all the different precincts on postcards. The address field. The stamp square. The postal barcode box. The message leftover blank.

I like it when a postcard's picture has been written on. Here, a resort hotel's balconied facade. An ink-sketched speech bubble (I am here)

We are walking the campus, crossing at a crosswalk when we notice the acid-yellow diamond-shaped warning sign, its matte shadow man walking.

The yellow sign is now framed by strobing LEDs, a book-sized solar panel powers it. It attracts our attention to how attention is attracted.

Even after all the LEDs, the neon yelling yellow, the sign, invisible, the crosswalk too. It must evolve with our accumulating indifference.

We stare at the warning sign warning. What else to add to the matte man? A hula-hoop? Wheels on his stumps? A halo? Anything to hook an eye.

Buried behind buildings (the theater, the power plant) the spring bubbles. It has been here forever. It's why the university was built here.

The students never knew, overlooked it on the way to classes. A muddy sump maybe. The coal bunker leached sulfur up above. Black backwater.

It is something to see, to take the moment to see. It is like a secret passage that appears after a spell. It seeps more detail as we stare.

The Russians say it is our task to make the stone stony again. And we are. We do. The generic shadow on the shingle and schist washes away.

Across the street, there's another kind of not seeing. A motor pool deemed ugly by the school draped in screened fences and overgrown hedge.

That camouflage means to double down, make our nonchalant not-seeing blinder. But it only makes me want to see what I'm not supposed to see.

Hidden behind the fences and hedges with the tractors and fuel drums, we see the parabolic arch of a Quonset hut sided with corrugated rust.

Quonset, I tell them, is one of my favorite words. I ask after theirs. Named, *Quonset* can be seen. We wonder why this or that word sticks.

This building has bona fides. This particular hut is historic. It's the last of a slew thrown up postwar to house the returning GI Billers.

The campus is filled with faux classical temples capped with every order of capital, cupola, and metope. But here this modest culvert means.

There's an old pond nearby. I have the students search for Basho's haiku. old pond / frog jump into / watersound floats up on their screens.

They're shy. Why is this one of the most famous poems in the world? We talk about the sudden turn. The way sight is swallowed up by a sound.

The pond once was the college pool. A hidden pump agitates the surface in ripples. A frog does jump, disrupting the disruption's disruption.

The university advertises itself: Alabama touching lives. The visual? A student's face lights up, enlightenment radiates outward into space.

Watching the pond's ripples dissipate, I ask the writers to imagine someone somewhere, bored, distracted. Now, now text something, nothing.

"Make nothing happen." It's a double-take the writer takes. The ply, play. The slipperiness of language, its amphibian nature. Its bothness.

In short, text, but text differently. Think of it as a gift. A sudden emergence in that someone's phone, a startled passenger on a lily pad.

Leap a leap, I say to them, and they heave to. They are coiled on the bank like students about to strike. Their thumbs skate like waterbugs.

I ask them to turn the volume up. I want to hear the whoosh the machine makes as the message goes. We've talked about Hermes. Here's Hermes.

They consider such compositions "random." This is all very random. Yes, exactly. We're looking for the meaningful composition of the random.

There's a murmuration of whooshes as their texts launch. The texts infiltrate the electromagnet porridge, a kind of slurp, a splash, a hush.

And now they read their work, but tell me where the message went. "To my brother in Oregon." "Oregon!" I shout, reminding them to be amazed.

No matter where they send, I am amazed. I am amazed. I tell them that, I am. You wrote something like that, and there it is there like that.

They read the missives. Their recipients. Think of the someone, somewhere whose phone alerts just now, like that, unwraps a knotted nothing.

One last thing I ask once they've shared their texts. I ask they turn their phones to vibrate, set at eleven, while we contemplate the pond.

Scattered, yes, randomly by the pond. One or two or more phones strike up a ribbit. *Ribbit. Ribbit.* The phones transmit a workshop of frogs.

9 #Because Social Media
Personal Writing and the Brave New World of Digital Style

Paul Butler

FROM THE HÔTEL DES BALCONS, I walked along narrow streets to the marketplace. It wasn't the April in Paris on the posters; the gray clouds reached down to the concrete, wiping smiles off faces that already struck me as stern, perhaps a bit drawn. It was Friday afternoon, late, and the vendors were beginning to shut down for the day, bringing in their fruits and vegetables, taking down the ducks and chickens they had festooned like ornaments from the ceiling.

As I listened to a butcher bark orders at his son, thoughts of Sunday flashed before me. I remembered it would be Easter. And here we were, Americans in Paris, college kids with passports and foreign accents, trying to learn the language and culture of a new country. Then, as if by accident, I saw them, the clay red flower pots, discarded *pots de fleurs* that beckoned even as they lay in dirt and mud and dung. I picked one up, imagining the possibilities. After sorting through a half dozen or so that were still intact, I went to see what else I could find in the dwindling daylight.

Across the open-air market, I spotted some straw, white and brittle, the perfect lining for the clay pots I'd discovered. The merchant made a dismissive gesture when I asked for a bundle, sucked in air as he muttered "*Oui*," and told me to take as much as I could manage. From there, I marched to the egg stall, driven by a purpose that was singular but ill-defined, like a bulb trying to sprout after a long winter. The eggs were the large brown variety, spotted and dirty and begging for color. I pointed at a bushel and asked the vendor the price. "*Quinze francs*," he replied abruptly, about three bucks for a few dozen eggs that hadn't been inspected but were fresh from the country. I grabbed the money from my pocket and carefully placed the cardboard platter in a canvas bag.

It's usually not on main streets that we find out where we're headed, but on accidental corners, unseen turns that offer a detour from the usual.

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So it was in the fading light of a Left Bank market that I developed a taste for the eclectic, an idea of what might fit together in different ways. As I made my way back over Rue Saint-Jacques and turned down Boulevard Saint-Germain, I bought bunches of lilacs and irises from a flower vendor, signs of spring that persisted in spite of the fog settling over a cool Paris evening.

Slowly, the rest of my plan developed: boiling eggs at the hotel, then dying them with food color as the *propriétaire*, a friendly woman who talked about Nixon and Kennedy—the "great" American presidents—watched in amusement. It was Saturday night when I put them together. The red pots were clean and seemed made for the straw I laid inside them. Painted shells, some chocolate, a handful of flowers along with some bread and cheese made up the Parisian baskets. A handmade note, unsigned, graced the edges: "*Bonne Pacques*," it intoned, in carefully drawn letters: "*Happy Easter*." It was an attempt to bring two cultures together, to remind us that we were expatriates, transplanted by choice to learn French and possibly to find something out about ourselves.

I rose before dawn on Sunday and stopped outside the hotel doors. I set the clay baskets where my colleagues would find them when they awoke and went out for morning coffee. As I look back now, I can scarcely recall the reactions of my students and professor. Was it surprise? Delight? I like to think of it as the unexpected pleasure of finding the familiar somehow transformed in Paris, a new way of seeing and thinking and being.

I recall that morning now with a fond haze that clings like ice to a window in winter. Time leaves only an imprint, half a memory of winding streets and terra-cotta *pot de fleurs*, an unfinished journal that still needs to be filled with details and feelings. When I try to analyze the experience, the effort seems unnecessary, unproductive. Chalk it up to youth, enthusiasm, the desire for unity amid a sea of foreignness. Probably, though, the truth lies somewhere else. On a spring night in an enchanted city, some discarded clay containers suggested an unseen vista. I saw in them a way to memorialize an elusive impression, a time impossible to hold on to. Years later, as I look back, I know that moment changed everything for me. As different cities have intervened, I still carry with me the fading light of an open market, and the desire to find a connection when nothing lingers but deserted streets and empty spaces.

#

An account of a year I spent in France, "The Clay Flower Pots," written at a National Writing Project summer institute, stands at the threshold of the digital age, predating Twitter hashtags, smartphone technology, and Facebook posts, today's lingua franca for students in a global networked community. Revisiting these words in the advent of the Internet, I feel compelled to ask, what role does personal writing play in our classrooms today? While some may see little connection between personal writing and the digital age, this volume makes a strong case for the opposite position. What's more, recent affirmative connections can be found in a special 2015 issue of *Biography*, "Online Lives 2.0," in Anna Poletti and Julie Rak's 2014 edited collection, *Identity Technologies*: *Constructing the Self Online*, where the authors mention "the persistence of narrative as a frame for understanding how identity is formed" (7); and in Nancy Baym's 2015 *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, where she states, "New media for personal connection make the social norms we take for granted visible and offer opportunities for changing them" (178).

In examining the connections between the personal and the digital, between narrative and technology, I focus here on three sites of intersection. First, I look at the uses of new media technology in classroom settings, in the form of video, and the "Concept in 60" assignment developed at Ohio State University. Second, I consider the use of Twitter, including hashtags, and other forms of social media in rendering the personal in different ways. Third, I evaluate the *Harper's* Index as a place where such traditional textual features as juxtaposition and ellipsis intersect with digital affordances.

Digital Technology and New Media

To examine the brave new world of multimodal composition, including video and visual rhetoric, fast-forward from the France narrative to the Digital Media and Composition Institute (DMAC) at Ohio State University. In learning to navigate the brave new world of multimodal technology during a two-week summer "boot camp," I returned once again to "The Clay Flower Pots." Assigned what's called a "Concept in 60" video, where in precisely one minute—"no more, no less"—according to the instructions, "your video text must take a critical, reflective, and/or interpretive approach to its subject matter" (DeWitt et al.), I found myself rethinking my Writing Project narrative, trying to capture its essence, the core of my experience

in France. As Dundee Lackey and Christina M. LaVecchia, fellow DMAC institute participants, explain in a webtext they wrote about the projects we produced that year, "We hope to capture the varied and significant ways in which this particular assignment at the institute challenges and develops participants' writing practices, and supports them in teaching students to work with multimodality. DMAC is a rich site for documenting ever-evolving best practices in teaching and writing with technology" (DeWitt et al.).

With the severe time limitations imposed on the "Concept in 60" video, I recognized immediately that I could give only an impressionistic rendering, a bare outline, a reflective and interpretive approach to the marketplace I had visited in Paris and the subsequent epiphanies I'd had there. How could I present my experiences in such a compressed way? What could I keep, and what would have to go? In using a multimodal approach, what "affordances"—potentials and limitations—does the medium allow?

I learned that in multimodal technology, words, necessarily reduced by the constraints of the medium, are, paradoxically, amplified, even transformed, by images. For example, as I sought to convey my experiences concisely, I found that simple objects held great weight: clay pots, brown eggs, stalls in an open air market, the Hôtel des Balcons, all carried greater significance as visual aids in my video than did the words in my narrative. Juxtaposed with images of straw, the clay pots, stacked on their sides and layered in rows, implied closeness to earth, nature, and simplicity, especially when combined with my descriptions of "clay red flower pots, discarded *pots de fleurs* that beckoned even as they lay in dirt and mud and dung," and "straw, white and brittle, the perfect lining for the clay pots I'd discovered." It is an instance of what Crystal VanKooten, in a 2016 *Kairos* article, calls "cross-modal reinforcement." As VanKooten explains, in cross-modal reinforcement she wanted "the audio to combine with and illustrate the visual, or, in other places, I wanted the visual to amplify or shift the meaning."

Perhaps more important, though, were the images appearing in my "Concept in 60" video that did not appear explicitly in my narrative. For example, shots of the Eiffel Tower, Nôtre Dame Cathedral, and the Tricolore, the French flag, broadened the perspective, adding a kind of surplus, more context, opening a window onto the City of Light. Scenes of Paris, even though perhaps outside of the eclecticism I had sought to convey in seeking out "accidental corners, unseen turns that offer a detour from the usual," helped illuminate the differences in language and culture I wanted to emphasize.

Several images provided an even more powerful addition. While the words themselves narrowed the French market to objects and a series of individual vendors, the video showed not only the crowded venue but the multiple human interactions there. The video, then, offered a significant contrast to the "deserted streets" I had evoked in my memoir; instead, they were filled with crowds and energy. Similarly, I ended the sixty-second video with a shot of a path through Paris's Jardin des Plantes, with a single person walking alone, leaves on the ground, and barren trees, conveying a concrete vision of the "empty spaces" that had merely been mentioned in the narrative itself. This control of multimodal elements is described as "craft" by David Blakesley and Karl Stolley: "Multimedia composition is the craft of inventing, shaping, producing, and delivering text, audio, video, and images purposefully."

Besides the video's images, another element, voice, reveals the importance of the affordances offered by digital technology. According to "Concept in 60" instructions, "You must strip your video of all actual audio. You may layer audio in your project as long as you avoid all literal video-audio matching" (DeWitt et al.). Thus, while readers might imagine, or recognize, a distinctive writer's voice when reading my memoir, viewers can hear the rhythm of my sentences and the unique cadences of my speaking voice on the video's voice-over. Using my own voice is significant because it offers an interpretation of the written word and deploys a tone at once objective and haunting, tinged by sadness and, perhaps, warmth. Hearing just one voice, in English, rather than the multitude of French voices stripped from the video's background sound, reinforces ideas of the writer's solitude amid a sea of absent voices.

Overall, the digital technology in my video, formatted for easy uploading to YouTube, had an unexpected effect: the severe time constraints served to enhance the pathos, or emotional impact, of the narrative. With most of my words edited out, I found myself relying on those already suggestive of deeper meaning: "I recall that morning now with a fond haze that clings like ice to a window in winter. Time leaves only an imprint, half a memory of winding streets and terra-cotta *pot de fleurs*, an unfinished journal that still needs to be filled with details and feelings." To fill in the gaps words could not provide, I relied on images, which themselves had unexpected emotional resonances. Sometimes, for instance, the images reinforced a meaning I had hinted at, such as the way clay pots, straw, and flowers are all from the earth; sometimes, they extended a meaning, such

as the crowded marketplace opposing the solitary nature of the scene as I presented it in my narrative. Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe reinforce the importance of the resources I drew on to produce my video when they write that "multimodality has to do with moving away from an exclusive reliance on alphabetic texts and often using images, audio, and video 'purposefully' to produce and shape meaning" (190).

Twitter and Social Media

The compressed nature of words in an era of multimodal composition is not confined to the realm of video alone. The influence of the social media site Twitter, constrained by 140 "characters" (e.g., the word *door* would be four characters), forces writers to make every word count. What is the effect of Twitter on personal writing? Perhaps in an effort to find out the answer to that question, the editors of the journal *Creative Nonfiction* started a contest of daily tweets, named "Tiny Truths." Some of the winning tweets show the possibilities of writing within the constraints of a limited number of words or characters; at the same time, tweets, much like haikus, reveal the large potential of writing in small spaces. Take for instance, the following "Tiny Truths" tweets:

> It's pay phones that pull me back. I slow down, stare, recall a late night gas station years ago. The first rings of our distance.

> I look around my house at my mom's table, great aunt's rocker, grandparents' chairs: my furniture talks to me in their voices.

> John Glenn grew up in my village and went to space. It's been 1962 here ever since.

Like my narrative account of France, these short tweets recall the past and evoke strong emotions about earlier times, and people, gone from the writers' lives. What is remarkable about all of the tweets is that they rely on past knowledge, or experiences, shared in some way, and on some level, by all readers. Thus, even though no longer widespread, the shared cultural knowledge of pay phones, the experience of family heirlooms that once occupied other spaces, and familiarity with the late astronaut John

Glenn, the decade of the 1960s, and Glenn's role as the first American to orbit the Earth in 1962, are all intended to elicit strong responses.

Why are Twitter and the constraints of social media particularly suited to personal writing? Paradoxically, their strict limitations force readers to supply missing contexts, emotions, and meanings. The tweets, for instance, begin in medias res, in the middle of the action. Thus, readers must, for example, conjure various settings from memory: a gas station with pay phones ringing or someone making a phone call from a stationary enclosure; a house filled with relatives' furniture; a small town similar, perhaps, to a place where a reader grew up; and a local kid made good. Without many words or content, the tweets require readers to supply a familiar or related setting, drawn from their personal experiences. Twitter asks all readers to participate in the personal.

Twitter also tugs at our emotions, using just 140 characters to achieve its effects. In the first tweet, for example, the writer uses the phrase, "The first rings of our distance," as a double entendre. If "rings" is a verb, the writer is alluding to a relationship separated by distance. If "rings" is a noun, the fragment is indicative of a painful recollection, signaling the beginning fragmentation of a relationship that has always been distant, even when in physical proximity. The short tweet thus focuses on absence, just as the second one does, this time with the personification of furniture evoking the "voices" of absent, and possibly deceased, relatives, the tables and chairs suggesting an antiphonal choir, voices talking and responding in kind. As Judy D. Nelson writes in a special 2016 issue of *Composition Forum* on emotion, "The structure of Twitter is particularly conducive to the broad circulation of affects and emotions." She goes on to explain the way in which Twitter organizes users in affective ways: "Through follower/ing networks and hashtags, which gather and categorize tweets on the same topic, users form (even if only momentary) bodies with their own affective capacities."

The personal writing of Twitter also has an unexpected effect, one that might yield productive results for anyone assigning students to tweet, much like the "Tiny Truths" contest does. Composing tweets seems to have the result of producing empathy, sometimes the opposite of what we might expect from typical writing on social media. That empathy is displayed explicitly in a tweet about the fate of creatures from the sea: "Forget dismay over live-boiled lobster. My empathy is with the oyster swallowed whole & alive, devoured by digestion" (*Creative Nonfiction*). The writer

adds extra emphasis through the use of alliteration, "live-boiled lobster" and "devoured by digestion."

Twitter also allows empathy to be expressed implicitly, by showing the triumph of survival or of the human spirit. Two examples follow:

> He expected the bird to fall limp, a dead weight thumping on
> the courtyard below, but it spread its wings and took flight.

> I measure winter in cocoa, 59 servings just enough to sweeten
> days layered in snow and bitter cold.

These tweets bind everyone together in a kind of common humanity, using the scheme of antithesis, or opposition, to reveal how having empathy for others, and even for ourselves, offers a positive view of human nature. The contrast in the structure of the sentences and in the words themselves shows empathy and compassion for life, a kind of moral compass, if you will. As Eric Leake states in his article, "Writing Pedagogies of Empathy," published in 2016, "Empathy and emotions in general are part of moral considerations. They alert us to issues of moral significance, and they help inspire moral actions."

Twitter and other forms of social media give students options in personal writing, enhanced by challenging them to use language differently. As journalist Rebecca Greenfield, drawing on University of Pennsylvania linguist Jeff Liberman, writes in *The Wire*, "Contrary to all the LOLs, emoticons and hashtags happening in feeds across the Twittersphere, Twitter isn't destroying the English language, it's making it better."

In addition to the tweets themselves, Twitter users are challenged with the use of hashtags, where the hash mark, or pound sign (e.g., #personalwritingrocks), groups together messages, or tweets, on the same topic. The practical effect of hashtags is to amplify an idea's importance through repetition. According to *Huffington Post* blogger Sabina Khan-Ibarra,

> hashtags have the power to bring attention to and mobilize
> a large population. Petitions, protests, letters to politicians
> and those in power are disseminated through social media,
> but what brings attention to a movement or a hashtag is the
> high number of mentions of a hashtag, which is what brings
> it worldwide attention.

The Harper's Index

Although we usually think of new digital technologies and writing as separate from other types of classroom writing and altogether different from the personal writing we most often ask our students to do, is that always the case? Is there a way to think of the personal and the digital together? Where shall the twain meet for our students in constructing a new kind of personal writing that works both online and in normal face-to-face settings?

In my effort to find a solution, I devised a final project in a personal writing class. I asked students to prepare their own version of the *Harper's* Index, designed by *Harper's Magazine* editor Lewis Lapham when he reimagined the magazine in 1983. Lapham calls the Index a "single page of numbers that measure, one way or another, the drifting tide of events" (qtd. in Brueggemann 220). Writing in the *American Journalism Review*, Alex Frankel describes the one-page Index as follows: "Adjoining facts complement one another as the list meanders through a variety of subjects, at times creating a narrative." Lapham comments on the narrative aspect of the Index in his introduction to *The Harper's Index Book*: "Numbers can be made to tell as many stories as a crooked lawyer or an old comedian. They can prove a theory or wreck a government, arrange a marriage or steal a fortune" (xi). One example, a favorite of the Index editor, demonstrates the way in which facts can complement each other in ways that tend to tell a story: "Average number of calories burned during an 'extremely passionate' one-minute kiss: 26. Number of calories in a Hershey's Kiss: 25."

In my writing assignment, I asked students to marshal the ideas and resources they had collected as a group to write their own version of the *Harper's* Index. In groups of three, they were responsible for researching, writing, editing, and preparing a list of Works Cited for their version of the Index, which Brenda Jo Brueggemann refers to as "clever, current, often amusing, too often troubling" (220). I gave students a lot of latitude in how they prepared their Index, but asked them to keep in mind some of the conventions that adhere to the genre. For example, the *Harper's* Index relies heavily on juxtaposition, the rhetorical situation (exigence, audience, and constraints), some audience knowledge or familiarity, and the use of certain rhetorical schemes and tropes, especially ellipsis, but also alliteration, assonance, anaphora, metaphor, and irony. Here are a few examples of the *Harper's* Index from April of 2016.

Percentage of people worldwide who trust print and broad-cast news as a source of accurate information : 58

Who trust search engines : 63

Portion of Americans in 1966 who said that they trusted the government most of the time : 2/3

Who say so today : 1/5

While the *Harper's* Index is published in the print version of the magazine, a digital version is also widely available online. The Index operates by juxtaposing information in interesting and informative ways, also using the rhetorical scheme of ellipsis, or the deliberate omission of information, to achieve its intended effects. The Index creates new ways of thinking about issues, problems, or ideas by virtue of the way information is presented. Take, for instance, three recent entries regarding the troubling Zika virus.

Number of years El Salvador's health minister has advised women to delay pregnancies because of the Zika virus : 2

Percentage of people in sub-Saharan Africa who slept under mosquito nets in 2000 : 2

Who do today : 55

The *Harper's* Index takes apparently random information and presents it in a manner one cannot call random at all. In that sense, the careful crafting of the juxtapositions sets the Index apart from information and commentary often placed side by side on social media. Nonetheless, the impact of connected information or commentary is similar to what one might find on the social media site of Facebook, where, in a far less controlled fashion, the same effects of juxtaposition, and ellipsis, often exist. For example, *Time Magazine* listed the following Facebook quotation, published in a poster format, and its accompanying user post, as one of the top three of 2015, with more than 8.4 million interactions:

They say true friends go long periods of time without speaking & never question the friendship. Re-post if you have at least one of these friends.

The Facebook user offered a short response to accompany the quote: "You know who you are :).” Much like the *Harper's* Index, this short example of personal writing on Facebook works through juxtaposition and ellipsis. While the principles are ideal for social media (e.g., Twitter and Facebook), the same ideas can be used in classroom writing, whether online or in a conventional format. Indeed, in many ways, the *Harper's* Index is a precursor to posting, and reposting, on Facebook, showing how the digital world and traditional writing have a number of reciprocal effects. As Jenna Pack Sheffield and Amy C. Kimme Hea explain in a 2016 article on the use of Facebook in developing Social Networking Strategies to conduct longitudinal writing research, "[W]e aim to balance the many purposes of writing that we find to be important by including posts that show our Facebook followers that we believe writing is a multidimensional practice that has knowledge-making, socio-economic, and social justice dimensions.”

The salutary effects of personal writing also exist on Twitter, not only as demonstrated in the "Tiny Truths” tweets from *Creative Nonfiction* but also in the way the social media site is used in teaching students about their writing styles. Take for instance a tweet by Shaquille O'Neill.

> Linderella story of the year jeremy lin has lingle handedly played lensational lincredible I'm linpressed all he does is LinLinLin.

When O'Neill used Twitter to show his admiration for NBA star Jeremy Lin, he sent out the often retweeted text quoted above. Anyone already drawn to Twitter, or to pro basketball phenomenon Jeremy Lin, appreciates O'Neill's pun, or play on words. Every day, students in our classes encounter *style*—ways of writing (puns included) that have effects on them and on the world at large. What would it would be like if they understood not only how style achieves its effects but also how to *use* that understanding to improve their own writing? What if students learned to use style as a rhetorical tool for personal writing, taking into account audience, purpose, context, and occasion?

While most commentators simply call O'Neill's play on words a pun, students might also want to know that he is adopting a sophisticated stylistic device known as a *neologism*—creating a new or imaginary word? Here, that neologism takes a special form called *metaplasmus*—where the new word is based on a purposeful *misspelling*. Thus, the over-the-top repetition of the letter *l* and of the name "Lin” has the rhetorical effect of imitating the "Linsanity” created by the star. Writing on social media

thus helps students learn how to recognize rhetorical devices used in writing (whether consciously or not) and then to apply that knowledge in their own style.

Toward a Personal Best in Writing in the Digital Age

Those of us who value personal writing may bemoan what we have watched transpire in the digital age. We see online technologies embraced by students, and, with tools like text messaging used on a daily basis, we sometimes wonder if the art of writing has been lost, possibly for good. A Cambridge University professor has warned that the art of writing essays has suffered with the advent of Twitter and Facebook (Henry). Professor Peter Abalafia states,

> "What they do write tends to be short messages in a sort of meta-language, with meta-spelling, on Twitter and Facebook." It seems clear, however, that digital technology has enriched forms of personal writing, enhancing aspects of writing that may not have been as apparent or visible in the past. The age of digital technology allows us to focus on aspects of writing that may be shorter, more concise, or constrained by whatever medium we adopt. As National Public Radio's David Folkenflik advises those writing mini-narratives on Twitter, "Concision takes precision" (qtd. in Tenore).

> Visual media tools, like video, as well as social media and other digital technologies, are not in any way inferior to our normal emphasis on text. Digital technology also focuses on text, but it does so in different ways—ways that enhance personal writing. The personal is alive and well in our digital age. We can learn from the technological tools available to our students and the innovations in writing they foster. As Nina Baym writes, "We are still standing on shifting ground in our efforts to make sense of the capabilities of digital media and their social consequences. New media are constantly developing, new populations are taking up these tools, and new uses are emerging" (23). Indeed, we can use the digital tools—and knowledge—we acquire as teachers to make the personal newly relevant for our twenty-first-century classrooms.

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10 Teaching the History of Life Writing and Memoir Online

Laura Gray-Rosendale

> Memory is a pinball in a machine—it messily ricochets around between image, idea, fragments of scenes, stories you've heard. Then the machine goes tilt and snaps off. But most of the time we keep memories packed away. I sometimes liken the moment of sudden unpacking to circus clowns pouring out of a miniature car trunk—how did so much fit into such a small space?
> —Mary Karr, *The Art of Memoir*

OUR MASTER'S PROGRAM in Rhetoric, Writing, and Digital Media Studies went online well over ten years ago now. Since that time, we have used some version of the Blackboard Learn online management system to deliver our classes. In this program my colleagues and I teach a wide range of courses, including introductory classes in Rhetoric, Writing, and Digital Media Studies, an introduction to research methods class, and a research projects graduate capstone class. We also teach a wide range of topics classes, including Topics in Digital and Social Media, Topics in Historical and Contemporary Rhetoric, Topics in Public and Disciplinary Writing, and Topics in Narrative and Creative Rhetorics. While our choice to go all online initially occurred largely due to budgetary constraints and not having enough on-campus students to effectively run our program, the impacts of having an on-line MA program have been far-reaching and, taken altogether, quite encouraging. As Susan Ko and Steven Rossen write in *Teaching Online*: *A Practical Guide*, virtual classrooms in fact can be a great benefit to our students by "joining together other students from diverse geographical locales, forging bonds and friendships not possible in conventional classrooms, which are usually limited to students from a particular geographic region" (4). Having a strong, award-winning online program has meant

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that while we usually still have a core group of ten to twelve graduate students on campus, the bulk of our eighty-plus graduate students are online only, from around the country and around the world.

Since that time when we first brought the graduate program completely online, I have taught some version of my graduate course, English 623: Topics in Narrative and Creative Rhetorics. This is a course that effectively weaves together two of my major research and teaching interests—rhetoric and creative writing. Versions of this course that I have designed have focused on Adventures in Memoirs, Contemporary Memoirs, and The History of Life Writing. In this chapter I hope to explain a bit about the structure of The History of Life Writing class, what it's like to teach subjects such as "the personal" online, and to examine three graduate student projects in particular—all of which draw at least somewhat on multimodal approaches—that have been constructed within this online course.

The Course Structure

In this course, my students read a range of crucial texts in common. One of the key texts of the course is Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's *Reading Autobiography*: *A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. Through reading and discussing this text, students learn about the history of life writing, as well as crucial categories for and approaches to analyzing life writing. They also read *The Art of Memoir*, Mary Karr's important contribution to understanding the genre of memoir, while also discerning how to best write memoir. They read Julie Rak's *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market*, which takes them behind the scenes, revealing the specific ways in which bookstores and publishing houses function to both produce as well as shape the memoir reading experience. They also read Sven Birkerts's *The Art of Time in Memoir*: *Then*, *Again*, which examines a series of famous memoirs, how they operate, and how the concept of time functions within each of them. Finally, they read from and do the exercises in Sherry Ellis's *Now Write*! *Nonfiction* that help them to hone and perfect their creative nonfiction writing abilities.

The major assignments in The History of Life Writing work in conjunction with these readings. Students read and respond to theory texts about the history of life writing and memoir in analytic blog posts and discussions. They engage in creative nonfiction writing exercises in creative

blog posts. And, finally, after crafting a detailed proposal about their Final Course Project, they compose a ten- to fifteen-page project (often multimodal in nature) that offers a careful analysis of a memoir or life writing text.

Teaching "The Personal" Online

I have definitely found that teaching life writing online poses certain different challenges than teaching the same class face-to-face. The students and I cannot see one another, so we find ourselves not reading one another— our facial expressions, our body language—as we might in a traditional class. Instead we read each other in a more limited and contextualized way, taking in the words each one of us produces for the class and the contexts they themselves create. We are often writing about very personal subjects, given the class content. The Ellis book and the creative blog post assignments especially encourage students to write about their own experiences and observations in detail and share them with the rest of the class. The personal is a huge part of the class, both in terms of its subject matter and how we approach that subject matter.

Ironically, the fact that we are interacting online—what might seem to some people as a far less personal learning experience—has allowed many students, they have told me time and again, to feel more free about sharing some of their more complex and harder experiences (for example, difficulties with family members and friends, experiences of trauma, transgender identity issues). One reason for this is that they don't have the same immediate fears concerning their peers' judgments. As Pat Swenson and Nancy A. Taylor, the authors of *Online Teaching in the Digital Age*, describe when writing about online education, "Although technology offers varied modes of discussion that can seem sterile compared to in-person dialogue, some of these platforms actually provide deeper means of connecting between students and teacher, resulting in a greater authenticity of written and spoken communication" (6).

The course is also very collaborative in both its approach and focus— student-centered and encouraging a great deal of student-to-student engagement. All of these things are critically important to creating a successful online writing course experience. As Scott Warnock suggests in *Teaching Writing Online*: *How and Why*, we need to "make it clear that they [the students] are responsible to build the knowledge of the course. They must be

active learners" (43). Likewise, Rita-Marie Conrad and J. Ana Donaldson argue in *Engaging the Online Learner*: *Activities and Resources for Creative Instruction*, "collaborative acquisition of knowledge is one key to the success of creating an online environment. Activities that require student interaction and encourage a sharing of ideas promote a deeper level of thought" (5).

Ideally, as Rosemary M. Lehman and Simone C. O. Conceição argue in *Creating a Sense of Presence in Online Teaching*: *How to "Be There" for Distance Learners*, the online environment "looks and feels as if the instructor has placed the learner at the center of the course development and created the course for that learner. It also looks and feels as if the instructor is accessible to the learners and the learners are accessible to the instructor and each other, and that the technology is transparent to the learning process (3). This "transparency" does not mean that the class is not itself shaped a great deal by technology. Far from it, in fact. As Claire Howell Major contends in *Teaching Online*: *A Guide to Theory*, *Research*, *and Practice*, "When teaching online, technology not only serves as a background, but also as a context for instruction, since it functions as the place where teaching and learning happen. That is, the *place* of the course is cyberspace, as that is where instructors and students interact, exchange information and ideas, make course products, and otherwise carry out the work of the course" (10).

And, as Michelle D. Miller writes in *Minds Online*: *Teaching Effectively with Technology*, though in many ways online teaching appears and operates differently than face-to-face teaching, the "hallmarks of quality—student effort, frequent and high-quality interaction, active learning, and so forth—appear to be quite similar across modalities" (41). Miller further contends that "Empirical research on outcomes tends to favor online learning, with some studies even turning up substantial advantages, particularly for designs where on-line and face-to-face component complement one another" (41).[1] Likewise, as Mary Deane and Teresa Guasch assert in their edited volume *Learning and Teaching Writing Online*, while "online learning and teaching" should be understood as "both structurally and essentially different from face-to-face interaction," both modes can be very valuable and effective. They also especially note that "teacher training" remains a "core part of successful technology-enhanced curricula" and that "evaluation" ought to be "fundamental to the enterprise of enhancing the learning and teaching of writing online" (2).

Moreover, there is a genuine sense of freedom that comes from being online that often enables students to be more forthcoming about personal

issues that they might not otherwise feel comfortable sharing. This may in part be due to the fact that my students are used to using social media platforms regularly as spaces to construct and share their own identities. It may also be because I work quite hard to use discussions and blog posts as places to create a supportive community online. But, as a result, students are often willing to take a leap of faith online—to let those "circus clowns keep pouring out," as Karr writes. And, they find that the responses they receive from one another more often than not tend not only to be thoughtful and respectful but also to be ones of great identification, empathy, and understanding. In an online environment, they find that they can write about the personal in uniquely personal ways.

The online teaching environment also lends itself well to multimodal teaching. It becomes quite easy and even natural for faculty and students to integrate blogs, Facebook, Google Docs, YouTube, Skype, and other networking options into their assignments and projects. This means that while I used to receive a lot of final projects that were more traditionally text-based only, now students often incorporate video components—that have visual and aural components—alongside their written texts.

Some Final Projects

The students construct their final projects based on a Final Project proposal blog post, which receives feedback from me as well as from their peers. Then they go on to compose a Final Course Project that offers a careful, critical analysis of some kind of autobiographical text(s). I deliberately leave this assignment open and full of possibilities, because these are advanced graduate students and I want to give them the chance to explore topics of their own choosing relative to the class topic. They then receive feedback on that project from me as well as from their peers.

This past semester a wide range of projects emerged from the class. One student who is herself a teacher had a close relationship with her grandmother, a woman who took the bold step of moving West at twenty-one to teach in rural schools. This student examined the changes in identity that her grandmother expressed in her collected letters. Another student, who was in the military for many years, decided to do a close rhetorical analysis of the collected letters of soldiers writing home to family members. Another student, in her seventies, analyzed her journals from when

she was a younger woman and wrote a detailed letter back to her younger self. Still others focused their analyses around one memoir or other auto-biographical text in particular.

In this section, I want to concentrate on the final projects written in blog form by three of my graduate students. The first is a careful and humorous analysis by Seth Muller of Dave Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. The second is a multimodal analysis by Carla Fuja of Maya Angelou's *The Heart of a Woman*. The third is a multimodal project by Jennifer Walker that centers around Augusten Burroughs's *Running with Scissors*. Each of these projects reveals something innovative about what students are doing with the issue of personal writing in the digital age within an online class environment.

Seth

Seth had long been captured by Eggers's book. And in our class texts on the "History of Life Writing" we read several sets of comments and analyses about Eggers's work, ones that acknowledged its use of metanarration, what many have argued is a sort of postmodern approach. Seth not only wanted to expose how these facets of Eggers's rhetoric worked. He also wanted to enact them in the very structure of his paper itself, the language choices he made, and the analyses he offered. In effect, Seth chose not to conduct a straight analysis of the text, but rather to enact Eggers's approach. This made for a very interesting paper, "Magic in the Stagger: The Meta-Mix and Fictional Blur of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*," and one that offered an inventive alternative to traditional notions about how to analyze personal writing.

Taking his cue from Eggers's introduction to his book, in which he writes directly to the reader about how exactly to read his book, Seth's paper begins with a set of quite humorous and specific "Rules and Suggestions for Enjoyment of This Essay." I'll include them here.

> 1) Don't overthink the title. It might come across as cele-bratory, but this essay isn't all the way that. The author just liked the way it sounded. If you have already let it sway you, and you are lulled into that way of thinking, that's fine. Let's just go with it. 2) It gets a little too long-winded and aca-demic in the middle—and feels the need to give a shout-out

to other critics. You can always skip this part if you're short on time. Or maybe you can take a reading break and try to rate it on the academic pomposity scale provided at the end of the essay. Or review the incomplete guide to symbols and metaphors. 3) The author met Dave Eggers in 2003 and had a slight man-crush on him for a brief time. Don't judge the author for having man-crushes. They are extremely minor emotional reactions and not at all sexual. Actually, just forget it was even mentioned. 4) This essay contains references to James Frey. The author is sorry, but he read about him fifteen times this semester and could not get *A Million Little Pieces* out of his head. 5) Frisbees. If you like Frisbees, you're in for a treat. They're a registered trademark. 6) The conclusion is pretty bold, but this author hopes you won't take it to mean that it's all the way true. Be sure to make up your own mind.

Here Seth is both analyzing Eggers's introductory comments—setting his own reader up for the reveal that Eggers and Seth himself will be playing with writerly conventions, ideas about truth, the privileging of linear chronology, and the like—and offering a parody that is essentially a meta-commentary on them.

Seth then introduces his readers to some of his own main claims in his paper. In the case of Eggers, "The boundaries of the genre are pushed to the near-breaking point with the extensive inclusion of paratext that insists, among other suggestions, the book might be as much fiction and fantasy as nonfiction. The concept of truth does not just become blurry—the author himself pushes the reader to question his veracity at various turns in the introduction." Seth goes on in the rest of his paper to examine those crucial moments in Eggers's text where he plays with the idea of truth or challenges the expected relationship between a reader and the memoir writer. In particular, he examines Eggers's play script of how a conversation with a mother at his young brother's new school might go. He also analyzes Eggers's use of a fake conversation between himself and Laura Fogler, the casting director for the MTV series *The Real World*. In the end, Seth asserts that "the honesty in the fakery and the power of disclaimer make *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* a towering memoir for the new century."

But Seth's paper does not conclude there. He then includes the following graphic, inviting the reader to score his essay, much as the reader is invited to analyze Eggers's book.

**You Are Invited to Score This Essay on the
James-Buckley Academic Pomposity Scale Provided Below:**

1 —— 2 —— 3 —— 4 —— 5 —— 6 —— 7 —— 8 —— 9 —— 10

Rick James	Willie Nelson	William Shatner	Brian Williams	William F. Buckley
(Not academic)	(More folksy)	(Faux pompous)	(Arrogant)	(Face-punchingly smug)

He also includes a symbol and metaphor guide to reading his essay, much like Eggers himself does with his book. Seth adds the following: "Artifice = You know, how writing isn't real but maybe also that nothing is real, or Nihilism; Critic = Thoughtful Viper; Frank McCourt = Good Old-Fashioned Memoirist; Frisbee = Virility; Land = Writing; Meta-whatever = Supreme Self-knowing; Moves = Decisions; *Real World* References = 90s Milieu; Slippery Slope = Not an Issue of Geology or Topography, but Over-imagination; Superhero = Unfulfilled Expectations, or Fiction."

What makes Seth's paper so intriguing is the way in which it both offers an analysis and a critique of Eggers's work through parodying what is, in essence, itself a parody. In terms of his own identity, Seth situates himself as making a metacommentary on Eggers's own metacommentary. Seth uses humor throughout his text to accomplish this beautifully. Seth received online commentary from me and his peers as he worked to draft this paper into its finalized version.

Carla

Carla offered a thoughtful analysis of Maya Angelou's *A Heart of a Woman* in her paper "*The Heart of a Woman-*Maya Angelou," touching on many of Angelou's other works as well. In the end, what she created, however, did not rest at the level of analysis. She also produced a video to be viewed alongside the paper in which she traced some of the key accomplishments of Angelou and the important changes in her life. As the reader reads Carla's text it is augmented by the inclusion of this multimodal component.

Carla's text begins with a summary of *A Heart of a Woman*, detailing its key structural features for the reader who may not be familiar with the text. Next she draws from Smith and Watson's text for analytical tools she will use in order to analyze the text. She points specifically to their

description of "authorship and the historical moment" in which they address the question of "What did it mean to be an 'author' at *the historical moment* in which the narrative was *written, published, and circulated*?" (237). Carla states that, "I think for Angelou the answer to this question would mean the civil rights battle that was being fought during the fifties and the changes that were taking place within the United States and other areas." She points specifically to meetings that Angelou recounts with Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. She also describes how Angelou creates a wider cultural and historical context for understanding her work by writing often "about the songs sung throughout the history of black people, commenting on how they have travelled through time from the beginning of slavery to the time that she writes of. It is through these songs that she writes of, as she goes through different situations in her life, that she is given strength."

Next Carla turns to how Angelou uses "the autobiographical 'I,'" another term that Smith and Watson point to as key for analyzing life writing. They address the questions: "How may you distinguish among the historical, narrating, narrated, and ideological 'I's' of the text? What is the position of the *historical person writing the autobiography* within her cultural world?" (238). Carla writes that "her [Angelou's] tone throughout this story is ever changing, although for the most part it is a telling of the events, and the tone of each given situation does come through." Carla then traces key shifts in this "autobiographical 'I'" throughout Angelou's text. Carla also points to how "body and embodiment" work in the text, other issues that Smith and Watson suggest are often at work in life writing. They examine the questions: "Precisely when and where does the body become visible in the narrative? Which part, or functions, or feelings of the body?" (239). Finally, Carla offers a rhetorical analysis of the text based on Aristotle's three main appeals—ethos, pathos, and logos. Her text closes with a series of images that feature quotes from Angelou's work that appear on the oprah.com, quotesgram, creativefan.com, and notedquotes websites, as well as a detailed video that Carla created about Angelou works and life.

What makes Carla's text so powerful is her attention to weaving together the textual component of her project with these quotes and the other visual images from her video that uses music as well. Though the assignment did not require that students do this, Carla saw the multimodal component of her project to be essential to its overall effectivity as an argument. As Jason Palmeri suggests in *Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing Pedagogy*, this multimodal approach to the writing process can be infinitely beneficial. He argues that ideally "we must embrace

a capacious vision of multimodal pedagogy that includes both digital and nondigital forms of communication: live oratory and digital audio documentary; quilting and videogaming; paper-based scrapbooking and digital storytelling; protest chanting and activist video making" (160). Carla's text does in fact accomplish this, weaving the traditionally alphabetic and print-focused together with the visual and aural.

Jennifer

In Jennifer's project, "Truthiness," she analyzed Augusten Burroughs's text *Running with Scissors*. As part of her analysis, she wanted to include information about the reception of the book, the function of the book in relation to the movie, and how issues of truth led to legal concerns surrounding the work itself. Her paper offers a careful consideration of these issues, but it also does something rather different. She repeatedly brings video into the project—interrupting and augmenting her written ideas with clips from *The Colbert Report* about "truthiness," as well as key scenes from the film based on the book.

Jennifer begins by recounting her first reading of the book: "It was the middle of summer. I was lounging on a float in the pool with a wine spritzer in one hand and Augusten Burroughs's memoir *Running with Scissors* in the other. As I read the details of Burroughs's life from child to mid-teen, I was appalled, mortified, and in shock. Yet, I couldn't put it down." She then links the book to a larger cultural phenomenon she is noticing in reality television.

> Our current culture seems to relish other people's problems. And, the more bizarre they are, the more obsessed we become. We watch *Hoarders* with pleasant angst, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* with self-righteous disgust, and *My 600 lb. Life* with indignant gratitude . . . Real-life characters engaged in seemingly normal events enhance viewers' attention, and the gratification of seeing someone else's life in turmoil feeds the viewers' voyeuristic desires.

She then includes a video of Stephen Colbert talking about how truth has been discarded in favor of "truthiness," a term "coined in the modern sense" by Colbert himself. As the *New Oxford American Dictionary* has it, it is

that which has the "informal quality of seeming or being felt to be true, even if not necessarily true."

Jennifer also calls attention to the problems within the genre concerning what counts as "truth," mentioning James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*. She then describes the lawsuit surrounding the Burroughs book and how the facts of the book were themselves called into question. She takes a look at how specific scenes from the book were refuted by the Turcotte family who was represented in the book and moves between images from the film to support her analyses.

In the end, though, Jennifer concludes that the book should be recognized as a rhetorically successful memoir and not discounted because of the scandal surrounding the text. She further writes, "But, as is the case with many memoirists, Burroughs maintains that *Running with Scissors* is his story, no one else's. He relayed the facts as he remembers them in his life. He maintains that the book is 100% true and that any discrepancies are due to his memory versus another person's memory. He also claims to have 20 years' worth of journals to back up his stories."

Jennifer's already very interesting paper about truth, memoir, and the book *Running with Scissors* is made that much stronger because she includes visual and aural elements within the piece. This allows her reader immediate access to *The Colbert Report* and scenes from the book as represented in the film. Once again, these multimodal components add to the credibility of her argument as a whole and make it come more alive for her reader. As Claire Lutkewitte articulates in her "Introduction" to *Multimodal Composition*: *A Sourcebook*, the use of multimodal composition is ever-more critical since "instructors and students are recognizing that old and new technologies have enabled, and even demanded, the use of more than one mode to communicate, entertain, solve problems, and engage in deliberation" (2). Lutkewitte also adds that "multimodal composition is more about the process, or act of composing, than simply the final product" (2). Jennifer's paper is as much about her putting this piece together, then—the threading together of print, visual, and aural aspects—as it is about the final version that she has created.

Conclusion

There is a tendency to see online courses as spaces that might be inimical to writing the personal. But the truth is that such spaces can be absolutely

crucial for experimenting with personal writing as well as analyzing personal writing. As Valerie Hill notes in her essay "Digital Citizens as Writers: New Literacies and New Responsibilities" within Elizabeth A. Monske and Kristin L. Blair's edited collection *Handbook of Research on Writing and Composing in the Age of MOOCs*, we have entered a world in which the "tools for writing merge physical, virtual, and augmented spaces. Certainly, opportunities to utilize communication have expanded; but, so too, the responsibilities for using those tools wisely becomes substantial" (57). Increasingly, if we take these "responsibilities" seriously, this seemingly either impersonal space or far too personal space—the Internet—can also be used as an exciting and innovative place to construct scholarly work and creative personal writing. What the online class accomplishes beautifully oftentimes is to connect students spanning the globe quite personally to one another and to what they are composing. It also supports multimodal writing projects in ways that may be somewhat easier and sometimes more effective than within traditional face-to-face classrooms.

Note

1.   The online teaching of writing raises its own new concerns, of course. It not only solves problems, but also presents new ones. Heather Fielding's important essay, "'Any Time, Any Place': The Myth of Universal Access and the Semiprivate Space of Online Education," in *Computers and Composition* suggests that a "neutral relationship to time" is often presupposed when we consider online courses. In reality, though, every student "will have to fit the course into his or her actual, lived experience, engaging in an ongoing negotiation between the parts of their lives as they decide what specific times they will use for their online coursework, and what else they will not do (work, socialize, engage with family, relax, sleep) during that time" (103/104). Finding ways to better understand how individual students are negotiating their online classes in terms of time, as well as integrating them into their everyday lives, remains crucial.

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11 Students Tell Me Things
Personal Writing in New Media Studies

Aimée Morrison

STUDENTS TELL ME THINGS. An ex-boyfriend circulated naked photos of one student online, and she's afraid to Google herself. A different student likes to troll newspaper comment sections under a pseudonym just to watch people fight. Someone else writes a very popular Twitter account on comics and porn. Yet another student produces green text on Reddit. Teaching topics in contemporary online media, as I do, inevitably elicits personal disclosures from students. Student disclosures used to surprise and discomfit me; it took me some time to come to understand these disclosures as structural and valuable, as frames through which students make sense of the parts of the online world with which they are less familiar. The Internet is made up of myriad niche genres largely invisible to anyone but insiders—fanfic sites, YouTube channels for clean eating cuisine, personal mommy blogs, fashion Tumblrs, Twitch screencasts, and cat memes each occupy their own part of the Internet, and serve as hubs for distinct communities and ways of knowing. As my students grapple with course material on selfies, or hashtag activism, or even the demographics of the tech industry, they necessarily frame their interpretations through their own experiences online, experiences that are as personal as they are various. Indeed, I have begun to build assignments that specifically *prompt* personal writing by students to make these experiences and framing more visible, while setting boundaries to maintain desired levels of privacy. This chapter will address one such assignment from my graduate course in English at the University of Waterloo, Writing the Self Online. I will describe the structure and purpose of the auto/biographical media production project from that course, and will share excerpts from the projects produced by six students among the thirteen-member cohort of my fall 2015 class.

   Incorporating digital life writing practice into my students' more critical or abstract study of online auto/biographical materials serves several pedagogical purposes. First, it enhances our understanding of the

links between the software or hardware platform used, the kinds of writing that can be produced on that platform, and the context-specific potential or actual audience associated with it. An essay on the collective writing platform Medium, for example, can draw an audience of strangers into long-form writing and be searched on the Internet, while Facebook status updates are much shorter and visible only to a circumscribed audience of "Friends"—further limited on the basis of invisible algorithmic calculations to optimize news feeds. Second, ethical issues related to personal privacy, intellectual property, and life writing's fundamental relationality are brought to the fore in this assignment, as students struggle to tell their own stories without disclosing too much of anyone else's. Along these same lines, as in all assignments that require the production of life-writing, students become acutely aware of the slippery nature of what constitutes a "true story," the ambiguities of the autobiographical pact, the unreliability of memory, and the sheer quantity of pruning and selection involved in auto/biography. Third, an assignment that has students both *producing* life writing and then *critiquing* it opens up a methodological discussion on auto-ethnography, participant ethnography, and surface reading, methods I believe to be crucial to teaching and researching online life writing, methods that can account for and incorporate the subjectivity of the researcher.

The assignment, in brief, is this: on the platform of their choice, highlighting one particular part of their identity, students craft an auto/biographical online presence over the course of six weeks, then produce a short analytical paper describing the process, their choices, the results, and how their practices make sense through a life writing and a new media studies frame. Students have proven themselves tremendously creative and thoughtful in the production of these projects. Having reworked the assignment over several iterations of this course, I have refined if not quite "best" then at least *better* practices for supporting students' safety online, as well as respecting their individual boundaries between what is personal but *shareable*, and what is personal but *private*.

I will begin by detailing the assignment and explaining how it works: what prompts are used, what limitations are imposed, what safeguards and boundaries are negotiated. Next, I will share student writing in response to the assignment, both what they produced as life writing, and the critical assessments they performed on this work. Finally, I will draw some conclusions around the benefits and risks of having students produce auto/biographical material online for a graded assignment, and suggest some possible "better" practices for others wishing to use such assignments in a variety of courses.

Auto/Biography and Analysis Assignment

The online life writing assignment is presented to students on the very first day of class, because experience has shown it can provoke substantial anxiety in some, and also test the creativity and confidence of many others: they need lead-up time before even beginning, that is. The assignment takes six or seven weeks to complete, and is the main writing activity of the first half of the term. Here is the assignment sheet.

> *Auto/Biography and Analysis Assignment*
> Due: [week 8], at the beginning of class
> Weight: 30%
>
> Digital life writing is audience focused, coaxed and coached by affordances and genre, multi-mediated, and interconnected. For this assignment, you will create *some sort of* digital self-representation. This self-representation must be about some aspect of your life (that is, *it must be life writing*) although the scope is fairly wide. You may, for example, focus on a particular part of your life, such as a hobby (knitting) you have, or a role you play (student, parent), so long as the posts deal primarily with your personal life. You might run an Instagram account, or do something more private with Snapchat, you might go really stealth with Whisper, or more public with a blog, a Twitter account, or Facebook. You might go collective with a #hashtag campaign, or make a Buzzfeed quiz to appeal to people like you. You might write a confessional essay on Medium or elsewhere. You get to choose. You might be anonymous, or pseudonymous, or use your real name. You might court a mass audience, or a niche one, or an audience of one.
>
> Decisions to Make:
>
> » Which "self" am I foregrounding?
> » What name will I use?
> » What platform to use?
> » What genre to write in?
> » What audience am I seeking?
> » How will I court this audience?

In addition to creating this digital life writing project, you will write a short paper—6–8 pages long—detailing your experience, both personally and in the light of the theoretical readings we've undertaken. You will be graded both on the quality of the life writing itself, as well as the sophistication of the analytical paper you write as a companion to it.

Questions to Consider:

» Are the stakes different in an online writing than in print? How?
» What does it mean to court and maintain an audience?
» How do platform and medium affect the writing and reception of life text?
» What is the role of genre in determining content?
» How did this all make you feel—and why?
» Have an idea? You should probably come talk to me, and we can make it work! I can help you determine scale and strategy, and create and respect boundaries.

Producing the Life Writing Itself

In my directions I've also highlighted the phrase "*some sort of* digital self-representation." Earlier iterations of the assignment that did not emphasize this point made students both very nervous, and very confused. The confusion related to how it would be possible to complete an online autobiography in the format and timeframe specified. The nervousness seemed to stem from the idea that to produce life writing necessarily entailed the production of a full (if shorter) autobiography: a complete account of a life, comprehensive in its coverage from "I was born . . . " to "and now I'm in this class." To compress such a narrative into six weeks of digital life writing seems, of course, an impossible challenge (hence the confusion), but the nervousness mostly stemmed not from the *scale* of the presumed assignment, but from the full and unflinching *personal disclosures* it seemed to exact. One student in an earlier version of the class burst into tears when presented with this assignment: he had been stalked online and never wanted to write personal material on the Internet ever again. Another student a few years after that told me her mother did not want her to do the assignment, because the Internet was an unseemly place full of strangers. As a result of

these and other interactions, I have recrafted the assignment prompts to be more sensitive to people's life circumstances, but the questions of privacy or unseemliness are teachable topics I have incorporated into the curriculum for the class as whole.

More generally, students were afraid to put their *whole* lives online to be read, and particularly did not want to share their whole lives *with me*, to be graded. A sensible objection! And, of course, such an outcome was never my intent. The current formulation of the assignment thus stresses the *partialness* of the life story required, and the *autonomy* students have in deciding what part of their life they wanted to write, and how. This agency is flagged by the "some sort of" statement, as well as by the fulsome list of quite varied platforms and identities students might choose to use and write about. This opens, again, useful discussions about the choices life writers make about which version of the self is being written, and how such stories will be framed and delimited.

Part of the work of the course is to help students see that all life writing is *partial* in its selection of which story to tell, *constrained* by social or material circumstance, and *motivated* by some desire that the telling can assuage. This assignment puts all those ideas literally at students' fingertips, in the choices they must make, or the compromises they face, in crafting their own online life writing. The examples offered of ways to limit the scope of this telling, as well as the recitation of numerous potential/acceptable online platforms, are meant to reassure students that the level of disclosure, the degree of seriousness or vulnerability it must manifest, and the range of media tools they can employ to structure their stories are theirs to decide, according to their own lights. Students needn't write long, personal essays of trauma, although they can if they wish. They can make a Buzzfeed list about "Things you can't understand if you weren't a nineties kid" that features images of defunct toys, odd outfits, and stars of children's television who've disappeared from the larger collective memory.

The "Decisions to Make" section continues this work of opening options to students, reassuring them that they have authorial control in deciding what (fraction of/which part of their) life story to tell and in what register or genre, and offering a template that can be used later in the analysis of others' online life writing. "Which self am I foregrounding?" addresses the partiality of all life writing, the necessary limiting and framing of auto/biography. This is the primary question, the main decision: the others, such as "What platform to use" and "What genre to write in," while important, are circumscribed by the primary decision about which self to

narrate. Tacitly or explicitly, all writers must decide each of these questions, and the assignment foregrounds them. The questions relating to audience (What audience am I seeking? and How will I court this audience?) are a recent addition, by necessity. Many earlier students were writing simply *for me*, even on highly public social platforms built on engagement. But a Twitter account with no followers or attempts to grow them cannot be a successful online life writing project, no matter how clever or compelling the 140 character bursts! Social media life stories with no sense of actual, anticipated, or desired connection to a particular audience is the sound of one hand clapping. The two new final prompts ask students to *conceive* of an audience, *create* and nurture it, and to *account* for it in the accompanying analytical paper.

In all, the descriptive preamble and the specific prompts in the assignment lead to more focused discussions with students as they explore their options; they seem reassured and empowered. A coda at the bottom of the assignment sheet once more encourages students to consult with me to refine and realize their projects, and reminds them that I take their sense of personal privacy and boundaries seriously. As I have refined these particular instructions with more specific prompts, a greater variety of examples, and a clear emphasis on privacy and choice, I find that students not only produce better life writing, more attuned to audience, genre, medium, and story, but are also more confident about their agency in making these choices. We see this play out in the analyses students produce along with their projects.

Producing the Critical Analysis

The second half of the assignment sheet guides students through the work of producing an analytical account of their own processes. The "Questions to Consider" by and large refocus the questions listed under "Decisions to Make" from a life-writing production lens to a critical reading lens. This part of the assignment entails writing a six to eight page critical analysis of their own life-writing text and their writing process, and asks them further to link their own textual production to larger questions in new media studies and auto/biography. It serves two purposes. First by having students critique their own texts, the assignment aims to inculcate an attention to context and a keener empathy with all online life writers. A student may be aware that his decision to put his writing in a password-protected site has limited his audience severely, but can also frame such a practice in terms of desired

privacy and sense of emotional vulnerability, for example. From this he can extrapolate that not-immediately-visible and yet not-unknowable personal or contextual factors surely guide other writers in framing their own online life writing. Another student might attempt to make a hashtag go viral, and fail: critically considering such an experience can lead the student to reassess how "simple" or "easy" Twitter is as a platform for collective conversation. Her understanding of the relationality of "network effects" will likely become more sophisticated as a result. The analysis portion of the assignment allows students to work these ideas out in concrete rather than abstract terms.

The prompts listed in the bullet points as "Questions to Consider," by deliberately echoing the points raised under "Decisions to Make" in the prior section, necessarily draw students into linking the *practice* of life writing to its *theory*—the life writer and the critic are each constrained by the same factors, which the life writer manipulates or compromises or battles in order to produce a satisfactory life-writing text, and which the critic uses as the basis for trying to understand and explain a writer's practices, craft, and context. As an ethical project, this linkage means to indicate that life writing in an online or any other medium is a deeply intellectual and creative act, even, perhaps in an #ootd ("outfit of the day") Instagram genre. Life writers, I mean here to suggest to students, are not naive and uncritical any more than academic readers have a secret key to unlock meaning, or a degree of omniscience or better judgment than writers themselves do about the work.

What They Did: Personal but Not Private Life Writing

Student projects this past iteration were the most various I have yet received. These projects generated the most office visits, the most e-mails, and, I think, the most laughter and surprise. One student used screenshots with names scrubbed out to outline her participation in a new-mother's group on Facebook. Another student used Facebook very differently: he played around with linking to different media (text or photo), different posting times, and different content categories to see what would generate the most likes and engagement from his existing friend group. One student, deeply skeptical of the entire enterprise, nevertheless threw himself fully into Instagram. One student used Tinder as a life writing platform, exploring its textual as well as visual affordances. Two students produced Buzzfeed

listicles (or, "list articles")—one crafted a list to appeal to a very wide audience of University of Waterloo alumni from all faculties and fields, and the other told a personal narrative of graduate student life with animated gifs. One student engaged in stream of consciousness narration of episodes from childhood, recorded as a Twitch video while he played through *Call of Duty*. Two students wrote blogs, one quite personal about her emotional journey through turning thirty and remaining single, which was linked through her real name to Instagram and Facebook feeds, and the other one pseudonymous, deliberately episodic, observational, breezy—and completely disconnected from the rest of her online life. Another student resurfaced e-mails and texts and other social media exchanges with his former romantic partners, trying to tell the story of his life in failed relationships captured in electronic conversation.

The process generated critical insights for students. Alex determines that his Facebook friends respond most positively to linked stories about videogames, particularly those tinged with nostalgia: these get the most links and comments, particularly if he times it right. This has as much to do with the platform and the context provided by his personal friend group as it does with his direct practices as an author, Alex discovers. He writes that

> keeping and maintaining an audience seems to be about competent use of the tools at one's disposal for authoring and shaping a rhetorically convincing package (captions, tags and content), which means understanding what affordances Facebook as a platform provides; picking content that will resonate and adjusting as it does or does not resonate in practice; understanding the limitations of archiving or longevity that are built into the platform, and then developing a kairotic sense of when a link should go up based on myriad factors related to the proven or intended audience. (Fleck 6)

Alex experimented with linking different types of stories, with captions and without, at different times of day, and different days of the week. Links might be powerful, but he still finds, at the end of the experiment, he gets a lot more engagement from his friends when he just posts selfies.

Airlie wrote a blog about being single, and the activities (yoga, art) of her daily life living on her own. She put a lot of thought into developing an avatar that would make her very personal blog seem more universal and hence more relatable: "The avatar I used is a photo of me stretching

my arms to the back to form a heart shape. This [. . .] was to make this site not just about me, the author [. . .]. It is about us having each other's back" (Heung 3). Airlie's blog eventually drew 171 followers over the course of the term, and this was meaningful to her: "Courting and maintaining an audience is not only to 'farm likes' or 'farm shares' [. . .] but to also build meaningful connections, connections that will in the end create a long run audience that will engage in more meaningful conversations, which has become a fundamental part of this website" (Heung 5–6). Using WordPress's own analytics, though, Airlie discovered her audience was primarily North American, despite her own cultural background and experiences in Hong Kong, leading her to wonder why: "Was it the language? Or was it the cultural aspects and ideologies that made the difference?" (Heung 4). Ultimately, she decides that North American culture is more ready to discuss and celebrate a "single life" narrative for adult women and thus she is more able to find an audience in that context.

Jin Sol did a close textual analysis of her own selection and authorship process as she put together a Tinder profile. Even though Tinder is mostly known for its rapid-fire photo-based swiping interface, Jin Sol noted its textual affordances as well: her self-description, while using only 20 percent of the characters allotted, packed a punch. She chose to describe herself thus: "i hate olives and soggy cereal and am highly prone to sarcasm and bad puns. you have been warned. [red wine emoji, camera emoji, pizza slice emoji]." Her analysis of the craft she employed in framing herself this way is worth quoting in full.

> In writing this little piece in the "About You" section, I made a number of deliberate choices. First, I chose to ignore proper capitalization and punctuation to show that I am laid-back and part of the younger generation that does not care much for grammar rules (as despite being an English student, I am more relaxed with these practices on online platforms). Second, I chose to write a light and silly note with an overall bare tone of voice rather than trying to squeeze an accurate all-encompassing description of me into five hundred characters. In doing so, I presented myself as humourous, all the while providing some true facts about myself. To end it off, I threw in the red wine, the camera, and the pizza emojis, all of which I feel are representative of me. The use of emojis—in particular, of the pizza emoji—to finalize my "About You"

section successfully shows my audience that I am cool and
relatable. (Kim 4–5)

Jin Sol so closely attends to the meanings of her own practices that she
produces here a tightly argued 164 *word* analysis of a 104 *character* Tinder
profile, to excellent result.

Rebecca and Kaitlin each crafted Buzzfeed listicles, for different pur-
poses, audiences, and effects. Kaitlin's project actually stemmed from her
work with the university, in Alumni Relations (UWaterlooAlumni). Her
Buzzfeed listicle, "Top 23 Ways to Know You're a UWaterloo Grad," aimed
to "serve the dual purpose of getting graduates excited about Convocation
and engaging with alumni to connect with them about memories they may
be able to relate to" (O'Brien 1). In this she was successful: using Buzzfeed's
native analytics, Kaitlin determined that the post "garnered [. . .] 11,000 total
views, with 7,944 views coming from the link being posted on Facebook
alone, and with Twitter having made the link accessible to 314 audience
members" (O'Brien 3–4). Kaitlin's critical analysis of the authorship pro-
cess stresses concepts such as the creation of an imagined community,
the implicit authority of having "Alumni Relations" listed as the author
of the piece, the specificity of the geographical locations, the difficulties
of appealing to a generic "alumni" that may have graduated in any of the
past fifty years, and the intertextuality of the pop culture GIFs inserted
into the mostly textual list. As she expresses it, "[i]n essence, the Buzzfeed
list triggers within audience members certain university-related memories
that have been stored and that may not have been accessed for a period of
time," both creating and nurturing a shared group identity (O'Brien 8).

Rebecca's listicle similarly addressed shared experiences among uni-
versity students, but adopts a more colloquial (often sarcastic) tone and
narrower conception of audience: her piece, "Battling the External Award
Application: An Endemic Grad Student Experience," focuses on the fall ritual
of putting together doctoral funding applications to the Social Sciences and
Humanities Research Council of Canada, a lengthy and laborious process
(Robertson). Rebecca's listicle made me howl with laughter: it was witty,
wry, cleverly intertextual in its deployment of memes and GIFs, and real.
Still, her analysis focused on how fraught the process was. In her own words,

I did choose [. . .] like many authors of first-person narratives,
to showcase vulnerability—in this case, my struggle with
completing an external award application. To some, such a

> struggle may seem trivial, but for me it exposes a weakness, a
> failure, and an uncertainty; it is a struggle that I do not share
> with my closest friends, family members or partner because I
> do not want to be judged as intellectually insufficient or aca-
> demically inadequate. Sharing this vulnerability forced me
> to consciously or actively acknowledge and grapple with the
> type of content I am willing to share and am comfortable
> with sharing online. (Anderson 2)

That is, hiding behind a pretty stylized and comical depiction of grant writing lurked much more complex issues. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, even considering how expertly the listicle worked in the genre described by the Buzzfeed platform's prior uses, Rebecca concludes that, were she to do it over again, she would choose another platform, like a guest post on an established academic blog: as a listicle, it's brilliant, but it did not meet its author's goals of fostering conversation and community—and that's what mattered to the author in this case (Anderson 10).

Intriguingly, both Buzzfeed projects played with pronouns. Rebecca situated the reader as both a "you" (in the headings) who is presumed to share the experiences narrated, and one who is reading about an "I" (in the image captions) that represents the individual author of the piece. She writes: "privileging the second-person pronoun in the headline while reserving the first-person pronoun for the description box provided and facilitated that delicate balance between widely applicable and personally authentic" (Anderson 5). Kaitlin's listicle, by contrast, deliberately uses the second-person pronoun exclusively, because of that project's different relation to audience, which focused more on "prosthetic memory" and collective identity than individual connection: "the use of 'you' throughout the list [. . .] placed audience members as the subject of the Buzzfeed list and in doing so, inserted them into the list and automatically involved those individuals in the content they were reading" (O'Brien 4–5).

John revived a dormant Instagram account for his project—he was pretty open in class about how he chose the platform precisely because he was so dismissive about its uses. But for the project he studies it carefully to understand how it works, finding of course that "[w]ithin the ecology of different social media platforms, there are 'right' and 'wrong' types of photos that should be posted and how they should be posted. Only through being familiar with the platform does one learn these unwritten rules because the platform itself does not teach them" (Yoon 3). To begin, he undertakes

a careful analysis of the Instagram interface, to determine what kinds of behaviors it aims to guide users toward. His next step was researching other users' streams and navigating various hashtags. As he notes, "the consumption of others' life-writings make up a bulk of the activity on the platform and serves as a learning opportunity for discursive coaxing" (Yoon 4). He also learns by doing, through trial and error: "One of my earlier posts is of a Popeye's [fast food takeout] bag [. . .] But as I entrenched myself in the platform's discursive affordances, I began posting selfies, an accepted type of photo, and learned to do the 'good' editing" (Yoon 3). By the end of the experiment, John was producing sophisticated, highly staged images in the #ootd and food photography genres.

Students who may have started the term referring disdainfully to Snapchat stories and participation in Twitter hashtags soon begin to invest themselves in describing their own communities of practice as worthy of scholarly attention. Jin Sol, for example, set out to do this in her project, in which she proposed to "map out the thought-process that took place during the construction of my identity on Tinder, applying the theory of online life-writing to analyze and reframe the creation of Tinder profiles as an autobiographical act" (Kim 1). When student life writers are able to read their own practices with such a nuanced attention to detail and context, it encourages them to extend the same attention to other writers. As a bonus, the assignments work to foster empathy and connection between individual students and between the students and me, as we learn more about each other—as multifaceted human beings—through this work.

The Personal Is the Pedagogical

My own scholarship has for some time been moving away from canonical or even self-evidently "literary" materials and toward everyday writing produced by everyday writers, such as personal mommy blogs, or Facebook status updates (e.g., Morrison). Using a rhetorical genre framing, which assesses the success of communication in terms of its ability to meet its own stated goals (Miller), I am able to use literary tools of close reading to understand how social norms and exemplary writing are performed in communities of practice. This has entailed not just closely reading a variety of everyday writing such as blog posts and selfies, but also engaging in forms of participant ethnography in which I study writers in genres that I also participate in, and allow these writers to describe their own practices and

purposes, to act as critics and interpreters in their own right (Gajjala, et al.). Such an approach results in analyses that hew to a "surface reading" imperative, where practices are minutely described for how they make meaning in a community of practice, fully contextualized (Best and Marcus; Love). This work is based, ultimately, on empathy. To read popular materials as though they are skilled expressions of social desire requires, perhaps, a shift in thinking for English students trained in a tradition of literary writers, great works, and the kinds of critical pyrotechnics associated with deep reading methodologies sometimes described even as the "hermeneutics of suspicion" (Best and Marcus 5). Empathy develops as students begin to see other life writers as making the same kinds of decisions as they do across the texts we study and produce in class.

This is a key goal of the personal writing assignment, actually. I have been surprised that students I teach in my new media courses—from first-year through doctoral students—are often very conservative in their understanding of the proper object of literary or rhetorical study. As much as they themselves might participate in digital cultural production (and a surprising number of them are digital refuseniks), they can be very judgmental about the quality or value of writing they encounter online: bloggers are "narcissistic," selfie-takers are "shallow," Facebook is "a popularity contest," Instagram is about "vanity," and Twitter is "just people taking pictures of their lunch." It is difficult to imagine students in a course on contemporary poetry holding the authors and writings in such disdain, but new media students have sometimes reflexively taken on the broader culture's dismissal of the perceived oversharing, triviality, illiteracy, gaucheness, et cetera of everyday online practices. In part, the online life writing assignment I give my graduate students is directly to counter this tendency. In any case, it turns out that most students practice something different online from what they preach in class. Most of my students, are, in fact, active and skilled users of various social media, online gaming platforms, and dating apps: they are savvy navigators of technical affordances generally. What they *theorize* is different from what they *do*. And so I craft assignments that foreground the *doing* part of online life writing, and make what is *done* the object of theorizing. Closing that gap between our own everyday practices and a more lofty and distant critical stance we may take when examining the everyday practices of others is, for me, a crucial objective of teaching life writing topics rooted in digital media platforms and services.[1]

Indeed, our personal narratives intersect with our scholarship perhaps more than we tend to acknowledge. Particularly in subjective disciplines

like literary studies, scholars act as highly trained but idiosyncratic filters who are free to pursue the lines of inquiry to which they are most drawn, in the direction they wish to follow. That's what *subjective* means, and it is, as they say in software development, a *feature*, not a *bug*. Interpretive work in humanities disciplines is *necessarily* and *fundamentally* inflected by personal and cultural matters of taste, interest, and experience, almost as much as by disciplinary training. This point was brought home to me during my doctoral studies, while working through some difficulty in a chapter on the gendering of the graphical user interface (GUI) of the original Apple Macintosh as female, as against the masculine command line interface of DOS-based computers. I was in a state of some agitation about my own failure to articulate how important I thought this gendering was to how computing as a set of practices and objects become highly masculinized. I mentioned to my supervisor that my biological father, a computer science professor, professed GUIs wimpy and inexpert. I also told her how I had struggled to feel I belonged in the high school computer science classes where I was the only girl. "Aha!" she exclaimed. "I wondered what the connection was, what drew you to this work!" She was right, of course: my own formative experiences led me, as moth to flame, into the literary study of computer culture.

I would not want to overstate the links between personal history and scholarly pathways: complex intersections of factors both personal and institutional, never mind happenstance, lead scholars into their specialties. Nevertheless, the linkages are often very close to the surface, and deeply meaningful, particularly for junior scholars working in contemporary fields like new media studies. As the (problematic) doctrine of "Do What You Love" suggests, and many scholars express, many of us are drawn first to the academy, then to our disciplines, and finally the particular topics within those disciplines because they fascinate us, or we identify with them (Tokumitsu n.p.). As much as we should rightly denounce the erasure of labor inherent in the ideology of "doing what you love," it's nevertheless worth noting that our work as scholars is *always already* personal, no matter whether you work on Anglo-Saxon texts because the language has a richness and a remoteness that fully engages your particular analytical sensibilities, or on Jane Austen because her books made your heart sing, or on early Canadian literature because as an immigrant you are fascinated by the stories the nation told itself to come into being, or on graphic memoirs of mental illness because you are bipolar and the memoirs resonate with

your own experience. Students working on particular instances or genres of contemporary online life writing because it's what they're reading for pleasure in their personal lives is just another point on a long continuum of humanities scholars everywhere being drawn into passion projects of one sort or another.

Ultimately, our work on the auto/biography assignments demonstrates once more that what is *personal* is also *political*. Student auto/biographical work online demonstrates the various intersectionalities of personality, technical skill, economic and social background and location, cultural community, and ethnic, racial, and gender identity in the production of networked representations of the self. Such work also keenly demonstrates that what is *personal* is not necessarily what is *private*, but may instead be pitched to a kind of public, however large or circumscribed. Further, many of the lessons of life writing as an academic area of study require a good deal of empathy and critical generosity to address: having to produce material themselves in these genres performed critical work in getting students to orient themselves toward the study of online life writing texts produced by others.

(Personal) Writing Across the Curriculum

This is feminist work, in that it stresses the role of subjectivity in the formulation of texts and analyses, and in its breakdown of the barrier between the public space of the classroom and the private lives of the individuals within it. Women have long been denied access to the public-facing role of author or critic, and have had their cultural productions dismissed in the ways popular writing on the Internet tends to be dismissed: unseemly, trivial, personal, unskilled. The segmenting of human activity into "private" and "public" spheres, the gendering of each sphere, the assignment of experiences to one sphere or the other, and the polarizing exclusion of what is "personal" from the realm of "public" speech is precisely what is being replicated in the denunciation of popular life writing on the Internet. When we dismiss as trivial status updates from the high school reunion, Instagrams of the cat, blog posts about the baby, or hashtagged tweets about everyday sexism, we reproduce and extend the exclusion of personal stories from public speech. By contrast, when we draw our personal stories into public spaces such as the classroom—

as much as we wish to share, and no more—we build spaces for empathy, connection, and a new model of scholarship that makes space for the acknowledgment and nurturing of the subjective aspects of the work that have been driving us all along, in one way or another. We build space to acknowledge the diverse ways and kinds of knowing that our life experiences outside of the classroom bring into it. Of course, the benefit does not fall solely to the students producing these projects. Reading their work has been eye-opening and productive for me as well, as both a teacher and a researcher. Students produced detailed insider accounts of parts of the Internet I didn't know about or practices I'd never heard of. Assignments like this one help create space in which students can occupy the role of expert, of guide, of teacher.

All my undergraduate and graduate courses now feature some sort of personal writing component. This might be as simple as having students e-mail me a two-hundred-word sketch of themselves, their interests, and their goals, with a labeled selfie attached. The selfies and the narratives personalize each of the students (in their own terms, as they have complete latitude in what they choose to write and what photo they decide to share), and the labeled photos help me learn their names. I write back to every student, sharing something personal related to what they've shared with me—Hey! I'm from a small Northern town, too! Or, I was an extra on *Kids in the Hall* once! Or, my favorite show is *My Little Pony*: *Friendship Is Magic*! We connect in small ways that render us human to one another, idiosyncratically. In a final exam I recently graded, one of my very quietest first-year writing students left me a tiny note at the end of his essay question: "Pinkie Pie is Best Pony," he wrote, referencing our (unexpectedly) shared fandom in coded, meme-inflected language. I was delighted by this; he struck me as more of a Fluttershy type, and his preference for the wild and gregarious Pinkie had me reassessing what I thought I knew about him. In all, small revelations like these build connection and trust. Students tell me things, and our collective intellectual and scholarly work, as well as the experiences we share as learners in the classroom, are the richer for it.

Note

1. My students work in this draws heavily from Smith and Watson's excellent guide, *Reading Autobiography*, as well as from the recent collection *Identity Technologies* (eds. Poletti and Rak).

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Voice Lessons, Multimodal Genres, and Digital Stylings

12 Voice Lessons
Hearing and Constructing Personal Voices in a Digital Age

Lynn Z. Bloom

VOICE IS WHAT WE HEAR FROM THE GET-GO. From before we're born, through the walls of the womb we're nurtured in our mother's tongue. We listen to stories before we can read them, swayed by the music as well as the words. Voice is woven throughout the fabric of our existence, whether it's up close and personal, rendered in hot language, or cold type. Voice is where we live. And personal voice is what we remember, credible, truthful (or so the speaker insinuates and so we believe), as individual and distinctive as a fingerprint.

Plan of this essay. First, let's listen to some voices, just to surround the sounds with our ears. After that, I'll define voice and identify some problems exacerbated in the digital age. The second half of this essay suggests some solutions—good personal writing assignments for the digital era.

One caution. When I say *voice* throughout this essay, I mean *personal voice*, the participant in, as William H. Gass says, "a converse between friends," uttered by "a self capable of real speech" (24–25), engaged, eager, enthusiastic—whether in person, on paper, or since the dawn of the digital age, through digital media. In any medium, voice conveys the authorial persona, a mind and character in reflection, animation, interrogation, even if the work at hand reveals nothing personal about the author, as in the examples that follow. So, listen up![1]

Hearing Voices

From a long, ever-expanding list of contemporary American personal essayists that extends from Sherman Alexie to Zadie Smith and the Wolff brothers, Geoffrey and Tobias, and on to Roxane Gay and Leslie Jamison, I've selected three writers whose distinctive voices illustrate

personal voice with every word, every phrase, every punctuation mark, every white space.

Brian Doyle's "The Greatest Nature Essay *Ever*" runs the title into the following first sentence without pausing: "would begin with an image so startling and lovely and wondrous that you would stop riffling through the rest of the mail, take your jacket off, sit down at the table, adjust your spectacles, tell the dog to lie *down*, tell the kids to make their *own* sandwiches for heavenssake, that's why god gave you *hands*, and read straight through the piece. . . ." In "Marrying Absurd," Joan Didion skewers Las Vegas weddings as early as the opening drive "across the Mojave from Los Angeles," where signs "way out on the desert, looming up from that moonscape of rattlesnakes and mesquite, even before the Las Vegas lights appear like a mirage on the horizon: 'GETTING MARRIED? Free License Information First Strip Exit,'" amenities in a city where "there is no 'time,' . . . no night and no day and no past and no future," constructed "on the premise that marriage, like craps, is a game to be played when the table seems hot" (79–81). Likewise, every element of David Foster Wallace's over-the-top account of a ten-day journalistic assignment at the Illinois State Fair, "Getting Away from Already Pretty Much Being Away from It All," combines to create an essay supersaturated with voice as the conduit to a congenial cacophony of sensory experiences—here, "where food is getting bought and ingested at an incredible clip. . . . The booths are ubiquitous, and each one has a line in front of it. Everybody's packed in together, eating as they walk. A peripatetic feeding frenzy. Native Companion is agitating for pork skins . . . she's 'storvin,'' she says, 'to daith.' She likes to put on a parodic hick accent whenever I utter a term like 'peripatetic'" (102).

These authors' voices sound natural, individual; they flow with ease, full of action, full of life, whether online or in print (all are available in both formats; Doyle himself was a regular blogger on the *American Scholar* website from February 2013 until June 2016). They're conversational, express a distinct point of view and complex of values; they're also fun to read. A lagniappe in these quotations is that each narrator's voice incorporates other voices. Doyle's reading-to-himself voice is punctuated with quotations from his other voices telling the dog—excited with the frisson of arrival—to "lie *down*" and issuing a crotchety-esque sandwich-making command to his kids— "for heavenssake, that's why god gave you *hands*"—who may have come in with him and the mail, but absentmindedly because he has levitated from the mundane household into the cosmic universe of the Greatest Nature Essay *Ever*. Didion's venal landscape is littered with signs for instant weddings in

tawdry circumstances, their commercial language selected to reinforce her own dismissive attitude toward these cheap substitutes for ceremony and substance. And Wallace's Native Companion employs a deliberately "parodic hick accent" to keep the written language in the same register as their conversation; she must be reading "A peripatetic feeding frenzy" in manuscript, because he certainly wouldn't talk like that. Or, being David Foster Wallace, would he?

These voices express personalities, the author's and those of other characters, on and offstage. They are the products of careful, thoughtful writing, with deliberate attention to the characteristics identified below.

Definitions: Do You Hear What I Hear?

Voice is style. The term, as illustrated in the above examples, encompasses significant aspects of sense (vocabulary, diction) and sound—tone, register, range, accent, articulation, phrasing, pauses, rhythm, variety, pace, syntax. Strunk and White's midcentury modern *Elements of Style* offers a mini-manifesto on voice: "Write in a way that comes naturally." "Do not overstate." "Do not affect a breezy manner." "Make sure the reader knows who is speaking." "Avoid fancy words." "Do not use dialect unless your ear is good." "Be clear." (70–79) Peter Elbow's hefty (442 pages) *Vernacular Eloquence*: *What Speech Can Bring to Writing*, elaborates on these aspects of voice, and more.

Voice is character, personality. As Mary Karr explains in *The Art of Memoir*, these elements of style become "*natural expressions of character*" (36) aka *Voice*. Indeed, says Karr, elaborating on what she learned in writing *Liars' Club*, *Cherry*, and *Lit*, "Each great memoir lives or dies based 100 percent on voice. . . . For the reader, the voice has to exist from the first sentence." All "great memoirists"—tellers of compelling personal stories—"sound on the page like they do in person," says Karr. "If the page is a mask, you rip it off only to find that the writer's features exactly mold to the mask's form." As Karr states in the title of chapter 4, "A Voice Conjures the Human Who Utters It," "voice isn't just a manner of talking. It's an operative mindset and way of perceiving that naturally stems from feeling oneself alive in the past" (or present, I would add). That voice "should permit a range of emotional tones—too wiseass, and it denies pathos; too pathetic, and it's shrill" (35–36). Like her writing, Karr's own gutsy voice is heavy on Texas-based idiomatic expressions: "mud bugs," "jug butt," "like a pair of walruses being schnuzzed on the same hot rock."

Voice is tone, *accent, pronunciation*. Consider the versatility of voice implied in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* by Sloppy's admiring neighbor: "Sloppy is a beautiful reader of a newspaper. He do the Police in different voices."[2] "He do the Police in different voices" was T. S. Eliot's working title for *The Waste Land*, an acknowledgment of that compelling chorus, both chorale and cacophony. This complexity of voices incorporated excerpts from grand opera—*Tristan and Isolde*, in German and English (lines 31–42) to ragtime—"O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag" (l. 128); and concluded with a nursery rhyme's dying fall, "London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down" (l. 236). Through such differing voices *The Waste Land* became the polyvocal dirge of the twentieth century.

Voice is imagination, *projection*. In Peter Steiner's iconic *New Yorker* cartoon, a large black dog sitting in front of a computer screen is explaining to a white dog with big black spots gazing up at him, "*On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog.*" We hear that dog speaking in a human voice. This may be our own ordinary voice, or the voice we use with our own dog, kindly yet authoritative, but it is not a bark, a woof, a grrr, or a whine. Our inner ear tells us exactly how that voice sounds as it speaks what purports to be the truth, that Internet self-presentation is always a construct, whether deliberate or inadvertent. That voice, too, conveys personality, both doggy and anthropo-canine, inspired by the cartoon images, but in our inner ear audible entirely through the words, the messages sent.

Voice is a construct. As in all storytelling, the construction of a particular voice requires manipulation for better and for worse. The double-edged Damoclean sword hangs always over the Internet, good dog, bad dog. Fortunately for writing teachers, the creation of a personal voice embedded in a persona for the purpose of committing a crime is beyond the scope of this essay, common though it is.[3] The problems of voice I will discuss here are related to casual and careless writing, not character. Furthermore, instructors will have more fun (and success!) if they function as music teachers or vocal coaches rather than as grammar cops.

Voice in the Digital Age

The culture of today's e-world encourages a fast and unreflective writing process: Write! Send! Reply! Tyler Knott Gregson, a wildly popular, "digitally astute"[4] poet, explains his writing process to swooning fans, "'You

guys see everything that I think. . . . If I think it, I write it, and if I write it, I put it out there." The upside is that digital authors, "no longer dependent on the gatekeepers," are not only finding a worldwide audience for their writing, revised or not ("I want my days filled / and my nights saturated / with the sound of you"), but that they are reviving mainstream interest in a neglected genre (Alter). The downside is that too many writers, aspiring or indifferent—students, citizens at large, sometimes even teachers—appear tone deaf, their potential awareness of voice eclipsed by haste of composition. Gregson's verse, for instance, could benefit from careful attention to sound and meter.

Even if students speaking in person are the wicked wits of the west, when they write quickly and casually, whether in hard copy or online, they lose their voices, for there is no identifiable persona speaking in a human voice. For instance, in "University Days" James Thurber employs his pitch-perfect sense of comedy to skewer an aspiring turn-of-the-last-century journalism student who can't write a lively lede to save his soul. The best Haskins can come up with in response to the editor's urging, "'Start it off snappily,'" is "'Who has noticed the sores on the tops of the horses in the animal husbandry building?'" (227). Would anyone, even a horse lover, be enticed to read further?[5]

Compare Haskins's hapless attempt with John Updike's "Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu," the evocative title of his elegiac portrait of Ted Williams, published in the *New Yorker*, October 22, 1960, a month after Williams retired from the Boston Red Sox. Four short one-syllable words step smartly along, enlivened by internal rhyme—risky because rhyme is usually taboo in prose but it's welcome here; followed by the two syllable word signaling the lover's farewell, full of longing and promise, *adieu*. Risky, too, to use a French word unlikely to be the normal locution of Hub fans; even though *New Yorker* readers might delight in seeing *adieu*, they'd never say such an effete word, except for Eustace Tilley. Updike trusts his midcentury readers, baseball fans or not, to know *Kid* and *Hub* and to appreciate the little joke in the rhyme even while he interrupts the predictable *Bid Adieu* with *Kid*, rounding third on the way to home plate and the farewell elegy, setting the tone of the article to come—clear, crisp, allusive, witty, respectful, and as unsentimental as its subject.[6]

In today's cacophonous world, people often can't hear their own voices. Even if their lives throb to the pulsating beats of breaking news, music pouring through their earphones 24/7, or the phone under their

pillow, sound drowns out voice, and it curtails serious thought. Even when that sound is words instead of music, much of what readers encounter in the blogosphere and the twitterverse lacks an individual voice. By July 2016 there were around 306 million blogs,[7] that number alone making blogs the most democratic genre of writing (note that I didn't say *literature*) imaginable. Because blog writers range from professional authors and publications (*The Onion*, *Salon*), people identified by roles (Grandma's Briefs), occupations (Eric the Car Guy, Broke Millennial), religion (the Naked Church), health (Nerd Fitness), to teenagers, schoolchildren, and millions more, their literary quality varies enormously.

Since there is no single typical blog, I've selected for literary analysis one somewhat at random, but aimed for a college audience, Uncle Bob's Self Storage, "5 Tips to Organize Your Dorm Room." Not bad, not good, it's written in a generic American voice, unremarkable and unrememberable. Given that Uncle Bob has locations in twenty-six states, we might reasonably assume that a corporate scribe is responsible for the following:

> Moving away to college is a big deal, but you might be surprised to see just how small your new living quarters are! According to college-connecting.com, an average sized dorm room is approximately 12′ x 19′ for two people. With such little space to work with, proper organization and storage is crucial! Here are a few tips to make your small space both practical and personal. . . . De-clutter Your Desk. Because dorm rooms are so small, it's easy for clutter to overwhelm your space. Above all, make sure your work area is clean and tidy by using desk organizers and keeping the amount of items on your desk at a minimum! By keeping your books, notebooks, and folders organized, your desk will have much more usable space—and you'll be less likely to lose important assignments in a mess of papers!

Uncle Bob speaks in the generic, all-American quasi-conversational (it's, you'll), friendly advice-giving voice, couching commands and "tips" (a fave blog word) in Standard English with an occasional mild slang phrase ("big deal," "mess of papers"). We may assume that Uncle Bob's blog, as a corporate product, underwent revisions. Bob's sentences are short, averaging twenty words. All but the last break into two halves, which could be

monotonous, if read aloud. Yet because the words, too, are short (107 of the 143-word total have one syllable, 25 have two; the longest—only one—has 5), they flow with innocuous ease. The language and thus the voice are devoid of color, imagery, unusual vocabulary (*little* and *small* suffice for size designations), or pronunciation, though a soupçon of alliteration creeps into one of the three paired terms, "practical and personal." Bob makes two mistakes, one of grammar, one of diction. If you can find them you're either an English teacher or a careful editor or both; do they bother you?

Yet nothing raises a hackle in this bland, depersonalized commentary except the exclamation points—four in seven sentences. Dorm rooms are small; *quelle* surprise! Storage space is crucial; no kidding! Good organization helps you find things; *mais certainment*! Dear reader, do leap up and click your heels thrice if this punctuation produces a frisson of excitement. And now for the dirty question. Whose voice, if any, will you remember after reading this section, Uncle Bob's or mine? *Exactement*! But even if the takeaway is that too conspicuous an advice giver would detract from the advice itself, the books on how to write by Anne Lamott (*Bird by Bird*), Stephen King (*On Writing*), as well as Mary Karr and Strunk and White (and while we're at it let's throw in George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language") demonstrate that this opinion is wrong, oh so wrong. We remember the advice *especially* because of the individual voice in which it's delivered, as in Anne Lamott's immortal "Shitty First Drafts": "All good writers write them. This is how they end up with good second drafts and terrific third drafts" (21).

Personal Writing Assignments: Voice(s) in a Digital Era

The personal writing assignments that follow are designed for the era of digital media. They are intended to marry what Prensky calls, in "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," significant elements of "legacy" education—reading, writing, logical thinking, and a host of embedded concepts such as analysis, narration, description, comparison and contrast, argument implied and overt, process—with "future" concepts and tools both digital and technological. As a Digital Immigrant,[8] in constructing these assignments I trust teachers and students born after 1980, Digital Natives all, to figure out the requisite elements of the relevant technology. I'm concentrating on the aspects of thinking, writing, and listening operative in both

print and digital realms. These assignments, like the preceding analyses of voice, are designed to focus on creating and sustaining a human voice in this most human craft of writing.

The assignments themselves should serve to dispel a number of myths about personal writing that have been infecting condemnations of "expressivist" writing for decades—and that have been wrong for decades, as well. As the first half of this essay has demonstrated, just because a writing has a strong, memorable, identifiable, personal-sounding voice does not necessarily mean that it is intimate, confessional, autobiographical, solipsistic, and thus has little or no relevance to anyone but the writer. Moreover, claims that personal writing needs little thought, intelligence, or talent and is thus easy to write, requiring neither editing nor revision, are equally innocent and erroneous,[9] as is evident throughout these challenging assignments.

1. Re-/create a personal voice through a personal blog (or Facebook page or dating profile).

    Part A.   Start locally. Find a brief blog entry written by someone you know that either lacks a voice or has a voice that does not represent the speaker as you know him or her. Try to retain the same content as closely as possible, but modify the vocabulary, tone, sentence structure, illustrations to reflect the characteristic speech and personality of the person you know. Without naming the blogger, ask someone who knows your subject to identify who it is. If necessary, try at least three revisions—with more specific or more colorful language, shorter or longer or rearranged sentences—until your mutual friend can identify the subject. Keep copies of each version so you'll know what you did. After three tries, whether or not you've conveyed the subject, move on to part B.

    Part B.   Re-/Create your own persona and personal voice through a week's blog posts. If you already have a blog, rework and revise it as in part A, to characterize yourself. Yes, you will be a character in your own writing, so present this persona in the role(s) you would most like your readers to respond to. If you wish, incorporate photographs and other graphics, music clips, various type fonts and spacing to make this experience graphically and auditorially memorable for your viewers/readers. In selecting your materials, consider

Daniel J. Solove's cautionary "The End of Privacy," which addresses the permanency of an individual's information online, no matter how intimate, damaging, false, or foolish—say, something people "did years ago as wild teenagers" (103).

2. Tell me no lies.

On a friendship site (such as Facebook) or dating site, find a profile of someone you know personally or are familiar with by reputation that you suspect to be dishonest. What are its purposes (such as friendship, self-promotion, to find a job or a date)? What is the prevailing voice of this profile? What makes you suspicious? Analyze the language and the photography or other graphics. Do any elements look Photoshopped or otherwise edited or invented? List the problematic elements and explain why each signals dishonesty? Are there other elements written in clichés or other stale language (loves candlelight dinners, long walks on the beach) that also need revision to bring out the subject's individuality? Rebecca Perkins, "The Dos And Don'ts of Writing an Online Dating Profile" (*Huffington Post* 5/23/15) has good advice.

Prepare a corrected version, with the same end in mind as in the original. Identify in writing what you've done to make this honest and personable, and explain why you did so. Ask a partner to compare the two versions. Which is more appealing? Why? Would you want to be this person's friend or date?[10]

3. Detect a scam and write a warning.

Analyze the voice and persona in selected spam e-mail of a particular type and prepare warning website copy to alert potential victims. Are there elements of the voice, the persona, the language that should arouse suspicion? Identify steps to take protection against scammers or other cybercriminals. Your voice (of authority? alarm? reassurance?) should impress readers with the seriousness of the problem. Examine selected websites, such as "The Nigerian Email Scam," Federal Trade Commission Consumer Information, or the FBI Internet Crime Complaint Center postings.

4. If your cell phone could talk, what would it say?

    Sherry Turkle explains in *Evocative Objects, Things We Think With*, "We think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with. . . . Some objects are experienced as part of the self . . . a young child believes her stuffed bunny rabbit can read her mind; a diabetic is at one with his glucometer." Pick an electronic or other technological device with which you have an intimate relationship (Do you sleep with your cell phone? Love your laptop or iPad? Run with headphones on? Track your movements with a FitBit?), and give it a voice that reflects its personality. Either let it speak for itself, in a dramatic monologue, or engage in a dialogue with it. (If you like its voice, as in your GPS or Siri, explain why; if you don't, what voice would you adopt, and why?) Either presentation should disclose the ways you use it, treat it, think about it, and thus demonstrate its personal significance in your life. How would you get along without it? Your presentation can either be written, or a combination of written and spoken words and visuals, via YouTube. (For amplification of this analysis see Hesse, Sommers, and Yancey.)

5. How do digital media influence your thought and behavior?

    Alternative A. Device deprivation. For additional investigation (following from no. 4), try a forty-eight-hour period without using this device (or a 24-hour period, if 48 hours presents too great a hardship), and report your findings in a voice that reflects your attitude during this time and after your reunion. You can speak in a dramatic monologue; or engage in a dialogue with the device, which may be silent, absent, or communicating with itself (or others) in your absence. How does the presence or absence of this device affect the way you think? The ways you see and interpret the world? (See Sherry Turkle, "How Computers Change the Way We Think" and Nicholas Carr, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?") Or try a satiric conversation between yourself and the voice of your GPS, or Siri or a robotic personal assistant, or drone (assuming that the drone can talk).

    Alternative B. Multitasking experiment. Analyze your typical writing process for a case study. You have a paper to write, perhaps for this very assignment. Keep a log of your behavior as you do the research

and/or writing. Try at least three different one-hour-long sessions. (1) Employ your typical work pattern, with whatever digital media devices/programs on that you usually use. Identify the amount of time spent actually doing the work, and the number and type of distractions, in thought and behavior. Identify the distractions that relate to digital media: if you're not using it, are you thinking about it? How much time does each distraction take? [You will, of course, be spending some time keeping the record.] (2) Then turn off all the media except the Internet if you're using that for research and use it *only* for that purpose. Keep the same record of thought and behavior. Which was more effective? Why? If you still have more work to do on the writing, keep the media off but allow yourself ten minutes' time to use it after every hour off. Does this knowledge make a difference? How generalizable are your findings to other students? Buttress your claims with current research, available (and ever-changing) on Google Scholar. You could start with James Gleick, "How Google Dominates Us," and consult other contemporary sources. Write this in voice and language that convey a researcher's authority.

6. Give voice to a concept, animate an idea through a dialogue.

    Here you and a partner will be defining, explaining an abstract concept (freedom, democracy, love, generosity . . .) through a dialogue spoken by two different actual people who are known for their life experiences and their thinking, writing, performance, or other means of communication on the subject. The voice and language of each character should be accurate to the person and the period, and the dialogue has to be derived from accurate information (cite your sources). The two people don't have to have been alive at the same time, and they don't have to agree on the meaning of their topic. For instance, Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King Jr. could discuss the concept of democracy, and agree on some elements but not on others, based on their respective histories of slavery and segregation.

    Or, with a partner, define a term that is common in technology but has different meanings in other areas of life. For instance, what does *friend* mean on Facebook in comparison with friends you know personally? When *friend* is a verb (as on Facebook), what does *friendship*

mean in the Facebook context? How does this differ from *friend-ship* among people you know in real life? (See William Deresiewicz, "Faux Friendship.")

7. First analyze a TED talk. Then write your own. [An extended project.]

Part A.   From the TED directory, pick a topic and a speaker that interest you. As you watch the video, note how the content of the talk is reinforced by the speaker's tone of voice, pronunciation, rate of speaking; facial expressions, posture, actions, gestures, and other body language; clothing, jewelry; movement onstage. Then read the transcript to check your interpretation. Write a brief essay in which you explain how the words and manner of delivery reinforce one another.

For a provocative talk on problems with social media, see Sherry Turkle, "Connected, but Alone?" (February 2012, 3.575 M views as of 24 October 2016). Turkle, an MIT professor whose earlier work (see *Life on the Screen*, 1995) embraced the numerous advantages of chat rooms and online virtual communities, in her recent work (*Alone Together*, 2012) addresses problems caused by digital devices "so psychologically powerful that they don't only change what we do, they change who we are."

Hugh Herr, head of MIT's Biomechatronics Lab, addresses "The new bionics that let us run, climb, and dance" (March 2014; 6,342M views as of 24 October 2016) as he paces the stage, walking naturally on bionic legs, "robotic prosthetics inspired by nature's own designs." His inspiring talk "that's both technical and deeply personal" gives state-of-the-art technology a human face, and human voice, illustrated by film clips from his own youthful climbing and the captivating, live performance of ballroom dancer Adrianne Haslet-Davis, who lost her left leg in the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing.

Either talk and its transcript (as well as many other TED talks) will serve as a model for how teachers can teach voice in a digital age.

Part B.   Write, rehearse, and film your own TED talk, incorporating other video, audio, and graphic illustrations as needed. This could be a team talk and production.

For the last two assignments I'm cueing in two aural multimodal compositions, inspired by Cynthia L. Selfe's discussion in "The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning."[11]

8. Compose a sound essay that delineates the essence of a relationship, a family, an event in your life, or a place. [An individual or team extended project]

This five- to ten-minute essay will involve an intermingling of voices, your own included. It can include personal commentary or reminiscence, dialogue among two or more people, interviews, snatches of songs or instrumental music, natural sounds including birds, animals, wind, and ocean.

Selfe suggests that students look at "<http://people.cohums.ohio-state.edu/selfe2/ccc/>, where they can listen to Sonya Borton's autobiographical essay, "Legacy of Music," in which she tells listeners about the musical talents of various members of her Kentucky family. In relating her narrative, Borton weaves a richly textured fabric of interviews, commentary, instrumental music, and song to support her thesis that a love of music represents an important legacy passed down from parents to children within her family"("Movement," 115).

9. Prepare a thirty- to sixty-second public service announcement for radio. [Team project, extended time.]

Pick a significant topic of current interest, perhaps even one that is controversial. With your team members, determine the purpose, the point, and the intended outcome (what do you want listeners to know and to do as a consequence of hearing this?) Can you tell or imply a brief story to help make your point? (Laurie McNeill's "Life Bytes: Six Word Memoir and the Exigencies of Auto/tweetographies" is to the point.) At the outset, determine where this will be aired—on the campus or another local radio station? Analyze some existing PSAs to understand which ones capture your attention, and why. Whose voices should present the message? What should they sound like? What language should they use? Will other sounds—music, street sounds—reinforce the message?[12]

These writing assignments incorporate a variety of best rhetorical and pedagogical practices, as Takayoshi and Selfe explain. "Teaching students how to compose and focus a thirty-second public service announcement (PSA) for radio" requires them to think clearly about written expression,

as well. Selecting "the right details" for the audio version requires students to examine "specific strategies for focusing a written essay more tightly and effectively, choosing those details most likely to convey meaning "to a particular audience, for a particular purpose." Furthermore, the "rhetorical constraints" of such an audio assignment require students to learn more about both what sound has to offer "the ability to convey accent, emotion, music, ambient sounds that characterize a particular location or event," and the constraints of an audio medium, "the difficulty of going back to review complex or difficult passages, to convey change not marked by sound, [and] to communicate some organizational markers like paragraphs)." Students can also compare the benefits and limitations "of audio with those of alphabetic writing," and thus become better able to make "informed and conscious choices" among modes and messages "in particular rhetorical contexts" (3).

All of the writing assignments above involve the "rhetorical constraints" and other rhetorical considerations discussed by Takayoshi and Selfe and embedded in the assignments themselves. Although most would benefit from the construction of a persona, none is confessional or solipsistic. Although all require personal investment and a personal voice, they are embedded in the wider world—real people talking to real people. Listen!

Notes

1. I am not concentrating in this essay on the political elements of voice, although readers are welcome to interpret any of the illustrations and assignments from a political perspective. A great deal of innovative and exciting contemporary scholarship has been devoted to this topic, as in Royster, Fontaine, and Hunter, Elbow (1994, 2012), Yancey, Gilmore, and Berman.

2. See http://genius.com/Charles-dickens-our-mutual-friend-chap -116-annotated. Dickens's lively alternative to monotone individualizes every character in every novel, as in *Great Expectations*, when Joe Gargery tells Pip how Mr. Pumblechook's "ouse, his Castle," was invaded: "They partook of his wittles, and they slapped his face, and they pulled his nose, and they tied *him* up to his bedpust, and they giv' *him* a dozen, and they stuffed his mouth full of *flowering annuals to perwent* his *crying out*" (pp 367–38). Parallel clauses in series; vigorous verb phrases ranging from

the biblical-sounding *partook of*, to contemporary slang, *giv' him a dozen*; vegetation comical in its semi-specificity—*flowering annuals*; delivered in the humble workingman's country accent that Pip, a "gentleman" nouveau and naive, has striven to shed.

3. *The worst are the online predators* (*nearly 1.5 million hits on 10/24/16*) *who abuse the rhetorical potential of various digital media—chat rooms (*en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chat_rooms), instant messaging, Internet forums, social networking sites, cell phone apps—to do online what such scum used to do in person to lure innocents into exploitative sexual relationships. Adopting false names, fake addresses, and romantic poses—at times pornographic, they solicit online nude photos of their victims, often for "sextortion" (blackmail), or in-person assignations, kidnapping, rape, even murder (Stolberg et al.). Likewise, Internet con artists pose as relatives, friends, even lovers of the innocents—often the aged and the lonely—they intend to defraud. Substituting perseverance for literary finesse, they may spend "weeks or months building a relationship." Warns the U.S. Diplomatic Mission to Nigeria, "Scammers can be very clever and deceptive, creating sad and believable stories that will make you want to send them money" (nigeria.usembassy.gov/scams.html*).*

4. Gregson's books sell upward of 100,000 copies, in comparison with 20,000 copy sales of Louise Glück's *Faithful and Virtuous Night*, 2014 winner of the National Book Award (Alter).

5. Another anonymous blog with a generic voice is Stupid Cupid. Consider this characteristic entry, "I got dumped (and lived to blog about it). Part 2," April 23, 2014: "I know D wasn't the right guy for me, romantically speaking. Even before he dumped me I think I knew, deep down, that one of us would have to end it eventually. But I don't feel like I wasted my time. I don't regret giving it another shot after that awful second date. I honestly think he was what I needed at this moment in my life. Beyond the fact that I had a lot of fun with him, I also think I just needed to know that there *are* nice, decent, considerate, thoughtful guys out there. After being jerked around by commitment phobic douchebags all last year, I needed someone to remind me that I deserve more." The author sounds just like the thirteen responses posted to this entry: "I feel like I was reading my own story with the last guy I dated and how we broke up, except he broke up with me through text and I wasn't able to get out everything I wanted to say. So I'm happy for you that you got that bc for me I felt like I was stuck in limbo for a long time. It will get better, just make sure to

keep on doing the stuff and hang out with the people that you really enjoy. Cliché, but it's true :-).”

6.   Of comparable wit and the insouciant yet understated voice of pride is World War II pilot Donald Francis Mason's triumphant cable, “Sighted sub sank same,” whose alliterative elegance has given the phrase a far longer resonance in history (and crossword puzzles) than the event itself warranted.

7.   Although this is an unreliable and ever-shifting figure (statista.com/statistics/256235), it represents an explosive rise from twenty million in 2011 (Cross 39).

8.   Though with far less of an accent than I had when Prensky published this now classic essay in 2001. One educator characterizes today's digital grandchildren as: “‘A three-year-old today isn't that different’” from people born thirty years ago, but “largely because of technology, ‘a thirteen-year-old is really different’” (Mead 38).

9.   For critiques see Berlin, as well as France; for a defense, see O'Donnell.

10.   Instructors would find Aimée Morrison's “Facebook and Coaxed Affordances” of interest; it may be more nuanced than undergraduate composition students would want to deal with.

11.   The assignment language is mine, the rationale Takayoshi and Selfe's. Selfe herself (yes!) proffers very detailed, analyzed models of multimedia assignments in “Toward New Media Texts: Taking Up the Challenges of Visual Literacy.” These are designed to help “faculty raised on alphabetic literacy and educated to teach composition before the advent of image-capturing software, multimedia texts, and the World Wide Web” expand their teaching to include “emerging literacies associated with these texts.” Selfe's step-by-step assignments connect visual with alphabetic composition; they are not technically complicated; teachers (who don't need to know a lot about visual literacy) and students are “co-learners in the project of paying increased attention to visual texts” (69–74).

12.   Bickmore and Christiansen illustrate “A Community Writing Campaign,” 154–56.

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13 When Research Goes Personal

Incorporating the Digital Multimodal Research Project in a First-Year Writing Course

Christine Martorana

IN 2016, Laura Micciche expressed her hope that the field of Composition Studies will more fully embrace a perspective wherein "the longstanding reason-emotion binary is not the default" (par. 12). This binary about which Micciche writes is truly "longstanding," extending back to the 1991 Conference on College Composition and Communication, when composition scholars Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae engaged in a public debate over the purpose of the first-year composition (FYC) course. Championing personal writing, Elbow proposed that FYC students should be encouraged "to write as though they are a central speaker at the center of the universe" (80). The goal of FYC, Elbow maintained, is to help students "feel like writers, and avoid setting things up to make them feel like academics" (82). Bartholomae, on the other hand, argued a different perspective, one rooted in "academic writing [as] a form of critical writing" (Bartholomae and Elbow 85). According to Bartholomae, the FYC course should not privilege personal writing; instead, it should focus on academic writing, on teaching students to engage in "deflection, appropriation, improvisation, [and] penetration" of academic discourses (66).

As Micciche's recent sentiment for our field makes clear, the passage of more than twenty years since the Elbow/Bartholomae debate has not dismantled this binary. We see it clearly today in the FYC course, for example, where personal, emotional writing continues to be differentiated from academic, reason-based writing. The personal literacy narrative is a common writing assignment, and many of us use low-stakes personal writing to prompt discussion. We then turn to the research paper as a typical culminating assignment, often requiring students to strip their research papers of the first person.

Not only do we continue to differentiate personal writing from research-based writing, but personal writing is often viewed as less authoritative and therefore less scholarly. This degradation of the personal extends as far back as classical rhetoric, where the most effective rhetor was the one who recognized that "his own experiences and opinions were not important to his discourse" (Connors 167). Today, much FYC pedagogy continues to delegitimize the personal by devoting less class time to personal writing, weighting research-based writing more heavily, and positing the research paper as the final assignment of the semester. While these choices may seem innocuous, decisions such as these are anything but neutral. As Barbara Kamler reminds us in *Relocating the Personal*: *A Critical Writing Pedagogy*, any distinction between terms "inevitably privilege[s one] over the other as more valuable, more powerful" (84). In the FYC class, the "more valuable, more powerful" genre is often research-based writing.

For instance, in presenting the research paper as the last assignment in the course, we are presenting it "as the final, even climactic step for students entering the communities of academic discourse" (Davis and Shadle 417). Accordingly, the research paper becomes a gateway assignment, one that symbolizes competency and achievement within the FYC class. Additionally, when we spend less time with and devote less weight to personal writing, we communicate the message that personal writing is not as worthy of our scholarly time or attention. As a result of our pedagogical tendency to separate personal from research-based writing, FYC students come to understand personal writing as separate and unequal, deserving of a place in our classrooms but only as a less serious, less scholarly, and more informal approach to writing.

However, the personal/research binary is a false one, a distinction rooted in the "overwhelmingly impersonal" approach of classical rhetoric (Connors 167). The reality is that research-based writing cannot be divorced from personal writing. All writing "is personal to the extent that it involves writers with gendered, classed, racialized, sexed histories" (Kamler 83). Even in a research-based assignment, writers' personal experiences and perspectives impact the research they conduct, their interpretations of the sources they read, and the choices they make with their writing. Relatedly, although a research paper might be void of first-person pronouns and explicit personal references, it is still the product of an individual writer and that writer's experiences. It is still, put simply, personal.

The fact that this binary is constructed means that it can be deconstructed. The following discussion is an effort to move in this direction.

Specifically, in line with William Breeze's call for composition instructors to stop "privileging agonistic writing genres or objectivity over subjectivity and personal experience" (71), I offer the FYC classroom as a prime site for making explicit the connection between personal writing and research. My claim is that not only can FYC pedagogy invite students to recognize the inseparable connection between the two genres, but it can also highlight the ways in which personal and research-based writing compliment and strengthen one another.

Although there are diverse ways to bridge personal writing with research-based writing in the composition classroom (e.g., Mahala's and Swilky's "academic storytelling" and Davis's and Shadle's personal research paper), I offer one specific assignment called the Digital Multimodal Research Project (DMRP). I developed the DMRP for the FYC course as a means of using the digital to challenge the personal/research binary. As Kristie Fleckenstein correctly notes, the digital has been connected with fostering a "troubling sense of dislocation and facelessness" (150). However, the digital also contains the potential to enhance the personal, to promote rather than obscure the individual writer.

This potential increases when a multimodal approach is employed, when writers "consciously use different modes both alone and in combination with each other to communicate their ideas to others" (Arola et al. 3). There are numerous modes from which writers can draw, including still image, moving image, color, alphabetic text, layout, and music. Although each mode can exist independently of the other modes, "it is the combination of modes—the *multi*modality—that creates the full piece of communication" (Arola et al. 4, original emphasis). Put another way, multimodality is the purposeful combination of modes within a text so that the message communicated through the combination of modes is unlike what could have been communicated by a single mode. Gunther Kress describes this combination of modes as a strategic "ensemble of modes" (157), a musical metaphor that emphasizes the role of the individual writer. Similar to a conductor whose guidance orchestrates various instruments into a single ensemble, the writer of a multimodal text brings together multiple modes to create "a multimodal ensemble of [her] own making" (160). Referring to himself as the writer, Kress explains, "The ensemble and all the action that precede and goes with it is based on my interest. My interest directs my attention, guides my framing of this moment and that shapes the selections [of modes] I make" (160). Put simply, multimodality brings writers——their interests, perspectives, and current situatedness—to the fore, and it

is for this reason that multimodality enhances the potential for the digital to promote rather than obscure the individual writer.

Nancy Baym's work supports this assertion. Baym describes digital writing as an "eclectic mixed modality that combines elements of face to face communication with elements of writing" (50). Digital composing with multiple modes, she explains, offers one way for the writer to highlight "that there is a real person behind [an] otherwise anonymous text" (62). Integrating photographs and sharing personal stories, for example, are modes that offer "options for self-presentation" on digital platforms (109). Operating from this understanding, I created the DMRP as an assignment that invites students to purposefully mix modes as a means of integrating the personal aspect of verbal communication (i.e., first-person pronouns, direct audience address, and personal references) with the communicative aspect of writing (i.e., edited alphabetic text and paragraph organizational structure). As a result, the digital as it functions within the DMRP offers an apt means of blurring the personal/research binary.

Additionally, in constructing the DMRP, I conceptualize my students as designers, as individuals capable of making specific design choices with their texts. In line with Kristin Arola, Jennifer Sheppard, and Cheryl Ball, I recognize that "*all* writing is designed," and I encourage my students to see themselves as "'designers,' 'writers,' and 'communicators'" throughout the DMRP composing process (xxiii, original emphasis). Accordingly, I do not specify a particular format for the DMRP, nor do I tell students what the final product must look like. Instead, I encourage students to design their DMRP according to the goals they have for their projects and the messages they want to communicate to their audiences. This student-as-designer approach aligns with Theresa McGinnis, Andrea Goodstein-Stolzenberg, and Elisabeth Costa Saliania's description of design within the context of digital texts. Specifically, they define design as "the ways in which the maker of the digital texts combines multimodal forms to express and convey meanings" (286). Adopting this perspective moves me to construct the DMRP as an assignment through which students are responsible for not only conducting research, but also for purposefully combining multiple modes in the design and presentation of their research. In what follows, I describe the assignment details and pedagogical goals of the DMRP. Sprinkled throughout my discussion are examples from several student projects alongside the voices of their creators.

The DMRP invites students to research a topic of personal significance, one with an explicit connection to their past, present, or future

lives, and then to present their research on a digital platform such as Wix, Weebly, or WordPress. Not only does the DMRP blur the personal/research divide, but it does so with a digital focus—and this, I claim, is central to the project's effectiveness. For our students, the digital is undeniably personal: it is texting, tweeting, and posting, what Jacob Babb describes as digital actions aimed at "captur[ing] present feelings and . . . construct[ing] digital identities" (par. 8). For these same students, the digital also extends into the realm of research: it is search engines, websites, wikis, and online databases. Put simply, the digital is not one or the other, either personal or research. It is both, and it is this very quality of the digital that makes it ideal for blurring the personal/research binary.

We begin the DMRP with a research proposal in which students share their research topic ideas. Students are encouraged to select a topic based on two criteria. First, research topics should have an explicitly visual component. This allows students to take full advantage of the multimodal aspect of the DMRP by catering to the use of visual modes. Second, research topics should have an explicit personal connection to the student's past, present, or future. This invites students to immediately situate the DMRP within their personal experiences, to acknowledge a direct link between their research and their lives. Not only does this blur the personal/research distinction, but it does so by valuing "the lived experiences and kinds of knowledge students already have" (Sullivan 45). Traditional conceptions of composition do not value our students' firsthand knowledge and experiences. Instead, this knowledge is "not real knowledge. Real knowledge, legitimate knowledge—the kind of knowledge *worth* knowing—is what students come to college and to classes like first-year composition for" (Sullivan 45, original emphasis). However, the DMRP offers a revised conception of what counts as "real knowledge"—one that conceives of students' experiences as legitimate and valuable.

The visual, personal topics my students select for the DMRP are diverse and varied. For instance, Tanner, a self-identified gay student, chose to research LGBT symbols throughout history. He explains, "To me, LGBT symbolism is an area of study that I have known for quite some time, and am interested in pursuing in the future. Throughout much of high school, I was devoutly active in my schools GSA, or Gay Straight Alliance" (Steslow). Another student Danielle chose to research the visual symbolism of roses—a topic she selected based on her goal of becoming a wedding planner. Lauren researched the visual music of Lady Gaga, because, as an art major and a self-described "visual artist who deeply loves music," Lauren wanted to

research the ways in which artists "explore various mediums . . . to emphasize the importance of the art itself" (Necaise). As Tanner's, Danielle's, and Lauren's topics suggest, there are multiple ways the visual and the personal can come together in a single research focus.

After selecting a topic, students begin their research. For many FYC students, the DMRP is their first time conducting research at the college level. Accordingly, I devote class time to introducing students to navigating library databases, reading/annotating scholarly articles, and citing in MLA format. I ask students to use at least four scholarly sources in their DMRP and to write annotated bibliographies. The annotated bibliography serves two purposes. First, it offers students a means of organizing their sources, often a necessary step for first-year students learning to navigate academic research. Second, since I request that each annotation include a summary and analysis of each source along with a personal reflective element, the annotated bibliography continues to blur the personal/research binary.

In this reflective part of the annotation, students write about the ways in which the source connects to, builds on, and/or challenges their personal experiences and knowledge. Including a personal component within the annotations further blurs the personal/research binary by putting students' own perspectives in direct conversation with the research. Furthermore, it encourages students to engage with their research topic as participants, individuals with a personal stake in the research, rather than as bystanders absorbing what others have written. As Lauren puts it, "It is completely important to feel a personal connection with any topic you are looking into [. . .] There needs to be room to flourish, and if you're researching or studying something [without a personal connection], you just feel trapped" (Necaise). From this perspective, we can see the ways in which the personal reflective element within the annotated bibliography invites students to more fully and freely engage with their research.

After completing the annotated bibliography, students begin creating the DMRP. When finished, each DMRP includes three components: an introduction (at least 500 words), a discussion of research conclusions (at least 750 words), and a reflection (at least 500 words). Within the introduction, students introduce viewers to the research topic and describe the project organization and the modes used. Students also use the introduction as a space for offering specific suggestions to their viewers for exploring the DMRP, such as which pages on the site should be viewed first.

Since I want students to see the introduction as a space within which they can immediately situate themselves within their research, I encourage

them to keep themselves present in both the content they write and the language they use. Students approach this in various ways. For instance, Danielle takes a very straightforward approach in her introduction, immediately positioning herself as the creator of this text. She writes, "In this multimodal project, I have combined stimulating colors, video, vibrant images, and unique formatting . . ." (Story). Tanner, on the other hand, uses his introduction to spotlight his personal intentions for his DMRP. He titles this page of his project "My Goals" and expresses his hope that his project communicates "the emotions that [he] felt while working on this project" (Steslow). Although two different introductory styles, both include an explicitly personal component and reveal the potential for students to present a text that effectively blurs the personal/research binary.

The second component of the DMRP, the discussion of research conclusions, comprises the majority of the project. Here, students purposefully use various modes to present the research they have conducted alongside their personal interpretations. Since students choose a research topic with personal significance, they come to the DMRP with preexisting, related knowledge. I encourage students to consider intersections between the research they conduct and their personal experiences and to use multiple modes to give these intersections expression. The digital nature of the DMRP facilitates this expression. Specifically, since the DMRP is housed online, students are able to strategically combine various modes as a means of intertwining personal experiences with researched information.

For example, one page on Lauren's DMRP is titled "The Fans." On this page, Lauren writes about the ways in which Lady Gaga connects with her fans, including Gaga's use of social media to invite fan interaction. As evidence to support her research, Lauren includes links to Lady Gaga's social media accounts and a photo of Lady Gaga fanart. She also includes a photo of herself dressed up as Lady Gaga for Halloween, a visual representation of Lauren's own personal fan interaction (see fig. 1).

Here, Lauren takes full advantage of the digital and multimodal aspects of the DMRP. On this single page, she uses alphabetic text to discuss her research conclusions, still images that offer visual evidence of these conclusions, and digital links that connect Lauren's DMRP to Lady Gaga.

A similar occurrence happens in Tanner's project as well. One of the LGBT symbols Tanner researched was the rainbow flag. In his discussion of research, Tanner explains that he learned through his research that the flag originally started as a peace symbol, "the Italian word 'Pace' written across its colors" (Steslow). He supports this claim through researched

Me sporting some of Gaga's most iconic looks for Halloween in 2011.
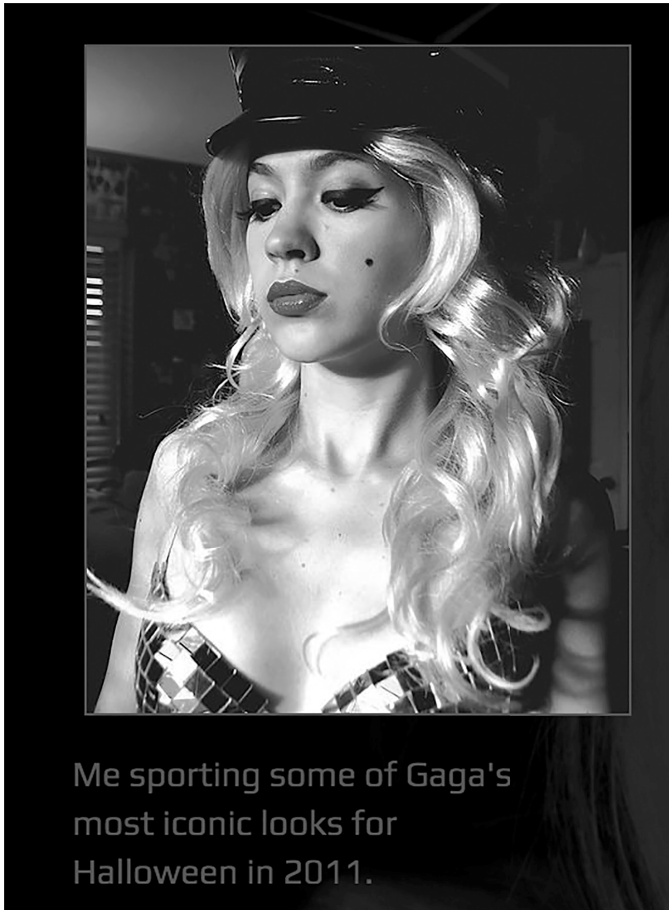
Figure 1: Lauren dressed up as Lady Gaga for Halloween

citations alongside an image of the flag. Tanner then goes on to make an explicit personal connection to his research, and he uses both alphabetic text and moving images to do so. He writes, "Today, that flag which is recognized for its progressive symbolism hangs above my bed back home; the place where I first sat with my own parents and explained to them that their son is gay" (Steslow). Next to this text is a moving photo montage that features several photos of Tanner, including one that shows him with a group holding the rainbow flag and another that features Tanner alone, wearing a wig and staring directly into the camera (see fig. 2).

Both photos are purposefully placed and an effective means through which Tanner inserts a personal component to his research. The photo on the left offers visual evidence of Tanner's firsthand interactions with the

rainbow flag. The flag is not a symbol he knows solely through research; it is a symbol with which he has personally interacted. This same emphasis on the personal is evident in the photo on the right as well. Here, Tanner presents himself wearing a long blonde wig. Choosing to include this photo alongside his textual description of the rainbow flag as a symbol for "peace, tolerance, and community" (Steslow) is a rhetorically savvy move, one through which Tanner invites his viewers to practice tolerance in the face of his own nonnormative aesthetic choice. Taken together and in conjunction with his written words, these photos emphasize Tanner's personal link to his research and the potential for modes to work together to blur the personal/research binary. Thus, similar to Lauren's DMRP, Tanner's project reveals the ways in which research can be presented in conjunction with the personal and the potential for both to be enhanced by the digital.

The third component of the DMRP is the reflection. In line with Kim Haimes-Korn, "I believe it is not enough to have students create digital and multimodal projects; it is when students reflect upon and articulate their learning that they benefit the most" (par. 1). Therefore, in this reflective component, students explain their rationale for the rhetorical choices they made throughout the creation of their project. Specifically, students reflect upon the particular modes they used, their purposeful combination of these modes, the ways in which the modes are effective given their specific rhetorical situation, and their consideration of the affordances of the digital in their DMRP. The reflection allows me to see the ways in which the students thought "through the affordances of the modes and media available before choosing the right text for the right situation" (Arola et al. 15). As a composition instructor, this component allows me to be a more effective

A photo montage of me throughout high school. Two pictures depict an Anti Westboro Baptist Church protest that I attended.

Figure 2: A moving photo montage that features several photos of Tanner

responder because I gain insight into the intentions and reasoning that informed the students' writing processes.

For example, by reading Danielle's reflection, I learned that the colors she used within her DMRP—light yellow, pastel pink, and deep red—were purposeful. She explains, "The color palate chosen for this project was chosen to be soft while still vivid, just like the rose itself. As my viewers navigate through the website, they can conclude that roses have been used for several meanings, most soft and beautiful, just like the colors chosen for the website. Also, the bold and vivid colors can represent the [symbolism] of the rose [as] sexuality within literature and religion" (Story). Without this explanation, I may have overlooked Danielle's specific attention to color as a mode; however, after being made aware of this, I could more thoroughly appreciate and respond to her use of multimodality.

As Danielle's, Lauren's, and Tanner's projects illustrate, the DMRP is unlike the traditional print-based research essay. Not only does the DMRP purposefully incorporate various modes, but also it does so on a digital platform, a virtual space that offers an expanded notion of audience. The traditional research essay has very defined audiences. Typically, these audiences consist of the student writer herself, the student's peers, and the instructor of the course. Furthermore, if the writing process includes drafting, each audience is often specific to a particular draft of the essay (i.e., the student is the audience of her first draft, the second draft goes through peer review, and the third draft receives instructor feedback). Put simply, audiences for the traditional research essay are typically predictable and identifiable.

However, the digital nature of the DMRP expands how students might consider audience, inviting them to account for multiple and potentially unknown audiences at one time. This expanded notion of audience is characteristic of digital composing environments where, "rather than creating entirely separate, discrete audiences through the use of multiple identities or accounts, users [can] address multiple audiences through a single account" (Marwick and Boyd 120). This attention to "multiple audiences" is evident in the DMRP, for instance, when students address an academic audience through their use of MLA citations, an audience of digital users through their inclusion of YouTube videos and weblinks, and an audience of their peers through written references to the DMRP as a class project. Additionally, because the digital encourages "rapid transmission of messages, even across distance" (Baym 8), the DMRP is not confined to audiences physically present within the classroom. That is, unlike the

traditional print-based research essay, the DMRP can easily circulate beyond the classroom into the lives of digital users.

I encourage my students to pay particular attention to the digital presence of their audience. One way in which they do so is by attending to the placement of modes within their projects, a rhetorical move grounded in the recognition that experiencing a digital text is different from reading a print-based text. During the DMRP composing process, students consider what viewers see on the screen at one time, all of the modes that are present in the viewer's line of sight and the ways in which these modes come together to communicate a message. For instance, Tanner offers the following explanation for his viewers: "The texts, pictures, slide shows, and videos are all laid out so that you get the full effect of each mode. This might mean that while reading a text, the eye is also able to view specific pictures that are appropriate to the text, or it may be a section where the text is meant to be read alone to yield reactions and feel the emotions I hope I am able to deliver." Here, Tanner reveals that he has carefully considered the viewing experience of his digital audience, the fact that any mode that appears on the screen at a given time influences the viewer's experience of the text. Put another way, Tanner recognizes that the exact placement of each mode contributes to the message on a given page, a recognition made explicit in fig. 3.

In this portion of his DMRP, Tanner has purposefully placed multiple modes, including alphabetic text that details the Nazi persecution of homosexuals, a background image of concentration camp prisoners, and a zoomed-in image of the upside down triangular patch worn by homosexual men. As a viewer, my interaction with this page of Tanner's project
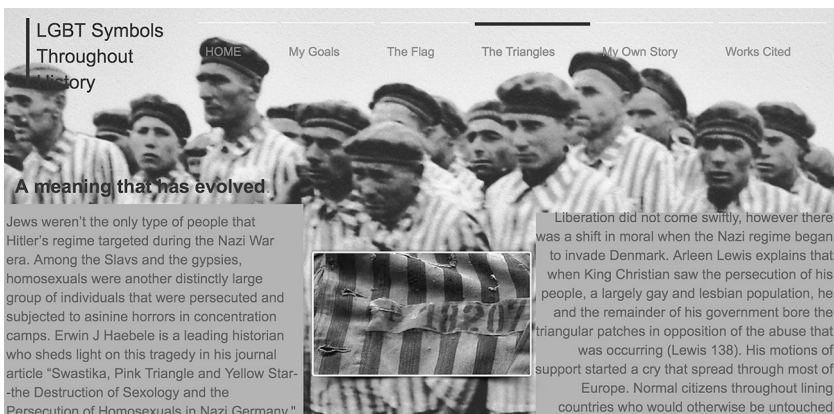
Figure 3: Multiple modes used by Tanner to draw in his audience

includes all of these modes at once; I cannot experience one without also experiencing the others. As I read about the homosexual "individuals [who] were persecuted and subjected to asinine horrors in concentration camps" (Steslow), I also see the solemn mass of faces in the background. As I read that "gay men were given a patch that resembled an upside down pink triangle" as a means of segregating them from the rest of the prisoners (Steslow), my eyes are drawn to the zoomed-in image of one such patch—that worn by a man marked as #18207. Color functions as an additional mode here as well, the muted, gray colors further communicating the gravity and somberness of Tanner's research topic. My understanding of the triangle symbol is thus the result of experiencing all of these modes in tandem on my screen, a viewing experience Tanner explicitly considered during his composing process. Thus, the DMRP moves students to consider their audience as digital users/viewers whose understanding of the text is shaped by the collective presence and purposeful placement of the various modes—an understanding facilitated by the digital, multimodal nature of the DMRP.

Not only does the DMRP invite more expansive attention to audience, but it also enlarges our understanding of personal writing in three ways. First, rather than relegating personal writing to the individual realm, the DMRP invites us to acknowledge a social element to the personal, to "relocat[e] individual meaning in broader cultural contexts" (Kamler 73). Specifically, students' personal experiences provide the impetus for their research topics and students are encouraged to situate their interpretations of the research in the context of their personal experiences with the topic. As a result, students experience firsthand the reciprocal relationship between the personal and the social. They come to recognize that personal experiences can guide academic explorations and be molded and remolded by these very explorations. For FYC students with several years of college-level writing ahead of them, the hope is that they will carry these recognitions into future college writing tasks, continuing to strike "the balance well between making writing meaningful to the student and making the student meaningful to the community" (Connors 187).

Second, the DMRP posits personal writing as a prerequisite for deep, critical engagement with scholarship. According to the "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing" outlined in *College English*—an extended description of the skills and habits deemed important for student success within postsecondary education by education and writing scholars—the college composition classroom should be a space where "writers are asked to

move past obvious or surface-level interpretations and use writing to make sense of and respond to . . . texts they encounter" (530). The DMRP offers one means of facilitating this movement from surface level engagement to critical analysis. This is evidenced in Tanner's discussion of the rainbow flag. Specifically, Tanner remembers the many GSA meetings he attended during high school, the presence of the flag at these meetings, and "the mission statement [the] club delivered everyday during its meetings" (Steslow). This personal reflection in conjunction with his researched discovery that the flag originally "stood for peace, tolerance, and community" moves him to comment on the ways in which "community coupled with friendship" can effectively combat oppression within the LGBT community (Steslow). As this example reveals, Tanner's conclusions move beyond a rehearsal of the research he conducted. Instead, rather than summarizing what he has researched about the flag, Tanner puts this research in conversation with his personal experiences and moves towards deep, critical engagement. He offers conclusions about what this symbolism of the flag suggests for the larger LGBT community, and it is his personal experiences within this community that allow him to engage with the scholarship on this deeper level.

Third, the DMRP reveals the value of inviting students to take a personal approach to the aesthetic presentation of their text. Unlike the traditional FYC research paper most often composed according to MLA guidelines, the DMRP does not mandate a specific format. While students are expected to follow MLA citation style, they are invited to aesthetically design their project based on the modes they are using and their specific research topic. In her discussion of researched blogs, Lisa Costello describes the ways in which having the freedom to make design choices with their blogs allows her students "to own the writing space into which they write" (182). She calls this "personal design input," commenting on the design choices her students make in regards to colors, pictures, and format (182). Similarly, students completing the DMRP make explicit choices regarding the selection and placement of individual modes, the design of each individual page, and the design of the site as a whole.

In reflecting on this aspect of the DMRP, Danielle remembers that "this was one of [her] favorite research projects . . . because it allowed [her] to use creativity" (Story). We can see this creativity exemplified in Danielle's project through several of her design choices, including her specific use of color and the banner of roses that frames the home page of her project. Danielle explains that she appreciated having the freedom to make decisions regarding the appearance of her text, because it made "doing something

that would have otherwise been a burden in another class" more enjoyable (Story). Although Danielle's attitude toward research as a burden may be more common among FYC students than we would prefer, allowing students to take a personal approach to the aesthetic design of their texts can help them gain a more positive attitude toward the research process. They can come to see that the personal can do more than inform the content we write; it can also inform the presentation of the content we write.

It is perhaps no surprise that the personal aspect of the DMRP sparks student interest in the research project. After all, "caring about something makes people want to participate" (Costello 181). However, as I hope this discussion has shown, the personal can do more than garner student interest. It can also move students to engage deeply with their research, move beyond reciting researched observations. When invited to blur the personal/research binary, students learn that personal writing and research-based writing are not mutually exclusive. They gain experience applying research to their personal experiences and then using these very experiences to offer a richer reading of the research. In short, students recognize the potential for personal and research-based writing to be reciprocally entwined, a recognition that affirms Bill Hart-Davidson's description of genres as only "*relatively* stable, [. . .] open to hybridization and change over time" (40 original emphasis). Additionally, as the DMRP suggests, when students are working on a digital platform, this recognition is enhanced. This is because digital platforms offer students more options for personally interacting with their research, what McGinnis, Goodstein-Stolzenberg, and Costa Saliania describe as "new means for representation, expression, and communication" (285). Students can play with the color palette of their project, insert relevant links, incorporate photo slideshows, and design page banners. Put simply, they can become writers, researchers, and designers in one space, finding points of meaningful connection between their lived experiences, their research, and their time in the FYC classroom.

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14 A Queer Challenge to Repronormativity in the Digital Classroom

Zarah C. Moeggenberg

I DIDN'T KNOW how to teach basic writing when it was handed to me. Like many, I was a graduate student—then getting my MFA in poetry. I was underprepared and given few resources. This was repeated during my PhD, where the composition program didn't have any formalized goals or outcomes for basic writing, no required textbook, and little support for basic-writing teachers. Still, teaching this course—above teaching poetry, creative nonfiction, fiction, first-year composition, or advanced research writing—has given me insight into the ways in which we aren't meeting the needs of our students, into how within all writing disciplines we are ignoring especially the digital paradigm through what J. Jack Halberstam in *In a Queer Place and Time* calls "reproductive temporality" or "repro time" (4–5). This reproductive temporality, which I'll explain more fully below, affects space, what we do with this space, and, especially, nearly invisibly, how we conceive of ourselves as being able to compose within a space that seeks to normalize—or else, continues to other and to silence.

A Beginning, A Story, A Thursday

Three years ago.

  At a university in northern Michigan, I was beginning to unpack what it would mean to queer a classroom. I had read about integrating queer texts. Jonathan Alexander and David Wallace's "A Queer Turn in Composition Studies: Reviewing and Assessing an Emerging Scholarship" was in my backpack, all worn, crumpled, and scribbled on profusely. I was obsessed. Using queer texts through representing queer people and issues was how I was working toward interrupting heteronormativity. My students

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in this particular semester had been watching the Sundance documentary series *Transgeneration*, which follows four transgender college students at different institutions through an entire academic year. Students were to write argumentative research papers on issues facing transgender students. On this particular day, I was asking them to research how queer students were supported on our own campus. My students, English-language learners and basic-writing students, were in groups of four or five and looking up different issues: clubs and organizations, bathroom policies, and housing placement. Each group was huddled around a laptop or two. (This institution is a laptop campus, with each student and instructor issued a device.)

I was happy with this class so far. While I knew that learning about queer concerns and identities was challenging, especially for some of my international students, my students had really been delving into the issues and collaborating well. One group was pointing at the monitor of the laptop, clarifying something or other. Another group was navigating a website. And then I saw the third group.

My student, "Carl," was talking on his iPhone.

"What's he doing?" I hissed at his group, walking over to him.

"He's talking to ResLife," another student giggled, covering her mouth.

"Seriously?" I asked, surprised, and not sure if I was okay with this. And, further, not sure if I was okay with not being okay. I continued to watch Carl.

He began pacing about the room, gesturing as he spoke to whoever was on the other end. "Really?" he'd exclaim once in a while. "Interesting," he would interject. He continued to walk back and forth down the open spaces between the rigid rows of tables.

Some students began to turn from their groups to watch as well.

Soon, Carl was off the phone.

"What happened?" I asked. Every student had stopped what they were doing, was leaning toward Carl. He sat down on one of the long tables in the middle of the classroom, stuck his iPhone back in his pocket.

Some of us moved closer.

"I decided to call ResLife, to get to the bottom of this. Then, I got transferred three times back and forth to a couple of different people, and all I wanted to know was how transgender students got placed into dorms! Finally, I talked to a woman," Carl continued, relating how exactly transgender students were placed into the dormitories.

And I began to realize what was queer about what we were doing wasn't what Carl and his classmates were researching at all. What was queer

was the active nature of our research, the collaboration, the community, and the digital rhetorical practices with which students were taking part.

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So it is that I ask that we begin to consider the ways in which we are reproducing norms in composition, creative writing, and other disciplines emphasizing text-production. Are we meeting the needs of our students, whose demographic is consistently and rapidly changing? Are we considering the ways in which they are prosumers or, someone who consumes and produces media? Are we considering the ways in which they are multimodal composers, daily, on multiple digital platforms? I believe that we are overlooking that many of our students belong to discourse communities where visual and oral composing are primary. There is an exigency to consider how messaging and other asynchronous discussion in spaces like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Tumblr are crucial to students' awareness of their individual writing processes and composing strategies. In his digital text, "Writing in the Moment: Social Media, Digital Identity, and Networked Publics," Jacob Babb stresses that we view our digital identities as epideictic discourse in order to become more aware of the ramifications of our actions in networked publics. I add that we must encourage students to pause and reflect on their digital discourse, the rhetorical practices they exercise in networked publics, as meaningful composing. We might even consider Dustin W. Edwards's typology for remix (46) as we do so, as it offers an excellent starting point for helping students see their own rhetorical goals more clearly. If students are generating digital texts with visual, aural, kinesthetic, and alphabetic textual components—the YouTube video, DubSmashing, the repeated emoji paired with text and gif in posts, responses, and tweets—with their audience increasingly more public, let's capitalize on that investment. We really need to begin to observe the ways in which digital multimedia and multimodal composing play crucial recursive roles in our students' abilities to self-conceptualize as writers and integrate such practices into the processes we impose on them.

On Repronormativity in Writing Classes

Since that day with Carl and my other students, I have begun to question the ways in which heteronormativity still manifests itself in our everyday

classroom practices, despite the supposed "queer turn" we have made. I wondered if the repetitive composing process I asked students to complete four or five times with different alphabetic assignments was in fact stifling some students. Beyond that day, I questioned whether daily activities were meeting my students' learning needs.

J. Jack Halberstam wrote of queer time, that using this concept clarifies "how respectability, and notions of the normal on which it depends, may be upheld by a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality" (4). He says that in Western culture periods of stability are desirable, and that those who do not live by the temporal framing desired by this middle-class logic are considered dangerous. Heteronormative time, according to Halberstam, is constituted by reproductive time and family time (10). Heteronormative time is *repro*-normative, *repronormative*. It reproduces norms that have been sanctioned as acceptable and desirable. Halberstam writes that "[q]ueer subcultures . . . believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death" (2). He notes that queer time is "the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing" (2). If *repronormativity*, according to Halberstam, and arguably Marx, Althusser, Lukács, or Judith Butler, means that norms are reproduced through hegemonic practices that solicit consent ideologically, rhetorically, specifically through reproduction itself, then I would extend his concept to writing studies. I suggest that *repronormativity* is analogous to what happens in writing classrooms.

So, then, what does this *repronormativity* mean in college writing?

In introductory writing classes especially, we are asking students to reproduce norms, to perform conventions in alphabetic prose. If heteronormative time for Halberstam is birth and marriage and reproduction and death, then straight time in the composition classroom, I argue, is the normative production of single-authored alphabetic writing. The "desirable" student produces a particular product through meeting particular deadlines on time, in the correct space, throughout the semester. The student births an idea, courts the idea, reproduces the idea through drafts, and submits the essay to the death of the grade. Repronormativity in the composition classrooms fetishizes a composed product that adheres to conventions within a prescribed and "normative" process. Conventions dictate when and how the life of students' writing will become, be, and end. There is little room for promiscuity.

The definition of queer time emerged out of the AIDS plague. It meant finding new possibilities out of what time and which means were available (Halberstam 2). Queer rhetorical practice capitalized—as it still does today—on collaborative, communal, multimodal composing. This often meant engaging with and creating multimedia in order to move toward more stability in local communities, and to cast a wider net of visibility for the ways in which queers were being ignored by the government and the public at large. However, if we do not begin to unpack the ways in which we are imposing repronormative single-authored alphabetic composing practices on our students, we will continue to ignore the digital paradigm. We will continue to reproduce norms. We will continue to silence students who we implicitly mark as Other. In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Althusser writes that a capitalist regime depends on the reproductions of norms:

> the reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order, i.e. a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class "in words." (88)

Important moves to include more diverse issues in writing courses and writing-intensive courses have been made and need to continue to be made to combat ableism, heterosexism, racism, xenophobia, and sexism. Still, more is warranted to ensure the successes of first generation and students of color, especially. We are in a powerful position to challenge normative practices that reinforce and reproduce conventions that silence students. Althusser, following Gramsci, notes that the school is the most powerful of state institutions because it not only teaches *know-how* but ensures *subjection to the ruling ideology* (Althusser 88). We can unpack our preconceived notions of *othered* writing practices, many of which are afforded by digital composing practices and which can be supported through a queered classroom.

An instructor inevitably imposes a process on students. My students complete ten to fifteen "Steps" throughout a semester. I give them a short

prompt that works to guide them toward a larger project. I get to determine that prompt, what they are required to perform, do, write, and so on. I determine the deadline. I decide if I want it to be in paper or electronic text. And, in some way or another in doing this, I am affecting their processes. What I do with these prompts will shape how they write for some time, maybe even the rest of their lives. So I have to be cognizant of what and why I ask them to compose, as well as *how*.

Another Aside

Somewhere between my MFA and my PhD I lost my process, my writing process. My MFA thesis was comprised largely of spoken word poetry. I would stand in the middle of my dining room, my feet bare on the pine floors, sway my body back and forth as I belted out poetry with my eyes closed, let the wood give and creak under my weight.

I would drive for four hours within the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, ten pounds of dog on my lap asleep, my iPhone dimly showing the silent roll of the timer on the voice-recording app, as hundreds of acres of pine and freshwater rolled by. I'd tap the timer off and on. I'd feed it through the electric tape deck of my rusty Subaru.

I'd listen, then re-record without or with something different.

Repeat.

At 6:00 a.m., I'd listen to these recordings on early dog walks to get coffee a block away, and then again on the five blocks down to Lake Superior. I'd write in the Notes app on my iPhone if I thought of something and maybe pull it up in the evening when I would spend a lot of time working on a word processor.

I'm just now starting to speak again as I write. I'm just now remembering to bring my mini-recorder with me on hikes. I'm just now finding a writing routine again. A lot was lost when the conventions of academic writing were imposed on me again.

"The creative writer and the academic are this far apart," Victor Villanueva said to me one afternoon, leaning back in his office chair, extending his arms and open palms in the air above his head. He looked up at each hand separately. "They need to come together," he said.

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I've spent the better part of the last year reading basic writing scholarship, beginning with Mina Shaughnessy and moving forward to the present. Villanueva said to me on another day, "All she meant was 'It's your *basic this*, and your *basic that*.' That's it." Shaughnessy had coined basic writing in her seminal text, *Errors and Expectations*, in order to address the emerging challenges facing writing instruction with open admissions in 1970. It has been in basic writing scholarship that I have been able to see repronormativity at play the most, with its emphasis on single-authored alphabetic processes and repetitive, structured conventions. Still more—and even in recent scholarship—there is a distinct lack of regard for variable recursive practices which include the digital. What Shaughnessy was getting at and what many still in composition studies do not understand is that *basic* writing is good ole writing. While Shaughnessy did unfortunately point to a study of error, she did get us talking about basic writers with sophistication. She celebrated the intricacies of their "errors." She also pointed to that what basic writers mostly need is a confidence boost, something our field has forgotten and forgotten, again and again. In David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky's *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts*, they stress the importance of reading alongside writing, a breakthrough in the field. Although well before the web, they assert that their course gave "students access to the language and methods of the academy" and that it was "not a course designed to make the academy—or its students—disappear" (9). Still, this is where a hammering of repronormative alphabetic process became a major hallmark of basic writing. Bartholomae and Petrosky involve students in twelve alphabetic assignments and twenty-five drafts and revisions over the course of a semester. While Bartholomae and Petrosky integrated reading in basic writing, an important contribution, their stress on quantifiable time and texts, and the repetitive engagement of such, is something that I believe hinders students from believing in themselves as writers, as it posits that there is a universal fix-it for basic writers.

Current literature on basic writing has not progressed much, and I'm sure much of this is because those who teach basic writing are, like I was, underprepared, without adequate support, and overworked. Although there have been recent discussions regarding the use of computers and multimodality in basic writing, such approaches still work from a deficit model and make inaccurate assumptions about students. In the "Closing Thoughts" of Braun, McCorkle, and Wolf's online essay, "Remixing Basic Writing: Digital Media Production & the Basic Writing Curriculum," for

instance, the authors discuss basic writing students as, though "adept at consuming digital media texts, they have oftentimes never produced them, and thus have not thought about these kinds of texts in rhetorical or compositional terms." Patterson, Hancock, and Reid's "Encouraging Digital Dexterity in Basic Writers" similarly depicts basic writers as "unfamiliar" with "expectations" of academic discourse in their introduction section, a common sentiment I hear at my own institution. Klages and Clark's more recent work, "New Worlds of Errors and Expectations: Basic Writers and Digital Assumptions," puts forth hopes of students becoming more "adept" at code-switching in utilizing ePortoflios (36). Throughout "'Diving in Deeper': Bringing Basic Writers' Thinking to the Surface" Cheryl Hogue Smith echoes a moment in Shaughnessy's work of bringing up the all too forgotten importance of confidence in developing students' disposition to think critically, though she does so by stressing the alphabetic entirely. The lot of recent literature on basic writing positions basic writing students as those who write on their own, who should write alphabetically, and who don't know about the expectations of academic writing. All of these writing teachers, though sometimes caught up in assumptions and essentialist notions of who the basic writer is, are aiming toward something more for our classroom practices. They do see that like all other students, the basic writer engages with multimedia, can compose digital texts, and is above all capable. As *basic writing* increasingly becomes a label we sneer at, we might take the term as pejorative, challenge what exactly the basic *this* and the basic *that* might be and mean. Further, if the stress on time and repetition and convention is akin to other subfields of writing as well, FYC, ESL, SLA, and creative writing, what might it mean to interrupt such repronormativity through queering our practices? And, as I have been suggesting, the queering of practices does not necessarily mean integrating easily labeled "queer texts" or "queer issues."

On New Queer Moves

Composing now, outside of the classroom, is highly multimodal and digital. And, as we forget again and again, as evident in the number of activities and assignments that are completely alphabetical and single-authored, composing has always been social. We need, then, to continue to integrate the digital paradigm into students' composing practices and into the practices we impose but with a queer approach. In order to include the digital

paradigm in recursive practices, I ask that we consider first what queer composition does. In order to do so, we must gain a more robust understanding of queer rhetorical practices, both on and offline, and how such work disrupts product-driven, single-authored repronormative composing.

> Picture this: It's 1988. A few hundred bodies are sardined together on a cement floor, listening intently to a few people at the front, working to determine the most effective phrase to chant at the next die-in. At the die-in they will lay on the street to generate more media, grasp the posters, keep chanting, and let the stretchers take them one by one. But here, on this cement, the papers rustle through from seated person to person. Heads crane to read about the new drug that's come out. Body-to-body, members of ACT UP slowly determine which affinity groups will take which street corners, who will record, what will be chanted, and what will happen if members are arrested.

> Picture this: It's 2003. She is 16 in Bay City, MI, a small town north of Flint. She is in a basement, working on the humming desktop computer. She plays what videos she can find about their experiences. She is close as she can get to the monitor. She can feel her face and shoulders grow warm. She hears the creak of the front porch, the key shove into the door, the click of the deadlock. She stops the boy on the video, removes the phone cord from the tower and quickly shoves it back into the cordless phone so that she can greet her mother who has come home from work.

> Picture this: It's July 2011. The sun is high in Chicago. We are body-to-body. We are leaning. We can feel the music in our shoes. Smiles weave together and across the street as pride continues.

By now, countless compositionists have called for more collaboration, for integration of multimodality into students' processes, and for more multimedia composing. One might ask, How is a queer approach any different from what we have already seen, if not representing ordinarily excluded people and the day-to-day social issues they face in our classrooms? I call for us to focus more on the *how* of queer composition, on how we ask students to compose *together*, and on the *how* of queer pedagogical practices.

To compose in a queer way means to subvert what norms one is expected to reproduce, to subvert convention, to question normalization. In the "Introduction" page of Alexander and Rhodes's online essay, "Queer Rhetoric and the Pleasures of the Archive," they write, "queer rhetorical practice focuses more on those strategies that seek to broaden, even to the breaking point, what counts or passes as 'normal.' In the process, queer rhetoric works to unseat the rhetorical and material tyranny of the normal itself." Our everyday practices as instructors, the design of our assignments, and the ways in which we approach assessment are inherently steeped in this "tyranny of the normal." And so when I say I envision queer composition as collaborative, as communal, as multimodal, as questioning, and as subverting, I mean to say that I envision students taking the agency together to do just that, but simultaneously. I envision them determining their own media together. I envision them trying new technologies together. I envision them composing all texts together. I envision them working beyond the temporal frame of the class period together.

I imagine my students handing in more *play* than major project.

I imagine them determining their own deadlines and drawing up their own collaborative contracts. I imagine them positioning me, instead, as a facilitator, as fellow resource, as fellow writer. I imagine them focusing more on what strengths they bring, what strategies they can contribute, even teach, than on changing to fit.

I imagine myself no longer at the head of the classroom. I imagine my students no longer in rows. I imagine, with this kind of "queer time" that Halberstam discussed, the walls of my classroom extending, even shifting planes to include the Web and what lies beyond the room, the building, the manicured lawn outside.

Because of repronormativity, we are caught in set units, in frames, in measuring parts, and weighing materials. We are caught in fixing, in evidence, and in the demonstration of the rhetorical strategies *we* learned to reproduce. Yet, if increasingly we are gaining students with rhetorical practices that emphasize multimodal composing and/or texts that position alphabetic as secondary to say, for example, the visual, it is time to queer our practices so that these students may learn, with each other, how to make queer moves in academic writing. In queering practices, I mean maintaining looser parameters and constraints so that students may collectively gain academic writing skills and understand conventions, certainly demonstrate them, but in ways that are comfortable and meaningful. I mean taking seriously, unpacking with students, writing prompts that they might

challenge and subvert in the future. I mean that instructors would need to challenge conventions in syllabus design in their departments and most specifically in the design of what constitutes a "major project." I mean learning to assess multiauthored, multimodal/multimedia projects. I mean complicating and challenging "normal" deadlines, by perhaps letting students determine them. I mean letting students design the major project, determine goals and desired outcome, and aid in assessment. I mean letting students identify which tools and technologies they would like to play with. I mean options. I mean openness. I mean getting more comfortable with being uncomfortable. This is part of queer pedagogical practice. But it wouldn't be queer if I called this a definition, would it?

 Composition studies has only conceptualized queer composition as subject: as characters, as issues, as themes, as people, as narrative, as loss, as death, as memory. Even within creative writing, it is *work* to find texts that integrate even the implied queer subject. We should begin to focus on *how* queers compose: with bodies; by creating and remixing multimodal and multimedia texts; through collaborative communications; and all toward communal purposes that elicit change. From the early nineteenth century forward, with remarkable moments in the 1960s, during the AIDS plague of the 1980s, with gay marriage very recently in 2015, and now with transgender rights, queer rhetorical practice has sought to interrupt and challenge the reproduction of norms through steadfast multimodal, multimedia, collaborative composition. Emphasizing and integrating within our pedagogies *how* queers have composed for decades might lead students toward gaining more confidence in both their own recursive composing processes and their self-perception as writers. Integrating the recursivity of digital composing into our practice is a queer move because it interrupts the binary we seem to ascribe to computing and traditional pen and paper writing. While it is in basic writing that I see this the most, we need to consider how various digital composing software programs and tools might be integrated into a project in much the same spirit Jodi Shipka in *Toward a Composition Made Whole* cautions that alphabetic composition processes may include integral and necessary multimodality. Centrally, we must ask students to compose more sustained collaborative multimodal and multimedia projects so that what rhetorical strategies they bring to the university have the space to be utilized, celebrated, and strengthened with what our own curriculum affords when it meets them.

 Queer pedagogy, as I see it, takes a bottom-up approach that makes explicit every member's strengths and contributions. I wonder if we might

emulate some of the affinity group structure in ACT UP when we ask students to learn new technologies or engage in new practices in/with digital spaces, and, more hopefully, that such groups would form based on writing and research interests. When composition goals are born and foregrounded collaboratively for a communal purpose, or when composing endeavors begin by recognizing and exercising group play, self-perception as singular writer is more accessible; useful practices within recursion of writing are more readily available and measured.

If all we ask students to generate is four to five single-authored alphabetic texts, we are not preparing them for the job market, nor for the collaboration or resourcefulness required of disciplinary composition, nor for challenging and subverting the normalization those disciplines will impose. Queer rhetorical practice is both a collaborative and resourceful dialectic endeavor, which is why I urge more emphasis on affinity formation and affinity project building in all writing. At this point, the praxis I will discuss below concerns the ways we reproduce traditional, conventional teaching practices, no matter our protestations that all writing is recursive and social, that we maintain the practices of the single-authored text even as we theorize, following Foucault, that the solitary author is a myth. What follows isn't a true reflection of those queer pedagogical practices that have emerged in composition studies—certainly it is less informed by pedagogies that emphasize operating on queer issues and instead, informed more by how queers have composed together in multimedia and with bodies. What follows is yet another indication that all our decades of saying writing is social and recursive doesn't show up in our teaching practices. I am taking a step toward a new queer theoretical approach to composition, as many queer pedagogies utilize digital spaces, especially asynchronous discussion, which serve to only generate and sustain heteronormative binaries. What follows, I hope, will bring us closer to conceptualizing queer composition and queer pedagogy more fully in practice, but I know that there is much work that needs to be done to realize it.

Queer Praxis

Recently, I asked students to build a Digital Scholarship Workspace. Though you may see the assignment in full as an appendix below, formally, the Digital Scholarship Workspace asks students to create a Wix or Weebly

website where they unpack an important social issue in their fields, and play toward arguing for conceivable change.

> Think of this project as exploratory. A space for collecting. A space for critical thinking. And a space to share scholarship, ideas, and questions digitally . . . Sources that you collect, work through, compare and contrast to other sources in this project will bring an audience toward understanding more fully what you, the researcher, sees.

I designed this major assignment because it makes room for two elements of writing that are central to queer pedagogy: narrative and play. I envisioned that this project would help my students to make queer moves because, in design, the DSW challenges lineation, the status of alphabetic text, and encourages students to move from space to space. I saw it as thesis generative, that in playing in the different pockets of their sites, they would come away with a solid thesis, ideas, and resources that they may choose to transfer into their more traditional papers that followed. It is named a workspace because I wanted my students to think of it as part of their becoming as writers, as space and not product. To my students, I stressed the growth and importance of digital scholarship, and that when they enter the workforce, and as they continue to participate especially in social media, they will generate nonlinear, digital rhetoric. I stressed that writing digitally enables them to think critically about how information is represented without a vertical word processor, that it asks them to jump around and play with language. I stressed that alphabetic texts may be better served by juxtaposing them with video, sound, image, or hyperlink, that perhaps the alphabetic may even need to be entirely replaced by other media. I also stressed reflexivity. I stressed narrative. I wanted my students to be cognizant of the way they are playing and why. I wanted them to reflect on where play led them. I also wanted their experiences, in any form, to be explicit and woven into those pages. I envisioned taking risks together, playing with video, manipulating images, and messing around on each other's sites. I envisioned checking in on the sites, but not in a way that evaluated them as "final drafts."

Earlier, I mentioned that the content of this section isn't entirely queer, and this is where I become critical of my own assignment. As much as the Digital Scholarship Workspace encourages play—and it does—it

also reproduces norms. It normalizes. It steals. A week before spring break, my advanced writing and research class spent their time in class in groups with markers and whiteboards. I asked them to draw possibilities for both creating multimedia and synthesizing the primary and secondary research of their individual workspaces. In other words, I wanted them to play with design. The possibilities they came up with that day together were rich. They envisioned making PowToons and Piktocharts, videos, graphs with sound clips, playing with Camtasia, including audio from previous interviews they had conducted, and taking local photographs to help convey prose from research they'd gathered. They filled the board with different frames for the web pages. In a class period, I watched them draw on paper, transfer this onto the board, and more significantly, begin to look at their peers more than at me in the corner. I had become a facilitator.

But two weeks later, I realized that as much as I had theorized, I'd fallen into the trap of repronormative pedagogy. In looking at their individual workspaces to check on their progress, their skeleton drafts due, I didn't see the kind of enthusiasm and play reflected on their sites that I had heard in my students' voices weeks before. Those things were lost.

Two takeaways. First, I had fallen into serving a repronormative, a heteronormative, ideology. Students will only see queer possibilities for an assignment with rigid parameters when they collaborate on that assignment from its conception to its construction, and from its construction to its draft hand-in (if that is required). Students play more and see more possibilities when they are given the time and space to do so. If I had let my students play and generate together, and not attached time frames, deadlines, and evaluative points to each stage of this process, those ideas they initially had together on the white board would have likely been realized, as well as expanded on in rich ways. I should have let them develop a website as a class, not twenty-five individual sites. Second, in creating this single-authored, repronormative assignment, I had taken something very important away from all of my students: confidence. What I see in their individual websites is toned down and the text of the articles my students have worked with dominates their own. In asking each student to compose on his or her own I took away imaginative resources, communication, encouragement, and queer possibilities that could have aided them in future writing. Despite the fact that I wanted this workspace to be a place to play, I felt the pressure of making it single-authored and heavy on requirements. I felt the pressure of seeking evidence, a product.

My students, made to work alone, felt driven to fold to convention and emphasized alphabetic text.

Students' relationship to their research, the way that they play with it, helps them come toward understanding their own processes, the ones they will need when they will need to set their own deadlines, when the composing and how it gets done is on them entirely. When we put a lot of constraints on assignments and force students into completing them alone, they come away with a lesser experience. I don't think this project is hopeless. It certainly failed to become a queer assignment. But I like to think of failures and moments of disavowal as a beginning. This particular assignment might bode well in a creative writing course as well. One of the things I wish we encouraged creative writing students to do more is to play with research, especially when it is related to a story we are aiming to write. Creative writing assignments can be queered in such a way that they encourage more digital play and more narrative reflexivity. Students could easily complete the same Digital Scholarship Workspace together to build toward an essay or set of essays/texts that share a common root that every student worked to cultivate.

In order to make the DSW and other projects work more effectively, they would need to be queered, become collaborative multimodal endeavors. I believe, like Laurie Gries contends in *Still Life with Rhetoric*, that ecological thinking isn't always fully developed—nor is it made possible by repronormative pedagogical approaches to writing. One thing that would make the DSW more effective is grafting Gries's new materialist approach to understanding how texts become rhetorically active. Focusing foremost on visual texts in digital environments, Gries relates that she isn't convinced that current "rhetorical theories and research methods work hard enough to make visible *how* visual things, in all of their complexity, actually matter to collective life" (58). Further, Gries argues "the relation between visual rhetoric and affective contagion has not been adequately explored to account for how visual things move other bodies to imitate feelings, thoughts, and actions" (58). This new materialist rhetorical approach to understanding how visual texts become rhetorical "privileges following, tracing, embracing, uncertainty, and describing" (88). I believe this could be useful to all writers, and it would be made possible by a queered ecology within assignment design. If students work collaboratively in groups on their DSWs, they would better be able to see how visual texts become rhetorical, how they come to mean and generate meaning within the small

ecological environments the students are each a part of. The difference here, however, is that students play a crucial role in generating these texts themselves, based on the needs of their projects and the dynamics of their group community, and simultaneously come to understand how such texts "move other bodies to imitate feelings, thoughts, and actions" (58). Understanding how texts come to make meaning as well as how they were created in communities is crucial. If we take a queer approach to these projects, Gries's call for more transparency in how texts become rhetorical is made possible.

Recently, though singly authored, I tried something pretty simple. All of the students who completed the DSW are also required to present their research at a Community Research Showcase (CRS) that other instructors and myself cocreated. In a computer lab I asked my students, in groups of three, to open a Google Doc and write their proposals for the CRS as if they were a panel. A simple platform, it enables my students to see how their classmates are making and breaking conventional moves we had identified in example panel proposals to professional conference call-for-proposals. What I would do instead following the DSW, redesigned as collaborative, is follow this project with a collaborative multimedia paper or video. The groups would remain the same and students would have to develop their DSWs into a more focused text. I would encourage, but not limit, students to use platforms like GoogleDocs and Slack as they work to transfer important multimedia text into a more formal project. I would let students set their deadlines and negotiate their roles, and have them complete the kind of collaborative contract that resonates with the guidelines in Arola, Sheppard, and Ball's *Writer/Designer*: *A Guide to Making Multimodal Projects*. Sometimes group projects can be stressful, certainly, but it's time we began to steer toward them in queer ways that help to sustain students' understanding of how media come to make meaning in communities, as well as of how they may continue to question, subvert, and challenge normativity in their own respective directions following such a course.

A queer approach to challenging repronormativity in writing pedagogies means making more options available to students and being critical of the ways in which we ask them to engage with those options, as we may fall into reproducing an ideology that stifles them. In every assignment, in every prompt, and in most class exercises there should be flexibility, especially if we are asking students to engage with spaces like Facebook, Twitter, and other social media spaces. At the Association of Writers & Writing Programs, at the College English Association Conference, and at the Conference on College Composition and Communication I increasingly

see panels that discuss the use of Twitter and Facebook in the classroom. In fact, I've been on these panels. Insofar as a queer pedagogical approach must include sustained collaborative multimodality and collaborative multimedia composing, a consciously queer pedagogy must recognize that Facebook, Twitter, and other social media spaces are not safe spaces for all students. In my own experience, as a queer woman, Facebook is politically tumultuous. Due to the bullying and backlash from the passing of gay marriage in June 2015, I left the platform shortly thereafter. In "Negotiating Identities/Queering Desires," Mary L. Gray discusses how queer youth must circumvent or face software that blocks them from examining discourses surrounding queer identities (177). Many software and digital spaces are designed with a normative user in mind. If we place constraints on queer projects, as far as which platforms students must use, rather than creating a rhetorically aware ecology of becoming, we may instead be silencing students. While Gray focuses specifically on rural queer youth, she makes two important points that hold potential for bringing us toward queering composition classrooms more consciously: (1) queer youth identities are "performative, socially mediated moments of being and becoming" (176); and (2) some websites are crucial to rural queer youth naming their own desires and interpreting their own stories, providing "partial relief to their search for realness" (189). So while we may be apt to require use of Facebook, Twitter, or Tumblr, we must note that such spaces do not always generate safety or a sense of belonging for all students, and I extend this to other marginalized and othered students. In her conclusion, Gray calls for scholars to look at everyday uses and practices of engagement with media (191). I second her call. We cannot use media for the sake of using media. We do not know the experiences students have had in platforms we would like to use in classrooms. We don't empower students by doing something new. We empower them through engaging them with meaningful practices, practices with which they are extended significant agency, and practices to which we pay attention. When we integrate practices that ask students to reflect critically on the composing processes that they already utilize, we are making moves that may help students value that which may otherwise be erased by repronormative practices.

Queer composition helps us to integrate the digital, the multimodal, the collaborative, the play, and the personal into students' processes. As we move forward, let's begin to think about how we impose processes, whether we are encouraging integral recursive digital practices into our classrooms, and in what ways we are assessing for the fetishized repronormative products

rather than for evidence of a meaningful becoming. The recent CCCC's "Statement on Language and Power" supports and encourages us to generate classrooms that enable the "full range of the power and potential of writers and writing." What we do with this space, with this time, is paramount to how we may silence or lift a student. How we help students to see and hear one another through meaningful composition is principal to their understanding the ever-increasing dialectic of composing, in any sphere.

Appendix

Digital Scholarship Workspace

Description: This project asks you to create a website using Wix (free website software available online) and generate an exploratory archive workspace. The digital workspace should stem from the synthesis you did previous to this project and invite the audience into understanding an important issue that needs to be addressed in your field.

Workspace?: Think of this project as exploratory. A space for collecting. A space for critical thinking. And a space to share scholarship, ideas, and questions digitally. Here you are delving deeper into a more focused aspect of your synthesis paper, that issue you were working toward unpacking. Sources that you collect, work through, compare and contrast to other sources in this project will bring an audience toward understanding more fully what you, the researcher, sees.

   At some point, on one of the pages, the visiting scholar audience should see a focused thesis statement based on your curation of scholarship, your analysis, and your critical thinking.

   From time to time, I'll check in on your site. I'll click around and look for the ways you are making connections between sources, reviews of sources, and synthesis of some of your primary research with those sources.

Digital?: We will be using Wix. It's free online web-building software. It's also relatively easy to use. It's important to appreciate and contribute to digital scholarship, a medium that is growing in every discipline right now for publication and research purposes. This project asks you to think rhetorically about how you represent scholarly argument and scholarly research in a nonlinear, digital way. It also expands our notion of audience

in that audience becomes much more public. Writing digitally also affords you the opportunity to think more spatially about how you represent information and enables you to think critically without the hurdle of the vertical word document.

Sources: In addition to some of the scholarly sources you included in your second project, a minimum of four additional scholarly sources should be synthesized in. There must be a minimum of six total scholarly sources in this project.

You should also include a minimum of two primary sources, one of which may be the survey or interview you conducted in your second project. For an additional primary source, you may consider interviewing another expert in your field, conducting a survey, conducting an observation, shooting video, or taking a collection of photos. Note that any images, graphs, and videos included or borrowed should be properly cited.

From this project you should be arranging information rhetorically, celebrating, creating, and valuing digital scholarship, and inviting the academic audience into what is largely a nonlinear literature review making moves toward argument.

Pages: In addition to the home page, you should have a minimum of five to six additional pages. On each page you may be synthesizing two or more sources, *or* providing a full review of a source, *or* relating primary research. Within the pages, the following should be accomplished:

- » Provide a thesis-driven page that includes the following:
  - » A working thesis statement (this may change with each draft) that is related to an issue in your field
  - » The history surrounding your issue
- » At least two critical reviews of secondary scholarly sources. Each review should be at least five hundred words in length and reflect how this contributes to your working thesis. You may place both reviews on the same page or put one on its own separate page.
- » Include four to five visuals, which may be photographs, video, charts, etc. Anything incorporated into the Wix website you create should be original and/or used with permission.

I do advise that you add a page that presents a list of works cited, but it does not count as one of your five to six required pages on your site.

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15 The Pleasure of the Voice
Speakerly Writing in the Digital Age

Jeff Porter

FINDING YOUR VOICE AS A WRITER is often hyped as the be all and end all of the authorial process. This has been especially true in the world of literary nonfiction where voice is shorthand for the aesthetic or rhetorical mastery of unstructured content. We've all been charmed by this notion, but it is an obviously deficient idea. Written texts don't really have voices. They may be teeming with stylistic codes, but those are quiet things. In the silence of the printed word, voice is at best an imprecise metaphor for the formal construction of a work across stylistic registers.

Not so in the case of aural forms of media, such as film, radio, YouTube, and podcasts, where, especially in the digital age, voice means vocalization. Here, voice is sound and that sound is of the body, aurality being what the mouth and vocal chords enact—not the printed page. The materiality of the embodied voice has to do with the acoustic properties of sound, especially in the case of spoken language in the multimedia classroom, in which prosody, timbre, pitch, and tonality play a part in the shaping of meaning, often in a way that lies outside referential codes. An actor's dark and creaky voice that says "from forth the fatal loins of these two foes" in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* will lend that text an entirely different sonic "color" than a bright and soothing voice, the downbeat coinciding with the fatalism of the Prologue's theme. In such a case, of course, we weaken the tension between form and content produced by the clash between social turmoil and the fastidiousness of the sonnet. When registered by the ear, the secondary "overtones" of the creaky voice, which have no fixed meaning, seem almost as important as the primary signification. Listening to *viva voce* is to receive a message, but that living voice can never be reduced to mere language.

As singers, orators, and actors know, the quality of a voice, its tone and accent, often possesses an expressivity that goes beyond the signification of what it utters, producing sounds in excess of speech and meaning.

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In this sense, the voice *resonates*, and its excess points toward a subjectivity that colors the words it produces (Erlmann 175–78). When typed out, the word *home*, for instance, will mean a place of residence, a dwelling, maybe even a point of origin, depending on the context. As a spoken word, *home* will be qualified by additional overtones stirred up by the properties of voicing aloud. The breathy baritone of Garrison Keillor in a twenty-minute monologue will surround a word like *home* with a folksiness and broad sentimental value that surely does not inevitably belong to the locution itself. Spoken by Garrison Keillor, the word will collapse wistfully into the meaning of another word—*nostalgia*. Home is a wonderful place to be from and go back to, he might say of that "little town that time forgot." The nasal-sounding voice of the high-pitched, fast-talking, excitable Woody Allen would no doubt add a different range of meaning to the word *home*. The classic Woody Allen persona refers to someone who is not at home in the world, who is insecure and even paranoid—someone with a surplus of neuroses. Home would be a trap. Same word but a world of difference.

Any fan of *Prairie Home Companion* or *Annie Hall* would get the point. The voice of Garrison Keillor or Woody Allen brings a unique expressiveness to the spoken word that emerges strictly from the acoustics of the sound event.

Why this kind of voice, the voice of aurality, should interest those who are preoccupied with written words, especially anyone who teaches personal writing in any of its many forms, is because sound evokes meaning as much as it points to something meant. As Charles Bernstein observes in *Close Listening*, sound is never arbitrary and rarely secondary but instead "constitutive" (17). To find the sound in the word is the project of spokenness. It is the first step toward cultivating what Jonathan Sterne calls the "sonic imagination," the feeling for sound and rhythm, an openness to sound as part of culture (5–6).

Sound is, in fact, promiscuous, especially when we choose, as happens in the case of opera or rock and roll, not to subordinate the material aspect of voice to its referential message. The reason people go to the opera is less to learn a story than it is to hear ecstatic voices, voices in pain and joy, as in the case of the howl of Orpheus in Monteverdi's opera (Poizat 76). As *Orfeo* suggests, sound cannot be limited to semantics or to a fixed message; instead, it takes off, flying beyond the content of its words, becoming if not pure sound then at least something larger. Popular music is full of a similarly powerful musicality, in which the message can never be found in the lyrics alone. Thom Yorke's eerie vocals for Radiohead show this phenomenon, as

any listener knows, since ordinarily, only snatches of words can be made out when listening to the band's music.

Disturbingly for the teaching of personal writing, the voice of aurality often gets shut out when it comes to putting words on the page. Despite being awash in a world of sound within popular music and culture, when students enter the writing classroom they almost routinely forget the sounded nature of words, having been taught to look at black ink on white paper rather than the sound in their ears. For students in the writing classroom, the process of composing tends to be about the arrangement of visually perceived words on the page, while sound is repressed. In the classroom, the language a student fluently chatters in at home becomes almost as dead a tongue as Latin.

The challenge for writing, and especially for creative nonfiction, is to find ways of reconnecting written words with the *spokenness* of sound and to turn voice into a mechanism for connecting words to the body. Arguably, every piece of writing comes with a vocal track that could animate disembodied marks on a page. But that track, for all intents and purposes, is typically muted in the minds of writers and readers, if only out of habit. Well trained in the ways of typography, we learn at a young age to silence the aurality of language to the extent that, in the modern written text, and especially in texts generated by young writers, voice remains a hidden variable.

If the voice of writing often exists primarily *in potentia*, waiting to breathe life into inert words, how can we tap that potential? One tactic that I have found useful when teaching creative nonfiction is to call attention to aural forms of media in order to show students what voiced prose can be and how they too can produce it. The history and practice of vocalization in media such as film and radio—and especially the acousmatic narrators of radio and nonfiction cinema who remain unseen—provides writers with models thinking about voice as an outgrowth of an embodied self. By listening to diverse and compelling voices as revealed in the history of twentieth-century film and radio, writers of creative nonfiction can find their own voice.

Revisiting the vocal traditions of film and radio makes a good starting point for awakening students to the literary uses of spoken narration—and an effective first step toward helping them position themselves as narrators in today's new media landscape. We have been taught, as Stella Bruzzi argues, to have faith in the *image* of reality, to grant it broad priority over its narrational voice (40). To reverse fifty years of phonophobia requires a

deliberate act of pedagogic will. A logical place to begin is with the heyday of radio, which was dominated by large voices with a flair for drama. The earliest and most extensive use of voice-over in American media was for *The March of Time* newsreel that began airing on radio in 1931, and was screened in thousands of theaters across the country. Part journalism, part soap opera, the program featured over-the-top dramatic reenactments of historical events such as the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Like other newsreels of the day, the show was built around a commanding announcer, often called the "voice of time," who guided listeners through a cycle of events that had already played out. The program's popularity was, in fact, driven in large part by the voice and delivery of its narrator.

Many voice actors served as commentators for *The March of Time* during the show's twenty-year run, including Orson Welles, but the most influential and longest-running was Westbrook Van Voorhis. His voice was deep, masterful, portentous, and reassuring, shedding light on the significance of world events as they unfolded. The voice of *The March of Time* was so pontifical that it was easy to caricature, as Welles cleverly did in 1941 in *Citizen Kane*.

How different was Herb Morrison's stunning eyewitness account of the spectacular Hindenburg disaster in 1937. A Chicago reporter, Morrison was sent to cover the Zeppelin's arrival in New Jersey, in order to record a routine voice-over for a newsreel. Microphone in hand, Morrison described preparations for landing when the giant airship suddenly burst into flames in midair. Passengers and crew members leaped for their lives. Morrison and his sound engineer stayed on, recording the catastrophe in detail. His narration is famous for its unrestrained emotional response to the disaster, for his anguished cry as he watched the Hindenburg disintegrate—"Oh, the humanity, the humanity!"

What we hear in Morrison's halting, stricken voice-over is a man unable to control the situation, reduced to tears and mournful outbursts, his subjectivity on display. It's difficult to imagine a sound more unlike that of *The March of Time's* "voice of God." Morrison restored to the human voice the body that was hijacked by *The March of Time* and, in creating the aural image of a narrator embedded in a social reality he cannot control, was well ahead of his time.

Following the lead of radio, Hollywood film studios began making voice-over a featured part of their movies in the 1930s. From *Wuthering Heights* to *The Magnificent Ambersons*, producers exploited off-camera narration to simulate the novel's narrative voice, a trend that coincided elsewhere

with the growing prevalence of voice-over in classic documentary films released in the 1930s and '40s.

Rather than offering an aloof and transcendent narrator, however, the great films of the 1930s and '40s often portrayed their spokesmen as the collective voice and conscience of the distressed world depicted in their films—and with this they repositioned the authorial voice of nonfiction to the left of Van Voorhis. This was especially true of Depression-era documentaries, such as Pare Lorentz's *The Plow that Broke the Plains* and *The River*, whose Whitmanesque narrators, vocally soaring to the music of Virgil Thompson, were as lyrical and expressive as they were compassionate and exhortatory.

From the perspective of potential utility of early radio commentators for today's writers of creative nonfiction, it's important to note that theirs were literary voices. And so nothing seemed odd about asking W. H. Auden to write a poem for a documentary on the British mail service, as Basil Wright did in the classic film *Night Mail*. Near the end of the twenty-two minute movie, as the train nears its destination, Auden's spoken verse and Benjamin Britten's musical score are carefully edited together over a succession of images of racing train wheels. Nor was it peculiar for Joris Ivens to ask Ernest Hemingway to write the voice-over narration for his 1937 classic documentary *The Spanish Earth*. In these and other films and radio shows, the voice-over was critical to the project of embodying subjectivity in popular discursive forms.

If the 1930s and '40s were the decades of the voice-over, the 1960s was a period of comparative speechlessness. Hit by the rise of a new medium, the tradition of spoken narration in radio and film—unfortunately for writers—came to an abrupt stop. Thanks to the arrival of television and the advent of a new kind of camera, the radio star was killed—along with other aural traces of literary culture, including the poetic voice-over—with consequences that are still with us. If many students are unattuned to their literary voices, we might well blame the 1960s.

Silenced by the new technology, the voice-over artists of yesterday were displaced by a new breed of storyteller. Lightweight, hand-held cameras and portable sound recording gear transformed the way nonfiction filmmakers went about telling their stories. Cameramen took to the streets, toting their smaller Arriflexes anywhere and everywhere to capture real events and situations as they occurred, without the kind of editorial control that had dominated the older style. Calling itself cinema verité, the new movement became a vogue in the 1960s, as filmmakers renounced

traditional documentary practices such as interviews, music, and sound effects. Increasingly, the visual footage had to speak for itself without vocal accompaniment. "My main feeling about film," Richard Leacock said in 1960, "is that film should not lecture, and it's a terrible temptation to lecture" (Youdelman 401). Cinema verité filmmakers agreed that the voice-over was the greatest sin in the history of documentary. Robert Drew, who made the classic *verité* film, *Primary*, complained that "words supplied from outside cannot make a film soar; narration is what you do when you fail" (Bruzzi 41). To progressive filmmakers of the 1960s, voice-overs could only mean one thing: the objectionable narration of a didactic white male who spoke in the high-handed style of *The March of Time* (Mamber 2–5).

The spoken language scene in Europe during the same decade was different. While Americans were putting a gag order on voice-overs, New Wave French filmmakers were unleashing their inner essayist, producing movies that showcased discursive narrators and loquacious commentators. Given their writerly backgrounds, it's no wonder that many New Wave filmmakers experimented with modernist modes of narrative complexity. As Jean-Luc Godard once said, "I consider myself an essayist, but rather than writing essays I film them" (Milne and Narboni 171). Godard used the term *essay* to refer to a kind of eclectic structure that drew equally on experimental, fictional, and documentary film techniques. Because of its open form, the essay gave Godard more room to move around as a filmmaker, allowing him to be digressive and ironic, to mix fact and fiction, to explore ambiguities, to be digressive, and to quote others.

Godard and the New Wave ushered in what is considered to be the most definitive film essay of all time, Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*, a long personal movie that had much in common with the literary essay. As Marker showed, engagement with the real world did not necessarily rule out a personal voice and an idiosyncratic style, as it did in the American version of cinema verité.

The premise of *Sans Soleil* is this: an unseen woman reads and comments on letters she receives from an on-the-go cameraman, Sandor Krasna, whose reflections on global travel dart from one observation to another. Krasna is an invented off-screen character, as is the unnamed narrator. The voice-over is spoken by a woman (Alexandra Stewart), who typically begins each section of the film with the phrase "He wrote me," or "he told me," or "he described to me." It's a fascinating strategy. Not only has Marker invented two personae for the commentary, but the boundaries between them, between the female narrator and the itinerant cameraman, become

so ambiguous that at times we can't say for sure who is speaking. This confusion doubles the subjectivity of the voice-over while at the same time complicating its authorial function.

A more recent nonfiction film goes even further in showing how expressive the voice-over can be when it takes its lead from first-person narration. Agnes Varda's *The Gleaners and I* (released in 2000) was inspired by a famous 1867 painting by Jean-François Millet that depicts three women foraging for left-over vegetables in a field after harvest. It was shot on digital video by the seventy-two-year-old Varda and is built around Varda's playful voice-over, an essayistic narration on the traditional practice of gleaning in all of its forms. It is not enough for Varda, however, to simply document gleaning as a social phenomenon. What begins as a portrait of modern-day gleaners, people who live on the leftovers the rest of us have discarded, soon turns into a meditation on waste, art, filmmaking, and aging. The most intriguing moment in the film occurs when Varda turns her hand-held digital camera on herself, focusing its lens on her wrinkled hands and graying hair. In these intimate memento-mori moments, we realize that not only tomatoes, turnips, and potatoes are harvested—so is the human body. In Varda's film essay, she becomes both a gleaner and the gleaned.

By placing herself within the story of gleaning, Varda is able to localize the voice of her film in her own body. It's an old body and it may be nearing its conclusion, as the voice-over repeatedly reminds us, but like a good essayist Varda takes us into her confidence by grounding her reflections, large and small, in her own voice. It's as much a way of connecting with her subject—through a kind of aural empathy—as with her audience. Nothing could be more charged with voice than the sound of this aging woman thinking out loud as she points her camera at a shapeless potato.

What filmmakers like Chris Marker and Agnes Varda can show essayists is how to create a distinctively voiced self. In the space often occupied by a detached narrator, Marker and Varda insert narrative personae who are so thoroughly grounded in an embodied self that they always seem to be caught up in the process of becoming (or un-becoming). The takeaway for students is that the act of pondering can be vocalized in a way that can carry a narrative forward. Not all students are familiar with the literary uses of the essay, in which the pondering self plays a substantial part, but the representational challenge of projecting such a persona in the multimedia classroom is irresistible, if only because creating its look or sound taps into each student's performative bent. As with theater, content is often a function of performance in new media writing.

It took Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March* (1986) to transform radical European constructions of filmic subjectivity into a talking-self suited for the American popular imagination. A film that pretends to follow William Tecumseh Sherman's bloody path through the South during the height of the Civil War, *Sherman's March* quickly redirects its attention toward the filmmaker's romantic frustrations. The movie wanders ironically between the search for the historical Sherman and the pursuit of romance, but its whimsical and digressive voice is its great strength. McElwee's peripatetic quest for understanding, which harks back to Thoreau and the belief that all thinking should be grounded in walking, features a persona that is heard more than seen, since it is largely made up of words spoken in a wry, self-deprecating voice-over that is as relentlessly self-qualifying as it is intimate and droll. It's a meticulously crafted voice that endows McElwee's filmmaking with writerly qualities.

As McElwee's film made clear, the spoken-word was catching on once again with American artists. In the following decades, the voice, which had earlier been silenced by American filmmakers, regained its resonance in movies, on TV, and in the alternative music scene. The story-songs of Tom Waits are a product of this moment. Many listeners first heard the gritty voice of Tom Waits on the radio, telling a story as naturally as if he were speaking to his best friend in his song titled "What's He Building": "What the hell is he building in there?" the smoky voice says. "He's pounding nails into a / hardwood floor and I / swear to god I heard someone / moaning low." Waits's "song" (it's not sung but spoken) is a strange piece that appeared on the album *Mule Variations* in 1999. The story is told from the point of view of a nosy neighbor whose curiosity about the guy next door gets the better of him. The more he ponders the stranger, the more paranoid and obsessive he becomes. "He never / waves when he goes by / He's hiding something from / the rest of us . . . He has no friends / but he gets a lot of mail," says the narrator, "I'll bet he spent a little / time in jail." The lyrics are set to music made up of percussive grooves, improvisational thumps and bangs produced by quirky instrumentation. The story lacks a plot, but it has an unforgettable voice.

As the music critic Daniel Durchholz has said, Tom Waits's voice sounds as if it had been steeped in a vat of bourbon, left to dry in a smokehouse, and then taken outside and run over with a car. Waits himself has said that he tries to make different kinds of characters out of his voice. "I have a falsetto and I try to sound like a cherry bomb, and a clown, and

an old-fashioned crooner. It's an instrument, and after a while you learn the different stuff you can do with it" (NPR interview). It is hard to say which comes first with Waits, the lyrics or the music. The conventional distinction probably doesn't hold much meaning in his case. He views himself as a word artist, and points to the Beat movement as the source of his inspiration. "The Beat poets were like father figures for me," Waits said in the NPR interview. "I took the train to SF to get my copy of Ferlinghetti's *Coney Island of the Mind* signed."

Waits's spoken-word songs remind us that narrative language is inherently melodic and goes beyond the meanings of words. In Waits's voice, for instance, there is a surplus of meaning that works on the imagination in extra-verbal ways, as if his voice had hands and gestured while it spoke. This surplus is the domain of *paralanguage*, the presemantic component of voice, comprising nonverbal elements such as voice quality (pitch and timber), emotion and speaking style, as well as prosodic features such as rhythm, intonation, and stress. Imagine a Darth Vader line from *Star Wars* ("The Force is strong with this one") spoken by another actor, say Christopher Walken, with his exaggerated New Yorker tonality and sudden off-beat pauses. While the words might remain the same, the meaning certainly wouldn't. There are no utterances, we are told by linguists, that lack paralinguistic properties, since speech requires the presence of a voice that can be modulated.

The song-stories of Tom Waits, which were inspired by the zany radio narratives of Ken Nordine in the late 1950s, were part of a pendulum swing toward the spokenness of literature. We see this in the spoken word movement of the 1990s in poetry but also in the popularity of Ira Glass's *This American Life*, which turned the short-form commentaries already being aired on NPR into fully fledged works of creative nonfiction. With the debut of *This American Life*, the radio essay acquired a life of its own in the mid-1990s, drawing on the appeal of the idiosyncratic voices and quirky storytelling of such writers as David Sedaris, Sarah Vowell, Scott Carrier, and David Rakoff. Theirs was not the customary broadcast voice, large and resonant, but instead embodied a unique speaking-self that turned its own imperfections into an imaginative force that was inseparable from the writing. So it is with Sarah Vowell, who sounds like a snarky teenager plotting revenge in her book-lined bedroom; or with David Sedaris, the boyish urchin whose mock-confessional ironies probe the absurdities of normativity; or with David Rakoff, whose rakish humor and world-weary persona

drew a cult following. For the most part, the success of *This American Life*'s essayists relied on the charm of their radio personae, conveyed through their distinctive voices, which listeners grew fond of and identified with.

What the essayists of *This American Life* share is a self-deprecating sense of irony that harks back to Montaigne, whose narrative "I" opened up a place outside of mainstream discourse for an unaffiliated voice. Like Montaigne, Sedaris, Vowell, and Rakoff cast their narrators as imperfect beings caught in the whirlwind of becoming. Unlike him, however, these writers infiltrated the space beyond the written word, the space of the encounter between language and voice. The grain in the voice, Barthes wrote, is the body in the voice as it speaks (182–83). Through acoustic means new media essayists have found ways to re-introduce their bodies into the practice of writing.

As this brief survey of the voice-over suggests, spokenness has a complicated history in narrative art. Knowing something about that history can help awaken the aural sensibilities of today's students, by recalling the voice as a maker of meaning from the periodic waves of neglect that has engulfed it. By listening to the varied voices of Orson Welles, Herb Morrison, Pare Lorentz, Chris Marker, Agnes Varda, Ross McElwee, Tom Waits, David Sedaris, Sarah Vowell, and David Rakoff—whose works are just a finger's click away from our ears—student writers can begin to reverse their default position of treating words as inert and silent marks on the page.

Recovering the sound of language is not an easy task. The cumulative effect of five centuries of literacy has made us forget that words were once not signs on a page but sounds spoken by bards and troubadours. But changes in digital media are helping us remember. As current technologies ask us to rethink our habits of reading and writing, perhaps envisioning ourselves as performers and listeners, a rediscovery of older habits is under way. It has been argued by Walter Ong that "writing can never dispense with orality altogether" (Ong 8). Beneath the written message always lurks a vocal track, a track that digital technology has helped make visible.

The history of the voice in film and radio can be a resource for writers. But to fully hear those historical voices, students first have to learn to listen. One way they can do so is by tuning in to the world around them, attending to what R. Murray Schaefer calls the "soundscapes" we inhabit (205).

In my writing classes, I often ask students to take a "sound walk," listening to and recording everything they hear, a task they find surprisingly hard. This kind of hearing, as Tom Rice explains, is a "listening out for a

particular sound," a kind of awareness that requires effort and a conscious direction of auditory attention (99–100). Humans have long had to make accurate sense of local sounds in order to navigate in and around their environments, learning to "read" their soundscape as exactly possible. In *The Perfect Storm*, Sebastian Junger explains how fishermen measure the speed and intensity of the wind by interpreting the sound it makes against the boat's wires and cables. A scream, he says, "means the wind is around Force 9 on the Beaufort Scale, 40 or 50 knots. Force 10 is a shriek. Force 11 is a moan" (105). Beyond that you don't want to go. Before the advent of sonar and GPS devices, boat captains navigating a narrow channel in the dark imitated the bat's sense of acoustic location so as to measure the distance from their ears to the shoreline. They whistled as loud as they could, and then listened to the returning echo. If the echo returned simultaneously from both sides, then they were safely in the middle of the channel (Truax 18, 21). Blind people use their walking sticks to the same end, tapping hard surfaces to gauge distance via the echoes they make.

Decoding sounds in any environment demands careful attention, but what often throws students is the problem of how to filter out the clamor of modern life: city traffic, air conditioners, airplanes, lawn mowers, leaf blowers, snowmobiles, mopeds. Where noise has become a fact of life, attentive listening is a challenge. Acoustic specialists explain that in a noisy environment, which they call a "low-fidelity" setting, the signal-to-noise ratio drops significantly so that it's nearly impossible for a listener to distinguish between wanted and unwanted sounds. When I'm walking my dog in the vicinity of a nearby hospital, for instance, I don't want to hear the roar of its massive heating-and-cooling system (which I do), but do wish to hear the discrete sounds of the crickets, cicadas, and the guy playing a guitar on his front porch (which I don't). In this case, my soundscape is chaos, because everything has collapsed into a steady and meaningless drone—the triumph of noise. The hospital's loudness has essentially produced a deaf spot. Were I a bat, I would be colliding with every tree or pole on the street.

Students on a sound walk have to discover how to separate signal from noise in order to overcome the deafness induced by our cacophonous culture. To hear discrete sounds and thus describe the acoustic properties of an environment, they have to sort out coherent and meaningful sounds from the welter of ambient noise around us. That may be a challenge, but it also offers a helpful reminder of the role listeners play when tracking the

location, quality, and identity of a sound object within a specific acoustic environment, distinguishing between background and foreground sounds, assessing the dominant tone, dialing up memories and subjective associations, canceling noise.

Sound-walking is different from other kinds of mobile listening (like tuning into a car radio or ambling about while wired to an iPhone). The sound-walk is a particular kind of movement through space where attention to listening matters acutely. It calls not just for hearing, but for listening attentively—tuning in. Such an exercise requires that students sensitize themselves to the acoustic cues they ordinarily take for granted: wind through the trees, the droning of a plane overhead, the rolling *kwirr* of the red-bellied woodpecker, the whining noise of a weed whacker, even the clatter of their own footsteps.

Tuning in may be unfamiliar, but with a little practice it's straightforward and fun. Much harder is converting sounds to words. We like to call the fiddle music of the cricket "chirping," but only because we can't think of another word for its perceived sound. Identifying what we hear is often challenged by a poverty of language, and to make matters worse our descriptive vocabulary skews toward sight. Students have little choice but to push language harder in order to tag their acoustic referents—say, the sound of rain on a tin roof (ring, pop, clink, patter, whisper, dancing, knocking, drumming, pouring?). "I heard the rain impinge upon the earth," wrote James Joyce in *The Dubliners*, "the fine incessant needles of water playing in the sodden beds."

The quest for acoustic adjectives often sends the writer in the direction of metaphor, beyond the categorical order of things, where the imagination seeks out substitute terms. "Fall is crunching under foot, the curled crack of maple leaves finishing life in a death chatter," wrote one student on her sound-walk. Wrote another: "A bullfrog moans in strange palpitations, two dogs in a kennel, pleading. A feather makes a sound that is stolen by the wind." And last, if morbidly: "When I see a dead raccoon I think about our relationship. There was one in the gutter today. As I walked past I heard the small sound of tiny insects burrowing their way through it. The raccoon is dead because it does not make noise. The raccoon I know is dead because the only noise it makes is not its own noise." The figurative turns many students take when translating listening into writing awakens the inherent spokenness of language, which resembles an incipient kind of poetry. Here meaning is not something that accompanies the word but is performed by

it, as Charles Bernstein would say. Anything that helps rematerialize language, such as metaphor, will lend itself to *voicing*.

The soundscape is the voice of the world, and it teaches us how to make meaning. As Marshall McLuhan observed, sound and space are profoundly connected, particularly in the human brain where the act of perception contextualizes what we hear not only environmentally but narratively as well. Once a sound is heard, as Rick Altman notes, it surrenders itself up to interpretation (19). It is no longer an isolated car horn or clap of thunder but a crucial sign in an evolving story (rush-hour impatience, the arrival of rain). Listening itself is a kind of narrative search for meaning that precedes language.

Like any acoustic environment made up of many tracks (crows in trees, skate boarder gliding down street, woman on cell phone), a piece of writing is a mix of multiple sounds ordered strategically and inventively to produce an aural experience in the listener's mind. By taking a sound walk, students become better listeners who are more alert not just to their acoustic environments, but also to the voices that can come into play on the written page.

Thinking about texts as having real voices, as being a mix of different soundtracks within an acoustic environment, is made easier by access to digital tools that encourage the electronic sharing of essays and stories, such as podcasting. While podcasts have been around for over a decade, they are currently enjoying a new surge of popularity, thanks to the demand for audio storytelling. Most podcasts are set up like a radio show, with episodic structures and guest visitors, but the key to producing a compelling podcast is to be able to tell a good story, which requires the expressive use of voice and sound. The trick is to integrate a spoken text into an imaginatively rendered acoustic space. But the idea of *voicing* is not peculiar to podcasting or other forms of radio art; we find it wherever the expressiveness of language evokes (rather than silences) the sense of spokenness inherent in the word.

Roland Barthes talks about the *writerly* work as text that engages the reader more actively in the construction of meaning. There is a plurality of cultural indicators for the reader to uncover that are not confined to any particular order by narrative structure. Following Barthes, we might say that the *speakerly* work is that text which draws on the voice of the writer, lures it into the play of meaning. In the *speakerly* text, voice does not stabilize meaning so much as complicate it, multiplying the locations

of subjectivity. The speakerly is a source of *jouissance*, insofar as it exceeds signification to some degree.

Stand-alone monologues, rants, soliloquies—these are familiar speakerly genres of literature. Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, Charles Baudelaire's *Paris Spleen*, Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse*, Thomas Bernhard's *The Loser*, Spalding Gray's *Swimming to Cambodia*, Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*, and Geoff Dyer's *Out of Sheer Rage* suggest a contrarian tradition that calls on the exuberance of the speakerly in their literary exploration of the contradictory and eccentric in human nature. Blogging, at its best, gravitates toward the speakerly, perhaps not with as notoriously hyperbolical a prose style as that of Thomas Bernhard, but nevertheless profits from the kind of stylized voicings that capture the performative nature of speakerly writing.

The destination of speakerly writing is as varied as the available venues. The voiced text can be shared through the microphone, WordPress, Vimeo, and even the page. With the return of spokenness in narrative art, the expressiveness of the voice is no longer a tool for telling people what to think but, rather, a way of embodying the writer in a complicated text. The writer's ability to inscribe him- or herself aurally into a position halfway between language and the sound-making human body opens up a culturally significant space for performing new subjectivities. Fully voiced writing is best accomplished in the classroom by reverse-engineering our most creative listening habits. To the extent that each one of us is engaged in a participatory acoustic culture, we are all in a sense sound designers and we are becoming more aurally aware every day. Few can listen to our environment without actively ordering the diverse tracks we hear or produce ourselves. At any given moment, everything we hear is mixed in the ear and thematically structured in our auditory imagination.

We are not taught to think of our voice in the literal sense when writing, as if the idea of voice could somehow be reduced to its message. We are taught instead that the acoustic structure of language is arbitrary. But ignoring the vocal track of writing is becoming increasingly difficult in the digital age, when new forms of expressivity call on the invisible storyteller in all of us. If indeed a new digital archetype grounded in the phonic side of writing—the speakerly—is emerging, then it promises to radicalize classroom practices. While writing may have created the possibility of language without a voice, digital media is teaching us that to be heard words must be sounded (Ihde 152). Whether standing before a microphone or tapping out words on a keyboard, we are all spoken-word artists.

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Jeff Porter is the author of *Lost Sound*: *The Forgotten Art of Radio Storytelling*, *Understanding the Essay* (with Patricia Foster), and *Oppenheimer Is Watching Me*. His essays and sound works have appeared in *Antioch Review, Isotope, Northwest Review, Shenandoah, Missouri Review, Hotel Amerika, Wilson Quarterly, Contemporary Literature, Seneca Review, Blackbird*, and *Atticus Review*, among other journals. He directs the Undergraduate Creative Writing

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Bonnie Sunstein has taught writing and crossed disciplinary boundaries for a professional lifetime. After teaching high school and holding numerous adjunct positions in New England, she studied folklore, anthropology, and narrative theory as a PhD student at the University of New Hampshire. At the University of Iowa, she crosses two worlds of scholarship daily: as professor of English, where she currently directs and teaches in the Nonfiction Writing Program—and as professor of Language, Literacy and Culture in Education, where she was program chair in English Education and established a writing center for graduate students. She conducts writing and teaching institutes across the USA and around the world, often focused on interdisciplinary research and writing. Her chapters, articles, and poems appear in professional journals and anthologies. *FieldWorking*: *Reading and Writing Research* is in its fourth edition, and five other books are popular among teachers and writers. Recipient of many awards and grants, Bonnie is finishing a book about teaching nonfiction writing for the University of Chicago Press, and another one about professors who work across disciplines for Indiana University Press.

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EDUCATION

At a time when Twitter, Facebook, blogs, Instagram, and other social media dominate our interactions with one another and with our world, the teaching of writing also necessarily involves the employment of multimodal approaches, visual literacies, and online learning. Given this new digital landscape, how do we most effectively teach and create various forms of "personal writing" within our rhetoric and composition classes, our creative writing classes, and our community groups? Contributors to *Getting Personal* offer their thoughts about some of the positives and negatives of teaching and using personal writing within digital contexts. They also reveal intriguing teaching activities that they have designed to engage their students and other writers. In addition, they share some of the innovative responses they have received to these assignments. *Getting Personal* is about finding ways to teach and use personal writing in the digital age that can truly empower writing teachers, writing students, as well as other community members.

"*Getting Personal* offers an engaging, comprehensive view of how and why instructors, in both creative and academic writing, can integrate contemporary writing and communication practices into their classrooms, assignments, and curricula."

— Jill Talbot, editor of *Metawritings: Toward a Theory of Nonfiction*

"I am right now rethinking some of my assumptions about what it means to do and to teach personal writing—especially in digital environments. I'm also taken with the fact that while the chapters are clearly academic, they are also personal, and while several of them explicitly call the 'false binary between the personal and the academic' into question, my sense is that they themselves do so implicitly as well."

— Barry M. Maid, coauthor of *The McGraw-Hill Guide: Writing for College, Writing for Life, Fourth Edition*

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