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Making Writing Matter: Using “the Personal” to Recover[y] an Essential[ist] Tension in Academic Discourse

Jane E. Hindman

In the search for the means to re-introduce human agency and difference into academic discourse and knowledge claims, several of us who profess English studies have made a pitch for a vision of academic writing that can—in Richard Miller’s words—provide “the very thing the academy is currently most in need of: a technology for producing and sustaining the hope that tomorrow will be better than today” (285). Constructing such a hopeful professional discourse requires substantial revision of our current professional discursive practices, however. While not an advocate of personal writing per se, cultural critic Wlad Godzich argues for a revision of our professional practices when he urges us to remember that “[k]nowledge must surrender its global pretensions. Its reach is always limited to its loci and condition of emergence, what Geertz calls the local It must not serve as an instrument of domination; in fact, it must renounce mastery as such” (266). Patricia Bizzell eloquently promotes the pedagogical implications of such a vision of professional knowledge when she asks us to accept “the authority created by collective discursive exchange and its truths as provisionally binding” so that “we might imagine the public function of the intellectual as precisely rhetorical: our task is to aid everyone in our academic community, and in our national community, to share a discourse” (261–62). The search for local knowledge and a shared, more hopeful discourse has rekindled interest in the rhetorical as well as material authority of ideologies, in various forms of writing collected under that overdetermined rubric “the personal.”

Many, however, object—sometimes strenuously—to proposals that academics use “the personal” as a way to renounce mastery and share a common discourse. Historically, scholars have submitted to the discipline’s view of the self as an unauthorized subject; we have been trained to see authors’ revelations of their personal lives as self-indulgent at worst, irrelevant at best. Joseph Harris epitomizes this perspective when he declares that there is “something peculiar in downplaying a sense of ‘mastery’ through calling attention to one’s self” (52). The disciplined see some-

thing natural in discursive gestures to the methods, subject[ivitie]s, territories, genres, structures and stylistic conventions of our discipline. “The briskness, clarity and self-effacement of academic prose can be seen,” Harris claims, “not simply as a surrender to the logic of patriarchy but also as a kind of deference, as a desire not to impose too much on one’s readers” (51).

Needless to say, this view of academic discourse is not popular among scholars whose professional and personal aims are to end oppression. They may argue that such professional reproduction of what Clifford Geertz has called “author-evacuated prose” misrecognizes the events of our daily lives because it willfully ignores the social construction of our experiences, our knowledge, even our very bodies, and likewise dispenses with the material aspects of composing and revising our lives. Thus proponents of discourse that challenges oppression contend that such discursive conventions as those of academic literacy maintain authoritarian inscriptions of self, knowledge, and power. For instance—and following Nancy Miller’s and Judith Butler’s feminist critiques of institutional discourse and agency—Andrea Lunsford realizes that feminists must primarily dedicate their efforts to asserting the discursive authority they have historically been denied, an authority threatened by postmodern challenges to a monolithic discourse or an autonomous subject. Lunsford subsequently “hope[s] that, working together, feminist rhetoricians can create, enact, and promote alternative forms of agency” and discursive authority (535). As a way to locate such agency, Richard Miller urges us to “excavat[e] bodily responses for material evidence of the ways culture is present in the writer’s very act of experiencing the composing process and in the reader’s responses to the writer’s text” (272–73). Such use of personal visceral responses in professional circumstances, he contends, may help us use our expertise to make writing matter, to make a difference.

Min-Zhan Lu enforces these calls for a revised view of literacy—particularly of readers’ responses to texts—and argues for professional reading practices that illuminate rather than mask the oppressive cultural forces inherent in institutional discourse(s). In delineating what is “at the heart of critical affirmation,” her term for revised literate practices, Lu also outlines what is crucial to authorizing the personal: “the tension between individual agency and collective goals of ending oppression.” I would additionally define this tension as the conflict between opposing conceptions of an expressivist, autobiographical self whose autonomy creates coherence out of inchoate experience and a socially constructed self who is always already constrained by the conventions of discourse. I argue that by refusing to delimit this conflict as a binary opposition that must be resolved, by instead holding that tension, we can critically, professionally affirm both the social basis of our professional discourse and our material agency as individual writers. Lu’s essay itself enacts this critical affirmation by demonstrating how neither postmodern theories of multiple positionalities nor utopian notions of collective interests served her ends.

No, no, no. This is not the way to make things clear. I'm already fogging up the issue with jargon like "agency" and "subject[ivitie]s" and "critical affirmation." And this way that I'm thinking I'm so clever by using "matter" to mean something it doesn't really mean: what's up with that? I can't get what I'm talking about any more. What is my point here? I'm so concerned with getting in the right sources that I can't get in what I want to say. Can't I keep this simple? Start over.

My name's JaneE and I'm an alcoholic. My sobriety date is January 1, 1987. I'm glad to be here today. As I understand the topic, the issue we're discussing is what makes someone "really" an alcoholic. Is it the word, the label, or is it something in her? How can you tell the difference? I heard the previous speaker trying to decipher two options. On the one hand, she wonders whether my—whether anyone's—acceptance of the label "alcoholic" stems from being brainwashed by all the talk about becoming a part of and learning to tell my story like other drunks do. If it does, then I'm not "really" an alcoholic at all, I "became" a drunk only because of words and in response to pressure to do "the program" right. Thus, I could "unbecome" a drunk if I just had the nerve or the imagination to break away from what you guys tell me I am from your words. On the other hand, it could be that my status as a drunk doesn't depend at all on what you say I am or even what I say I am, but on something that exists inside me, something that's there whether I recognize it or not, something that's in all of us who are alcoholic. If that's true, then no matter what, I always have been and am always going to be "really" an alcoholic and it doesn't much matter if I call myself that or not. So am I really a drunk or did you guys just convince me that I am?

Well. This can surely look like a dilemma. But on the other hand, I could just say to the speaker(s) who raised the question, "What difference does it make what the answer is? If you think you're not really a drunk, then go drink again and find out for yourself whether or not you're powerless over alcohol. If you're not, then lucky you. If you are, then come back here and we'll still be sitting here talking about how to stay sober." But such a simple answer is not what you're looking for when you're compelled to ask these sorts of questions; the simplicity only makes sense if and when you've already resolved the issue. I know that I've spent lots of time thinking over this dilemma—feeling really scared about it in fact, terrified that I'll discover something shaky in what I've come to trust as the bedrock of my success with recovery. I'm afraid to trust other people's stories of who I am and what I'm like. So I'll try not to be glib and instead say this: for me—though I can't speak for anyone else here—both of those things are true. And they're both not true. It doesn't work just one way.

Absolutely it's true that I "became" an alcoholic when I entered these rooms: when I listened to all your stories and I read your book, things in my life that used

to seem incomprehensible started to make sense because you showed me how to see them in the framework of alcoholism. It's true that the story I used to tell myself about my life was quite different before I "became" an alcoholic: I told myself—and anyone else who would listen—that it was everybody else's fault or just bad luck that I got arrested so often; that I was perpetually in debt and missed work as often as not; that I was estranged from my family and had a boyfriend who beat me up; that I'd dropped out of graduate school and—despite having two masters degrees—could only find work as a secretary. It's true that when you all told me that you'd had similar problems and that alcoholism was at the root of them, you provided a different explanation for my motives and choices. When you showed me how to use writing an inventory as a tool for taking responsibility for my resentments and my choices, the way I told my life story changed too. So it is true that you "brainwashed" me into making myself in your image when I didn't see myself like that before.

But it's also not true. I didn't become an alcoholic only when or because I heard your words. I knew I was an alcoholic long before I said the words. When I was 21 I visited a friend in detox, read the "Signs of Alcoholism" chart on the wall, and answered yes to well over half the questions. You weren't telling me what to say then; nobody was. Then at age 27 I was diagnosed with scar tissue on my liver. You all didn't talk me into that; I didn't even know you then. During the last four years of my drinking career I originated eight car wrecks, three DUI arrests, and thousands of dollars in civic fines and lawyer fees. I blacked out virtually every time I drank even if there were days, even weeks, in between my drinking episodes. Would that those realities had been created by your words only. But they weren't. And so I have no doubt that I "really" belong here.

And yet your words do create reality. This I truly believe. The first time I came into these rooms and said out loud "I'm JaneE and I'm an alcoholic," my life and my reality changed—for the better and, I hope, for good—one day at a time. If, as the speaker fears, that belief in your words isn't "real," oh well: I'm willing to keep acting as if it's real because it helps me to live and it keeps me from killing myself (or you) on the freeway. And it sure does beat getting arrested.

Okay, now I get it. It's the "what-if-everything-I-believe-all-turns-out-to-be-propaganda" fear thing, right? It's the mind/body problem made current. It's my personal version of the "do I have an essential self?" or "am I 'just' a product of what society's words made me?" debate. But what does my version have to do with College English? Why should those readers care about my alcoholism?

In addition to being JaneE and an alcoholic, I'm also Dr. Hindman, a feminist academic, a rhetorician, an associate professor in a department of Rhetoric and

Writing Studies, an advocate of at least some of the versions of “the personal” that English studies has witnessed of late. What I want to consider here is this important question: in what ways can personal writing illuminate the theory and practice of teaching composition? At least initially, I am not concerned with students’ “personal” writing but with our own. My purpose in these pages is to demonstrate a process for composing a (fleeting) self and a (professional) life that can make our disciplinary writing matter. I use “making writing matter” in several senses: in Foucault’s sense of resisting the institutional will to truth by restoring to discourse its character as a material, local event; in Richard Miller’s sense of creating “a technology for producing and sustaining the hope that tomorrow will be better than today” (285); in the commonplace sense of having use or relevance and thus making a difference; in the specialized Marxist/feminist sense of making a difference and therefore mattering in our articulations of the experience of the Other, the object not the usual subject of conventional discursive gestures.

To that end I will consider—as I have been doing—how my personal experience with alcoholism and with the discourse of recovery demonstrates to me the futility—indeed, the conceit—of trying to dispel the tension between competing versions of how the self is constructed. I’ll also consider how I learned to write in/for recovery; how much that writing mattered (literally and figuratively) to me, how it has affected my professional writing. This type of personal writing, one I have elsewhere called “embodied rhetoric,” thus offers lessons for composing a better life. For me, that better life also has meant not just better living through sobriety but also better teaching, better thinking, better writing.

As you may have guessed, my personal and my professional life often fold into one another. When during the third year of my sobriety I went back to school to get my doctorate in Rhetoric and Composition, I spent lots of hours reading and writing and thinking about how language works. When I went to AA meetings, I’d analyze that discourse just as I did when I went to the movies or the sorority dinner or the zoo. I thought about how as a newcomer I’d learned the routinized patterns of sharing that the others used, about the ways I had learned to arrange the details of my life when I told my story to the group and to recognize the new turning points and climaxes that “came forward” when I told even myself what it all meant. At school I noticed a change in my teaching, a shift from my telling my students what they should do when they wrote to my sharing with them my own “experience, strength and hope” with the writing process. I used “I” more and “you” less, especially when I conferenced or read their reflection essays.

Once I even “came out” to a class when a group’s presentation on *The Bluest Eye* concerned the issue of alcoholism. The presenters asked the rest of the class to take the “Warning Signs of Alcoholism” test and we obliged. Worry-

ing aloud that he'd answered several questions with "yes," one of the students took another's advice to "Ask the teacher what her answers were. She'll know what's a normal number." I told them that I was certainly not a good yardstick of normalcy in this context since I knew I was an alcoholic but hadn't had a drink in several years. "If you have as many 'yes' answers as I do," I said, "You could be doomed." They said "Wow" and then we continued with the group's presentation. No big deal. Several more students than usual wrote their research papers on topics related to alcoholism; one guy even approached me to say he'd seen me at a meeting years before, had been sponsored by a friend of mine, had gone back out. A few days later I saw him at the meeting I told him I attended regularly; he became a regular too. That made "coming out" with my personal life to my students more than worthwhile, I think, but I've never again found a reason to do so in class.

I have—clearly—found reason to do so in other professional settings, however. The most disturbing to date was an MLA convention several years ago. At that time, I was a fourth-year graduate student only days away from her seventh AA birthday, and thus was drawn to a panel promising to consider the power of various "marginalized discourses": butch and fem coming out stories, incest survivor stories, and AA recovery stories, which would reveal, the presentation's title claimed, "the alcoholic epistemology." The young woman presenting this latter paper argued that the discourse of AA (represented, she said, by the Big Book and the stories told at AA meetings) imposes an epistemology and an identity on AA members that didn't exist before. In other words, she claimed, AA members adopt what she defined as the AA "master narrative," accept the definition that that narrative gives, and then alter their stories of their lives in order to adhere to that definition. If not for the discourse of AA, she implied, alcoholics would not know themselves as alcoholics.

A long-term member of the AA community myself, someone whose life had been transformed by that "master narrative," I naturally resented the implication that I had been duped into accepting an identity imposed by an oppressive discourse. Longing to shout "This is total bullshit!" from the front row, I resorted to furiously scribbling my objections in the margins of my program, planning the questions I'd fire at her afterwards. I most wanted to ask "What makes you so interested in the language of AA? What's at stake for you in this research?" But I never did get to that question.

I was able to ask the presenter if she knew of a book by Chuck C. called *A New Pair of Glasses*. She did not. In her answer she was quick to volunteer that she was *not* a member of AA. I told her—and the audience—that in my experience Chuck C's book was very popular among AA's, that she might benefit from reviewing it since—as its title indicates—it probes and applies the "new vision"

metaphor for recovery that the presenter claimed to have “uncovered” and of which, she implied, AA members were unaware. The session chair quickly called on someone else.

I (im)patiently raised my hand again and waited until given a second chance to ask a question. I began by saying “I’m curious about your view of what’s at stake for you in analyzing AA’s language” but at that point the session chair—an older man who, I sensed, was the young woman’s graduate advisor or mentor—jumped up to cut off my question and any answer the presenter might have had. He broke into academic smokescreen—nebulous, generic verbiage about discursive location of identity construction which included a sufficient number of multi-syllabic buzz words to dissuade further questions and use up the remaining time.

I left the session unconvinced to say the least, ticked that I’d been cut off, and righteously indignant. “What crap!” I thought to myself. “These friggin’ academics think they know everything. Who does she think she is to say she knows AA better than the people in it? Wait till she hears what I have to say about this.”

Now here was clearly a case in which I had something at stake in writing an academic paper. Here was a way that my personal experience could help me make a professional argument. And did I ever want to make it! Even if it took years to figure out how to prove what I had immediately known, I was not to be deterred. Even when I discovered that I could not in good faith use the presenter’s name without her permission, I refused to be daunted: I found other inscriptions of points of view similar to hers, namely Robyn R. Warhol’s and Helena Michie’s “Twelve-Step Teleology: Narratives of Recovery/Recovery as Narrative.” I was determined to prove these perspectives of AA wrong. I wanted to use—in typical academic fashion—my superior analytical skills to prove that others’ academic analyses are total[izing] crap. I had several options for doing that, I was sure.

For instance, I could enable and evidence my “higher” perspective by following through on the gesture I had initiated at the MLA conference, that is, I could introduce other, better textual sites than those my opponents use and demonstrate how those sites contradict my opponents’ arguments. In this regard, I would point out, for instance, the MLA presenter’s claim to have extrapolated her poetics from the stories and the “literature” of AA, even though the only text she referred to was *Alcoholics Anonymous*, otherwise known as “the Big Book.” While that book is certainly central to AA epistemology, it is by no means the only text that members rely on, regularly cite, and consider authoritative. Nonetheless, even the Big Book concedes in its description of the “miracle of healing” that helped the third member of AA (and by implication any future member) that “its [the healing miracle’s] elements

are simple. Circumstances made him willing to believe” in a higher power and a new way of life (57). Those elements do not sound like the groundwork for a foundationalist epistemology to me.

Similarly, I would continue in my demonstration of the inferior textual interpretation[s] of my opponents, Warhol and Michie’s perspective on recovery discourse is founded entirely on the “[t]he AA ‘story,’ as a discursive form,” an AA’s story being the narrative version of her life story that AA tells (327). Warhol and Michie’s examination of this form “raise[s] the issue of difference, questioning the place of individualism and diversity in that narrative” (332). Their “goal is to identify the teleology of the Twelve Steps, and . . . to consider what it says to and about the culture’s need to uphold the fiction of the unified subject” (332).

These two authors rightfully identify the practice of telling one’s story as important to recovery discourse; however, it is by no means the only, nor even necessarily the primary, form of recovery discourse, nor is it synonymous with the Twelve Steps.¹ Further, Warhol and Michie’s claim that “the discourse of the [AA] master narrative not only erases difference but pathologizes it” is just plain wrong (339). Had those two read more carefully the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* volume that they cite, they might have uncovered the following:

The unity of Alcoholic Anonymous is the most cherished quality our Society has. . . . “Does this mean,” some will anxiously ask, “that in AA the individual doesn’t count for much? Is he to be dominated by his group and swallowed up in it?”

We may certainly answer this question with a loud “No!” We believe there isn’t a fellowship on earth which lavishes more devoted care upon its individual members; surely there is none which more jealously guards the individual’s right to think, talk, and act as he wishes. No AA can compel another to do anything; nobody can be punished or expelled. (129)

Even this brief rejoinder to these authors’ claims awakens, I trust, a reasonable doubt about my opponents’ credibility. Thus, my authorized gesture to a specialized body of knowledge could serve me well in proving my argument more credible than theirs.

In another institutionally authorized move, I could gesture to other experts’ theories, experts such as Stuart Hall, for instance. I could note that the presenter’s analysis of the rules and systems of classification of an ideology, namely her critique of the discourse of Alcoholic Anonymous and its capacity to inscribe members, did indeed demonstrate how one is positioned by the discursive formations of specific social ideologies. However, she is clearly not aware of Hall’s claims that “we are not entirely stitched into place in our relation to a complex field of historically situated ideological discourses” (106). Because people occupy various positions within different and often competing ideological frames, Hall argues “[i]t is the position with the different signifying chains which ‘means,’ not the literal, fixed correspondence

between an isolated term and some denotated position” (108). Thus, the presenter’s implication—that AAs lose the capacity to discern truth from ideology because they accept AA’s epistemology—is inaccurate.

Another authorized option would be to equate opponents’ arguments with other academic arguments commonly made. In this case, I could gesture to the disciplinary objection to the “confessional” aspects of the personal, that is to authors’ revelation in public discourse any private—and thus potentially discomfiting for listeners or readers—aspects of their lives. I could say that though they never used the words, my opponents implied—as did Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*—that while a confessional mode of discourse may appear to be a free expression of the self, it is in actuality a particularly insidious form of social control. I could note Warhol and Michie’s straight-out claim that the AA practice of telling one’s story is a “narrative impersonation” (338), that “the acquisition and continual retelling of the story becomes the very process that constitutes the alcoholic’s self” (340). At this point, I would likely as not refer to John Schilb’s reading of Foucault in order to note that “personal narratives have [also] served good political uses”; these politically advised uses of the personal have occurred not just in recovery circles but also within, for instance, feminist consciousness-raising groups wherein “building a vital solidarity with one another by exchanging personal stories” is crucial (173). “A Foucauldian view of autobiography obscures this history,” Schilb contends, and so would I in my demonstration of how Warhol and Michie likewise obscure the history of AA’s success in facilitating many alcoholics’ recovery of useful and productive lives (173).

I could further gesture to ongoing disciplinary debates favoring the personal by equating my opponents’ arguments with contested, essentialist understandings of difference and identity. Here I would invoke some feminists’ complex and sophisticated understanding of autobiography and difference. This gesture would allow me to say—with appropriate derision—that had they known the term, the MLA presenter and/or Warhol and Michie might have used Trihn Minh-ha’s term “planned authenticity” when AA’s implying that rhetoric creates a self that was not really “there.” “Planned authenticity” describes a context wherein one is forced to reveal not the “actual” self but an “authentic” one. In applying this term to the context of AAs telling their stories, I would point out that my opponents invariably cast themselves as the saviors of the “real” self, the one being duped by AA rhetoric. I would rely on Minh-ha’s argument that

Every notion in vogue, including the retrieval of “roots” values, is necessarily exploited and recuperated and the invention of the need to recover an authentic ethnic self goes hand-in-hand with the hegemonic culture’s role of savior of the endangered species. (89)

I would also note the ways that feminist autobiography theorist Shirley Neuman

articulates better than I can the problem with such an essentialist (and uninformed) analysis of the politics of a location as the ones my opponents give. Though Neuman's discussion relates to lesbians' "coming out" stories, not to recovery discourse, her objection to the "universalizing justification" in theories of autobiography nonetheless applies:

the extrapolation of a poetics of lesbian autobiography or even of lesbianism from these stories has, as Bidy Martin points out, "mask[ed] the role of rhetoric" in constructing this new lesbian and "rendered invisible" or "anachronistic" the lesbian who "came out" before this new narrative structure was in place. (220)

The MLA presenter's and Warhol and Michie's poetics of AA discourse "rendered invisible" those alcoholics who "'came out' before this new narrative structure was in place" and masked the role that biology as well as rhetoric plays in positioning an alcoholic—recovering or not.

But, JaneE, these gestures might be institutionally authorized, but they're not personally authorized, because they're not what I see as feminist: they sometimes utilize feminist texts, but they're not feminist in practice, for they seek not to empower but to have power over another. There's more too: the trouble isn't just that these limited but authorized gestures force me into not just an adversarial stance, but also that the positions they allow only partially enunciate what I know. They don't include my body. They don't account for that sinking feeling I'm having as I write: even as I construct my unassailable proofs of "my opponents'" flawed perspectives, I am noticing ways that they are right. I need to embody that voice, too.

My personal experience tells me that it's Warhol and Michie's and the MLA presenter's academic analyses—not the discourse of AA—that are reductive. The discourse of recovery is reductive too sometimes, but it is also more complicated than those academic analyses let on. The "real" truth—the truth that makes the most difference to me, the one that I count on because I feel it in my gut and because it helps me to sustain enough hope to keep on going—is this one:

I can rely on the story of myself that AA tells me; it's valid, it had been "true" for years and years before I "found" it. In fact, I was happy as hell to finally hear its truth so I could say "oh, so *that's* what's wrong with me, *that's* why I have seemed so different from people who have control over themselves in ways that I don't. Thank God there's an explanation for this." It felt good, felt right, to seize the "darkness" ("I'm JaneE and I'm an alcoholic") rather than deny it, rather than to persist with my increasingly ludicrous belief that with respect to alcohol I am just like everyone else. For me to think that such a construction of myself ("alcoholic") didn't exist before I went to AA and "agreed" to it is simply absurd. Just

ask any of the well-meaning loved ones who tried to beg, bribe, bully me to stop drinking; ask the cops who arrested me for three DUIs, ask the doctor who found scar tissue on my liver.

Thus, it seems that this ideological construction (“alcoholic”) was in some sense created and could have been accurately applied to me long before I ever seized its narrative, that it would have existed as a way I am constructed whether or not I ever recognized it, whether or not any ideology ever articulated it. Indeed, some people (e.g., the AMA) make very convincing arguments that the trait “alcoholic” has *material*, biological origins, and that even alcoholics who no longer drink have brain wave patterns and neuro-chemicals different from “normal” people’s. It seems that we must acknowledge that history/biology to at least some extent determine this position and that it would be difficult if not impossible to change it by word alone.

However, my personal experience also includes hearing people in AA meetings espouse the very argument that the MLA presenter gave. For instance, a relatively common assertion at meetings is that “I wasn’t an alcoholic till I met you all, and then I became one really fast.” Most of us who have been around for a while laugh—albeit somewhat ruefully—at those kinds of comments. To a newcomer, though, this kind of laughter can seem unsettling if not excruciating. It’s scary to admit a dependence on what people say in recovery meetings, to recognize the tenuous mitigation that words have provided, to try to decipher the paradox embodied in such claims: “I denied that I was an alcoholic until I heard other people describing their own alcoholism and realized that, because my life and thinking and catastrophes sound just like theirs and because I have no ability to control my actions when I use alcohol, I realize that I am indeed an alcoholic. If only I’d never heard your words, then I’d never be an alcoholic at all.” Yep, that’s true. It’s also true (for me) that if I’d never heard those words or if I were to choose to ignore them, I’d either die of alcoholism in some form (wet brain or sclerosis, car accident, household accident, heart attack, violent dispute) or I’d get desperate and demoralized enough (if I were lucky) to return to recovery.

Thus, I understand and believe arguments about the power of discourse to inscribe an identity. Still, I know that I definitely *am* making a choice when I construct myself as an alcoholic because I chose not to for quite a while even though I somehow “knew” the label fit. I also have experienced how my conscious choice to construct my self in a particular discursive position creates a reality that didn’t exist before: my identity as an alcoholic changes drastically

when I—or anyone else in recovery—define myself as such. That first introduction of myself as an alcoholic changes me forever. In fact, if *any* material event(s) could make me act/think/operate like a “normal” person (that is, one who doesn’t drink compulsively, one whose obsessions don’t dictate her thoughts and actions, one who has at least a bit of awareness of and willingness to consider the needs of people other than herself, one who doesn’t keep performing the same actions over and over expecting different results), then that event would be choosing to construct myself as an alcoholic, followed by—for me—getting into recovery and working the steps.

So at least in the case of identifying as a recovering alcoholic and accepting the recover(y)ing ideology, what Stuart Hall says is true: “[t]he notion that the ideologies [which supply our identities] are always-already inscribed does not allow us to think adequately about the shifts of accentuation in language and ideology, which is a constant unending process” (113). To choose to construct myself rhetorically in this particular position is the only way I could hope to escape the deterministic and bleak physical aspects of that position and recover a way to live. The ideology of AA allows me to escape the monolithic perspective offered by the status quo and its ideology of alcoholism (e.g., if you had will power, you could control your alcohol consumption). It enables me to subvert the dominant paradigm (“drinking is a social activity, a way to loosen up and relax with friends”) and intervene into what appeared to be an inevitable tragedy. Further, I know that I have accepted a new paradigm, adopted in many regards an overarching “master narrative” that shapes my life, makes meaning of it. I have experienced this shift primarily because I regularly go to meetings and occasionally tell my story, that is, because I participate in the practices wherein the ideology of AA is promulgated.

Clearly then, rhetoric *does* play an essential(ist) role in constructing me as a recovering alcoholic; biology alone cannot posit me as such. But I myself choose to make that position mean when I tell “my story,” call forward AA’s inscription that makes my story mean. True, it is my self-introduction (“Hi, I’m JaneE and I’m an alcoholic”) which confers my authority to speak at an AA meeting.² Still, it is making my self-composition and my body mean in specific ways that is requisite to locating myself in recover(y)ing discourse. Agency—recognized here as a performative speech act of self-proclaimed alcoholism—determines the position; ideology inscribes the agent. Language constructs and deconstructs, inscribes and erases.

Thus, I can also see some truth in the “Twelve-Step Teleology” description: I as an AA member *do* accept a particular ideology and it creates in me an epistemology and a notion of a self which did not exist before. I do agree to foreground certain aspects of my life when I tell my story and gloss over others.

But so what? Does that mean I'm not an individual? And if so, who cares? It saved my life to choose to let AA's ideology configure me. Deny it or not, that identity (i.e., I'm a drunk) will be following me wherever I go, whether or not I drink again, whether or not I choose to construct it self-consciously or not. So who can figure which came first, which to privilege. I know I can't seem to make it make sense as long as I try to pin it down to one way or another.

Paradox. Both . . . and, not either . . . or. An obligatory erasure of what AA calls "alcoholic black and white thinking" and what the academy calls "the logic of non-contradiction." Herein lies the evidence that my personal experience has given me an idea to think with when I evaluate the disciplinary debate between discursive and essential[ized] explanations of difference and identity.

Yet, this infiltration of the personal into the professional is actually an exchange, for academia gives me ideas to think with as I recover. My training as a writing teacher, for instance—my internalized directives to "show, not tell" and to develop my ideas with specific examples—enhances the recover[y]ing writing processes of the twelve steps. This training also facilitates the recovery of others whom I sponsor and thus guide through the process of working the steps. Likewise, my academic training in rhetoric and ideology helps me critique AA's potentially essentialist discourse, refines my capacity to follow the common 12-step directive to "take what you like [from the things we say and suggest] and leave the rest." As a result I feel empowered to compose a [recovery] life that sometimes goes against the grain of suggested AA practice.

One quite significant example is my choice to break my anonymity here at the level of print, an action that directly conflicts with AA's twelve traditions.³ That choice causes me no little trepidation, for I cannot deny that the choice serves me, that I am in part motivated by the promise of the cultural capital that my revelation offers me in this context. Thus, and especially to readers who are members of recovery groups, this rhetorical choice will likely seem self-serving and disrespectful of the spiritual foundation of AA. This critique unsettles me as much as if not more than disciplinarians' potential criticisms of my forced authenticity, my confessional discourse, or my essentialist reading of recovery experience.

Nonetheless, I choose to face that unsettling critique because I believe that revealing my identity as a recovering alcoholic will—in this context—serve others, because I believe it demonstrates through the most effective means I have available how personal experience can enable a professional self whose research practices are mental *and* visceral. I am certain that following my own material chain of associations in my reading and writing has been crucial to my own professional practice. There is no telling if or how I could have learned to recover the tension in these contradictions if not for the very high stakes involved: I cannot afford the luxury of

a nihilistic and cynical, exclusively post-structuralist explanation of discourse and identity; likewise, I am compelled to incorporate the definitive power of rhetoric into my materialist feminism. My own life or death stakes in recovery (to drink is to die, and to disavow my alcoholism would be to drink) and in academic discourse (to write what I know, to publish or perish) have literally demanded that I learn how to embody the tension between social constructionist and expressivist perceptions of the nature of writing and the writing Self.

The discursive practice of recover[y]ing this essential[ist] tension between oppositional selves and positions has evolved into a type of personal academic writing that I call embodied writing. Elsewhere, I have theorized the ways that embodied writing rejuvenates professional practice because its authorization of material conditions generates new knowledge and resists authoritarian disciplinarity (“Writing an Important Body”). Here, my goal is to demonstrate how that practice has served me and, I believe, can serve the profession well too. So in addition to the ways I have already enacted that practice here, I will enunciate just what “embodied writing” is and how it generates knowledge.

I must not lose sight of the fact, however, that the “knowing” I advocate will appear unattractive to some of you because—to you—it seems “unprofessional.” Those familiar with Stanley Fish’s perspectives on professional practice will no doubt recognize the highly self-conscious form of professionalism that I have been enacting by calling attention to, staging, the ways I am authorizing a professional self. Such discursive practice is certain to be unpopular, Fish argues, with the anti-professionals who dispute a rhetoric[ian]’s calling attention to it[her]self and “enforce [instead] a distinction between professional labors on the one hand and the identification and promotion of what is true or valuable on the other” (215). An anti-professional’s will is to adopt a disinterested, impartial discourse; a “pro” professional recognizes rather than resents the rhetorical nature of professional knowledge and authority. Such semantic distinctions seem clever when Fish twists them. But they become unwieldy and jargon-ridden when I do, so I will suspend Fish’s proof.

This willing suspension is crucial, for embodied writing and reading require me to surrender my analytical need to be right and/or absolute in my understanding of how language [and life] works. That surrender is what reveals the absurdity of the MLA presenter’s one-sided understanding of AA rhetoric *as well as* my own folly in trying to deny the partial truth(s) of her perspective. That surrender reveals the need for another logic, one *not* based on non-contradiction or supremacy. That surrender is an essential element of the personal academic writing that I advocate.

Another crucial element is unflinching self-reflection, maintaining a relentless awareness of the ways I use rhetoric to position myself. This element of embodied rhetoric most clearly gestures to the existing discursive conventions of the discipline,

which—of course—is a necessary move: if I am to have a voice here at all, I need to convince you as academics that I can earn and indeed deserve the right to be heard in this context. Thus, I have to attend to your conventions and preferences. Needless to say, then, I began this essay with gestures to others in the discipline who might agree with me.

However, the self-reflexivity of embodied rhetoric demands that I continually call attention to the gestures that I am using and to my motives in doing so. Accordingly, and in order to forswear the mastery typically awarded to the gestures with which I began, I interrupted them. That interruption, however, is not essential; nor is it necessarily more sincere, compelling, or genuine than the former gesture. I am not compelled by some “true self,” or “authentic voice” to interrupt my academic or professional self with an italicized “real” voice telling me to get more clear. I could revise the time and type of interruption if I wanted to: after all, I constructed it. Clearly, I created the interruption for effect: I wanted to represent my internal experience of competing ideologies occupying my mind simultaneously and of trying to determine which one to privilege when and why. I chose to speak here in several “voices” because I come to this—like all—topic from several different positions. In this—as in all—[life] writing situation, I have many conflicting intentions.

Further, I made the rhetorical choice to interrupt the professional context and to recover[y] my personal life as an alcoholic because naming myself and my addiction has a shock potential that I have chosen to capitalize on. Most of you are probably familiar with the opening routine for AA speakers; thus, my gesture to it locates you in an unfamiliar (within the pages of *College English*) but nonetheless recognizable discourse that shifts (maybe) what you expect from me. At the same time, my discursive “coming out” as an alcoholic likewise gestures to the recent professional trend (dare I say “convention”) of an author positioning herself as an advocate of personal writing by revealing something “relevant” about her life. As Richard Miller has pointed out, however, our “nervous” system recognizes as relevant only certain kinds of “comings out; coming out as a Christian, for instance, does not in academic circles gain the approval that coming out as, say, lesbian does.” I am banking on it (and blind reviews by *College English* readers supported my investment) that my location as a recovering alcoholic will be read as relevant, that it can serve as my ticket into the discipline’s cultural hall of mirrors wherein I have paid for the right to reflect [on] a self not commonly associated with the profession.

My hope is that you will recognize my gestures to authority not as cynical or antiprofessional with respect to disciplinary discursive practice but as unflinching self-reflection on, as critical affirmation of, those same practices. My proposal for an embodied rhetoric is not the first to advocate such an earnest attention to professional discursive practices. In her call for us academics to authorize a literacy of “critical affirmation,” Min-Zhan Lu suggests that we “practice ways of reading and writing,

speaking and listening, in which one's authority comes from one's ability to confront one's own privileges rather than to merely confront the privileges of others" (193). She further recommends that we "revise our literacy practices in not only print form but also in our private thoughts and feelings during and outside the contexts of scholarly exchanges" (192). In the embodied writing I have practiced in recovery, such vigilant affirmation of a rigorous discursive ethics is called making "a searching and fearless moral inventory."

In recovery writing, the composing process for writing such inventory usually begins in intense affect—resentment, anger or alienation. Expression of undisciplined emotion is its invention; the body is its generator. When embodied writing is successful—that is, when my personal writing is disciplined and responsible—it transforms my immediate self-absorption with subjective affect into an awareness of not only how my responses have been socially conditioned and socially perceived, but also how I as author can intervene in that conditioning. Thus, like Richard Miller's proposal that we "excavat[e] bodily responses for material evidence of the ways culture is present in the writer's very act of experiencing the composing process," my proposal for embodied writing relies on visceral reactions as the point of departure for examining and revising personal and social practices (272–73). Because embodied writing insists on my being accountable for my mental and physical reactions—my "tastes" and my feelings—it also requires me (or any other individual author) to recognize, personalize, and resist resolution of the tension inherent in multiple (contradictory) positions. Though my invention initially relies on subjective irrationality, in order to make my writing matter I must "write through" these often extreme emotional reactions in order to recognize how they have been formed, in order to gain awareness of my individual chain of associations as well as the social sites informing those responses.

I accomplish this recognition by systematically examining the stakes of my subjective response. For instance, I consider how the situation which evoked my resentment or anger or alienation affects my personal relationships as well as my view of myself, how it threatens my emotional or material security, how it impedes in my goals for success and self-satisfaction. Most importantly, taking inventory of my affective responses requires me to scrutinize the fears that belie my vehement insistence that my anger is justified and that my position is uniquely righteous, factual, exact, superior.

As an example, let me rehearse my process of writing through my resentments toward the MLA presenter I encountered back in 1993. When I considered well my irritation at her audacity in presuming to understand the complex social interactions of a group of people she had observed apparently only briefly and at a distance, I recovered another reaction that burbled up, too, when I attended her presentation: "Ahh-ha! So *this* is what it feels like to have some know-it-all university person

observe you and yours and then have the nerve to tell you what you ‘really’ mean when you talk or sing or pray or make baskets or whatever. No wonder those quilting women didn’t like what I wrote about them. No wonder.”

Only a year previous to that MLA presentation, I had done an ethnographic study of my own, an examination of the talk among a group of African American quilters (“Quilt Talk”). I had demonstrated the similarities between the quilters’ interactions and Roger Abrahms’ descriptions of the “negotiations of respect” among African American women. I had argued that the purpose of their quilt talk is to identify and define the qualities that determine the hierarchy of their positions as well as the appropriateness of jokes and complaints within the sewing circle. Thus, I was sure, quilt talk passed on an ethics not just for good quilting and sewing but also for good living.

When I was invited to present the paper at a conference and have it published thereafter, the small group of women did not object to my taking their photographs in preparation. They were a little bit surprised that people in Lincoln, Nebraska, would want to hear about what we did at Miz Jordan’s sewing class in Tucson, Arizona, but they were also pleased for me, I think, because they knew that it meant a lot to me that my paper had been accepted. When I presented my work to them before I left—showed them the slides for the talk and offered them the chance to review the paper—two of the six women actually did read my work, though I think politeness motivated them more than curiosity. Their first response to the piece was that “Oh, it’s very nice.” When pressed, the teacher of the group told me in her characteristically sweet and quiet way, “It’s nice, but I wouldn’t say that’s what we mean.”

“Hmm,” I answered. “Which part isn’t really what you mean? I don’t want to say things that aren’t true.” But she could not or would not tell me what aspects of my claims seemed overblown, did not seem to care to or perhaps didn’t know how to talk about “claims” in that way. “That’s not really what we mean” was the extent of her critique. The other reader, Miz Summers, had no comments at all, a silence which was meaningful in itself since it came from a woman who usually voiced her point of view on every topic.

I felt troubled by their reactions, but—needless to say, perhaps—I gave my presentation anyway, had that paper published as it was. I justified my choice by telling myself that I was the one who had read lots and lots of sociolinguistic work about African American communication and about quilting, that oftentimes insiders are not analytically aware of the goings on in their talk, that writing my piece from the first-person point of view gave me just as much authority to define our interactions as those women had. I continued to quilt with the women for another year, but I lost the heart to continue writing up my “findings” and rerouted my dissertation to the study of discourse and authority in other contexts.

It was not until after the 1993 MLA convention—after I heard that young woman try to tell me that AA discourse constructs for its members a contrived authority, got ticked off at her superior attitude, and wrote through my anger—that I recognized my own status as an arrogant academic who had the nerve to tell others I had known only briefly what they “really” meant when they talked. Even then, the humility was fleeting: in the years since that conference, I have not entertained my awareness of my complicity nearly so often as my self-righteous indignation. In the years since that conference and previous to this revelation to you, I have discussed with a few friends and colleagues my decision not to continue my work with the quilting women. But I have not tried to explain that decision nearly so assiduously as I have tried to figure out ways to prove that woman presenter wrong.

This persistent belligerence on my part, I discover, conceals another fear, one even more threatening than my realization that I myself have committed exactly the same mistake that I have chastised another for. I see that my adamant skepticism of the MLA presenter’s and Warhol and Michie’s perspectives on AA discourse emanates from my fear that they are right, my fear that my dedication to recovery discourse and practice really does oppress me in some way and that I have preferred to misrecognize (i.e., remain willfully ignorant of) that fact. Recognizing the possibility that I am thus “duped” forces me also to recognize that any day I could experience a shift in the interplay of various social factors that have made it possible for me to ascribe to AA discourse and not to take a drink for fourteen years. Any day that could happen; in fact, simply thinking and voicing these thoughts could be the catalyst that sets that shift in motion. And I would not be the first to experience such disillusion. In fact, most people who “go back out” and drink again don’t know for certain, if at all, why they did so. The fear most of us in recovery associate with such a mystery precipitates our need to postulate, even proselytize, theories and explanations about how to avoid such a displacement in our beliefs. But no matter what we say, neither we nor anyone else really understands without doubt or question.

What I am left with, then, is simply my decision to believe a certain way. If going to AA meetings and learning to look for similarities rather than differences in the stories that people tell can show me how to live, then I will do it. I will do it even if or though I may be simultaneously constrained by Warhol and Michie’s “questioning the place of individualism and diversity in that narrative” (332). I will do it because my life’s at stake. I will do it because this AA discourse and practice have shown me how to use my own body as a way to recognize and critique the social sources and effects of my often unruly, unhelpful, self-destructive responses.

Like Haraway’s notion of “positioned rationality,” recovery writing has helped me develop a process of writing through my irrationality and conflicting positions that grants me powers of analysis while pressing me to reflect on how my knowledge, affect, and taste are produced by the specific social locations which define me

(196). Recovery writing has taught me how to begin in undisciplined self-absorption and recover[y] a vision of the ways that my social status, my self-image, my ambition are affected by my personal feelings and choices. Such rigorous self-reflection enables me to see how I contribute to problems not only when I interpret social issues “only” personally but also when I withhold important personal information from myself or others about the complete situation and when I demand more than my share of power, prestige, cultural capital. The discursive tools of recovery writing have been crucial to recognizing myself personally and professionally as part of a larger social network, as well as (or sometimes rather than) an individual target of an individual enemy. Embodied writing has helped me see that it is in the gaps of the contradictory positions and emotions where I can learn the most. That is, it is in the interplay of my attempts to mediate those contradictions that I can best become aware of those sometimes invisible ideologies that discipline me and those social institutions which construct me. It is in recognizing the essential[ist] tensions among those ideologies, in authorizing multiple positions and multiple gestures that I discover and recover agency and meaning.

As Stanley Fish did in his discussion of “Anti-Foundationalism,” I too may well be ending with “the not-very-helpful news” that practice is not necessarily, if at all, “enabled and justified by theory” (355). In fact, our discursive practice is enabled and justified by the personal whether or not we recognize it as such and whether or not we are willing to be held accountable for our situated motives, choices, ethics. If we are to maintain in practice our professed belief that there are no foundations—then individual belief is what we are left to assert and rhetoric is our means for making those assertions persuasive.

That bromide may well be sufficient, however, if we insist on a more humane, more self-reflective, more accountable academic rhetoric. A composing process which requires me to evoke my beliefs at their most invisible embodied place, to scrutinize relentlessly the stakes in maintaining those individual beliefs and to confront the privileges they afford me, and to stage self-consciously my methods for persuading you of the authority of those beliefs—that kind of composing produces writing that matters. It offers what Richard Miller calls for, namely “material for constructing a more humane and hospitable life-world by providing the very thing the academy is currently most in need of: a technology for producing and sustaining the hope that tomorrow will be better than today and that it is worth the effort to see to it that such hopes aren’t unfounded” (285). Because it is personal, situated, and local, embodied writing—like anti-foundationalism—cannot, indeed should not, construct unconditional arguments that resolve contradictions beyond a reasonable doubt. It can offer “nothing but the assurance that what it is unable to give you—knowledge, goals, purposes, strategies—is what you already have” (355). Nevertheless, if and when we are willing to recover[y] the tension in that leap of faith, then what we have is enough.

NOTES

1. "The Twelve Steps" are themselves a discursive form given in *The Big Book* (59-60); they are often displayed on a large banner and almost always read at any AA meeting. "Working the [twelve] steps"—*not* telling one's story—is almost universally considered to be the most crucial activity of AA recovery, an activity which in part involves generating several different kinds of texts, minimally "a searching, a fearless moral inventory" and "list of persons we had harmed." Telling one's story is usually seen as only one aspect of "working the twelfth step," that is, of heeding that step's call for AAs to "carry this message to alcoholics."

2. At some "open" meetings (wherein attendance is not restricted to alcoholics only), a group conscience (democratic vote of all members) can determine that even those who do not self-identify as alcoholic can have a voice, i.e., "share." Even at closed meetings, group conscience can decide that if someone is willing to say "Yes, I want to quit" and thus meet the requirement set by AA's third tradition ("The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking"), then, sober or not, she is authorized to speak.

3. I refer to the section of the eleventh tradition, which states ". . . we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and film." In this regard then, let me hasten to note that the opinions I express here are strictly my own and do not represent those of AA as a whole.

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