Writing an Important Body of Scholarship: A Proposal for an Embodied Rhetoric of Professional Practice

Jane Hindman
CUNY Guttman Community College

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Recommended Citation
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https://academicworks.cuny.edu/nc_pubs/71

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I begin my reasoning and reflecting (as I almost always do) in the throes of contradiction. On this occasion, the inconsistency concerns our professional standing. I'm not gesturing to the oft-mentioned conflict between our institutional status as gatekeepers of Standard Written English and our disciplinary claim to be oppositional intellectuals. That paradox does indeed deserve attention and plays a significant role in my inquiry, but as a point of departure I want to explore a puzzling discrepancy between the content of our disciplinary arguments and the discursive moves that enable them. My hope is that the exploration will reveal the ideological constraints of the abstract, rationalist, disembodied rhetoric our profession usually demands. Since it is by definition constrained by the logic of noncontradiction and by professional standards, that rhetoric mystifies the professional practices that authorize it.

Such mystification of our discourse renders us vulnerable to Jack Selzer’s charge that “the relationship of rhetorical events to the material world that sustains and produces them has not often enough been fully elaborated or clearly articulated” (9). Like other authors in Selzer and Crowley’s *Rhetorical Bodies*—a collection that attempts to “steer rhetoric more firmly in the direction of those elaborations and articulations”—I too witness the need for a more “material rhetoric” (9).

More specifically, and like Yameng Liu’s contribution to the collection, I am predisposed to focus on what Foucault describes as the prohibitive procedures that allow—in fact, demand—discourse “to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality” and ensure that “we do not have the right to say everything” (216). Liu’s specific analysis uncovers the discursive procedures by which the media determine the public’s percep-
tion that Dick Morris’s most serious ethical lapse is “neither his involvement in the sex scandal nor even his betrayal of trust, but his flagrant transgression of established political, ideological, and ultimately rhetorical boundaries” (315). This determination of Morris’ ethics, Liu argues, results from the ideology of journalistic coverage that demands partisan control of rhetorical skills and distinct reverence for the demarcation between either/or; in journalistic discourse, that ideology functions as “a key mechanism in regulating the deployment and movement of human resources in contemporary rhetorical practices” (316).

Liu’s insightful conclusions regarding the prohibitions on materiality in journalistic discourse clearly describe the partisan, rationalist ideology denying materiality and informing the discourse I will consider. But unlike Liu or any of the contributors to Rhetorical Bodies, I ask us to turn our critical gaze to our own professional discursive practice. By professional discursive practice, I mean the entextualization involved in what we do as professionals: reading, writing, and evaluating students’ and our own discourse(s). Excluding those occasions when what we profess is technical and/or “professional” writing and/or “creative” writing, the practices I want to consider are those in which we produce and consume academic discourse in our capacities as professional rhetoricians and compositionists as well as the material conditions that authorize that discourse. I hope to show that, like the journalistic discourse Liu considers, our scholarship authorizes a peculiarly restrictive and abstract ideology and that “regulation of the flow of embodied rhetorical resources” is that ideology’s “characteristic mode of operation” (317).

My argument requires two moves. First, I will identify a specific set of our professional discursive practices, those that not only support Shari Benstock’s claim that “the question of ‘genre’ often rides on the question of gender” but that also disable efforts to institute change in the academy (148). Second, as antidote to these gendered power relations, I will propose “embodied rhetoric,” a rhetoric characterized and authorized in part by specific sorts of “personal” author- and context-saturated gestures to everyday life that replace or supplement our conventional discursive gestures to an always already constituted authority. I initiate my conception of an embodied rhetoric with Nancy Miller’s notion of “personal criticism” (in part to emphasize the “criticism” crucial to the discursive style I propose and in part to be specific in my use of the commonly over-determined term “personal”) and then build on Miller’s original conception of personal criticism in three crucial ways. Finally—and in order to demonstrate how one can embody the rhetoric, the ideology, the affect,
the contradictions our profession demands—I will gesture to the events that precipitated this argument. I hope to convince you that an embodied rhetoric, one that gestures to autobiographical as well as disciplinary authority, not only accounts for the contradictions inherent in ponderous materiality but also loosens the rhetorical constraints hindering our adapting to the exigencies and contingencies of our profession. Embodied rhetoric regenders academic discursive practice and thus assures agency and power to feminist theory and praxis. By implication, then, it also facilitates our efforts to effect change in our own and in our students' lives.

**Ideological Constraints in Professional Rhetoric**

I began by declaring a puzzling discrepancy between the content of our disciplinary arguments and the discursive moves that enable them. Consider, for example, the last decade's proliferation in composition studies of well-respected arguments dismissing foundationalist claims to knowledge about writing and the composing process, advocating constructivist views of the inherently social nature of that process, and explaining how anti-foundationalist theory can inform our classroom practice. Indeed, this latter feature of rhetoric and composition's specific "body of knowledge"—namely, the capacity to marry theory and practice—either always has been or has come to be seen as its distinctive quality. Sharon Crowley has argued that "because composition cheerfully operates without a founding theory, it has never generated a readily identifiable discipline" (192). Yet, such cheerful operation becomes less and less possible as composition achieves legitimate disciplinary status. Such status secures not just individual jobs but also a collective place in the institution, as well as the authority to speak as professionals. Securing a legitimate territory is the aim of the process of professionalization; legitimation is always already any profession's "will to truth," a term Foucault uses to describe a particular aspect of discursive prohibition—namely, the opposition between true and false. Resolving the legitimation crisis provokes any profession's defining and protecting the boundaries of its self-professed and discrete body of knowledge, its system for determining merit, its procedures for generating new knowledge, and its process for reproducing authority.

Composition's specific will to truth, as Lynn Worsham argues, materializes in its particular "epistemological attitude" and its "pedagogical imperative" ("Writing" 98). The profession's epistemology, she explains, appears to be "both transpersonal and objective" but is actually
“based on subjective needs and desires,” while its “will to pedagogy” requires “every theory of writing to translate into a pedagogical practice or at least some specific advice for teachers” (83,96). These are both institutionally created, sanctioned and maintained practices, requirements that academic authors must satisfy if they wish to authorize their professional discourse. Hence, while it may indeed be the case that composition has no founding theory per se, we seem at the very least to have a founding faith, a self-professed creed: producing and consuming writing theory—that is, the newest and best of the profession’s important body of knowledge—improves (if not confers) one’s capacity not just to theorize about but also to teach composition well. This faith sustains our expertise and our discipline as not simply a “service” requiring no theoretical grounding or academic rigor; nor is it an abstraction disconnected from the social realities of writing bodies. Clearly, rhetoric and composition studies is “about” the marriage of theory and practice. It has to be.

Nonetheless, and as Stanley Fish has relentlessly reminded us, linking composition studies with an anti-foundationalist position—and, by implication, with any particular theoretical position—can “bring with it no pedagogical payoff; [likewise] being opposed to anti-foundationalism [or any theoretical position] entails no pedagogical penalty,” for there is, “as James Reither observes, no transition from ‘knowing that’ to ‘knowing how’” (335). Indeed, our discrete body of knowledge—the nature of rhetoric and its procedures as well as the most effective and ethical methods for teaching that supposedly unattainable transition—have perplexed philosophers and practitioners for eons. In fact, the particular practices manifesting composition’s will to truth reenact the long quarrel between rhetoric and philosophy. Ironically, these same practices also sustain not just a “hostility to rhetoric” but also an “anti-professionalism,” labels that Fish gives to the desire that “enforces a distinction between professional labors on the one hand and the identification and promotion of what is true or valuable on the other” (215). Thus, our discipline’s marriage of convenience makes for uneasy bedfellows, for its consummation is logically impossible.

It’s not rhetorically impossible, however. In fact, the “will to pedagogy” necessitates that rhetorical move—which, it would seem, is made but not recognized, practiced but not allowed. “Why has the field of composition disallowed such a discourse?” asks Victor Vitanza, for whom exploring the mystification informing the field’s interests and practices is crucial. Vitanza recognizes that such a discourse would
require innovative rhetorical practices, “uncanny criticisms . . . with the sole purpose of establishing the (postmodern) conditions for the possibilities of discourse in and about writing theory and pedagogy”; it would necessitate conceiving a professional discourse that “requires itself to bear witness to what has been disallowed” (139). Likewise recognizing the need for innovation in professional discursive practice, Lynn Worsham invites a rhetoric of theory, a “rhetoric of inquiry [that] goes further than the deconstructive insight that the rhetorical or tropological dimension of language undermines straightforward grammatical meaning” and moves toward intervention into discursive practices through “a new metalanguage” that describes “theory as a set of tropes that structure inquiry” and that “redescribes the humanities and social sciences in rhetorical terms” (“Rhetoric” 393).

To my mind, the rhetorical turn that Worsham and Vitanza advocate becomes possible through rhetorical analyses of how we as professionals “do” theory, how our professional practices drive the discipline. Such analysis requires studying not just the teaching of writing as a means for transcribing thoughts but also our scholarly, administrative, teacherly rhetoric as a method of inventing and judging and interpreting epistemologies. Composition studies, Worsham tells us, “offers an especially productive place for studying the many ways a field constitutes itself rhetorically—in general, through strategies of invention, judgment, and argumentation” (“Rhetoric” 395). As scholars, we compositionists can offer this productivity in part because our process of professionalization is so recent and in part because writing itself—as Foucault well documents—is central to the technology of disciplinary procedures. Worsham explains that not just social space and knowledge fields but even “what we take to be the most private and personal of phenomena—emotion and the body—are effects of social organization and are made available for public administration through the techniques of discipline”; thus, in order “to understand the discipline that has evolved to study and teach writing, we must understand the way it works at both the semantic and affective levels to produce and organize knowledge and experience” (“Rhetoric” 397).

I agree wholeheartedly with her conclusion that “what is needed is a feminist critique of the disciplinary discourse of composition studies.” As my particular method of answering Worsham’s call to “challenge the claim that through the appropriation of various theories and approaches the field escapes the disciplinary apparatus of modern patriarchal society,” I will explore the construction and perpetuation of academic
authority itself ("Rhetoric" 398). My purpose will be to make visible the source of the legitimacy of what we do as compositionists and uncover the possibilities for feminist agency in our practices as professional academics. To that end, let me turn to feminist autobiography theorist Shari Benstock's claim regarding the interface of genre and gender and to my ensuing charge that our professional discourse and practice are "masculinist" and therefore confining. Conventionally, ubiquitously, and, of course, regardless of the biological gender of its author, thefiguring of this academic discourse is masculinist: it is represented and taught as if it were coherent, method(olog)ical, articulate, consistent, democratic (or at least impartial and consensual), and, most importantly, rational. Further, our theorizing of this academic discourse has historically, persistently, and blindly been considered the necessary, provocative, and generative impetus to our pedagogical and scholarly practices.

We professionals recognize that these representations are not entirely accurate. Indeed, within the pages of our professional journals, reviewers' reports, and peer evaluations we debate—sometimes vehemently—the (anti)foundational, (a)rhistorical, (in)accurate nature of such claims about our discourse. Probably the most effectual efforts to revise the disciplinary response to what Worsham has termed the field's "pedagogical imperative" have been feminist arguments for "a nonoppressive, dialogic relationship between theory and practice" (Ede 327), for a "postdisciplinary" notion of the relationship between teaching and theory (see Harkin). This enterprise has yet to have much of an effect on the discipline, however. We persist (sometimes to ourselves, usually to other professionals, and almost without exception to our first-year composition students) in our representations of academic discourse as a more or less transparent and intellectually superior technology best suited to a disinterested, objective pursuit of truth. This masculinist figuration of our discourse inscribes what Pierre Bourdieu terms "misrecognition," a voluntary, culturally endorsed process that creates "a truth whose sole meaning and function are to deny a truth known and recognized by all, a lie which would deceive no one were not everyone determine to deceive [her or] himself" (133).

Misrecognition is, of course, instrumental to sustaining the status of a profession(al): it's the strong will of professionalization that inextricably links our status as a legitimate discipline to our strong will to be the disciplinarians of (and disciplined by) our profession. As Magali Larson explains in The Rise of Professionalism, "The singular characteristic of professional power [is]... that the profession has the exclusive privilege
of defining both the content of its knowledge and the legitimate conditions of access to it, while the unequal distribution of knowledge protects and enhances this power" (48). Further characteristics of the professional project, Larson tells us, are its production of “at least a minimal sense of the cognitive superiority . . . which distinguishes all . . . [professionals] from the laity” and its tendency toward the “monopolization of status and work privileges in an occupational hierarchy” (47, 51). Finally, it is “ideologically necessary for the legitimation of monopoly that instruction—the acquisition of competence—appear to be accessible to all who seek it and are able to assimilate it” (51). This ideological cover serves to protect and enhance the inequity in status that professionalization constructs, for as professionals our business is to define and control legitimate access (our “gatekeeping” function) to the knowledge that we construct and authorize (our scholarly function). Thus, according to Larson’s perspective anyway, the mystification that comprises misrecognition also defines professionalism—at least in part.2

Vitanza rightly identifies the source of compositionists’ most crucial professional misrecognitions: “(1) the will to systematize (the) language (of composing), (2) the will to be its author(ity), and (3) the will to teach it to students” (140). But he’s overly hasty in assuming that these characteristics emerge singularly and/or only from “the strong will of the field of composition,” for, at least in one sense, this institutionalized denial and/or (mis)recognition is not unusual or discipline-specific (140). In fact, it’s commonplace not only in the academy but throughout our capitalist economy. (As a particularly poignant example, consider that at the time of this writing, our nation as it is embodied in the president urges us to (mis)recognize Osama bin Laden and the Taliban as “pure evil” and to deny earlier U.S. political interests in collaborating with both and thus providing their military and intelligence training.) Our profession—like all others—is self-professed, self-constructed, self-affirmed, self-administered; in other words, ours is an autobiographical profession. In order to maintain our status as professionals, however, even we rhetoricians concerned with de-mystifying language use cannot fully recognize the autobiographical construction of our profession and its authority. Thus, Vitanza is again correct when he speculates about composition’s reasons for disallowing such a critical in(ter)vention as the “perverse comedy” that he recommends: that sort of alternative rhetoric would indeed “place the field in the midst of a ‘legitimation crisis’” (140). Bearing witness to our own rhetoricity acknowledges the self-construction of our knowledge as well as our efforts to demonstrate cognitive superiority. Thus, in order
to avoid such a legitimation crisis, we—like all professionals, particularly those whose status is questionable or fledgling—compose an authority that appears to be removed from its material sources in our professional practice. Like other professionals, we systematically and systemically reroute our professional authority from the transient, contextual vicissitudes of our everyday practices and corporeal selves to an already constituted and abstract realm of disciplinary subjects, linguistic patterns, and texts.

Within our professional discursive practices, this detour is enabled by the gesture, a rhetorical move that shifts authority away from the “inside” of our material contexts, to the “outside” of our discursive conventions. Under the cover of various discursive gestures, we simultaneously invoke that always already constituted disciplinary realm of methodologies, subjects, territories, genres, structures, and stylistic conventions of our discipline and disavow the transient, material realm of professional practice(s) and corporeal producers of texts. For instance, I enable the discourse I present now by gesturing to existing bodies of scholarship (autobiography theory by Shari Benstock and Nancy Miller as well as sociological analysis of professionalism by Magali Larson); similarly, I noted the already constituted project of demonstrating gender inequity in discourse and practice. I definitely did not gesture to my experiences with, or to my anger and frustration resulting from, these inequities. I have authorized (in the abstract) those experiences and affective responses by gesturing to another scholar’s accepted work with “the personal” and by using her term “personal criticism” to assure you that I’ll focus on the “critical” more than the “personal” aspects of the personal. (In the specific, however, I have not gestured to those experiences or feelings—not yet anyway.) Most convincingly, perhaps, my references to “deficiency,” to something lacking, in the collection Rhetorical Bodies and in the work of Miller and Vitanza make my argument possible, for therein I deploy the ultimate academic (masculinist) gesture: pointing out a lack that my superior mastery will fill.

As you can see, conventional academic discourse works to entextualize an abstract body of knowledge and disembodied the individual writer because it requires gestures to those methodologies, subjects, territories, genres, structures, stylistic conventions and—of course—ideologies of our discipline. Historically, paternalistically, conventionally, we have been disciplined to see, as Joseph Harris does, “something peculiar about downplaying a sense of ‘mastery’ through calling attention to one’s self” (52). By definition, then, our discourse cannot be subversive or counter-
hegemonic or interventional, for it is doggedly determined to be arhetorical. In exchanging positionality for certainty, contingent truth for professional ideology, we deny the rhetoricity of our own language. When we misrecognize our gestures, when we deny the collective but nonetheless self-constructed and self-authorized character of disciplinary authority, we sentence ourselves to the discipline of the master narrative, to the discomfiting position of being rhetoricians who are hostile to (our own) rhetoric.

This institutionally misrecognized discursive practice co-opts the feminist project even as it appears to sponsor it. Consider, for instance, the past five years or so of the discipline's apparent and extensive support for numerous theoretical explorations of feminism's implications for composition theory, methodology, and practice—as evidenced, for example, in such volumes as Feminism and Composition Studies, Ethical Dilemmas in Feminist Research, Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy. Despite their existence and even widespread acceptance, these feminists' discursive attempts to appropriate political agency and reinscribe professional practices and identities have tended to be disembodied and therefore disempowered, without access to experiential, autobiographical authority.

Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford allude to this conundrum in "Writing Back," their invited response to a section ("Exploring Discontinuities") of Feminism and Composition Studies. "What significance, if any," they ask, "should we (or other readers) attach to the fact that your essays tend to accept and embody, rather than to transgress, the conventions of traditional academic prose? Does this acceptance and embodiment mark a place of paradox and difficulty or does it represent a judicious response to your specific rhetorical situations...?" (318–19). My hunch is that this sagacious question is more complex than its either-or articulation suggests, for the answer to the second question is "both." For instance, unless she has been granted the license of well-known critics such as Hélène Cixous or Jane Tompkins, a feminist scholar's "judicious response" to most if not all rhetorical situations in which she hopes to be published (particularly by the MLA, the publisher of Feminism and Composition Studies) is to rely on the conventions of academic prose, and that response can and does simultaneously "mark a place of paradox and difficulty." Nonetheless, the fact that here and now I am using traditional academic prose does not necessarily mean I accept it, nor does it mean I embody it in a literal sense. It appears, then, that when Ede and Lunsford refer to those who "tend to embody" the "conventions of traditional academic
prose,” they are figuring those authors as talking heads: I am in their sense “embodying” academic prose, but what my physical, determinate body now enunciates is unbeknownst to you. In fact, you probably weren’t even recognizing my body until I brought it up, until I ask you to imagine what I’m doing as I write. (Am I frightened/exhilarated/aroused when I point out Ede and Lunsford’s (mis)use of either-or language? Is my adrenaline pumping? Am I sweating and swearing as I write? Does my stomach hurt? Am I a straight female? How do I look? Am I dressed? Not?)

When we do not acknowledge the material conditions of all features of our bodies and our “selves” at practice, we undermine feminist revisions of discourse. We make it impossible to heed calls like Worsham’s—one that asks us to “expand our notions of literacy to their widest possible circumference, to a point where literacy must involve us, and our students, in more than an epistemic relation to the world and to the earth” (“Writing”101). This avowed feminist revision is not the only casualty of an arhetorical approach to academic discourse: such misrecognition also incapacitates the project of subverting oppressive power regimes, a form of literacy that Min-Zhan Lu has called “critical affirmation” and that relies on “mark[ing] writing, especially personal narratives, as a site for reflecting on and revising one’s sense of self, one’s relations with others, and the conditions of one’s life” (173).

We can see then that not just feminist goals of regendering masculinist practices but also our discipline’s epistemology is at stake in recognizing our discursive tactics as autobiographical. Insisting on transcendent, reified disciplinary authority leaves us vulnerable to domination by consent to the ideology of professionalism. And that ideology, like the journalistic will to truth that Liu examines, functions as “a key mechanism in regulating the deployment and movement of human resources in contemporary rhetorical practices” (316). However, and as we shall see, recognizing—indeed, foregrounding—the emergent, fleeting, and tacitly autobiographical authority of our discursive community could facilitate the professional exigencies of generating knowledge. We need such discursive practices to support the mission of subverting the dominant (masculinist, oppressive) paradigm and yet maintain our mission to profess English; we need a discourse that facilitates the production of, but not the passive consumption of, the products of the dominant culture. Such facilitation in our scholarly enterprise is crucial to using the workplace as a site for converting hegemonic practices to a force that effects change. Clearly, we must recognize and self-consciously inscribe specifically the autobiographical composition of our authority as pro-
professionals. We must feature the rhetoricity of our discursive practice and demonstrate its contextualized knowledge claims if we want our work as professors of English to avoid the global pretensions of hegemony.

**Embodied Rhetoric’s “Double Gesture”**

To that end, I propose an embodied rhetoric that, in general terms, involves a crucial shift in discursive practice and representation from our conventional (mis)recognition of academic discourse as an impersonal, detached, objective, structured presentation of clear positions, arguments, and evidence to a less-familiar but more rhetorical approach that recognizes academic discourse as a result—a process not a product, an epiphenomenon if you prefer—of the discursive practice of academics. In specific terms and conventions, embodied academic discourse requires gestures to the material practices of the professional group and to the quotidian circumstances of the individual writer. Such gestures would allow us to work under the cover of professional expertise and to the ends of what Michel de Certeau calls “the ordinary,” those practices of “everyday [wo]man” who uses clever tactics of improvisation to outmaneuver the discipline of institutions (13). This supplemental tactic that I propose could acknowledge the conflicting functions of a professional academic: a guardian of cultural capital disciplined by the conventions of professional practice and a cultural critic committed to revealing and decentering hegemonic domination of access to power and knowledge. It could likewise acknowledge the logical contradiction that Fish notes in compositionists’ persistent attempts to argue for a “pedagogical payoff” in being opposed to anti-foundationalism and—by implication—to link theory with practice at all (335). Embodied rhetoric allows such contradiction, for it crosses the ideologically constituted line demarcating a logical separation between theory and practice. Instead, it generates a both/and professional ideology that recognizes the conditions of its construction.

Let’s look more carefully, then, at how we might refigure our professional discourse such that it attends to our own textual mechanics and avows authority in our practice as professionals rather than only in disciplinary, abstracted descriptions and interpretations of ourselves as writers and scholars, experts in the field. We’ve seen that in order to recognize the ways we conceal our self-proclaimed authority we must gesture to the contexts and intentions of our practice. Acknowledging the autobiographically driven aspects of our work as professionals and as
individual subjects is how we make our writing matter. But how do we do this?

We must gesture to our bodies, our lives. Jane Gallop’s manifesto *Thinking Through the Body* suggests a method for initiating such gestures. When Gallop describes her efforts as a professional reading subject, she says, “I think through autobiography: that is to say, the chain of associations that I am pursuing in my reading passes through things that happened to me” (4). Likewise, as a professional academic writing subject, I can mark my body’s presence when I authorize texts by calling to the surface at least some of the associations that my thinking passes through, associations evoked by my gender, race, class, sexual orientation, politics, and so on. Jacqueline Jones Royster says that she tries to think and listen through her associations. The “me” that I want to think through is not only someone who professes composition (who’s recently tenured but still needs to get published, who’s committed to the feminist enterprise of intervening in patriarchal disciplinarity, who’s a member of a “stand alone” department struggling to prove its scholarly worth to a large state university aspiring to become a more notable research institution); she’s also a forty-seven year old woman, a feminist partner, a recovering alcoholic, a sister, a daughter, a stepdaughter, a landscape painter, an ex-wife, and on and on. These sites of my body authorize my texts, for the language I use entextualizes these associations regardless of whether or not I recognize (or even privilege) that process.

Lest listeners immediately evoke the “essentialism” bandwagon, let me hasten to point out that these particular embodiments and their individual entextualizations are by no means fixed for any one group or even any one individual; in fact, these associations, what Stuart Hall calls “connotational chains,” can be interrupted. True, my body—like my profession—is undeniably implicated in ideological discourses. True—and as Hall argues—it’s no easy task to change the associations. On the other hand, Hall says,

It is by no means adequately proven that these positionings alone constitute the mechanisms whereby all individuals locate themselves in ideology. We are not entirely stitched into place in our relation to the complex field of historically situated ideological discourses exclusively at that moment alone. . . . We remain open to be positioned and situated in different ways, at different moments throughout our existence. (106)
According to Hall, then, I—anyone—can simultaneously occupy various and perhaps even contradictory positions. Invoking W.E.B. Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk*, Royster refers to this capacity as deciding one’s “rhetorical purpose to be to cross, or at least to straddle boundaries with the intent of shedding light” (34). In other words, I can make the choice to pledge allegiance to different ideologically inscribed positions at different times, choose which of the various positions that I occupy at any given historical moment will best define me in a given context. These multiple choices provide the agency and the myriad locations I need to resist containment and co-optation by uninspected—that is, misrecognized—ideologies.

In order to realize fully the material and therefore fugitive authority of these rhetorical choices within my disciplinary discourse, an embodied professional rhetoric should recognize and acknowledge how I as author and my profession as discipline self-authorize; in other words, such discourse must recognize and utilize autobiographical evidence and stylistics. As an embodied rhetorician, I accomplish this autobiographical aspect of my “data” by drawing attention to—and subsequently destabilizing—the sanctioned gestures informing its “mastery” as a professional. My embodied rhetoric further recognizes the authority of my personal, individual autobiography by gesturing to the chain of associations motivating my discourse. Such an approach to our own academic discourse proves not only more candid and less elitist, but also more potent because it recognizes and professes the situatedness of our practice.

It would seem, then, that the language of the ordinary person inscribing his or her everyday life, the language of autobiography, may well provide the most effective means of recognizing and subverting hegemonic discursive conventions. For, as de Certeau contends, “To discuss language ‘within’ ordinary language, without being able ‘to command a clear view’ of it, without being able to see it from a distance, is to grasp it as an ensemble of practices in which one is implicated and through which the prose of the world is at work” (11–12). To grasp our discourse as “an ensemble of practices”—or, in Foucauldian terms, “to restore to discourse its character as an event”—an embodied rhetorician who wants to maintain his or her professional obligations must foreground more than his or her professional “positionality” (129). That particular discursive gesture has become so commonplace that it’s lost its subversive force in all but the most elaborated of examples. (For an effective example, see Lu’s “Critical Affirmation,” which presents three
extensive "instances" of Lu’s positionality as Asian, as [privileged] Asian immigrant and researcher.) Instead, and in order to author a subversive ordinary language, I must also foreground my own autobiography. I do so by making my scholarly writing “personal” in a very particular way: I stage the authority of my expertise and simultaneously expose it as a rhetorical pose, a gesture, an authority presumed by the autobiography of my profession and of myself as a particular author of multiple positions.

Nancy Miller’s notion of “personal criticism” best describes this specific kind of autobiography, a discourse that not only reveals its internal signature in passages that “invoke that moment in writing when everything comes together in a fraction of poise” but also fosters the “reclaiming of theory: turning theory back on itself” (6, 5). Miller explains that the personal in these texts is “at odds with the hierarchies of the positional.” What’s more, she claims,

By turning its authorial voice into spectacle, personal writing theorizes the stakes of its own performance: a personal materialism. Personal writing opens an inquiry on the cost of writing. . . . [It] blows the cover of the impersonal as a masquerade of self-effacement . . . and points to the narcissistic fantasy that inheres in the poses of self-sufficiency we identify with Theory; notably, those of abstraction. (24, 25)

What Miller describes as the “poses of self-sufficiency” emerge from what I earlier described as the requisite discursive gestures that systematically and systemically reroute professional discursive authority from everyday practices and corporeal selves to an already constituted abstract realm of disciplinary subjects, linguistic patterns, and texts. I also described, in addition to abstraction, other masculinist poses of self-sufficiency that chronicle our fantasy about the nature of academic discourse—notably, those of coherence, method(ology), clarity, consistency, impartiality, and, most importantly, rationality. Such poses may sustain our professional status, but they remain impotent to recognize what I’ve called the self-professed, self-constructed, self-affirmed, self-administered composition of academic discourse.

The vigor of the particular form of professional personal writing that I am calling “embodied rhetoric” emerges from its recognition that disciplinary knowledge, like autobiographical authority, is contingent on disciplinary context, on ever-shifting, transient, emergent events that can never be contained, complete, structured. When our discourse implies a
coherent, autonomous, unified body of disciplinary knowledge, we misrecognize or disavow the authority in which that knowledge is grounded. An embodied rhetoric, however, celebrates this discontinuity. Such an aspect of discursive authority, Benstock claims,

might be the most interesting aspect of the autobiographical: the measure to which “self” and “self-image” might not coincide, can never coincide in language . . . because certain forms of self-writing . . . have no investment in creating a cohesive self over time. Indeed, they seem to exploit difference and change over sameness and identity: their writing follows the “seam” of the conscious/unconscious where boundaries between internal and external overlap. (148)

Benstock defines that “seam” as “the space of difference, the gap that the drive toward unity of self can never entirely close . . . the space of writing.” She further characterizes autobiography as “a coming together of method [writing] and subject matter [self-hood],” a method that “reveals gaps, and not only gaps in time and space or between the individual and the social, but also a widening divergence between the manner and matter of its discourse” (146). For us as professionals, this coming together of our discursive matter and method is crucial to our success as professors of academic discourse because it demystifies the nature of our professional expertise; facilitates more sincere, straightforward professional authority; and subverts the totalizing effects of the hierarchies of disciplinarity.

Embodied rhetoric could indeed facilitate that kind of professional success. However, in order to exploit autobiographical authority’s unique capacity to “reveal gaps” in the manner and matter of my professional writing, I must not attempt to write my (professional) life or my body (of knowledge) as a unified whole. By the same token, I need not—in fact, should not—construct a binary opposition between my organic “real” self and my traditional, dispassionate, disembodied—and therefore ultimately essentialized—professional self. As Royster explains this point, “all my voices are authentic” (37). Thus, in order to maintain my discursive professionalism and simultaneously resist disciplinarity, I must utilize what Shirley Neuman calls the “poetics of difference” that emerges from an autobiographical discourse that accommodates the specificity and the possible agency of the subject/author of discourse. “Such a subject,” Neuman explains, “is neither the unified subject of traditional theory of autobiography nor the discursively produced and dispersed subject of poststructuralist theory . . . . It is a complex, multiple,
layered subject with agency in the discourses and the worlds that constitute the referential space of his or her autobiography, a self not only constructed by differences but capable of choosing, inscribing, and making a difference (225). Here we see, at last, the crux of Benstock’s claim that “the question of ‘genre’ often rides on the question of gender,” since the notion of carefully circumscribed and clearly demarcated boundaries between “self” and other is a gendered one (148). When she and other feminist theorists of women’s autobiography incorporate difference into earlier, masculinist notions of autobiography (such as Gusdorf’s) as an attempt to construct a unified and unique self, they demonstrate that such a limited understanding of that genre does not account for authors whose reflections in the cultural hall of mirrors does not reflect unique or unified individuals.

Susan Friedman—expanding on Sheila Rowbotham’s *Woman’s Consciousness, Man’s World*—explains how women’s experience of self does not (necessarily) include the privilege of conceiving of oneself as isolate or individual: “A woman cannot, Rowbotham argues, experience herself as an entirely unique entity because she is always aware of how she is being defined as woman, that is, as a member of a group whose identity has been defined by the dominant male culture” (75). Friedman writes, “Not recognizing themselves in the reflections of cultural representations, women develop dual consciousness,” a sense of self that “directly parallels W.E.B. Du Bois’ identification of a dual consciousness for blacks living in a dominant white culture” (75, 76). Such a separation affects women’s discursive representations of themselves, Friedman explains, creating a powerful “poetics of difference” in women’s autobiography: “Cultural representations of woman lead not only to women’s alienation, but also to the potential for a ‘new consciousness’ of self. . . . Not recognizing themselves in the reflections of cultural representation, women develop a dual consciousness—the self as culturally defined and the self as different from cultural prescription” (75). For women autobiographers, she continues, this sense of self and group identity is dually inscribed in “an identity that is not purely individualistic” or “purely collective” (76).

Notice how this explanation of a self that is made possible by shifting what we recognize as an autobiographical act is much like the shift in gesture that I’ve suggested we academics can make possible by foregrounding the self-constructed aspects of our professional authority. For us as academic professionals, such a dually inscribed identity could give rise to a less-disciplined, more autonomous but nonetheless profes-
sionally sanctioned scholar. If we attend to the lessons found in Friedman’s analyses of women autobiographers, we see that inscribing such an identity must originate from feeling and in the body: “Alienation from the historically imposed image of the self is what motivates the writing, the creation of an alternate self in the autobiographical act. Writing the self shatters the cultural hall of mirrors and breaks the silence imposed by male speech” (76). For my purposes, however, it is crucial to amend Friedman’s description: I want to use the term “masculinist” rather than “male,” for the self reflected in our professional culture’s hall of mirrors and its requisite silence can be (indeed, often has been for me anyway) imposed by females’ as well as males’ masculinist speech; likewise, a male may be just as alienated from the profession’s historically imposed image of self as I often am.

In other words, in the case of the professional academic, a felt dissonance is what provides discursive inspiration for the type of personal criticism that I am proposing: an awareness of an essential(ist) tension between what I say and what I do as a professional, between what I must do because I am disciplined by the profession’s conventions and what I can say even as I write about disciplinary matters like, say, facilitating agency and decentering hegemonic conventions; that tension is what provokes my words. Such a complex, even contradictory, discursive identity can be acknowledged in an embodied professional discourse, for a discourse that gestures to conventional disciplinary authority and to professional practice reveals the “gaps” between what I say and what I do; such discourse could shatter the mystery of academic authority and the professed coherence of professional identity.

As Friedman proposes in her account of women autobiographers’ “awareness of the meaning of the cultural category WOMAN,” I am proposing rhetorical moves that acknowledge dominant categories (“disciplinary knowledge” and “professor”) and undermine their authority. This turning of disciplinary authority back on itself as a form of resistance is made possible when we simultaneously gesture to the transient and contextual self and to the authority constructed in the act of writing. The writing process’ capacity to formally indicate but not possess nondiscursive activities enables this simultaneous gesturing. As Neuman explains,

This complex . . . process of inventing a self in autobiographies by women or in poetics of women’s autobiography is often defined as a double gesture by which the narrator presents herself or is read as culturally defined as a woman and as “different from cultural prescription,” as both
the product of social discourse and as individual. . . . [T]he quest for individual autonomy without renouncing a collective identity . . . emerges as a structure that is modified, but not abandoned. (218; emphasis added)

The academic version of such a “double gesture,” as you may recall, involves staging the authority of professional expertise and simultaneously exposing it as a pose. In other words, in the act of invoking disciplinary authority by making the requisite gesture to the abstract realm of disciplinary knowledge, I as writer undermine its authority by self-consciously noting my disciplined, discursive performance and likewise gesturing to the material dominion of my personal and/or professional life. That is, I point to myself as a constructed professional and myself as an autonomous professional, myself as professional disciplinarian, and myself as democratic individual. The duality without duplicity of this gesture restores not just sincerity and agency but body to my professional discourse.

Articulating New Paradigms
What I wanted to do was to tell you the story of how I came to recognize much of what I discuss herein, especially the point about the hostility to rhetoric inherent in our professional discursive practices. In fact, an earlier version of this essay did begin by describing a discussion between graduate students and me when we read Stanley Fish’s “Anti-foundationalism, Theory Hope, and the Teaching of Composition” in our Research Methods in Rhetoric and Composition course. My students’ questions brought into sharp relief the otherwise ill-defined ideological conflicts inherent in the profession’s (my) endorsement of Fish’s argument(s) and its (my) self-definitions. In that course, we’d read various compositionists’ arguments favoring anti-foundationalist stances, in particular Stephen North’s chapters on practitioners, chapters in Contending with Words, and Patricia Bizzell’s specific explanation of anti-foundationalism’s value to pedagogy. When we then read a counterargument, Fish’s “Anti-foundationalism,” my students were outraged. I paraphrase their reactions:

If Stanley Fish already proved—and that was several years ago—that practice has nothing to do with theory, then why do people keep trying to prove that it does? So many of the research methods we’ve studied and even your advice to us as fledgling researchers all focus on an application of theory to the composition classroom; most of the articles we’ve read, even the abstract theoretical ones, seem to require an “application to the
classroom" section. If everybody already knows—because Stanley Fish said it—that there's no logical connection between theory and pedagogy, then why do they keep on trying to find one? What's up with that? Are they just stupid? Don't they read him? If they disagree with him, why don't they say so directly rather than just ignore him? What's the point of people writing all these articles if everyone apparently ignores them anyway?

Earlier, I wanted to follow that episode by describing at length my subsequent process of scrutinizing Fish's rhetoric in that article as well as in his examinations of anti-professionalism and the professional practice of blind submission. My earlier draft's analysis of that rhetoric was meant to demonstrate Fish's own contradictory moves: because he relies on logic to make his point in "Anti-foundationalism," Fish engages in the same anti-professional stance that he mocks in others. Berating J. Hillis Miller's, Bizzell's, Robert Scholes' and others' attempts to connect anti-foundationalist theory with pedagogical practices and thereby demonstrate "that what they do can be justified or explained by a set of principles that stands apart from their practice, by a theory," Fish enables his logical superiority but disavows the exigencies of rhetorical practice (354). What Fish's critique leaves unsaid, then, is that given their rhetorical situation those compositionists "swerve" from the logical consequences of anti-foundationalist theory because professionally they cannot do otherwise: even when arguing that all knowledge is situated and that therefore no rule or maxim can be detached from professional practice, an academic must also argue that his or her particular maxim or rule or insight is authorized by something other than his or her practice, life, or self. Hence, what Fish criticizes as a logical contradiction is simultaneously a rhetorical necessity. Further, as evidence of professional discourse's ideological control of the flow of embodied rhetorical resources, it demonstrates that professional discourse allows compositionists to deny Fish's gesture to the logic of noncontradiction but has disavowed or at least mystified any complementary gesture to the rhetorical requirements of material discursive conditions.

That was the story I wanted to tell. But when in my earlier draft I made the gesture to story—especially right off the bat and especially at length—a professional's review advised me to "imagine, in other words, a revised essay that did not feel it was necessary to dredge up Fish (Ugh—are we still mired in the foundationalism/anti-foundationalism debate?)." Even for the reviewer who appreciated my story, the narrative got in the way of my point: "The earlier discussions of Fish were interesting, but I
kept wondering why you were spending so much time on him... I kept wondering how Fish’s article was attached to current scholarly conversations and to your definition of embodied rhetoric.”

I give you these two examples primarily to answer what I anticipate as a very reasonable objection you may have: why does someone arguing for an embodied professional rhetoric write such—more or less—disembodied prose? One reason is that it’s difficult to get professional readers to engage in what Krista Ratcliffe calls “rhetorical listening,” a method of listening (or in this case “reading”) in ways that “promote a feminist literacy”: it’s unfamiliar and therefore difficult to read (195). From readers grown accustomed to conventional discursive practices, it beckons responses like this one from yet a third reviewer: “What I love about [other autobiographers] is that they don’t trivialize their autobiographically grounded rhetoric by presenting it as a ‘gesture.’” Similarly, it is difficult—for me anyway—to write embodied professional rhetoric well: in trying to use conventional rhetoric to establish ethos and credibility to authorize embodied rhetoric, I make many mistakes. I take too long to get to the point, apparently unable to stay within the conventional article length of twenty or so pages. I often don’t cite the most appropriate representations of current scholarly debate (I cannot necessarily control or predict the sites of the debates that animate me, that invoke my embodied responses). I don’t explain myself very well (of course I didn’t want to dredge up the foundationalism/anti-foundationalism debate. The essay “Anti-foundationalism” is merely the site of my own and my students’ irritation and of my later rhetorical analysis; otherwise, its content is irrelevant to my purpose here. Furthermore, I believe that acknowledging my discourse as a series of rhetorical moves neither undermines nor disowns it: gesturing to my own body or life story no more trivializes it than the announcement, “By the authority invested in me by the state of ______” undermines the authority of a person allowed to say, “I now pronounce you man and wife.” The gesture directs attention to the source of the authority, but it does not thereby diminish that authority.)

Nonetheless (and here’s another important reason why I gesture to reviewers’ reactions to my earlier draft), professional readers’ reactions can help me to focus my embodied professional discourse. For instance, I discovered that, indeed, I can tell my “story” much more briefly, and in doing so I rediscovered the point of embodying my argument. Proving that Fish contradicts himself, too (or at least denies the material conditions of compositionists’ professional discourse), is not what I want to
foreground. No. What I do want my story to emphasize is how I felt during my graduate students’ and my discussion of Fish’s article and how those feelings shaped my multiple responses. I was particularly animated by these student reactions: “If everybody already knows—because Stanley Fish said it—that there’s no logical connection between theory and pedagogy, then why do they keep on trying to find one? What’s up with that? Are they just stupid? . . . What’s the point of all these articles?” My visceral responses were many. My flushed, hot skin and my quickened heart rate brought to light my undeniable but not publicly expressed feelings: anger (“No, they’re not ‘stupid,’ you arrogant jerks. And who are you to think that you know more than the experts? You’re the students here.”); fear (“Geez, these guys are right. We do look pretty stupid, don’t we? These students see this better than I do.”); and shame (“I don’t know why we write all that stuff except that we have to in order to keep our jobs. How ridiculous is that! Why have I chosen such an absurd way to make a living?”).

I imagine my students could see my flush and make assumptions about its source, but what they heard (I think) was my jarring laugh followed by my careful explanation: “While I can understand how the situation appears ridiculous to you, I can tell you that the reason that compositionists persist in connecting theory and practice is that it’s part of the job. We do it because we have to.” Thus, a further important aspect of my story is its demonstration of the rhetorical choices I made in distinguishing which responses would be private, which public. My voiced response at the time of the event embodies the effects of disciplinarity, the ways that even “what we take to be the most private and personal of phenomena—emotion and the body—are effects of social organization and are made available for public administration through the techniques of discipline” (Worsham, “Rhetoric” 397). I felt frustrated and fettered by my own public response, however, probably because “that’s the way we’ve always done it” responses to my own legitimate intellectual inquiries have always enraged me. To my own dismay, I saw that I’d become—or at least acted like—one of the “because I’m the Mom and I said so” authority figures I’d always abhorred, someone who preferred to subdue rather than empower intellectual curiosity. I’d seen the “enemy” and it was I. This “alienation from the historically imposed image of the self is what motivate[d] the writing” of an embodied, multiply-motivated self: immediately after class, I wrote up much of my earlier draft’s analysis of Fish’s rhetoric, searching for the position that would “break the silence imposed by male speech” (Friedman 76). I read
more Fish than I ever had before; I also felt quite confident in challenging him on at least this one point.

Clearly, then, my story is also important because it exemplifies the way our discipline "works at both the semantic and affective levels to produce and organize knowledge and experience" (Worsham, "Rhetoric" 397). In later discussions in that same graduate course—discussions focused usually on articles in Contending with Words—I often cited to students their reactions to Fish's article as an example of what Worsham and Vitanza might mean when they point out the necessity of alternative rhetorics in composition studies. Needless to say, an example that they'd generated themselves facilitated their comprehension. To be quite honest, my students' earlier questions and my subsequent analysis of Fish's rhetorical moves facilitated my own understanding of those authors' calls for difference and rhetoricity in professional discourse. Thus, the material conditions in our classroom obviously resulted in, among other things, this essay; my feelings at the time produced and organized my professional process of producing knowledge. Most importantly, without my students' unprofessional—that is, not controlled by professional ideology—responses, I may not have seen and certainly would not have understood as well the crucial, rhetorical, and embodied connection between my own theory and practice.

I hope, then, that we can now agree in our answers to the following question, one previously posed by Yumeng Liu:

Shall we work toward relaxing the prohibitive "procedures" [of discursive practices] and facilitating an even freer flow of rhetorical resources, or shall we continue to impose a restrictive regime in the name of political commitment, ethical integrity, or ideological probity, even at the cost of a rhetorical study or theory divorced from what is going on rhetorically in the actual world, and unable to exert much material impact on it? (325)

I hope, too, that I've been able in this short time to elucidate how feminist theorists' explanations of autobiographical gestures' capacity to acknowledge ideological cultural representations and simultaneously authorize writers' material contexts suggest an alternative rhetoric. Further, I trust that I've demonstrated the radical potential of such feminist discourse to elude the problematics of an insincere avowal of a continuous self and to subvert hegemonic and/or essentialist definitions of identity. Finally, I hope I've convinced you theoretically and perhaps practically that similar use of autobiographical gestures in our own
professional academic discourse may well resolve the tensions inherent in our personal and professional identities and facilitate our construction of a self and a profession more autonomous, less unified.

If so, then you are apt to see, as Michel de Certeau does, that the language of an ordinary person inscribing his or her everyday life may well provide a more effective means of recognizing and subverting hegemonic discursive conventions than our specialized, conventional, professional language has provided. In The Practice of Everyday Life, de Certeau tells us that unlike the “Expert’s discourse,” the ordinary person’s inscription of his or her own everyday practice “does not profit from knowledge by exchanging it against the right to speak in its name; he [or she] retains its exactingness but not its mastery” (13). He writes,

This is no longer the position of professionals, supposed to be civilized men among savages; it is rather the position which consists in being a foreigner at home, a “savage” in the midst of ordinary culture. . . . [S]ince one cannot find another place from which to interpret it. . . . since, in short there is no way out, the fact remains that we are foreigners on the inside—but there is no outside. (13–14)

And since there is no outside—no reified Knowledge or Truth from which we can speak as experts or even as wholly completed selves—then recognizing ourselves carousing on the inside, noticing ourselves basking at that center and turning it out for all to see (in other words, authorizing the practice of our everyday professional life) is the way that we can attain a “fraction of poise,” gain local knowledge, and resist being always already inscribed by the language we compose.4

San Diego State University
San Diego, California

Notes

1. Though the “genre” I discuss is our own professional discourse, I recognize that the status of academic discourse as a discrete “genre” is neither undisputed nor unified. Given, however, my fairly cohesive audience of rhetoric and composition specialists and given my further qualification that—for my particular purposes here—what I mean by professional academic discourse is the sort of writing typically published in our disciplinary journals, I trust that readers will invoke relatively consistent notions of the kind of prose I am talking about.
2. What may be distinctive of us as professional academics is that we additionally and simultaneously insist on touting ourselves as facilitators of democratic access to the sites of our professional power and knowledge. Thus, for those of us who profess rhetoric and composition, a most disingenuous but seductive avowal is our telling ourselves—as Bizzell has told us—that “our task is . . . to share a discourse” (262).

3. For an example of my own embodied professional rhetoric, see “Making.”

4. I gratefully acknowledge Krista Ratcliffe’s reading of an earlier version of this draft (especially her gracious willingness to be accountable for her “blind” review by signing it). Her insights—particularly in distinguishing between a rhetorical and logical connection of ideas—greatly facilitated my naming my point and getting to it. Thank you, Krista, for your excellent rhetorical listening.

Works Cited


