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Jane E. Hindman
CUNY Guttman Community College

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Recommended Citation
Hindman, Jane E., "Special focus: personal writing" (2001). *CUNY Academic Works.*
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/nc_pubs/75

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Special Focus: Personal Writing

Jane E. Hindman

[**Editor's note:** *The following pieces treat the nature, role, and problematics of personal writing in academic discourse and professional work. Jane E. Hindman guest edited this special-focus section; she introduces and contributes an essay to it. Although the entries can be read as individual pieces, collectively they address—and challenge—the place of personal writing in our professional contexts. Please see "Announcements and Calls for Papers" for details on a special issue dedicated to this topic.*]

Any academic even vaguely aware of current trends in scholarship has noted the preeminence of "the personal" in the last few years. In examinations of how a researcher's position constructs her qualitative studies (Geertz, Kirsch); what limits on self-disclosure should constrain our assignments to students (Morgan); which aspects of our individual backgrounds we can feasibly bring into the classroom (Spack, Bloom); how one's literacy autobiography predicts, expands, and limits her identity (Brodkey, Villanueva); how such seemingly private, individual characteristics as our visceral responses are socially, professionally disciplined (R. Miller; Hindman "Authorizing"); how readers' consumption of others' self-disclosure necessitates self-reflexivity (Lu; Hindman "[Mis]Recognizing")—in these ways and others we have been expanding our fascination with the ways identity, positionality, and the body [are] construct[ed by] discourse. Much less clear, however, is just what we mean when we use the terms "the personal" and "personal

Jane E. Hindman is associate professor in the Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies at San Diego State University. Her research has considered a wide range of topics—from developing methods for evaluating writing and teaching, to analyzing quiltmaking as metaphor and practice in African American rhetorics to authorizing anger in a woman's reading of Plato's *Gorgias*, to theorizing and embodying "the personal" in academic discourse—and has appeared in *Pre/Text*, *Journal of Basic Writing*, *JAC*, *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, *LIT*, and others. She's currently completing a book, *Inside Out: Getting Personal about Professing Academic Discourse*. Her life work includes writing about, but trying not to take, things personally.

writing." Even more murky are our standards for measuring the effectiveness of personal writing, despite the fact that we have ardently debated its merits and deficiencies.

Ameliorating such mystification is the purpose of this special section. It aims not only to clarify the myriad denotations of "the personal" in academic discourse but also to suggest viable criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of personal writing's contributions to knowledge-making in English studies. Further, it offers an example of how personal writing can promote the material as well as the subversive authority of our own professional discourse.

Dedicated to "The Politics of the Personal," the first selection presents an informal dialogue among several prominent authors. As is evident in the authors' varying views, the possibilities of a more personal form of academic discourse have developed from the particular context of current literary and literacy studies: these include in the last decade our emerging recognition of the qualitative researcher's role in constructing knowledge; feminist rhetoric's concern with the ethics of representation and the concurrent postmodern shift from the individual to subjectivity; English studies' fascination with blurred genres; critical autobiography's critique of a unified author; and expressivist pedagogy's promotion of students' need for a discourse authorized by their own experiences and cultural knowledge. From these same possibilities, however, emerge the problems of personal writing: because our notions of "the personal" have evolved from such diverse contexts, our multiple and sometime duplicitous understandings of it create confusion and powerful (and potentially pompous) political debate. A crucial contribution of these symposium authors' conversation, then, is their presentation of many of the competing versions of personal discourse as well as the accompanying challenges to particular versions.

Deborah Brandt's and Ellen Cushman's depictions of the personal, for instance, refer to the concepts of positionality and reflexivity in ethnographic and/or case studies. In general terms, the role of the personal in these instances is to contextualize, to situate, the background(s) of not just the individuals considered in a study but also the researcher herself. Proponents of "personally" positioned researchers and interviewees hold that because abstract discourse objectifies the individual characteristics of human subjects and constructs author-evacuated prose, it removes any materiality from discourse. As a result, such discourse perpetuates the disciplinary will to truth because it misrecognizes (that is, willfully ignores) what is at stake in the writing. Thus, for many, ethical qualitative research practices demand that the researcher reflect on and explain to readers how her own definitive characteristics—such as race, gender, socio-economic background, and so on—as well as those of her subjects influence her findings and the construction of her text.

Clearly, Brandt, Cushman, and Anne Herrington object to this particular insistence on including "the personal" in professional writing: Herrington argues that "a

methodological imperative to write of what we might view as private" invades the privacy of researcher and subject(s); Brandt claims that demands for individual disclosure fragment the interests of the collective; and Cushman contends that "pressures to self-disclose often compromise scholars' agency." These objections evoke a recurring challenge to personal writing, one that John Schilb "think[s] of as the Foucauldian argument, for those who advance it are apt to cite the . . . *History of Sexuality*. There [Foucault] points out that even in secular spheres, the modern West has used confession as a mode of social control; getting people to reveal their private life is a prime way of disciplining them" (173). Opponents use this "Foucauldian argument" to undermine claims for the subversive power of personal writing, to deny its ability to offer scholars what symposium author Gesa Kirsch calls "'a place to talk back,' to write in ways that bring about the possibility of change." To such opponents of the power of the personal, this "Foucauldian argument" demonstrates the coercive and co-optive capacity of the personal to create what Trinh T. Minh-ha has termed "planned authenticity."

What opponents do not always consider, however, are the ways that self-disclosure can be tempered, controlled. An ethics that recognizes and reveals what is at stake in professional writing—be it qualitative, theoretical, practical or "purely" autobiographical in nature—is not synonymous with what Herrington fears may be "an imperative or expectation that we should be outing ourselves about all manners of personal things." As even symposium author Victor Villanueva argues—"even" because of his widely-read, intimate accounts of growing up as a person of color—"there are parts of my life that remain my own." Schilb also notes that historically the practice of telling one another stories of oppression and resistance has built solidarity among women and members of other marginalized groups; the "Foucauldian argument" against personal writing, Schilb reminds us, "obscures this history" (173).

Ellen Cushman's further objection to "justify[ing]" how she gained access to the community she studied summons another challenge to personal writing: "Self-reflexivity is the problem here," she claims, "because it inevitably leads to a simplification." Though this particular challenge is more often launched at strictly autobiographical rather than positioned, self-reflexive quantitative accounts, it articulates what is often described as the inherently "essentializing" nature of the personal. This charge centers in the belief that in narrating their life-experiences authors invariably construct a simplified, unified, and therefore fictive version of a complex "essential" self. Often evoked by feminists as well as American ethnic rhetoricians decrying the notion that some fundamental or quintessential characteristic defines or distinguishes the Other, this challenge to personal writing has best been countered by theorists of women's autobiography. In particular, Susan Freidman has demonstrated how women autobiographers, denied the luxury of experiencing the Self

as undivided or autonomous, construct a double identity; discursive representations of this identity gesture to the Self as it is socially constructed and conceived (Woman) and the self as it opposes that construction (woman). Such double gesturing creates a personal writing that foregrounds rather than covers over the gaps and fissures in the various position(s) and identities that any one of us occupies.

Another common objection to "the personal" comes from those committed to the notion that academic discourse should be strictly attuned to the needs of readers. Joseph Harris's grievance encapsulates this challenge: "when I read an academic article, I look for a way of rethinking my work, not for a glimpse into the life of its author" (51). Committed to an "objective" view of academic discourse, critics like Harris read personal writing as "self-indulgent," for it is not disciplined, professional, socially conscious. In John Schilb's words, this objection is based on the belief that "far from being empirical reality, personal experience is a construct shaped by institutions, ideologies, and discourses" (173). This disapproval of personal writing further supposes that individual, autobiographical accounts of experience must diverge from socially conscious accounts; it assumes that by definition a glimpse into one's life cannot also provide a way to rethink professional work.

Such a limited view of personal writing ignores the political work that autobiography can do. As symposium author Victor Villanueva argues and demonstrates, autobiography can be used "as a way of knowing our predispositions to see things certain ways." Villanueva's notion of the "autobiographical mixed with the theoretical," a genre he calls critical autobiography, differs from "straight autobiography" because its mission is to "problematize the existential." Schilb supports such an interpretation of the rhetorical possibilities of autobiography when he argues that "even as an autobiography reports certain events in the author's life, it can present an experience as provisionally defined and open to interpretation" (173). This sort of critical autobiography—because it seeks to "reconcile a theoretical position that argues that ways of seeing the world are contextually constituted and linguistically mediated . . . with a methodological position that strives for . . . objectivity"—often takes a mixed-genre form. In addition to Villanueva's own *Bootstraps*, examples of this hybrid form of personal writing include those advocated and practiced by Jane Tompkins, Keith Gilyard, Patricia Williams, and Nancy Miller.

Nancy Miller's notion of "personal criticism," an "explicitly autobiographical performance within the act of criticism" (1) is likewise evoked in symposium author Richard Miller's conception of "nervous writing." Nancy Miller's case for personal criticism "entails the reclaiming of theory: turning theory back on itself . . . to perform this new writing (which is also a reading)[and which] requires the rejection of theory because theory exacts as its price the repression of feelings" (5). Richard Miller supports a conception of the personal when he seeks evidence of feelings in "writing that emerges out of nervous states, writing that produces such states, and

writing that demonstrates . . . how cultural training makes itself known in individual experience." Clearly this kind of personal writing is disciplined and socially conscious, for its goal, Richard Miller tells us, is "a better understanding of the institutions that have most affected all our lives."

Gesa Kirsch's symposium contribution further considers the interface of the personal with "the structures in which we work and live." But as her "May 1999" vignette describing the tension between the professional and the personal demonstrates, those institutional structures dictate a politics of interpretation that disallows certain representations of the personal. Kirsch thus makes plain the fact that the problem(s) with the personal include not just textual production (i.e., personal writing) but also other professional practices. In the symposium's Response section, Anne Ruggles Gere artfully points out that "three factors contribute to personal writing—the one who tells the story, the person or institution that elicits the account, and the reader or consumer of it." Symposium author Min-Zhan Lu's focus on the latter factor enhances our conception of "the personal" when she turns to "the political responsibility of the reader," that is, to textual consumption. Lu's call for us readers to "demand of ourselves the same rigorous reflexivity we ask of qualitative researchers" suggests a professional ethics that requires not just writers but also readers to position themselves responsibly. Such a discursive ethics adjudicates problems of the personal; in particular, it addresses objections like the one Cushman raises in the Response section when she questions the ways in which the personal can be "consumed and commodified by readers."

As you can see, the authors of "Politics of the Personal" represent—though sometimes without explicitly naming or recognizing—many of the varieties of rhetorical moves and genres referred to by the term "the personal": for instance, a specific, individual positioning of a researcher and/or the subjects of a qualitative study; an instance of "outing" oneself by revealing religious, sexual, ethnic, racial, or economic affiliations; an autobiographical account, a memoir; a hybrid genre of theory and autobiography; an embodied writing that examines the institutional origins of individual affect and taste; a reader's individual decision how to consume and circulate texts. Other common conceptions of "the personal" in professional academic writing include creative nonfiction, the teaching story, and the increasingly popular How-I-Came-To-Be-in-This-Profession saga.

The second article in this section, Candace Spigelman's "Argument and Evidence in the Case of the Personal," acknowledges many of these versions of the personal. She adds to the list too: the personal sometimes appears as an anecdote used to frame an otherwise analytical essay, as the personal essay, or the personal narrative often assigned in our students' "experience-based" writing. Her summary of the prominence of personal writing in composition, literary studies, and writing

instruction provides useful context for the heated debates about and challenges to the personal. In addition to the objections to the personal I have discussed above, Spigelman's essay recounts and rejoins other various threats of the personal. Particularly insightful is her invocation of Aristotle to argue for the logic of narrative structure and the validity of personal experience as evidence.

Even more timely is her willingness to suggest criteria for evaluating the personal. As symposium author Kirsch points out in her "October 1999" vignette, many object to personal writing because "it can silence rather than enable response." Such an objector may ask, "What grounds are there for me to disagree when the article uses the personal as evidence?" Spigelman answers well when she explains the irrelevance of validity testing with respect to the personal and introduces the notion of "narrative fidelity" as a way to measure personal writing's "potential for encouraging human understanding and moral conduct." In addition, she suggests, "we might also call upon current theories relating to teaching and particularly to writing instruction" when we evaluate personal narrative.

In the last article of this special section, "Making Writing Matter," I also explore the criteria for creating and evaluating personal writing. Likewise, I work toward defining a professional discursive ethics when I outline a process for how writers (or readers, for that matter) can position themselves responsibly through a process of embodying their responses, surrendering their reliance on resolution, reflecting on their own rhetorical motives, and inventorying the stakes of their discourse. The primary purpose of "Making Writing Matter," however, is to enact my own conception of "the personal." I seek to redirect our notions of personal writing away from a discovery of truth in "the" individual self and toward a conception of a social self that can be recognized or discovered in one's embodied responses. Like Villanueva and Richard E. Miller, I am committed to a notion of "the personal" that "problematizes the existential" and considers "how writing acts on the self not just how self acts on writing." The motive for what I alternately call "embodied writing" or "personal criticism" originates in individual affect; thus, its agency is material, less constrained than that presumed by a view of a writing self whose identity is only and always already written by the texts that precede it. Its agency is also collective, for it examines how tastes, affect, and knowledge are disciplined by and for particular, institutional realities.

Not this preface, none of these articles, not even the sum total of their collective explanatory power, will resolve the ongoing debate about the proper status of "the personal" in our professional discourse or in the writing classroom. In fact, and as usual, it seems that the more we discuss, the more we find to question. Nevertheless, and further conversation notwithstanding, may the following provide you a context and a quality within which to ponder the personal.

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