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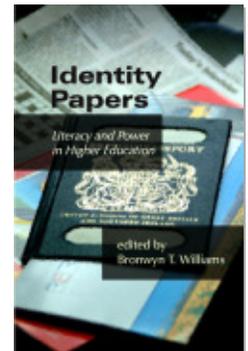
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6

SHE TOILED FOR A LIVING

Writing Lives and Identities of Older Female Students

Mary Hallet

I don't doubt for a moment that she loves her life.

And I want her to rise up from the crust and the slop

and fly down to the river.

This probably won't happen.

But maybe it will.

If the World were only pain and logic, who would want it?

—Mary Oliver, “Singapore”

I don't know what Martha Ballard looked like. Still don't know, after all the years I've been working with her diaries. She became for me a voice, but that took a long time. Before she was a voice she was a mark on the page.

—Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Midwife's Tale* (the film)

DOWN AND DIRTY

“In general,” the college administrator pronounced, tugging at his tie, “older students do not know how to write academic essays and need lots of help. They are also less sophisticated when it comes to college life.”

I was 40 years old, a nontraditional undergraduate enrolled in a women's liberal arts college on the East Coast, about ready to graduate, and thinking about my future. My college experience at this school had been a good one, largely because the institution had invested much time and money in the building and strengthening of its nationally known nontraditional students program. For the most part, faculty and college administrators seemed to take a holistic approach to older female students, not only in terms of what these students brought to the classroom, but also in terms of their experiences and lives outside of the academy.

Because of what I perceived as their more enlightened stance toward older female students, I was always stunned to hear the occasional negative comment such as that made by this particular administrator.

I had been appointed as a nontraditional student representative to the college's admissions committee, and had learned through the course of my tenure on that committee that tensions rose when hard decisions had to be made about the "desired" population of the institution and who should be admitted. These tensions were exacerbated when financial considerations prevailed. In this case, the decision had been made to eliminate the college's blind admissions policy, an approach to admitting new students based only on their qualifications rather than on their ability to pay tuition. Up until this point, students admitted who could not pay were awarded financial aid packages. This is, in fact, how I myself had been able to attend this particular school. But now this policy was coming undone.

It's not that I did not believe older female students new to the academic environment struggled with writing (I certainly had when I when I first arrived), nor that I did not think that older students, often first-generation college students, approached college from a sometimes uninformed perspective. It's just that the administrator's proclamation simply did not ring true for me. I knew, for example, that every spring nontraditional students, who comprised a small percentage of the campus population, were often awarded at least half of the college's academic writing prizes and that they traditionally occupied a good many of the summa cum laude slots on the graduation program. Because of these paradoxes, I began to see how, no matter what facts pointed toward real academic achievement on the part of nontraditional students, some academics still perceived the older female student as alien to the academy, and a threat to academic space and standards.

About this same time the Career Resource Center at the college sent out a pamphlet to prospective employers to counteract age discrimination in hiring. On the cover of the pamphlet was the picture of a professionally dressed white woman between 40 and 50. She carried a briefcase and smiled confidently at the camera. Bold letters at the top of the pamphlet announced: "The Benefits of Hiring Older Workers." Inside a list of reasons proclaimed why hiring older workers might be a good idea: we were not only more mature, experienced, and dependable, but we tended to call in sick less than younger workers. We could be counted on to be productive citizens. Like vintage machinery, if well cared for, we could go on indefinitely.

This pamphlet mildly offended me, and many of my peers as well. We couldn't quite pinpoint exactly what it was that irked us about this pamphlet; surely it was produced with good intentions—to combat age

discrimination in hiring. Nevertheless, it touched a nerve with us, and I believe it did so on several levels. First, we could not conceive of a similar publication about our younger peers who were also about to graduate, a pamphlet that announced, “Hiring Younger Workers,” and that listed the productive attributes of young people in the same way: dependable, seldom get sick, get along well with others, likely to have many productive years ahead of them. The pamphlet made us feel a little bit like sturdy work horses with good teeth and lungs. But it was the word “workers” that irritated me even more. It seemed to me that my younger peers identified themselves, and were identified by the college, as being women with careers—not as workers.

In retrospect, I see that my association with the word “worker” was complicated, and not one for which the college could have been entirely responsible. I had been raised by a widowed mother, a strong woman with a high school education who took care of four of us as best she could on her legal secretary’s salary and my deceased father’s Social Security death benefits, but still had to sometimes hit up her reluctant brother, a warehouse manager, for occasional handouts. Before returning to college after a hiatus of twenty years, I had been a data entry operator for the Colorado Department of Revenue, and later for oil-related businesses in Denver before the oil industry itself went suddenly, violently, belly-up. I had also been a membership specialist (translated data entry operator) for a large national organization. In most of these jobs my female co-workers and I were relegated to the kind of open cubicles the comic strip *Dilbert* makes fun of: small stall-like spaces with walls just high enough to separate us from one another and from the college-educated staff who had their own offices with doors and windows; but low enough so that we could always be seen and our activity and production monitored.

When I finally got my B.A., I spent the summer before going on for my Masters degree working for a temporary agency. I was 41 years old; my younger co-workers, male and female alike, called me the “temp-girl,” and I worked in a large bank’s mortgage department answering the unwanted calls from economically disadvantaged people who were responding to the bank’s federally mandated program designed to give such people a shot at home ownership. The young mortgage officers at the bank hated these calls and had hired me to run interference. If these people, who were desperate to own a home, expected a quick call back, they had another thing coming. I was ashamed of the role I played at this bank, and ashamed to be back in a low-hierarchy clerical position.

I realize now that much of my response to the college's brochure had to do with a sense of shame that I, like many low middle-income or working-class people, carry with them as they see themselves climbing the ladder to professionalism and middle-class success. It has taken me years to overcome that shame and to value my identity as a first-generation college student with a less-than-privileged economic background, and I find now that I can stand up with backbone and a great deal of pride to professors such as the one in my department who recently claimed that, because I had not, as he had, come from an academic home or professional family background, I had to negotiate a "larger learning curve" in the academy.

This struggle to come into my own as an academic—one who not only came through the academy's back door as a first-generation college student, but who did so at a "late" age—has encouraged me to reconsider my writing pedagogies, especially when teaching nontraditional students. Because I sometimes teach an autobiographical writing course for evening students at my university, I often teach to a classroom of older female students. As I teach these students, I have a heightened awareness of the multiple ways they construct identities in the classroom, ways that are often antithetical to traditional views of academic space and purposes. I have come to recognize the complicated and often vexed identities of these students—both as they are realized in autobiographical writing and as they are often distorted through un-theorized pedagogies and unquestioning acquiescence to naturalized notions of academic standards and intellectual space. In the rest of this chapter, I suggest ways of considering the positions of older female students in the academy, and approaches to their writing that will allow for the fleshing out—rather than the *flattening* out—of their contingent, layered, and fluid identities.

WORKING WOMEN ALL

The textured, mutable, and interlocking identities of older female undergraduates can best be explored within a framework of varying and often contradictory perspectives: the generalized and the particular, the academic and the personal, the intellectual and the embodied. In this essay, I explore the tensions that arise from these diverse perspectives, particularly those that inform (and also vex) learning, writing, and teaching. In doing so, I show how the identities of older female students are often imagined according to, or constructed by, their reproductive and "laboring" histories, as well as by their supposed proximity to dirt, materiality,

and embodiment. I will also show how the often unconscious association of nontraditional female undergraduates with maternity and physicality simultaneously positions these women as “always already” outside the academy while attempting to limit them to “pure” academic spaces. Finally, I will suggest ways that we can use these tensions to help such students compose life stories that position them as historical and political subjects both within the academy and their communities at large.

I begin this essay with two quotations, both of which I refer to here to launch my discussion of older women students in the academy, cultural and academic perceptions of such students, and how these women construct and perform through autobiographical writing what John Ernest calls “multiply contingent identity” (28). The first quotation is from Mary Oliver’s “Singapore” (1992), a poem in which the speaker narrates her encounter with a cleaning woman in a restroom in that country’s airport. Entering the restroom, the speaker sees the woman in one of the stalls, stooped over a toilet bowl, cleaning ashtrays. With this image, and indeed with the poem itself (the only one of its kind in a collection of poems largely characterized by their references to nature), Oliver calls to question common assumptions about poetry—especially *her* poetry—that a “poem should always have birds in it,” and that a “person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem” (72).

Although the reader of Oliver’s poems may indeed wish “happy” and stable places, in this poem she encounters an artificial space, a human-made site inhabited not by the flora and fauna of Oliver’s other poems, but by a woman laboring on the ground over a toilet bowl. Both the space and the woman are imaged in relation to human excrement, to the residual grime of ashtrays, and to the “natural” dirtiness of the human body. For all its references to embodiment, however, the space of the poem itself is strangely—and paradoxically—both ephemeral *and* finite. The site cannot be described as a liminal space, as such a term would suggest a potential boundary crossing, and would thus lend to the space a transforming quality it does not have; neither the poem’s speaker nor the cleaning woman will necessarily transition from one side of this space to another. Earlier in the poem, in fact, upon witnessing the woman at work, “disgust argue[s] in [the speaker’s] stomach,” as she signals her freedom and eagerness to leave the space by groping “in [her] pocket, for [her] ticket.” Meanwhile, the cleaning woman stays put. Left behind in the latrine, suspended amid the “crust and the slop,” kneeling before the toilet bowl scrubbing “airport ashtrays, as big

as hubcaps,” she remains anchored in the repetitious dailiness of her duties (72).

Certainly, in its wish for possibilities beyond “pain and logic,” Oliver’s poem gestures toward hope. Nevertheless, the poem’s speaker locates this hope not in the woman’s life outside the poem’s frame—that is, within family, community, and culture—but rather as emanating from the woman’s acknowledgment and affirmation of the speaker herself: “I mean the / way she folded and refolded the blue cloth, / the way her smile was only for my sake” (73). While I do not want to reduce the poem to political and socioeconomic binaries, there seems to be some sense at least in which the woman’s light and life is activated by, and thus indebted to, the speaker and the metaphorical images that construct both space and identity in the poem. The woman, the poem’s title indicates she may not be a White Westerner, and whose constructed setting is a nowhere space inaccessible to nature or community, remains alien and out of place.

In the second quotation I use above, from the documentary *The Midwife’s Tale* (1998), nature as metaphor for human experience gives way to a discursive and embodied human presence, a more viable presence than the one presented by Oliver. Here, with the historian’s subject coming to voice (“she became for me a voice”), as well as the “markings” on the page made by the subject herself, we see a more dialogic relationship between experience and interpretation of experience, between analysis of a subject and the subject’s construction of identity through her own written record. If we consider the quotation in the context of the documentary from which it comes, we note the pronounced interrelationship between observer and subject. Whereas Oliver’s speaker’s relationship with the working woman in the Singapore restroom is constructed solely through the speaker’s voice and perspective, in *The Midwife’s Tale*, relationships and identities between historian and subject, not to mention between subject and community, intermingle and shift. Moreover, since the historian derives her interpretation from her subject’s diary itself, the subject’s discursive voice, rather than simply the historian’s observation, becomes central to the midwife’s identity, as well as to the identity of the historian who studies that voice.

The historian who narrates *The Midwife’s Tale* is Laurel Ulrich, who published a book by the same title in 1990. In the book, Ulrich historically contextualizes the diary of the midwife Martha Ballard, an eighteenth-century working woman from Hallowell, Maine. This diary, as with other similar documents written by women in colonial and

postcolonial America, had been ignored for years by other (mainly male) historians, as it was deemed to concentrate too heavily, and only, on the work and trivial details of domestic life, rather than on larger historical events, such as battles and the signing of important national documents. But as Ulrich herself points out, “[i]t is in the very dailiness, the exhaustive, repetitious dailiness, that the real power of Martha Ballard’s book lies” (Ulrich 9).

In 1997, Ulrich collaborated with writer and producer, Laurie Kahn-Leavitt, to produce a film version of *The Midwife’s Tale*, a dramatic recreation shown as part of the PBS series, *The American Experience*. In the film, representation and construction of the subject’s identity are complicated by the triangulation of her experience through the layering of—and fluid connection between and among—the midwife’s diary, the historian herself, and the actors who represent Ballard, her family, and her community. In several scenes, for example, viewers see Ulrich poring over the diary, trying to make sense of what Ulrich calls its “scratchings”; as Ulrich mouths the words of the diary out loud, the viewer also hears the voice of Kaiulani Lee, the actress who plays Ballard in the film, speaking the same words. As the voices and identities of Ulrich and Ballard meld together, the scene shifts from Ulrich to the actors representing Ballard, her family, and her community. With this shift, Ballard becomes, vis-à-vis the actor who portrays her, not just a fully embodied object of study, but also a participating subject in her own story.

Thus, while we can only imagine the life circumstances and network of relationships of the working-class woman in Oliver’s text, Ulrich’s story and the circumstances of the midwife’s labor are literally fleshed out for us, and even given an almost three-dimensional character through the tightly interwoven triad of text, historian, and actor; the words and images of each of these subjects intersect, interrupt, and interact fluidly, sometimes overlapping, sometimes separating. As with Oliver’s poem, work and labor are at the heart of Ulrich’s narration. In Ulrich’s text, though, images of labor are complicated by Ballard’s multiple roles and her intense capacity for work: as colonial housekeeper, as midwife and healer, and as an almost dogged recorder of her own life and history. The connotations of “labor,” moreover, become even more complicated when the viewer considers Ballard’s association with birthing mothers and the labor of childbirth.

Ballard’s role in birthing and healing lend to her work and life a similar relationship with human “dirt,” or the “crust and the slop” of the cleaning woman in Oliver’s poem. Ballard’s association with the

stuff of the body—indeed, embodiment itself—is highlighted in detail throughout the film: Ballard attends countless women giving birth; assists men, children, and women, victims of eighteenth-century epidemics, coughing up blood; empties slop jars; trails her skirts through the mud of unpaved streets as she is called to sit with a dying woman; is shown down on her knees, incessantly cleaning up her own family’s “crust and slop.” Yet her “working class” life opens up far beyond the four walls of the cleaning woman’s latrine as depicted solely through the eyes of Oliver’s speaker. Not only do the horizons of Ballard’s life expand to include family, community, and Ballard’s profession as healer, they also push beyond temporal confines to include historian and actor as participants in Ballard’s life and story. While Oliver’s poem constructs working-class life only through the fleeting gaze of the artist herself, Ulrich’s text and the documentary arising from it reveal the multiple dimensions of a working woman’s life as seen through a variety of eyes and as lived in relationship to various communities, both in the past and in the present.

Of course, Oliver’s poem is what it is; the conventions of poetry, and especially of the short poem form in which Oliver normally writes, do not allow for the kind of expanded discussion and perspectives that characterize the historian’s book and the documentary connected to it. I like Oliver’s poem, the questions it raises about poetry in general, and Oliver’s own poetry in particular, as well as its courageous foray into new territory, its brave consideration of a single working-class life. I use it here in relation to Ulrich’s work largely metaphorically, as a way to discuss issues of identity construction among and by older female students in the university where I teach, students who, for the most part, have held working to lower middle-class kinds of jobs, and who have complex lives and relationships outside of our classrooms.

As I juxtapose Oliver’s poem with Ulrich’s historical interpretation of the midwife’s life, I use Oliver’s poem to highlight what I see as a common tendency among academics to objectify working-class older women who return to school by viewing them only through our own lenses and positioning them in a limited and enclosed intellectual space. Simultaneously, I use the documentary *The Midwife’s Tale* to offer alternative, concurrent, and multiple approaches to perceiving and teaching such women. To this extent, I compare the speaker in Oliver’s poem to teachers who define the identities of their older female students solely according to their *own* perceptions and experiences as academics. (Most of these teachers, unlike the older women in their classrooms, have

taken a direct and linear path to their academic careers.) At the same time, I discuss Ulrich's documentary not only as a way of opening up our field of vision to the broader and highly contextualized lives of the women we teach, but also as a classroom tool that helps us do so.

SITES OF LABOR: MAKING ROOM FOR MOMMY

If the speaker in Oliver's poem stands in relation to the cleaning woman as some academics stand in relation to older female students in the academy, what useful parallels might we draw about the ways we define those students' identities? Oliver's speaker depicts the cleaning woman's identity mainly as constructed in response to the speaker's own gaze; in this sense, the teacher in the writing classroom, as well as the scholar who writes about such students, often teaches to, and defines, older female identities as constructed only in relation to her or his individual classroom and pedagogies. Because we often have the perception of a fixed academic space occupied equally by students of all ages, life circumstances, and backgrounds, and because our relationships with our students are most often limited to that perceived space, we often imbue the classroom site with a significance it may not necessarily have for older students, much as the speaker of Oliver's poem sees, leaves, and limits the cleaning woman to a single enclosed space and identity constructed solely in response to the speaker's gaze and by the poet's words.

This tendency to telescope the older female student's experience into a single site of identity and intellectual achievement, and to perceive that space as an ultimately significant site, erases from the subject's body—in some figurative sense at least—important identifying marks, particularly those having to do with the “dirt” of reproduction, mothering or reproductive (non)history, human relationships, and what is commonly described as women's work, or working-class labor. The result of such erasure is a streamlined intellectual identity confined and defined by a streamlined and decidedly terminal academic space. To expand our view of the older female student and to acknowledge an intellect “soiled” by human labor and relationships risk admitting into the academic spaces of the writing classroom that which is commonly perceived as alien and even threatening to the academy. I see as proof of this alienation the complaints of colleagues concerning students whose first priority is not their academics, but rather their work and their families. Somewhat ironically, such positioning of older women students according to their relationships, or according to their reproductive histories (whether or not they have had children), does not necessarily result in

the recognition of complex identities; rather this kind of positioning attempts to streamline “laborious” identities so that they fit into a single one-size-fits-all academic space.

My focus earlier in this essay on images of “crust and slop,” as well as on the proliferation of different kinds of dirt related to the body and associated with working-class lives and environments, lays the groundwork for my discussion here of so-called sterile academic and intellectual sites and the alien figures that some see as contaminating those sites. As one of my colleagues exclaimed recently on a university list-serv: “Some people are simply not university material!” The suggestion of “material” here hints at embodiment, as well as a textured toughness resistant to the kind of shaping it might take to fit that material into a desired form or space.

Beyond this notion of rigid (rigorous) shaping, however, are also negative images of the body—that is, identities as constructed through physical and somatic experience. Such bodies are often seen as not only contaminants in the university classroom, but also as antithetical to the intellectual mission of the university itself. Too often, the texts written by these bodies are judged as physical manifestations of the writers themselves, especially when surface and compositional “flaws” are deemed reflective of not only the writer’s (lack of) intellect, but also of her or his right to enter the university as a participating body.

Deborah Mutnick (1996) best illustrates this linkage of bodies to so-called flawed composition in her study of basic writers: “As in other types of oppression—sexism, for example—the basic writing student is often viewed as alien and inferior, the ‘body’ of his or her texts regarded contemptuously” (xxiv). Such an image of the body as out of control can be extended to nontraditional female students whose physical lives and concerns spill over both into and out of those academic spaces that some teachers and administrators wish to contain. It is no surprise, in fact, that suspicion of the working-class female body (indeed, of *all* bodies constituting other than the academic class) parallels what Kylie Message (1998) calls the streamlining of the abject female body in the 1950s, around the same time that the G.I. bill allowed working-class male students into American university classrooms. Examining Australian advertisements that replicate those of American magazines, Message notes that

... the increasingly attractive postwar forces of modernism and consumerism were inherently tied and marketed toward women and the home

. . . . Women were bound and sentenced by the filth of their maternal bodies and to regulate their family's dirt Represented as being passively bound to this association with filth, housewives were encouraged to participate in an economy of consumerism by imperatives to cleanliness [and] the body of the housewife was encouraged to conform with modernist designs of streamlining. (2-7)

By quoting Message, I am not suggesting that all older nontraditional students are mothers (I was not one), nor that their identities are necessarily constructed by motherhood. Rather, I am arguing that the older female body is often associated with its reproductive history. That this is true is evidenced in the constant pinpointing of older women according to their reproductive pasts. Whereas older men in public life are not necessarily defined as fathers or grandfathers, older women are often described in the media according to their reproductive histories. Recently, for example, while interviewing workers at a bomb-making plant, CBS's Bill Geist spoke with a number of men of various ages, including some over 50, without once referring to their roles as fathers or grandfathers. When he approached a woman of about 60, however, he introduced her as a grandmother. This focus on the maternal history of women and their roles as caretakers suggests that unconscious associations with embodiment and uncontained "filth" are more pronounced with women than with men. Here, then, we may recall the woman in Oliver's poem, a working-class woman contained and defined by her small space and the "crust and slop" that characterize that space.

This notion of an identifiable (and identifying) space for containment becomes a central issue for composition theorist Jonathon Mauk (2003), who notes that many students not containable within traditional academic spaces actually occupy *no* space at all:

Although the average college student is impossible to profile, a vast number of college students share a common trait: they are unsituated in academic space. Or put another way, academic space is not an integral part of their intellectual geography. They are first-generation college students; they are commuters; they are part-time community college students; they are "non-traditional" (above twenty-four years old), with jobs and families And, collectively, their presence portends change for academic space. (369)

Mauk sees these students in a state of "nowhereness," and suggests that the assignments we give them "need to create a *material-discursive where*"

for these students (379). Likewise, John Ernest (1998)—a nontraditional student turned academic—extends “terms of identity [that] are both positive and negative” (27) to his own sense of academic space. Noting that “we define ourselves both according to who we are and according to who we are not” (27), Ernest sees working-class and nontraditional students as being both “in and out of the game,” or both insiders and outsiders within official academic sites. “According to the official academy,” Ernest argues, “education is a high ideal, a shining city on the intellectual and social hill, a lifetime pursuit, both the means and an end itself” (33). By pinpointing a *nowhereness* (non) occupied by working-class and nontraditional students, both Mauk and Ernest emphasize the need for identities as constructed not only by place, but also by what Kristie Fleckenstein (1991) describes as a coextensive “[w]ho and where (thus, what)” (286). Ernest agrees with Fleckenstein when he asserts that “class is both defined and experienced relationally” through “multiply contingent identity” (28), an identity that shifts and shapes itself according to relationships and the spaces they occupy.

It is with this sense of sites and identities as intermingled, fluid, and ultimately relational that I turn here again to Ulrich’s *The Midwife’s Tale*. My intent is not to be prescriptive, nor to offer easy solutions that help nontraditional female students construct identities. However, I believe that texts like Ulrich’s, and documentaries such as the one that springs from Ulrich’s text, are exemplary in the way they allow for the construction of the kind of multiple contingent identities Ernest describes. The film highlights, first, the importance of primary “pure” autobiographical documents, in this case, the midwife’s diary, a text that defines the midwife almost solely in economic and bodily terms, with each entry concerned with births, deaths, illnesses, and economic exchanges made for professional services. Second, the film situates the diary in historical terms and makes it (and the midwife) a valid subject for academic study. Finally, the embodied details of the midwife’s life, as well as of her community and family, are fleshed out—made whole—for the viewer. These different modes of signifying the woman and her work speak to a sense of relational identity not contained in a single site, but rather transcending—or at least concurrent with—different spaces and temporalities.

SHE TOILS FOR A LIVING: DOCUMENTING LABOR

In more practical terms, the documentary lends itself to the kinds of writing assignments Mauk (2003) recommends, assignments that provide “a conceptual place (a topic) while also prompting students to

make meaning out of the people-places that constitute their daily lives” (381). To encourage this kind of meaning making, I use *The Midwife’s Tale* along with other texts, memoirs and autobiographies that narrate the experiences of others, and that include the perspectives of those from different cultures, races, and ethnic backgrounds, and also the perspectives of both men and women. In recent classes, for example, students read James McBride’s *The Color of Water* (1996), James Carroll’s *An American Requiem* (1996), Elva Treviño Hart’s *Barefoot Heart* (1999), and Adeline Yen Mah’s *Falling Leaves* (1997). Using these texts in addition to the documentary ensures that most students will find a way to “relate” to the course and also to the stories of others. While reading these texts, they are able to recognize the significance of people and places in the construction of autobiographical identities.

While all of these texts are equally important to the class, however, I lay the groundwork for our discussions by beginning with *The Midwife’s Tale*. By doing so, I encourage students to contextualize autobiographical experience in terms of labor and gender. I also reveal autobiographical documents, and the subjects who write them, as essential components of history. While they are watching the film, for example, I ask students to list all the different kinds of labor that characterize the midwife’s story: the historian Ulrich at work over the midwife’s diary, for example, or the midwife on her rounds and women laboring in birth. I also urge them to pay attention to gendered divisions of labor in the film. At the same time, I have students make note of the triangulated voices that tell the midwife’s story—the midwife’s words as written in her diary, the historian interpreting them, and the actors representing the midwife and her community. With these observations, students begin to see that autobiography, as well as the autobiographical subject and audience, are complicated and contiguous elements. For older female students in particular, the recognition of the complexities of rendering daily labor, and the contingent qualities of work, family, and community, help them see their own lives (which they often view as mundane) as threads in a larger cultural tapestry and as events on a continuum of historical moments.

Immediately after viewing the documentary, we open up analysis of the midwife’s experience to other issues, and discuss Ballard’s experience in relation to other women of her time, particularly women of color and from different economic backgrounds. At the end of this discussion, we form a kind of rubric together, one that helps each student begin to position herself or himself as an autobiographical subject. The rubric headings include: Labor, Class, Gender, Race, Family, and

Community. Once students have discussed these elements in relation to the documentary, they are prepared to begin looking at them in their own lives.

The next step toward writing their own autobiographies is a series of diary and journal keeping entries. For the first couple of weeks of class, I have students keep what I call a working diary, one that concentrates only on the so-called mundane details of daily labor and relationships. Much as Martha Ballard recorded only the sparse details of her daily life (weather conditions, babies delivered, one sentence summaries of often momentous family or community events), students also make daily entries listing only the bare facts of work, family, and community. When they have completed this diary, they exchange it with a partner, who then plays historian, working to interpret and flesh out her or his classmate's life. By doing this, students come to recognize the difference between merely relating chronological facts for oneself, and writing with an audience in mind. They also begin to recognize themselves as historical subjects.

More important, perhaps, students learn to view work and economic class as crucial components of life and the construction of life narratives. For older female students in particular—especially those who have worked in lower paying clerical or blue collar positions before returning to school, or those whose work has been centered in the home—this kind of recognition of daily labor and its importance not only to autobiography, but also to history, allows them to bridge the gap between the personal and the academic. Not only are they invited to incorporate daily details into their academic writing, they understand the personal and historical importance of such details.

Finally, as we progress to other texts, students begin keeping a journal, which is distinguished from the diary by its fleshing out of details and its more expansive reflective nature. As they compose this journal, I encourage students to build on, rather than drop, the “mundane” facts of their diary entries, so that they are less likely to gloss over those elements of work, class, race, and gender that underpin their life's stories, and are also less likely to sublimate those elements to the narration of such “life-altering” events as marriages, births, and deaths. In fact, they come to see such life events as largely dependent upon their personal positions as political, historical, and working subjects.

I do not claim here that all students in my autobiographical writing classes end up writing perfectly detailed autobiographies characterized by a fully developed political and historical awareness. Nevertheless,

I have had the pleasure of witnessing older female students find an expansiveness in their lives and writing that permits the opening up of academic space from a site of “nowhereness” to a territory of intersecting identities, temporalities, and historical positionings. Thus, what Ulrich calls the “exhaustive dailiness” of the diary becomes the means of constructing not individual and isolated identities, but rather dynamic identities rooted in relationships, histories, and the rich messiness of embodied experience.