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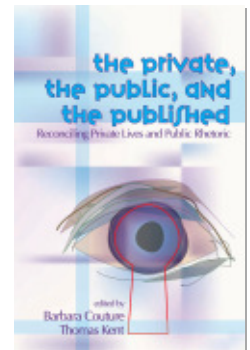
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CULTURAL AUTOBIOGRAPHICS

Complicating the “Personal Turns” in Rhetoric and Composition Studies

Krista Ratcliffe

For the past few summers, I have taught a course entitled Rhetorics of Women’s Multicultural Autobiographies in which students and I read American women autobiographers (Maya Angelou, Dorothy Day, Diane Glancy) and autobiography theorists (Joanne Braxton, Leigh Gilmore, Sidonie Smith). Although the stated purpose of the course is to question definitions of *autobiography* as well as to critique its purposes, tactics, and effects, a side benefit for me is that teaching autobiography theory has helped me to rethink the *personal turns* in rhetoric and composition studies.

DIGRESSION 1: *I know it’s more accepted these days to say “composition studies,” but I recently realized that on this matter, I am a “conservative” in that I refuse to relinquish either the founding role of rhetoric in our field or the rhetorical dimension of all the work we do, both scholarly and pedagogically.*

The phrase *personal turns* signifies moves within rhetoric and composition studies to employ personal stories—often autobiographical—within scholarship and pedagogy. Two such turns have occurred. Like the bellbottom pants students now sport, the first personal turn (expressivism) had a previous life in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It emerged in reaction to revived classical schools of rhetoric, primarily Aristotelian, which posit writing as an invention process that can proceed rationally and systematically on any topic, though topics were usually academic or public, not personal. Expressivism generated a debate about *whether* to use personal topics in writing pedagogy and couched the debate in terms of invention (classical heuristics vs. expressive freewriting) and genre (academic essay vs. personal narrative). In the mid-1990s, a second personal turn emerged in reaction to heavily theorized post-structuralist and feminist/cultural studies schools of rhetoric, which posit

writing as multiple signifying processes functioning within linguistic and cultural systems and which invite writers to analyze how they use language and how language uses them. This second turn generated a debate about *how* to use personal writing in scholarship and pedagogy and couched this debate in terms of function; for example, “Should a story stand alone (à la Wendy Bishop, Peter Elbow, and Joe Trimmer) or be employed as cultural critique (à la Susan Jarratt, Jackie Royster, Victor Villanueva, and Lynn Worsham)?”

In this chapter, I argue that these two personal turns, though related, generate debates with different histories, definitions, and stakes. I conclude by imagining how autobiography theory, particularly a concept of cultural autobiographics, may productively complicate our field’s thinking about “personal turns.”

MAPPING A HISTORY OF THE PERSONAL TURNS

To map a history, let’s circle back to 1963, when Albert R. Kitzhaber’s report on the Dartmouth study of student writing was first published and when the number-one TV show in the United States was *The Beverly Hillbillies*. While Jed and all his kin were heading west toward the cement pond, Kitzhaber, Edward Corbett, and James Golden were circling back through Western history to classical Greece, later joined in their journey by Winifred Horner.

DIGRESSION 2: My favorite Win Horner story is that she flunked first-year English. Well, actually, she chose not to complete a writing correspondence course that she had signed up for while living on a farm and rearing her children, letting them run around the living room while she climbed into their playpen with her typewriter.

When Edward Corbett and others argued that English departments should revive the study of classical rhetoric, with a healthy dose of eighteenth-century theory thrown in for good measure, what they meant was that writing teachers should teach Aristotelian invention (topoi, enthymemes, and appeals) along with elements of Hugh Blair’s style. Motivated by the task of training TAs to teach composition to an increasingly large and diverse student body, these scholar-administrators argued that classical rhetoric provided foundational principles for teaching writing. Their collective action laid a cornerstone of our discipline, rhetoric and composition studies.

In reaction to this emphasis on classical rhetoric, the first personal turn emerged. Consider, for a moment, the late 1960s and early 1970s. People were rejecting any expert over thirty and any method that didn't enable students to turn on and tune in to the times; simultaneously, people were embracing a journey into the self. In 1973, the first personal turn was taken by Peter Elbow, who offered students teacherless classrooms with freewriting and peer review via his *Writing without Teachers*. Granted, Elbow has argued that freewriting is not self-centered but rather an "invitation [for students] to take a ride on language itself, and . . . to 'get out of the self': to relinquish volition and planning and see what words and phrases come out of the head when you just kick it and give language and culture a start" ("Response" 506). While I recognize this potential, in my experience as a college student in the late 1970s and as a beginning teacher in the early 1980s, freewriting was often employed in ways that asked students to generate ideas from the inside out—that is, to go inside themselves to "find themselves" and to discover what they didn't know they knew; it was rarely employed to expose cultural discourses that inform their identities. As such, this "finding oneself" form of invention was a far cry from Aristotelian invention.

To clothe "finding oneself" in academic dress, cognitive theorists arose in the 1970s and early 1980s, hoping to map the inner journey of successful student writers so that teachers could use such maps to help not so good student writers learn to navigate *the* writing process.

DIGRESSION 3: In the twilight of cognitive theory, I was hooked up to a brain machine, thanks to Roxanne Mountford, to test my brain for left-side, right-side activities. According to the guy operating the machine and the pictures he gave me afterwards, my brain negated this spherical schemata. When I performed the tasks designed to test one side of my brain or the other, both sides lit up. I couldn't decide if that meant that I was really smart . . . or (more likely) that I just needed a whole lot more brainpower than most people to perform the mundane tasks the operator gave me, my favorite being to think of all the words I could that begin with "P." For the record, Roxanne abandoned this research.

Again, because rhetoric and composition studies does not exist in a vacuum, the same cultural impulse that celebrated natural food and natural childbirth and encouraged Aretha to belt out "You Make Me Feel Like a Natural Woman" may have encouraged Janet Emig, Linda

Flower, and John Hayes and, later, Mountford to investigate “what comes naturally” to good writers. But alas, mapping *the* writing process proved impossible because, while there may be general patterns of brain activity, there are also patterns dependent not simply upon nature but upon a person’s particular experiences within culture.

Once our field found itself contemplating people’s experiences within culture, we were in the mid-1980s, in the heyday of social constructionism, which challenged expressivism. Instead of foregrounding the personal, different factions of social constructionism foregrounded the textual and the cultural, respectively. The first faction, which promoted the textual, was heavily influenced by poststructuralism. Followers of Jacques Derrida argued that deconstructive textuality was the only game in town. Followers of Roland Barthes declared the author dead, the self a lexical subject, and personal thoughts merely discursive citations of all the discourses surrounding and embodying us. Followers of Michel Foucault declared the author simply a function. What’s a writing teacher to do? Well, Greg Ulmer started holding textshops instead of workshops, and Victor Vitanza honed his call for a third sophistic. At the same time, a second faction of social constructionists, such as David Bartholomae, Pat Bizzell, Jim Berlin, and Joe Harris were also influenced by post-structuralist thought but mainly as it intersected with cultural theory. Uncomfortable with the ideas that language is the only game in town and that life is only a linguistic game, they argued that violence in a written text is not the same as violence in the streets. Though both a book and the street may be read as texts, they may not be reduced to identical textuality. Hence the rise of the cultural. According to Berlin, that rise engendered a merger of rhetoric, post-structuralism, and cultural studies (*Poststructuralism* 16). This merger was designed to impress two ideas upon teachers and students: 1) the cultural discourses into which we’re born possess an agency to influence our thinking via socialization; and 2) we possess a personal agency (however limited) with which to articulate cultural discourses and “talk back” to them (Trimbur, “Agency”).

DIGRESSION 4: Of course, I can’t resist adding here the now oft-repeated claim: many feminist and ethnicity scholars had been saying these things all along, wondering why the author had been declared dead just when women and nondominant ethnic groups were gaining entry into the academy in greater numbers.

Although this second faction researched the tensions between discursive/cultural agency and personal agency in many different cultural sites (such as ethnic groups, religious institutions, and popular media), Bartholomae and Bizzell were interested in university culture, especially student writing—thus, their emphasis on theorizing and teaching “academic discourse” (Bartholomae, *Inventing* 134; Bizzell, *Foundationalism* 53; Harris, *A Teaching Subject* 98–107).

The early 1990s saw a debate between Bartholomae and Elbow on the merits of academic writing vs. personal writing in the composition classroom. Bartholomae defined *academic discourse* as critical writing “where students (with instruction—more precisely, with lessons in critical reading) can learn to feel and see their position inside a text they did not invent and can never, at least completely, control” (“Writing” 482); Elbow defined *personal writing* as separate from academic writing, as writing that focuses on students’ ideas and enables students to say, “I feel like I *am* a writer” (“Being” 489). This debate demonstrated that, although social constructionism had at that moment gained disciplinary ascendancy over expressivism, expressivism was far from dead.

On the heels of this debate, a second personal turn emerged in our field in the mid-1990s, bringing together (if you’ll pardon my parlance) strange bedfellows: the far from dead expressivists and the feminist/cultural folks who never really believed that the author was dead. Expressivist threads were picked up by Wendy Bishop in her article “Places to Stand: The Reflective Writer-Teacher-Writer in Composition” and by Joe Trimmer in his collection *Narration as Knowledge*, both of whom defend the role of “story” as scholarship and pedagogy. Simultaneously, the feminist/cultural studies folks were exposing, in both scholarly and student writing, that the personal is always implicated in cultural critique and that the cultural is always implicated in personal writing. In “When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own,” Royster argues for an emphasis on—indeed a respect for—the “subject positions” of particular readers and writers (29). Jarratt and Worsham’s collection, *Feminism and Composition Studies: In Other Words*, echoes Royster, and to some extent Julia Kristeva: that is, when historical women and the category Woman are inserted into the history of composition studies, also inserted is an invitation to rethink not just our field but our own subjectivities, our politics, our texts, and our pedagogies. Given these strange bedfellows, the second personal turn engendered a debate not about *whether* to use personal writing in scholarship and pedagogy but about *how*. In other words, the second personal turn engendered a debate about politics.

DEFINING THE DEBATES AND TERMS OF THE SECOND PERSONAL TURN

Within the second personal turn, expressivists and feminist/cultural studies folks both advocate the personal but in different ways. These differences are evidenced in the CCCC's programs of 1998 and 2000. With the 1998 theme "Ideas, Historias, y Cuentos," Victor Villanueva located himself more in the cultural studies camp by offering conferencegoers an opportunity to link ideas, history, and personal stories; with the 2000 theme "Educating the Imagination and Reimagining Education," Wendy Bishop located herself more in the expressivist camp by offering conference-goers an opportunity to reaffirm the creative imagination's place in our field, and if you examine the program, you'll see lots of panels on stories, very few on the history of rhetoric. Now I don't offer these examples to celebrate Villanueva and excoriate Bishop; as Pat Bizzell once mentioned in an e-mail message, it's probably a good idea to have the conference rotate its emphasis. I do, however, offer these examples to demonstrate that the debate between expressivists and feminist/cultural studies folks is alive and kicking.

DIGRESSION 5: My naming two sides of this debate "expressivist" and "feminist/cultural studies folks" is admittedly both accurate and troublesome. The labels work to define how the debate functions, but they also elide certain issues, or more importantly, certain subject positions: e.g., some expressivists are feminists; moreover, some feminists and cultural studies scholars disagree about the role of gender in cultural critique.

The debate between expressivists and feminist/cultural studies folks may be better understood, however, by examining the terms that inform it. For although the differing emphases of the two schools may be clear, as Jane Hindman points out in a 2001 *College English* symposium on personal writing, "[m]uch less clear . . . is just what we mean when we use the terms 'the personal' and 'personal writing'" (34–35). In the wake of critical theory's upheaval of all our sacred *terms* (e.g., *author*, *reading*, *writing*, *reader*), the second personal turn must contend with terms that are more contested, less self-evident.

Yet the expressivist ideology of the second personal turn is haunted by the first turn's fairly self-evident terms: *personal*, *writer*, *writing*, and *story*. *Personal* represents experiences of writers; *writer* signifies people who are individual agents; *writing* refers to processes of discovering, communicating, and narrating; and *story* represents a self-contained

narrative. Thus, writers write stories about their personal lives. Given these terms, the hermeneutic circle closes, apparently complete. As Christine Farris has argued, this ideology was foregrounded in a 1999 call for papers for a special edition of *Writing on the Edge*, which Elbow guest-edited, a special edition entitled “True Stories” (“Feminist” 10–11). Although that title resonates with echoes of the Hollywood glamour magazines that populated the “beauty shops” of my childhood, Elbow has something quite different in mind. He invites readers to submit the following: “Any stories related to writing, teaching writing, or teaching and learning are welcome, but *please* let the story work on its own; don’t include a moral or point or piece of wisdom. We are looking for student stories, teacher stories, convention stories, dream stories, transcribed oral stories, writing program stories, classroom stories, writing stories, stories from the past, stories from the present, stories of any form, shape, or possibility” (CCC Online; my emphasis). Note the “please.” Elbow is imploring us to curtail our impulse for academic critique and to foreground the story, the implication being a call for an *ars narratia*, the idea that a story should not critique but be.

DIGRESSION 6: *When I spoke on this topic at the 2000 Summer Seminar in Rhetoric and Composition Studies at Millikin University, a student showed me to my dorm room and told me in an awed, hushed tone, “This was Peter Elbow’s room. He just left this morning.” In Elbow’s honor (and I do truly respect his role in opening a space for the personal in our field), I’ll refrain from making a point about this story.*

Feminist/cultural studies ideology of the second turn is more clearly haunted by critical theory’s upheaval of all our sacred terms. The term *personal* signifies people’s experiences and opinions, which are always implicated within cultural systems; *writer* signifies culturally located subjects who are socialized by cultural discourses and who also possess a certain agency for talking back to these discourses; *writing* signifies processes of recognizing this discursive socialization and of either reinforcing or resisting it; and *story* refers to a narrative that is at once both personal and cultural, both representational and representationally suspect. This ideology promotes writers telling stories as a means of identifying and critiquing not just their own always changing cultural locations but also the attitudes and actions that emerge from these cultural locations—the idea being that an awareness of intersecting discourses of race, gender, class,

age, nationality, region, and so forth makes a person more able to understand and negotiate with other people, who also have their own particular always changing cultural locations. In “As We Were Saying,” Jarratt articulates this stance: “The difference between self-reflective feminist narratives and expressivist paradigms is theoretical, political, and rhetorical: the difference between the collective ‘we’ of my title and the unbracketed first person evoked by some advocates of personal writing in the composition class” (6). Note Jarratt’s “we.” With its use, she insists on a writer’s culturally, and hence chorally, implicated subjectivity even when that writer says “I.” And it is just this cultural implication, she claims, that the expressivist “I” ignores by remaining naively unmarked.

Although the undergraduates in my autobiography class are unaware of this debate, they often rehearse it. In the summer of 2000 while reading Nikki Giovanni’s *Sacred Cows . . . and Other Edibles*, several white students commented that they didn’t realize Giovanni was black until she told them. I asked if they thought she was white. No, they replied, they just didn’t think about race/ethnicity at all; further, they replied, Giovanni’s being African American didn’t matter. Their replies may be read in a couple ways: 1) they are not prejudiced and are happy to read writers of any ancestry; and/or 2) they believe that race and ethnicity should not factor into writing and reading. So we talked for a moment about cultural markers (such as race, motherhood, gender, and age) in the texts that we had been reading. We talked about why some writers have the privilege to ignore these markers and why others don’t. We talked about Giovanni’s decision to explicitly include them in her text so that readers cannot read her as unmarked. In their initial replies, the students were echoing the expressivist stance: what’s important is the story, not the cultural location of the writer. Giovanni herself, however, was echoing the other side of the debate: what’s important is not just the story but also how it is *visibly* informed by the author’s and readers’ subject positions.

DIGRESSION 7: *I wonder how the students would have told this story? What kind of character would I be?*

At this point in this chapter, it would be easy, as I noted earlier, simply to align myself with Royster, Jarratt, Worsham, and Villanueva and feel smugly self-righteous about my choice. But to my mind, the road to self-righteousness (especially my own) is always suspect. So that idea, coupled with my hunch that this debate may have something more to

tell us than the simple binary that meets the eye, leads me to yet another issue: the stakes of getting personal.

ASSESSING THE STAKES OF GETTING PERSONAL

Although I've clearly located myself within the feminist/cultural studies camp, I know some really good scholars and teachers who are expressivists (and yes, I know how that sentence sounds, but it's true). Moreover, I respect how these teachers use their (dare I say) values and beliefs about language and writing to excite students into wanting to write. So whether theorized from the sites of expressivism or feminist/cultural studies, our field's personal turn in many ways heartens me. But the story does not end there because I am also troubled. I'm troubled not because I want to convert the expressivists. I don't (except on days when I'm really cranky). I'm troubled because I see problems that haunt both camps, these being the stakes of getting personal. Although the stakes of *how* personal writing is employed in rhetoric and composition studies raise myriad questions, here I address only three: 1) How does the personal count in scholarship? 2) How does it count in pedagogy? and 3) How does it count in cross-cultural communication?

First, in terms of scholarship, one stake concerns the role of theory. Although expressivists and feminist/cultural studies folks make similar textual moves in their scholarship, they position themselves differently in terms of theory. In the scholarship where Bartholomae engages Elbow and Elbow engages Bartholomae, where Jarratt engages expressivists and Bishop engages social constructionists, they all set up a thesis, establish reasons that may be enumerated and relegated into logical categories, and weave personal stories into the piece as evidence. But Bartholomae and Jarratt embrace theory; Elbow and Bishop seem . . . well . . . a little more suspicious of it. In "Places to Stand," Bishop confronts this issue head-on when she says: "[I]t seems so uncanny for me today to be hearing . . . that expressivists don't do other things ('things' are often represented by the word 'theory') because they 'can't,' not because they choose not to" (11). This "choosing not to" idea was reinforced to me by Joe Trimmer, to whom I owe a great debt for encouraging me to enter this field at a time when I wasn't sure I was smart enough for Ph.D. studies. Years later, after attending one of my CCCC's talks, he sent me a piece he had written along with a note that said something like: Here's my foray into multicultural autobiography, but notice, no theory jargon. What I get from reading Elbow, Bishop, and Trimmer is that they are all more than a

little fed up with academic jargon in scholars' and students' writings—and in some cases, rightly so. Their eyes and ears desire a cleaner prose; their writerly sensibilities demand a broader audience reminiscent of the public intellectuals of old. In some ways, I'm sympathetic to those ideas. Theoretical writings are sometimes poorly written. But so are stories. Conversely, both theoretical articles and stories can be done well. The question for me about the role of theory in rhetoric and composition studies is not so much a question of writing quality as one of disciplinary function: what does theory make (im)possible? For me, as a scholar, theory productively complicates my thinking, my writing, my teaching, and my daily living; it offers me a forum for framing my own ideas; and it offers me a humility in recognizing that *my* ideas, experiences, and stories are rhetorically linked to a community of thinkers beyond myself.

Another scholarly stake of getting personal concerns negotiating the question: what counts as disciplinary knowledge? When reviewers of book manuscripts and tenure cases assess scholarship in terms of how well it extends disciplinary knowledge, what are they to do with stories that stand alone? Can story count as theory? You bet. Even Judith Butler agrees. But can it stand alone? That is the question, and it invokes a tension that is felt by expressivists and feminist/cultural studies folks even though personal writing is widely employed today. Otherwise, why would Bishop feel compelled in "Places to Stand" to assure readers that she wants to hear their stories? "Did you not know I wanted to know about it? I do" (29). And why would Worsham, citing Toni Morrison's Nobel lecture, assure readers that "[n]arrative is radical . . . creating us at the very moment it is being created" (337)? The conventions of scholarly readership (e.g., for reviewing book manuscripts and tenure cases) are such that personal writing cannot simply stand alone but must further disciplinary knowledge; in other words, scholars (especially beginning ones) must navigate existing institutional structures that demand they distinguish a *Harper's* creative nonfiction essay from a *CCC's* scholarly article. Granted, a third option does exist. Villanueva names this option "critical autobiography" and defines it, via Antonio Gramsci, as a "mixed-genre," a hybrid of personal story and intellectual critique (Symposium Collective 51). But as Chris Farris argues, negotiating this textual terrain is tricky. What if one reads it from within traditional scholarly criteria? What if one develops new criteria (telephone conversation) for reading it? These are not impossible questions, but they are important ones that need to be more fully disseminated and discussed so

as to clarify for scholarly writers and readers the stakes of getting personal. Second, in terms of pedagogy, the stakes of getting personal include how well teachers and students perform in the classroom. Again, similarities exist between expressivists and feminist/cultural studies folks. We all want students to leave a writing course with an increased appreciation for writing, with an increased respect for the power of language, with an increased ability to engage in writing as intellectual and communicative acts. And we may all use freewriting and peer groups, circled chairs and portfolios.

One pedagogical stake lies, again, in teachers' orientation toward theory. Teachers' theoretical assumptions (whether articulated or not) drive their use of pedagogical tactics. For instance, freewriting may be used by an expressivist to dig into the self; it may also be used by a cultural studies person to expose cultural discourses that embody us. Circled chairs may be used by a feminist to promote a more equal forum; they may also be used by a tyrannical teacher to better control students. I could go on, but I won't. My point (and personal pet peeve) is that pedagogical tactics are not inherently expressivist or feminist or anything else. Just as Aristotle argues that rhetoric becomes good or bad in the hands of a moral or immoral rhetorician, pedagogical tactics gain meaning from how they are employed. Granted, rhetorical structures and pedagogical tactics have inherent limitations and possibilities. But that is precisely why teachers of writing need to clarify their theoretical positions and then clearly articulate these positions for students and for themselves. Otherwise, freewriting in the hands of a cultural studies teacher might still be perceived by a student as a means of purely private investigation.

Another pedagogical stake lies in the question of course content. Horner rehearsed this question in her oft-cited *Bridging the Gap*, a 1983 collection in which everyone from J. Hillis Miller to Wayne Booth weighed in on whether readings should be used to teach writing. (Horner said no; Miller and Booth said yes). Bartholomae makes critical reading and writing about texts, such as Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger from Memory* and Plato's *Phaedrus*, a focus of his composition course ("Wandering" 97); although Elbow agrees that students should read texts, he advocates spending less class time on reading and more having students write by "*pretend[ing]* that no authorities have ever written about their subject before" ("Being" 491, 496). For a teacher, this choice has

institutional and disciplinary implications. For example, listen to the following tirade against personal writing by Richard Marius, a Harvard professor who wrote the “Composition Studies” chapter in Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn’s *Redrawing the Boundaries*: “Get rid of autobiographical writing in the classroom. . . . Autobiographical writing demeans our profession. While our colleagues in history, literature, and other liberal arts are asking for writing about the world out there, we often look like a crowd of amateur therapists delivering dime store psychology to adolescents. Our discipline then becomes trivial in the eyes of the larger faculty” (475–76). My point is not that one should be intimidated by Marius’s admonition; actually, his dismissive tone about personal writing makes me want to pledge allegiance to expressivism. My point is that this bias is still “out there,” affecting things like hiring, tenure, promotion, pay raises, and personal status within one’s department. Part-time and untenured pedagogues know this better than anyone else.

Third, in terms of cross-cultural communication, a stake in getting personal concerns how well U.S. cultures develop tactics for negotiating commonalities and differences. Although this issue is so complex as to make me throw up my hands before I begin, I choose to focus on one tactic: the trump card, particularly its reception. A trump card is a personal story linked to a cultural location; it is used as a shortcut to a conclusion, functioning enthymemically via traditional common sense. In rhetorical exchanges, a trump card can take any claim on any topic. The trump card wins the argument—unless, of course, it is overtrumped by a more powerful trump card. And there’s a whole deck of them—both traditional and revisionary. Traditional trump cards may be classified according to relational roles, such as the parent card, the teacher card, the boss card. For example, when I tell my six-year-old daughter to pick up her toys “because I say so,” I’m hoping she’ll be sufficiently intimidated by the parent card to do as I ask. As this example indicates, such trump cards work only because there is an accompanying subordinate position to be trumped (child, student, employee). Traditional trump cards may also be classified according to cultural markings such as race, gender, class, age, and nationality. For example, when white students say that Giovanni’s race does not matter, they are speaking from a position of privilege. Common sense tells us that if a traditional card is played and we occupy a subordinate position, then we had better listen and act

accordingly . . . or resist and be aware of the consequences. Obviously, traditional trump cards still resonate within the United States: parents still say pick up your room because I say so, and privileged whites still say race does not matter. Yet, these traditional trump cards may be stood on their heads when proved unjust, for example, when adolescent or adult children challenge the parent card or when civil rights movements challenge the traditional race privilege card. Interestingly, though, traditional trump cards are often received not as trump cards but as norms; it is mainly revisionary actions, such as children arguing for rights or nonwhites arguing that race does matter, that suffer the label “trump card.” And this phenomenon leads me to questions of reception.

In terms of trump card reception, sometimes a trump card is simply a trump card. It happens. People of every cultural location use them to achieve their own ends. But sometimes what is *received* as a “trump card” is not *intended* to be one. Sometimes what is received as a trump card is actually intended as a necessary corollary to the topic under discussion. What is at stake in getting personal is that people in authority often choose to interpret another’s story as a trump card. The O. J. Simpson trial is a perfect example. When Johnny Cochran and his defense team introduced LAPD attitudes toward African Americans into the defense, the media accused him of playing the race card. But, as Cochran and his team showed, racist attitudes did exist among LAPD officers; consequently, Cochran and his team deemed questions of race a necessary corollary to their defense of the murder charge. But the (dominant white) media’s and John Q. Public’s reception of this corollary as “the race card” prevented productive discussion of LAPD corruption. Stasis theory helps explain the problem. The media and public obsessed on the stasis of conjecture (i.e., is race an issue?); actually, the majority obsessed on arguing that race was not an issue and concluded that Cochran was simply attempting to deflect discussion of the real issue, murder. A more productive option for discussion might have been to pursue the stasis of quality (i.e., given that race is always already a factor in daily U.S. life, to what degree did racist attitudes inform white officers’ handling of the evidence and to what degree should such attitudes influence the verdict?). From this point of stasis, there would have been heated discussions but perhaps not such racially divisive ones.

When people choose to interpret an/other person’s personal story as a trump card (and, remember, it is always a choice), they often enact one

of three dysfunctional receptions: 1) they remain silent; 2) they talk back to the “other” person but remain overly suspicious; or 3) they speak in ways that essentialize gender and other cultural categories by saying, for example, “oh, that’s just how *they* are”—as if all the *theys* are exactly alike.

DIGRESSION 8: *It probably hasn’t escaped your notice that calling someone an expressivist or social constructionist may also function as a trump card.*

The danger with trump cards is that when they are used or, worse, when necessary corollaries are received as trump cards, three negative consequences ensue: 1) cultural categories (such as gender, ethnicity, age, nationality) are reified; 2) the potential of both the personal and cultural are downplayed and sometimes downright denied; and 3) possibilities for cross-cultural dialogues are shut down. In sum, the status quo reigns.

So our discipline’s stakes in how to use personal writing are greater than just a question of differences in theory and pedagogy. The stakes are also in how well we help facilitate cross-cultural communication. Perhaps in further interrogating the trump card and other cross-cultural tactics, expressivists and social constructionists may find adjoining ground.

RE/THEORIZING THE PERSONAL—OR, HOW AUTOBIOGRAPHY THEORY MIGHT INFORM OUR CURRENT PERSONAL TURN

Like rhetoric and composition studies, autobiography studies gained respectability within the academy only within the last thirty years, with founding texts being James Olney’s 1972 *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* and his 1980 *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. When the field’s early focus stayed on great men, the field of women’s autobiography emerged, and when that field’s early focus stayed on white women, an emphasis on women’s multicultural autobiography emerged. During this evolution, old definitions of autobiography were exploded. The old definitions posit autobiography, historically, as a literary genre—a genre defined as the “full factual account of the author’s public self, . . . [in] a linear, chronological exposition of events, . . . within a single work” (Morgan 5), a genre that operates as a not so thinly veiled hero’s tale, a genre that purports to be didactic or confessional or some combination of the two. Literary scholars have often dismissed this genre, ranking autobiography as inferior to other genres (such as poet-

ry and drama), fearing that if personal experience entered the literary realm, then somehow the aesthetic might be polluted by the didactic/confessional. Feminist literary scholars have often dismissed not the genre but the traditional definition, questioning the gendered assumptions behind phrases such as “full factual account,” “author’s public self,” and “linear, chronological order exposition.” Rhetoric and composition scholars have often dismissed this definition, too, questioning its positivistic overtones. To help rhetoric and composition studies incorporate more productive ideas about autobiography, which in turn may help our field complicate notions of the personal, I offer a concept of cultural autobiographics, a concept indebted to many rhetoric and composition and autobiography theorists. Cultural autobiographics posits autobiography, or personal writing, as both genre and rhetorical tactic; it interweaves the personal with the textual and the cultural, and it exposes the material dimensions of language and written texts.

When positing personal writing as a genre, cultural autobiographics presumes not a stand-alone story but Villanueva’s “critical autobiography,” a “mixed-genre” or hybrid of personal story and intellectual critique (Symposium Collective 51). When positing personal writing as a rhetorical strategy that permeates all genres, cultural autobiographics complements Villanueva’s ideas with Leigh Gilmore’s. Gilmore coins the term *autobiographics* and defines its “elements” as

those elements of self-representation which are not bound by a philosophical definition of self derived from Augustine, not content with the literary history of autobiography, those elements that instead mark a location in a text where self-invention, self-discovery, and self-representation emerge within the technologies of autobiography—namely, those legalistic, literary, social, and ecclesiastical discourses of truth and identity through which the subject of autobiography is produced. . . . Autobiographics, as a description of self-representation and as a reading practice, is concerned with interruptions and eruptions, with resistance and contradictions as strategies of self-representation . . . [and] is the site of multiple solicitations, multiple markings of “identity,” multiple figurations of agency. . . . The *I*, then, does not disappear into an identity-less textual universe. Rather, the autobiographicality of the *I* in a variety of discourses is emphasized as a point of resistance in self-representation. (42)

In conceptualizing autobiographics, Gilmore asks us to imagine the “presence” of autobiography in all texts; thus, she shifts the question from whether the autobiographical exists in a text to questions of degree and manner.

To demonstrate how the personal, the textual, and the cultural intersect, cultural autobiographics harkens back to Janice Morgan, who (echoing Olney) reminds us that the term *autobiography* contains etymological echoes of all three categories. That is, *autobiography* contains *auto* (signifying self), *bio* (signifying life), and *graphy* (signifying writing/textuality). According to Morgan, depending on which etymology is emphasized, we get three different views of autobiography. Focusing on *bio* gives us a premodern emphasis on the life of a person in relation to existing cultural structures; for example, one was born either a serf or a king with little or no options for change. Focusing on *auto* gives us a modern emphasis on the life of a person as an autonomous self, as with Ben Franklin’s argument that a person’s hard work promotes success. And focusing on *graphy* gives us a postmodern emphasis on the life of a person as lexicon of textuality *à l’écriture féminine* (Morgan 5). Although I agree with Morgan (and Olney) that playing with etymologies is fruitful, I want to argue that instead of relegating these three emphases to differing philosophical systems, we might try merging them into one: materialist feminism. Within this framework, autobiography may be imagined as cultural autobiographics—i.e., as a space where the personal (*auto*), the cultural (*bio*), and the textual (*graphy*) intersect as competing agents.

DIGRESSION 9: *Because Leigh Gilmore’s autobiographics signifies cultural discourses and because Janice Morgan’s bio signifies culture, my use of the “cultural” marker preceding “autobiographics” may seem redundant, but given the pervasiveness of individualism in U.S. culture, I’ve found it a useful emphasis with students.*

Within this materialist emphasis of cultural autobiographics, personal writing emerges as a textual map of the personal and the cultural. Such textual maps function as a metonym for culture, not as a metaphor for it, in that an individual’s text is associated with a culture, not representative of its entirety. And such textual maps have material effects on people’s lives, other texts, and cultures. Conceiving personal writing as cultural autobiographics enables students and scholars/teachers to write the personal as described by Victor Villanueva in the *College English*

Symposium Collective (51), to read the personal as described by Min Zhan Lu in the same symposium (52–55), and to listen to the personal as described by Joanne Braxton in *Black Women Writing Autobiography* (5). Writing, reading, and listening to personal writing—whether women’s multicultural autobiographies *or any other text*—enables students and scholars/teachers to map intersections of various cultural categories, such as gender and whiteness, as they merge in particular ways in particular people’s lives and texts. Conceiving personal writing as cultural autobiographics also enables students and scholars/teachers to foreground the representational gaps in time and place inherent in all personal writing. In sum, practicing cultural autobiographics as writers, readers, and listeners necessarily engages students and scholars/teachers in conversations about the ethics of writing, reading, and listening.

DIGRESSION 10: *I admire the following quote by Victor Villanueva: “There must be room for elements of autobiography, not as confession and errant self-indulgence, not as the measure on which to assess theory, not as a replacement for rigor, but as a way of knowing our predispositions to see things certain ways, of understanding what it is that guides our intuitions in certain ways. This is autobiography as critique” (Symposium Collective 51).*

This is what Adrienne Rich calls recognizing our own “politics of location” (212).

FINAL DIGRESSION: A STORY OF MY STORIES—OR, THE PERSONAL AS SYNECDOCHE

My ten numbered digressions interrupt the text proper, yet they serve the text, too, demonstrating different functions of stories and storytelling. Digression 1 (which attempts to recover the name rhetoric and composition studies) locates my current disciplinary standpoint but only hints at its cause, i.e., my training with Ed Corbett. Digression 2 (which tells Win Horner’s story) exemplifies my commitment to foregrounding the lives of women. Digression 3 (which recounts my brain machine experience) historicizes me within a particular (cognitive) moment of our field, but it uses Roxanne Mountford as a character and backgrounds her story within our field, a success story that extends far beyond this anecdote. Digression 4 (which questions the timing of the death of the author) preaches. Digression 5 (which questions the terms

I employ) acknowledges the slipperiness of terms and the violence inherent in all definitions. Digression 6 (which relays my Peter Elbow story) attempts to have fun, not make fun; but I'm not sure that it works, and I'm not sure that it's scholarship. Digression 7 (which narrates a classroom moment) acknowledges that a narrator's point of view determines the story and that we are all the "heroes" of our own stories. Digression 8 (which admits that my terms may be used as trump cards) turns my critique on myself—but not too seriously. Digression 9 (which lays Leigh Gilmore, Janice Morgan, and my students alongside one another) attempts to define and defend my use of cultural autobiographics within scholarly conversations and within pedagogical practices. And digression 10 (which highlights a quote I admire) only hints that I collect quotes to help me think things through, but you might not know that from my text; it might just look as if I threw in Villanueva's quotation in a rather sloppy fashion, leaving it hanging in ways we encourage our undergraduate writers not to do.

Because these digressions are texts, they are representations of people, places, and ideas. At best they function as synecdoches; at worst they function as misrepresentations, appropriations, or silenced voices. As the writer, I control some part of how these representations are received; as readers, you control more; and our common discourse . . . well, it controls even more. So in contemplating *how* to use the personal in scholarship and pedagogy in this our second personal turn, rhetoric and composition studies needs to theorize further both the synecdochic methods of representation and the ethics of such representations in the personal writing that haunts our scholarship and our pedagogy. That's what I believe . . . but *I* am also echoing what Chris Farris said on the phone last evening. That's the problem—and the beauty—of personal writing: it is written, as we all are, by the people and the discourses we encounter. We all know that. But given that we live within an academic discourse community where who-says-what counts, and where, presumably, people count too, we must proceed with care—in all senses of the word.