Personal Effects

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Depression is boring, I think, 
and I would do better to make 
some soup and light up the cave.

Anne Sexton

There seemed to be no standard for dealing with this gifted, ghosted 
woman.

Maxine Kumin

What is the secret that “oozes from the box?” Deleuze and Guattari 
suggest “the secret must sneak, insert, or introduce itself into the 
arena of public forms; it must pressure them and prod known 
subjects into action.”

Thousand Plateaus

PROLOGUE

Anne Sexton was an inspiring, conscientious teacher, a fact that often goes 
noticed. In addition to her teaching appointment at Boston University, Sexton 
taught poetry at Mclean Psychiatric Hospital, Colgate University, Oberlin 
College and Wayland High School in Wayland, Massachusetts. Her collabora-
tion with Herbert Kohl and the Teachers and Writers Collaborative in the 
1960s made substantive contributions to revitalizing English education, in part 
by initiating teaching partnerships among writers, artists and teachers. Sexton 
is rarely thought of as a dedicated teacher, nor is she immediately associated 
with the significant contributions she made to Teachers and Writers. Rather, 
she is most often remembered for her struggles with alcohol and addiction to 
pills, a mental illness that defied cure, or as a “confessional poet,” a category 
that annoyed and offended her.

When asked about her status as a confessional poet, Sexton explained that 
she preferred to describe herself as a “storyteller.” Her skill at handling plots 
and character is evident in the subjects she addressed in her poetry—madness, 
spirituality, addiction, adultery, death, and the myths encrypted in what she
refers to as the gothic New England family romance. Among the most striking trademarks of Sexton’s poetry is a cast of personae who expose and question the mass produced images of middle-class women in post World War II America. Typically, Sexton’s poetic forays terminate in uncanny images where female bodies are fragmenteds—a violent breaking heart, a splintered hip, a valley of bones. Sexton replaces images of the content, suburban housewife with “full helpings,” as Alicia Ostriker notes, “of her breasts, her uterus, her abortion, her ‘tiny jail’ of a vagina, her love life, her mother’s and daughters’ breasts, everyone’s operations, the act of eating . . . even the trauma of her childhood enemas” (11, 1982). Each of these images possess a peculiar power that direct her readers away from sentimental notions of home as a place of plenitude. Throughout Sexton’s poetry, bodies move toward the edges of life, death, old age, the ends of marriages, childhoods, sanity and love. Kitchens become sites of family constraints and family bonds, spaces where, despite most peoples’ preference to avert such issues, the poet inquires into psychic lability and the fallibility of the family.

Yet, despite the substantial collection of lecture notes, correspondences with students and journals that Anne Sexton left behind, the remains of her teaching life have rarely been addressed. In this chapter, I situate Sexton’s life as a teacher in the center of what feminist philosophers address as some of the key questions and problems in feminist pedagogy: the problem of navigating the appropriate distance between teachers and students, the relationship between emotional life and knowledge, and the difficult questions surrounding identification and separation in the classroom. This chapter does not offer a biographical portrait of Sexton, rather it literally performs a method of writing auto/biographically in which Sexton functions as an interlocutor or shadowgraph, indirectly illuminating gender, sexual and cultural sediments that influence our conscious and unconscious interests, our scholarship and our teaching. I draw on Sexton’s pedagogical documents to test the limits of how much our students need to know about us, what the role of transference and counter-transference plays in our teaching, and what it means for our students to write auto/biographically, beyond the usual story-telling or narration of experience.1

Among the key documents that I focus on are the lecture notes Sexton wrote as the Crawshaw Chair in Literature while teaching at Colgate University in 1972. These notes, housed in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, Austin, suggest that Sexton developed innovative approaches to teaching writing that were performative in structure and drew on one of the privileged concepts in psychoanalysis, that it is the love object that teaches.2 While Sexton’s lecture notes may at first appear as a series of narcissistic
acts in which she consistently violates the proper distance between herself and her students, her pedagogy in fact suggests possible ways for educators to compose spaces for learning and teaching that address the half-spoken losses that society and culture fail to address. Sexton did not ask her students simply to listen to her “confessions,” nor did she ask them to directly site their losses or “self-disclose” in the seminar room. Rather, she uses a performative pedagogy to indirectly route her students through figures of others so they could more fully apprehend themselves in relation to history and literature. A close reading of Sexton’s teaching documents demonstrate that we do not simply come to know ourselves directly, by writing our life, rather we must take indirect routes through the other, through history, literature, and theory, to represent our lives. Through these indirect writing and reading practices we can more fully rethink and modify personal and social expectations. Such indirect routes bring the auto/biographical I to form in ways that can more fully contain the histories and the biographies of those before us, drawing our lives, to paraphrase Virginia Woolf, from the lives of the unknown who were our forebears. The purpose of this approach to auto/biography is not to pass on tradition, but to break its hold over us, and to intervene, as Anne Sexton so boldly did as both poet and teacher, in the transmission of canonic culture.

The losses and ambivalence that Sexton carried into her teaching life manifest themselves in her performative approach to teaching writing and these performances allegorize losses that are deemed ungrievable within our culture. As a young mother, Sexton not only lost her children to the anguish of mental illness, but she writes of abortion and the loss of physical health to cancer, drug and alcohol addiction. Sexton often claimed that her poetry did not replicate her life, but staged it—that it was a public performance of the most prevalent cultural expectations of femininity in post World War II America. The losses that accrue in Sexton’s poetry, losses that were not only ungrievable at the time, but often remained unnameable, constituted a part of the prescribed cultural roles for women and children. These losses figure into Sexton’s melancholic teaching. In this chapter, I conceptualize melancholia as a lyric lament through which a person protests our culture’s narrow prohibitions on who can rightfully grieve and which losses are worthy of recognition.

The lyric turn Sexton makes toward themes of loss is painful insofar as she implicitly attests to the social and psychic threat of contemporary diseases such as AIDS and cancer. Her pedagogy also brings to consciousness what Melissa Zeiger describes as a cultural melancholia that resonates through the end of a century that has repeatedly witnessed unimaginable loss of life, from World War I through the Holocaust and Hiroshima to Cambodia and Bosnia. (see Zeiger’s Beyond Consolation). The attempt to represent, in writing or
otherwise, memories that we inherit via these encrypted losses can be traumatic, therefore raising questions about the propriety of different kinds of cultural remembrance. Central to this debate has been the question of whether the public exposure of pain and loss is either morally necessary or politically effective. For curriculum studies, a series of questions emerge: In our interactions with the past, what does curriculum remember, repress, or encrypt? How does one enter into an exchange with the past that can negotiate trauma, and at the same time locate the historical specificity of our students?

Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, I argue that melancholia can be a rich resource for teaching and scholarship; it holds nascent political texts which students and teachers can draw upon to re-establish the lines that demarcate psychic and social life, and in turn re-negotiate the personal, social and political prohibitions on grieving. By giving dramatic language to ambivalence and loss, Sexton demonstrates how pedagogy can be used to ritualize melancholy, creating an occasion for teaching and learning that can open texts to meanings otherwise foreclosed upon.

THE ARCHIVAL SITE

Long before her death, Anne Sexton meticulously prepared her manuscripts and letters for the archives so that her work could be reborn into historical memory. She often hoped aloud that her poetry would endure to offer comfort and insight to those who, like her, suffered with the unrelenting pain that dominates people who are afflicted with mental illness and addictions. The archive of Anne Sexton, like the body of Sexton herself, exceeds the limits of a conventional teaching life; it generates a particular form of melancholy that is associated with a life falling apart, a terminal, unrelenting, inexplicable mental illness that resulted in Sexton ending her life by carbon monoxide poisoning on Friday, October 4, 1974, at the age of 46. After returning home from lunch with her close friend, Maxine Kumin, she climbed into the driver’s seat of the old red Cougar she bought in 1967, the year she started teaching, and turned on the ignition (Middlebrook, 1991, 397).

It is July of 1994. I am working in the archives at the Harry Ransom Research Humanities Center at the University of Texas, shuffling through some folders that contain correspondences Sexton exchanged with her students. I’m hungry, restless and feeling stiff from sitting all day, so I decide to take a walk. Before I leave, I randomly pull a letter from the file in front of me, skimming through it, planning to return to it later in the day. I note that the letter was written by Chris Leverich, an English major at Colgate University during the spring of 1972, and that the letter is in fact a substitute for the final assignment—an imagined interview with Anne Sexton. In his letter, Leverich
details a trail of memories, lost expectations, and emotions that he has kept to himself throughout the term. “In a way, I’ve fallen in love with you,” he writes:

Of course, it’s a fantasy. I know that. Yet, there is something, a force, a charm that is ever powerful and ever attractive to me. So many times I’ve wanted to be alone with you, to talk to you, to break the formalities of student and teacher. . . . I guess that’s a fair summation of my first feelings toward you: an initial sexual attraction gradually honed into a mixture of respect and admiration. As the semester went on and I got more and more into your poetry whole new horizons opened up before me. I knew I was reading your life and what it was to you. (HRRHC)

Leverich goes on to capture, with tremendous exactitude, the sense of loss he felt for never having really gotten to know Anne Sexton, noting that the end of the term would mark the last time he would hear her voice.

I sort of resigned myself to never knowing you, even after that little spark flared up in me when you called my name—“Chris.” But it seemed like only a reflex action after Bruce said it. Still, I wanted it to roll around over your tongue. I wanted you to say it again in your head and remember it. I couldn’t stand that you wouldn’t even remember my name someday. Like you said in class about John Holmes: “If you leave someone without having them love you, then you lose them.” I knew we would leave that way and I would lose. (HRRHC)

The explicitly sexual content of this letter can be read as an Oedipal narrative—a son’s longing for his mother—and contains images of a desire to be devoured (even if in name only). Leverich goes on to fantasize about driving to Radcliffe to meet Sexton’s daughter, Linda, where they would talk about philosophy. “But I didn’t go. I didn’t go because I knew I wouldn’t see what I wanted. I wouldn’t see a miniature you . . . I knew I never wanted Lolita, but Jocasta” (HRRHC). Leverich’s desire to know Sexton is, as he notes, a fantasy that I could not help but worry about. On the one hand, I worried about her. To what extent were the images in Leverich’s letter symptoms of his desire to swallow his teacher up, a violent fantasy through which to threaten his teacher’s identity and claim her for his very own? On the other hand, I worried about Leverich. To what extent did Sexton’s memories of sexual distress and loss figure into her pedagogy at this time, mixing in with this student’s past, a past wrought with pain and loss that he may very well have been working hard to forget? I began to think about how the encrypted memories we hold of violence, lost ideals, and betrayals are acted out through pedagogy, memories that appear absent but take up an uncanny presence in our classrooms.

Teaching and learning inevitably invoke ghosts from the past, family dramas, and failed romances. Nested in each word Leverich writes, in each scriptural
relic, is a personal past that was awakened as he sat in class working with Sexton’s poetry, among her poems “The Truth the Dead Know,” “Her Kind,” “Somewhere in Africa,” “The Fortress,” “Said The Poet to the Analyst.” As a student in this class, Leverich took part in classroom assignments that were performative in structure. “Give me a persona,” Sexton asked her students. “Could you write with your mother’s voice about her marriage, about her son . . . a woman in church, what is she thinking?” (HRRHC). Leverich writes of the sudden death of his own father when he was eight years old, and his admitted proclivity to “look for a mother and father . . . perhaps that’s what I see in you; a woman who is both dominant and passive, at once bold and timid, and even impatient yet understanding.”

As I read this letter, I felt as if Leverich had isolated the ache of loss because it was so deeply tied to difficult realities, emotions, and ideas. Such acts of isolation not only numb pain, but they hold it in reserve, blocking it from circulating in our imagination, emotions, initiatives and contacts with other people. The confinement of an unbearable reality to an inaccessible region of the psyche is what Maria Torok refers to as “incorporation” or “preservative repression.” Drawing on clinical observations made by Freud and Karl Abraham in 1922 of the increased sexual activity of people who experienced a death in the family, Torok proposes a new category of psychology—the illness of mourning. She argues that the pain associated with loss is not directly tied to having lost a loved one, but rather this pain is associated with the secret that the loss occasions, a secret that she refers to as the “psychic tomb.” Torok understood the flow of sexual desire in the face of death as the final, climactic outpouring of love for the departed. Complications ensue, however, when the bereaved is a parent, grandparent, sibling or other “nonsexual associate,” because in such cases, sexual feelings and outbursts are personally and socially unacceptable to the mourner; the involuntary effusion of feeling constitutes an event that the mourner cannot make sense of with respect to her or his somber feelings of loss and bereavement. In these instances the affect experienced in the face of death must be kept under wraps, thereby transforming this final outpouring of love into an intrapsychic secret. The mourner sets up a secret enclave, what Torok refers to as a crypt, for the departed love-object, precisely because the survivor is being deluded by society and culture into behaving as if no trauma or loss had occurred.³ Or, to put this another way, the departed returns to haunt the living because they have not been granted a proper burial. In Torok’s view, the shameful, undisclosed suffering of the dead returns to their descendents and unsuspected, the dead continue to lead a devastating psychic half-life in them.

Torok’s work emphasizes the ways in which the inherited fears, anxieties and hindered self-fashionings that were unresolved by our descendents are carried
into succeeding generations and take occupancy in our lives as memories that are neither fully evident nor fully concealed. This emphasis calls attention to the history of psychic structures, and how psychic traumas and secrets can be inherited rather than strictly tied to individual experience. The concept of the phantom offers us another route into Leverich’s letter, a route that brings us beyond reading this document as a letter written by an individual student, to postulating that encrypted in this love letter, this failed assignment, are inherited, secret, psychic substances of his ancestor’s lives and that these substances can take up an uncanny presence in the classroom. Leverich’s love letter might be more fully understood as an indirect, circuitous outpouring of love, not literally for Sexton, as he told me years later in an interview, but for a beloved aunt who he had lost to drug and alcohol abuse, a woman whose presence he felt in the poetry and teachings of Anne Sexton. The memory traces in Leverich’s writing provoke an unsettling disruption in this class, a disruption that was provoked not simply by Sexton’s presence, but by the presence of others who are neither fully remembered nor forgotten, neither fully recognized nor ignored (166 in Torok).

“Memory is a sense of the other,” writes Michel De Certeau; memories “call out to the other who is absent; they are produced only in a place that does not belong to it,” hence [memory] develops along with relationships. . . . It responds more than it records . . . memory leaves its mark like a kind of overlay on a body that has always already been altered without knowing it. This originary and secret writing “emerges” little by little, in the very spots where memory is touched. Memory is played by circumstances, just as a piano is played by a musician and music emerges from it when its keys are touched by the hands. Memory responds more than it records, up to the moment when, losing its mobile fragility and becoming incapable of new alterations, it can only repeat its initial responses (De Certeau, 1984, 86-88).

De Certeau portrays memory as an “anti-museum,” that floats and refuses to be fixed in time or space. Pedagogy directs its attention toward remembering and forgetting at every turn; the question that remains is whom do we choose to remember in our classrooms and whom do we fail to address? How do we respond to the memories that are too terrible to disclose? I want to use De Certeau’s notion of memory as an ‘anti museum’ to emphasize the project of remembering implicit in the work of Abraham and Torok. Their concept of the psychic crypt suggests a project of remembering the dead and restoring to memory forgotten and erased persons that harbor secrets and fears that continue to live a half-life in succeeding generations. On one level, the individual example of Leverich depicts how a seminar space might become a site of private
mourning. Leverich’s memories of loss appear to circulate and flow through his readings of Sexton’s poetry, thereby infusing the pedagogical event with the specificity of his own emotions, history, and desires. We might read Leverich’s letter as an attempt to articulate strains of feeling that he associated with intergenerational secrets that were unmoored by the poetry of Sexton. The pedagogical project lies in creating occasions, through writing, talking and other acts of symbolization, for Leverich to refine an attachment to the half-spoken losses haunting his personal past and to coordinate these losses with the larger social field. This work is particularly difficult, however, when the losses a person suffers with are not recognized as legitimate and thus not granted public space for articulation.

The melancholic temperament that Torok sought to understand is marked by a loss of address that gives way to an unbounded state in which a person appears to abandon her position as a subject, for she has no addressable other, that is to say, there is no one to listen to her plaints, no one who recognizes her grievances as worthy of attention. In many ways, melancholy bears out the ‘crisis of representation’ that Simon Watney and Paula Treichler have ascribed to the AIDS crisis. Both Watney and Treichler speak of the human devastation incurred by the AIDS epidemic, as well as the rage at injustice that it demands. In her study of AIDS and breast cancer elegies, Zeiger points out that the work of Watney and Treichler emphasizes the profound difficulty of “producing an adequate discursive response to something as ideologically dense and resiliently irrational as AIDS discourse has been. Because hatred of people with illnesses, and of gay men and women, is naturalized at so many levels, discursive refuguration has had to take place in moral, emotional, sexual, metaphysical, aesthetic, and political terms” (Zeiger 21). If a crisis cannot be named or represented, then how can it be taught? If the only modes of representation available to us as teachers function either to sensationalize and thus diminish human suffering on the one hand, or to disassociate people from daily experience and therefore from the human on the other, then we slip into a pedagogical narrative that disassociates itself from the life of feeling and the needs, desires and vulnerabilities of the body. Melancholia inevitably poses questions about the difficulties of representation and the sense of despair that can be associated with establishing modes of address when what people long to write about can place them in jeopardy, compromise their safety, or position them as a contaminant among their classmates. Nested in these questions are other questions about memory, remembrance and separation—not simply the final separation between the dead and the living, but also a wide range of disconnections between persons who are “well” and “sick”, emotionally stable and unstable, intellectually worthy and unworthy, excessive and productive. What degrees of distance do we keep
between the living and the dead? How do we remember those we have loved and lost?

Many of the poems Sexton wrote and taught in her classes contain themes of loss and mourning and attest to the psychic and social threat of cancer, early sexual distress, addictions and madness. Maxine Kumin remembers Anne Sexton in her early years as a poet, working strictly with traditional forms, “believing,” writes Kumin, in the value of their rigor as a forcing agent, believing that “the hardest truths would come right if they were hammered to fit“ a stanzaic pattern, a rhyme scheme, a prevailing meter (“Reflections” in Anne Sexton, The Artist and her Critics, 1978, p. 104). Sexton often spoke of writing poetry as a form of psychoanalysis that could create coherence out of the disjunctive, fragmented experiences of psychic lability that came to take possession of her. For a time, the dramatic situations Sexton rendered in her poetry functioned as an effective methodology for inquiring into memory and grief. In “Briar Rose”, a poem from her 1971 collection, Transformations, she renders a searing representation of sexual violence:  

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Each night I am nailed into place
and I forget who I am.
Daddy?
That’s another kind of prison.
It’s not the prince at all,
but my father
drunkenly bent over my bed,
circling the abyss like a shark,
my father thick upon me
like some jellyfish.
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Here, Sexton uses vivid images to convey how sexual assault functions to eradicate identity, “I forget who I am;” resulting in a form of amnesia that effectively takes a victim’s life, “nailing her in place”, imprisoning her, stripping her of will and agency. Throughout the time Sexton wrote poetry—from 1957 when, at the suggestion of her psychiatrist, she enrolled in a poetry workshop taught by John Holmes at the Boston Center for Adult Education, to the time of her death in 1974—Sexton used writing to “make a new reality and become whole . . . When writing,” Sexton explained, “it is like lying on the analyst’s couch, reenacting a private terror, and the creative mind is the analyst who gives pattern and meaning to what the persona sees as only incoherent experience” (quoted in Middlebrook, 1991, 64). While teaching at Colgate University during the spring of 1972, Sexton described the tight lyric form as a cage in which a writer could put wild animals in, a means through which to “make a
logic out of suffering . . . One must make a logic out of suffering or one is mad.” She asserted, “All writing of poems is sanity, because one makes a reality, a sane world, out of insane happenings” (HRRHC).

Yet the memories of loss that Leverich inscribes in his letter and Sexton in her poetry did not simply surface because they willed them to, just as I cannot simply summon up my own memories and set them in the syntax of an essay. Women, marginalized people, and those who have endured trauma cannot write from memory, argues Shoshana Felman, for our auto/biographies are comprised of precisely what our memories cannot contain, or hold together as a whole, although our writing inadvertently inscribes it. While the historical conditions that constituted trauma for a white middle-class woman such as Sexton are not equitable with the historical conditions of people who have endured generations of colonization, in both cases the structure of trauma works to obliterate an addressable other. Felman finds that memories can only surface and circulate vis-à-vis a process through which we access our stories indirectly—by conjugating literature, theory, and autobiography through reading, writing, and, I will add, history and performance, and in turn reading into the texts of culture our difference(s) as missing, absent, lost. This approach to writing, reading, and teaching auto/biography requires that we are united with the lives of others, not by a synthetic understanding, but whereby one person’s concerns are meaningful to another and these concerns return to us an unexpected revelation, desire, or insight in our own life. The letter written by Leverich was just one artifact that returned an unexpected insight. As I re-read his letter, I remembered a scene earlier that term, long before I had left to make the trip to Austin, Texas, a scene that reminded me that Sexton was indeed perceived by many as a teacher perpetually in error.

THE RETURN OF AN INSIGHT

After I had received the news that I was awarded funding from the University of New Hampshire to travel to the archives, one of my colleagues came up to me in the hallway. He made it quite clear that he thought the university was wasting its money on this project. “My wife wondered,” he told me with a laugh, “why you would want to study someone who was not only crazy, but who slept with her students? And what has this project got to do with teaching and teacher education anyway?”

At that moment, I became acutely conscious of how precarious Sexton’s status as a teacher would be. It is one thing to write about mental illness and loss as a poet, but to teach in the throws of profound melancholia, anxiety, and alcoholism is quite another. It became evident that the remains of Sexton’s teaching life were quite troubling, for the images that surfaced when I proposed that her
teaching life be remembered, that we might even be instructed by her pedagogy, were those of a woman in ruins, untrustworthy, and strange. The ghost of Sexton, as teacher, exists at the border between convention, rationality, and madness. As I approached Sexton’s life as a teacher, I felt myself writing and teaching from a vulnerable position. I began to loosen my grip on the sense of command and authority I brought to the archive. In retrospect, I remember this encounter in the hallway because, as much as I wanted to deny it, my colleague’s questions were questions I had harbored all along. The letter written by Chris Leverich was but one relic that provoked my own anxieties to surface, anxieties that I had managed, up until now, to ignore.

I have since learned that much of what remains of Sexton’s teaching life represents excessive sexual violence, anxieties, fears, and desires to remember and be remembered, all of which will not remain repressed. To consider bringing these excesses into the realm of education is to threaten the meticulous work that is being done by mainstream culture: (1) to solidify normative notions of what it means to be a good teacher and a good student, (2) to possess emotional stability, and (3) to determine which bodies and bodies of knowledge are most worthy. Sexton is the symptom that signals the (failed) repression of the infectious, melancholic teacher; she is the non-normative teacher who is believed by many to lack academic taste and who, as my colleague demonstrates, can function as a foil for educators to declare themselves “dissimilar” to her excessive, tormented pedagogy. After all, educators worth their salt are prudent and straightforward.

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FRAGMENT

Anne Sexton appears as an uncanny interlocutor through whom I have begun to approach unresolvable questions about memory, knowledge, and the body, questions that were fused into my teaching life from the very start. I began to teach in 1981, the year my father began to suffer with esophageal cancer, a disease that is aggressive and for which there was very little curative treatment. Esophageal cancer does not strike out randomly, rather it is selective, primarily afflicting people who are addicted to alcohol. One morning, early in December, after my father had just returned home from a month-long stay in the hospital, I sat at the kitchen table with him, not knowing what to say, yet knowing I had to say something, for he had arrived, we were told, at the limit of his life. And what was left for him to do he had to do alone. “Does it terrify you to know you will die soon?” I asked him quietly. “Alone into the alone,” he quoted from C. S. Lewis. He said it felt like that. And, how improbable that it should be otherwise. Long before my father had died, he felt cut off from us, and it was not simply the certainty of his death that made this so. Nor was it
the fact that as a doctor, he knew all too well what the months ahead would hold, his biggest fear being that he would suffocate to death.

My father suffered with severe melancholia that took hold of him at unexpected times, thrusting him into painful silence, isolation, and despair. He drank, I think, to ease an unrelenting anguish that he never spoke of but that intruded on him throughout his life. I could tell you that like many men growing up during the depression and World War II, my father learned to believe that drinking was a part of being a man. I could tell you that like many men of his generation, drinking was tied to rituals that bound people in rites of celebration, mourning, friendship, romance, and religion. But such a narrative departure into cultural history would only serve as a defense against the pain, loss, and sense of betrayal that came to feel so familiar to me as a child. For me, liquor was never endowed with romantic or sacred properties. Rather, in my mind, it was nothing less than a lethal substance my father used to commit a slow suicide.

How could a devoted doctor knowingly and most deliberately disease himself? How can a person who excessively diseases himself so skillfully offer others a cure? I was left with unresolvable questions that I could not put to rest, and for which I could find no meaningful allegorical equivalents or redemptive possibilities. The losses that I accrued through my father’s life and death—a sense of abandonment, betrayal, a severed attachment—are among the encrypted details that seep through my pedagogy and my scholarship.

My father’s life and death taught me to be skeptical of knowledge. Not only are skeptics determined to avoid confusion, but they are also fond of delay and doubt. They harbor suspicions about forming attachments to concepts, persons, and beliefs. Perhaps this is why the null hypothesis always intrigued me—it offers a method through which to claim an attachment and then delay commitment through methods of deliberate disavowal. The art and science of a democratic education offered me processes through which I could put my skeptical temperament to use. The scientific method of John Dewey subordinates transmitting the past to creating a future that is distinct from the past (see Dewey, 1984). This method of inquiry is described by Horace M. Kallen as one that ‘makes precept a function of practice, exalts variation over repetition, encourages the free co-operation of differences to displace the regimented reproduction of identicals, prefers the doubt, the enquiry, the experiment of competitive cooperation of the sciences to the obedient and unquestioning rehearsals of dogmatic faith’ (360 in Hook)—all problems that we struggled with in our Catholic household. “One can never know,” my father’s father would say as he read the newspaper in the evening, sitting on the terrace, drinking a glass of wine.
But the truth is that the feelings of skepticism that flooded our home were more akin to a kind of wholesale mood of exaggerated distrust and an unexpressed yearning not to repeat the past than they were to the disciplined forms of scientific inquiry that my father found so compelling. I could write a narrative history of my family’s skepticism for you. I could write about the ambivalence my paternal grandfather felt about educating his children—skeptical as he was of the educational value of academic knowledge, both wanting and not wanting his children to secure academic degrees, feeling torn, possessing, despite his lack of formal education, an enormous appetite for the lyricism of Dante, Leopardi, Puccini. I could go on to link my family’s proclivities to doubt our lovers and to scrutinize our politics, religious faith and one another to philosophical traditions that scrutinize the sanctities of faith and hope.

And I could render scenes of teaching where skepticism seeped into my classroom, touching my curriculum entirely. But such a move, once again, would only serve as a defense against a more profound lesson my father handed down to me, for the practice of skepticism was not the most memorable lesson I inherited. From my father, I learned that knowledge and the body are often at war and, despite our apparent mastery of knowledge, our bodies too often remain vulnerable. In seeking knowledge, we are really seeking insight into what to do with our bodies, for teaching and scholarship are inevitably about decisions of the flesh.

In looking back, I learned to recognize that in the throws of illness, loss, or during a crisis in meaning, there are prohibitions placed on the expression of weakness, fear, and pain. But perhaps more importantly, I have come to understand that the shameful, undisclosed suffering of the dead, suffering that could not be expressed, returns to their descendents and unsuspected, this suffering continues to lead a painful half-life in them. Thus, the undisclosed suffering of my father, made manifest in his acute melancholia, lives on, haunting me in unsuspected ways, slipping into my pedagogy uninvited, compromising my capacity to refine my attachments to memory and history. From this point of view, a dividing line no longer falls between my father’s life and death. His life and death can flow together, repeating and reinforcing each other vis à vis my teaching life.

In the narrative account I offer, I turn to teaching as a consolation for my loss, and this turn exacts a serious price. Not only do I position myself as a vulnerable daughter who inherits a scholarly and pedagogic project from her father, but by using pedagogy as a consolation for loss I displace my sense of abandonment, betrayal, and outrage rather than working through it. My loss registers in strikingly apparent ways. For example, in the books that I choose to read with my students in courses I teach in curriculum studies, literacy, and
English education. Among them, *Missing May* by Cynthia Rylant, *Krik? Krak!* by Edwidge Danticat, *My Brother* by Jamaica Kincaid, *Fugitive Pieces* by Anne Michaels. Each of these stories portrays profound loss, from the death of a beloved aunt and a brother, to the horrific loss of life endured by the people of Haiti, to the brutalities of World War II. These books function like urns, holding loss, keeping it in place. As my students and I read *Krik? Krak!* events that we have failed to learn about claim a presence in the room, a presence that demands that we speak beyond our means. Yet, to what extent do we use this book to console ourselves after learning of the U.S. involvement in Haiti and the horror of living under the brutal threats of the Tonton Macoutes? Do the routes that we take through Danticat’s book only function to offer my students a narrative adjustment to loss, a consoling sign that enables each of us to adjust to the injustices that Danticat writes about? Do these consoling signs in turn distract us from properly re-membering the dead? The historical figures in these stories are not easily quieted by the official discourses of monuments and memorials. In her analysis of *Shot in the Heart*, the account by Mikal Gilmore of his family history and the execution of his brother, Gary Gilmore, Leigh Gilmore emphasizes that “trauma causes history to erupt from its manageable confines. In this context, the dead are no longer persons who lived in the past, but angry, bitter, and mournful ghosts. The dead in this construction refuse to do the work of history, which is to stay buried, in effect, to ‘be’ the past, and to maintain the rationality of time as past-present-future. . . . The dead return because they were not properly buried” (5). To address trauma in the classroom raises several questions posed by Gilmore, including how the dead will permit and be permitted by the living to live on. Such questions invariably pose rhetorical challenges that are directly tied to melancholia, for melancholia is brought about by a ‘failed mourning,’ a failure that torments the melancholic by stealing speech because the losses that she has endured are not deemed grievable by our culture, and therefore they cannot be spoken aloud.

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler elaborates on the ways in which melancholia works as a lyric lament to protest our culture’s narrow prohibitions on who can rightfully grieve, and which losses are worthy of attention. Following Butler, I want to argue that melancholy can be a rich resource for teaching and scholarship, for it holds nascent political texts which students and teachers can draw on to redraw the lines that demarcate their own psychic and social life, and, in turn, renegotiate the personal, social, and political prohibitions on grieving. The pedagogy of Anne Sexton offers us insight into how poetry and writing can be used to renegotiate these prohibitions, particularly the lecture notes she wrote while teaching at Colgate University during the spring term of 1972. These lecture notes provide a more complex way of
putting melancholia to productive use in the classroom, offering us insight into the ways in which we might use poetry, performance, writing, and reading for learning about the transitions necessary to life, grieving being one among many of the vital transitions we can work through.7

THE MELANCHOLIC PEDAGOGY OF ANNE SEXTON

Throughout Sexton’s pedagogic documents are moments in which she directs her students’ attention to social issues pertaining to the suffering, violated entity Elaine Scarry has termed “the body in pain.”8 The bodies in Sexton’s poetry are most often women’s bodies—one freshly scarred from a hysterectomy, a dying woman who is incontinent, a young girl giving up her baby, a daughter refusing to grieve—who speak to the reader through dramatic speech. While much of the subject matter for Sexton’s poetry came directly from her own life and times, she also transcended these biographical details, shaping them into art forms that spoke to a vast audience about the silent anguish felt in many post World War II households, testifying, in other words, to the discontent felt in the bourgeois American family.

When writing poetry with her students, Sexton asked them to use the force of dramatic consciousness to engage in composition processes that demanded what Sexton described as a “total immersion of you into the subject.” (HRRHC). In her poems, as she tells her students, we have the poet as actor:

Wearing different faces; the young girl running from her lover . . . the unknown girl giving her baby up so intensely, so close to the bone . . . we have the seamstress bitter and gnarled over her sewing machine, spitting bile onto the zippers and we have the young lovers, the young girl specifically with her adulterous moment trying to marry for a moment at least some happiness (HRRHC).

The acts of total immersion that Sexton engaged her students in often began with the invitation to “write a short poem, a character sketch using a persona . . . become that person, put on that mask.” The methods of dramatic introspection and incorporation that Sexton used to write poetry and to teach writing are strikingly akin to those used by actors as they work to build their characters. Nowhere are these methodologies more evident than in the notes she wrote for a course she taught as the Crawshaw Chair in Literature at Colgate University. The Crawshaw Chair required a long, weekly commute from Sexton’s home in Weston, Massachusetts, to Hamilton, New York. Sexton was required to teach two days of classes back-to-back, a writing workshop for about ten students in the evening, as well as a lecture course on poetry in the afternoon. During the time Sexton commuted from Weston to Colgate, she often complained of feeling anxious to the point of nausea. Much of Sexton’s
teaching was accompanied by stage fright and uncertainty, and there were many bad days and fears of failure.

Leverich describes Sexton as a shy, sensitive person who, on certain days, would sit at her desk in class, chain-smoking cigarettes, croaking out words between drinks of water. She seemed to him a desperately lonely creature. At the same time, there was a force, a charm, that was ever-powerful about her. She was both bold and timid, dominant and passive, even impatient, yet understanding (HRRHC).

In a conversation I had with the chair of the Department of English at Colgate, Bruce Berlind, he recalled the difficult weekly routine of picking Sexton up at the airport in Syracuse, driving back to Hamilton, New York (frequently singing songs from the 40s), and, the next day, driving back to the airport where she boarded a small plane for Boston. They co-taught the poetry workshop, and Sexton taught the lecture course alone. The lecture course, entitled “Anne on Anne,” co-designed with Berlind, was composed of a series of eleven lectures for a small group of English majors. Berlind describes this course as a “course in herself.”

Its structure was simply linear, beginning with Bedlam and coming up-to-date. The lecture component of the classes was minimal. Mostly the classes were discussion sessions based on the students’ readings of her books, copies of Anne’s drafts of many poems, and copies of various interviews and reviews of her work. The “first-person presence” was, of course, at the center—although Anne often claimed that the I in poems dealing with her affairs was a fiction (Personal correspondence, 1996).

The aim of this course was to engage students imaginatively with the writing life of Anne Sexton by studying and then performing the interpretive methods she used to write poetry. Gathered together in Lawrence Hall, room 320, students would sometimes inhabit the poetic form of a Sexton poem and then extend it, at times changing the content, but miming the metrics. Sexton openly invited her students to study along with her what she referred to as the tricks, flaws, and false starts that a poem undergoes before it reaches its final, published form. Throughout her lecture notes are meditations on poetry, mini-lectures, and classroom assignments that suggest that Sexton was not satisfied with having her students talk about poetry. Rather, she demanded that her students inhabit poetic forms and take on personae. In Lecture I of the Crawshaw series Sexton read the following statement by one of her critics: “Anne Sexton’s poems, for example, create largely the world of her persona, the I of the poems, which undergoes a continuing development and is clearly related intimately and painfully to the poet’s autobiography.” She, in turn, responded to this statement by stating that
I would like for a moment to disagree. It is true that I am an autobiographical poet most of the time, or at least so I lead my readers to believe. However, many times I use the personal when I am applying a mask to my face, somewhat like a young man applying the face of an aging clown. Picture me at my dressing table for a moment putting on the years. All those nights, all those cups of coffee ... all those shots of bourbon at 2 a.m ... all this applied like a rubber mask that the robber wears (HRHRC).

Like Sexton’s composing processes, theories of melancholy evoke acts of incorporation, skin, and the personal and cultural objects we endow with meaning. In ways akin to a method actor, the melancholic incorporates the beloved; she takes them in as idealized, demonized, in some cases, exoticized, others. In his 1917 essay, “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud argues that when a person has lost someone he/she loved, the ego incorporates aspects of the lost other into its very structures, thereby “sustaining” the life of the bereaved through acts of imitation. “By taking flight in the ego,” writes Freud, “love escapes annihilation.” Yet this escape from annihilation comes at great cost, for the incorporative strategies used by the melancholic function to disavow the loss and to deepen the grief.

These incorporative strategies are an effective means through which to remake the ego into the person who has been lost. It is in this sense that the melancholic bears a resemblance to a method actor, for her body becomes a double body, skilled at reproducing the gestures and being of some other person, a lost love, a charismatic leader, the ethos of a nation (see Phelan, 1993, 172). The language that Constantin Stanislavski used with his actors during rehearsals is replete with the language of incorporation and is useful for understanding the strategies used by the melancholic. In *Building A Character*, Stanislavski documents a young actor’s discussion of the process he used to create the character of a man who possessed distinctly different characteristics than himself. He writes:

[A]s soon as I was in this other man’s skin, my attitude towards you (Stanislavski) underwent a radical change. ... I enjoyed looking you full in the face in a brazen way and at the same time felt I had the right to do it without fear. Yet do you believe I could have done this in my own person? Never under any circumstances! In that other person’s skin I went as far as I liked, and if I dared do that face to face with you I should have no compunction in treating the audience across the footlights in the same way. (p. 27–8).

The capacity to cross the boundaries of skin into the character of another, and to do so with intention, caution, consistency, and to keep within the boundaries of the character, the play, or the “given circumstances” is work the
actor, unlike the melancholic, is adept at. The melancholic does not exert agency over her desire to transpose the ego of the bereaved into her own. And while both the actor and the melancholic may be skilled at transposition and incorporation, the actor retains these incorporative strategies as techniques, while for the melancholic these strategies serve to chisel away at the ego, resulting in a profound sense of ego loss.

Jacques Hassoun characterizes the melancholic as the eternally ravished one, the passive victim, who is depleted of drives and thus incapable of investing anything in the social world, sinking deeper and deeper into a desperate, endless recitation of complaints that are directed at unnameable, ungrievable losses. About social and institutional life, writes Hassoun:

Confronted with the enigma that the Other’s violence poses, the subject—here brought to subjection—finds himself somehow confronted with an absence of otherness. Where all the components of the social bond should be—audible, comprehensible—suddenly what looms up instead is a surprise that can only alienate the subject (Hassoun, 7, 1997).

I find Hassoun’s portrait of the melancholic troubling, however, for he casts melancholia as a passive state wherein a person is utterly stripped of agency and will. Returning to Freud, I found a somewhat different portrait, for the plaints and endless lyric laments of the melancholic proceed, according to Freud, from an attitude of revolt, a mental constellation by which a certain process has become transformed into melancholic contrition (1989, 169–70). I want to proceed from the position of revolt and lyric lament that characterizes much of Sexton’s poetry to the place of her pedagogical performances. As I do so, I want us to keep in mind that while the melancholic is overpowered, she refuses to be tamed (see Fanon 1965).

**APPARENT CONFESSIONS**

On the one hand, Sexton appeared to engage in self-conscious confessions in the seminar room, displaying her own raw and visible wounds to the academy. Confessions work to enlist the sororial and fraternal sympathies of the listener so as to exonerate the sinner and, in turn, to efface the differences between them. The confessional narrative casts Sexton as the victim, and through the medium of narrative, she passes her guilt on to her students and readers. After all, we may very well summon up some sympathy for Sexton, secretly finding that we are more like her than we dared imagine, and, out of our own unexamined anxieties, we might very well exonerate her.

Sexton openly admits to “doing reference work in sin,” and to using her place at the podium to seek “an appeal before a trial of angels” (HRRHC). In one of her
lectures at Colgate, she brings her students back to the scenes that inspired her poem “Flee on Your Donkey.” Sexton begins this lecture by telling her students that they will learn things that “no one else in the world knows” from looking at her worksheets. Back at the scenes that inspired this poem—a poem that would take Sexton from June 1962 to June 1966 to complete—students learn of Sexton’s desire to flee not only life but madness. She confesses that this is “a poem that everyone told me not to publish. It was too self-indulgent, it was material I had already gone over. And yet, I hadn’t told the full story of my madness. I hadn’t talked about fleeing it as well as fleeing life” (HRRHC). Her lyric laments persistently invoke the bodies of women who are confined, maimed, dying, contemplating suicide, melancholic, medicated, or penetrated without consent.

Yet, while Sexton appeared at every turn to confess her life repeatedly and unabashedly to her students, positioning herself as an apparent victim, her lyric laments and apparent confessions come from a mental constellation of revolt that is characteristic of melancholia. This melancholic revolt is manifested both in the trope of the mask that appears throughout the Crawshaw Lectures and in her parodic sensibilities. Sexton insisted on the fictive character of the I in her poems and explained to her students that, in the case of her poetry, “I am often being personal but I am not being personal about myself.” Sexton’s parodic sensibility functions to undermine the normative order of “performing confession” in the academy. Parody need not be comic. Derived from the Greek parodia, parody is a countersong, a neighboring song (see Crapanzano, 1990, 144).

Like melancholia, parody is structured in ambivalence, for it too has the paradoxical capacity both to incorporate and challenge that which it criticizes. There is a paradox inherent in the incorporative tactics of Sexton’s composing processes: she simultaneously incorporates loss or lack in her body and disincorporates the authority of the master by wearing her wounds, to paraphrase Franz Fanon, on the surface of her skin like an open sore—an eyesore to the colonizer.

The losses and ambivalence that Sexton carried into her teaching life manifest themselves, I believe, in a specifically performative approach to teaching writing. Put more directly, the performativity marking Sexton’s teaching documents is drenched in melancholia, and these performances allegorize losses that are deemed ungrievable in academic institutions where grief is preempted by the absence of cultural conventions for avowing loss. I do not intend to suggest that all performative pedagogies are manifestations of trauma, but I do want to argue that there is social value in framing performative pedagogy as a structure of address that is directed toward loss. This value is articulated in the following passage by Butler: “Insofar as the grief remains unspeakable,” writes Butler, the rage over the loss can redouble by virtue of remaining unavowed.
And if that rage is publicly proscribed, the melancholic effects of such a proscription can achieve suicidal proportions. The emergence of collective institutions for grieving are thus crucial for survival, for reassembling community, for rearticulating kinship, for reweaving sustaining relations. . . . What cannot be avowed as a constitutive identification for any given subject position runs the risk not only of becoming externalized in a degraded form, but repeatedly repudiated and subject to a policy of disavowal (Butler, 1997, 148–149).

By giving dramatic language to ambivalence and loss, Sexton demonstrates how pedagogy can be used to avow a broader range of subject positions in the classroom. Her use of performance accommodates the double-ghosted bodies that are housed in the melancholic. Performative modes of address have the capacity to bring about dialogue with the phantoms we hold, precisely because in performance, the body is metonymic, of self, of characters, of voice, and of personae. As I said earlier, what marks the melancholic student is a loss of address, an unspeakability that is not a symptom of thoughtlessness, or “retrieval problems,” but rather a symptom of what cannot be spoken in school. In my case, I failed to locate a narrative structure through which I could speak of and grieve my father’s self-abuse and my sense of abandonment. Consequently, I used teaching as a means through which to compose a narrative that could contain my loss. This move, however, only served to harbor the not fully confronted phantoms or secrets from my earlier family history. The figure of Anne Sexton is but one example of an historical figure to whom I turned in order to establish an addressable other through which I could work through the losses that were encrypted in my pedagogy. In this sense, we might think of Anne Sexton as a mask through which I could approach the secrets of my past about the claims addictions made on my family and how these secrets exert their influence on my pedagogy. What remained half-spoken in my life prevented me from using language in conventional or normative ways. Thus, the mask constitutes another kind of expressive contract, it organizes an/other operation of language.

Students who get lost in their own circuitous speech can often establish an object of address through the spatial registers characterizing the mask and the image or through the fragmented, associative narratives of juxtaposition. Because performance is contingent upon physically establishing an addressable other, an audience, and crafting a character and a point of view (subjectivity), it offers a viable means through which to introduce the Other into pedagogy. In this sense, pedagogy can ritualize melancholy by creating an occasion for writing that is open to ambivalence and can, moreover, allow the writer to link melancholia to a larger historical field, which would open texts to meanings otherwise foreclosed.
The approach to remembering I call for requires that we create exchanges between the ghosts and the living, thereby transforming losses that await articulation into meaning. This work is delicate; it calls for a logic that Peggy Phelan describes as moving us beyond the Euclidean plane, for ghosts defy the laws of “proof,” and hence they are likely to be subjected to dismissal and doubt (1993). The melancholic cannot reproduce or prove the presence of the Object she longs for, but if, through writing and other forms of representations available through the expressive registers of theatre, dance, the visual arts, and music, the melancholic can remember by generating personal meanings, details, and associations, then she can restage and restate the effort to remember her loss. In this way, she can learn how loss can acquire meaning, and potentially generate recovery, not of the departed, but of herself, as the person who remembers.¹⁰

If I began this chapter in the archives in Austin, I want to end with a phone call to Aspen that was prompted by the letter I found in the archives. In February 1998, I interviewed Chris Leverich. Leverich remembers Sexton as fragile and sickly, suspicious, her eyes glazed over with tranquilizers. “I felt that she was working hard to get through the class. She was so terrified to be there, and you could see the terror in her body. At the same time, she was profoundly insightful, perhaps the finest professor I’ve ever had.” When I asked Leverich what price he exacted as a student in her class, he told me that “Anne Sexton’s teaching triggered for me a deep channel of emotion and areas of thought which were oftentimes frightening, so much so that I would push them aside. I’ve looked at these emotions for brief moments of time, but they trigger feelings beyond grief and sadness. Sexton wrote and spoke to us about her deepest emotional and social involvements, and she taught me to address mine.” Leverich’s memories suggest that Sexton’s pedagogy of masks offered her students opportunities to approach, in some instances to wear, the masks of an Other. Such an approach to teaching and learning can create possibilities for teachers and students to re-draw the lines demarcating their own psychic and social life, and, by doing so, to renegotiate the personal, social, and political prohibitions on grieving.

NOTES

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1. This essay portrays an example of what Leigh Gilmore refers to as the “auto/biographical demand,” a form of critical life writing in which the demands of autobiography, the call to tell my story, and the demands of biography, the call to tell your story, coincide. Gilmore argues that the auto/biographical demand presents a narrative dilemma because it both divides and doubles the writer. At the moment that I begin to tell the story of Sexton’s teaching life, aspects of my life surface and demand articulation. These demands provoke a sense of instability in my writing and pose emotional and rhetorical constraints that auto/biography manages by mingling a range of forms: biography, memoir, autobiography, poetry, the essay and theoretical writing. Throughout this chapter, I draw on Gilmore’s concept to explore the ways in which the auto/biographical demand places in relief the double bind faced by a writer who inherits the unavoidable tasks to speak for the dead and to properly address a traumatized past that is unspeakable because it remains shrouded in shame. The dead, Gilmore goes on to remind us, make demands on the living, they surface in our dreams, our current relationships, through writing, teaching, and scholarship. But in order to understand these demands, the writer must distinguish between her story and theirs and in so doing, must navigate through the delicate tensions that are inherent in the narrative structure of auto/biography—the tension between telling stories and sustaining family loyalities, articulating family secrets and properly mourning a traumatized past (see Gilmore).

2. Throughout this chapter, I draw on teaching documents that are housed in the Anne Sexton archive at the Harry Ransom Research Humanities Center at the University of Texas, Austin. When referring to these materials, I use the abbreviation HRRHC.

3. Abraham and Torok develop the concept of “cryptonymy” to reconfigure the Freudian notion of the unconscious as a psychic crypt, a kind of tomb or vault harboring the not fully confronted “phantoms” or secrets from the analysand’s earlier family history. For more on the concept of the fantome and cryptic incorporation, see Peggy Kamuf, “Abraham’s Wake,” Diacritics 9,

4. Madeleine Grumet discusses the epistemic and pedagogical implications of composing educational autobiography by conjugating theory with literature, history, and other people’s stories in “Scholae Personae: Masks for Meaning.”

5. For an extensive discussion on the concept of a “return of a difference,” see Elizabeth Ellsworth (1997), *Teaching Positions*.

6. To ‘work something through’ is to re-possess or reclaim emotions that we have become estranged from; this work makes present that which was otherwise encrypted or buried in the past so that it can in fact be felt as emanating from one’s own person, one’s own body. Thus, ‘working through’ memories entails the gradual knowing of the disaffected material that comes from our own being. In his essay, “Remembering, Repeating and Working Through,” Freud describes this process as one which must “allow the patient time to become more conversant with this resistance with which he has now become acquainted, to work through it, to overcome it, by continuing, in defiance of it, the analytic work according to the fundamental rule of analysis” (volume twelve, *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, p155).

7. Throughout this essay, I characterize Anne Sexton as a melancholic writer/teacher. Although Sexton’s mental illness was never defined during her lifetime, psychologist Kay Redfield Jamison maintains that if she were living today, the case for manic-depressive illness would be very strong. Not only does Sexton have a strong family history of mental illness and suicide, but her symptoms—pronounced swings and labiality in mood, expansiveness, impulsivity, altered sleep and energy patterns, anger, seasonal variations in mood—are all highly characteristic of manic-depressive illness. So, too, are her alcoholism and the worsening, rapidly cycling quality of the course of her illness. Sexton’s “hysterical” symptoms may very well have been a manifestation of the emotional extremes and labiality that go along with manic-depressive illness. Women who have affective illness not uncommonly are diagnosed as “borderlines” or “hysterics.”

With this said, I want to emphasize that throughout this chapter I use the term melancholic to evoke more than a congenital disease caused by a biological endowment gone awry, or a “brain problem.” I do not wish to deny the biological dimension of melancholia, rather I wish to argue that melancholia
contains the possibilities to articulate more fully the boundaries between psychic and social life, and, like every human emotion, it offers us the opportunity to gain insight into self and Other. Sadness, writes Michael Vincent Miller, informs us that the loss was important; “anger alerts us that the person in our path is an obstacle. Depression can be the most chastening state imaginable: it throws us back on our deepest sorrows and feelings of helplessness. What it may tell us about our limitations, our fears of abandonment, failure, death, ought not to be narrowed too quickly to a matter of neurotransmitters flowing between synapses” (see Miller in Hassoun, viii–ix).

8. See Elaine Scarry (1985). Scarry not only explores the political implications inherent in the inexpressibility of physical pain, but she explores the role of the imagination in coming to terms with the limits of language, arguing that ‘the human being who creates on behalf of the pain in her own body may remake herself to be one who creates on behalf of the pain originating in another’s body; so, too, the human beings who create out of pain (whether their own or others’) may remake themselves in a way that distributes the facts and responsibilities of sentience out into the external world’ (pp. 324–5). Scarry’s theory of making offers important insights into the potential implications of Sexton’s poetry, suggesting that her imaginative work as a poet, teacher and playwright distributed unspeakable facts and responsibilities of sentience into an external world in an effort, not only to articulate loss, but to move away from pain, towards the boundaries of self-transformation.

9. Diane Wood Middlebrook is cautious about concluding that Ralph Harvey, Anne Sexton’s father, made sexual advances toward her. However, Sexton’s memories of this abuse do surface in her psychiatric tapes and in her work. Middlebrook writes, “Was Sexton’s report a memory or a fantasy? This question achieved great importance in her therapy, and in her art, but it cannot be answered with certainty. The evidence for its actuality lies chiefly in the vividness and frequency of her descriptions during trance states. Moreover, Sexton’s symptoms and her behavior—in particular, the dissociative states that were so prominent a feature in her case, her tendency to sexualize significant relationships, and the fluidity of the boundaries she experienced between herself and other people—fit the clinical picture of a woman who has undergone sexual trauma. From a clinical point of view, her doubts about this memory were not evidence that it did not happen” (57). Middlebrook goes on to note that Sexton’s accounts did vary and that her memories of abuse surfaced in therapy when she was reading and writing about incest, especially during active work on a play that had, as its central conflict, an incestuous episode. “As Sexton frequently commented,” notes Middlebrook, “once she had put a memory into words, the words were what she remembered. Thus she could give dramatic reality to a feeling by letting
it generate a scene and putting that scene into words for Dr. Orne while in a trance” (57). Dawn Skorczewski however, notes the danger inherent in questioning the evidence of such abuse, arguing that to suggest that Sexton merely dramatized her memories through her art is to align ourselves with patriarchy. For a substantive and moving discussion about the educative value of teaching incest narratives, see Authoring A Life, by Brenda Daly.

10. In Unmarked: The Politics of Performance, Peggy Phelan elaborates a form of remembering that does not seek to reproduce the lost object but rather rehearses and repeats “the disappearance of the subject who longs always to be remembered” (147). The crucial point underlying Phelan’s argument is that to simply describe what or whom we have lost does not reproduce the object, rather these descriptions remind us how loss acquires meaning and can indeed generate recovery, not of the lost object, per se, but for the person who remembers. The economy of performance spurs memory on, encouraging memory to become present, yet these memories cannot be contained or controlled.