MIXING IT UP

The Personal in Public Discourse

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In the last two decades of work in composition studies, the personal as a category has come under siege from proponents of post-structuralist, post-Marxist, feminist, and social constructionist theory. This siege has now provoked a backlash in which personal, expressive writing is valorized for its difference from conventional, and especially densely “theoretical,” academic writing: scholars engaging in personal writing are now hailed for defying academic disciplinary conventions. Roughly simultaneously, in response to the same theoretical perspectives that have laid siege to the personal, critical ethnographers in and outside composition have concluded that these theories place an ethical responsibility on ethnographers to make public admissions of the involvement of the personal in their work (see Kirsch and Ritchie). Thus, the intrusion of personal writing into a compositionist’s scholarly text can currently be taken either as a gesture in defiance of recent critical theory or as a means of complying with the ethical strictures that theory imposes.

In this chapter, I examine how we have arrived at these contradictory positions. I argue that confusion over what constitutes the personal has led to this discrepancy in positions on its use and prevents us from more productive engagement with the personal in public discourse, in both our writing and our teaching. I begin with a brief review of the specific challenges theorists have posed to prior conceptions of the personal and then explore the implications of these challenges for current debate on the rhetoric and ethics of public engagements with the personal in writing. My contention is that those who valorize personal writing for break- ing away from academic writing conventions all too often mistake rehearsals of an established public genre of writing for writing that contests dominant social constructions of what is deemed to be personal, and personal in, experience and writing. A commodified notion of
personal writing is treated as in itself producing a specific kind of work; the labor of writing, reading, and researching in producing specific use values from that writing is dismissed from consideration. In critical ethnography, this commodified notion of the work of personal writing appears as the fetishizing of specific textual forms, which are treated as in themselves constituting a means by which to conform to ethical strictures. Thus the full material social process of ethnographic work is reduced to a focus on the problematics of textual conventions, with deleterious results.

In my view, it is Marxist-inflected theory that has posed the most serious challenges to dominant conceptions of the personal in writing and that has provoked the most serious backlash. Raymond Williams explains the issue of the individual writer for Marxist theory thus:

To see individuation as a social process is to set limits to the isolation but also perhaps to the autonomy of the individual author. To see form as formative has a similar effect. The familiar question in literary history, “what did this author do to this form?” is often reversed, becoming “what did this form do to this author?” Meanwhile, within these questions, there is the difficult general problem of the nature of the active “subject.” (192)

The tendency in Marxist thought that most transforms the question of the individual author is its identification of the individual subject “as a characteristic form of bourgeois thought” (193). Not only is the writer’s language defined as social in its forms and conventions, so also are the “contents of [the writer’s] consciousness.” It is this last implication of the sociality of writing that, Williams notes, provokes the sharpest reactions. And insofar as it has sometimes led to understanding individual writers as mere “carriers” of determinate social structures, that reaction, that is, the reduction of a writer’s consciousness to no more than a particular social or historical category, is fully understandable. Consider the move to categorize writers using the triumvirate of race, class, and gender, say, or the reigning zeitgeist of a given time and place. What is missing in such readings, Williams notes, is any consideration of the “living and reciprocal relationships of the individual and the social” (194). Faced with such reductions, “it is not surprising that many people run back headlong into bourgeois-individualist concepts, forms, and institutions, which they see as their only protection.” The social, imagined as monolithic, is deemed not to allow for
any possibility of individuation, and so a “social perspective” on the personal is rejected as inadequate and reductive.

In practice, this rejection has led to a renewed valorization of the personal in writing. Identifying academic writing with stylistically dense, abstract, theoretical writing and with what seem to be inappropriate constraints made on writers by the social, represented by the academic institution, compositionists have turned to recognizably nonacademic discursive moves to counter what are seen as the limitations that academic discourse places on what writing may express and accomplish (see, for example, Bridwell-Bowles; Tompkins, “Me”). However, such moves essentially sidestep the sociality of the personal, risking in effect the reinforcement of dominant conceptions of the personal and the social. Williams observes that what modes of domination exclude is often designated as “the personal or the private, or as the natural or even the metaphysical. . . since what the dominant has effectively seized is...the ruling definition of the social” (125). It is this seizure, Williams insists, that has to be resisted. But those writers turning to the personal instead often accept such ruling definitions, turning to what the dominant has deemed “personal” as a refuge from, rather than a contested site of, the social.

Thus, in practice, this turn to the personal has resulted not in new forms of writing but in recapitulations of the generic category of personal writing—that is to say, writing recognizably “personal” because it rehearses those features dominant culture has designated to be “personal.” And so, as Joseph Harris complains, we often get not a new form of discourse or an intervention in dominant (say, academic) discourse but uncritical adoptions of the “older belletristic” discourse of the personal essay, as cultivated by such canonical figures as Montaigne, Addison, De Quincey, Orwell, E. B. White, and the like (Harris, “Person, Position, Style” 50).

Such uncritical adoptions of this traditional genre are problematic because of the ideological message carried by the genre itself (see Haefner). As Fredric Jameson has warned, because a genre “is essentially a socio-symbolic message . . . [whose form] is imminently and intrinsically an ideology in its own right,” this message persists in any reappropriation of the form (141). Those writers who adopt the genre of personal writing under the illusion that they are thereby escaping social discourse—“cultivating some tufts of what grows wild outside,” in Peter Elbow’s formulation (“Response” 90)—fail to recognize the form’s
ideological message and so can be said not so much to appropriate the genre but rather to be appropriated by it. If, for example, a genre establishes a “contract” between a writer and his or her specific public (Jameson 106), the genre of personal writing itself comprehends a set of expectations, beliefs, and attitudes about the value and constitution of personal experience, at least the experience of the writer, and a way of approaching that experience, which is profoundly ideological. Writers (and readers) adopting such a contract uncritically reinforce just such expectations, beliefs, and attitudes.

This is not an argument against reappropriating existing genres, the personal essay included. Indeed, from a social perspective, there is no alternative to engaging existing social forms, just as there is no possibility of inventing a purely personal, private language untouched by the social. Rather, it is an argument for confronting, and making strategic use of, the social historicity of any of the genres we adopt in our writing, recognizing both the historical ideological content of any discursive genre, personal writing included, and also the susceptibility of that content to change as it is deployed in different social and cultural contexts. It is in so doing that a particular discursive genre can be reappropriated to new ends.

All this is to redefine the question of the use of the personal in writing as, first, a question of the rhetorical gesture any such use makes, given the specific material social circumstances of that use. Both the rhetorical and ethical significance borne by use of recognizably personal writing will depend considerably on the social location of the speaker, the occasion, the intended purpose, and audience. The particular ethical and rhetorical charge of an instance of personal writing is contingent on both the history of the use of such writing and on the material social circumstances of that instance of use. Hence, calls to valorize, engage in, and teach personal writing miss the mark. We need instead to interrogate how a particular writer’s engagement in such writing might operate, given the particular circumstances and purposes of that engagement.

Consider, for example, the following situation. A few years ago, as a member of the Iowa Immigrant Rights Project (IRP), I participated in lobbying Iowa state legislators (and others) on behalf of policies affecting the civil rights of recent immigrants to Iowa. This lobbying took the form of conversations with individual legislators, public debate, a newspaper editorial, and letters to the editor. In my lobbying efforts, my
claims about immigrants were questioned—their susceptibility to violations of their rights and to prejudice and violence, their commitment to learning English, their alleged criminality, and so on. The Iowa IRP was a loose affiliation of immigrant groups, the local American Friends Service Committee, interested members of various religious and labor organizations, and public interest lawyers. Thus, my membership in the IRP in itself gave me no particular credibility with legislators: it signified at best only my concern—shared by other members of the project—about immigrant rights’ issues. The rhetorical difficulty I faced, in my spoken and written discourse, was how to persuade legislators of the validity of my claims.

Any strategy I used involved some sort of personal admission, if we accept that any self-identification other than my affiliation with the IRP constituted an “exposure” of information otherwise private. For example, in discussing English Only legislation and the difficulties of language learning, I might attempt to gain more credibility for my claims by identifying myself as a professor of English, on the assumptions that this would lead my audience to 1) grant me expert status on language learning; and 2) accept my commitment to the English language (a commitment proponents of English Only legislation claim its opponents do not share). Alternatively, in making claims about immigrants’ experience of discrimination, I might identify myself as the spouse, stepfather, and in-law of recent immigrants, on the assumption that my claims about the experiences of immigrants would be accepted as reliable by virtue of being close to firsthand.

The rhetorical value of these personal admissions would be contingent on a variety of factors. Most obviously, the rhetorical value of the first admission would depend on the esteem, or lack thereof, with which academics, and particularly English professors, were held. Simply put, would my identification as English professor mark me as expert or egghead? Similarly, admitting to marrying into a family of recent immigrants might work either to validate my claims about the experience of immigrants, and my right to speak for them, or alternatively to call into question my objectivity on the matter and mark me as a special interest whose personal feelings colored his views of the public interest. Public discourse has available a variety of categories into which to place admissions like mine. In fact, in making any of them I am simply offering my listeners a set of possible, and quite public, familiar ways of categorizing
me and thus my argument. This highlights the fact that no such thing as personal writing exists, if by personal we mean writing that does not arise from and invoke some shared, public, socially constructed category: egghead or expert, authentic family man or special pleader. Instead, being personal constitutes a rhetorical strategy, successful or not, of donning the mantle of a public category to establish a persuasive ethos.

This is perhaps more readily seen when public figures attempt to get personal. For example, when presidential candidate George W. Bush confessed to the world his faith in Jesus Christ as his personal savior, he may have been attesting to a profound experience, but he was not being personal at all. Rather, he was invoking a range of possible publicly available categories into which voters might place him: Bible Belt hick, devout and trustworthy Christian, panderer, moral titan. That it was not an aberration from public discourse is clear from the responses it evoked. While editorialists and pundits disagreed with one another over the political import of Bush’s statement, they had no trouble determining the simple meaning of his admission, something they might have experienced if he had offered a statement coming from some realm truly outside the social—if one can imagine any such thing.

But uses of the personal raise not only questions of rhetorical efficacy but also, as the term ethos suggests, questions of ethics. If the ability to make rhetorical gestures of personal admission constitutes a kind of cultural capital, then the value of that capital is contingent on one’s social capital. The fact that an established figure in literary criticism like Jane Tompkins has gone personal in her academic writing (e.g., “Me and My Shadow”) may speak primarily to her social position in the academy—her going personal may function less as a risk taken than a display of that position. We see evidence of this in the conflicted response to Tompkins’s essays in which she goes personal (“Me,” “Pedagogy”). Olivia Frey expresses the hope that Tompkins’s “brave experiment” will pave the way for others (507–08). But Frey also notes that she herself cannot yet go personal because she is, after all, “not Jane Tompkins” (524). Similarly, Terry Myers Zawacki reports: “When I read Tompkins’ essay [“Pedagogy of the Distressed”], I can’t help thinking about the authority that Tompkins has, because she is ‘Jane Tompkins,’ to challenge boundaries” (35).

In noting that they themselves are not so free to go personal as Tompkins, Frey and Zawacki raise a second complication for writers con-
templating such moves: not only is there nothing ethical about the dis-
tribution of capital of whatever kind, the value of that capital is contin-
gent on whether it is recognized by others in positions of dominance. As
demonstrated by teachers’ responses to students’ autobiographical
efforts, not all instances of writers “going personal” are accorded the
same value. Or, to return to the lobbying example, the options for going
personal or not, options that were available to me, were not available to
all. Rather, they were contingent on perceptions of my national, racial,
and gender identity.

For instance, while my (pale) skin color does not in theory denote my
citizenship status (e.g., I might be a citizen of Canada, France, Ireland,
the United Kingdom, New Zealand), for the vast majority of Americans,
it does. Nor in theory should the particular inflections I might give to
my words denote my citizenship. In practice, however, my skin color and
vocal inflections are commonly taken (recognized) as an indication of my
nationality as American. My being male probably furthers this identifi-
cation, given patriarchal notions of Americanness. So, while I might
choose to identify myself as a member of a family of recent immigrants,
or to leave my family relations unexpressed, that choice was and is not
available to many others—for example, those with darker skin tones or
those who speak with particular accents. In short, how I choose to rep-
resent myself is more than a matter of individual rhetorical strategizing
based on surmises about my audience; it is a matter of my material social
position as a white male speaking in a particular accent on issues of
immigrants’ rights in Iowa—a matter not simply of positioning oneself
but of contending with how one is positioned materially and socially.

Questions of how to confront the power relations of social material
positioning have been addressed most prominently in the work of criti-
cal and feminist pedagogy and critical ethnography. In this work, the
personal is understood not as a way of writing emerging from and
answerable to a realm outside the social but as a site where the social,
understood as heterogeneous, is negotiated. This recognition of the
sociality of the personal raises questions of epistemology, rhetorical effi-
cacy, and ethics. First, to put it crudely, if knowledge, personal and oth-
otherwise, is socially constructed and continually under construction, as it
were, then claims to the objectivity of one’s knowledge are untenable
and, therefore, rhetorically inefficacious. Second, the operation of
power relations between speaker and listener, and between researcher
and informant, has to be recognized in the production of any representation of their interactions. My representation of another’s experience is not only epistemologically suspect but politically suspect as well: by what authority, it may be asked, do I speak for, and in the name of, others—such as recent immigrants? Third, just as my authority for speaking in the name of others is suspect, so I need to be wary of the likely political, material, and social effects of my representations of others on them. I cannot disavow responsibility for such effects by claiming that I am simply speaking the objective truth or have the best intentions for those in the name of and for whom I claim to speak.

It is difficult to argue against the strictures these concerns place on ethnographers. And the history of anthropology provides ample testimony of the dire effects of work uninformed by these concerns. Nonetheless, those attempting to follow these strictures in their writing now confront new ethical dilemmas. For critical ethnographers who intend their work not simply to increase the general stock of knowledge but to improve the material social conditions of those living at the field site, the more closely they attempt to follow these strictures in their writing, the more ineffectual that writing appears to be in achieving such ends. In “Beyond the Personal,” Gesa Kirsch and Joy Ritchie have argued that ethnographers need not only to “encode in [their] research narratives the provisional nature of knowledge that [their] work generates and the moral dilemmas inherent in research” but also to “reconsider our privileging of certain, coherent, and univocal writing and include multiple voices and diverse interpretations in our research narratives, highlighting the ideologies that govern our thinking as well as those that may contradict our own” (24). Heeding such calls, ethnographers have produced a wealth of texts presenting multivocal, tentative, personal perspectives. Unfortunately, as Kirsch remarks in a subsequent essay, these textual practices themselves can disguise writers’ continuing authorial control, they can fail to provide the theoretical framework and cultural context necessary for understanding the multiple voices merging in a single text, they make new and difficult demands on readers, they require tolerance for ambiguity and contradictory claims, and they easily become elitist and exclusionary. (193–94)

Too often, Kirsch warns, the politically emancipatory aims of the writers can be contradicted by the exclusionary effects of their writing.
Ralph Cintron echoes this warning, observing of educational ethnographies that the “pragmatic needs of education [may] . . . inhibit ethnographic experimentation” (401). For Cintron, only those writers who “need not answer to institutions that are significantly controlled by ‘bottom-line’ economics,” who instead “have the luxury to experiment,” can legitimately engage in such experimentation. Thus, just as critics indulging in recognizably “personal” writing can be said to be displaying the privileged position that enables them to afford to do so, so for Cintron only those ethnographers in the privileged position of being free of responsibility to “bottom-line economics” or material consequences on others from their writing can afford to write other than traditional, impersonal ethnographies. Indeed, we may understand their experiments, like authors’ engagements in the “personal,” primarily as displays of that privilege.

However, rather than assuming display of privilege as the motivating impulse for such textual experiments, I would argue that they arise instead from significantly mistaking where the work of ethnography, and the emancipation it is meant to effect, is located. If work comes to be located primarily in the text, then writers will focus attention on applying the strictures to the formal features of the written commodity. It is thus that a writer can come to substitute his or her own emancipation from writing conventions for the emancipation of those living at the research site, and thus that complexities of textual notation can come to stand in for the complexities of negotiating the experience, politics, and ethics of face-to-face encounters between the ethnographer and informants. To return to the example of my lobbying, it would be as if my concern to accurately represent the ethical complexities of the issues surrounding immigration, my own investment in such issues, and the problematic of my speaking on behalf of others were to override my efforts at persuading tired and impatient legislators to adopt a particular stance on pending legislation, so that I produced discourse fraught with disclaimers of my objectivity, qualifications to my positions, attempts at the presentation of multiple perspectives and voices, and the like. After all, in my experience with the IRP, members constantly confronted such issues in the process of researching and developing position statements, organizing events, forming coalitions, and reviewing crises both unexpected and ongoing. But while I would agree that questioning one’s own positionality, interests, and the politics and problematics of representation
is indeed crucial work for those involved in such projects, that is not to say that a text emerging from that work should attempt to capture those dynamics in its notational strategies, any more than a text needs to incorporate all the alternative drafts produced in the process of its composition. While such a text might be useful to the writer or those studying the writing process (think of scholarly editions of literary texts), it would carry significantly less use value as a lobbying tool. In short, much of what theorists like Kirsch and Ritchie quite rightly call for in the work of ethnography could (and does) take place in the work that goes on at the research site, which can then inform, rather than find formal textual equivalents in, some of the published writing that emanates from and reports on that research. But there exists no necessary equivalence between a textual form and the ethics of the interactions on which the text itself reports.

This confusion between a textual form and the ethics of the work, part of which includes textual production, mirrors compositionists’ confusion in their recent valorizations of personal writing. In both cases, a textual form, or set of forms, is imagined in itself to produce specific effects, good or bad, rather than being seen as notations whose ethical value depends on the specific practices, and conditions (including histories) of practices, with them. This confusion instances commodity fetishism, in which “the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race” (Marx 164–65). The value of the form is identified not with the social relations of its production (including reception) but with the form itself. Consequently, it is the exchange value of the form, rather than its use value in achieving particular ends in specific circumstances, arising from particular kinds of labor with it, that is recognized.

We can see this treatment of writing as commodity in the kinds of valorization given to writing highlighting the personal location of the writer. Critics’ praise of such writing rarely addresses the specific use it has had. As Harris observes, praise for Jane Tompkins’s personal essay “Pedagogy of the Distressed” was directed at Tompkins herself for taking such a risk—not, significantly, for any insights it offered. (In fact, as Harris observes, Tompkins’s essay simply “recycl[ed] many of the insights of writing teachers from Britton to Bruffee to Elbow without citation” [Harris, Person, Position, Style 47–48]). And as David Shumway
observes in a rejoinder to Frey, Tompkins’s essay “Me and My Shadow” was successful first and foremost at achieving distinction for the writer, for being “noticed” (“Solidarity” 107–09; “Comment” 833).

On those occasions when some use for the personal in writing is identified, its use for the writer is often conflated with its general use for all. In other words, the writing is again treated as a textual commodity: its effects are imagined to inhere in the text and, like any commercial product, to be guaranteed for any and all consumers. Such an approach ignores the ways in which the use value of writing varies by the writer, the occasion of its production, the reader and the practices of reading and conditions of reading it—that is, by the labor and social conditions of production. Writing, personal or otherwise, is not in itself useful but rather can be used for particular, different purposes by particular readers following specific practices, which themselves merit interrogation.

For example, it seems quite likely that, as Jane Hindman argues in a recent essay defending personal writing, a “glimpse into one’s life [can] provide a way to rethink professional work,” and, as she quotes Victor Villanueva, Jr. observing, autobiography can be used “as a way of knowing our predispositions to see things certain ways” (Villanueva, “The Personal” 51; qtd. in Hindman 37). These sound like eminently laudable goals for a writer to pursue for herself, at least some of the time. For a particular writer to use the activity of writing as a way to rethink his professional work and come to know his predispositions might be just the thing for that writer to pursue in his private journal, written to himself, should he have the time and means and need to do so. But the writing produced might well be useless in helping other readers rethink their professional work, or come to know their predispositions, or indeed accomplish any number of other tasks. The use value of the writing, in other words, is particular not to the text but to the user, occasion of using, and mode and condition of use.

If the value of personal writing is itself contingent in these ways, then its place in writing pedagogy needs to be rethought. Recent arguments for the inclusion of personal writing contend that personal writing offers a way to enable students to break free from the confines of academic discourse (Annas; Bridwell-Bowles 350; Torgovnick 27; see Haefner 127–28). The aim here is to make possible the emergence of forms of thought not expressible within such confines. But here again, the labor of producing writing, of writing as an activity, is often elided,
and features of the commodified form of the personal essay are often
treated as in themselves giving students this freedom. It makes good—if
by now common—pedagogic sense to warn students against paying too
much attention to conventions of form at certain stages of their writing
and to encourage them to find ways to link their writing to their per-
sonal lives. However, doing this is not the same as advising them to par-
ticipate in a particular genre—that is, to produce the product commonly
recognized as *personal writing*. For writing that may exhibit few or no
traces of personal writing in its forms may nonetheless stem productively
from a writer’s personal engagement in the writing. Harris has
observed that while Harry Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital*
bears no features of that genre of writing recognized as “personal,” it is
nonetheless personal in the sense that Braverman shows “passionate
commitment to his subject through the range of his reading and the
clarity and care of his argument” (“Person, Position, Style” 49). In the
introduction to his book, Braverman admits that “[l]ike all craftsmen,
even the most inarticulate, I always resented [being robbed of a craft
heritage and given little or nothing to take its place], and as I reread
these pages, I find in them a sense not only of social outrage . . . but also
perhaps of personal affront” (6; qtd. in Harris, *Person, Position, Style* 49).
Thus, for Braverman, there is a personal resonance in making his argu-
ment in *Labor and Monopoly Capital* against the degradation, through de-
skilling, of work and workers.

Yet, Pamela Annas, in “Style as Politics,” compares Braverman’s style
of writing unfavorably to writing that is more recognizably personal in
style. Annas encourages her students to produce writing in which they
base their arguments “at least as much on lived personal experience as
on more conventional sources of information” (369, qtd. in Harris,
*Person, Position, Style* 48). But she fails to recognize Braverman’s writing
as such, even though from his introduction it too appears quite clearly
to be based “at least as much on lived personal experience” as other writ-
ing Annas singles out for praise that is more recognizably personal in the
textual forms it takes (e.g., Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* and
Robin Lakoff’s *Language and Women’s Place*). What distinguishes
Braverman’s book is not its absence of foundation in personal experi-
ence but the rhetoric Braverman employs in his writing. In other words,
Annas identifies the personal only in writing with a set of recognizable
textual features. She is thus blind to the possibility that writing that follows
conventions of impersonality might be as profoundly personal as—perhaps in some instances more so than—conventionally, and thus recognizably, personal writing.

This is not to condemn writing that draws on conventions of personal writing but to insist that any conventions be interrogated for the uses to which they are put, for whom, by whom, and how. In his contribution to a recent *College English* symposium, “The Politics of the Personal,” Villanueva, regularly cited for his autobiographical *Bootstraps*, ends up warning against writing that constitutes effectively “the reverse of the wolf in sheep’s clothing . . . expressionism with a social and political rationale” (52). While he insists that “[t]here must be room for elements of autobiography” in our writing, he calls for “the autobiographical as critique,” “not as confession and errant self-indulgence, not as the measure on which to assess theory, not as a replacement for rigor” (51; my emphasis).

The question of whether to allow for the personal and private in writing is, in short, a misguided question. What matters is not whether writers employ the conventions of personal writing in their writing, but the ends to which they employ them and the circumstances, and reading practices, that might allow for such ends to be achieved. Do we want, or need, writing that rehearses the conventions of personal writing to reinscribe the ideology of individualism? Can we deploy personal writing to call into question conventional understandings of what the personal means, to mix it up, as it were, in our writing? Under what circumstances might such mixing end up valorizing, again, conventional understandings of the personal? By what reading practices might such conventional understandings be undermined? Insofar as all writing is, in some sense, personal; insofar as all writing is also, in a profound sense, public; and insofar as the personal and the public in writing are not commodities but effects, it makes no sense to ask whether we, or our students, should produce, or be allowed to produce, either. Instead, we can ask of any writing and reading practice how conventions associated with either the personal or the public, conventionally understood, are deployed, and how we ourselves in our reading and writing might mix up, to contest, the conventional understandings of both.