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DYNAMIC DISCLOSURES: PERSONAL WRITING, RELATIONAL RHETORIC, AND INSTITUTIONAL NARRATIVES

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by

Vicki C. Hsu

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The dissertation of Vicki C. Hsu was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Debra Hawhee
McCourtney Professor of Civic Deliberation
Director of Graduate Studies Department of English
Dissertation Adviser
Chair of Committee

Athelstan S. Canagarajah
Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Applied Linguistics and of English

Ebony Coletu
Assistant Professor of English

Rosemary Jolly
Weiss Chair of the Humanities in Literature and Human Rights
Professor of Comparative Literature and of English

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School.
Abstract

This study explores how personal narratives are deployed in academic settings—at times as strategies of self-empowerment that shift institutional practices and procedures, and at others as evidence of multiculturalism in ways that continue to obscure systems of domination and institutional constraints on self-determination. Drawing from the work of sociologist Margaret R. Somers, I develop an approach to personal writing specifically attuned to how (re)contextualization can assign new value to one’s story in service of different individual or institutional goals—for example, how an autobiography that once changed a homogenous literary landscape might later be tokenized as evidence of multiculturalism in lieu of systemic change. Rather than speculating about the individual intents of authors and their stories, I examine how these narratives network into communal traditions, beliefs, and practices, and how their value is continually reassigned at different sociocultural moments. In examining personal writing as relational rhetoric, I build on rhetoric and composition’s historic commitment to deliberative democracy as well as its more recent return to issues of social justice.

Through a commentary on the life writing of Gloria Anzaldúa and Richard Rodriguez, I examine how their (very different) narratives have been used to reshape normative conceptions of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and spirituality—and how critical responses to these narratives continually refigure their value for public debates surrounding institutional practices and discrimination. Turning from the professional discourse of English studies to its pedagogical practice, the fourth chapter asks and answers: what is the work we ask students to do with their personal narratives, and how does that differ from the work we do as writers and scholars? Finally, I narrativize my
own experience within different institutional contexts in order to explore first the limitations of the genres we are given for self-articulation, and second how a relational view of personal writing might allow us to expose those limitations, and to connect our experiences with others who have also been isolated by those barriers. My conclusion then reflects on how we might discuss, write, and teach personal writing with an eye toward its relationality—with an understanding that the value of any given story is less an inherent trait than a product of its deployment, continually (re)constituted by evolving sociocultural contexts and conversations.
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Chapter One

(Re)Inventing the “I”: The Relationality of Personal Writing

“For a long time I vowed I wouldn’t fall into writing ethnic stories, immigrant stories, etc. Then I realized that not only was I working against these expectations (market, self, literary, cultural), I was working against my kneejerk resistance to such expectations. How I see it now is no matter what or where I write about, I feel a responsibility to the subject matter. Not so much to get it right as to do it justice.”

– Nam Le (“Knopf”)

Before Nam Le became a student at the acclaimed Iowa Writers’ Workshop, he already had an exceptional biography—the sort of life that would make a sensational memoir. As a baby, Le escaped the Communist regime in Vietnam with his family. They landed first in Malaysia, then eventually Australia where Le attended Melbourne University. There, he completed his Arts/Law degree, which culminated in an honors thesis on W.H. Auden, composed in rhyming couplets (“When the Boat Comes In”). Next, Le became a corporate lawyer and was admitted to the Supreme Court of Victoria. This was not, however, the story he chose to tell.

In 2008, Le’s debut publication was a work of fiction—a short story collection titled The Boat. The volume’s first story, “Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice” opens with a metafictional prod at his readers. It features a narrator named Nam who was also born in Vietnam, who also grew up in Australia, and who also abandoned a law career to attend the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. Like Le, Nam begins with an adamant disavowal of ethnic stories. In “Love and Honor,” Nam recalls the advice he received from a writing instructor: “Ethnic literature is hot. And important too” (9). Literary agents reinforce the sentiment: “There's a lot of polished writing around
[... ] You have to ask yourself, what makes me stand out? [... ] Your *background and life experience*” (9). In a market that covets “ethnic literature,” one of Nam’s classmates confers his respect: “You could totally exploit the Vietnamese thing. But instead, you choose to write about lesbian vampires and Colombian assassins, and Hiroshima orphans—and New York painters with hemorrhoids” (10). In fact, the subsequent stories in *The Boat* actually do feature Colombian assassins and New York painters (disappointingly, though, no lesbian vampires¹). Le’s stories move from Colombia to Iran to Hiroshima—through experiences far removed from his own. “Love and Honor,” though, starts the collection with a dilemma drawn from (we’re led to believe) the author’s own life: As a student at Iowa, Nam struggles with whether or not to narrativize the experiences of his father, Thanh, in Vietnamese prison camps. Eventually, he decides, “I would write the ethnic story of my Vietnamese father. It was a good story. It was a fucking great story” (17).

In a feverish night, Nam composes the narrative of Thanh’s life and sacrifice, titled “Ethnic Story.” Nam thinks: “He [Thanh] would see how powerful was his experience. How valuable his suffering—how I had made it speak for more than itself” (27). Nam’s father, however, sets fire to the typewritten pages, destroying the only copy of the narrative. “Love and Honour,” then—though an account rooted in Le’s ethnicity, and one inflected with notes of the author’s own life—has not been an account of its own creation. When Nam tells his father, “This [story] is important [...] It’s important that people know,” Thanh responds, “Only you'll remember. I'll remember. They will read and clap their hands and forget” (24).

¹ When asked if he’d ever written a story about lesbian vampires, Le answered, “Lesbians, yes. Vampires…well I had to leave some room for interpretive distance. I don’t like to give too much away.” (“When the Boat Comes In”)
As the pages of Nam’s “Ethnic Story” dissipate into smoke, he describes himself: “so full of wanting I thought it would flood my heart” (28). What is it, though, that Nam actually wanted—what does he lose in the ashes swept away by the wind? As he waits for Thanh to finish reading his “Ethnic Story,” the character thinks to himself: “[Thanh] would read it, with his book-learned English, and he would recognize himself in a new way. *He would recognize me* [emphasis added]” (27). This longing to be recognized—to be granted subjectivity—has been at the heart of autobiographical practice since its earliest conceptions as agentic narration. Since then, theories have expanded to address context and coercion as they complicate the demand for self-disclosure. What Nam discovers – perhaps what Thanh already knows when he tells his son, “it’s not something you’ll be able to write” (24) – is that the stories we tell about ourselves are never simply “true.” Like all other narratives, they are subject to the plasticity of language, the opacity of self-understanding, and the cultural forces that guide our actions.

The challenge of the so-called “ethnic” writer that Nam is working through has been examined by many other writers from the margins. Gloria Anzaldúa describes the struggle in *Luz en lo Oscuro*: “to write (produce) without being inscribed (reproduced) in the dominant white structure” and “to write without reinscribing and reproducing what we rebel against” (7). The character Nam and the author, the actual Nam Le, have two different answers to that challenge. Whereas Nam insists that he will tell a “true story” by probing and recording the intricate details of his father’s experience, Le seems to share Thanh’s circumspection. Instead, Le’s “Love and Honor” acknowledges these memories in brief, matter-of-fact lists: “the forced confessions, the indoctrinations, the starvations”

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2 Most histories of Western autobiography acknowledge Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* as the first book-length autobiographical narrative (Smith and Watson 105), and so the majority of autobiographical writing for the next thousand years arose “as a form of devotion in the service of spiritual examination” (105).
(25). Even while describing Thanh’s past, Le refuses to rehearse the character’s suffering. Rather, Nam “imagined [Thanh] locked in rage, turned around and forced every day to re-witness these atrocities of his past, helpless to act. But that was only my imagination. I had nothing to prove that he was not empty of all that now” (26). Le turns attention away from the spectacle of Thanh’s past and to the circumstances that demanded it—that is, Nam’s own longing to capture a part of that history, and the literary market that would applaud him for it.

At first, “Love and Honor” could be read as a thinly veiled exploration of Le’s own experience—about whether to exploit his ethnicity through his writing. Rather than submit his autobiographical self to the market for exotic stories, though, Le wraps his immigrant history in the metafictional account of another Vietnamese-American writer named Nam. “Love and Honor” calls attention to its own context and exploits that context to expose the expectations for “authenticity” and self-disclosure that surround readings of ethnic literature. In doing so, it asks how one can do justice to these forgotten or perhaps never-heard stories without subjecting one’s suffering to public voyeurism. Le’s “Love and Honor” is then one possible response of many to the dilemma faced by many writers of underrepresented populations: whether and how to speak of their experiences in a market that has commodified such accounts in a reductive form of multiculturalism.

Despite the apparent failure of Nam’s “Ethnic Story,” Le’s own ethnic story is the first of his collection, suggesting that on some level he agrees with Nam: these stories are important. It is not that stories of “ethnic” or otherwise marginal experiences should not be written, but that those aspiring toward “truth” or “recognition” are set up for failure. In
an interview with an Australian newspaper, *The Age*, Le explains that his aversion to ethnic literature “has very little to do with ethnic fiction itself.” Rather, he’s averse to “the whole infrastructure that is built around the stories once they’ve already been put down” (“When the Boat Comes In”). What we need, then, is a way of writing and discussing self-writing that does not assimilate easily into the infrastructure built around it—that does not measure representativeness or truth, and aspires to something more concrete than recognition.

Toward such an understanding, I propose a relational approach to personal narrative, which maps how narratives and their attendant identities are (re)deployed in different settings for shifting individual and organizational motives. In focusing on relationality and context, my emphasis moves away from the one-on-one exchange between author and reader and the “recognition” that can result from that interaction—though I do not deny the impact of narrative in that respect. By taking broader view, I consider how stories and the identities they represent are assigned value in hegemonic struggles, and how those values enforce or upset the means by which individuals and entire communities are denied equal treatment and access.

*“They Will Clap Their Hands and Forget”: The Multicultural Imperative and the Neoliberal University*

Across the humanities, the social and the hard sciences, large swathes of research have investigated the human desire to narrate our own experiences. In their historical overview of autobiography studies, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson attribute the move toward notions of a discursively-mediated “identity” to the Marxist analysis of class
consciousness; Freudian analysis and the destabilization of “self”; and linguistic theory from Sassure and Russian Formalists that troubled the supposed transparency of language (200–201). Since the 1980s, then, a wide range of disciplines has explored self-writing as the mediation of individual and communal experience. William C. Spengemann and L. R. Lundquist describe autobiography as “a cultural act” (501) that “brings together the personal, unassimilated experiences of the writer and the shared values of his culture” (502). More recently, Paul John Eakin’s Living Autobiographically draws from Antonio Damasio’s neurobiology theory to posit a notion of human consciousness that can only exist by narrativizing individual experiences in relation to cultural norms.

Also since the 1980s, a growing body of work has used the tension between individual lives and collective frameworks to pressure those cultural norms. In legal theory, Kimberlé Crenshaw’s groundbreaking scholarship showed how the “single-axis framework” (139) in antidiscrimination law rendered illegible the experiences of black women, who are marginalized by both race and sex. While self-narrative as critical practice has been attributed to works as early as Montaigne’s Essays and Walter Benjamin’s autobiographical writing (Smith and Watson 229), the rise of “autocritique”—life narrative as cultural criticism – gained far more momentum with publications by feminists-of-color. Books such as Audre Lorde’s Zami, Cherríe Moraga’s Love in the War Years, and Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands disrupted normative understandings of gender, class, race, and sexuality through the authors’ uniquely constellated experiences of these identity labels. Caren Kaplan dubs this strategic mixing of autobiography criticism and autobiography itself an “out-law genre.” Such writing “enables a deconstruction of the ‘master’ genres, revealing the power dynamics
embedded in literary production, distribution, and reception” (Kaplan 119). As the outlaw narratives of Lorde, Moraga, Anzaldúa and their contemporaries dismantled hegemonic norms in academic writing, autobiography-as-critique found a small (and still frequently contested) space in the academy, where it is often used to evaluate generic conditions and their limitations.

The irony of texts such as *Zami* and *Borderlands*, though, is that their unprecedented success launched them into the academic canon—eventually settling into the infrastructure that once made such narratives impossible. As Nam’s professor tells him, right now, ethnic literature is “hot”—so much so that Nam’s friend sees it as a “license to bore” (“Love and Honor” 7) According to this friend, “As long as a Chinese writer writes about Chinese people, or a Peruvian writer about Peruvians, or a Russian writer about Russians” (7) the story will sell. While Nam’s friend ignores the appalling disparities in publications and publicity for writers of color³, he does touch on the very real commodification of ethnic stories—a process that reduces personal narratives to economic and social capital, which often benefit larger institutions and collectives rather than the actual author.

While the out-law narratives of the 1980s carved their way into an overtly exclusionary system, the present manifestations of racism, heterosexism, ableism, and sexism are more covert. In the neoliberal⁴ era, “diversity” has become an ordinary,

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³ In a landmark article, Roxanne Gay examined every book featured in the *New York Times Book Review* in 2011 and found that 88% of the authors were white, and among those, only 33% were women (Gay). In 2014, Aimee Phan followed up by tracing the problem through the lack of non-white book editors and reviewers (Phan). Relatedly, Lee & Low’s 2015 survey of children’s book publishers and found that the overall industry is 79% white, 88% straight/heterosexual, and 92% non-disabled. (Low)

⁴ While the term “neoliberalism” is used broadly to define a range of policies and ideologies, I use this term to characterize the political and economic frameworks that have risen to prominence in the United States within the past three decades. At the core of these practices is a focus on individuality over larger social
everyday term even while economic inequality skyrockets, class political power shifts to the top .01% of the income bracket, and social protections attenuate.\textsuperscript{5} Sara Ahmed’s \textit{On Being Included} explores this re-valuation of difference in higher education, where gestural commitments to “diversity” can actually obscure hegemonic systems and practices. Through an ethnographic study of diversity practitioners, Ahmed reveals how universities can capitalize\textsuperscript{6} on the value of \textit{perceived} diversity through declarations of “diversity” or by designating specific individuals for the labor of diversity, without actually making diversity an institutional priority. In multiple interviews, these practitioners describe their occupations as “banging your head against a brick wall” (26), encountering ongoing resistance to the very work institutions appointed them to do. Like the “ethnic stories” described by Nam’s teacher and friend, the bodies of these diversity practitioners are themselves given a superficial and objectifying value that does not necessarily support their actual work. In the name of “diversity,” stories and people alike become evacuated of substance, deployed as synecdochic representations of social progress.

The abstracting of material inequality from antiracist discourse is not especially new in American politics. In 1944, \textit{An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy} attributed U.S. global ascendancy (after World War II) to its apparent progressivism: “America, saving itself [from its racial dilemma], becomes

\textsuperscript{5}In Peter Evans and William H. Sewell, Jr.’s “The Neoliberal Era,” the authors sort through how neoliberalism impacts economic patterns, political ideologies, policy paradigms, and social imaginaries—to varying degrees in different settings. In the United States, “neoliberalism’s most consistently enthusiastic proponent and adopter” (48), income inequality has reached levels unseen since the first World War while social provisions and policies for workers’ rights decline (50-51).

\textsuperscript{6} Nancy Leong’s “Racial Capitalism,” from the perspective of legal theory, also offers a thorough examination of how white individuals and predominately white institutions can derive social and economic gain from the identities of nonwhite individuals.
Savior of the world” (Myrdal qtd. in Melamed 20). Jodi Melamed’s *Represent and Destroy* identifies *An American Dilemma* as a crucial launch point for “official antiracisms” – state-sanctioned narratives of racial equality detached from lived realities, which restructured racial privilege in the United States. As formal antiracism became a part of the narrative of American greatness, racial privilege shifted to white liberals who were responsible for reforming Southern attitudes. All the while, African American success was still measured by conformity to (white) cultural normativity.

Though the figure of the magnanimous white man advocating for minority rights can be traced back to the Abolitionists Movement, this particular iteration of the white savior was made through his training in knowledge of the “other.” Here, Melamed identifies the pivotal role of literary studies, which established the race novel as “a means to transform white America’s attitudes” (22). This transformative power was assigned to the texts themselves without any discussion of what it meant to read race novels. Instead, race novels populated course curricula and bookshelves, establishing a national identity of abstract equality. In this environment, “the circulation of the race novel alone functioned (1) to unify racial-liberal ideology; (2) to direct habits of interpretation, thus controlling what counted as a race matter and constituting and validating information about race; and (3) to influence subject formation by creating the conditions for people to self-identify with racial-liberal identity categories.” (23) The institutionalization of ethnic literature then kept white majority culture at the center of U.S. global ascendancy—the protagonists in America’s narrative of social reform.

Over time, the terminologies and foci of official antiracisms have shifted. Melamed’s book identifies three distinct movements: racial liberalism (from the 1940s to
1960s); liberal multiculturalism (1980s to 1990s); and neoliberal multiculturalism (2000s to present). Throughout these changes, however, universities and ethnic literature have kept their roles in shaping the race-liberal subject. In a globalized, market-driven society, where difference is a “valorized domain of knowledge” (43), universities are still responsible for “certifying and racializing the multicultural global citizen” (44). To this end, ethnic stories still offer “close and intimate access to racialized others […] and the power to transform attitudes in a way that guarantees social progress” (45). This “progress,” much like the “diversity” that supports it, remains detached from material conditions.

Whereas early official antiracisms drew from state authority, though, the neoliberal era is marked by diminishing trust in national governments – and with it, limited state intervention for social protection (Evans and Sewell, Jr. 49). Instead, emphasis falls on “personal responsibility over larger social forces” (Giroux 1). The neoliberal university accordingly teaches students to “do good, to feed the poor, to uplift women, and to presume responsibility for near and distant others” (Melamed 45), all while becoming “heroic entrepreneurs” (Spellmeyer 567). So the academic-industrial complex promises to help students access the labor market by tailoring education to market demands.7 In doing so, it implicitly affirms a financial system predicated on personal responsibility and self-reliance—a system “unconcerned about the potential

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7 Henry Giroux’s entire body of work offers incisive critique of the corporate university. In a 2015 interview with Michael Nevradakis, Giroux discusses efforts in Texas to lower tuition for courses that leant themselves directly to business interests (Nevradakis 453). Similarly, Florida’s Governor Rick Scott offered lower tuition rates for “job-friendly degrees such as engineering or biotechnology” (Alvarez).
political power of private economic elites” (Evans and Sewell, Jr. 49) and entirely vulnerable to corporate influence.\(^8\)

Throughout the evolution of official antiracisms, then, the university has served to contain difference—to make it legible in ways that often enforce the existing order.\(^9\) This does not, of course, characterize the will of individuals. Throughout the academy, there are many whose individual perspectives, research, and intellectual labor strive toward upsetting socioeconomic imbalances. Among educators and researchers, there is an enormous range of awareness and complicity in the university’s role of containment. Containment, though, is the nature of institutions.\(^10\) To return to Sara Ahmed: things become institutional when they recede from view (21). The work of the diversity practitioner—not too removed from the work of the “ethnic story”—is the “practical labor of ‘coming up against’ the institution” (174). Even in “banging your head against a brick wall” you “[allow] this wall to become apparent” (174). In turning to relationality, we can track how individual stories encounter institutions—where they come up against the wall, or become a part of the infrastructure. This mapping itself helps generate knowledge about our institutions, discovering what does or does not come up against these walls—what adds to the mortar and what rattles the foundations.

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\(^{8}\) Evans and Sewell Jr. draw from an ideologically diverse range of analysts to reflect on the increasing power of corporations and its dramatic impact on U.S. politics (49)

\(^{9}\) Roderick Ferguson’s *The Reorder of Things* maps how educational institutions have appropriated minority cultures through departments on race, gender, and sexuality.

\(^{10}\) I borrow the idea and terminology of containment from Rosemary Jolly’s forthcoming *Effluent Communities: Towards Practices of Posthuman Rights*, which examines how human rights law functions as a “strategy of containment” that demands certain representative subjects to act upon, rendering non-representative subjects to a de facto disposability. As a strategy of containment, human rights legislation conceals the enormous amount of social injustice that remains, and the work it would take to undo that injustice.
Personal Writing as Relational Rhetoric

Alongside the rise of feminist and other marginalized literatures, theories of relationality became a prominent facet of autobiography studies in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1988, Susan Stanford Friedman’s “Women’s Autobiographical Selves” pushed against autobiography studies’ emphasis on individualism, describing it as “fundamentally inappllicable” to women and minorities (34). A few years later, Sidonie Smith’s “The Autobiographical Manifesto” identified how certain writers (Cixous, Anzaldúa, Haraway) deployed self-writing to critique dominant models of selfhood and to engage the cultural construction of identities. By the mid-1990s, scholars such as Nancy K. Miller, Paul John Eakin, and Susanna Egan began exploring how autobiographies are refracted through other narratives – individual and collective. In Miller’s words, “Autobiography’s story is about the web of entanglement in which we find ourselves” (544). To better trace these entanglements, I adopt Margaret R. Somers’s sociological conception of narrative identity—a theoretical basis that accounts for autobiography both as a “psychological imperative” (Eakin, Living Autobiographically 78) and as a discursive production.

Also in the mid-1990s, Somers drew from emerging research on the epistemological and ontological functions of narrative to propose a theory of identity that is both constructed and sustained through stories. She argues, “it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it

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11 Other influential texts include Mary Mason’s “The Other Voice” in 1980, which examined early women’s writing as identity-in-community, and Michel Foucault’s “Technologies of the Self” for its analysis of how confessional practices disciplined the Christian subject.

12 Though not exclusively about autobiography, Susan Stanford Friedman’s Mappings importantly theorizes identity as “fluid sites that can only be understood differently depending on the vantage point of their formation and function” (Friedman, Mappings 47). Friedman draws from a wide range of texts from fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and film.

13 From “political philosophers, psychologists, legal theorists, feminist theorists, social workers, organizational theorists, anthropologists, and media sociologists” (Somers 606)
is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities” (606). As part of a “relational setting”—that is, entangled in relationships and cultural practices—autobiography enables writers to locate themselves and their experiences within “a limited repertoire of available social, public, and cultural narratives” (614). The “ethnic story” is then neither inherently progressive nor helplessly doomed for assimilation. Rather, it enters into the discursive flow of circulating conversations.

Somers’s framework pushes away from representational readings of personal narrative—which, in 2015, Laura Bieger still describes as a prevalent mode of interpretation in English studies. While disciplinary discussions have long embraced narrative’s ability to redress social wrongs, its capacity for healing is only retrospective, “elucidate[ing] what already has been lived […] from a safe distance” (Bieger 20). By contrast, what I refer to as “personal” writing is described by Somers as “ontological narratives,” which dismantle the division between experience and narrative. Personal writing is not a mere critique after-the-fact; it continually (re)constitutes social life.

In Somers’s words, ontological narratives “are used to define who we are; this in turn can be a precondition for knowing what to do. This ‘doing’ will in turn produce new narratives” (618). As such, ontological narratives both reflect and revise the writer’s self-conception. They are informed by larger cultural scripts and traditions, which Somers calls “public narratives”—our institutional and collective stories. Any individual is bound to a multiplicity of these, and one’s location within institutions and social practices also determines the intelligibility of one’s personal narrative. The inability to fit one’s experiences into available public narratives can lead to “confusion, powerlessness, despair, victimization, and even madness” (630), enacting the sort of implicit censorship
Judith Butler explores in *Excitable Speech*. In receding from view, public narratives become one of “the most implicit forms of power” (Butler 134)—rendered (relatively) invulnerable by their illegibility.

Importantly, the relationships between individual and public narratives are never fixed. Somers’s ontological narratives are filtered through the many lenses provided by our cultural understandings and relationships, which over time continually refigure the conditions of agency and constraints related to identity. Even texts as enormously successful as *Zami* and *Borderlands* were not transformative by some inherent power. They strategically intervened in specific political and cultural moments. They made apparent the walls that had shaped their own telling, and, in doing so, ruptured certain barriers. As I will explore in later discussions, though, by passing into the world once denied them, stories can later recede into the background.

To track how written autobiography participates in this perpetual rearrangement of alliances and identities, I turn to rhetorical theory and its emphasis on discourse as movement. Debra Hawhee’s refiguration of invention as a kairotic “hooking-in” to ongoing conversations helps illuminate how personal narrative is constantly (re)invented in different cultural moments and institutional contexts. Drawing from the celerity and multi-directionality of *kairos*, Hawhee’s “Kairotic Encounters” proposes a theory of invention that resists its conventional association with beginnings. Rather, “invention-in-the-middle” occurs in medias res, as all stories do—inserted into existing traditions and conversations about autonomy, family, race, religion, sexuality, among more. As Hawhee explains, invention based in *kairos*\(^{14}\) does not rely on logical steps and prefigured arguments. The writer must cut from and into divergent discourses, strategically selecting

\(^{14}\)an ancient notion of time that marks its quality and movement rather than its duration
elements to include and others to ignore. Invention-in-the-middle thus also dispels the image of an autonomous rhetor “discovering” or “creating” arguments. Instead, the discursive encounter is a meeting of forces: “‘I invent’ in the middle becomes ‘I invent and am invented by myself and others’” (17).15

In this project, I examine how personal narratives are reinvented by their shifting positions within institutional frameworks, and at different historical moments. To do so, I pay attention to what Somers calls “relational setting”—that is, the matrix of other narratives, both individual and collective, that shape a story’s significance (Somers 625–626). With each new setting, these narratives shift on the continuum of complicity and resistance. Depending on context, stories that intervene in complex systems of identity can also participate in the policing of self-expression. As “diversity” becomes a form of cultural capital, we need to offset demands for representations of the “other” by attending to how personal stories encounter (and are sometimes subjected to) other discursive forces. Attention to relational setting allows us to track which public narratives are being served by the deployment of marginal experiences for political change or institutional demands. As with all narratives, the discursive trends I map here are constellations16—approximated trajectories traced through noticeable patterns. Because meaning is (re)shaped through ongoing negotiation, there are no guarantees—no way to fix the significance of a narrative or to secure it against misappropriation. As in actual

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15Hawhee also derives this concept of invention from the Greek verb heuriskô, which, in Greek literature occasionally appears in the middle voice—a grammatical construction that “conflates active and passive meanings: the subject at once also becomes the object.” (17)
16 I borrow the term “constellation” from Paul Kei Matsuda’s discursive history of process and post-process theory, which emphasizes how both our disciplinary fields and our dominant theories are but “constellation[s] of intellectual activities” (Matsuda 75), networked together through shared (and negotiated) assumptions and objectives.
cartography, though, the goal of this mapping is to reach a more complete understanding
of our world – a larger view of where we have been, where we are, and where we can go.

While such an approach offers many possibilities, I use this project to focus on
the narrativization of marginal identities in academic genres rehearsed in rhetoric and
composition. Though the exact name and boundaries of our field remains contested\textsuperscript{17},
rhetoric and composition\textsuperscript{18} (in its many variations) generates a constant demand for
personal writing for a wide range of educational, cultural, and scholarly objectives. This
extensive engagement with personal writing invites more elaborate forms that can make
legible different instances of self-disclosure. Because personal writing permeates so
many forms of discourse (from critical articles to creative nonfiction to student memoirs),
I intend for my discussion to “cut across the binaries” (Horner and Lu 483) that have
traditionally divided the field: rhetoric/composition, theory/practice,
scholarship/teaching. I hope for this project to speak to the discipline under multiple
headings—to Adler-Kassner and Wardle’s “writing studies,” which “advocate[s] for
writers and writing and making change through knowledge” (9); as well as Bruce
Horner’s “composition,” whose classrooms “allow for experimentation, thinking, and
reflection of real use-value”\textsuperscript{19} for the renegotiation of English (Horner, “Rewriting
Composition” 472). With a relational view of personal writing, I ask how value is
assigned to different representations of self, and what consequences arise from these
efforts toward curricular and social change.

\textsuperscript{17} For example, see David Smit’s \textit{The End of Composition Studies} and Sidney Dobrin’s \textit{Postcomposition}, as
well as Bruce Horner’s response to both texts in “Rewriting Composition: Moving Beyond a Discourse of
Need.”

\textsuperscript{18} For a history of the relationship between “rhetoric” and “composition,” see Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan
Lu’s “Working Rhetoric and Composition”
A Turning Point in Composition

Personal writing remains one of the most notorious controversies in the history of composition studies. In the words of Kimberly K. Gunter: “if we had to choose two rhetoric and composition scholars to face off in a Steel Cage Death Match, we would have to choose, still, Elbow and Bartholomae” (64). Over the years, their names have come to stand in for expressivism and social constructionism respectively – though such usages necessarily reduce their arguments to the broad strokes of their respective methodologies. As the story goes, Elbow champions the writing classroom as a utopian space where students use personal writing to explore and find their own voices. He strategically gives the students more freedom because “what the culture does—as [Bartholomae] point[s] out so powerfully—is do their thinking for them” (Bartholomae and Elbow 91). Bartholomae, by contrast, insists on teaching the “thesis-driven argumentative essay” that has become the “default form of academic writing in U.S. colleges and universities” (Mlynarczyk 22). In doing so, Bartholomae emphasizes to the student that “her paper [is] already written by the culture,” echoing a “predictable version” of the writer, the daughter, the family, etc. that she has internalized (Bartholomae and Elbow 85). Despite their very different perspectives, though, at the center of this disagreement is a shared concern for cultivating student awareness of their roles in history and culture—and to empower them to participate in its evolution.20

That shared objective is also at what motivates Patricia Bizzell’s catalyzing 1999 article, “Hybrid Academic Discourse,” which finds common ground in a polarizing debate. While Bizzell stood firmly with Bartholomae in the social constructionist camp,

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20 Elbow himself calls attention to this shared objective in his response to Bartholomae (Bartholomae and Elbow 87–88).
here she revised her earlier perspective to account for new, “hybrid” forms of writing from composition scholars. Responding to works by Mike Rose, Helen Fox, Keith Gilyard, and Victor Villanueva, Bizzell notes how these writers use the personal to “do intellectual work they could not if confined to traditional academic discourse” (Bizzell, “Hybrid” 12). Their hybrid texts deviate from the impersonal and agonistic stances of traditional academic writing.21 Instead, books like Rose’s Lives on the Boundary and Villanueva’s Bootstraps draw from the writer’s own “emotions and prejudices” to “find common ground among opposing positions rather than setting them against one another head to head” (12). With a closer look at Bootstraps, Bizzell catalogues common traits of hybrid academic discourses, including: the use of nonstandard English; invocations of personal experience; appropriative history by writing oneself into the story; indirect argumentations, and more (16). While Bizzell’s recommendations catalyzed major disciplinary changes at the time, by now, her objective in “Hybrid,” seems somewhat conservative. She argues that teachers of writing must familiarize themselves with these discourses in order to “prepar[e] students for success in college” (8). A few years later, then, Bizzell’s “hybrid” forms grew into a more expansive view of composition studies.

Alt Dis: Alternative Discourses and the Academy, the 2002 volume co-edited by Bizzell, Helen Fox, and Christopher Schroeder, shifts the terminology from “hybrid” to “mixed” and “alternative,” focusing on how these discursive forms create alternate visions of composition itself. While Bizzell opens the collection with further reflections on how discursive mixing extends what rhetoric and composition already does, Malea Powell follows with a more radical vision of the field. Of postcolonial theory, and

21 Bizzell summarizes the conventions of “traditional academic discourse” as objective, skeptical, and traditionally white, male and privileged (Bizzell, “Hybrid” 9–11).
expanding the discipline, Powell says: “It’s not that I don’t believe in that story. It’s not that I’m not committed to that story. It’s that there’s so much more involved in being able to have this story than the telling of it can hold” (14). Through a brief history of Native rhetorical strategies, Powell argues that indigenous peoples have long “used the laws, practices, and representations that were imposed on them” (20). In other words—they were already alternative. Instead, Powell asks that we imagine scholarly practices rooted in other forms of knowledge—ones that challenge “the nature of what we have inherited in the discipline” (Womack qtd. In Powell 20). Similarly, also in Alt Dis, Jacqueline Jones Royster draws attention to the fabricated nature of academic discourse—that it is an invention, that it is plural, and that it does not exist apart from, above, or beyond surrounding discourses (25). In acknowledging the contrivance of all discursive standards, Royster also challenges the field to “turn on different assumptions” – to open itself to other paradigms and forms of expression.

First among the paradigms that Alt Dis works to dismantle is the veneer of a stable academic discourse. LuMing Mao’s chapter suggests that perhaps “alternative” does not go far enough—still implying a division between “traditional” and “alternative,” as if any discourse could be pure. The problem with such a conceptual paradigm—beyond the impossible fixity it demands of language—is that it fails to acknowledge the partial complicity of progressive pedagogies. Mao quotes Gilyard’s 2000 CCC article, which sums up the double-bind of liberal education: “Whenever we participate in the dominant discourse, no matter how liberally we may tweak it, we help to maintain it” (Gilyard 268). Refusing to engage at all, however, also surrenders certain opportunities to redistribute the resources at the institution’s disposal. The answer then—for Gilyard and
Mao, and I daresay most teachers who remain in the academy even when they “don’t approve of the game” (Fox 59)—is not to abandon the system altogether. For Mao, the promise of alternative discourses (despite the potential pitfalls of the terminology) is in establishing new (non-binary) paradigms and exploiting the plasticity of language. Through alternative discourses, we explore and test the boundaries of our linguistic practices. Like Ahmed’s diversity practitioners, we make the walls apparent, and “rewrite the world from the experience of not being able to pass into the world” (Ahmed 176).

In fact, a lot of our disciplinary growth has come from such rewriting. In addition to Bizzell’s reflexive revision of her pedagogical perspective, hybrid/mixed/alternative discourses—(and what Smith and Watson call “autocritique”)—has made available viewpoints and experiences that had previously been excluded from professional conversations. These voices include but are not limited to the perspectives of women (Jarratt and Worsham; Kirsch et al.; Glenn and Lunsford); people of color (Smitherman; Royster; Gilyard; Villanueva; Young); indigenous voices (Anzaldúa; Lyons); queer voices (Wallace, Compelled to Write; Rhodes and Alexander, Techne); those marginalized by socioeconomic class (Rose); and religious perspectives in general (Goodburn; Rand; Gere). Other projects have also specifically advanced the critical insight of personal writing, such as Sheryl I. Fontaine and Susan Hunter’s Writing Ourselves into the Story; Joseph Trimmer’s Narration as Knowledge: Tales of the Teaching Life; Karen Paley’s I-Writing: The Politics and Practice of Teaching First-Person Writing; Deborah H. Holdstein and David Bleich’s Personal Effects: The Social Character of Scholarly Writing; two special issues of College English (2001; 2003) focusing on “personal writing,” both guested edited by Jane E. Hindman; and Candace

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22 Gunter proposes the term “braided” text in 2011.
Spigelman’s *Personally Speaking: Experience as Evidence in Academic Discourse.*

Though many of these writers took issue with or were otherwise alienated by “the game,”
ye saw value in engaging—in breaking rules and changing the terms of play.

As Mao observes in *Alt Dis*, though, discourses once considered alternative can be
brought to the center. As these alternative texts circulate in critical conversations, they
also become a part of the discursive landscape, sometimes acquiring so much legitimacy
that they drown out other voices (121). Only a couple years after the publication of *Alt
Dis*, Bruce Horner observed that “a commodified version of personal writing” had
emerged, often valorized for automatically “performing a certain kind of work” (“Mixing
It Up” 186).²³ Personal writing had transcended its former taboo to become one of the
more popular classroom genres. Pedagogies championing the liberatory effects of
personal writing conflated the textual form with the work that writers had used it to do:
“its [personal writing’s] effects are imagined to inhere in the text and, like any
commercial product, to be guaranteed for any and all consumers” (195).

More recently, in 2014, Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes connect these
assumptions to the multicultural imperative in university curricula, which “often seek[s]
to contain difference in order to make it legible, identifiable, and thus acceptable to a
normative readership” (Alexander and Rhodes 431). The products of such pedagogies,
though, are not in any way “alternative” to academic conventions. Instead, students
consume and reproduce the fixed product of “personal writing” – a series of traits and

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²³ Horner’s perspective, though not traditionally associated with pedagogies based in “personal” writing, is
perhaps most notable here because he asks how we might “deploy personal writing to call into question
conventional understandings of what the personal means” (Horner, “Mixing It Up” 197). A relational view
of personal writing asks that we contextualize discussions of narratives within the cultural forces that shape
their formation, exposing the ways notions of “personal,” “private,” and “public” are reified through the
circulation of texts.
gestures that constitute what dominant discourse already deems to be personal. Such pedagogies not only allow culture to “do [students’] thinking for them”; they give students models of self-articulation and selfhood that only fit into normative frames. If we want to keep alive both Bartholomae’s and Elbow’s concerns for teaching students critical awareness, and for giving them the tools to engage their place in history, then we need to think beyond the generic traits of singular texts. We must rethink how we teach units like the student memoir—considering how the overall course curricula and the larger university context shape expectations for student narratives.

In 2014, Rhodes and Alexander also guest edited a special issue of *College English*, recounting rhetoric and composition’s historical investment in challenging systemic inequalities. The issue, titled “Reimagining the Social Turn,” traces several movements that “turned” disciplinary attention to how writing could intervene in “the cultural, political, and socioeconomic conditions that shape the theoretical and material realities of our work” (481). The most recent turn, as described by Kinney et al’s 2010 issue of *Composition Forum*, takes “embodied activism” as its starting point –asking how the personal and the political intersect, and propelling those intersections into action (482). Embodied activism seems appropriate in our moment of economic anxiety and escalating disparities in wealth distribution. It is a bit ironic, then, (though perhaps also expected) that those anxieties have also directed attention and resources away from the more abstract ideas of cultural critique and toward pragmatic “skills building and career preparation” (484). In light of the field’s pivot toward transferable skills, Rhodes and Alexander and the contributors to their issue urge the field to think beyond preparing students for the uncertain future. Rather, “the critique of that future, and the development
of an imagination to envision alternatives to it” (484) must remain an integral part of our pedagogies.

While I agree that composition must always keep an eye toward the inevitably ideological nature of language instruction and language use, it would be too easy to fall into the institutional inertia described in Ahmed’s *On Being Included* – where a stated “commitment” to social justice can mask complicities in very unjust systems. For example, in the same year as their “Reimagining in the Social Turn,” Alexander and Rhodes also published an article in *CCC* observing the effects of the “multicultural imperative” on course curricula. The authors note that these pedagogies have emphasized commonalities at the expense of the “radical alterities with which students should be encouraged to grapple” (431). As in Melamed’s neoliberal multiculturalism, these multicultural pedagogies favor narratives of inclusion and shared humanity, often creating a “flattening effect” where difference is celebrated without explorations of its sociocultural consequences.

For example, Alexander and Rhodes consider same-sex marriage—how emphasizing the common category of “marriage” might overlook how politics, law, and social environments have shaped experiences of marriage very differently for queer individuals. Rather than settle for forms of cross-cultural understanding predicated on the familiar and the knowable, they ask the field to channel our efforts toward writing and writing instruction that “fundamentally questions what we believe or hold to be true” (450). “Flattening Effects” ends with a proposal that composition “understand story and narrative (particularly narratives of difference) a bit differently” (449), perhaps by encouraging students to write about “what they suspect they do not know” (445). A
sample prompt asks the student to inhabit a term of identity usually used to describe someone “other.” It instructs, “Do not make a claim. Do not argue. Do not conclude. Explore, meditate, engage in self-reflection” (445). The request for self-reflection, however, takes us back to Elbow and Bartholomae’s debate: Do we give students free rein and risk allowing them to parrot under-examined normative frames? As I intend to show in later chapters, Somers’s terminology can help distinguish between demand for narratives for the sake of institutional recognition, and the invocation of experience to engage and grapple with difference.

**Beyond a Politics of Recognition**

A growing body of work outside English studies has also challenged multiculturalism as a routinized response to difference, and offers potential insight into how we might tether disciplinary conversations about equality and justice to material circumstances. Here, it is important to note Kelly Oliver’s challenge to what she calls the “fundamental tenet” of multiculturalism: the idea “that the social struggles manifest in critical race theory, queer theory, feminist theory, and various social movements are struggles for recognition” (“Witnessing and Testimony” 78). Oliver's *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* argues that reparative politics based in recognition necessarily reinforce the hegemonic structure—wherein the oppressed must seek acknowledgment from the oppressor. As an alternative, she offers a notion of relational subjectivity described as “witnessing,” where an encounter with the other is not a search for similarities, but rather an opening up to the ways that other experiences and worlds are made unavailable by structures of privilege and subordination.
The limits of recognition and potential avenues beyond it have been taken up by scholars in legal theory (Leong); critical race studies (Ferguson; Melamed; Ahmed; Grice and Parikh); queer-of-color critique (E. J. Martínez); and also in indigenous studies, where emphasis falls on how models of “recognition” impose systems of value and legitimation that many indigenous peoples do not share (Tauli-Corpuz). Like Oliver, First Nations scholar Glen Coulthard also derives alternatives to recognition from the insights of Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*. For Coulthard (via Fanon), transformative politics\(^\text{24}\) require that the colonized turn away from “the assimilative lure” of recognition (43) and instead “recognize[e] *themselves* as free, dignified, and distinct contributors to humanity” (43). Coulthard takes a step further than Oliver, though, in moving beyond individual and collective self-affirmation, instead emphasizing the necessity that these strategies “remain grounded and oriented toward a change in the social structure of colonialism itself” (147). Coulthard thus offers an approach to self-determination where personal writing plays a significant role, but is not granted an inherent power. Rather, it becomes important when directed toward the transformation of social, cultural, and economic relations. What Somers’s framework allows me to do in this project is to orient discussions of personal narrative toward their larger cultural contexts, rather than allowing them to stand in for the work of diversity or social justice.

\(^{24}\) Also like Oliver, Coulthard turns to Nancy Fraser to distinguish between “affirmative” and “transformative” politics. Both Oliver and Coulthard argue that breaking the chain of oppression requires the transformation of pathological hierarchies rather than methods of inclusion via affirmative (often recognition-based) policies.
Relating Unwelcome Stories

Rhodes and Alexander’s *College English* issue also reveals both how personal writing remains a critical part of our professional discourse, and how we could still use more robust frameworks that network individual narratives into larger movements. In revitalizing the social turn, David L. Wallace’s “Unwelcome Stories, Identity Matters, and Strategies for Engaging in Cross-Boundary Discourses” argues for personal writing—specifically, “unwelcome stories”— as integral to the pursuit of social justice. He also cautions that these narratives can reinforce certain oppressive practices while exposing others. Drawing attention to the complications that arise from our multiple identities, Wallace calls writers to account for positions of relative privilege even in stories of marginalization. In Somers’s terminology, a personal narrative from a marginal subject can still invoke public narratives used to subordinate others. While Wallace’s methodology advances a more responsible approach to self-writing, it invites even more questions about how personal narratives can engage social practice. If personal writing is already so complicated and particularized, how do we connect it with collective movements and organizational structures? Furthermore, how does rhetoric and composition help students access personal narrative’s potential as cultural resistance when we are also responsible for normative training in college writing?

Wallace calls for a more adroit approach to personal narrative through careful examination of Vershawn Ashanti Young’s “Your Average Nigga,” which draws from Young’s own experience to expose how academic practices can trap “African American men in places where they are not white enough for the educational establishment but also must continually prove their blackness” (“Unwelcome Stories” 551). Despite Young’s
insightful analysis of race relations, Wallace challenges Young’s casual reference to being “fagged and sissied out” (Young qtd. in Wallace 552), which echoes the homophobia and heteronormativity that have contributed to Wallace’s own experiences of marginalization. As a gay white man, Wallace recognizes, “I must balance my need to critique Young for failing to engage with a queer rationality while always being mindful that he speaks and writes from a racialized rationality that I can never fully understand” (553).

Even within Wallace’s multifaceted and deeply reflective reading, though, the “meaning” of Young’s individual narrative appears static—complicated in that it inhabits more than one “axis of difference” (555), but singular in that it examines how this one text reflects or resists normative expectations. Through such a reading, all efforts toward social change are a matter of description: Young’s story tells Wallace about a racialized experience he (Wallace) can never fully understand, and Wallace responds with a statement of queerness that challenges Young’s heteronormative assumptions. While this exchange moves beyond mere “recognition” of sameness, it then divides interlocutors by their unknowable difference. We remain trapped in Gloria Anzaldúa’s metaphorical standstill, where we shout from one riverbank to another (Anzaldúa qtd. in Wallace 553), trading different identity labels as tokens for incomparable and incomprehensible pains.

I agree wholeheartedly with Wallace’s challenge to reductive dominant-marginalized binaries, but he retains some of this dichotomization in his reading: “Young is not just speaking from blackness to whiteness, but also from heteronormativity to homosexuality” (554). Wallace has multiplied the number of binaries, but the oppositional stances remain. Furthermore, as Wallace’s argument complicates our
expressions of identity, he must also acknowledge that Young’s version of “blackness” necessarily differs from that of a black woman or a gay black man, and Wallace’s experience of “homosexuality” is similarly unique to his own multiplicity of cultural alliances. As someone moved by both Young’s narrative and Wallace’s response, I find it difficult to engage this dialogue. On what side of the river does the queer Asian American woman stand? I look for a way to connect with their work that is not about sameness or difference—that does not compare our individual suffering, but builds from our collected expressions a larger vision of the world. These experiences are more than isolated memories; together they can map the social patterns—or make visible the walls—that have made our experiences so difficult to name.

These questions allow me to connect rhetorical scholarship with efforts in queer and critical race theories to move beyond discussions of equivalence in identity-based politics. While postmodern theory has long problematized essentialist leanings in political movements for minority rights, we must somehow contend with the continued political, economic, and social relevancy of identity labels even as we acknowledge their fluidity. For example, José Esteban Muñoz argues that we should look not for similarities and differences between self and other, but “trajectories and intersections between our senses of the world that make the world” (108). Meanwhile, in Asian American studies, Helena Grice and Crystal Parikh challenge that increased representation and visibility do not transform the practices that denied recognition in the first place. Rather, they propose that gender and sexuality serve as “critical analytics” by

25 Much credit goes to Paula M. Moya and Michael R. Hames-Garcia’s Reclaiming Identity for demanding more robust theories of identity that do not simply abandon it as a “theoretically incoherent and politically pernicious” basis for political action (Moya, “Introduction” 2). Their philosophically diverse and methodologically rigorous collection was catalyzed by what Satya P. Mohanty’s “postpositivist realist” approach to identity.
which “to take stock of the historical and material conditions, relations of power, and possibilities for social transformation in which political and cultural representation takes place” (177). Toward this objective, a relational approach to personal writing can help distinguish how individual experiences are deployed across institutional spaces over time and examine the consequences of these applications—whether they reify institutional power or narrate a divergence from dominant cultural assumptions.

The meaning and impact of each story is then specific to its relational setting—not determined by the author’s intent or a reader’s single interpretation, but renegotiated with each unique application. Agency is not located in a single author or text, but in relational networks—in the ways narratives are deployed across institutions and social settings (Somers 634). Individually, Young may affect Wallace’s awareness of racial dynamics in higher education, and Wallace (if Young reads his response) might inspire Young to reconsider his discussion of masculinity. These are important exchanges, but Wallace and Young are not only educating one another across differences; their narratives engage and contribute to larger discursive patterns. For instance, in addition to nuancing conversations about race, gender, and sexuality, Young and Wallace share in another tradition of marginalized discourse: personal writing as academic work. Patricia Bizzell called it “Hybrid Academic Discourse” in 1999, inspired by examples from Victor Villanueva, Mike Rose, Helen Fox, and Keith Gilyard. Bizzell and others expanded this definition under the terms “mixed” and “alternative” discourse in 2002 (Alt Dis). In 2004, Young’s “Your Average Nigga” spoke in direct conversation with Gilyard’s Voices of the Self. His acknowledgements thank both Gilyard as an early reader and Villanueva as a referee. By 2014, Wallace’s response to Young – though
“unwelcome” in some ways—is also enabled by the same lineage of brave and vulnerable self-writing in which Young participates. Though many of these writers base their arguments in “personal” experience, their stories would not be so powerful in isolation. In concert, they reshape the landscape of academic writing—of who is allowed to speak, of what, and how. Self-writing then becomes an act of reinvention, inviting new possibilities for the articulation of both individual and communal identities.

To connect my own response to Wallace, I could not speak in binaries. I could not tell if “Unwelcome Stories” spoke to me from queerness to queerness, whiteness to yellowness, or from an established male scholar to a female voice still trying to find her place in an expansive conversation. It did, however, resonate with my own experiences in ways that prompt further reflection about the ways personal identity factors into our professional roles. To borrow Muñoz’s vocabulary, it is possible to see how Wallace’s trajectory and mine intersect at a point unmapped in most discussions of identity and disclosure in the classroom. In a brief passage, Wallace recounts the moment that compelled him to come out to his class: a student submits a blatantly homophobic paper and Wallace outs himself as a “real live homosexual” (“Unwelcome Stories” 548), asking the student to think more critically about his writing. Though I have also on occasion come out as queer to my students, those memories do not necessarily inform the strongest connection I can make with Wallace’s story.

In my first semester of teaching, I avoided class discussions about race. It was my first time living outside a major city, and my students were almost all white, all from small towns in Pennsylvania or neighboring states. A few weeks into the semester, I received a paper proposal decrying immigrants for “ruining our country” and lauding the
Chinese Exclusion Act for its efforts toward restricting immigration. Obviously, my circumstances differ from Wallace’s in that I did not have to reveal myself as the “other.” However, like Wallace, I was shocked by the very personal reminder that identity is always at issue, and my student could “[tap] into a dominant cultural value” (549) to remind me of my own vulnerability. What our stories share in common is the understanding that power issues as described in classroom settings are not always “as simple as traditional approaches to pedagogy and research methods assume” (548)—that the teacher is not a blank vessel of institutional authority, but brings with him/her personal attributes that factor into the classroom dynamic. Because my students engaged one another’s essay topics and drafts in workshop settings, I had to decide how to respond to this student’s proposal without limiting her freedom of speech, or allowing her classmates to feel threatened by her aggressive position. Difficult negotiations of identity emerge whether or not we actively bring them into our curricula. Disciplinary discussions of personal identities within classroom settings, then, must attend to the role of self-disclosure beyond mere representation for the sake of normative analysis. Somers’s distinction between ontological and public narratives permits a more detailed view of the circumstances that structure demand for experiential accounts.

Though my experiences allow me to become Wallace’s ally in some respects, other moments in “Unwelcome Stories” give me pause. Like Young, I have struggled to perform my race according to gender expectations. The traditionally “feminine” clothes that my parents tried to cloak me in draped awkwardly on this body—this body that walks with a wide gait and sits with its knees apart. Even my voice is brusquely low, so that for Chinese school recitations, my teachers asked that I pitch it higher for the stage.
Though I recoil at Young’s casual deployment of homophobic slurs, I also hear in it a
difficult account of unbelonging. I hear “fagged” not in Young’s lone voice, but as an
echo of the racist and masculinist standards that had shaped his self-conception—what
Oliver describes (via Fanon) as “double misrecognition” (33-34). Though Young’s
reiteration of homophobic values does merit further scrutiny, Wallace’s oppositional
approach elides the fact that both he and Young have been censured for breaking the
rules of normative masculinity.

My own experiences—different but resonant with Wallace’s and Young’s—
neither directly echo nor invalidate theirs. What energizes me most about their writing is
not the way I can align or distance myself from their stories, but the way their writing
paves a start for new roads of inquiry into how the personal can intervene in efforts
toward social justice. I encounter Young’s and Wallace’s narratives in the sort of
incommensurable intersection that Muñoz discusses in “Race, Sex, and the
Incommensurate”—the experience of “being-in-common-in-difference” (Muñoz 112)
through which we can think beyond the register of the individual and see ourselves
networked in larger discourses of belonging. In doing so, we forge alternative
perspectives on academic practices, rather than petitioning for scholarly discourse to
merely recognize our differences.

To highlight the interrelations of personal and public narratives, each chapter of
this project examines the demands placed on personal writing in different settings.
Chapter Two begins with the curricular inclusion of “minority” stories, focusing on
Gloria Anzaldúa’s body of work. It considers how the diversity imperative in higher
education has reinvented her corpus as part of its own history, and asks how the role of
these texts—particularly the oft-cited *Borderlands*—transforms through each reiteration. The third chapter then turns to one of the most controversial autobiographies in English studies: Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger of Memory*. I examine how *Hunger* emerged as a “Chicano” story in a political climate made tense by the influx of immigrants—despite the fact that neither Rodriguez nor the Chicano community would have liked him to speak for them. I then trace how the political applications of Rodriguez’s life story shifted in the subsequent decades, throughout which Rodriguez continued to re-story his life. Chapter Four then moves to the composition classroom. Focusing on textbooks as an important site of disciplinary identity, I consider how the institutional position of first year writing reshapes pedagogical practices to suit expectations that we teach a broadly applicable “academic discourse.” Chapter Five positions my own experiences in relation to the other stories and theories that appear throughout this project, braiding these narratives to explore the inevitably personal nature of cultural critique, as well as the unexpected sites of knowledge and interpersonal connection found within the academy.

With an eclectic range of texts, this project moves through a wide range of “identities” and sociocultural positions – not to suggest that these experiences could be in any way synonymous, but quite the opposite. In finding relationships among different identities, I emphasize how disparate experiences can be subjected to—and thus used to critique—the same or related structures of oppression. With my conclusion, I offer suggestions for the continued writing, reading, and teaching of personal writing in ways that acknowledge its social and interpersonal nature, as well as its role in transforming larger cultural scripts over time. The sociopolitical impact of this writing is cumulative and not at all immediate. As Rhodes and Alexander remind us, however, “more needs to
be done” (“Reimagining the Social Turn” 486) to advance social change. Toward that project, personal writing as social engagement—as (re)inventing our relations to larger narratives and to one another—helps not only envision a more equitable future, but articulates it into being.
Chapter Two

The Burden of Proof: The Personal in Academic Discourse

“Academic writing is a single thing only in convenient arguments. If you collect samples
of academic writing, within or across the disciplines, it has as many types and categories,
peaks and valleys, as writing grouped under any other general category...”
– David Bartholomae, “Writing with Teachers” (62–63)

Like narratives, genres are constellations—approximated trajectories drawn
through recognizable patterns. As rhetoric and composition continues to re-story itself
over time, it also establishes a set of widely accepted and recognizable traits, shaping a
public narrative of “academic writing” that—in the words of Patricia Bizzell—“reflect[s]
the cultural preferences of the most powerful people in the community” (“The Intellectual
Work” 1). In Bizzell’s account, academic discourse is most commonly objective,
skeptical, and argumentative: “responding with doubt and questions to any claim that
something is true or good or beautiful” (2). All participants in this discourse “must use
language carefully, demonstrate their knowledge of earlier scholarly work, argue
logically and fairly, use sound evidence, and so on” (2). While Bizzell’s description was
issued in 2002 and noted the increasing diversification26 of the academy, that
diversification has also been subsumed by the normalizing practices of institutional
multiculturalism. Even though Bizzell’s work observed the inroads that marginal writers
had carved with alternative rhetoric, Kimberly K. Gunter’s 2011 “Braiding Rhetorical
Power Players” still describes a “thesis-driven argumentative essay based on sources” as

26 Bizzell writes: “more people of color, more women, more people from the lower social classes, more
people whose native language is not English or not the so-called Standard English” are gaining access to
higher education and getting published in academic journals (“The Intellectual Work” 2). Though such
change has not been easy and is far from complete, “slowly but surely, previously nonacademic discourses
are blending with traditional academic discourses” (2). Here, I am using the term “diversification” to signal
the shift in demographics—a phenomenon that is distinct from (though connected with) “multiculturalism”
as a discursive framework for valuing difference.
the “default form” of academic writing (Mlynarczyk qtd. in Gunter 65). This is the same year that David L. Wallace’s *Compelled to Write* charges that “we [rhetoric and composition] have not gone far enough in addressing our complicity in maintaining the discourses of power that marginalize groups within our society” (8).

If, as Somers postulates, writers must invent their stories from the narratives at their disposal, how do marginal subjects write their experiences into the discourses that have suppressed them, and that readily assimilate gestures of defiance? This chapter focuses on how the entrenched practices of academic writing, with an emphasis on evidence-based argumentation and through a vocabulary of recognition, can turn attention away from the ontological role of personal writing. As ontology, personal writing does not merely reflect our experience, but situates it in a web of social and institutional practices. Losing sight of this situational engagement, however, leads to Alexander and Rhodes’s “flattening effect” in which we reduce the narrative to its representational function and slot it into course curricula where it stands in for institutional diversity. Such tendencies even in arguments for “social change” then often work to mask ongoing complicity in systems of oppression.

As discussed in my introduction, composition studies perhaps most notably opened up to personal writing with Bizzell’s 1999 “Hybrid Academic Discourse.” In 2002, Bizzell’s co-edited *Alt Dis* renamed these forms “mixed” or “alternative” discourses, the goal of which was still to enable alternative forms of intellectual work (Schroeder, Fox, and Bizzell x). In 2011, both Gunter’s “braided texts” and Wallace’s “alternative rhetoric” hook directly into Bizzell’s trajectory, petitioning for “discourse practices intended to disrupt dominant discourse and its attendant cultural values”
Beginning in medias res, both Gunter and Wallace reference Bizzell’s “Hybrid Academic Discourses,” as well as Victor Villanueva’s use of his own experience to complicate public narratives of assimilation and enfranchisement through education. Bizzell, Gunter, and Wallace all argue for an expansion of academic scholarship and pedagogy that accounts for the alternative forms of knowledge that personal writing can provide. So personal writing, a similarly diverse range of practices, garners a reputation as a progressive or radical genre.

As Sidney Dobrin observes, however, academic discourse is “perpetual[ly] assimilative” (56), accustomed to absorbing the discursive forms that challenge it. Academic discourse conventions then often determine the rubric with which we discuss and implement personal writing. Even discussions of personal writing as “alternative” sometimes overemphasize experience as “evidence” in a more straightforward, thesis-driven argument. They treat stories as representational facts. While evidence-based argumentation does sometimes make for good research, such straightforward argumentation has a tendency to “flatten” (in the words of Alexander and Rhodes) the rhetorical potency of personal writing. Filtered through the vocabulary of evidence, narratives that once provided alternative knowledge and voices are often subsumed by the dominant narrative of superficial multiculturalism.

Even in these “alternative” theories, explicit discussion of the personal in academic settings is still frequently framed in terms of evidence. For instance, in Alt Dis, Bizzell describes alternative discourses as “admitting personal experience as evidence” to challenge the assumptions of the “dominant white male group” (“The Intellectual Work”

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27 A practice that can be traced to the regard for “testimony” as a complete representation of reality. Patricia Williams’s *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* examines the problems that arise when testimony becomes fungible and its value is determined by the market.
2). Also in *Alt Dis*, Krista Ratcliffe characterizes the historical divide between “expressivist” and “cultural studies” camps as one based on experience-as-evidence:

In the scholarship where Bartholomae engages Elbow and Elbow engages Bartholomae, where Jarratt engages expressivists and Bishop engages social constructionists, they all set up a thesis, establish reasons that may be enumerated and related into logical categories, and weave personal stories into the piece as evidence. (206)

Though our meta-language about personal writing focuses on its ability to make available alternative forms of knowledge, our actual discussion of personal writing still focuses on those dominant conventions described by Bizzell as reflecting “the cultural preferences of the most powerful people in the community.”

Where discussions describe the extra-evidentiary work of personal writing, the vocabulary becomes a lot more ambiguous. Bizzell’s “Hybrid Academic Discourses” focuses on characterizing the shared traits of hybrid texts rather than examining how they achieve intellectual work that is “greater than the sum of its parts” (13). In *Alt Dis*, Helen Fox waxes poetic, equating writing with sorcery: “As witchcraft, writing is high art” (59). For Gunter, a “tension of multiplicity” (77) emerges between experiential writing and academic conventions. By 2015, Muñoz’s “Race, Sex, and the Incommensurate” embraces the unknowability of narrative—a correlative to the incalculable experiences of life. Undeniably, part of the power of narrative is its indeterminacy. This ambiguity, however, also makes it vulnerable to appropriation by superficial gestures of inclusivity that leave the apparatuses of systemic inequality untouched.
To track how shifting cultural and institutional contexts can reassign meaning to individual narratives, this chapter focuses on the work and legacy of Gloria Anzaldúa as well as how her writing has been selectively taken up within composition theory and curricula. As perhaps one of the most prolific authorial touchstones for personal writing in North America, Anzaldúa laid a foundation for both personal writing and alternative rhetorics in the academy. Because she has become an iconic figure, her story demands greater attention to the consequences when a narrative of marginalization becomes a mainstream text. In order to explain the ways Anzaldúa disrupted normative discourses at the time of her publications, I begin with an exploration of how Anzaldúa’s anthology projects allowed her to place her personal narrative alongside others in collaborative efforts that channeled self-affirmation into institutional change. Rather than relying on institutional recognition, these writers began with their own values and traditions, and worked their narratives into the discursive spaces that were once closed to them. Finally, I return to David L. Wallace’s project to consider what a more situationally-sensitive, continually-reinvented notion of personal writing can offer alternative rhetoric. In practicing Hawhee’s invention in-the-middle, I hope to build from and onto Wallace’s demand that this discipline devote more effort to examining its own hegemonic structures.

**Anthologizing as Activism**

Within rhetoric and composition, Gloria Anzaldúa’s most famous text is undoubtedly *Borderlands*. Specifically, the chapter “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” is widely excerpted for disciplinary texts from Bartholomae and Petrosky’s undergraduate
writing textbook, *Ways of Reading*, to Glenn and Lunsford’s rhetoric anthology, *Landmark Essays on Rhetoric and Feminism: 1973-2000*. As Cynthia Franklin notes, however, the academy’s historical focus on *Borderlands* “obscures *Borderlands’s* grounding in and connection to *This Bridge*” (418). Published six years before *Borderlands*, *This Bridge Called My Back* was a collected anthology that brought not only Anzaldúa, but many other women of color to the feminist movement. In fact, much of Anzaldúa’s literary work involved curating anthologies, a work she describes as activism: “You can recreate reality. But you’re going to need some help because it’s all done in relationship with other people” (Keating and Anzaldúa 270). Her three edited collections: *This Bridge Called My Back*, *Haciendo Caras*, and *this bridge we call home* contain a broad range of voices, issuing more complicated and thought provoking challenges to identity politics. Though *Borderlands* is undoubtedly a powerful book that has influenced several decades of queer and feminist writing, scholarly focus on Anzaldúa’s monograph discounts the profound impact of her edited collections and the way they built upon a longer history of feminist activism. Attention to the (re)invention of identity, both individual and collective, reveals how these anthologies responded to available discourses and their limitations, continually reassessing what had been accomplished and what more needed to be done. Perhaps most importantly, these anthologies enabled women of color to speak and to organize among themselves, fostering the sort of self-empowerment that Couthard (and Fanon) argue are integral to

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28 In *Academic Lives*, Cynthia Franklin focuses especially on a Norton anthology’s choice to include a chapter from *Borderlands* rather than a piece in *This Bridge* that examines “similar issues about writing from a more explicitly collective and activist perspective” (31). Augenbraum and Olmos’s *The Latino Reader* also chooses to excerpt from *Borderlands* rather than any of Anzaldúa’s anthologies. Within *Borderlands*, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” seems especially popular, and appears across a wide range of texts from Ritchie and Ronald’s *Available Means: An Anthology of Women’s Rhetoric(s)* to Michael Austin’s *Reading the World: Ideas that Matter*. 
moving beyond oppressive structures.

Spurred by the momentum of lesbian and feminist journals such as Calyx, Third Woman, and Sinister Wisdom, co-editors Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga assembled an even larger forum, in writing, of women of color. In their introduction to the first edition, Anzaldúa and Moraga describe This Bridge as a project already long overdue. The book was conceived of and realized in two years with urgency. Due to its unprecedented sales numbers, Bridge was able to make present bodies and experiences hitherto invisible in the academy. Since then, Bridge has often been credited for turning a largely Anglo-centric feminist movement toward the concerns of women of color and queer women.

Even as Bridge continued to serve as an inspirational text, though, Anzaldúa saw that its work could not stop there. The problem with providing the exemplary text of marginalized voices is that it becomes the exemplary text. In the introduction to Haciendo Caras, Anzaldúa expresses her surprise that no one had followed up on her work to pick up where Bridge left off. Without new voices and further conversation, the book became a static representation of otherness. Norma Alarcón observed that oftentimes Bridge was used to cite an instance of difference among women, but that difference was never substantively explored. Instead, much of feminist scholarship referenced Borderlands to acknowledge difference but then negated that difference in favor of the unitary (and universalizing) category of “woman” (“Theoretical Subjects” 31). Bridge became the requisite text for diversity in women’s studies courses, tokenizing

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29 At the time of Franklin’s Writing Women’s Communities, This Bridge was in its ninth printing of the second edition with more than 86,000 copies sold (Writing Women’s Communities 31). As of 2016, This Bridge is in its fourth edition.
30 While acknowledging Bridge’s place within a larger writing movement, Teresa de Lauretis famously credits This Bridge Called My Back as a major catalyst for third-wave feminism (Aanerud).
the “same half dozen mujeres” (Anzaldúa, *Haciendo Caras* xvi). Those mujeres\(^{31}\) were also the only ones invited to speak at universities and to submit their writing for anthologies. Already, then, the multicultural imperative had subsumed the voices of these women in an easily contained narrative of “diversity.” By continually referencing this single text, the academy could pretend inclusiveness while still limiting access.

Responding to these circumstances, Anzaldúa organized *Haciendo Caras*, intentionally seeking out and including “unknown, little published, or unpublished writers” (xvii). Whereas *Bridge* featured women of color addressing the anglocentrism of the feminist movement, *Haciendo Caras* created a space where these women could also “[concentrate] on our own projects, our own agendas, our own theories” (xviii). Yet again, these narratives cannot be read as mere representations of identity for mainstream consumption. In Anzaldúa’s words, the essays in *Haciendo Caras* were “not only about survival strategies, they *are* survival strategies”\(^{32}\) (xviii). Emerging at a defining moment in feminist history, they negotiated the very meanings of feminism and collective solidarity for women of color. Rather than speaking to white feminists, Anzaldúa “wanted a book which would teach ourselves and whites to read in nonwhite narrative traditions—traditions which, in the very act of writing, we try to recoup and to invent” (xviii). In doing so, these women both recovered and created non-normative narrative traditions, engaging Fanon’s self-affirmative cultural practices rather than “relying too heavily on […] dominant institutions of power to do this for them” (Coulthard 23).

\(^{31}\) Later in her career, Anzaldúa chose not to italicize non-English words as “such italics have a denormalizing, stigmatizing function” (*The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* 10–11). In keeping with her decision, I choose to eliminate the italics here.

\(^{32}\) In 1999, Gerald Vizenor initiates an analogous movement in Indigenous Studies. His *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* defines “survivance” as “an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name” (vii).
Anzaldúa and Keating responded again to the fear of quiescence in 2002, culling old and new voices for *this bridge we call home*. In the introduction, Anzaldúa reflects on the need to build on the conversations from *This Bridge Called My Back*. She writes, “*this bridge we call home* is our attempt to continue the dialogue, rethink old ideas, and germinate new theories” (“Preface” 2). Like *Haciendo Caras*, *this bridge we call home* reassesses the discursive landscape and adapts accordingly. Rather than speaking to white feminists or among feminists of color, *home* envisions a radical solidarity – enacting a politics of inclusion that does not erase difference. In a controversial demonstration of inclusivity, Anzaldúa and Keating incorporated white writers as well as male writers in this volume, risking the discomfort and displeasure of mujeres de color. This risk, however, was intentional, because “there are no safe spaces” (3), and clinging to that false sense of security also risks complacency within continuing injustice. Certainly the stories told within *this bridge we call home* each contain moving messages, but part of the text’s provocation is in its making—in the commingling of seemingly disparate voices asking “what we’re doing to each other, to those in distant countries, and to the earth’s environment” (2).

Even the editors of *home* did not anticipate the submissions they received and had to allow these surprises to take the conversation in new directions. Over the call for submissions, the editing process, and the publication of *this bridge we call home*, Keating found writers who not only expanded anglocentric and heteronormative feminist practices, but who also challenged Keating’s own conceptions of feminists of color. Keating describes her initial “astonishment, bewilderment, dismay, and concern” (“Charting Pathways” 12) to see many women of color author very theoretical pieces.
Reading submissions in 1999, Keating wondered, “does this use of theory indicate that they’ve been seduced by the academy, that they’re ‘white’ academic clones/drones?” (13). While part of Bridge’s oppositional stance to the academy took form in its nontheoretical language and its “challenge to high theory” (13), many writers in home seem comfortable with that theory—perhaps because many more contributors to home are located (“with great discomfort and ambivalence”) inside the academy. In the twenty-one years between anthologies, then, we see how discourses are mutually affecting.

Curating this bridge we call home, Keating experiences the sort of surprise and discomfort that can catalyze a shift in perspective. After reading “dozens of theoretically astute submissions,” Keating concludes that she “must actively resist the belief that women of color don’t ‘do theory.’ It’s another false division” (13–14). She uses this realization to counterpoint Audre Lorde’s famous claim in Bridge that the “master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (94). Perhaps in “academic guerilla battles” (Keating, “Charting Pathways” 14), multicultural feminism could use academic theory without merely assimilating. Many of the writers for home encountered This Bridge Called My Back in academic settings and brought the language of the academy into their contributions to this bridge we call home. By the time Keating publishes home, she puts her self-story beside those of others with similar passions but very different origins, positioning herself within a very different discourse of resistance. By inventing-in-the-middle, with the discursive tools at their disposal, these writers can adopt terminologies from discourses of power without being assimilated. Here, even theory becomes yet another resource—one that must be used with awareness of its exclusionary history, but also one that might be opened by new voices and ideas.
Throughout this history, Keating, Anzaldúa, Moraga, and the many contributors to their volumes situate their experiences and voices within conversations largely dominated by white, heteronormative perspectives. As written coalitions, these anthologies bring together individuals who had been isolated and silenced by the academy and connect their activisms. At the time of their publications, these stories disrupted public narratives that mostly ignored their very existence. However, as Cherríe Moraga reflects in 2015, in the Preface to the 4th edition of This Bridge, “history is always in the making” (xxiii), and subsequent narratives have re-made these landmark texts as a part of institutional identities.

Becoming a Landmark

When marginal voices do manage to break into the mainstream, they also become a part of its history. Many years after This Bridge and Borderlands, Gloria Anzaldúa is a canonical figure. In their review of feminist history, Glenn and Lunsford’s Landmark Essays on Rhetoric and Feminism includes This Bridge Called My Back as part of second wave feminism’s challenge to heterormativity. The volume then excerpts from Borderlands, situating it alongside Audre Lorde’s “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” and Andrea Lunsford’s “On Reclaiming Rhetorica” with the following introduction: “As the three landmark essays in this third section illustrate, women’s rhetorical displays have often been distinguished by their acknowledgement of their marginalization, their physical bodies, and the risk of speaking out itself” (Lunsford and Glenn 8–9). Anzaldúa’s “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” then appears as proof of rhetoric’s disciplinary evolution—its coming to understand that it “can be inhabited by
those considered to be ‘others’” (9). While Anzaldúa once wrote as an outsider to both academic settings and 1980s feminism, she is now a part of those narratives. This is, of course, a part of the goal—to join the conversation. In becoming a part of the rhetorical canon, *Borderlands* is reinvented as a landmark text while it simultaneously rewrites the field as a more inclusive discipline. As it becomes embedded in the field’s own history, though, it is also sometimes adopted by misleading narratives of inclusion and multiculturalism.

To be clear, Anzaldúa and Lorde did provide foundational texts for feminist rhetoric, and their becoming a part of rhetoric’s history through collections such as Glenn and Lunsford’s *Landmark Texts* is crucial for the growth of the field. There is also a danger, however, in accepting this new narrative of our diversified discipline. After texts like *Borderlands* became more visible, stories with strategically-placed codeswitching and “ethnic” spiritualities are almost expected from so-called minority writers. Similar to Alexander and Rhodes’s “Flattening Effects” (discussed in my introduction), Bruce Horner’s “Mixing It Up” points to how the recent surge of experiential writing from underrepresented voices prompted a new and still precarious context where self-writing is often assumed as a gesture of defiance when it only rehearses an established genre of the “personal” (185). The commodification of these stories often valorizes the person (and his/her identity category) rather than the writing itself. These authors can be inserted into conversations about race, gender, and sexuality as “evidence” of inclusivity—a select title on a syllabus, a single name on a panel or committee, etc. The overall effect of these attitudes is that we might continue to ignore marginalizing structures under the guise of embracing difference and diversity. As teachers of writing, we also risk imposing these
narratives and values on our students without offering them the same opportunity for self-
empowerment.

The academy’s emphasis of Borderlands, despite its context in a much more
collaborative series of projects, is no accident. As Borderlands becomes a landmark text,
it also becomes a part of the North American tradition of autobiography—one that has
long been tethered to notions of individuality, and one that has also used that
individualism to both conceal and contest larger issues of race, class, and sexuality.
Though the actual range of autobiographical forms is remarkably varied and flexible, its
overall history has deep roots in “the ideology of individualism” (Smith and Watson 124)
from Augustine’s Confessions, to Benjamin Franklin’s journey as a “self-made man”
(116–117). Even with recent diversifications of self-writing practices, professors of
autobiography Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note that “Americans in particular
continue to be attracted to Horatio Alger-esque fantasies of the self-made individual
overcoming adversity” (124). The fantasy of bootstraps individualism, however, is also
probably one of the founding myths of American conservatism: the wealthy made it with
their own sweat and blood; the poor simply lack the drive and discipline; we are all in full
control of our circumstances and not bound by larger hegemonic structures.

As Cynthia Franklin explains in Academic Lives, personal writing has become so
closely tethered to this trope of an individual overcoming adversity that a “vocabulary of
oppression” (34) has become the default language of academic memoirs. In Franklin’s
words, the current trend of academic autobiographies – often written from positions of
privilege – tends to “focus on feelings or experiences of marginalization without
investigating how those feelings and experiences are socially situated and constructed”
Such disavowal of political context, though, is only available to those of relative
privilege, and in the wake of their stories, “legitimate claims of marginalization are often
dismissed or emptied of meaning” (6). For my discussion, I will abstain from terms such
as “legitimate claims,” because I wish to avoid comparing or assessing experiential pain.
Like Franklin and Horner, though, I stress that the personal is not an automatic challenge
to normative understandings. Whereas autobiographies by feminists of color once
generated space for new voices in the university, the curricular inclusion of their work
often papers over the systems of exclusion and discrimination that Borderlands, Bridge,
and home defied.

**Telling Alternative Stories**

The discursive movements spurred by intersectional feminism in collections such
as Bridge and home established the foundation from which David L. Wallace builds his
“alternative rhetoric” in 2011. In the interest of furthering personal writing as institutional
critique, Wallace (whose “Unwelcome Stories” I detail in Chapter One) begins his book,
*Compelled to Write*, by calling attention to the field’s complacency. As in “Unwelcome
Stories,” Wallace demands that rhetoric and composition take more responsibility for the
entanglements of language, power, and identity in our scholarship and pedagogy. For
Wallace, addressing systemic marginalization begins with “alternative rhetoric,” which
establishes the copresence of those designated as “other” within the larger culture
(*Compelled to Write* 31). Personal writing then becomes invaluable in that it can make
present those whom dominant culture has denied while also addressing the author’s
intersectionality and opacity—terms that Wallace borrows from feminist and queer
theory. In short, personal writing can acknowledge that one stands in multiple relations to discourses of power, and that one’s self-knowing is always incomplete. As in critiques of recognition-based politics, however, the mere articulation of difference does not necessarily beget mutual understanding, and making the “other” present does not necessarily grant him or her agency. With the help of Somers’s terminology, I now consider what a relational understanding might add to rhetoric’s attempt at alterity.

Among the four examples of alternative rhetoric examined in *Compelled to Write*, Wallace describes Gloria Anzaldúa as “pressing alternative rhetoric” more so than the others (208). Once again, *Borderlands* is our landmark. Like Glenn and Lunsford, Wallace discusses the tremendous contributions that *Borderlands* made to cultural, feminist, and queer theory, particularly how Anzaldúa’s refusal to compartmentalize the wide-ranging influences in her life “invites us to see that identity is multiple and contingent” (208). This narrative that Wallace uses to speak of Anzaldúa is not particularly “alternative.” Certainly, it is true: Gloria Anzaldúa was and continues to be a forceful influence for writers from America’s borderlands. To speak of her as such, though, does not address the academy’s continued tokenization of the “same half dozen mujeres.” Nor does it examine why, despite *Borderlands’* integration into the academic canon, we “have not gone far enough” (8) in addressing our own complicities in systemic inequality.

These systems are easier to maintain, though, when we invoke the ideology of individualism. In his brief summary of Anzaldúa’s life, Wallace begins by categorizing her narrative as yet another rags-to-riches American story:
In one sense, her life could be read as an academic version of a Horatio Alger story similar to Douglass’s, as she begins life as a working class Tejaña [sic] girl whose family has lost their landholdings and who subsists by sharecropping, but because of her intelligence and drive, she becomes one of the most influential critics of race and other prejudices in American society. (121)

Narrating Anzaldúa’s story as one of self-driven progress, Wallace titles the section “From Queer Girl to Elder Status,” focusing on Anzaldúa as lone pioneer and suggesting a linear trajectory and transformation. This story omits many of Anzaldúa’s ongoing struggles, including challenges with chronic illness and healthcare that bring even the claim of “influence” into question. Wallace is right in that Anzaldúa’s writing did break into a largely white, heteronormative discourse. Her influence, however, both emerged from and enabled the solidarity of other marginal subjects. In mapping a one-way, self-driven path to success, Wallace taps into the neoliberal narrative of American triumph and individualism. There is not anything factually false or wrong in Wallace’s characterization of Anzaldúa, but this particular retelling of her life reiterates a lot of the narrative that has already canonized *Borderlands* within rhetorical studies, raising the question: What more can we do when (in Wallace’s words) we as a discipline have still “not gone far enough in addressing our complicity in maintaining the discourses of power” (8)?

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33 Due to her self-employment status, Anzaldúa had difficulty maintaining health insurance throughout her career. During the mid-1990s, much of her energy was devoted to researching and learning to live with diabetes, as well as working to secure adequate health insurance. Appendix 2 in *Luz en lo Oscuro* delves deeper into Anzaldúa’s lifelong struggle with her health.

34 Cynthia Franklin’s *Writing Women’s Communities* situates *Bridge* within its historical context as a project that was undeniably influential, but also made possible by feminist publishing initiatives from the 1960s and 1970s (32). *Writing Women’s Communities* also traces the many interconnections between writers and editors among multi-genre anthologies by women of marginalized backgrounds, arguing that granting *Bridge* sole responsibility for mobilizing women of color within academia risks dehistoricizing the text.
In search of an answer, Wallace turns to *Borderlands* as an instructive text. With almost pedagogical language, he breaks *Borderlands* into “lessons” (146) for helping marginal voices speak to and against dominant discourse. As this vocabulary would suggest, Wallace relies on a lot of the default language of the academy, which results in an evidence-based, fact-driven discussion of narrative. The limitations of this approach become most evident in his exploration of the Coatlicue state, which regards Anzaldúa’s writing as a descriptive recounting of her experience rather than an integral part of it—a representational reading rather than an ontological one. Quoting Anzaldúa, Wallace defines the Coatlicue as “an intensely negative channel” (Anzaldúa qtd. in *Compelled to Write* 130) in which one wrestles with the effects of cultural dissonance. In confronting this conflict, the mestiza (or, Wallace’s “alternative” rhetorician) makes the Coatlicue a generative position through which she finds greater self and social awareness. Wallace’s discussion, however, focuses largely on Anzaldúa’s descriptive and definitional statements, ignoring how her narrative also enacts these claims—it produces the negative channel; it creates cultural dissonance. At best, Wallace’s alternative rhetoric recounts personal details to prove a point to the dominant other. At worst, it rehearses one’s pain in search of normative approval.

To follow Anzaldúa’s example, Wallace reflects, “In my case, taking up Anzaldúa’s challenge means daring to tell about my experiences in the Coatlicue state because of my closeting as a homosexual” (131). He then interprets that challenge almost too literally: he *tells* of his experience (to invoke the creative writing platitude: show, don’t tell). He relies on statements of fact to do the work of narrative. In the three-paged interchapter that follows his analysis of Anzaldúa’s concepts, Wallace describes a
moment when he tries and fails to explain to his father how he felt divided by his home and school cultures: “I was a different person in the two settings. I had no friends who crossed contexts, and the worlds seemed separate” (159). In a truncated scene, young David approaches his father: “You know, Dad, um…” The scene, however, stops there as Wallace digresses into his admiration of his father.

The following paragraphs reflect on Dad’s talent as a bricklayer and his ability to acquire new skills. The reader sees Wallace’s “minister-dad” skillfully pressing each brick into the mortar; his hands move with deliberate and practiced ease. Wallace explains the abandonment of his narrative:

I have digressed from my the “light of the world” story because I wanted to show the ‘jack-of-all-trades’ side of my father and how much I admire him even though this moment was hard for me. I came to my father that day looking for dialogue about my two worlds, not sure what to make of this separation and perhaps a little proud of who I was in school and wanting him to know that other me and be proud of him, too. (160)

Just as young David did, the narrative avoids the cultural and individual expectations that engender his personal conflict. After Wallace describes his father as a jack-of-all-trades, he never returns to the scene. He reflects instead that “I want to read this story as an instance of being in a Coatlicue state, of the coming together of divergent aspects of my life and my inability to negotiate my identity at those points” (161). Near the very end of the interchapter, Wallace finally confesses: “On the day I tried to talk with my dad about my two worlds, even the most supportive informed response could not possibly have helped me come to an understanding of self that would have made my homosexuality
articulable that day” (161). This is the first time the section references Wallace’s sexuality. Until this point, Wallace’s (unsuccessful) conversation with his father was ostensibly about the separation between “who I was in school” (160) and his home life. The above sentence, however, suggests that the entire conversation was an attempt to articulate his homosexuality. The use of euphemism without reflexive explanation replicates young David’s self-censorship, rendering unspeakable both his feelings of alienation and the forces that inspired them. Of course, the “unspeakable” is the modus operandi of institutional power. Implicit censorship works not by regulating speech, but by determining what is even speakable (Butler 133). Without naming or confronting this censorship, Wallace’s narrative normalizes the silence that separated him from his family—in a sense, recreating the closet he worked so hard to escape.

The quiet preponderance of normative expectations also helps explain some of the gaps that Wallace finds in Anzaldúa’s work: 1) “Anzaldúa does not provide much substantive description of what it would mean for the dominant to account for their failure to deal with their own opacity and the attendant marginalization”; and 2) “Borderlands itself does not offer much insight into how that confrontational stance [between oppressor and oppressed] can be productively broken” (144–146). True enough: Anzaldúa does not explicitly describe what it would mean for the dominant to account for their complicity, and Borderlands does not prescribe steps for breaking oppositional stances. With a focus on representational narrativity, Wallace traces a linear progression from “queer girl” to Chicana elder. This narrative flattens Anzaldúa’s identity into that of the perennial “other” offering her story for recognition. It is what Keating calls a “status quo” story – a narrative that normalizes the existing social values (“Transforming Status-
Quo”). Though Anzaldúa rises from a “poor Tejaña [sic] girl” (*Compelled to Write* 120) to “a star in women’s studies circles” (123), in Wallace’s accounting, she remains a perpetual outsider, petitioning for acceptance from the academic elite. The walls that divide center and fringe remain. If we read *Borderlands* as situated in, and moving among, systems of identity though, we can see it as a generative encounter with Coatlicue. It participates in the change that Wallace is looking for, serving as both the rupture and bridge that permeates borders.

In *this bridge we call home*, Anzaldúa calls writing “an archetypal journey to the self, un proceso de crear puentes” (“Now Let Us Shift” 574). A move away from the language of evidence, toward personal narrative as reinvention, can better account for writing as proceso—as the fraught and painful process of building bridges. *Borderlands* does more than *describe* the Coatlicue state; it participates in it. In recalling her early menstrual bleeding—a product of her endocrine condition—Anzaldúa writes: “The bleeding distanced her from others. Her body had betrayed her… Her soft belly exposed to the sight of everyone” (*Borderlands* 65). With this passage, she willfully reveals those things dominant cultures had told her to bury in shame. Anzaldúa invites absolute strangers into the intimate, excruciating moments of her childhood, but this writing is also an act of defiance. Her narrative uses this humiliation to critique the very conditions that induced it.

In a narrative trajectory very different from that of Wallace, Anzaldúa’s story plunges headfirst into the discourses that have engineered her fear and self-loathing—and only then does she overcome them:
No, it isn’t enough that she is female—a second-class member of a conquered people who are taught to believe they are inferior because they have indigenous blood, believe in the supernatural and speak a deficient language. Now she beats herself over the head for her ‘inactivity,’ a stage that is as necessary as breathing. But that means being Mexican. All her life she’s been told that Mexicans are lazy. She has had to work twice as hard as others to meet the standards of the dominant culture which have, in part, become her standards. (70–71)

I quote the passage at length because it enacts a difficult negotiation between differing values. It intertwines multiple levels of Somers’s narrative identities. Here, the public narratives that have made Anzaldúa feel alien, mutant, and deformed clash with the ontological narrative she needs to make sense of her world. She describes her two selves: one part “the accusatory, persecutory, judgmental” and the other “the object of contempt” (67). In moments, she echoes the “standards of dominant culture” defining women as second-class and her language as deficient. In others, she speaks with heightened awareness, noting that she has had to work twice has hard, that she “has been told” these things that others accept as truth.

When Anzaldúa begins to break from this fear, she does so through languages and identities that have been disparaged. In other words, she empowers herself through alternative systems of value rather than relying on the ones that have been thrust upon her. Her resistance begins in her body—the one marked as “other”:

Shock pulls my breath out of me. The sphincter muscle tugs itself up, up, and the heart in my cunt starts to beat [...] I collapse into myself—a delicious
caving into myself – imploding, the walls like matchsticks softly folding inward in slow motion.

I see oposición e insurreción. I see the crack growing on the rock. I see the fine frenzy building. I see the heat of anger or rebellion or hope split open that rock, releasing la Coatlicue. And someone in me takes matters into our own hands, and eventually, takes dominion over serpents—over my own body, my sexual activity, my soul, my mind, my weaknesses and strengths. Mine. Ours. Not the heterosexual white man’s or the colored man’s or the state’s or the culture’s or the religion’s or the parents’—just ours, mine. (73)

In the journey to insurrection, Anzaldúa collapses physical reality with the supernatural—both frames of knowledge that have been dismissed as inconsequential or irrational in intellectual arguments. The spirituality of la Coatlicue, though, brings Anzaldúa to clarity. She sees that there is “a greater power than the conscious I. That power is my inner self” (72). La Coatlicue enables Anzaldúa to accept her own plurality and her strengths and weaknesses. She owns her body, her sexual activity, her soul, and finally, she writes, “I am not afraid” (73).

This personal transformation is important, but the impact and influence of Borderlands cannot be understood as an inherent quality of the text. Instead, considering Anzaldúa’s narrative within its relational setting illuminates how her writing draws from and onto conversations about identity—both collective and individual. The very existence of Borderlands did not make it revolutionary, but its contextualization in a larger discursive movement does. As in Coulthard’s model of empowerment, Anzaldúa’s
resistance did not stop with self-affirmation. Her narratives also shifted the material conditions of the academy.

In an interview with Debbie Blake and Carmen Abrego, Anzaldúa recalls the expansion of her work through artistic and intellectual circles: “the Chicano community would not publish me and has been the last to read me” (Keating and Anzaldúa 230). *This Bridge Called My Back* first had to reach the “the grassroots community […] and the dyke community” (230). As it gathered a wider readership, it finally attracted the attention of academics and Chicana/os. *This Bridge* thus set the foundation for *Borderlands* to take its place in the academic and Chicana/o canon, where it challenges what it means to be and to speak as an intellectual, and a woman, and a Chicana, and a lesbian. Anzaldúa reflects that “… a lot of the changes in the Chicano and the Latino cultures result from having more access to knowledge. So for the first time these chicanitos and chicanitas are being exposed to the work of Chicanas and the work of Chicana dykes” (231). By drawing attention to “the Chicanas, who have been denied their bodies, a language, respectability, and integrity” (231), Anzaldúa calls for more accountability from the Chicano culture, which has not only silenced women, but trained men “to be macho [and…] to kill off the feeling, the emotional part of themselves” (231). In *Borderlands*, she extends her experience – this deeply feeling, embodied, emotional experience—out to Chicanos: “As a person, I, as a people, we, Chicanos, blame ourselves, hate ourselves, terrorize ourselves” (67). This “we,” is less a representation of reality than a gesture of hope. It is an invitation. It is what autobiography scholar Paul John Eakin calls an “art of the future” (*Living Autobiographically* 148), imagining a more inclusive world into being.
Revisiting Wallace’s two criticisms of Anzaldúa’s work, I respond that the answers to his questions are actually intertwined: confrontational stances are broken by providing opportunities for the dominant to account for their own opacity. Doing so begins with the sort of self-determination discussed by Oliver and Coulthard—empowerment through alternative understandings and values that do not require the recognition from the oppressor. Anzaldúa exorcises her internalized hatred by countering it with indigenous spirituality. As alternative models of seeing and being, her stories then throw into relief the naturalization of discriminatory systems. The role of the dominant is then to get out of the way—to foster conditions where the oppressed can share their stories rather than continuing to speak for them.

Anzaldúa’s journey to self-affirmation began to actually change academic structures and practices when it made apparent the institutional walls that had rendered her experience invisible—the omissions that prevented “chicanitos and chicanitas” from encountering the work of “Chicana dykes.” Anzaldúa describes this process as a collaborative effort—not an individual mission of insurgence, but a community of disparate individuals invested in their shared fate. As Anzaldúa remarks, “for me to be effective in making whatever little changes I can, I have to get this respect, this acceptance, this endorsement from my peers” (Keating and Anzaldúa 262). This acceptance, though, came on her terms rather than those dictated by normative values. In a 1996 interview with Andrea Lunsford, Anzaldúa describes the moment when compositionists began to notice her work as “a bigger shock than finding that anthropologists or women’s studies people were reading me” (275). The discipline that had once silenced her, that had marked down her writing and sanitized her language, was
reproducing her work in textbooks and anthologies and inviting her to speak. Similarly, the Chicano collective revised its historical exclusion of Chicanas when it accepted Anzaldúa as a kindred voice.

Obviously, these changes are not a panacea. As shown even in later applications of Anzaldúa’s work, a story can be appropriated and reinvented in different contexts. Stories that once worked together to map out larger systems of oppression can be de-contextualized to support narratives of recognition-based multiculturalism. Anzaldúa’s body of work—as opposed to Borderlands as lone example—provides a particularly illuminating study because she was so attuned to changes in her rhetorical context, and each subsequent project pushed further against oppressive norms. Wallace emphasizes the need to acknowledge an individual’s different relations to power, and to that I add the need to account for those relations shifting over time.

Throughout Anzaldúa’s efforts for social equality, she was not perennially powerless. After accessing discourses of power (after becoming an “elder”), Anzaldúa also opened those discourses to writers without the same means. In describing her anthologizing projects, she says: “You can recreate reality. But you’re going to need some help because it’s all done in relationship with other people” (270). In This Bridge Called My Back, Haciendo Caras, and this bridge we call home, Anzaldúa speaks in concert with many voices, who together explore and discover alternative modes of thought and argumentation. Though Borderlands is undoubtedly a powerful book that has influenced several decades of queer and feminist writing, scholarly focus on Anzaldúa’s monograph ignores its place in a larger network of writing that built upon,
(re)appropriated, and converted collective histories to create radically different spaces and practices in the academy.

**Experience Becomes Evidence**

In the late 1990s, when Patricia Bizzell described personal experience as “absolutely taboo” (“Hybrid” 13), she did so in a different setting than our present moment. Her “Hybrid Academic Discourse” responded to a demographic shift in the academy, when writers from less historically privileged backgrounds were incorporating their experiential knowledge into composition scholarship. Naturally, those scholars found the terms of this discourse limiting. At the time, Villanueva’s blend of analytical insight and newyorcian English offered a pointed challenge to the limitations of academic conventions. Now, rhetoric and composition has already been moved by Villanueva’s *Bootstraps*, and has also begun to view personal writing as part of its history. With the assimilation of texts such as *Borderlands* and *Bootstraps* into the rhetorical cannon, academic conventions have also begun to explain the work of personal writing in its own terms.

Tellingly, one of the field’s few book-length explorations of personal writing in academic settings is Candace Spigelman’s *Personally Speaking: Experience as Evidence in Academic Discourse*. Building from the *College English* symposia on the “personal” in

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35 This historical moment obviously follows publications such as *Bridge* in the 1980s—or even before that, *The Black Woman: An Anthology* in 1970, which theorized from experiences of marginalization. Earlier, too, in composition studies, conversations examined the value of traditionally nonacademic discourses—perhaps most notably in the 1974 NCTE resolution on “Students’ Right to Their Own Language.” The difference that Bizzell notes in 1999 is the use of hybrid (or “mixed”) forms—the intermingling of personal and academic perspectives for critical work. As Keating noted in 2002 (with *this bridge we call home*) that increasingly more feminists of color were using “high theory” in their work, compositionists writing from nondominant linguistic backgrounds knit together divergent cultural traditions to “do intellectual work they could not if confined to traditional academic discourse” (“Hybrid” 12).
rhetoric and composition, *Personally Speaking* brought intensified, much-needed attention to applications of personal writing in intellectual projects. As the title suggests, *Personally Speaking* focuses on the evidentiary. To be clear, Spigelman makes no effort to contest standards of academic discourse beyond its wariness of personal writing. Though she acknowledges feminist critiques of combative argumentative traditions, hers is a more conservative project in that it works “to retain both the term and the idea of academic argument [emphasis in original]” (Spigelman 10). *Personally Speaking* is a defense of personal writing as logical. To reassure critics that it can meet standards for intellectual rigor, Spigelman proposes an evaluative method to examine the validity of narrative arguments. Published at perhaps the height of composition’s most recent interest in personal narrative, in 2004, Spigelman’s *Personally Speaking* made important inroads for personal writing as academic work, but did so by conceding to the argumentative traditions that have discredited perspectives from outside normative expectations.

Drawing authority from the rhetorical canon, Spigelman legitimizes her ideas through Aristotelian theory, as well as the work of James C. Raymond, Kenneth Burke, and finally Walter Fisher. She creates an evaluative methodology that allows experience to “[contribute] to the construction of logical arguments much the same as any other illustrative example” (95). Using Fisher’s narrative fidelity, Spigelman argues that a story’s validity is determined by whether it aligns with the audience’s own experience and understanding (101). Experience as evidence then employs the logic of equivalence; a story’s efficacy is limited by audience perspective. To become effective “proof,” a
narrative must align with the audience’s own experiential knowledge, and stories that fall too far outside the reader’s own experience would be dismissed as invalid.

Certainly, shared origins or experiences would make readers more amenable to certain narratives, but stories have long been – and will continue to be – integral to exposing readers to worlds very unlike their own. In fact, the primary criticism leveled at Fisher’s model has been its inability to challenge prevailing value systems—a troubling limitation when many of the strongest arguments for experiential writing focus on its ability to challenge entrenched norms. Worse yet, framing those narratives as evidence risks reducing people to their experiences, which is especially tempting when only a few voices from certain backgrounds have received recognition from dominant culture.

Experience as illustrative example turns individuals into—to borrow Gloria Anzaldúa’s words—“parts, problems, or useful commodities” (“Now Let Us Shift” 569). Spigelman herself addresses the dangers of assessing experience as evidence for members of marginalized groups, where “invoking one’s experience as agent, witness, or survivor to be the ground of evidence often colludes with those who would construct the marginalized category” (75). As such, Spigelman’s book cautions that assessing experiential writing requires attention to context and sensitivity to experience’s indeterminacy.

More than a decade after Spigelman’s publication, we require more theories of personal writing and ways to track the multiple uses of experience in intellectual undertakings. Whereas Spigelman suggested that the exclusion of personal narrative from

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36 See Rowland; Kirkwood; Stroud
37 See S. Miller; Hindman
38 More recently, Gillian Whitlock has examined the co-optation of autobiographies by Middle Eastern women to reveal how personal stories can be enlisted as propaganda.
academic discourse was its greatest threat, by now the uncritical inclusion of personal narrative seems a more immanent concern. The “personal” is undoubtedly still often derided in scholarly genres, but it does also appear frequently in the form of student narratives39 and in the narratives of marginalization that have been tokenized as representative stories. Many discussions lack the conscientious analysis of Spigelman’s method, but the language of “evidence” is already the de facto language of the academy—as evidenced by Ratcliffe’s assessment of the expressivist vs. social constructionist positions. Wallace’s Compelled to Write—also a conscientious and necessary project—still invokes the logic of evidence in his treatment of Anzaldúa’s writing.

By the rubric of experience-as-evidence, Wallace’s story of Coatlicue makes sense. It recognizes that queerness exists, but falls short of confronting the values that have created this marginal position. It sustains the invisibility of queer experience by allowing its implicit censors to stay unseen. Certainly, the alternative is a harder story to tell—the one for which we do not yet have models or sufficient language. For this reason, we need to be able to discuss the work of personal writing on multiple registers. Personal writing as “evidence” is one important possibility, but it regards Anzaldúa’s work as a bridge (noun, fixed, static) and overlooks its role in bridging (verb, dynamic, in-motion). As such, personal writing remains an isolated and isolating task. Anzaldúa’s story, in this conceptualization, is limited to a bildungsromantic trajectory from young Tejana to Chicana elder, leaving unmentioned the networks of relationships that her work inspired. Anzaldúa’s experiential writing literally gave so many writers the terms through which to

39 Kimberly K. Gunter describes the student memoir as the “gimme” assignment of first-year composition (71).
articulate their own stories. *Bridge, Haciendo Caras, and home* feature many writers interpreting Coatlicue and nepantla through their own experiences—adding to the density of these terms. The continual (re)invention of multicultural feminism throughout Anzaldúa’s lifework could not be effectively captured by the language evidence or by the yardstick of narrative fidelity. There is no single narrative, text, or isolated author that contains the “women-of-color consciousness” mapped and theorized by these many different writers and perspectives. Rather, communal identities emerge from the connections and tensions between the many pieces.

I dwell with Wallace’s work not to disparage his project, but to add to the constellation of alternative rhetorics. *Compelled to Write* does further “alternative” voices in ways that go unacknowledged in arguments that stress language as representation. Wallace’s eclectic arrangement of texts—Douglass’s *Narrative*, Sarah Grimké’s *Letters*, Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*, and David Sedaris’s multiple memoirs—works toward the productive intersectionality that he champions. The resituating of these narratives in unusual company brings to light unexpected commonalities and resonances between otherwise disparate positionalities. Wallace envisions and enacts alliances across differences, using his privileged position in the academy to draw attention to these works and what more they have to offer. Given Wallace’s position, though, I am a little disappointed that he chose to focus solely on works that have already received ample attention.

I know that I am asking too much of Wallace’s single text. As he notes, “most change that matters comes in small increments” (*Compelled to Write* 161). In looking at personal writing as relational engagement, I emphasize the aggregative effect of texts
interacting as opposed to any lone example. Over time, the publication, recirculation, and
discussion of these texts reshape the overarching narrative of shared identities, as well as
the available narratives for articulating one’s alliances with those groups. While the texts
discussed in *Compelled to Write* are beautiful and moving and, yes, revolutionary, they
are not inherent bearers of change. Change did not happen instantaneously when
*Borderlands* was printed. Change happened when *Borderlands* appeared on syllabi in the
classrooms where Anzaldúa was once chastised. Change happened when other women of
color responded with narratives and anthologies of their own. Change happened when
readers who inhabit vastly different points on the spectrums of gender, race, and sexuality
became writers with their own stories of their intersections with *Borderlands, This
Bridge, Haciendo Caras*, and *home*. My response to *Compelled to Write*, then, is less a
delineation of its flaws, but an initiation of – and provocation for – further work. We do
not write merely to call for change; we write to bring those changes into being.
Chapter Three

A Single Life Reinvented: The Many Stories of Richard Rodriguez

In *Luz en el Oscur*ó, Gloria Anzaldúa’s posthumously published dissertation project, she refers to Richard Rodriguez as an example of one who has “severed [his] raíces” (68) – or at least tried. Notoriously the “Mexican-American Chicanos love to hate,” Rodriguez used his first autobiography to deny any affiliation with Chicanos, and attempted to jettison his “minority” status (R. Martínez). As Anzaldúa reminds us though, “Identity is multilayered, stretching in all directions, from past to present, vertically and horizontally, chronologically and spatially” (*Luz En Lo Oscuro* 69). To return to Kimberlé Crenshaw, in one of the foundational texts of intersectional feminism, she notes that “single-axis” frameworks can limit inquiry in cases of multiple discriminations (“Demarginalizing the Intersection” 139). The relational process of identity discourse helps explain how major works by both Anzaldúa and Rodriguez became canonical in discussions of personal narrative and Mexican-American identity. Whereas Anzaldúa had to write herself forcibly into the Chicano community, however, Rodriguez struggled to write himself out of it.

As kairotic constructs, identity labels such as “Chicano” or “Chicana” are not fixed categories, but fluid and responsive modes of mutual engagement with the world. For example, whether or not Rodriguez belongs in the Chicana/o communit(ies) is still easily contestable. Looking at personal writing as an ongoing negotiation among many (and sometimes opposing) available narratives allows for a discussion of identity that can address the cultural implications of individual and social experience, without assigning
fixed categories. Because Rodriguez’s autobiographies have remained prominent in
English studies since the 1980s\textsuperscript{40} and have given rise to such contentious interpretations,
they inspire reflection on the ways conflicting cultural motives can meet and grapple over
a single narrative and its designated meaning.

As one of the most controversial voices in Chicano studies, Rodriguez has fueled
ongoing, heated discussions about Mexican-American and gay identity in the past 35
years of re-storying his life. Between 1982 and 2002, he published three autobiographies,
each ten years apart and very different in style and content.\textsuperscript{41} The first book, *Hunger of
Memory*, follows a mostly linear trajectory from his childhood in a Spanish-speaking
home through his uneasy ascension to public intellectual. Although *Hunger* explicitly
details Rodriguez’s discomfort and disaffiliation with the Chicano movement, many
regarded it as “the first book written by a Chicano to be widely and enthusiastically
reviewed” by mainstream publications (Paravisini-Gebert 82). Meanwhile, many self-
identified Chicanos balked at Rodriguez’s assimilationist stance (Marquez 238).\textsuperscript{42}
Despite *Hunger of Memory*’s anti-Chicano position, though, both white and Mexican-
American readers evaluated *Hunger of Memory* as a Chicano narrative—a fact that then
prompted Rodriguez to reconsider his cultural alliances in later books.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{40} *Hunger of Memory* is still one of the most widely anthologized memoirs in composition readers (R.
Saldívar, “Ideologies” 26; Marquez 238; Paravisini-Gebert 82). Excerpts from both *Hunger* and *Days of
Obligation* also appear frequently in English Literature Advanced Placement exams.
\textsuperscript{41} Though Rodriguez’s 2013 *Darling* is his fourth autobiographical book, his first three are still frequently
referenced as a cohesive “trilogy” respectively focused on class, ethnicity, and race. I choose to examine
the trilogy because these texts are more often discussed in concert. Though I do not have the space to
discuss it here, I believe *Darling* fits with this same trend and adds yet another dimension to Rodriguez’s
problematization of identity-based discourses: class, ethnicity, race, and spirituality.
\textsuperscript{42} For negative reviews of *Hunger* by self-identified Chicana/o critics, see (R. Saldívar, “Ideologies”;
Particularity vs. Universal Humanity: The Value of Being Asimilao”).
\textsuperscript{43} In interviews, Rodriguez has described his later books as direct responses to his critics (Arias).
Days of Obligation, published in 1992, and Brown in 2002 began to integrate Rodriguez’s narrative with Mexican mythologies and histories. Though all three books are sold as autobiographies, Days and Brown focused less on Rodriguez’s immediate experience, instead weaving his own stories with those of the cultural “minorities” whose company he denied in Hunger. While many have read this transformation as either an entire reversal of Rodriguez’s earlier position (J. D. Saldívar) or a dishonest revision for the sake of public approval (Marzán), this ongoing controversy can also be seen as integral to the cultural contribution of Rodriguez’s writing. Moving from representational to ontological narrativity, we can consider Rodriguez’s autobiographies and their critical responses as the making of social life rather than its description. In what follows, I reexamine Rodriguez’s multiple autobiographies as an ongoing negotiation of both Rodriguez’s identity as well as his relation to Mexican American, Chicana/o, and queer communities. I argue that the overall debate has not only shifted Rodriguez’s own alliances, but has demanded more elaborate approaches to identity that can account for individual difference without destroying collective solidarity. As a strategy for locating individual experiences within communal understandings, the acts of both writing and reading self-narrative become integral to the evolution of our communities.

Autobiography as Negotiation

Published in 1982, Richard Rodriguez’z Hunger of Memory emerged in the period that Cynthia Franklin calls “the heyday of identity politics” (Academic Lives 5). This was the year after This Bridge Called My Back was published, and five years before Borderlands. While Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga were building a coalition of
women, however, Richard Rodriguez was trying to tell a story of “my life only. My own” (*Hunger of Memory* 7). *Hunger* opens with an explicit denial of Rodriguez’s ethnic connections: “There are those in White America who would anoint me to play out for them some drama of ancestral reconciliation […] But I reject the role” (5). Instead, Rodriguez fully embraces the paradigm of Richard Hoggart’s “scholarship boy.” Aligning his experience with those of Hoggart’s white, British working-class males, Rodriguez chronicles how his own education distanced him from his working-class roots. He describes himself as “a middle-class American man. Assimilated” (3).

Fanon’s work provides a counterpoint to Rodriguez, describing assimilation as the fantastical, unachievable myth on which colonial power is built (*Black Skin, White Masks*). For its endorsement of this myth, *Hunger* especially appealed to America’s majority culture. Against Rodriguez’s own protestations, he became the envoy of Mexican Americans. The publisher (Bantam) aligns *Hunger* with the rags-to-riches immigrant tale: “*Hunger of Memory* is the story of a Mexican-American Richard Rodriguez, who begins his schooling in Sacramento, California, knowing just 50 words of English and concludes his university studies in the stately quiet of the reading room of the British Museum.” The *New York Times* called *Hunger* the “Mexican variation on the classic American lament for lost ethnicity” (Schreiber), and *Barnes and Noble* sells it as “Latin American Literature.” In the words of Raymund A. Paredes, “Probably no work by a Mexican-American writer has attracted so much national interest [emphasis added]” (18). That qualification is important: Though Rodriguez himself claims to tell an “American” story, mainstream publications hyphenated that claim. Even telling his “own story,” Rodriguez became the representative voice for Mexican Americans. As a
Mexican-American story, *Hunger of Memory* received front-page features in *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* book reviews, as well as attention from *Time*, *Newsweek*, and other major publications, earning the ire of Mexican-American authors and critics with much greater investments in their ethnic community (Paredes).

The popularity of Rodriguez’s narrative is less surprising considering how eagerly it embraced the dominant narrative of assimilation in the midst of California’s language wars. In 1990, the *New York Times Magazine* describes an LA classroom that “could just as well be Mexico City or San Salvador, Grenada or Seville: a roomful of Hispanic children and a Hispanic teacher speaking Spanish” (Bernstein). As the immigrant population of Rodriguez’s home state boomed, educational administrators grappled over whether to offer instruction in students’ home languages. In this political climate, a narrative by a Mexican American who opposed bilingual education became sensational. After narrating his journey from a working class background to a public intellectual, Rodriguez endorses the language of the majority: “What I needed to learn in school was that I had the right—and the obligation—to speak the public language of *los gringos*” (*Hunger of Memory* 19). No wonder “White America” celebrated him. Not only did Rodriguez speak their language; he told everyone else they should be speaking it too.

In “a political climate turning chilly towards minorities” (Paredes 18), Rodriguez’s narratives became fodder for the political right. As not only a Mexican-American story, but the Mexican-American story, *Hunger* modeled a nonthreatening version of difference that reified the status quo—a version that could contain America’s rising immigrant population through quiet assimilation. That same *New York Times Magazine* article cites Rodriguez as a “celebrated dissenter” on bilingual education and
describes *Hunger of Memory* as “a vivid portrait of the Hispanic experience”—one that rebels against the “Hispanic establishment” (Bernstein). Rodriguez was also interviewed by *People Magazine* in a feature titled “¿Habla Espanol? Author Richard Rodriguez Does, but He Wishes the Schools Would Stop.” The interview delves directly into *Hunger*’s most polemical opinions, asking leading questions about the “pitfalls” of bilingual education and provocative ones like “did you deserve it [affirmative action]?” (Chiu). So Rodriguez becomes not only one of the most visible Mexican Americans, but famous for his opposition to policies intended to address minority concerns. Though neither Rodriguez nor members of the “Hispanic establishment” would have liked *Hunger* to be a representative story for Mexican Americans, mainstream presses regarded it as such. Here, Somers’s vocabulary is useful for describing the social forces at play. What Rodriguez refuses to acknowledge in trying to write his “own” story is the importance of his relational setting. As the racial majority in America grows anxious about demographic shifts, his story becomes appealing “evidence” for assimilationist policies. Mexican-American writers and critics then had little choice but to respond to Rodriguez’s popularity as a representative voice.

Addressing the political context that *Hunger of Memory* was assigned, Ramón Saldívar’s “Ideologies of the Self: Chicano Autobiography” evaluates *Hunger* as an example of tensions within Chicano writing. His review provides an illuminating example for this discussion not only because Saldívar remains an influential figure in Chicana/o studies, but because Saldívar makes explicit the relational context that Rodriguez tries to ignore—the involuntary support that *Hunger* gives to anti-immigrant attitudes and policies. Given *Hunger’s* complete disavowal of any connections with the
Chicano movement (in fact, it details Rodriguez’s discomfort in the company of self-identified Chicanos at his university), it seems unlikely that Rodriguez or any Chicano writers would have liked to consider *Hunger* a Chicano autobiography. However, to challenge Rodriguez’s position as “the voice of ‘Hispanic America’” (R. Saldívar, “Ideologies” 26), Saldívar “reads *Hunger of Memory* against [Ernesto] Galarza’s life-story” (33). In other words, Saldívar addresses the context in which mainstream publications positioned Rodriguez’s autobiography and aligns it with other Chicano narratives to show how Rodriguez fails to connect with the Mexican-American community and its history.

Examining both *Hunger* and Galarza’s *Barrio Boy* within the tradition of Chicano writing, Saldívar unsurprisingly finds Galarza’s narrative much more valuable. In his assessment, Saldívar points frequently to the ways that Galarza acknowledges and adroitly deploys the tropes of immigrant autobiography. For example, Saldívar cites Galarza’s exploration of his new neighborhood, “[mapping] out the border of the barrio” (31). A young Galarza wanders through a Japanese movie theatre, a Chinese restaurant, and a cathedral, locating him in the multicultural “borderlands” that Anzaldúa later made famous. These spatial signifiers of difference suggest to Saldívar a discursive formation of identity—an awareness of difference in his complex renegotiation of self. Like many other multilingual writers, Galarza also refuses to divide Spanish and English, using language to establish a “continuing correspondence between personal and social identity” (32). Saldívar sees the book’s travel metaphors, its diverse neighborhoods, and its linguistic fluidity as implicit critiques of public/private binaries. These familiar markers
of multicultural autobiography situate Galarza’s narrative within a discursive tradition and make his political position immediately legible.

By contrast, Saldivar sees Hunger as unreflective and uncritical of its sociohistorical context. Saldivar’s discussion, however, centers largely on Rodriguez’s external politics—as sensationalized by popular media (such as the People interview)—rather than the text itself. Responding to the overwhelming attention that Hunger received for its positions on bilingual education and affirmative action, Saldivar reiterates the same emphasis in his article. Without digging into the text and the fraught personal experience that Rodriguez has with liberal educational policies, Saldivar interprets Rodriguez’s argument as an uncompromising assimilationism. He summarizes Rodriguez’s position as the following: bilingual education is a “hindrance to the access to a ‘public’ language” and affirmative action “denigrates the achievements of those who have made it on their own merits” (27). At the time, this was the prevailing interpretation of Hunger, but the text itself delivers a more tempered reflection on the flaws of these liberal education initiatives – a temperance that critics such as Michael Nieto Garcia explore many years later in light of Rodriguez’s subsequent publications.

While Saldivar suggests that Rodriguez resents educational aid programs for denigrating the value of his own hard work, Hunger’s actual passages about affirmative action are less self-oriented. Rodriguez draws attention to how affirmative action allowed his story to justify institutional inertia. In his telling, rather than addressing the systemic conditions that prevented students of disadvantaged backgrounds to enter and acclimate to academic culture, administrators simply filled race quotas with students of-the-right-color. Such policies were predicated on the belief that all brown people were
interchangeable. As a beneficiary of these affirmative action programs, Rodriguez is paraded as the exemplary minority figure. Meanwhile, he encounters students whom he deems genuine “minorities”—students whose lifetimes in inadequate schooling systems could not prepare them for university classrooms. These students quietly drop out after serving their statistical purpose while Rodriguez advances, upheld as evidence of these programs’ success. Rodriguez writes:

Not surprisingly, among those students with very poor academic preparation, few completed their courses of study… And the university officials who so diligently took note of those students in their self-serving totals of entering minority students finally took no note of them when they left. (Hunger of Memory 155)

This passage, perhaps Rodriguez’s most direct criticism of affirmative action, implies a more complex position than Saldívar’s quick summary. The above excerpt grounds Rodriguez’s critique in the inadequacies of these aid programs. Unequal access to education has certainly played a role in these students’ lives; however, shuttling them into university classrooms addresses the problem too late. In Rodriguez’s view, allowing himself to count as a “minority” ignores the students who need more drastic institutional reform to address their educational needs.

These passages from Rodriguez’s narrative do challenge dominant mythologies, but from an unlikely perspective. He is a Mexican-American intellectual who does not identify as Chicano. He is a beneficiary of affirmative action who does not consider himself a minority. He has been shuttled through life under the rubrics of identity categories that he finds unsuitable, and he writes his discomfort—though not in Spanish,
and certainly not from the barrio. In *Hunger*, he recalls when ethnic studies programs emerged along with the growth of the Chicano movement:

My relationship to many of the self-proclaimed Chicano students was not an easy one. I felt threatened by them… I needed to tell myself that the new minority students were foolish to think themselves unchanged by their schooling (I needed to justify my own change).

I never worked in the barrio. I gave myself all the reasons people ever give to explain why they do not work among the disadvantaged. I envied those minority students who graduated to work among lower-class Hispanics at barrio clinics or legal aid centers. I envied them their fluent Spanish. (159)

Though Rodriguez’s actions in the narrative remove him from other Mexican Americans, his memories and his rendering of them are critical of a cultural environment that insists upon his Mexican identity. In fact, his conflict arises from his inability to reconcile his self-conception with the “minority” student that others see in him. Saldívar censures Rodriguez for failing to engage his own cultural-historical context, but he isolates this failure primarily to Rodriguez’s deviance from Chicano politics. The fact that Rodriguez does not fit in as a Chicano, however, is an important part of his critique.44

Regardless of Rodriguez’s motivations, his attempt to write an autonomous autobiography prevents him from speaking to (and against) the public narratives he finds objectionable. Rodriguez tries to reject the role of tokenized “other” with a simple declaration, but (in Somers’s words), “social actors do not freely construct their own

44 Rodriguez himself has stated that he does not seem to fit Latin American notions of masculinity, and that he may be “too effeminate” to appeal to Latin American readers (Sedore n.p.). Of course, actual notions of gender and sexuality in Latinx culture are more complicated, and any generalizations (just like personal narratives) must be made with awareness of their relational settings—that is, how they would fit into existing struggles over cultural identities (see discussion of Soto later in this chapter).
private or public narratives” (630). Under the illusion of complete independence, Rodriguez delivers a nuanced critique of educational policy that cuts through a dichotomous debate, but he refuses to acknowledge that public narratives have already written him as Mexican American and sutured his personal story to debates over the uses of educational funding. A lot of his voice is then subsumed by the public narratives that market him as a “celebrated dissenter” in minority politics. I detail Saldívar’s review because it resonates with a lot of the early critical responses to Rodriguez’s work: when “White America” ignored Rodriguez’s refusal to be their Chicano emissary, he became the token Mexican American. Saldívar’s review than assesses Hunger as a Chicano autobiography and assails it for its many deviances from that cultural narrative. If Somers is right in that we story our lives in part to make sense of our experiences, then it is no surprise that Rodriguez adapted his narrative style to the criticisms leveled at his first book.

*Days of Obligation*, published ten years after *Hunger*, introduced a new Rodriguez: one with ties to Mexican soil if not the Mexican community, and one living in San Francisco during the AIDS epidemic. *Days* narrates Rodriguez’s return to Mexico, investigates national histories, myths, and cultural miscegenation, and famously contains Rodriguez’s coming-out essay, “Late Victorians.” Though Rodriguez still perceives himself as an outsider, the narrative locates his physical self among minority groups, which was enough to reshape both criticisms of the author as well as readings of his first book. While the reception of Rodriguez’s work diverged, many Mexican-American critics tempered their opinions of Rodriguez. Some chose to read *Days* as a retreat from *Hunger*'s assimilationist position (de Castro 101), and others used the information they
learned from *Days* to offer redemptive interpretations of *Hunger of Memory* (Rodríguez; Garcia). With this account of Rodríguez’s physical journey to Mexico and his exploration of his Latin-American roots, the author became a more esteemed member of the Mexican-American community.

José David Saldívar, Ramón’s brother and colleague at Stanford University, followed Ramón’s *Diacritics* review with a reassessment of Richard Rodríguez in 1997—five years after the release of *Days of Obligation*.\(^{45}\) J.D. Saldívar declares *Days of Obligation* “everything that *Hunger of Memory* was not” (146). Whereas Rodríguez denied his Mexican roots in *Hunger*, he “metamorphosed into an ‘expert’ on things (pan-)Latino” in *Days* (146). Whereas *Hunger* had little to say of the US-Mexico border or of Mexico itself, *Days* documents Rodríguez’s journey into the country that he had never known as a child. Whereas *Hunger* speaks largely in isolation, *Days* engages Mexican intellectuals such as Samuel Ramos and Octavio Paz. After detailing this transformation, J.D. Saldívar concludes that *Days of Obligation* “dialectically negates and overturns” (*Hunger of Memory*’s vision of assimilation).

For the most part, these assessments do not contend with the fact that *Days* also retains a lot of the controversial opinions from Rodríguez’s first book. In *Border Matters*, J.D. Saldívar writes, “Rodriguez seems to want to put behind the earlier polemical assaults on affirmative action and bilingual education” (151). However, the discussions of affirmative action in *Days* seem more a reframing than an actual “putting behind.” In *Hunger of Memory*, Rodríguez focuses on his own fraught relationship with affirmative

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\(^{45}\) It is important to note that Rodríguez has been invited to speak at Stanford multiple times—where both J.D. Saldívar and Ramón Saldívar teach, and from where Rodríguez graduated with his B.A. in English in 1967. There are, of course, many possible conversations between them that were never documented in written form. In focusing on how individual experiences network into public narratives, though, I focus my attention on how Rodríguez’s narratives are (re)written through major publications.
action: “Because many Hispanics were absent from higher education, I became with my matriculation an exception, a numerical minority. Because I was not a cultural minority, I was extremely well placed to enjoy the advantages of affirmative action” (151). This argument, though on behalf of the Hispanics who could not benefit from such policies, stems from his individual experience—an approach that Ramón Saldívar deemed solipsistic in 1985 (27).

In Days, Rodriguez repeats his position, denouncing affirmative action again for its inability to distinguish differences among ethnic “minorities.” This time, however, he abstracts the experience to an indistinct collective: “Those Mexican Americans who were in a position to speak for the group—whatever the group was—that is, those of us with access to microphones because of affirmative action, were not even able to account for our own success. Were we riding on some clement political tide? Or were we advancing on the backs of those who were drowning?” (69–70). Rodriguez’s major shift here is not in perspective, but in his phrasing. Instead of basing his criticism in his own experience (“I”), he abstracts his argument to a theoretical “we.” He is not speaking for just himself; he is speaking for all those Mexican Americans who might have benefitted from affirmative action. This rhetorical maneuver seems especially strange directly following his discussion of “Hispanic” as a “bureaucratic integer—a complete political fiction” (69). Rodriguez’s “we” also invokes a political fiction. He constructs solidarity with a nebulous community of other Mexican Americans who have been called upon to speak on their Mexicanness—a collectivity no more concrete than the statistically-fabricated “Hispanic.”
The attitudinal shift in *Days* has less to do with educational and social policy and more to do with the way Rodriguez performs his cultural alliances. He situates himself among Mexican Americans instead of detailing the uncomfortable divide between him and the younger generation of Chicanos. In doing so, Rodriguez reconfigures the relational setting of his narrative. Rather than denying any connection with Mexican Americans, Rodriguez’s hooks into their narrative practices. This time around, *Days* also engages the autobiographical tropes that Ramón Saldívar sought in *Hunger of Memory*. Just as Galarza walked the borders of his barrio, Rodriguez explores Tijuana as a contact zone. He becomes the journalistic traveler that R. Saldívar sought in 1985. *Hunger’s* description of Rodriguez’s childhood Sacramento did not evoke recognizable models of ethnic culture, but he renders Tijuana—like Galarza’s eastern restaurants amid western cathedrals—as a hybrid city, a “colony of Tokyo” and a Taiwanese sweatshop (150). Though his polemical opinions of bilingual education and affirmative action remain essentially unchanged, they become more palatable within the recognizable markers of an ethnic autobiography.

Even with these changes, however, *Days* did not garner an altogether positive reception. When readers interpreted Rodriguez’s coming out as a turning point in his conversion to Chicano theorist, these autobiographies became tethered to new public narratives. In 1982, *Hunger* (perhaps unintentionally) entered a discursive struggle for control over narratives about immigration and educational policy. In 1992, *Days* spoke about (or was seen as speaking for) gay identity on the heels of the AIDS crisis and with the rise of LGBT rights movements. As both an epidemic disease and an “epidemic of
meanings” (Treichler 11). 46 AIDS had leant force to homophobic beliefs and acts (36). Renewed violence against and fear of homosexuals had given rise to “pre-Stonewall repression” (39). Given this historical moment, LGBT writers and allies had many reasons to be wary of Days, just as Mexican Americans were of Hunger in 1982. At a pivotal moment in LGBT politics, Rodriguez published the story of a Catholic man who chooses his religion over his sexuality.

In response to Border Matters, Scott Michaelsen’s “Hybrid Bound” contested Saldívar’s focus on Rodriguez’s homosexuality. With a close reading of “Late Victorians,” Michaelsen insists that Rodriguez remains a “bitter foe of liberalism.”: “Rodriguez identifies himself not as ‘gay’ (there is no ‘coming out’ in these pages) but as a person with a deep ‘unwillingness to embrace life’” (n. pag.). Pointing to the many scenes that detail Rodriguez’s physical isolation, Michaelsen describes “Late Victorians” as proof that “Rodriguez seeks to distance himself, at every turn, from the culture of gay life” (n. pag.). Like Saldívar, Michaelsen also focuses on the way Rodriguez strays from communal narratives. Days has closer ties to the church than the Castro. While the San Francisco gay community struggled with the AIDS epidemic, Rodriguez often chose isolation. For example, Days depicts Rodriguez at an AIDS Support Group meeting. While he reflects on how the city had knit defensively into a community—nurses and nuns, people of every color and sexual orientation—Rodriguez sits among these people, admiring how they had “learned to love what is corruptible, while I, barren skeptic […] I shift my tailbone upon the cold, hard pew” (Days 47). Just as Hunger of Memory seemed to choose the “public” demands of education over Rodriguez’s “private” (and Mexican-

46 Paula Treichler’s “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification” (first published as an article and then as the first chapter of How to Have Theory in an Epidemic) examines the linguistic and social construction of AIDS as a “gay disease.”
American) home life and culture, *Days* aligns Rodriguez with the church instead of the gay community. In Michaelsen’s critique, “Late Victorians” then “affirms the results of the AIDS epidemic because it potentially will force San Francisco gay men to embrace a Catholic community of resigned suffering” (n. pag.).

Undeniably, *Days* is not a story of gay pride. It does, however, grapple with Rodriguez’s conflicting loyalties. The full sentence from “Late Victorians” reads: “It was then I saw that the greater sin against heaven was my unwillingness to embrace life” (*Days* 43). The statement follows the death of César, a figure detailed with painful intimacy. Throughout the chapter, César appears as a foil to Rodriguez’s circumspection—where César “boasted of freedoms” (29), Rodriguez spoke of limitations. While César celebrated his open sexuality, Rodriguez saw its buried past. “Coming out of the closet,” Rodriguez reminds us, “is predicated upon family laundry, dirty linen, skeletons” (30). “Late Victorians” opens with two juxtaposed images: the Gay Freedom Day Parade and a young woman stepping over the railing of the Golden Gate Bridge “to land like a spilled purse at my feet” (27). What violence—the passage prompts us to ask—goes unnoticed beneath the fanfare?

In the early 1990s, gay rights activists were combating the stigma of homosexuality with pride. The “Gay Freedom Day” parade that Rodriguez describes at the beginning of “Late Victorians” was renamed “Gay Pride” in just a few years. Rodriguez’s sorrow disrupted this narrative of positivity. In a 1997 interview, Rodriguez describes a letter he received objecting to his sadness: “Why are you sad? Aren’t you proud of being gay? […] Don’t you realize, we’re all okay?” (London). Such questions, however, invite Anzaldúa’s wisdom: “it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank,
shouting questions” (Borderlands 100). The insistence upon singular models of dissent rather than the search for alliances across difference risks dismissing continued injustice for the sake of solidarity. Rodriguez may not celebrate his heritage or his homosexuality in ways that align with the narratives these communities have used to build collective strength, but we need ways to discuss the sociopolitical implications of an experience without allowing it to speak for (or against) the whole of the community—for example, ways to account for the intersections of religion and sexuality without subjecting all homosexuals to the values of the church.

I want to emphasize that Rodriguez’s choice to render both his ethnicity and his sexual orientation without the typical gestures of communal affiliation was definitely dangerous at the time of his publications—with burgeoning critical discussions concerning identity politics. Telling an ethnic story of guilt rather than pride and a gay story of melancholy rather than happiness risked (or perhaps invited) misappropriation by conservative parties. I would respond to Ramón Saldívar’s criticism, however, to say that Rodriguez does not “deny social or political significance to his life” (R. Saldívar, “Ideologies” 28). In fact, he sees systemic inequality perpetuated by some of the social and political significances assigned to him. Viewed through different relational lenses, Rodriguez’s story meditates on how educational institutions tokenize him as a Mexican American at the expense of underprivileged students. In Days, celebrations of progress in gay rights risk ignoring both past and continuing struggles within the vast spectrum of gay experience. Rodriguez’s life is rendered illegible by the public narratives assigned to him—as a Mexican American/Chicano, as a gay man, as a Catholic. That illegibility, however, is his point: The discursive frameworks imposed on readings of his work
sometimes foreclose conversations about emotional complexity and partial complicity in
journeys from margin toward center. It also blinds us to the oversights of reformative
policies that acknowledge a need but fall far short of the solution. In Rodriguez’s
autobiographical trilogy, then, it is possible to find support for what Stephen Slemon calls
an “interested post-colonial critical practice [emphasis in original]” (9). As in Spivak’s
strategic essentialism, this practice allows identities to function as “operations of a crucial
strategy for survival in marginalized social groups” (9) while acknowledging the
constructedness of the text. An interested post-colonial critical practice thus enables
“oppositional truth-claims” (9) through strategic alliances without binding the author to
an identity that is solely defined by this political moment.

Rodriguez Reinvented

In fact, Rodriguez’s narrative strategies seem premised on the plasticity of
identity labels. In Rodriguez’s third autobiography, Brown, he draws even more from the
histories and mythologies that he once ignored. The book’s title is also its primary
metaphor: the miscegenation (“browning”) of America. Family, religion, race, ethnicity,
and sex are all “brown” subjects—all part of our theatre of selfhood, the performed
authenticity through which we create our social identifications. “Brown” is also a way of
writing—a smudging of narrative lines so that de Tocqueville intrudes upon Rodriguez’s
schoolyard while Malcolm X lectures from a television screen. Through the blurred
storylines, Brown still addresses all of Rodriguez’s old fixations: affirmative action,
bilingual education, and the “minority student” label, and he still opposes them all. Yet,
as he acknowledges and explores his relation to the public narratives he once “rejected,”
Rodriguez is no longer dismissed as an assimilationist turncoat. Nor do reviews focus on these topics. As Somers reminds us, social action takes place through the “construction, enactment, and appropriation” (629) of the stories made available to us, rather than fabricating them at will. Or, perhaps to invoke Anzaldúa again: new consciousness is formed when “we are on both shores at once” (Borderlands 100).

In fact, opinions of Rodriguez shifted so dramatically that critics have used his latter books to redeem Hunger of Memory. For example, Michael Nieto Garcia’s “The Inauthentic Ethnic” re-envisions Rodriguez’s first book in light of his later publications. Garcia examines prior readings of Hunger, calling attention to the limited interpretive frames each critic brings to his/her approach. In doing so, he relies heavily on details from Rodriguez’s latter texts and his current life. In one of the few moments that engage the actual text from Hunger of Memory, Garcia imports a metaphor from Brown into Hunger. The black suit, which serves as a device for Rodriguez’s social fluidity in Brown also makes an appearance in Hunger. In Brown, the suit is empowering; Rodriguez “could go to the opera. I could go to New York” (82). Garcia argues that the suit also helps Rodriguez challenge extant models of race and ethnicity in the beginning of Hunger. However, the tuxedo in which Rodriguez begins Hunger of Memory seems more a strait jacket. At a cocktail party, Rodriguez is an invited speaker for contemporary education, the poster-child for America’s fantasy of successful assimilation. From this position, Rodriguez contemplates the separation he endures from his parents. In Brown, the suited Rodriguez is empowered—he could do any of these things. In Hunger of Memory, “It is education that has altered my life. Carried me far” (5). Stripped of agency, Rodriguez is acted upon; he has been altered, been carried. Read alone, Hunger
emphasizes Rodriguez’s involuntary complicity in dominant culture—an accomplice in
the taming of the “other.” With Brown, though, Garcia finds subversive potential in
Hunger’s narrative.

Through continual reinvention, critics both write from and write onto Rodriguez’s
self-story, reshaping larger narratives of cultural belonging. Using Brown to reexamine
Hunger, Garcia challenges the interpretive frames brought to ethnic autobiographies and
in so doing reshapes the available means of articulating ethnic identity. Similarly, with
Days, J.D. Saldívar accepted a Chicano theorist who still spoke against bilingual
education. As Hawhee reminds us, though, invention in the middle is a meeting of forces:
“I invent” becomes “I am invented” (Hawhee 17). As the conversations surrounding his
autobiographies transform, Rodriguez himself moves with it—is moved by it, sometimes
literally. He discovers a more “Mexican point of view” in Tijuana and Mexico City,
finding new iterations of his themes in the physical and spiritual landscape of Mexico.

Though Hunger of Memory narrates the scholarship boy’s transformation into a
public person, the trilogy as a whole performs the conversion. With each subsequent
book, Rodriguez the individual disappears further within collective identities. Hunger
laments Rodriguez’s loss of intimacy, but actually contains a wealth of intimate scenes—
particularly in the portraits of his family. These moments are rich with emotion and
affection. When Rodriguez hears his mother calling to him in Spanish, her voice
reassures him: “You are home now; come closer; inside. With us,” (17). The loss that
Rodriguez laments in Hunger is detailed as an emotionally charged experience tethered to
his unique circumstances. As his argument evolves through his second and third books,
however, such intimate scenes become increasingly rare.
In *Days of Obligation*, as others have observed, the public and the private do not divide so cleanly. Again, intimacy begins in Spanish. Rodriguez explains that Spanish possesses two different forms of “you.” There is *tú*, the intimate recognition, and there is *usted*, “The formal, the bloodless, the ornamental you” (54). In English, however, there is only “you,” and that “you” appears with varying degrees of intimacy throughout the text. In “Late Victorians,” Rodriguez switches to second-person in a tender address to César: “There were times, dear César, when you…” (29), yet in “Mexico’s Children,” you becomes the universal you, the generic you, the American you: “You betray Uncle Sam by favoring private over public life, by seeking to exempt yourself” (63). The English “you,” which does not distinguish between degrees of intimacy let alone individual people, is only definable within context.47 By drawing attention to the infinite possible referents of “you,” Rodriguez reinvents the pronoun with each relational setting. In each iteration, Rodriguez himself is also reinvented—at times starkly individual (eulogizing César), and at others subsumed by the universal “you.” Speaking of the American melting pot, he says, “You will find yourself a stranger to your parents, a stranger to your own memory of yourself” (161)

Ten years later, both *tú* and *usted* are replaced by Rodriguez’s all-encompassing “I.” In *Brown*, the stories Rodriguez tells of his own life are truncated and subsumed by the very historical events that critics demanded. A story that begins with his sister ends with Malcolm X. Rodriguez’s elementary school memories are now about Carl T. Rowan and Frederick Douglass. Toward the end of the book, Rodriguez describes a student

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47 This propensity for reinvention is what French linguist Émile Benveniste described as the intersubjective nature of personal pronouns. Unlike nouns, which refer to relatively fixed and objective notions, “I” and “you” can only be defined by the “instance of discourse” where it appears (Benveniste 218). See also Richard Clarke’s notes on Benveniste.
asking him a personal question. The student asks Rodriguez how he measured the influence of homosexuality on his writing. Rodriguez writes:

I replied to the young man’s request for candor cryptically. Walt Whitman, I said.

Whitman’s advantage was that—prohibited from admitting the specific—he learned to speak of the many. (223)

Ever cryptic, Rodriguez appears to have followed Whitman’s example. In *Hunger of Memory*, he chronicled the selfish, painful moments as the son of Mexican immigrants—and he was rebuked for abandoning his origins. With *Days of Obligation*, he discussed his experience of hurt and humanity living as a gay man during the AIDS epidemic, and readers questioned his reticence and melancholy. So, finally, with *Brown*, Rodriguez buries himself—the individuality of his that received such scrutiny and reproach. Instead, he tells the story of “America”—a story of miscegenation in which *tú* and *usted* become “we.” In 1982, the scholarship boy mourned the loss of his intimate moments. In 2002, he finally disappeared beneath all the other things the public asked him to be.

As autobiographies are necessarily shaped by the stories that have come before, they also reconfigure the possibilities for self-articulation. In a similar vein, Rodriguez describes assimilation as reciprocal—a way of transforming society just as society transforms him (Arias). Even while Rodriguez’s voice became increasingly less “personal” throughout his books, he retained his primary interests. His criticisms of liberal educational policies—for which he garnered much of his early notoriety—remains in *Days* and *Brown*, though framed less individualistically. In *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez’s refusal of his minority status earned him harsh criticism as an ingrate, a traitor, and an oblivious dupe that had been seduced by delusions of seamless
assimilation. Later in Brown, Rodriguez denies his membership in any minority collective yet again. This time, however, he addresses his critics directly: “By telling you these things, I do not betray ‘my people.’ I think of the nation entire—all Americans—as my people” (128). The argument develops into a position against identity politics that might have been read as assimilationist in Hunger of Memory: “The trouble with today’s ethnic and racial and sexual identifications is that they become evasions of citizenship” (128). Rodriguez claims that the word “culture” has been used to create distance—to separate children from grandparents, so-called Hispanics from white Americans. In the spirit of rectifying that distance, we arrive at brown: “the color of consort” (133) – the color of mestizaje, perhaps only a shade darker than assimilation.

If, following Somers, we think of “culture” as a relational setting, we see how different social and institutional forces can facilitate connection or separation. In Hunger, Rodriguez resented minority labels that had been imposed on him—and perhaps rightly so, as “[t]here is no reason to assume a priori that people with similar attributes will share common experiences of social life, let alone be moved to common forms and meanings of social action, unless they share similar narrative identities and relational settings [emphasis added]” (Somers 635). In other words, blanket categories of identity are at best limited, and at worst harmful and misleading. These categories become useful when used to make sense of individual experiences within larger cultural contexts. In 1982, Rodriguez saw no reason to forge alliances with Chicanos or other Mexican Americans. As his story circulated, however, he was positioned in discussions again and again as a voice of “Mexican America.” In subsequent autobiographies, he then discovered

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48 Even in 2002, Paula M. Moya uses these political positions to read Hunger of Memory as a neoconservative narrative (see citation).
connections with Mexican history and lore, and used these connections to throw into relief the relevancy of his own experience for discussions of Mexican-American and gay identities.

**Criticism and Communities of Fate**

As individual narratives and critiques transform larger frameworks, we must attend to the consequences of their reciprocity. In *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer*, Sandra K. Soto cautions against the uncritical acceptance of Rodriguez as the exiled victim of cultural norms. She responds to Randy A. Rodríguez’s “queering” of *Hunger of Memory*—another interpretation that uses Rodriguez’s later books to find hidden progressivism in his earliest autobiography. Soto contends that, in order to position Richard Rodriguez as the misunderstood queer, R.A. Rodríguez renders “Chicano” as a bastion of homophobia and sexism. In so doing, R.A. Rodriguez forecloses much more generative connections between race, gender, and sexuality that can be traced throughout Chican@ literature. Later in the book, Soto queers another canonical figure, “Don” Américo Paredes, to support her theory of an always racialized sexuality. Soto then explains how her work can help disrupt essentialisms within ethnic studies as well as extend the reach of queer theory. While Soto distinguishes Paredes from Rodriguez in that Paredes makes explicit his critique of gender norms, a similar distinction applies to Soto and R.A. Rodriguez. Soto considers and emphasizes the way her assessments of individual texts can shift the larger discourse whereas R.A. Rodríguez’s rereading of *Hunger* isolates Richard Rodriguez as the one exception in a narrow culture.
Soto’s reflective criticism pays careful attention to the collaborative way that meaning is built from life stories. The lenses we use to read personal narratives have larger implications for discussions of identity. Such insights complement R. Saldívar’s thoughts on the responsibility of the critic, published long after his attack on *Hunger of Memory*. In a 2012 *PMLA* article, he argues that the critic and author should not be working against one another, but helping form “shared communities of fate”—a concept he draws from his own book, *The Borderlands of Culture*. These communities arise through thoughtful deliberation between people who “care about each other’s fate and want to share each other’s fate” (Kymlicka qtd. in R. Saldívar, “Criticism” 966). As critic, then, Saldívar sees his responsibility as collaborating with authors and other critics to form those communities.

In *Hunger of Memory*, when Rodriguez sets himself in opposition to Chicano identity and its objectives, Saldívar understandably excludes him from the community and fate that he hopes to build. Yet, as Saldívar points out, globalization demands “models of identity and cultural struggle that are inclusive and expansive” (*The Borderlands of Culture* 430). Saldívar arrives at the problem that plagues so many discussions of minority politics: How can individuals find communal solidarity while acknowledging such heterogeneity? Identity as kairotic construct offers a promising start by asking readers to look for points of invention even among discordant voices.

With an emphasis on invention rather than retrospection, a relational approach explodes one of the foundational theories of autobiography studies: Philippe Lejeune’s “autobiographical pact,” which binds reader, writer, and publisher to assume an “identity of name” between the author […] the narrator of the story, and the character who is being
talked about” (12). In Lejeune’s formulation, autobiography is a “referential text,” which tries to provide (with “resemblance to truth”) information about an external reality (22). The trouble, as identified by Leigh Gilmore and other feminists scholars,49 is that Lejeune’s pact assumes that reality and truth are “simply there” (Gilmore 76), without questioning who scripts those truths and through what means. As relational rhetoric, however, autobiography and its criticism employ “identity” as a set of social alliances—sometimes elective, sometimes transient, always with a view toward how those identities have been leveraged within different cultural settings. Like each invocation of “you” in Days of Obligation, the meaning of a narrative and the identities of which it speaks must be reassessed with each iteration.

The heart of autobiography critique is then not the dissection of a single life or its representation, but a consideration of how its stories respond to and encounter other cultural forces. Critical responses to personal narratives become opportunities to tether these narratives to larger conversations and controversies. With this view, the ongoing deliberation over whether Richard Rodriguez intended to be, or could be, queer in Hunger invites further reflection on how communal alliances are made. In (re)examining Rodriguez’s life stories, we can ask less about Rodriguez’s own self-conception and more about what queering these narratives would add to or take away from the aims of Mexican American and queer politics. In the preface to Brown, Rodriguez claims: “I believe it is possible to describe a single life thrice, if from three isolations: Class. Ethnicity. Race” (xiv). However, the conversation around these books has multiplied and divaricated into so many rich discussions to imply that a single life can be described an infinite number of times—and never in isolation. And perhaps that is for the better. If

49 Also see Sidonie Smith’s “Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance.”
autobiographical writing can only ever be a partial truth, then the complexity of selfhood, written and lived, must be rendered and discussed as rhetorical movement. The growth of self and society happens within the negotiation of contradictions and the miscegenation of thought and meaning—a “brown” project if there ever was one.

I am Invented

As I write, I move into—sometimes intrude upon—conversations in which I have never belonged. While some of my analyses may seem argumentative, I am not searching for direct opposition, but angles and negotiations that other writers may choose not to adopt. As much as I would love the safety of an airtight, unassailable argument, I can no longer trust what feels comfortable or safe. I can no longer respect the boundaries that partition us into neat and containable sectors of difference—to do so would ignore the way systems of power often operate across those boundaries. As with Wallace and Young, my story does not layer neatly onto those of Rodriguez. A closer look, however, finds points of contact even within our many asymmetries. I encountered Hunger of Memory first through the vitriol of many other writers whose narratives I deeply admire: Keith Gilyard, Victor Villanueva, and Morris Young. I accepted their criticisms. After all, Rodriguez’s discussion of his family and his ungenerous perspective on other Mexican immigrants made me uncomfortable. Meanwhile, I composed my own literacy narrative as an assignment for a graduate seminar on literacy. I wrote a meandering, clumsy exploration of my upbringing as the only child of first-generation Taiwanese immigrants. I did not think much more about Rodriguez until years later, when I read Days of Obligation and the painful reticence with which he details his life on the fringes
even of his fringe community. With characteristic slyness, the self-named “Mr. Secrets” (the title of *Hunger*’s closing chapter) tells us “To grow up homosexual is to live with secrets within secrets” (*Days* 30). Here again, Rodriguez’s identity is fleshed out by the accretion of narratives.

At first, I felt betrayed by the fact that Rodriguez had claimed to detail his most intimate stories in *Hunger* and yet omitted any discussion of sexual orientation. I returned to *Hunger of Memory* and mapped out every passage about vulnerability and sexuality that evades the topic of sexual orientation. While reading Gilyard’s, Villanueva’s, and Young’s stories, I had searched for some faint recognition of queerness—some hint of how marginalized sexualities navigated the minefield of public/private negotiations. Without any such model, I assumed there was no place for such discussion in this genre of writing. In the 60-plus paged literacy narrative that I submitted as a final paper, I did not acknowledge my own sexual orientation, deeming the topic either irrelevant or inappropriate for the context. It is not irrelevant.

My family’s traditionalism, our language and cultural divergences, my gender expression and sexuality all played significant roles in how I arrived at an MFA program: seriously ill, critically underweight, and trying to excise myself from my fiction by writing stories about raceless, heteronormative characters. The mending of my body and relationships over the next five years (for reasons I will explore in Chapter Five) also have everything to do with how I wound up studying rhetoric, looking at personal narratives. My anger at Rodriguez eventually ceded to the understanding that I had been silenced by the same fear, the same practiced self-censorship, the same protective instinct to cling to my secrets. Stepping back from uncritical fictions, I am now searching for how
the naming of our wounds can begin the work of healing—not just individual but within and across communities. Over that time, I have continually revised my literacy narrative—still very much in-progress (and in-process)—in hopes of creating a more illuminating (though inevitably partial) map of these intersections. I still find some of Rodriguez’s politics off-putting, but I am now grateful for his story—for it making explicit the implicit censors I did not know were there. I did not need anyone to ban the discussion of sexuality; all I needed was for no one else to speak of it.

In revisiting Rodriguez’s life stories and their many critiques throughout this chapter, I have been searching for connections to other experiences and to larger systems of power. In doing so, I emphasize an understanding of personal writing and its criticism as a process of negotiation—one that makes strategic alliances according to the political and cultural moment, but does not freeze the texts or the writers in that moment. I am saying neither that our stories have objective meanings, nor that they can have just any meaning, but that their significances must be continually re-made within context. When personal narratives are read, discussed, and theorized with attention to relational networks, these connections can be traced to their structural causes without depending on essentialist arguments or surrendering to postmodern abandonment of all identity claims. So we might see Muñoz’s “commons of the incommensurable” (113) as always in-process, where our intersections must be reexamined and redefined each time we make sense of the world in efforts to (re)make that world.

The vast distance between Rodriguez’s experiences and my own still makes me self-conscious about my (lack of) authority in entering this conversation. Perhaps if I only stuck to experiences closer to my own, I could have found a narrative by a queer Asian
American woman that also served my argument. Even then, though, my intersections
with the author and her communities would be partial and incomplete. Furthermore, in
my research, I have not found any narratives by queer Asian American women that have
received anywhere near the attention and circulation as Rodriguez’s texts—for reasons
that must be tied to the relative invisibility of Asian Americans in discussions of racial
justice. To quote another woman of color, Mitsuye Yamada: “I am weary of starting from
scratch each time I speak or write, as if there were no history behind us” (68). In
borrowing from the histories of Young and Wallace and Rodriguez—inventing from the
intersections of their ongoing work—I write to further a conception of personal narrative
that allows us to build from one another even when our experiences or perspectives do
not align fully. I hope to join Wallace and Rhodes and Alexander in advancing the
personal as relational rhetoric, carefully reaching across differences to map the larger
world in which we all belong.
Chapter Four

Convenient Arguments: The (Re)Invention of Academic Discourse through Classroom Texts

The previous two chapters considered how personal narrative functions in a relational setting—which is to say, how personal narrative is both constituted by and constitutive of its contexts. Examining conversations concerning narratives by women of color, Chapter Two argued that some stories may begin with the sort of self-empowerment that leads to institutional shifts, but may subsequently be later absorbed into narratives of multiculturalism that sustain structural power. Still with attention to how discursive climates evolve over time, Chapter Three then reexamined Richard Rodriguez’s personal narratives within rapidly changing political contexts. I now move closer to the heart of composition studies, namely the first year writing classroom, and consider how this new setting creates different demands of personal narratives and their writers.

Despite ongoing resistance to the “personal” in academic settings, personal narratives also persist in both scholarly publications and classroom assignments, at times sparking arguments about what sort of writers have the right to experiential writing. While Deborah Holdstein observes that personal writing is often “a luxury, the privilege of those who have somehow arrived” (Bleich and Holdstein 9), the student memoir is also the paradigmatic initial essay in FYC—a way of “eas[ing] students into academic discourse” (Rieger 145). As these contradictory statements would suggest, similarly divergent perspectives grapple over the place of personal writing in academic settings. Some critical essays argue that composition teachers and scholars should write and
publish personal essays (Bloom; Bishop) while others see the personal as strictly a place for immature (and thus student-based) self-reflection (Harris). Arguments that sequester personal writing to either the already-established or the inexperienced, however, presume that the personal can be neatly excised from disciplinary settings and practices. Bizzell’s “Hybrid Academic Discourse,” though, recognized the expansion of the academy to include those whose personal experiences often came up against institutional conventions. Her argument for teaching these hybrid writing practices to students then taps into Bartholomae and Elbow’s shared objective, which drives some of composition’s most heated debates: the desire to empower students to analyze, critique, and change the discursive worlds in which they are embedded.

This is the same objective at the heart of Gerald Graff’s pedagogical projects – both his book, *Clueless in Academe*, and its companion textbook, *They Say/I Say*. In both *Clueless* and the introduction of *TSIS*, Graff emphasizes “that schools and colleges need to invite students into the conversations and debates that surround them” (Graff xvii). Perhaps best known for his insistence that college education should “teach the conflicts” (13) – that we should teach our students the cultural and philosophical controversies at the center of academic debates – Graff, like Bartholomae, Elbow, and Bizzell, is concerned with equipping students to participate in important social and political conversations. In a gesture fitting of Rhodes and Alexander’s social turn, Graff insists that we must “widen our notion of who qualifies as an ‘intellectual’” (25). In his words, this is a pedagogical mission that “everyone committed to democracy on the Right, Left, and Center should be able to accept” (262). *Clueless* envisions a pedagogy that integrates students’ experiential knowledge with the forms of the academy—one that changes the
discourse of the university while expanding its membership. His duo of texts then offers a particularly interesting example for this study, because both books incorporate the same personal narrative. In *Clueless*, Graff speaks to composition theorists and teachers and narrates his personal story to support a critique of pedagogical conventions. In *TSIS*, he recounts those same events to demonstrate argumentative strategies for student readers. The reinvention of Graff’s story between these two very different academic contexts raises questions about the sorts of personal disclosure demanded by different institutional settings. More specifically: what is the work that composition classes ask students to do with their personal stories, and why and how does it differ from the work of our own scholarship?

*They Say/I Say*

Though even some of Graff’s harshest critics describe the foundational premise of *Clueless* as “nearly irresistible” (Jurecic 325), *They Say/I Say* has earned certain notoriety as one of the most divisive student texts in circulation. Described by its publisher (W.W. Norton) as “the best-selling book on academic writing,” *They Say/I Say* is currently used by over half the universities and colleges in the United States (Graff and Birkenstein xvi). At the same time, the book’s emphasis on template-based writing has been widely criticized by composition scholars (Rouse 456) – so much so that the authors published a defense of “formulas” in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Birkenstein and Graff). The

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50 Actual sales statistics from publishers are well-protected, and thus far W.W. Norton has been unresponsive to requests for sales information. While university bookstores still distribute a lot of classroom texts, at least according to Amazon.com sales rankings, as of October 2016, *They Say/I Say* ranks #2 in textbooks for composition and creative writing—behind Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style* (“Amazon Creative Writing & Composition”). *TSIS* also ranks #2 in books for “Writing Skills Reference” (“Writing Skills Reference”). While Amazon updates these rankings every hour, *TSIS* consistently appears in the top 5 for both categories.
textbook itself also anticipates resistance: “We are aware, of course, that some instructors may have reservations about templates” (Graff and Birkenstein xxii). In fact, many composition scholars remain skeptical. Phyllis Benay expresses concern that “the facile fill-in-the-blanks format” (370) prevents students from understanding the point of each rhetorical maneuver. Hollrah and Farmer worry TSIS subordinates the importance of context—rendering all conversations “at best as pretexts, motivations […] for the deployment of the obviously more important templates” (202). Similarly, Ann Jurecic describes Graff’s approach as an overemphasis on templates—which, when decontextualized, can “[reduce] writing… to an empty exercise” (329). A closer look at how Graff’s own story changes with recontextualization reveals the often unseen institutional forces that redirect pedagogical practice away from its original intent.

Like Clueless in Academe, the introduction to They Say/I Say articulates broadly appealing pedagogical objectives. It emphasizes that good writing engages a conversation, and offers to help students enter that conversation by “demyst[ying] academic writing” (xvii). TSIS even attempts to balance opposing poles of composition, referencing a wide range of figures from David Bartholomae to Peter Elbow, Kenneth Burke, and Mike Rose (xvi). This textbook, the authors state, arises from their shared interest in “democratizing academic culture” (xvii) by showing students how to join academic debates. In addition, TSIS’s characterization of academic writing as intervening in ongoing conversations (13) should lend itself to personal writing as invented-in-the-middle. Like Nancy Somers’s ontological narrativity, which both emerges from and reshapes larger cultural scripts, TSIS describes effective writing as “engaging the voices of others and letting them in turn engage us” (xvi). At first glance, then, TSIS seems to
follow exactly the trajectory set forth by *Clueless*, offering a pedagogy that teaches outsiders to join and transform a members-only discourse.

A dramatic shift happens, however, between the theoretical composition explored in the introduction to *TSIS* (and all of *Clueless*), and the composition executed in the textbook content. As the context shifts, the discipline itself is reinvented into a set of mechanical maneuvers removed from existing conversations. As the title would suggest, *TSIS* is divided into sections. First, it provides templates for quoting and summarizing the arguments of others (“They Say”), and Part II offers templates for three “most common and recognizable” (56) forms of response (“I Say”). These three forms are: agreeing, disagreeing, or some combination of both. They also acknowledge that more complicated responses are possible, but they recommend beginning with a “no-nonsense formula such as: ‘I agree,’ ‘I disagree,’ or ‘I am of two minds’” (57). Personal experience, too, obeys these rules: “X tells a story about ________ to make a point that ________. My own experience with ________ yields a point that is similar/different/both similar and different” (xxiii). Here, personal experience is useful only insomuch as it confirms or denies a preexisting claim. As in recognition-based politics, one’s story is held up to existing frameworks and assessed by predetermined values and practices. As my preceding chapters have stressed though, personal narratives have effectively intervened in institutional patterns when they emerged from, and made available, alternative forms of knowledge. Unsurprisingly, templates alone are not particularly conducive toward such projects.

Because much of the critical conversation around *TSIS* has focused on the controversies of template-based teaching, my own engagement with Graff’s work moves
beyond an emerging scholarly consensus about the limitations of *TSIS*’s formulaic approach. Instead, I focus on Graff’s own personal narrative and the unspoken expectations for student writing that it reveals in its transformation from scholarly practice to pedagogical tool. Specifically, *Clueless* puts forward a striking example of personal narrative that becomes stripped of its cultural relevancy in *TSIS*. Detached from relevant theoretical and cultural touchpoints, Graff’s narrative in *TSIS* becomes a perfunctory rehearsal of academic conventions. This iteration of Graff’s story inhabits a genre that exists solely for institutional assessment and approval, performing a set of rhetorical maneuvers shaped by classroom texts and practices. This stripped-down notion of the personal can be found in a host of other textbooks that, though less directly formulaic, focus on genre conventions as the course objective—in essence creating a list of rhetorical traits that student essays must replicate. Such a widespread oversimplification of personal genres creates the illusion that student writing can exist independent of relevant cultural narratives, and limits their potential to participate in the important work of composition – where discourse can and does bring about social change. This chapter then finds a counterexample in the recent growth of “Writing About Writing” pedagogy. Without applying WAW’s course content to all composition classes, I try to develop from its principles a set of strategies that might help bring pedagogical approaches and materials in line with composition theories.

“Hidden Intellectualism”

In *Clueless in Academe*, Graff’s personal narrative appears as a chapter titled “Hidden Intellectualism.” Like the book itself, the premise of this chapter is fairly
“irresistible” (to borrow Jurecic’s term). Graff draws from his own academic history to argue that schools should foster students’ existing knowledge and passions to give them a personal stake in their education. In *Clueless*, “Hidden Intellectualism” opens by engaging another personal narrative and finding in it alternatives to the academy’s traditional understandings of intellectualism. Graff begins with Michael Warner’s “Tongues Untied: Memoirs of a Pentecostal Boyhood,” which details Warner’s transition from a Christian Pentecostal upbringing to his present career as a “queer atheist intellectual” (Warner qtd. in Graff 211). Though Warner’s account is far removed from Graff’s experiential knowledge, Graff uses Warner to initiate his own inquiry into the possible oversights of academic culture:

To be sure, since religious fundamentalists rarely become intellectuals of any kind, much less queer theorists, we might conjecture that Warner’s intellectualism must have come from something else in his background. Yet I suspect there are many buried or hidden forms of intellectualism that do not get channeled into academic work but might if educators were more alert about drawing on them.

Taking a page from Warner, I want to suggest that educators need to pay more attention to the extent to which adolescent lives are often already ‘steeped in argument.’ My own working premise as a teacher is that inside every street-smart student—that is, potentially every student—is a latent intellectual trying to break out. (Graff 212)

In “taking a page from Warner,” Graff is not agreeing, disagreeing, or some combination of both. Warner does not actually make a claim about where his intellectualism comes
from, but Graff is still able to connect “Tongues Untied” to an argument that finds critical thought in contexts commonly dismissed by academic culture.

In fact, the hidden intellectualism in Graff’s own history is not grounded in his home life. Raised in a middle class home where his parents provided “good models of literacy” (215), Graff is not the most surprising example of alternative intellectualism. Rather, this hidden intellectualism begins with the kids from the neighboring block—whom Graff and his friends (“with a romanticizing inflection”) called “hoods” (216). These kids are “African Americans, Native Americans, and ‘hillbilly’ whites” (216), whom Graff admires for their perceived toughness. Driven by a will to impress the hoods, Graff and his peers engage in “complicated debates” over who is the toughest. This competitiveness, tethered closely to sports culture, is where Graff learns to think and argue insightfully about “the meaning of masculinity and its symbols” (219). While the hoods also participate in (and inspired) these performances of masculinity, though, they are not given the same opportunity to convert their nonacademic interests into intellectual capital.

In *Clueless*, Graff dwells on the fate of the hoods; they are “tracked” into vocational subjects such as machine shop and mechanical drawing while Graff enrolls in a liberal arts program. Graff, with his white-collar background, is not the “hidden intellectual” of this story. Rather, by using Warner’s story to investigate alternative sites of intellectual development, he credits the hoods – who were denied the same opportunities – for his early education in argumentation. By drawing attention to an educational system that directed these boys into a very different fate, Graff is able to use the intersections of these stories—Warner’s, his own, and those of the “hoods” – to
critique conventional notions of intellectualism. Graff’s opening statement, “that inside every street-smart student—that is, potentially every student—is a latent intellectual,” then becomes a proposal that would change not only how composition is taught, but who is invited to join these conversations, and what kinds of conversations they have. He issues a call to find the hidden intellectual in every student, rather than only those who seem immediately inclined toward academic culture.

When Graff reinvents his narrative for TSIS, however, he also abandons its connections with – and thus its critique of – larger sociocultural structures. Fitted to the textbook’s templates, “Hidden Intellectualism” detaches from its relational context. TSIS removes all references to Warner. Instead, this version of “Hidden Intellectualism” begins with one of the moves from the textbook: introducing a “standard view.” Graff attributes a popular opinion to a universal whole: “Everyone knows some young person who is impressively ‘street smart’ but does poorly in school. What a waste, we think, that one who is so intelligent about so many things in life seems unable to apply that intelligence to academic work” (244). Rather than beginning with Warner’s alternative sources of knowledge, Graff gives voice to a very normative perspective—what a waste that people can squander their intelligence without contributing to academic labor. Graff then responds with his “I say”; he disagrees because his own experience allowed him to channel his talents into academic success. In a pared-down narrative, Graff details a linear trajectory from his anti-intellectual childhood to “composing the kind of sentences I am writing now” (248). Fitted to the templates of TSIS, Graff’s experiential account narrows to only those events that help prove the relevance of his own “street smarts” for literacy training.
This reduction of Graff’s narrative all but erases the larger sociocultural forces at work in his original story. The “hoods” appear only in a single paragraph as bullies and thieves. Graff is trying to “impress” them because “[t]he hoods would turn on you if they sensed you were putting on airs […] ‘Who you lookin’ at, smart ass?’ as a leather-jacketed youth once said to me as he relieved me of my pocket change along with my self-respect” (246). Gone are the discussions of performative masculinity and the economic factors that shaped his education. As “evidence,” these boys would not fit easily into Graff’s “I say” argument. Contrary to his own story of how “anti-intellectual” argumentative culture helped him succeed in school, the working class hoods were much less likely to achieve Graff’s intellectual status. In Clueless, the dissonance between these experiences draws attention to how a pedagogy that embraces alternative forms might also invite students from marginalized backgrounds to join in and to change the production of knowledge. When TSIS all but erases the cast of “others” from his narrative, however, Graff’s truncated story becomes a single narrative of his ascension as an intellectual.

Though the events at the core of “Hidden Intellectualism” remain consistent between Clueless in Academe and They Say/I Say, when the essay disengages from other narratives and conversations, it also loses its ability to reflect on and offer alternatives to institutional norms. At first glance, Graff’s reference to Warner in Clueless may seem like a casual anecdote—an opening example that merely introduces his topic—but it is a generative encounter. Warner’s narrative, despite (or even because of) its marked divergences from Graff’s experience and argument, enables Graff’s critique. Unlike Graff, Warner hails from a community that is underrepresented in academic culture, and
unlike the “hoods” whose educational tracks directed them away from the academy, Warner becomes a self-proclaimed “queer, atheist intellectual.” Graff’s story, in drawing together these narratives, becomes the site of productive engagements. In *Clueless*, Warner’s story, Graff’s admiration of the “hoods,” and the fates of those boys meet to reveal how institutional practices can unevenly elevate certain forms of knowledge and experience while denying others. In *They Say/I Say*, slotted into student templates, the story loses its critical footing.

The most common criticism of *TSIS* is that templates stifle students’ “development as thinkers and writers” (Jurecic 328). While that is quite possible, the transformation of “Hidden Intellectualism” raises a different concern. *TSIS*’s reduction of Graff’s essay obviously does not curtail the author’s ability to think critically, but it does strip the narrative of its connections with other voices and conversations. In *Clueless*, the essay plays a significant role in connecting Graff’s more abstract argument with his own experience as well as the experiences of those ignored by the academy. In *TSIS*, he cuts away the larger context—and consequently, the other voices that empower its challenge to educational structures. With this paring down, Graff seems more concerned with modeling superficial linguistic “moves” than with finding and voicing a critical view of his experience and his world. While *TSIS* opens by urging students to “become active participants in the important conversations of the academic world and the wider public sphere” (xvii), Graff’s “Hidden Intellectualism” shows students how to shape their experiential knowledge into pre-set argumentative patterns.

Though the conceit of the composition classroom is often that students should write as if they are speaking to an external audience, the transformation of Graff’s
narrative suggests that institutional context can reshape student narratives to emphasize the reality that students are writing for assessment and approval. In fitting his story to a set of assigned principles, Graff subordinates his message to a predetermined form of speaking and knowing. Such approaches to student writing are not that far from Freire’s banking model of education, in which we distribute syntactic patterns to our students. Through such a model, student narratives exist entirely for institutional recognition. Contrary to much of our pedagogical theory, we are not teaching students to engage important disciplinary or cultural conversations. Instead, we ask them for a performance of forms determined to be capital by university values.

The Containment of Academic Discourse

The problem with They Say/I Say is not so much that it tries to formalize the conventions of academic discourse, but that these formalizations fail to capture the work of academic writing. The principle on which the templates are founded is a project that aligns with this one—and one consistent with most theories of composition: Much of our writing engages ongoing conversations, and conversations entail certain expectations and recurrent moves. For example, with his original publication of “Hidden Intellectualism,” Graff challenges public narratives of intellectual development while also acknowledging the academic community through generous treatments of works by other college professors such as Ned Laff and Thomas McLaughlin. Graff concedes to McLaughlin’s argument that students are already immersed in “issues like ‘cultural products in personal lives and identity formation’” (McLaughlin qtd in in Graff 224), but adds that we can empower students to better understand and shape their place in these issues when we give
them terms like “cultural” and “identity” and “interpretive” (225). Graff’s story is then a very specific engagement with conversations about literacy development and English pedagogy. The citations of English teachers, relevant theorists, and memoirists help situate and strengthen Graff’s critique. Contrarily, the templates in TSIS are predicated on the belief that there is a universal conversation called “academic discourse” and that this conversation can be engaged through the templates. Even Graff’s revision of his own essay, however, loses its cultural relevancy with a focus on what academic writing looks like rather than what it does.

In fact, while TSIS purports to teach the most common moves of a nebulous and acontextual “academic discourse,” these templates sometimes contradict the conventions of actual writing done in the academy. Very recently, Zak Lancaster investigated this disjunction. Using electronic concordancing software, Lancaster examined the “recurring linguistic resources that academic writers use,” and he concludes that “for the most part, these do not include the wordings suggested in TSIS” (455). Looking at three corpora of academic papers—the academic section of the Corpus of Contemporary American English, the Michigan Corpus of Upper-Level Student Papers, and five years’ worth of self-directed placement exams from the University of Michigan and Wake Forest University—Lancaster finds that the language of more experienced writers is decidedly less agonistic than the techniques modeled by TSIS. Specifically, “academic” writers employ what Lancaster calls “interpersonal tact”—forging connections by not attributing views directly to the reader or specific groups of people. Rather, they “hedge,” and make concessions to opposing views as a strategy for building understanding (456-457). When other voices appear in academic texts (“they say”), they are used to position the writer
within conversations, rather than (in the words of TSIS) to “disarm” or to make “a kind of preemptive strike” (Graff and Birkenstein qtd. in Lancaster 457). Instead of naming a specific “they,” or anticipating objections from the reader, academic writers acknowledge other (possibly oppositional) stances as a way of positioning themselves within these conversations. Similarly, in Clueless, Graff does not open by inventing an opposing “they say.” Instead, he starts with a narrative divergent from, but pertinent to, his own.

How, then, does TSIS arrive at its oversimplified conception of academic writing? The key may be in Lancaster’s observation that “agonistic orientations to argumentation are more deeply embedded in the public’s and academy’s metalanguage about writing” (457). In fact, Clueless in Academe issues a direct defense of agonism in a chapter titled “Two Cheers for Argument Culture.” Graff says, “in our scholarly papers, most of us follow a conventional framework that requires us to position our work in opposition to someone else’s, which we prove wrong” (84). Clueless itself, however is more complicated than that. Beyond the interpersonal connections forged by “Hidden Intellectualism,” even Clueless’s introduction is an attempt to reconcile seemingly oppositional perspectives. In Graff’s words, this book “is an attempt by an academic to look at academia from the perspective of those who don’t get it” (1). His solution proves neither party wrong, but shifts the terms of the argument. Rather than directly defending or assailing the opacity of academic culture, Graff considers how other forms of intellectualism could contribute to and alter classroom practices and values. In the process, Graff suggests that these individuals are not inherently clueless, but unaware of the rules of the game—rules that should be changed with projects such as Clueless in Academe. Though Graff writes this more subtle argument, he also reproduces what
Lancaster calls “metalanguage”—a public narrative of academic writing that actually discounts the generosity and subtlety of academic conversations.

Lancaster’s study thus arrives at a new problem: debates over whether or not the templates in *TSIS* can effectively teach academic writing never question whether the templates even reflect academic writing or help students engage its ongoing conversations. Somewhere between Graff’s pedagogical theory in *Clueless* and its practice in *TSIS*, the relational setting has been transformed so that students are writing to fit a set of guidelines, in a context divorced from larger cultural narratives. A related critique could be made of the many template-free textbooks in composition. Though most resources do not break down writing patterns to the sentence level, they do try to capture conventions through other formalizations. Specifically, essay “genres” are a popular way to organize composition courses. Like Lancaster, I want to emphasize that effective writers do make use of discursive conventions—both in strategic adherence and resistance. However, not enough attention has been paid to whether or not these genres enable the sort of intellectual work so many writing instructors aspire to teach.

### The Metalanguage of Genre

While not all composition textbooks organize their chapters by “genre,” many do. For example, the following popular texts all set up course assignments as separate genres:

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While the actual approaches to these assignments may vary, the overall configuration suggests a set of core genres that remain central to composition. Popular assignments include profiles, reports, proposals, memoirs, and evaluations or reviews. This list does not seem too far removed from Sharon Crowley’s description of current traditional rhetoric, which she traces back to the late 1800’s. In *Composition in the University* (1998), Crowley identifies the four genres of current traditional rhetoric as exposition, description, narration, and argument (94), and considers their continued prominence in composition pedagogy. *Composition in the University* also observes that current traditionalism still informs “the best-selling composition textbooks” (211), which often begin with a collection of heuristics that then support current-traditional writing strategies such as classification, analysis, definition, comparison and contrast, and cause and effect (212).

In an ongoing study from UNC Chapel Hill called “The Genre Project,” Jordynn Jack and collaborators identified similar genres as the predominant assignments in first year composition. Their survey of course syllabi and textbooks found that FYC students are primarily assigned very broad “genre types” rather than specific genres—i.e.
“analysis” instead of “literary analysis” or “scene analysis” (rhetorical analysis is the exception). From their selection of syllabi, the most popular genres were: research, description, argument, narration, personal essay, analysis, and exposition. In Jack’s words, the generalizability of “genre types,” means these assignments are often “remove[d] from disciplinary context and rhetorical situation.” Like Graff and Birkenstein’s templates, they suggest that these de-contextualized, universally applicable forms are the end goal rather than the conversations that rhetorical forms and tools should help students engage.

While the classroom implementation of these textbooks and syllabi may vary significantly from teacher to teacher, their collective impact is a metalanguage about composition—they write into being a discipline that specializes not in critical thinking or discursive engagement, but in teaching the analysis paper, the narration essay, the position paper, and so on. If, as Bartholomae claims, academic discourse is only one single thing in convenient arguments, the shape of that single thing is reified in the canonical genres of composition. Certainly, genres can be useful for containing otherwise complex rhetorical strategies—the genres that we teach, however, and the manner through which we teach them merit further scrutiny.

Just as TSIS asks students to fill in the blank of predetermined templates, many of these genre-based approaches emphasize the superficial characteristics of given forms over the ways they are deployed in real-world situations. For example, both the Harbrace Guide (Fig. 1) and Norton Field Guide (Fig. 2) provide broad, general outlines:
Without a specific conversation to which these essays respond, the textbooks can only speak in very general terms about how to fill their outlines. *Harbrace* emphasizes that, “The important consideration here is to be sure the events you’ve narrated, the details you’ve provided, and the reflection or analysis you’ve composed all work together” (117). Similarly, Norton describes a good memoir as one that “conveys something about the significance of its subject” (188). In these instances, the inventional process happens in reverse; the form comes before its context. The assignments are then forced to help students locate (or imagine) audiences and situations that might be amenable to mandated forms. For example, the *Harbrace* memoir unit asks students to find an audience by listing “the names of persons or groups who might be most interested in hearing about
your experiences”(114) and the Norton asks “What about [this event] might interest someone else?” (189). In these books, genres are not only conventions, but final products—creating the illusion of a fixed form that is an objective in and of itself.

As Carolyn Miller famously argues, genres based on formal systems overlook the role that genres can and do play in social action. When genres are understood as open and responding to a social need (C. R. Miller 157), they become the means to social change rather than the static product of a class assignment. As part of a relational network, personal writing is a reaction to larger forces, and can create avenues for addressing institutional practices and constraints. Contrarily, both Harbrace and Norton suggest that their genre selections serve largely to teach students the “academic” writing demanded in university classes. In an example of writing process, Harbrace details the experience of Writing and Technology student Stacy Simkanin:

Stacy didn’t need to think much about the genre in which she would write: her instructor had already determined that fitting responses would take the form of an academic essay, rather than another genre, such as memoir, profile, report, argument, or proposal. (Glenn 62)

Though Harbrace describes rhetoric as usually beginning with a problem and then determining the most suitable means of persuasion (3–5), this example limits the scope of student writing to the classroom. The “problem” the student is addressing is that she has a college writing assignment. The Norton Guide makes the point more explicitly: “Much of the time, your college writing assignments will specify a particular genre” (243), and when that happens, you can “simply turn to the appropriate genre chapter” (xvii).

Lancaster’s study suggests, however, that these genres fail even as approximations of
academic writing. Instead of preparing students for future writing, these assignments invent and sustain a set of conventions that exist purely to measure student achievement.

At the same time, the narrative that these genres will exist in settings outside the composition classroom also feeds into what Crowley describes as a “discourse of need” (257) – an assumption that students need composition to initiate them into institutionally sanctioned forms of speaking and writing. While the discipline has often clung to this narrative to justify its utility, this version of composition also subordinates it to the rest of the university. Rather than existing as its own body of knowledge, composition is tasked with the role of socializing students into the imagined discourse of the academy. This mission, as Horner points out in “Rewriting Composition: Moving Beyond a Discourse of Need,” is an impossible one. When composition inevitably fails to transmit the fantastical single discourse known as academic writing, the field is seen (by those both inside and outside the discipline) as having failed its institutional purpose.

**Rewriting Intellectualism**

Both Crowley’s *Composition in the University* and Horner’s “Rewriting Composition” challenge composition to take control of its own defining narrative—what we do, and teach, and why it matters. Crowley asks the field to shed the notion that students need first-year composition. What could composition be, she asks, if we taught composing as its own body of knowledge rather than as one that informs other disciplines? Horner similarly urges composition to focus on its own capacity for knowledge-making. “Rewriting Composition” articulates a vision for composition as a site where we think through problems of language and culture, rather than a purely
preparatory space. Here, I use the term “we” to be intentionally inclusive because it is not just the theorists of composition who shape understandings of language and its practices. If we take seriously the work of composition and its classrooms as “real work,” then our students’ writing must also be regarded as real and capable of influencing cultural practices and assumptions.

*Composition in the University* and “Rewriting Composition” also align with one another in envisioning distinctly social approaches to composition, where our courses teach students to think critically about and engage important conversations. Since Bizzell’s publication of “Cognition, Convention, and Certainty” in 1982, most approaches to writing pedagogy, regardless of name, have been finding ways to recognize that 1) discourse conventions exist; and 2) “to point out that discourse conventions exist would be to politicize the classroom—or rather, to make everyone aware that it is already politicized” (Bizzell, “Cognition” 238). In other words, composition must enable students to make their thoughts and experiences legible through writing conventions, but also empower them to challenge the limitations of those conventions.

A big step toward this objective would require reexamining the way genres are taught in composition classes. It is not that writing conventions or even templates cannot be helpful in teaching effective writing principles, but that when we make them objectives in and of themselves, we create genres that exist only for institutional assessment. If instead we orient students toward conversations with which they would like to engage, then these genres become a part of their toolkit from which they might select an amalgam of strategies as most do when participating in academic discussions. Personal writing, as relational rhetoric, would then become an important element of
composition pedagogy, moving beyond its traditionally isolated place as the perfunctory student memoir. Writing from and about personal experience becomes a way to make larger cultural concerns relevant on the small, local level. As relational rhetoric, personal writing can make explicit the writer’s own relations to discursive norms, and invite further examination of those norms.

A promising direction for revising composition curricula is emerging in Writing Studies and the related “Writing About Writing” pedagogy. For example, Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs’s college reader titled *Writing About Writing* takes a markedly different structure than most composition textbooks. Focusing on writing as both content and skill, *Writing About Writing* uses carefully sequenced readings and assignments to engage students in critical discussions in composition studies. The book is then organized by “threshold concepts” – agreed-upon, discipline-specific principles that provide both a way of thinking and heuristic for inquiry. The concepts are as follows:

Chapter 1: “Literacies: Where Do Your Ideas about Reading and Writing Come From?” *writing performance is informed by prior literacy experiences*

Chapter 2: “Individual in Community: How Do Texts Mediate Activities?” *writing mediates activity*

Chapter 3: “Rhetoric: How is Meaning Constructed in Context?” *writing is completely dependent on the situation, readers, and uses it’s being created for;*

Chapter 4: “Processes: How Are Texts Composed?” *writing is knowledge-making, and making knowledge requires ongoing and repeating processes, and writing is not perfectable*
Chapter 5: “Multimodal Composition: What Counts as Writing?”  

writing is by nature a technology (7–8)

Though WAW includes traditional composition “genres” such as the literacy narrative and the personal narrative, these assignments are not introduced as fixed forms; rather, they are prompted as responses to collections of readings.

Though not at all formulaic in its approach, WAW nevertheless shares some of TSIS’s methodology: it first introduces a conversation and then invites students to engage. As opposed to TSIS, however, WAW focuses on connecting students with specific conversations rather than estimating the moves of a broad “academic discourse.” For example, the literacy narrative assignment begins first with readings that include Deborah Brandt’s “Sponsors of Literacy,” Donald Murray’s “All Writing is Autobiography” and Sherman Alexie’s “The Joy of Reading and Writing.” Following a diverse selection of arguments that use very different rhetorical strategies, WAW asks students to analyze their own literacy experiences and to position those experiences in relation to this body of work—for example, considering “what works or doesn’t work in literacy education” (207).

Importantly, WAW does not describe the assignment via the stylistic features of literacy narratives—the student is not told to begin with a personal story or to have body paragraphs with evidence (though s/he might). It does not demand the personal in any particular arrangement or framework. Rather, the assignment is to engage with understandings and practices of language acquisition. Instead of inventing a de-contextualized setting for students to rehearse academic conventions, WAW invites students into the intricate web of public narratives that academics actually engage. The
assignment then becomes a potential site of interpersonal connection—where the student sees how larger scripts about literacy are already at work in her intellectual development, and where she is given the opportunity to participate in those narratives.

Wardle and Downs’s research, however, is not without its critics. In fact, the Writing and Rhetoric faculty at the University of Rhode Island issued what Downs calls a “condemnation [by] an entire department” (Downs 171). Following Downs and Wardle’s 2007 proposal for a WAW approach to FYC, Miles et al.’s “Thinking Vertically” expressed concern that such an approach prematurely “mir[es] all students in the specialized discourse of an advanced discipline” (504). I see in this claim two different concerns: first, that WAW is too specialized for a general education course; and second, that the material in composition theory is too difficult for beginning writers. In the spirit of an always in-process, negotiated composition, though, I believe we can draw certain important principles from WAW pedagogy without assuming that it applies equally well to all institutions in all circumstances.

As of right now, WAW divides each threshold concept into its own chapter, each one thematically focused on a different writing concern. The literacy narrative assignment, for example, is a part of chapter one—the goal of which is to examine how prior literacy experiences inform our encounters with language and communication. The subsequent chapter then turns to the study of discourse communities and follows with an ethnographic assignment. I wonder, though, if we could structure the concepts themselves around more focused objects of study. Allow me for a moment to imagine a course specifically attending to the construction of literacy:
1. *Writing performance is informed by prior literacy experiences*

The course’s first unit would begin with texts that encourage students to grapple with literacy as a cultural construct. Readings might include Villanueva’s *Bootstraps*, John Duffy’s *Writing from These Roots: Literacy in a Hmong-American Community*, and selections from digital archives of literacy narratives—such as those curated by Ulman, Dewitt, and Selfe in *Stories that Speak to Us*. At the end of this unit, students could select and analyze a specific literacy narrative (perhaps from the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives) with particular attention to how it speaks to/with/against the way literacy has been defined in the author’s life. This assignment could require many standard composition genres such as rhetorical analysis, position, and/or definition, but students would be taught to deploy these forms within a specific conversation rather than as isolated rehearsals of rhetorical strategies.

2. *Writing mediates activity*

This unit might turn to more everyday acts of literacy, examining how communities—perhaps communities in which the students are already embedded—circulate language to coordinate and direct group action. Assignment 2 would encourage students to think beyond conventional and text-based modes of composing. Sites of study might include digital landscapes such as discussion forums or fantasy sports leagues, or local organizations. In asking students to examine more closely how literacy already structures their lives outside the classroom, this unit might involve genres such as a research paper, a profile, or a report.
3. *Writing is completely dependent on the situation, readers, and uses it’s being created for*

Next, the course might encourage the students to take a more active role in analyzing the discursive worlds that they are preparing to enter. They may begin with a topic of academic interest that engages them—literacy is one possibility, but they might also draw from their fields of specialization. After assembling an archive that spans mass media coverage and academic publications (possibly, even multiple academic genres) they would be asked to examine what values emerge in these different contexts, and to share their findings with their classmates. The final product could be a more traditional paper, or perhaps an oral presentation, a website, a video, or even a blog documenting the research process. Across these options, this unit could invite genres such as cultural analysis or compare and contrast.

4. *Writing is knowledge-making, and making knowledge requires ongoing and repeating processes, and writing is not perfectable*

Here, students could create their own literacy narratives. After the preceding assignments, students can hopefully begin their narratives with awareness of how culture has been (re)made through such writing, and with attention to how personal writing can both challenge and/or affirm our public narratives about language and literacy. Narratives might be text-based, or may be multimodal. This narrative might then be workshopped with their classmates and revised, emphasizing the classroom as its own discourse community that continually reshapes our engagements with language.
5. *Writing is by nature a technology*

This unit may begin with different forms of literacy – considering how new technologies shift the ways we write and read ourselves and others. The class could analyze and discuss texts such as online forums or wikis. The final assignment could be a collaborative project – a group podcast or other public document that addresses a local need in literacy development.

This is obviously only one possible example among an infinite number. While this course design still takes writing as its object of study, it is possible to envision composition classes that apply these threshold concepts to other topics. For example, another famously “advanced” textbook, *Ways of Reading* by David Bartholomae, Anthony Petrosky, and Stacey Waite, includes “assignment sequences” grouped around thematic readings. Here, possible themes include “The Aims of Education” (readings include Paolo Freire, Mary Louise Pratt, and Richard Rodriguez, and Richard E. Miller) and “The Arts of the Contact Zone” (Pratt again, Gloria Anzaldúa, John Edgar Wideman, and Edward Said).

Where instructors find such topics too “specialized,” they might begin with more pressing local concerns and connect them with relevant social and cultural structures through readings from a wider perspective. A course that examined educational institutions might culminate in student assignments that advocate for a different distribution of educational funds, or for the implementation of School Breakfast Programs in elementary schools.51 In sustaining a set of core concepts at the center of composition studies while allowing its actual content to flex, we can connect university English departments – and the university as a whole – more closely with the concerns of

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51 Both these examples come from a unit of English composition that I taught where students became passionate about, and took steps toward, implementing their ideas in their local contexts.
the people who come to it. In this approach, I am advocating for a model of teaching English that shifts the focus away from acculturating students to the forms and practices of the academy. Instead, we might ask how the university might better serve the populations that constitute it. In doing so, we invert Graff’s model of hidden intellectualism in which universities locate aspects of the student’s history that might help her contribute to academic projects. Rather, we turn the resources and insight of the university to the concerns and needs that may have prompted our students to seek an education in the first place.

For this reason, it is important to note that WAW’s threshold concepts themselves are subject to continual revision. In the words of Adler-Kassner and Wardle’s Naming What We Know, these concepts are “kairotic: they articulate the substance of the field as a mechanism for mapping the field itself” (xxix). Drawing on composition’s ongoing habit of self-reflection and revision, Writing About Writing pedagogy asks that the discipline continually reexamine these concepts and only retain them so long as they help students see how knowledge is made through writing, and how they might participate in the making of that knowledge.

I ask us then to approach the composition classroom as its own unique relational setting—one obviously tied to scholarly genres and conversations, but also one that involves students who bring with them a wide range of experiential wisdom and personal investments. In Graff’s own words, “what looks like anti-intellectualism in student culture is often an alternative intellectualism” (Graff 222). While Graff explains how schools can access that alternative knowledge to acquaint students with academic conventions, we should also consider what actual alternatives they offer to institutional
practices and values. As a site where different personal and public narratives intersect, the composition classroom becomes a place where our own theorizing of language and pedagogy is tested and developed through new settings and applications. In *Clueless*, Graff writes, “it is not clear why an academic semester should not be almost as carefully scripted and orchestrated as a theater performance, a film, or a concert” (39), but that statement assumes an impossible mastery. It assumes that we know the script—that we can predict the narratives students will bring to and find in our classes. Rather than a pedagogy based on predictable forms, then, I ask that we consider what composition classes might look like if students were seen as participating in the difficult, sometimes incommensurable work of writing—if students were encouraged to experience language as a meeting of forces where both they and the discourse itself might be reinvented.
Chapter Five

In Others’ Words: An (Inter)Personal Narrative

“A bibliography is a list of sources […] one has used for researching a topic.”
– Purdue Online Writing Lab

“Describe [the work] as objectively as possible: even if you are writing an evaluative annotation.”

“Rigidity means death.”
– Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands (79)

A (Partial) Auto-Bibliography

Various Children’s Books on Neuroscience.

The earliest books on my shelf are about medicine. Of my toys, a yellow, plastic doctor’s kit is the nicest thing I own. For a long while, I say I want to be a doctor. When people ask “what kind?” the answer changes. Pediatrics, neurology, surgery. I don’t actually want to be a doctor. I want to be a thing that sparks the enthusiasm I see in my parents when I assemble a model skeleton on our living room floor. The finished product frightens me for years. Its ribs hang from a display hook. Its head lolls back, jaw agape. Nevertheless, I keep it on the bookshelf in my room, averting my eyes every time I walk past.

Books About Detectives.

Encyclopedia Brown, The Hardy Boys, Sherlock Holmes. Not Nancy Drew—that’s for girls, and I eschew all things coded in pink. I try to solve the mysteries
before the protagonists do. These are questions with answers, though, and I bore quickly of problems that have already been solved.

*All Things Magic.*

It begins with *Animorphs*—both wish-fulfillment and escape. I’ve always been enamored with the idea of bodily transformation. I read and imagine how it would feel to inhabit the flesh of a wolf or a bear, to feel muscle braiding across my bones, my jaw stretching to fit teeth that could shred. How would the ground feel beneath claws meant to break earth? What could my muzzle divine from the night air? How would I move in a body made to hunt, to kill?

In reality, I read during recess in the nurse’s office, where I spend my first two years of elementary school breathing from a nebulizer. I systematically consume each library shelf row after row. *Animorphs* leads to Robert Jordan, Mercedes Lackey, and J.R.R. Tolkien. I spend an entire year collecting 250 handwritten pages of *Lord of the Rings* fanfiction. I do not know yet to read for Christian symbolism, or the debatable essentializing of race. Over a decade later, in my first graduate seminar, I learn Joseph Campbell’s term “monomyth.”

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52 See Yatt; Rearick; Straubhaar

The book that awakens me to the power of language. For some reason, most people are surprised that this is my favorite book.

Perhaps because it’s not particularly trendy, or because it doesn’t quite fit the notorious “MFA aesthetic.” Perhaps because my life has very little overlap with O’Brien’s. That is, though, exactly what I love about language—its ability to connect otherwise disparate experiences.

This is the first book that moves me to tears, even though I have never known war, never known the protection of a rifle, never known the grim clarity O’Brien finds amid so much evil. For a moment, his truth is truer than my truth—this American soldier stacking bodies of KIA Vietnamese. In that same decade, my grandfather fights a losing war in China. A Colonel for the ROC, he leaves Chengdu for Taipei when the Communist Party gains control of the mainland. My uncle—my father’s oldest brother—is named Taisheng, meaning “born in Taiwan.”


Cal is the first protagonist I meet whose gender identity strays from the socially acceptable, whose first sexual experiences are part curiosity, part fear. I do not yet have a name for what I am—just the unspeakable frenzy of excitement and guilt.
when a friend reclines her head on my shoulder. *Middlesex* wins the Pulitzer in 2002, which is also the year I lose my closest friend. When I come out to her in 8th grade, she worries for me: “What if you are like this forever?” She tells her parents and they forbid her from seeing me. I am officially a “bad influence.”


The first time I read an Asian American writer, it is by accident. I read her not for our shared continent, but for the graceful complexity of her characters. In twenty short pages, I watch them flower into fully dimensional people. I follow them from Cambridge to Rome, reaching across oceans and decades for connections that will hold. My first short stories are modeled after those in *Unaccustomed Earth*. I study the elegant arc of Lahiri’s narratives, and attempt to mimic them in my own. I do not linger on her transcultural themes. I do not realize there is something familiar in the quiet tension of these households—the silence that crops up at the intersections of so many languages. I do not yet think of “Asian American” as a community, and it never strikes me that any label could conflate Calcutta with Taipei.

When I start graduate school, Lahiri is the only Asian American writer I can name. I am lost in conversations about the Kingston-Chin conflict, and conversations in which people assume that I’ve read Ha Jin and Fae Myenne Ng. I start to read them, searching for passage into the world to which I’m already supposed to belong.

Just as accidental in my ethnic identity as Liu, I share his wariness of alliances based on an imagined pan-Asian culture. Even then, though, I am a little uneasy with Liu’s conclusion. With much more diplomacy than Richard Rodriguez, he advances an argument for assimilation—that “what is lost is not necessarily sacred” (55). In Liu’s own words, nothing brings out one’s inner Asian American like “other people’s expectations and a sense of danger” (62). Though I have yet to examine my own ethnic alliances, I feel threatened by the idea of abandoning Asian America. I fear that something very important would be lost.

In my first year as a Ph.D. student, I draft a literacy narrative for a graduate seminar. It responds largely to Liu, finding many resonances between his story and mine. Like Liu, I’ve resisted joining all Asian American associations. Like him, I never sought Asian friends (much to my parents’ disappointment). Like him, I never felt a particular identification with the term until the emergence of my professional career. But it is precisely because of these sympathies that I respectfully disagree with him. I am still searching for the terms for it—how we are sculpted by hands other than our own, how history layers onto our bodies like a second skin.
The first draft of my narrative contains no reference to sexuality—not an active choice, but a response to the models I use. Writing from Liu’s example, and then those of Keith Gilyard, Victor Villanueva, and Morris Young, I find no place for queerness in an otherwise neat trajectory from second-language-learner to English fluency.


Late to find Asian American writers, I am even later to find queer voices. The essays in *This Bridge*, written seven years before my birth, map a history to which I already belong. At 27 years old, Cherrie Moraga writes, “All along I had felt the difference, but not until I had put the words ‘class’ and ‘color’ to the experience did my feelings make sense” (25–26). At 27 years old, I read her account of listening to Ntozake Shange: “She was speaking a language I knew—in the deepest parts of me—existed” (26). CLICK. Like Moraga, I too am shocked by my own ignorance. So these women—the “colored in a white feminist movement; the feminists among people of our culture; the lesbians among the straight” (19) – reach through time and pull me home.


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53 In 2015, Red Hen Press comes under fire. Founder and managing editor Kate Gale publishes an article in *Huffington Post*, defending AWP against charges that the Association of Writers & Writing Programs fails to address diversity at its annual conference. Gale’s tongue-in-cheek piece casually invokes stereotypes and clichés from a place of privilege. “How gay is AWP?” she asks. “I would say that I’m about 30% gay, that percentage accounting for all the time with girls before I started dating guys and which I’d be happy to return to if the need arises.” Following Gale’s article, three members of Red Hen Press’s advisory board resign: Helena Maria Viramontes, Garrett Hongo, and Sherman Alexie (Kirch). That same year—same
Though never one for identity politics, I find myself drawn to other writers of color, other women who have tried to bridge the distance between their ivory towers and the memories in their veins. From Washuta, I borrow this play on bibliographies and the courage to write an educational trajectory fraught with illness and instability. I draw from her the hope that someday I will make peace with the rules of my body.

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“For those of you in or beyond the dissertation, I will simply say that I hope some of this explains why scholarly writing is so damn hard. You are the product of a system that, though it thinks incredibly well about other people’s writing (literature, for example), does not think well—or act or institutionalize thoughtfully—about its own.”

– Eric Hayot, The Elements of Academic Style (16)

How does a story invented-in-the-middle begin? With the voices of others? With the illusion of authorial independence? With the narratives and expectations that shape the possible forms it could take? Perhaps it begins in Mandarin, my only language until preschool—a language I can no longer write. It begins in Phoenix, where my father becomes the first and (at the time of this writing) only member of our family to earn a Ph.D. It begins in a sparsely furnished apartment next to Arizona State University where my mother makes epicurean meals out of ramen and bok choy, and where I learn English by watching Sesame Street on a secondhand TV. My parents are afraid to teach me; they
do not want me to inherit their accent. When my father gets back from campus, he lets me ride on the handlebars of his bike and we spin circles in the parking lot.

Twenty years later, I cannot talk to my parents about graduate school.

“Your father raised this family on less money than you make now,” my mother reminds me. The three of us lived on his graduate stipend and WIC packages until my mother also attended graduate school, got a second Masters, and a job that was sixty miles away. She drove two hours each way, through flat expanses of open desert, to a remote medical center where she started as a dietetic intern. My parents made do with less than I have now, less than I have ever had, so that at twenty years old I could tell them I had decided to pursue a career in English.

“What career?” My father asked over the phone. I was 1,200 miles away, strategically calling from my Houston dorm so that we would not have this argument in person. “Language is hobby,” he tells me. “You need something more dependable. Write in your spare time.”

I always have—in my spare time, in stolen time, in time I never had. Long before I encountered Somers’s terminology, before I could use or define the word “ontological,” writing helped me make sense of the world, helped make my world.

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“Narrative, anecdotal introductions are far from the only way to engage a reader. You can also start with a strong question or argumentative claim.”

— The Elements of Academic Style, “Introductions” (91)

How do I tell a story of Asian America? The continent that never was, a “bureaucratic integer” (Rodriguez, Days 69) that aggregates dozens of countries from the Far East, Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent (“Pew Research Center”). Perhaps
this story begins in 1492, when that Italian explorer Christopher Columbus sets sail for Japan and instead lands in the Bahamas, when he and his men claim what they believe to be the East Indies for the Spanish crown and dub the natives “los indios.” Is it wrong to trace the origins of Asian America to the mere fantasy of the Orient? Does it begin instead with the importation of Asian bodies? With the hundreds of thousands of indentured South Asians, kidnapped and shipped to plantations for the British Empire? They called these people “Coolies.” In Tamil, கூᾢ (pronounced kuli) signifies payment for menial work. In Urdu, quli means labor (Amrith 47). In Chinese, 苦力 (Kǔlì) translates literally into “bitter strength.”

So the history of Asian America begins with two assumptions: 1) that Asians are constituted for bitter labor, for the jobs no one else wants; and 2) that Asians are driving down wages, stealing jobs from otherwise deserving “Americans.” By 1882, anti-Chinese sentiment culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act. Active for over sixty years, this was the first and only law in American history to exclude people based on nationality. A multinational business in falsified identities arose to forge “paper sons” and “paper daughters,” making Chinese Americans— in the words of historian Erika Lee— the first “illegal immigrants” in United States history (95). Centuries later, the label and stigma has been passed onto another of America’s racial groups.

54 Today, English dictionaries disagree on whether the term is offensive. For Merriam-Webster, the word simply means “an unskilled laborer or porter usually in or from the Far East hired for low or subsistence wages.” The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, however, describes it as “a very offensive word for an unskilled worker,” especially in parts of Asia. “Do not use this word,” it warns.
55 Growing up, I went to my parents’ Taiwanese American dentist, who would chat with my mom and dad about their trips home as he dug around my mouth with a dental pick. He performed most minor procedures on his Asian patients without numbing agents. My first pulled tooth happened without anesthesia. I didn’t learn until afterwards that it was even an option. “Asians can handle more pain,” he explained.
By now, if there is a public narrative of Asian America, it is that of the “model minority.” It is the “Asian Nerds” in *Mean Girls*. It is Mitsuye Yamada’s description of the “submissive, subservient, ready-to-please, easy-to-get-along-with Asian woman” (32). It is America’s docile subject, used to defend the attainability of the “American dream.” We either don’t get to or don’t want to participate in conversations of racial injustice because we are “honorary whites.” This is my claim: Every story is also a strategic forgetting; we write to protect the things we need remembered.

There’s a story I’ve told many times—well, half a story. In high school, I am leaving the band room with my girlfriend when a guy jumps out in front of us, yelling variations of “ching chong” and things that I suppose are meant to sound Chinese. I wind back an arm and swing my fist, just grazing him with my knuckles as he ducks past. As he dodges, he trips over his own feet and falls down. By now, I remember very little about him—just the way the red hood of his sweatshirt flops behind him when he falls. He doesn’t even look back at me. Instead, he yells “Oh shit,” as he runs in the other direction and his friends laugh. The moral is that bullies don’t expect you to fight back.

Life doesn’t happen in fables, though. There’s a second half to the story. Later that week, I am leaving the band room again, alone this time. It’s late on a Friday and most people have left. I don’t even see them coming. My arms are pinned behind me. My saxophone falls to the ground; I hear the case scuff on concrete just before I’m dragged onto my back. I try to sit up and someone yanks me down by my shoulder. Red Hoodie is chanting in fake Chinese again, skipping a tiny victory lap before I feel a shoe strike my
ribs twice. It’s over pretty quickly. Footsteps approach. Red Hoodie calls out, “Let’s go.” By the time I’m on my feet again, they are skidding around the corner and gone.

Why don’t I tell anyone? In part, I think, it’s pride. There’s a story I try to tell about myself—mostly fiction—in which I am stronger than I am. I am the independent, self-sustaining, never-need-help-from-anyone sort. Also (despite what my history might suggest), I’ve always had a fear of conflict. I would rather let the encounter slide than deal with its drawn-out consequences. What strikes me about this memory now, though, is that I didn’t think about racism or homophobia. I never thought about what would make me a target to a total stranger. In retrospect, I see that many of the taunts I heard in high school were racially charged, but it didn’t occur to me then. I didn’t even see myself as Asian American. I didn’t question why I wanted to be well-behaved and disciplined. It hadn’t yet occurred to me that I am a character in other plots.

Besides, there were too many other stories I wasn’t telling that year—my last year of high school. I remember it as the culmination of tensions between my parents and me. There were many reasons we fought: because I hadn’t cleaned my room, because I hadn’t come home the night before, because I had chosen language over science, because I was disrespectful, because I was too American, because I dressed too masculine, because I left my books on the couch, because we all knew I was dating a girl but no one could say it. Sam’s parents knew about us and would not allow me past their door. We spent most of our time in borrowed spaces—bookstores, coffee shops, 24-hour diners. I would idle my car around the corner until she snuck out to meet me. Her father often threatened to call the police, and sometimes he did. The time they caught us, though, wasn’t his doing.
On 05-??-2006, between approximately 2100 and 0100 hours.

Sam and I sit in my car, in the parking lot of park. I find comfort in the weight of her head on my shoulder, her hand splayed open on my chest. We have run out of places to hide. We think we’re safe behind the windows of my car, in the silence of a suburban neighborhood, in the hours when everyone else is sleeping. But we are not alone.

Sam gasps and points over my shoulder. A man stands two feet from my windshield. He has been watching us from beneath the hood of his sweatshirt. I can’t see much of his face, but the streetlamps light his tongue when he raises a hand to his mouth, index and middle fingers splayed in a “V.” He licks the air between them. I’m so new to lesbianism, I only vaguely guess the meaning of the gesture. I lock my doors. Sam’s grip is tight on my arm.

I stare him down—at where his eyes would be in the shadow beneath his hood. He removes a phone from his pocket and dials. I cannot hear what he is saying, but he paces the perimeter of my car, speaking into his phone.

“Let’s get out of here,” I tell Sam.

When I pull my car out of the parking lot, a police car is waiting. It trails behind us, so close that its unlit sirens fill my rearview mirror. I drive under the speed limit and obey all the lights. Sam and I do not speak.

Ten blocks later, the sirens finally switch on. My car alights with red and blue.
Immediately, I pull over, parking my car in the alley. After a short eternity, a policeman emerges from the car. Most of what I see is the beam of his flashlight and the handle of his pistol buckled neatly into his belt. He leans through my window and asks for our IDs. He asks if we know that it is past midnight, if we know that public parks have closing hours, if we know that we were trespassing. In fact, we don’t know. We are quiet, demure, respectful. We apologize. I grovel, and I hate the sound of my own voice as I do it.

He tells us there have been incidents of vandalism in the parks—that someone called him reporting a couple of suspicious figures playing with lighters. He asks if we have lighters, but he asks it with a grin—like a kid waiting for you to guess the punchline of his joke. He asks where we go to school. He asks what we study. He asks more than he should. He runs his flashlight through my car. He tells us he could arrest us, and I want to ask for what, but I don’t because I’m afraid of what he will do if we are defiant.

After a half-hour interrogation, after repeated threats of arrest and changing our permanent records, he leaves us. I drive Sam home in silence and kiss her goodnight. My own house is dark when I return. I shut the door quietly so as not to wake my parents. I feel my way toward my room and slip into bed.

Everything about the evening feels wrong. When I close my eyes, I see the man’s tongue between forked fingers. I feel the white sear of the policeman’s flashlight in my eyes. I want to tell my parents, but they don’t know about Sam. They don’t know about me. There’s too much I haven’t told them.
Perhaps this story begins in 1981, when Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa write “We are all family” (“Children Passing” 3). It begins when they carve open a space for women of color in academic circles. It begins when the contributors of This Bridge bleed onto the bleached white canvas of 1980s feminism with their very personal stakes in conversations where they don’t have the privilege of analytical distance. It begins when these writers envision and initiate a brighter future for “the next generation, and the next one… entrusting you with the legacy of our thoughts and activisms” (xxiv). And, it begins again when these stories are painted over by appropriative histories, when students can read about, write about, and circulate This Bridge without threatening the status quo, when we fragment and talk about their stories as isolated narratives. When Gloria Anzaldúa is rewritten as a lone pioneer. This story begins by asking how to carry this legacy. It asks how we can take up Cherrie Moraga’s “theory of the flesh” (Moraga 19), where oppression cannot be dealt with from a purely theoretical base, where redressing social wrongs requires grappling with the twisted fibers of our experience.

Like Moraga, my story begins with the promise of a new generation. My life was supposed to be easier than those of my parents. With my un-accented tongue, I was meant to blend seamlessly into the American workforce, to climb ladders to places that my parents could never reach with their encumbered speech and their alien documentation. My story, too, begins with pride in my education—with faith that the appeasing the right people in the right places would secure my future. Of course, that is also the myth of Asian America, is it not? The Pew Research Center calls it “The Rise of Asian Americans.” Economist Tapan Monroe calls ours “The Great American Success Story” – statistically speaking, the highest-educated racial group in the United States. I
prefer, however, the term Sharon H. Chang borrows from Professor of African American Studies Imani Perri: “gilded cage” (49).

The public narrative of Asian America – the model minority myth, the story of American achievement—is also one of its greatest limitations. It is the narrative used to discipline America’s docile subjects and to spur resentment from other racial minorities—to suggest that we cannot speak about racial injustice or discrimination. Three decades after Moraga and Anzaldúa wrote in concert with Asian American voices, feminist Suey Park speaks out on Twitter: “I am tired of the patriarchy in Asian-American spaces and sick of the racism in white feminism.” In response, the hashtag “#AsianPrivilege” surfaces: “#AsianPrivilege means being overrepresented at universities then changing the narrative to make it like you oppressed” (Dawson). The story goes: we have no right to complain when others have it worse. In Moraga’s words, however “the danger lies in ranking the oppressions” (24)—in forgetting that they are products of the same forces. Divide and conquer. This is how we are isolated from one another. This how we are silenced.

In 2016, two years after the emergence of “#AsianPrivilege,” the hashtag of the moment is #oscarssowhite. For the second year in a row, every acting nominee at the Academy Awards is white. The Academy chooses a black comedian, Chris Rock, to host the ceremony. In a performance otherwise applauded for its “brilliant” confrontation of Hollywood’s exclusionary practices (Lowry), Rock also enlists three Asian American children as the punch line for a joke. The skit begins by introducing the “most dedicated, accurate, and hard-working” accountants from PricewaterhouseCoopers: “Please
welcome Ming Zhu, Bao Ling and David Moskowitz.” Three children of Asian descent walk on stage. They have no lines. Instead, they stand amid laughter and applause as Rock defends his joke with a follow-up jab: “If anybody’s upset about that joke, just tweet about it on your phone that was also made by these kids” (L. Liu).

In the words of Slate’s managing editor, Rock’s joke, even in a most generous reading, would fail as satire of an Asian joke: “it relies on equally base premises: Asian kids are either accountants or child laborers.” He could be speaking of children raised in graduate-degree households, or kids in rural China trying to break into the middle class by soldering circuit boards, but it doesn’t matter because he is invoking the “misapprehension that undergirds every stereotype about Asians: that they are all the same” (L. Liu). Not only does Rock remind America that most of its discussions of race are framed, literally, in terms of black and white, but also, he perpetuates the trend where we throw one minority under the bus to appease another.

A close friend of mine, a Chinese American actor and playwright, accidentally incites a comment war on his Facebook page. After sharing an article about Rock’s stereotyping, he is assailed with remarks about Asian privilege. Though I am reluctant to join social media debates, I find myself sucked into the argument. Throughout the many years that he and I were “best friends” in elementary and middle school, we never called ourselves Asian American—not when we traded lunches with Chinese pastries, not when we taught our classmates phrases in Mandarin, not when we were bussed over to the high school for pre-calculus classes in the 8th grade. Suddenly, though, we are united by a sense of threat. In the words of Eric Liu: “All it had taken was a stage and a villain” (The
Accidental Asian 62). If Asian America is a continent, it is one to which I’ve immigrated on a ship built of racial exploitation.

On my friend’s Facebook wall, I find myself shouting from one river bank to another. I engage at length with a classmate of his from CalArts—an actress who insists, repeatedly, “I have real problems to worry about. But what would I know? I’m just a black woman.” This is her trump card—why Asian American problems shouldn’t matter to her. Her attempt to weaponize one experience of oppression against another, however, is also exactly why we need these conversations. We need to care about one another’s experiences. We need to confront our own complicities. We need to find where we have swallowed the voices of our oppressors and spit them back out. This story begins with the omissions in the one we’ve been telling.
A (PARTIAL) CV

“Curriculum Vitae n. the course of one's life” – Oxford English Dictionary

V. Jo Hsu\textsuperscript{56}

(Legal Name: Vicki Hsu\textsuperscript{57})

EDUCATION

\textbf{B.A.} in English and Visual and Dramatic Arts, Rice University, Fall 2006 – Fall 2010

When I arrive in Houston, my parents and I have hardly spoken for a year. They help me move into my dorm, though. They travel with me all 1,200 miles. We fill a Target shopping cart with dorm necessities, and my mother arranges my clothes in the plain, prefab dresser I’ve chosen as mine. Before she leaves, she reminds me where everything is: shirts in the top drawer, toiletries in the bottom. She reminds me to take care of myself. Never ones for long goodbyes, my mother hugs me, my father claps me on the back, and they leave. Years later, Dad tells me how Mom went to my empty room when they got back to Arizona. How she sat on my bed, surrounded by the things I left behind.

My freshman year, on one very quiet Saturday morning, I come out to my mother over the phone. She says nothing for a long time, then says, “I hope there are no more secrets.” And there aren’t, but our silence remains. Instead of asking periodically if I am dating anyone, my mother switches to asking if I am still attracted to women as if hoping I had changed my mind. When I get angry, she responds defensively: “I don’t know how to deal with these kinds of things. In Taiwan, no one was this way.” I once heard a comedian say, “I would rather be black than gay because you don’t have to tell your mother you’re black.” Though I’ve met Asian families who have embraced queerness, in my own, coming out to my mother was much like telling her I wasn’t Chinese.

In college, I fall in love with a woman. We date for four years—before same-sex marriage is legalized in either of our home states. Before we can even imagine that it would be recognized nationwide. I tell my mother about the trips we take together, about the shows we see at the theater, about the new restaurant we tried. I wage war with her denial, and I think that if I bombard her with enough truth she’ll have to accept it. Still, though, my mother refers to Elle as my

\textsuperscript{56} Does it look assertive enough if I type it in bold? After I give a talk in graduate school, a professor reminds me: “Be more assertive. You need to be able to control the room.” He gestures at my general appearance. “It is obviously harder in certain cases, where people will make assumptions based on gender or race.”

\textsuperscript{57} My parents named me “Vicki.” It was an afterthought. After I am born, they realize they haven’t picked out an English name for me, and they decide on a character they like from “Three’s Company.” I’ve never seen the show, but I’ve looked up the character. She has virtually the same pose in all her pictures. Her head is tipped so her neatly cropped blond bob frames her delicate features. She’s beaming at the camera. She’s almost always in her boyfriend’s arms. I don’t think she’s a major character—just someone’s girlfriend.
“friend” or my “roommate” When I graduate six months early, I tell my mother that I’m moving to New York, where Elle is interning for the year.

“Don’t let people see you,” she warns me. “I mean, it’s okay for women to be close friends, but you know…”

“Just stop,” I interject.

“The world is not so kind,” she says, and for the first time I realize that there is more fear in her voice than disgust.

M.F.A. in Creative Writing—Fiction, Pennsylvania State University, Fall 2010 – Spring 2012

My mother is right; the world crushes my 21 years of naiveté. By the time I arrive in Pennsylvania, I am a fraction of the person I once was – 2/3rds to be exact. In the eight months between my Rice graduation and my start at Penn State, I have lost over 35lbs and all the most important relationships in my life. Once again, my parents are the ones to help me move into my new—still temporary—living space. Once again, we are hardly speaking. We regard one another with wariness and suspicion.

I do not have enough things to fill my new apartment. All the furniture is rented, and it looks like it was excavated from a mountain lodge in the 1970s. None of my clothes fit me—in fact, nothing fits me. I have to lash size zero jeans to my waist with a belt that’s too big. Elle punched a new hole in it for me, inches from the smallest setting. I have kept her warmest winter boots, the oversized flannel shirt in which she slept, and the watch she gave me for our anniversary. She mails me the French press we shared, wrapped in one of our bathroom towels. It breaks in transport. By the time it arrives, it is a mess of shattered glass and bent metal. I could think of nothing more appropriate.

Ph.D. in English—Rhetoric and Composition, Pennsylvania State University, Fall 2012 – Fall 2016

I do not discover rhetoric and composition until graduate school. When I find it, it gives me a vocabulary for the discussions I’ve been trying to have all my life. It names the problems of language and oppression that have unsettled me for as long as I can remember. If my MFA helped me realize that I might be Asian American, my Ph.D. compels me to participate in the evolution of that conversation—the “rhetoric of becoming” prompted by LuMing Mao and Morris Young (5). In 1981, Cherríe Moraga laments that “we have let rhetoric do the job of poetry” (25). Perhaps what we need now is a little more poetry in the work of rhetoric.

Over these years, I begin to reclaim the things I have lost—my family, my communities, my strength both bodily and spiritual. At the nexus of these experiences—my poetic training, the insight of rhetorical and cultural theory, the psychological and physical damage of living with an illness that has no explanation—I find this project: The importance of being able to name our experiences and to find in them shared values and shared visions. To do that, we need to overturn the prevailing narrative of personal writing as a superficial, self-absorbed genre. This shift requires bridging the traditional divides in scholarly
discourse – theoretical vs experiential; creative vs critical. Only then can we find those voices left out of extant discursive practices and open a space for them to speak.

OTHER EXPERIENCE

Intern, Foundry Literary + Media, New York, NY, 2010

Here are the missing eight months between Rice and Penn State. Elle and I have an apartment in Bed-Stuy, complete with bed bugs, mice, and a landlord who can’t fix any of our problems. We both work long hours, and I am waiting to hear back from graduate schools. My health, which has always been fickle, degrades from minor inconveniences to a genuine struggle. I maintain a low fever for months. My stomach hurts constantly. I have no appetite. I never sleep for more than an hour or two at a time. I tell no one, hoping that if I ignore it for long enough, it will resolve on its own.

I start my mornings as an intern for a literary agency, sifting through submissions from the slush pile. In these months, I read more pitches for “the next Twilight series” than I can count. At night, I bike to Park Slope, where I work the closing shift at a ramen restaurant. The owners are Australian, but the chef is Japanese American and French-trained. Every night, he gives me a hefty serving of the family meal—kitchen surplus that he turns into rich curries or stews. His roasted chicken over rice reminds me of night markets in Taipei, of comfort food from Styrofoam bowls on fold-out plastic tables. While the rest of the staff eats their dinners, I portion everything into plastic take-out containers and store them in the fridge. I bring them home at the end of the night for Elle. When she asks if I’ve eaten, I say yes. When she tells me how delicious it is, I agree. When she settles beside me in bed, I am too weak and tired to hold her.

As I drift in and out of consciousness, I account for the things in my life that make me inadequate: the jobs that hardly pay for the paper-thin roof over our heads, the bedbug-infested mattress that we have wrapped in plastic for six months because the damn things still won’t die. The fourteen graduate school applications I have out to MFA programs from which I still haven’t heard though reports of acceptances and rejections proliferate the internet. The parents to whom I rarely speak because I can no longer defend the career choice or the relationship I had defied them for. The beautiful woman sleeping beside me—my best friend, whom I am letting down with each passing day.

PUBLICATIONS


The first short story I publish during my MFA program is about a cisgender, heterosexual white woman literally running from her problems. Unable to face the deterioration of her relationships and career, she attempts to shed her grief on open pavement. The problems stay, but her body is diminishing beyond repair. When “Flashpoint” is accepted for publication, the

All writing is personal
– Spigelman, Experience as Evidence in Academic Discourse
editor emails me with one suggested revision:

How about cutting the line “My once thick, auburn curls have faded to the color of sand”? It’s the only line that identifies the character as white. I think the story would be better off not identifying the narrator's race at all. Otherwise, it feels odd, as if you deliberately wanted to whitewash the narrator, although I have a feeling that you included the line so readers wouldn't automatically assume that the story's autobiographical. But as an Asian American writer myself, this seems like the wrong move.

He is right. Though the story is not autobiographical, I share enough with the protagonist that I try to distance us through superficial features. The editor’s gently-worded note exposes my unconscious evasion. Why am I so afraid of creating an Asian American character? Have I been trying to whitewash myself? More, what is wrong about admitting my personal investment in my work? I delete the line.

So I become an Asian American writer by an act of omission. Or perhaps, not yet. Not until I actively write Asian Americans into my stories—their dark, straight hair, their more terracotta than porcelain skin. Not until my thesis project maps a family’s multi-generational migration from China to Taiwan to America—a family not too far from my own, but also definitely not my own. At my thesis reading, a professor asks: “Why did you choose to tell this story in the genre that you did; why not autobiography?”

He’s never spoken to me before. He does not know me, but he thinks he does. Perhaps that’s what I get for writing about a first-generation queer from a Taiwanese family. We all look the same.

"The Simplicity of Salt." Bluestem 4.1 (September 2011).

Superstar Chef Grant Achatz has cancer of the mouth. After chemotherapy, he loses his sense of taste. I read about it in the New York Times amid other disheartening news: oil spills, Arizona immigration law, the rise of the Tea Party. I can’t stop thinking about Achatz, about the chef who risks his life to save his tongue, who spends his days serving up an experience he can no longer have. It is Saturday and early in the semester, so I am the only person in the grad office. Alone in the cubicle farm, I wonder how it would feel to chew without taste. I probe around the inside of my mouth, trying to imagine the absence of feeling.

Already, my classmates refer to me as the “food writer.” All my stories have descriptions of food. The most common remark I get: “Your writing makes me so hungry!” I don’t tell them I’ve been starving for years.


A man loses his wife in childbirth. He cradles the infant that he knows is not his. It is a story about loss, about insecurity and irreconcilability. It is a story about the fates we have not chosen, and about using the cards we are dealt.

It's sad, because I think people have this conception that when a doctor says something, that's the golden standard; they're always right. And in fact, they're not always right.

– Grant Achatz (Landau)

My first attempt at nonfiction, and the first of many times I try to tell this story. The “us” in the story is technically Elle and me, but this is the first time that I see the larger cultural scripts that stitched us together, and more importantly, the ones that pulled us apart. I see my own complicities in narratives about sexuality and race—ones I obeyed because I didn’t even know they were there. I am proud to publish this in an Asian American journal—to place my story within the range of Asian American experiences.


A Chinese weightlifter—an Olympic champion—returns to her village after an injury ends her career. The character is fictional. The conditions of her career and her retirement, the conscription of children from poor, rural villages, the exploitation of athletes, the ability of the human body and spirit to endure despite all odds—these things are all very, very real.

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Before we moved to New York, Elle’s mother confronted me in a parking lot at Rice. The thing is, I have always admired this woman—despite her objection to the very idea of me. She raised Elle on her own, with their entire family back in Indonesia. Even as she spoke to me about God and homosexuality, most of what I recognized in her voice was fear. It was a tone already familiar to me: a mother trying to save her daughter from the world. She had given everything to Elle, and, when I looked her in the eye, I felt I was taking a part of that away. She asked me, “How are you going to support her? How will you take care of her?”

There were so many assumptions about gender embedded in that question that angered me, but she triggered an abiding guilt I’d been carrying for years—the same one that ignites when my parents remind me (still, six years into graduate school) that it is not

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58 During my MFA program, a classmate once described to me the difference between fiction and nonfiction: With fiction, you start with nothing and build your world. With nonfiction, you start with *everything*, with all the beautiful and hideous excesses of life, and you pare away until you find it—the white hot core of what you have to say. The challenge often feels the same, though: an impossible one. I am chasing a receding horizon—that vanishing point where your view meets mine.
too late to reconsider med school or law school. Like many other graduate students in the liberal arts, I am constantly reminded that we occupy a profession where the supply of qualified, capable employees far exceeds the demand, where people with six-year degrees accept barely-livable wages for their love of a discipline, for their belief in language, for the conviction that what we do is worthwhile. I lose sleep thinking of my parents and the checks they mail to Taiwan every year for their family’s care. I read the unrelenting articles about jobs in the humanities and how many English Ph.D.s can’t find employment. I fear I have squandered their sacrifice—the opportunities they gave me with their practical, dependable jobs. Perhaps it is all too fitting, then, that I find the power of narrative at the very limitations of medicine.

Medical History Form

Name: Vicki Chenyi Hsu
DOB: June 2, 1988  Place of Birth: Lubbock, TX
Job Title: Graduate student
Employer: Pennsylvania State University
Allergies to Medications: None that I know of

Personal Health History
Check each item that applies. If yes, explain.

Hernia

For the first eight months of my life, I cry interminably. I don’t sleep through a single night. The doctors assume I have colic. When mother notes an abnormal bulge beneath my skin, she calls her brother—a surgeon in Taiwan. He diagnoses me over the phone: I have a hernia,59 and not the words to name it.

59A bilateral inguinal hernia, to be specific. Inguinal hernias are 10 times more common in males than in females. I have apparently never complied with gender norms.
Asthma

The first lie I tell my parents. Not the last. In the first and second grade, my asthma is so bad I’m supposed to spend lunch hours in the nurse’s office, breathing from a nebulizer. On a drive home from school, my mom asks if I’ve been to the nurse. I say yes, but I’m not a very good liar. She repeats the question again. And again. I become more panicked with each insistence.

“Really, so if I call the nurse right now, she’ll tell me that she saw you at lunch?”

“No,” I admit.

When we get home, she tells me to kneel facing the wall. She leaves me there for twenty minutes. I scream apologies for the first ten. I do not realize that she’s concerned for my health, or that she’s teaching me about honesty and about taking care of myself. So begins the pattern where my mother tries to protect me and I thwart her at every turn.

Skin Problems or Chronic Rash

I have eczema, which gets worse in colder or dryer weather—rashes on my forearms and my joints, more nuisance than painful. Like my other conditions, doctors tell me it worsens with “stress.” In the winter, the skin across my knuckles splits open and bleeds. Most lotions make it worse. My skin, it turns out, has expensive taste.

When I am eight years old, my mother takes me to get my ears pierced. I suspect she thinks it might feminize me, her daughter who chooses boys’ clothes and toys at every opportunity. She speaks nostalgically of her own childhood, how she liked to play dress up, how she adored fancy dresses and jewelry.
“Sometimes it makes no sense that you’re my child,” she says. And it’s supposed to be funny. Sometimes it’s funny.

I agree to the ear piercing because it is something for us to do together. I want to do it because it is something we can do together. We drive forty minutes to the nicer mall. I remember watching the Papago Mountains roll past the windows – thick saguaros spanning their arms skyward, polished mounds of red sandstone bathed in Arizona sun. I won’t realize how beautiful this landscape is until years later.

At the mall, Mom gets her ears pierced first. My memory of her, quietly poised amid all the kitsch and garishness of Claire’s, epitomizes two things I admire about her. First, she is and always has been unflinching in the face of pain. Both my parents, really, are disciplined in ways that seem stereotypically Chinese: they work hard; they accept the things they cannot change. They do not cause trouble. Second, my mother has an elegance that has always escaped me. She even pulls off those cheap, plastic earrings with grace.

I, however, do not. The employees sit me in a chair and give me a teddy bear to hold. Two women stand on either side of me with piercing guns and I squeeze my eyes shut. It is over in seconds. The little blue studs punched into my ears look entirely out of place. In two weeks, my earlobes swell to several times their normal size. I develop a fever as my body rejects the metal. I have no choice but to let the piercings close up.

Chest Pain

It starts in middle school. Sharp pains, vertigo, shortness of breath. My blood pressure dips precariously low without warning. My mother and I fight all the way to the
 cardiologist’s office each time the many times we go. I resent the hours wasted under examination for conditions that are never explained to me. They never find anything anyway. I carry a monitor around so I can watch when my blood pressure plummets, but there’s nothing I can do when it does.

**Weight Fluctuations**

For most of my life, my weight has a steady upward climb. Also around middle school, the doctor is concerned that I am overweight and recommends that I join a school sport—but I’m an asthmatic, clumsy kid with sensitive skin and low blood pressure. I try out for the softball team and fail twice. The coach loves that I’m good with numbers, though. She asks that I work as the team manager with the promise that maybe, someday, she’ll let me play. For two years, I track batting statistics and plays for our team and their opponents. I watch every game from the dugout. I decide that I am not made for athleticism – or perhaps, I accept the decision that has been made for me.

**Stomach or Intestinal Problems**

It starts when I am young, young enough that my parents can still pick me up. I am again sick without explanation. I have not stopped throwing up—food, then water. Nothing stays down, so now it’s just stomach bile. It burns as it comes up again and again, yellow and acidic. My throat is raw. I am too nauseous to stand. I don’t remember what the doctor says. I don’t remember the hospital. I don’t remember the car ride. I remember the way my father wrapped me in a towel. I remember the way he ran through the waiting room. I remember the safety of his shoulder while the world spun.
In high school, I get a stomach virus. This is the first of many. The pattern will recur often in my adulthood. I run a high fever. I can’t stop throwing up. I get chills. My parents both go to work and I am alone all day, drinking Gatorade and zoning out in front of daytime TV. At some point, I lose consciousness. I wake to the sound of the thermometer beeping and my mother’s panicked face. My temperature is 105 degrees. We go back to the hospital where we’re told it’s a stomach bug. It’ll pass. The next day I’m back at school with a backpack of white bread and electrolytes.

In college, a moment of unexplained nausea becomes two weeks without solid food. Elle brings me every variation of soup they sell in Houston, but they all make me sick. By now, I am accustomed to working through it. I go to my job at the media center. I attend class. I finish my assignments on time. I finish my college career with honors, two majors, and some GPA above 4.0. I get better, but never completely. By the time we move to New York, I have forgotten what it is to live without pain.

In Brooklyn, I routinely wake with a low fever, which I treat with two Tylenol before I take the G train to Union Square. I get overwhelming bouts of chills and nausea. I always hurt. I have trouble describing it to doctors—it feels as if my stomach is simultaneously expanding from within and being compressed from without, just a little south of my sternum. It is mildest in the morning and nearly unbearable by night, like the organ is pulling apart. It gets worse when I eat, no matter what I eat. I am afraid to eat. I tell no one.

From January through May, I whittle away. Elle finally confronts me in her own, blunt manner. Her reflection frowns at me in the mirror. “You’re not okay. Do you see yourself? I feel like I’m dating a cancer patient.”
My reflection stares back, halfway out of my work clothes, looking for my pajamas. The waist of my jeans crumples at my hips where I had to bundle the fabric beneath a belt (the one that’s too big). My skin sinks between my ribs, enough that I can count them by sight. I never knew my bones were so small. I realize then how long it has been since she’s touched me—how she always watches me from afar, as if afraid I might break.

It takes another few months for us to break up. It is a slow and ugly process in which we cannot reconcile what we could have been with the reality of what we are: two strangers who have long stopped being good for one another. Neither of us wants the responsibility of abandoning the life we’d built together for years, the only certainty of our present and futures. We chip away to see who can drive the other to leave first. I lose.

Elle watches as I divide our things. I pack my half into my one duffel bag and she tells me, “I will only get over you once.” There is no coming back. I hear those words, and somewhere, I register that I should be sad, but there is a way you shut down when your body believes it’s dying. There is a way that physical pain becomes emotional anesthesia. There is a way you stare back, blank, at the person who has been your world and tell her, “Okay,” because all you can think about is how you are so cold.

After we split up, Elle and I don’t speak to each other for another four years. When we begin to talk again, we share snippets of what happened in those eight months, reconciling our very different experiences into one coherent narrative. It turns out we’ve both been telling friends and family the same story throughout these years. In an unspoken agreement, we’ve written over our ugly last months of cruelty and
estrangement with a peaceful separation. I got sick; I had to leave the city; the relationship was too hard to sustain. That is the easy explanation. It is also a partial one.

It also turns out that both of us withheld the news from our parents. After returning to Arizona, I wait weeks to tell my mother that Elle and I have split up. I know that this is the news she has been hoping for the many times she asked if we were “still together.” I do not want to give her that satisfaction. I finally spit it out in the middle of a conversation, but nothing can prepare me for my mother’s poorly masked relief. Within months, she is asking whether I’m dating a man. Every time, the question guts me.

Here’s the kicker, though. In some ugly corner of my heart, I—too—is relieved. I think for a short, delusional period that I can wind up with a man whom my parents will want to meet, whom I can introduce to our extended family. I don’t actually recognize this feeling for another couple years. I don’t realize that this is why I cannot stand to talk to my mother. It isn’t that I can’t face her relief; I don’t want to acknowledge my own. I finally recognize my complicity during my comprehensive exams as I am writing about the psychology of colonialism—how oppression latches on like a parasite, how it feeds on the blood of others. The same discourses that taught me I was Asian American gave me the terms to understand why I found the label so incompatible with my sense of self for so long.

There are many reasons that I did not have to think much about America’s colonial history until graduate studies—not least of which that I inhabit a body that allows me to do so. In a certain sense, Asian American privilege does exist, though as an indirect product of white supremacy. The model minority myth arose amid the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, positioning Asian Americans as the successful and
unthreatening counterpoint to African Americans. More than thirty years later, when I started misbehaving in second grade, a teacher saw my inattention as boredom; she recommended me for the “gifted” test, which tracked me into the accelerated learning programs that shaped the rest of my primary and secondary education.

At eight years old, I did not look for the politics that channeled particular students into classrooms with more attention and more resources. I did not look for the hegemonic structures that subsist on the dismissal of identity politics as unfounded and untenable. No wonder, then, I had a narrow view of Asian America. For most of my life, I had exactly one model of Asians and it did not include people who thought and looked like me. I defined my sexuality against my ethnicity, seeing both as concrete and unnegotiable categories of being. Not until graduate school did I meet or hear about Asian Americans who identified as anything other than heterosexual. Because I had spent so long distancing myself from the things that already marked me as other, my world of queer Asian America was just Elle and me.

The winter after my exams, I manage to meet with Elle in Houston. We spend a few days revisiting the places we had once shared and discovering new pockets of our old city. I pick her up every day in a rented car. When I ring the doorbell, her mother avoids the door. As I’m driving her home on the last day, Elle muses aloud to me: “I think, chances are, I won’t end up with a woman. It’s just harder that way with my mom.”

I confess to her then the feeling that took me so long to recognize: Hope. It was my last thought as I left our apartment—hope that I could forge a life that would not
further the divide between me and my parents. Hope that I could whittle myself into a shape they would recognize. I still don’t know how to forgive myself for it.

I expect Elle to be incensed, or maybe I wish for it. I want her to punish me for the things I cannot reconcile on my own. Instead she considers me sadly from the passenger seat. She says, “I never knew you felt that way.”

“I didn’t either.” I answer. “It doesn’t matter. Turns out, I don’t think I can actually become that person.”

Emotional or Psychiatric Problems

Until 1973, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association defined homosexuality as a mental illness. It remained on the World Health Organization’s list of mental disorders until 1990. Of course, it takes a while for theory to become practice. At the time that I am writing this in 2016, the WHO’s International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD) retains a category of “gay-related diseases.” The WHO’s Departments of Mental Health and Substance Abuse and Reproductive Health and Research has issued a statement urging the organization to remove “gay-related diseases” from the forthcoming 2017 edition of the ICD.

Sometime in the nineties, I am watching a TV sitcom with my parents when the word “gay” is used as a punchline. I no longer remember the context, but it is some sort of offhand pejorative. My mother asks if I know what “gay” means.
My answer is matter-of-fact: “It is a man who loves another man,” I tell her.

She nods. “We don’t know yet what’s wrong with their brains, but sometimes something goes wrong…”

This is the definition I remember when, at eleven years old I confess to my best friend the feeling for which I have no name. This is the definition that makes sense of it all when her parents decide I can’t be trusted. This is the explanation I give myself when I can’t find stories of queerness, when every romance ends with the woman finding her prince, when I can’t see myself belonging in any of the happily ever afters.

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My mother and I are driving on the Arizona freeway when she tells me: “Our genetics are terrible. That’s why I didn’t want children. I didn’t want to put a child through that.”

I am behind the wheel so I can’t turn to look at her. Instead, I stare down six lanes of speeding SUVs. That is okay, though, because I have not been able to meet her eyes since I got back from New York. Defeated, I had called home to tell my parents I am not well—to ask them to take me in, to take care of me, this daughter they never asked to have.

After a battery of hospital exams, blood draws, and biopsies, I discover I have a BMI of 15. By most medical definitions, I am literally starving. An upper endoscopy finds an inflamed stomach lining, but nothing else. There is no explanation for my amalgam of symptoms, so I am told to take Prilosec—an over-the-counter acid reducer, what people take for heartburn. There is no test for pain, no way to quantify it for other people. When my parents hear that I am physically fine, they begin to treat me with
suspicion. I am sick by choice, and getting better is just a matter of eating more. My father stays home from work to monitor my meals. My mother looks at me like I’m the person who is killing her daughter. After long enough, I wonder if she’s right.

In the months that I am home, I catch my mother researching not digestive conditions, but deceptive behavior in eating disorders. I find the printouts in her office, but I say nothing. I’m not entirely sure she’s wrong. Each night, she sets a large bowl of rice before me and tells me to eat, and when I stare down at it, I am filled with paralyzing dread.

We are still having these standoffs when she moves me to State College, and when she leaves me on the other side of the country, when she hugs me at the airport and tells me—begs me—to take care of myself. When I hear the worry in her voice, I wonder how I could do this to myself. I have always wanted to be stronger than I am. I have dreamt of being built of sinew and claws. The last thing I want is to become the fragile, withered thing I see in my reflection. It makes no sense, but my tests say that I am fine. I don’t have celiac. I don’t have H-Pylori. I, too, become convinced that I am somehow self-sabotaging. So in the evenings, in my first graduate school apartment—the spacious one-bedroom I’d once chosen for Elle and me to share—I force-feed myself until I can’t stand. Some nights it’s just pain, sometimes it’s nausea. I gain weight, but only by small increments. In my first year, I go at least another five rounds with the thing the doctors call a stomach virus. Illness becomes a way of life and it is the fractured lens through which I experience the world throughout graduate school.
Medication History Record

Name: Vicki Hsu  
Date of Birth: 6/2/1988

Current Diagnosis
The gastroenterologist says I have IBS, or “irritable bowel syndrome.” It is a diagnosis by elimination; there is no test for it. My symptoms don’t altogether fit, but – of course – everything varies in personal experience. There is also no treatment for it. At best, you can try to control the symptoms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prescription Medications Used in the Past Four Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Omeprazole**  
(basically, prescription-strength Prilosec) | 40mg 2x/day | Possible side effects include fever, cold symptoms, headache and (ironically) stomach pain and nausea. Fortunately, I experience none of that, and also no improvement. |
| **Dicyclomine**  
(an antispasmodic to relax the muscles of the stomach and intestines) | 10mg 4x/day | Also no help. Side effects include headache, nervousness, dizziness, weakness, and drowsiness. I can’t tell if I’m experiencing them all, or if I already had those symptoms anyway. |
| **Sucralfate**  
(used to treat ulcers. It lines the stomach by sticking to ulcer sites and protecting them from stomach acid) | 2 tsp 3x/day, before meals | Some days I think it helps, others I feel just as bad. Less serious side effects include insomnia, headache, and drowsiness. Again, I don’t know if it’s the medication or grad school. |
| **Xifaxan**  
(an antibiotic used to treat hepatic encephalopathy, traveler’s diarrhea, and IBS) | 550mg 2x/day, for 30 days | I feel better for the first few days and then the side effects intensify. I am nauseous for hours after each dose and what little appetite I had disappears. When I return to the gastroenterologist, he sighs down at my chart and shrugs. “Well. It looks like we’ve tried everything.” |

Any OTC Medications Used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symptom</th>
<th>Medication</th>
<th>Frequency and Dosage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pain</td>
<td>Tylenol and Advil</td>
<td>Not often. I actually hate the idea of medication—of being anesthetized to the</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
things happening in my body. Of course, I’ve long lost control anyway.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Medication</th>
<th>Frequency and Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heartburn</td>
<td>Prilosec, Zantac, Nexium, Tums, Rolaids</td>
<td>Almost daily. Most of them in combination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congestion</td>
<td>Zyrtec, Allegra, generic Phenylephrine</td>
<td>Also daily. I can’t tell if I’m perennially sick or allergic to Pennsylvania.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleeping Aid</td>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>I don’t think I can stand to be drowsier than I am, so I don’t sleep. Or, when I do, I wake in a panic, my heart pounding, my clothes damp with sweat. On the nights I drift off, my body startles awake at 4:00am, like clockwork.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>I’m told this is a condition of the career that I’ve chosen. A classmate of mine texts me about the bottle of wine she is drinking from her bathtub. Another chain smokes on my balcony. In the second year of my MFA, a friend asks: “Do you think we all just pretend we’re okay and break down in the privacy of our own homes?” Yes, I do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>“In Taiwan, we don’t really believe in depression,” my mother tells me. “If you’re sad. There’s a reason. You figure it out. You get better.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Medicine, it turns out, is also sometimes an art of approximation. With no other recourse, I take the route I know best: read everything. I look for firsthand accounts of struggle and recovery from similar symptoms. I find many stories about food-allergy-induced-IBS. When I ask my gastroenterologist, he suggests that testing is pointless, that my symptoms don’t present as an allergic reaction, that allergy test are – and this is true, as far as I know—fairly inconclusive. I insist anyway. I request a full panel of possible food allergens—the most reliable test for which is a skin prick test. Almost instantly after the nurse applies the serums, my back is inflamed. “Oh my,” she says. “Well. It looks like you’re allergic to five things.”
Now when I tell people, I always list them in order from “least-annoying” to “most-difficult”: celery, peas, pork, barley, and rice. The last always elicits an obligatory Asian joke, and it’s not unwarranted. In Chinese, the word for meal is literally rice. Breakfast is “early-rice.” Lunch is “noon-rice.” Dinner is “late-rice.” The quintessential Taiwanese comfort-food dish, my favorite meal as a child, is minced pork on rice. Still, I am probably the happiest person who has ever been diagnosed with five food allergies. It is the first answer that has made sense of my litany of symptoms—from asthma to eczema to nausea and stomach cramps, vomiting, and indigestion. I’ve been poisoning myself for years, possibly my whole life, without knowing it. Purging my kitchen of all allergens is a long and arduous process, but for the first time in a long time, I begin to feel better—genuinely better. That process, however, is not clean. It is like waking from a nightmare to find that you weren’t in fact dreaming—that someone, someone starved and angry and depressed made a mess of your life and your relationships, and you must make what you can from the shambles. Still, the five welts on my back were my vindication. I was reacting to something that wasn’t my own insanity. I had external proof of my pain, and I could take steps to make it better.

In truth, food allergy is not the perfect answer. Doctors have been trying to find the underlying cause for a year now. The endocrinologist suspects hypothyroidism. The internist believes it’s dysautonomia. The immunologist thinks I should see a gastroenterologist. To make sense of the body, medicine splits it into pieces and assigns an expert to each part. Still, in 2015, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine estimated that roughly 12 million adults are misdiagnosed each year in the United States, and up to 17% of adverse patient effects are due to misdiagnosis. The
reason? Poor communication. At the end of their report, the NASEM recommends more
effective collaboration among healthcare practitioners, involving patients in the
diagnostic process, and establishing a work culture that provides feedback on diagnostic
performance.

Over time, I’ve learned to speak the language of my care providers—to carry my
medical history with me and to translate the charts and statistics into the lived experience
of those numbers. I’ve learned to read my TSH, free T3 and T4 levels, and to monitor my
blood pressure and heart rate, and to plug those numbers back into a system that can
assign the proper treatments that help me feel better. Unintentionally, I also stepped
sideways into the health industry. I became the communications specialist for a company
that hosts clinics about fitness, strength and conditioning, and nutrition for health and
performance. I interview top coaches and researchers in kinesiology and nutritional
science and transcribe their findings in layman’s terms for blog posts and seminar
materials. I coach Olympic-style weightlifting classes at a local gym. I pass for someone
who is hale.

At lunch with a professor from my department, I abstain from the bread basket
and explain that I have many food allergies.

“That’s surprising,” he says. “I’ve always assumed you were very healthy. You
give off that sort of impression.”

“I was very sick when I started grad school. I’m getting better now,” I answer.

He studies me over the wire rim of his glasses. “I think it’s very cool – the way
people develop strengths in moments of weakness.”
The novel project that became my MFA thesis was about a Taiwanese American family (much to my own surprise). It spanned several generations and traveled from China to Taiwan to New York. In many ways, it was about what all stories are about: in the words of Nam Le, the “old verities”—“love and honour and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice.” Unlike Le’s “ethnic story,” mine had a queer protagonist. If you considered its quantifiable traits (Taiwanese family, Brooklyn apartment, angry queer), there were many superficial resemblances to my life. The question the professor asked about genre, however, made the wrong assumption. This was not my story—not my Asian America, at least, not yet.

My experiences in graduate school gave me an awareness that I was being mapped onto discourses I had no part in—ones that I knew nothing about, but was expected to speak for regardless. If I was going to belong in Asian America, though, I wanted it to tell stories of lesbian couples, and of families who talked about and grappled with their cultural dissonances. Telling these stories became a way to (re)define what Asian American meant to me—and hopefully to others. I wasn’t speaking about some innate feature of my identity, but trying to expand the body of knowledge used to speak of that identity and to advocate for the individuals within it.

In order to write about an Asian American family whose generations stretched from the Chinese Cultural Revolution to present-day New York, I had to re-learn to read my first language. Just as Richard Rodriguez’s self-storying took him to Mexico, my Taiwanese narrative returned me to my linguistic origins. I sent my mother passages with my rough translations and asked for her help. Meanwhile, she traded me snippets of writing that she needed for work. I had copyedited many of her reports, memos, and
letters before, but for the first time we actually discussed the very different logics that inform Chinese and English. We compiled a list of Chinese terms that have no English equivalent.

My favorite example: 关系. Pronounced “guanxi,” 关系 approximately means “relationship.” It is, however, also all of the history and context of that relationship. 关系 is built over time in the give and take between individuals. As such, 关系 also connotes trust and obligation. Good deeds and good will are expected to earn reciprocal behavior. If I may make the trite Chinese-American reference to Confucius, in Confucian thought, 关系 is also a determiner of social status. Social harmony is founded on people seeing themselves within a network of relationships and strengthening those connections.

Though my parents did not attend my MFA reading, my mother did read my thesis. A few days later, she sends me a text message: “I’m sorry if our misunderstanding of your sexuality made things hard.” We still have a long way to go, my parents and I. Years later, my mom forgets Elle’s name and asked me about “that girl who was your roommate in New York.” The fact that she’s asking, though, is a start.

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“One way to think about a good ending is that it first closes all the things you’ve opened”
— The Elements of Academic Style “Ending Well” (131)

Back to the question of genre: why did my first exploration of Asian America begin in fiction? First, because the work of narrative takes place across multiple genres and because the nature of genre itself is elusive. But second, and
more importantly for this discussion, I avoided experience-based nonfiction for years because I bought into the myth of personal writing as a finished representation of self, and I feared the judgment that comes with it. Even in creative writing, personal narrative is dangerous territory. Established memoirists from Noelle Howey to Mary Karr warn younger writers to “wait 10 or 20 years” (Stein). The assumption in that warning is that you will get it wrong the first time—that the wisdom of age and distance will produce a “truer,” more insightful story. Personal writing is a record of your history, rather than the making of it. This idea of personal narrative, however, is also only true in convenient arguments (often ones used to dispute the veracity of a text). Though time most certainly yields new (and perhaps deeper) perspective, it should not discount the value of one’s initial reflection, nor should it curtail one’s ability to enter conversations and make personal engagements in that moment. The idea of personal writing as a fixed, polished product imposes impossible expectations on a form that is inherently flawed and in flux.

For example, Eric Liu – like Richard Rodriguez—revises his assimilationist leanings in a later publication. *The Accidental Asian* declares Liu’s “deep skepticism” that Confucius’s “*The Analects* or the *Tao Te-Ching* worked their way into my cultural DNA” (151). Yet, Liu’s 2014 *A Chinaman’s Chance* opens with an adage from Confucius himself. After quoting a passage from *The Analects*, Liu details his recent exploration of Confucian texts; he’s begun reading them alongside his mother. This is a project that spans multiple generations, as Liu and his daughter also make up their own goofy Confucian aphorisms (My favorite: “I forgot where I put my toast – Confucius” (4). As relational rhetoric, personal writing enables Liu to incorporate Confucius into his “cultural DNA” on his terms. He connects with Confucian thought by both reading
traditional texts as well as creating absurd parodies—what could be more Asian American? It wasn’t that Liu’s younger self was “wrong” in *The Accidental Asian*, but that he inhabited a stance from which he has progressed – and is capable of revising—in a later narrative.

Moreover, *The Accidental Asian*, even in its polemical stance—or perhaps, because of these things—was vital for my own development as an Asian American writer. I latched onto the voice of someone else still grappling with the identities and expectations that had been thrust upon him. That narrative, even as I contested Liu’s view of assimilation, gave me a point of entry into the conversation. Several years later, also unexpectedly, I find myself invoking Confucius in my own story-of-becoming.

This is, of course, only one version of this story—a story that involves many other people with a myriad of different perspectives. Through even a slightly different lens, these events must look entirely different. When my mother told me that she never meant to have children, I imagined myself the unwelcome intruder. I remembered the way my father used to get angry when I was a kid. He would tell me I was his worst mistake. With my mother’s confession, I kept seeing my own childhood as a product of being unwanted. I kept reading resentment into the times I was told to shut up, to stop goofing off, to stop acting like a child.

I am twenty-eight years old now. In less than a year, I will be the same age my parents were when I was born. I will actually be further along in my career than my father was. He was still a graduate student, trying to raise a family on a stipend made for one. It is because my parents have provided so well for me that I cannot imagine being in their place. I have been able to make the choices they could not. I could risk financial
instability and their disapproval because regardless of how I stumbled, or how I hurt them, they would help me back up again. There is a version of this story in which I was a mistake, but there is also one in which I was born into a home that welcomed me despite, unprepared – that sacrificed for me well before I understood it, and that stayed open to me regardless of the many ways I tried to leave.

Telling any story of myself, to be honest, still makes me anxious. It is such an assailable genre. Experiential accounts can always be contested, and their meaning inevitably shifts over time. I am sure I will look back at this with a different lens someday. I will wish I had rendered something differently. I am encouraged, however, by the legacy of the many courageous writers before me—those who risked being a little imprecise, inviting attacks that will inevitably feel personal, and exposing the things for which they have been shamed. With much gratitude for their bravery, I add my stories to their long tradition, hoping that, together, we advance a world where such writing is no longer such a perilous act.
Conclusion

Making Monsters

“In Beverly Hills will this monster make a man.”
– Richard Rodriguez, Hunger of Memory (3)

“I cannot discover myself in the mirror, for the mirror is a monster.”
– Marla Morris, “Young Man Popkin: A Queer Dystopia,” this bridge we call home (138)

“You guys know about vampires? You know, vampires have no reflections in a mirror? There’s this idea that monsters don’t have reflections in a mirror. And what I’ve always thought isn’t that monsters don’t have reflections in a mirror. It’s that if you want to make a human being into a monster, deny them, at the cultural level, any reflection of themselves. And growing up, I felt like a monster in some ways. I didn’t see myself reflected at all. I was like, ‘Yo, is something wrong with me? That the whole society seems to think that people like me don’t exist?’ And part of what inspired me, was this deep desire that before I died, I would make a couple of mirrors. That I would make some mirrors so that kids like me might seem themselves reflected back and might not feel so monstrous for it.”
– Junot Diaz, speaking at Rutgers University in 2007 (Donohue)

In an ethnographic study of diversity practitioners in academic institutions, Sarah Ahmed describes how discrimination becomes institutionalized by “receding from view” (182) – by becoming an ordinary part of daily life. Ideological critique is then “a critique of how things surface” (185). It makes visible the things we are told don’t matter, aren’t important, or aren’t even there. This work is difficult. It finds us when our experiences defy what we are told is normal, or natural, or real. It requires telling the stories that others do not believe exist. It risks—to return to Somers’s words—“despair, victimization, and even madness” (626). It is intensely personal, but it should not be isolating.
By examining self-writing as a relationally-dependent, ontological function, I have argued that the acts of both writing and reading personal narratives are integral to institutional growth. In Chapter Two, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, and AnaLouise Keating offer models of how personal narratives can function as kairotic responses to institutional silences, using experiential accounts to disrupt the structures that have enforced their marginalization. Chapter Three then follows the controversy surrounding Richard Rodriguez and his many autobiographies as a negotiation of Mexican-American and Chicano identities—one that prompted reflexive discussions of how one comes to belong in an ethnic collective, and how that ethnicity can be rendered in response to political conditions. Chapter Four turns to the composition classroom, examining Gerald Graff’s personal narrative in relation to composition’s historical subordination as a service discipline. It uses the reduction of Graff’s autobiography to measure how different institutional pressures divert our pedagogical practices from their theoretical ideals. Finally, Chapter Five traces a personal discovery of the power of naming—of making a few mirrors of my own.

Writing Personal Narratives

Back to the question I was asked at my MFA thesis reading: “Why did you choose to tell this story in the genre that you did?” Why narrative? Why not traditional academic discourse—the nebulous form that Patricia Bizzell described as objective, skeptical, and argumentative? Why does institutional critique necessitate the personal? In part, because narratives are unavoidable. We learn about our world through stories—through histories and mythologies, through news and interpersonal exchanges. In
Somers’s words, “social life is itself storied” (614). Social life is also incommensurable, in a way that escapes the language of evidence and “thesis-driven” arguments (Gunter 65). Accounting for the shifts in social assumptions and practices that are prompted by personal and public narratives gives us a view of personal writing as academic “work” that exceeds traditional, evidence-based argumentation. More importantly, though, institutional critique should involve the personal because institutional violences are personal. To think otherwise is to belong on the other side of privilege—where systemic hierarchies recede comfortably from view.

By connecting the individual to larger configurations of cultural meaning, personal writing allows us to locate and sometimes alter our positions within a network of relationships. Experience-as-more-than-evidence permits divergent narratives to build upon one another for collective impact. For example, *This Bridge Called My Back* created an alliance of women of color—the first of its kind, in writing. With the united force of allied but distinct voices, it prompted a predominantly white feminist movement to engage more complex models of identity and identity politics. In an even more inclusive approach, *this bridge we call home* spoke with the voices of men and women—of color and white—to explore yet more challenges to feminism and multiculturalism. Many years later, these texts still gives feminists of color and queer feminists a point of entry in what can be hostile or hazardous terrain.

Seen as exploration rather than definitive truth, personal writing becomes Paul John Eakin’s “art of the future” (*Living Autobiographically* 148)—the makings of cultural and personal evolution. Richard Rodriguez’s self-stories started to reconcile the many identities that had been assigned to him. The strict divisions set up in *Hunger*—
between languages, between cultures, between his public and private selves—began to
dissolve in Brown. At the same time, the repositioning of his autobiography within
different conversations—about class, ethnicity, sexuality, and religion—exposes the
limited frames we have for expressing and understanding those identity categories.
Looked at as re-invention, Rodriguez’s self-stories are less reflections of who he is than
the process of his (and our) becoming.

By dislodging the personal from its traditional association with “individual,” this
study also sees personal writing as a social engagement rather than a solitary burden.
Rodriguez’s refusal at the beginning of Hunger could also echo the reluctance of many
“ethnic” writers to story their lives: “There are those in White America who would anoint
me to play out for them some drama of ancestral reconciliation […] But I reject the role”
(5). Rodriguez’s misstep, as usual, is in thinking of himself as an isolated example. No
one wants that role, and yet so many writers of marginalized backgrounds risk it with
their stories. Ahmed reflects on the isolation that often attends being “the race person” in
academic settings: “we can find ourselves: people of color being interviewed for jobs ‘on
race’ by white panels, speaking to white audiences […] I should stress that we do want
there to be posts on race and ethnicity. We also want there to be more than one; we want
not to be the one.” (Ahmed 5). We want not to be the one, but in order to become more-
than-one, we must all turn up, and when we do, we must have some way of holding
together across our differences.

As part of a constellation of meaning, personal writing becomes more than a
metric for comparison. We can move beyond the historicization and naturalization of
difference. Instead, difference becomes a catalyst for change—a discovery of alternative
values rather than a search for recognition. As the contributors to *this bridge we call home* wove disparate voices and experiences into a more expansive vision for multicultural feminism, we can use personal narrative to map the patterns of systemic injustice and, together, push against them.

**Reading Personal Narratives**

A relational approach to narrative identity also calls for more reflective practices of criticism and circulation. It invests in the aliveness of our language: Where and how we cite, promote, or critique a personal narrative also shapes our cultural and organizational narratives. As Soto highlights so well in *Reading Chican@*, acts of reading assign value to different articulations of self, renegotiating the boundaries of our social collectives. For example, Soto explains how R.A. Rodríguez’s queer reading of Richard Rodriguez positions the author as an exile – the outcast from a generalized, homophobic ethnic whole. R.A. Rodríguez interprets *Hunger* as a flat textual representation of self and Chicanoism as a closed set of values. By contrast, Soto practices a more open approach to criticism. Attempting to “avoid predicting, assigning, or valuing ‘types’ of racialized sexuality” (122), she queers another historically masculinist figure, Américo Paredes. Reading his work against his reputation, Soto investigates how sexuality has always informed racial identity in Chican@ writing.

If we understand identity work as ongoing reinvention, Soto’s valuable contribution is not the definitive truth on Paredes or Rodriguez, but an insightful intervention in ongoing conversations. Again trying to speak cautiously about a topic on which I lack authority, I recognize that there are ample reasons for Chican@ writers and
critics to scorn Richard Rodriguez—not least of all because his overblown publicity overshadowed the more socially and politically astute works of other Mexican-American writers. In the spirit of contingency, though—in embracing the “mutually constitutive, unpredictable, incommensurable, and dynamic” (Soto 6) nature of identity and its expression—I wonder if productive work can emerge from a text that political tensions and popular media positioned in the spotlight. I wonder if any narrative by a gay, Catholic Mexican American would have attained such visibility in 1982 without its appeal to dominant narratives. I wonder if Days of Obligation and Brown could have prompted such rich investigations of cultural miscegenation without Hunger’s initial popularity. I wonder how many narratives Hunger has enabled by nature of becoming a part of the literary canon. I ask these things not to celebrate Richard Rodriguez—or his still-isolating politics—but to consider how we develop reading practices that do not fixate on the author’s individual identity and life.

While representational analyses have fueled many critical discussions, moving beyond experience as evidence invites a more interesting series of questions that focus less on individual identity and broaden the possibilities for discursive engagement. Reading for narrative’s relational networks, we can ask how a story contributes to or changes public scripts. We can examine its insights into patterns of systemic violence without fixing the narrator’s identity to one social category. The study of personal narrative becomes less about how the world was than about how the world could be. If Soto—the self-described “young, queer, femme, Chicana, feminist scholar” (126)—might find a broader vision of Chican@ politics in the patriarchal figure of Américo
Paredes, perhaps there are more yet-unexplored possibilities in the many narratives at our disposal.

**Teaching Personal Narratives**

It is common for rhetorical scholars to outline their conclusions by first delineating implications for future research and then offering suggestions for the writing classroom. In alliance with Horner’s “always emergent” composition (“Rewriting Composition” 451), however—where the seemingly ordinary work of our classrooms can be a site of “real” intellectual progress—I insist that the writing we teach our students should help them access the rigorous forms of cultural engagement that I outline above.

Personal writing in the composition classroom should not remain an exercise in isolation, and writing as interpersonal exchange should not be limited to peer review workshops. If the goal is to help students participate in important critical conversations, then (as Graff himself insists), we must not hide the tools of our trade.

Though genres and imitation still have pedagogical applications, there is a danger to teaching them through polished, standalone products. In particular, we reiterate the narrative where composition serves to socialize students into a uniform and broadly generalizable discourse, which they presumably will use in the rest of their academic career. Instead, as invented-in-the-middle, personal writing becomes a way to engage topics of intellectual concern—topics that are often incommensurable and escape bounded forms and single genres. By locating experiences in relation to larger cultural conversations, personal writing invites students not only to work through their connections to intellectual topics, but to forge new connections as well.
As the makings of a relational network, personal writing also becomes a way to encourage community within our classrooms, and to help students see writing as a social as opposed to solitary practice. Students could undertake not only the reflective and contextually-aware self-writing that I describe in this study, but also the sort of conscientious reading that Soto demonstrates in *Reading Chican@*. By setting students up to become co-producers of meaning in one another’s drafts, we give them an investment in one another’s work, and a real conversation in which they belong.

**On Endings (or the lack thereof)**

“A paradox: the knowledge that exposes your fears can also remove them. Seeing through these cracks makes you uncomfortable because it reveals aspects of yourself (shadow beasts) you don’t want to own.”

— Gloria Anzaldúa, *Luz En Lo Oscuro* (132)

“Diversity work thus requires insistence. You have to become insistent to go against the flow, and you are judged to be going against the flow because you are insistent. A life paradox: you have to become what you are judged as being.”

— Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included* (186)

*Borderlands* and *Hunger of Memory* became a part of the academic canon. Gloria Anzaldúa is now a Chicana Elder. Eric Liu is an Asian American who writes about Confucius (however tongue-in-cheek). When you break through the gates, you find yourself standing inside them—a part of the landscape you once assailed. Personal writing as relational rhetoric also closes the distance between self and other. We are distinct, but interconnected and bound by webs of expectations, and habits, and so many stories.

I hope that this view of personal writing might temper the stigma and fear that attend autobiography. When narratives are treated as static and singular personal “truths,”
they are set up for failure. No story is a complete rendering; nothing can hold up to years of analytical scrutiny. No wonder Ellen Cushman describes it as a “butterfly fixation” – being splayed apart and pinned to a display case. She feels “Sick. Compromised. Naked” (45). Rather than subjecting the author to scrutiny and personal attack, a relational approach to personal narrative turns our attention to how stories intervene in cultural and institutional scripts. With our disciplinary narratives—as we continually revisit and redefine the role of composition—we read with much more generosity. I hope, then, that this study steers the discipline away from conceiving of and discussing personal narrative as a permanent record of self, which can further dissuade individuals from breaking the silence.

In my experience, the making of mirrors also requires running up against the expectations that made me believe in monsters in the first place. It requires excavating those parts of myself I believed alien and unspeakable and then identifying the narratives that assigned those values. This is the sort of work that personal narrative can do—it “brings to the surface” the ugly, the fearsome experiences we have allowed to recede from view. Silence often comes easier, but it can also normalize the conditions that induced it. It makes us complicit in our own isolation, and it continues to ignore that people “like me” could ever exist.

To close, then, I wish to invoke someone whose courage inspires me to write, whose work reminds us that social change is a tireless project—that it is collective and also inescapably personal. From the unfinished dissertation of Gloria Anzaldúa, who left this world too early, with a wealth of generative thought and provocations: “May we do work that matters. Vale la pena, it’s worth the pain.” (Luz En Lo Oscuro 22).
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V. Jo Hsu  
The Pennsylvania State University

EDUCATION
- Ph.D. in English Rhetoric and Composition, Pennsylvania State University, 2016
- M.F.A. in Creative Writing, Pennsylvania State University, Fiction, 2012
- B.A. in English (with honors), Visual and Dramatic Arts, Rice University, 2010 Summa cum laude

SELECTED AWARDS AND DISTINCTIONS
- Predoctoral Fellow, Center for Humanities and Information, Pennsylvania State University, 2015-2016
- Nomination, The Pushcart Prize, for “The Story of Us,” 2012
- Jacob K. Javits Fellow, United States Department of Education, 2010-2015

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Rhetoric and Composition

Fiction
  http://www.breakwaterreview.com/8/strong-woman/
  http://www.tingemagazine.org/flashpoint/

Nonfiction

SELECTED PRESENTATIONS
- Rhetoric Society of America Conference, Summer 2016: Atlanta, GA  
  “A Single Life Thrice: The Negotiated Self in Richard Rodriguez’s Autobiographical Trilogy”
- Center for Humanities and Information, Spring 2016: Pennsylvania State University  
  “Exceeding Evidence: Personal Writing as the Negotiation of Identity.”
- Rhetoric Society of America Conference, Summer 2014: San Antonio, TX  
  “Composing a Boundless Self: Breaking Binaries and Borders by Speaking our Shame”
- Center for Democratic Deliberation Colloquium, October, 2013: State College, PA  
  “Motivating the Movement: Occupy Wall Street and Kenneth Burke’s Occupation”