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# Forum

PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles in previous issues or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. The editor reserves the right to reject or edit Forum contributions and offers the authors discussed an opportunity to reply to the letters published. Occasionally the Forum contains letters on topics of broad interest written and submitted at the editor's request. The journal omits titles before persons' names, discourages footnotes, and regrets that it cannot consider any letter of more than one thousand words. Letters should be addressed to PMLA Forum, Modern Language Association, 10 Astor Place, New York, NY 10003-6981.

**T**WENTY-SIX readers of *PMLA* responded to a call for comments on the place, nature, or limits (if any) of the personal in scholarship. The statements are arranged in two sections: The Inevitability of the Personal and Problems with Personal Criticism. A list of contributors follows:

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## The Inevitability of the Personal

The self permeates reading. The self therefore permeates criticism, theory, and scholarship. It takes no great talent as a reader to interpret scholarly essays in terms of the author's strivings, yearnings, rivalries, or grandstandings. A reader attuned to the crosscurrents of our profession can easily sniff out the quest for tenure, raise, or offer, spot toadying, or detect the oblique sarcasms of scholarly controversy. Writing expresses situation. Writing expresses personality. *Le style c'est l'homme même*. The personal is there, both in the writing and in the reading. Why suppress it? Our nineteenth-century forerunners didn't: Goethe, Hazlitt, Emerson, Thoreau, Arnold, Sainte-Beuve, France.

Why did we start masking the self? I think we were following a scientific ideal, perhaps under the influence of German scholarship. We were conforming to

a nineteenth-century worldview in which an “objective” world of facts and laws was reliable and mattered more than the unpredictable, incomprehensible, “subjective” world of self. Perhaps we needed to make literary studies respectable, objective, and scientific. We were to make “a contribution to knowledge.” That was plausible when literary scholarship favored philology, bibliography, and archaeology, endeavors in which one can make the self less visible. Today, however, we would not say so readily that the compiler of a Keats concordance, the editor of a scholarly text of Beckett, or the discoverer of a lost poem by Shakespeare is contributing to objective knowledge. We understand that they are providing resources for human beings to use. They are engaged in human transactions. Would anyone suggest that a Bowers, a Saintsbury, or a Harbage did not have a personal style and preoccupations that affected his work?

In this postmodern age, we are rightly skeptical about claims to objectivity. I am, you are, a person who walks, talks, works, makes love, worries about salary or tenure, all with a certain personal style, and incidentally writes essays for scholarly journals. If a hundred years of psychoanalysis have taught us anything, it is that self—identity—colors everything we do, even the writing of abstruse theoretical essays. As Freud said, “No mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his finger-tips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore.” In this era of the disappeared subject and cultural determinism, we still sign our essays, list them in our bibliographies, and express our outrage at plagiarism or failure to acknowledge sources.

We are, willy-nilly, personal. Let’s go with it, then. Let’s enjoy it. Let’s chuck the pretensions to infallibility customary to our profession and have some fun. Is this new trend productive? It may not represent the contribution-to-knowledge model of productivity. But there is another kind of productivity, the writing of things that are pleasures to read. How do you evaluate a personal essay? You evaluate it as you would evaluate any essay, by Pound or Mencken, by Hunt or Ruskin, or even by one of our students.

I ask my students to model their essays on the personal criticism of Updike, Rushdie, or Oates. Try to be a writer, I say. To be sure, we MLA types will probably never write like a Barnes, a Barth, or any of the many other “creative writers” who have written superb—and personal—criticism. It would be good for our and our students’ souls to try, though, and our readers, those precious few, could probably stand it too. Why now? Could it be that a growing number of academic critics are realizing that academic writing about literature or “culture” has lost political support by cutting itself loose from the concerns

of ordinary people? There in the back of the bus are some nonacademics who might just support the NEH, the NEA, tenure, or better salaries for teachers—if they could figure out how our essays matter. In this harsh time, could we be returning to the battle cry of another harsh time, the sixties? To *relevance*?

Why not be personal then, even perhaps literary? It is, after all, precisely our postmodern understanding that we are embedded in a political culture, that we cannot pretend to objectivity, that encourages us—some of us—to try to write in a more personal vein. If we are involved in what we write, let’s enjoy it. Let’s roll around in self-hood, play with it, fly it from the masthead for all to see. Be creative, have fun—even in the pages of *PMLA*. Wouldn’t that be something!

NORMAN N. HOLLAND  
*University of Florida*

In a footnote to his “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity” (1956), Ralph Ellison argues that “while objectively a social reality, the work of art is, in its genesis, a projection of a deeply personal process, and any approach that ignores the personal at the expense of the social is necessarily incomplete.” Although we literary scholars tend to believe that criticism is not subject to the kinds of analysis we apply to creative works, the meanings of our texts are produced by the conscious social concerns and unconscious personal desires, the ideological positions and unacknowledged longings, of us and of the writers we discuss. Scholarly prose, like imaginative literature, is inevitably personal. Combined with social, political, and individual beliefs and commitments, personal desire determines intellectual curiosity and discursive style. Even the topics scholars select to write about are displaced ways of writing about the self. Like the works we read, our subjectivity is discursive. And like creative writers, we literary scholars use narratives to fashion our selves, our disciplines, and our communities. Literary criticism is instructive not simply because it tells about a work and the work’s author and culture but also because in mediating the intentions and desires of the author and the critic, criticism helps readers to recognize their own intentions and desires.

When we invoke objectivity and universality, we appeal to power and mystify our personal investments so as to speak for everyone. In doing so, we silence those who cannot make similar appeals. When the literature we studied and taught was defined by Eurocentric men, those who were not part of this group were forced to mimic those who were or to refrain from speaking.

I know much about this process. I seldom spoke in classes in high school, college, and graduate school, where I was usually the only student of color. When it was time for me to write my PhD thesis, "The Act of Rebelious Creation: The Novels of Richard Wright," I had to create a voice for myself that didn't mimic somebody else and that expressed what I thought and felt. Wright's novels provided a site for me to occupy as I struggled to create myself as a fledgling scholar. With every scholarly project, I repeat a similar process of re-creation.

By foregrounding the subjectivity of all expression, what we call postmodernism undoubtedly accentuates the opportunities for expressing the personal. Postmodern skepticism has also partly undermined meta- and master discourses, which in the West were articulations of white patriarchal law masked as common sense, positivist science, and universal truth. If nothing else, the possibility of a multitude of personal expressions enables those who were silenced to speak. Some might contend that all we have to show for our troubled skepticism is a babble that invites anarchy. But I would argue that exchange among multiple viewpoints is a new and improved model of democracy, though it is vulnerable to the dominant power, which wants to reinstall the master narratives.

We literary scholars can help our students see how an ever-expanding plurality of personal and cultural narratives determines all our identities. This is cause for celebration, not for anxiety and nostalgia. By making personal sites public and by realizing that there's no boundary between our scholarship and our political commitments, we can give meaning and voice to those identities.

CLAUDIA TATE  
*George Washington University*

The personal is part of everything done by human beings, every business enterprise, scientific work, literary study—part of just plain living and even survival. An innovative scholar may convince others intellectually, ideologically, methodologically, but the personal reasons



Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945), *Self-Portrait, Drawing*, 1933, charcoal on brown laid Ingres paper, 18¾" × 25" (47.7 × 63.5 cm). ©1996 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington. Rosenwald Collection.

behind the formation of a theory or the pursuit of an obsessive topic should not be forgotten. The originality of a theoretical framework derives from the particular perspective of its creator in ways that may be only vaguely known, even by the scholar in question. By this means the personal becomes universal.

To cast the personal as solipsistic would, however, be going too far. Objectivity must be allowed as part of the personal. "Pure" subjectivism must be tempered by the universals of human existence, which include notions of an objective reality, of a generally accepted sense of order (even in the midst of chaos). There are identifiable points between the extremes of subjectivity and objectivity, as between free will and determinism.

In my field, Chicano studies and, more specifically, Chicano literature, the common ground between human universals and Chicano ethnic specificity must be found. At the same time, the need to demythify past stereotypes is of paramount personal and general importance. Advocacy scholarship that sets the record straight by focusing on the forgotten, the neglected, the marginalized requires hard work, but it is a duty, a necessity. Necessity drives the personal. The challenging of old notions generates fear in some who wish to maintain the status quo, which itself was bizarre and threatening originally. The concrete advances of more than a generation of serious Chicano

scholarship are not yet generally recognized. Much remains to be accomplished in Chicano literature and personal scholarship.

By invoking Chicano ethnic specificity in literature, by calling attention to a particular, personal form of scholarship to study a Chicano culture marked by a distinctive sociopolitical poetics, I do not deny objective, universal aesthetic criteria. Magnitude, unity, and harmony in scholarship, as in art, are still basics. Acuity, imaginative creativity, absorbing illumination, innovation, compelling arguments, in-depth substantiation, and precision and clarity remain fundamental criteria for literature and scholarship.

ARTHUR RAMIREZ  
*Sonoma State University*

The place of the personal in scholarship? This is a rhetorical question because it hardly requires an answer. Scholarship *is* personal. The will to know, which is at the base of all scholarship, is located not only between the ears but equally under the sternum and in the crotch. Intellectual curiosity, love, and desire are intimately intermingled in our work as scholars. As I see it, the real question is when and how the personal should be given expression in the scholarly text. It is hard to legislate on this matter or to generalize. We are responsible for understanding our own motivations, and the extent to which we make them explicit will be closely connected with how academically acceptable we perceive them to be, the scholarly genre we adopt, the mode of publication, our perceived audience, and, of course, who we are.

I have grappled with the question of the personal in scholarship as a graduate student writing a dissertation-biography on the life and literary career of Bret Harte. This project has taught me how personal are the origins of all scholarship yet how difficult it is to give direct expression to one's motivations even in talking about one's writing. When my colleagues have asked, "Why Bret Harte?" I have answered in a variety of innocuous and sensible ways: "He needs to be reassessed"; "There hasn't been a scholarly biography on him in over sixty years"; "He is the first American author-celebrity, a pioneer in raising the status of authorship in America, the 'father of the local-color short story,'" and so on. These explanations do not fully explain why I have spent the last three years trying to decipher thousands of Harte's letters in poorly lit reading rooms, spooling through miles of microfilm, and traveling to the far corners of the world to seek out houses and neighborhoods that often turn out to have disappeared long ago. It is my answer to my friends that reveals the main reason for my interest. I tell

them that when I first read "Tennessee's Partner," I sensed a strong homoerotic undercurrent in Harte's writing and that the intuition was strengthened by further reading of his works and seemed to have a bearing on his life as well. I felt that a detailed historical examination of Harte's life and writings would contribute to our understanding of the formation, nature, and variety of male sexual identity in the nineteenth century, as well as being the kind of gay-affirmative work I wanted to engage in.

I have written the book I wanted to write, yet it is free of any expressions of my personal motivations for writing it. The lengthy introduction presents a detailed, "objective," and, I think, convincing case for reexamining Harte but says nothing about my theories on Harte's sexuality, presented in the body of the work, or about my (real) reasons for choosing the subject. My self-censorship is based on a fear of being perceived as unscholarly if I aver a "personal" interest in my topic. This fear is not unwarranted. One of my two (straight) supervisors expressed no concern about my hypothesis until he discovered that I was gay. Then he felt called on to remind me that a doctoral dissertation was neither the time nor the place for personal quests or "crusading." He was right, of course. I think my reticence about my motives made for a better dissertation and was necessary for the best communication with my primary readers (my dissertation committee). After all, the desire to be understood should be paramount when one considers whether or not to get personal.

AXEL NISSEN  
*University of Oslo*

It is frequently said that there has been a "proliferation" of personal narratives by scholars. The point of announcing a "proliferation" is generally to sound an alarm. I hear the insistent ring of this "personal" alarm, but I am not convinced that "personal criticism" is in fact a new phenomenon.

Not that there aren't a lot of personal narratives in the criticism of the last decade. Indeed, there are. I myself have perpetrated a number of them. And I have avidly read a good number of others. But I am not sure that this is something new.

Snideness aside (and I'm afraid there is something about this forum or this topic or both that predisposes me to self-conscious snottiness), I believe that literary scholarship has always been replete with personal narratives. To my knowledge, the inclusion of personal narratives has always been the norm. This can be clearly seen in prefaces, acknowledgments, dedications, footnotes. It can also be seen, albeit less clearly, in

arguments, examples, paraphrases, juxtapositions, interpretations, and evaluations.

Scholars conventionally tell us of personal affects and connections in prefaces and other casual asides. The personal is sufficiently entangled with the work to oblige mention in the published text, if only on the edge of it. Scholars particularly wedded to the rhetorical conventions that legitimate scholarship have written and read as if the personal narratives that edge the scholarly text could be cordoned off, segregated from the scholarship proper. But it has been the pleasure of other scholars to speculate endlessly on the connection between the knowledge in the main text and the relations glimpsed in dedication, footnote, and so on. Most of the time, we do this speculating casually, in conversation or in reverie. But some of the time, we do it formally, in class, or in colloquium, or in our writing, as we turn to metacriticism or the history of criticism.

In the body of the scholarly text, certain moments of rhetorical intensity—insistent repetitions, oddly resonant words or examples, moments where the argument seems unnecessarily contorted—signal points where the personal is, willy-nilly, attempting to narrate itself. Many scholars have speculated endlessly on these revelations, too. And while the majority of that speculation looks like gossip, some of it announces itself as critical theory or the history of criticism.

I find it pretty much impossible to imagine literary scholarship unmarked by personal narrative. So, to my mind, the question cannot possibly be, Should we get personal in our scholarship? A plausible question might be, Are there more or less productive ways of getting personal? Since I've wasted so many of my allotted thousand words in needless and surely counterproductive snideness (I can only wonder what insufficiently recognized personal narrative has been distorting this effort), I have to give this question short shrift. But I presume this won't be the last time MLA members talk about this subject. It might even be said that it's almost all we ever talk about.

What worries me is not scholarship that seems narrowly personal but rather scholarship where the personal does not recognize itself as such and thus passes for the universal. A classic example of the latter is readings of literature that lyrically speak male heterosexual desire without noticing that such a stance is personal, assuming an unmarked, universal reader. Now, personally, I kind of like male heterosexual desire (the narrative risks getting excessively personal here), but I find it troubling when it can't recognize its boundaries and takes itself for the human.

My last example caused me a certain concern about whether I was being "excessively personal." Although I

was being coy and playful, this is, for me also, a serious concern. My personal name for this excess is narcissism. When writing and reading criticism, I find myself worrying about the tempting pleasures of talking about oneself. As someone who explicitly includes personal narrative within the scholarly text, I'm always asking myself, Are you saying this because you enjoy talking about yourself or because it is intrinsic to the point you're trying to make? (When I get self-conscious about the danger of narcissism, I start talking to myself in the second person.)

In my self-censoring impulse here, I join those who complain about how the recent proliferation of personal criticism represents a form of self-indulgence. Despite my snideness, I don't wholly disagree with this contemporary moralism. But I'd rather articulate the danger as double, a danger not only of too much but also of too little.

Personal narrative that spins off in details whose only purpose seems to be autobiographical completeness (the full exposition of the self), in which the life takes on a life of its own, makes us lose sight of the hinges where knowledge touches life story. To my mind, this fall into autobiographical excess is the near counterpart of relegating the personal to the dedication or preface. Both excesses contribute to our failure to recognize the extent to which knowledge is entangled in life. Attempting to steer between these two dangers, I'm headed for a writing where it would be literally impossible to separate gossip from scholarship.

JANE GALLOP

*University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee*

Checking my e-mail the other day, I was startled to find an unsolicited discussion-list message from a colleague about a recent campus visit by Alicia Ostriker, who had come to Emory to read and discuss her book *The Nakedness of the Fathers*. Wondering whether any of the rest of us had gone (and feigning surprise at such public displays of prurience), the writer of the message said that he, for one, had had quite enough of naked fathers; Nancy Miller had seen to that. Naked bodies, it appeared, were unseemly academic subjects, particularly when the bodies in question were fathers'.

Bodies are anything but absent from academic discourse these days, even if they are mainly theorized bodies. Yet that there are links between the bodies we theorize about and the ones we live with in the flesh is one of the premises of many contemporary critical practices, including feminist, gay and lesbian, queer, postcolonial, African American, ethnic, and cultural studies.

So why the fuss? It is not, I submit, about the body at all. The anxiety of offended propriety here is a response to the display of a personal relation: a relation between a writing I and a written-about you that is private, perhaps even intimate, and thus “naked” in the sense of being vulnerable to betrayal (of confidence), abuse (of trust), and exploitation (of commodification). This is an anxiety I share. To write about my father is to appropriate him as material for *my* story, not his. It is a form of expropriation. At the same time, it is a gesture of personal and professional integrity. For in writing about my father, I expose the matrix of affective pulls, loyalties, commitments, and accountabilities that forms a bedrock of knowledge and insight for us all.

Such exposures of the private self that informs the public voice are not new, a fad of identity politics. They have been much honored in the decorum of scholarship. One could even say that the ritualized expressions of gratitude and debt—acknowledgments, dedications, epigraphs, anecdotal inserts in prefatory notes and afterwords, and the like—virtually constitute a genre.

Reading acknowledgments affords me a predictable pleasure not devoid of a touch of guilt. As I think that I should immediately engage the text on intellectual grounds, I am initially drawn, irresistibly, to its margins. This is where the story, for me, begins. Sometimes this is where the deeper motives for the work are most clearly, if inadvertently, revealed. Moreover, if the integrity of knowledge production rests in part on our capacity for critical self-reflection, the acknowledgments and analogous apparatus are an integral part of the scholarly project. It is here that the material grounds of learning are first mapped. In the ritual thank-yous to family, partners, and friends, to colleagues and institutions, the vital intersections between the life of the mind, the realities of work, and our daily lives in human communities become visible in ways that render palpable the historical contingencies of knowledge.

At times, this history is a record of gender patterns and their shifts. The conventional thank-you to the wife “without whom . . .” becomes an acknowledgment of John, who “didn’t wash my socks but supported me intellectually.” Who is mentioned, who is not—spouses, lovers, children, networks of friends, the women and men who helped with the technical production—are a record, however faint, of the circumstances and mind-sets that brought forth this work. For example, the short prefatory note and the brief afterword in Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis* indicate that this book was “written between May 1942 and April 1945” in Istanbul, largely from memory without the aid of a “well-stocked library of European literature.” The envoi, in which Auerbach dedicates his

work to “those of my friends from the past who survived” and to those “whose love for our Western civilization has survived undarkened,” establishes this study not only as a monument to the civilization whose passing the author fears but also as a love letter to those whose culture and lives have been destroyed or forever altered.

The personal frame in which our scholarly work is embedded—the acknowledgments and dedications, the stories told in forewords and afterwords—is much more than a set of personal anecdotes. Reading this material therefore yields much more than the satisfaction of prurient curiosity. Indeed, this frame is a vital and valid window through which to review the integrity of our scholarship. Here the lines that converge to produce authorship are drawn, and here we acknowledge the larger communities to whom, in our work, we are responsible and accountable.

ANGELIKA BAMMER  
Emory University

When I write academic prose, I use the first person, and I instruct my students to do the same. The principle that researchers should acknowledge their participation in their work is an outgrowth of a humanistic approach to linguistic analysis. In my book *Talking Voices* (Cambridge UP, 1989), I see everyday conversation as made up of linguistic strategies that are usually thought quintessentially literary—what I call “involvement strategies” such as repetition, dialogue, details, and the use of narrative. Understanding discourse is not a passive act of decoding but a creative act of imagining a scene (composed of people engaged in culturally recognizable activities) within which the ideas being talked about have meaning. The listener’s active participation in sense making both results from and creates interpersonal involvement. For researchers to deny their involvement in their interpreting of discourse would be a logical and ethical violation of this framework.

The typical methodology for scholarship in my branch of discourse analysis (known as interactional sociolinguistics, because we analyze the discourse of human interaction) is to tape-record and transcribe naturally occurring discourse, to analyze it in ways not unlike those used for literature (looking for recurrent patterns of specific linguistic forms), and to present an exegesis supported by excerpts from the transcript. In interactional sociolinguistics, it is common for the researcher to be a natural participant in the interactions under study. This is a variation on the staple of anthropological method in which the researcher participates in order to observe. I encourage students to take their tape recorders with

them and to record (openly and with permission) dinner-table conversations and other interactions in which they take part.

Having participated in an interaction affords the researcher insight into its context that is essential to understanding the interaction. Without such insight, much of the meaning would be opaque, since conversationalists routinely refer to past incidents, use in-group language, and are motivated by emotions sparked by prior interactions. Moreover, the history and nuances of speakers' relationships with one another inform every utterance.

This method introduces the risk—indeed, the certainty—of bias: the lack of objectivity everyone necessarily brings to interactions. But objectivity in the analysis of interactions is impossible anyway. Whether they took part in the interaction or not, researchers identify with one or another speaker, are put off or charmed by the styles of participants. This one reminds you of a cousin you adore; that one sounds like a neighbor you despise. Researchers are human beings, not atomic particles or chemical elements.

Mary Catherine Bateson points out in *With a Daughter's Eye* (Morrow, 1984) that analysts of human behavior should pursue not objectivity but disciplined subjectivity. The researcher must be alert to biases and try to correct for them. Scholars in my field do this by questioning first interpretations, looking for patterns beyond the ones that appear initially, and checking interpretations with a number of different sources: participants, other speakers of similar and different backgrounds, and other researchers. The writer who believes in the possibility of objectivity will not be on the lookout for bias and will do nothing to correct for it, thereby increasing the likelihood that the analysis will be compromised by it.

Another danger of claiming objectivity rather than acknowledging and correcting for subjectivity is that scholars who don't reveal their participation in interactions they analyze risk the appearance of hiding it. "Following is an exchange that occurred between a professor and a student," I have read in articles in my field. The speakers are identified as "A" and "B." The reader is not told that the professor, A (of course the professor is A and the student B), is the author. Yet that knowledge is crucial to contextualizing the author's interpretation. Furthermore, the impersonal designations A and B are another means of constructing a false objectivity. They obscure the fact that human interaction is being analyzed, and they interfere with the reader's understanding. The letters replace what in the author's mind are names and voices and personas that are the basis for understanding the discourse. Readers, given only initials, are

left to scramble for understanding by imagining people in place of letters.

Avoiding self-reference by using the third person also results in the depersonalization of knowledge. Knowledge and understanding do not occur in abstract isolation. They always and only occur among people. In *Our Own Metaphor* (Knopf, 1972), Bateson explains that when she had to report the results of a conference, she approached the task as if writing a novel, using literary techniques to capture the emotional elements of human interaction that led to conferees' creation and communication of ideas. She notes that in standard conference proceedings, in which the emotion is edited out, the ideas cannot be fully understood because they are taken out of their human context. In a similar spirit, Nigel Gilbert and Michael Mulkey, in *Opening Pandora's Box* (Cambridge UP, 1984), show that scientific insight occurs in an atmosphere of intense emotional excitement that is excluded and denied in scientific writing.

A therapist friend once commented that someone denying emotions and motives is not trying to understand them. In a parallel fashion, denying that scholarship is a personal endeavor entails a failure to understand and correct for the unavoidable bias that human beings bring to all their enterprises.

DEBORAH TANNEN  
Georgetown University

The invitation to participate in this Forum couldn't have been more timely. I'd just completed a book project in which I'd found myself, somewhat to my surprise, repeatedly turning to personal narrative techniques in the introductory chapter to encapsulate the evolution of my argument and methodologies. However, the first thought that sprang to my mind at the request that I write about academic uses of the personal was how amused some of my graduate students might be, since I have apparently garnered a reputation among some of them for keeping the "personal me" at a distance, however "personally engaged" I've been in their work and careers. I'll return to the complexities that attend the personal in teacher-student relations, but I begin with this vignette because I suspect it touches on a paradox intrinsic to this Forum: not only is one person's sense of the "personal" never the same as the next person's, but the fiction of intimacy established by the recourse to the personal, in scholarship or the classroom, always involves a verbal performance—one that, however truthful, inevitably occurs within implicit quotation marks.

Two examples from my recent book illustrate these points. The introduction includes a long section in which

I cast an autobiographical eye on the many titles and subtitles that I tried on for size and discarded over the years in my search for the ineffable combination of words to sum up the scope of the project. Although I was aware that admitting to my inability to name the project for years might invite criticism that I still hadn't succeeded in doing so, I suspected there would be some heuristic value in laying bare the slow evolution, the false starts, the surprising shifts, through which any piece of scholarship proceeds. Looking back at the quasi-confessional mode of this section, however, I now see that its apparent openness masks a strategic purpose, one I perhaps share with other scholars who at times find the more abstract heights of academic jargon intimidating. For the fact is that in my experience the personal voice has become a honed praxis that allows me to "speak theoretically" without having to "speak theory" and thus having to worry whether, in speaking theory, I'm somehow doing it inadequately or insufficiently. Since knowledge is the name of the game in our profession and since the display of one's theoretical expertise and verbal facility in currently popular fields is an outward sign, however misplaced, of academic worth and marketability, outright admissions of ignorance ("I don't know") or of noncomprehension ("I don't understand") are not only rare but, when pronounced, often an occasion for embarrassment. "Getting personal" provides a provisional counter to this posturing, creating a relatively safe space in which to own the limits of one's understanding, as well as to engage a level of theoretical speculation to which the language of high theory is not the sole means of access.

Similarly, the language of autobiography also frames what, paradoxically, is the most theoretical aspect of the introduction: a personal meditation on the power that extended narrative fictions and techniques of close reading have always held for me, in an age of postmodern pastiche and cultural criticism that has increasingly rendered such methods and desires unfashionable, quaint, even reactionary. In today's academic climate, simply arguing for a return to close reading might be to court instant dismissal (perhaps rightly so). I attempt to counter this reaction by drawing on the personal: contextualizing the relation of such nostalgic desires to the more broadly ranging cultural criticism that I also increasingly find myself writing, musing about whether such a defense is in fact a way of saying farewell to a critical practice that has long occupied my imagination.

While the proliferation of autobiographical narratives by scholars is a significant development, the role that the personal plays in pedagogy is equally important. Hence I will conclude by considering some connections between the practice of personal criticism in scholarly writing

and the demands placed on the personal as a dynamic mode of instruction, particularly in graduate education. As the rigid hierarchies policing student-teacher relations have begun to lessen in many graduate programs and as we teachers have come to treat our graduate students more as peers—a development that reflects the questioning of such hierarchies by feminist, minority, and poststructuralist studies—many professors find themselves asked not only to give more and more of their "personal" time but also to become, in effect, "persons" joined in a communal enterprise to other persons. Establishing a new, more productive method of learning and mentoring on the basis of the personal should not, however, be confused with, or become a mandate for, establishing intimate relationships in which one's personal life is necessarily open to public scrutiny. Indeed, the most effective way we teachers and professors can use the personal in graduate instruction is to make available for scrutiny the evolution and tentativeness of our thoughts—in other words, to make visible the processes by which we arrive at ideas in our teaching methods and in our commentary on students' work. The most valuable way we can personalize, hence humanize, the teacher-student relationship, I suspect, is not to make our lives an open book but something altogether more self-exposing: to offer up our thought processes as a kind of open text from which students can learn that it is all right to say, "I don't know," "I don't understand," "Help me out." Indeed, the hardest task I've faced as a teacher is to convince graduate students that I don't always have a hidden agenda, that the openness of a seminar topic may reflect my genuine lack of an answer or a solution.

Like the deployment of the autobiographical in scholarly writing, the use of the personal as a pedagogical method is a performance, but one that may make a difference in efforts to forge new avenues of thinking about and transmitting knowledge. If through our example we teachers can, without forfeiting all we *do* know, begin to break down the hierarchy that assumes we always know more, and know better, than our students, we may help to dissolve the pernicious boundary between "insiders" and "outsiders" that too often attends scholarly discourse and that may in part account for the increased use of the personal voice by some academics as a specific strategy to "speak theoretically" without "speaking theory." This achievement could turn the fear of exclusion into a means of inclusion and thus into a productive arena characterized by continuing discussions rather than by critical one-upmanship. While the word *humanistic* has fallen from general academic use in this poststructuralist era, the word *humane* still encapsulates a quality that scholars and scholarship, teachers and students,

might well emulate; and this, perhaps, is the most elusive but most desired goal of those who write, practice, and perform the personal as a mode of critical perception.

JOSEPH A. BOONE  
*University of Southern California*

The topic of this Forum presumes that experience is personal and is not located within the larger movements of history and that individuals do not make history. This notion of the personal suggests that scholarship and intellectual production are not as immediately personal gestures as they are public ones. The formulation that interests me then is locating myself in history and not so much writing the personal into scholarship. I would reframe the topic around the questions of locating one's subject position and investigating the way that this position informs what one writes and teaches and the stands one takes on the curriculum we have inherited, on the material we teach, and on political issues.

Those dominant in society often do not need to locate themselves in history, which assumes their presence. The idea of the objective academic or scholar has existed to maintain a hierarchy. Just as whiteness and masculinity remain unmarked and normalized race and gender positions, the notion of academic neutrality, of distance from the academic material, maintains the hegemony of white male upper-class heterosexual interests.

As African Americans, Caribbeans, women, and leftists (some of the groups to which I belong) entered the academy, we did not have the luxury or the benefit of remaining unmarked. In fact, identifying ourselves and claiming our interests were necessary since we were already located and named by the dominant culture. Putting ourselves in our projects is central to the scholarship that some of us do.

The organizing principle of my book *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (London: Routledge, 1994) is the notion of "migratory subjectivity," a metaphor that speaks to my identity and to the multiple locations in which Afro-Caribbean and African American subjectivity is formed, reconstituted, and relocated. Migration is a way to think through the subjectivity of identity, of literary creativity, and of the spaces we inhabit temporarily. The liberation of the subject from fixity in the wake of postmodernism is a benefit, one case when larger theoretical concerns confront practical experiences. In a social science discussion of migration, the various movements of my family are but statistics in an enterprise much bigger than we are. And it is there that my personal experience touches on and becomes part of the fabric of those larger theoretical concerns.

Further, my becoming a professor did not happen by chance or by my will and diligence alone. Rather, it is the product of generations of strugglers, who made sure that I had the space and the wherewithal to do my work and to join the now recognizable tradition of black women's critical scholarship. I can be true to my work only if that history is central to it.

Not every scholarly endeavor is perforce loaded with individual experience, but there are some projects and contexts in which locating oneself in history as an active subject is a necessity. Seeing myself as located in history and with the potential that we all have to make history allows me to bring my lived experience squarely into the space of academic work, which pretends to be objective and disembodied but in reality is grounded in experience.

CAROLE BOYCE DAVIES  
*State University of New York, Binghamton*

In the days before women's and "minority" literature, when I went to graduate school, the place, nature, and (possible) limits of the personal in scholarship were not issues debated in the circles in which I moved. We read Thoreau's *Walden*, Whitman's "Song of Myself," and other canonical masterpieces and valued them for their "universality." By the time I joined the professorial ranks, the literary landscape had shifted drastically, and Thoreau and Whitman were joined in many classrooms and on the pages of some books and journals by then noncanonical figures like Frederick Douglass, Emily Dickinson, and Harriet Jacobs. These changes came about in the wake of a revolution in education that carried people like me—women of all kinds and men who did not belong to the dominant group—into academe as teachers and students. We set about challenging worship of universality in human experiences, suggesting instead the foregrounding and embrace of difference as a category of analysis. One's perspectives on the major aspects of life, we posit, are influenced by one's identity. Factors like race, gender, religion, class, and sexual preference make a difference in how each of us interprets experience.

Before the revolution, the production of knowledge was controlled by men of the dominant culture, who spoke for all others. The introduction of individual group differences as a significant analytic category threatened the status quo and led to the interrogation of the personal in teaching and scholarship. Upholders of the canon invoked the virtues of disinterested objectivity; those who spoke for the other side insisted that differences cannot be wished away and that their presence makes a fiction of pretensions to universal intellectual objectivity. Having long ago decided that truth, like beauty, resides in the

eye of the beholder, I place my loyalties with those who privilege difference in this debate.

As a teacher and scholar I constantly examine the beliefs that I bring to my classroom and to my writing. Integrity demands that I take my aims in both activities seriously. I embrace the production and dissemination of knowledge that enriches our understanding of the whole human condition and that includes a diversity of opinions embedded in a variety of collective and personal histories. This knowledge is broad-based and inclusive.

When I consider the history of black people in America, I wonder how a slave's thoughts at Walden Pond would have differed from Thoreau's or how a slave would have responded to Whitman's song of himself. We know that the sentiments of one former slave about the Fourth of July celebration were decidedly not those of his white New England friends. In the tradition of the personal as Thoreau and Whitman conceived it, Frederick Douglass delivered a powerful abolitionist speech, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" to a full house of antislavery whites in Rochester, New York, on 4 July 1852. "I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary . . .," said Douglass, invoking the personal but meaning all people of his race. "This Fourth [of] July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn." Instead of gratitude for the invitation to speak, he asks, "Do you mean, citizens, to mock me by asking me to speak today?" Who other than a former slave could have recognized the irony of inviting a former slave to participate in celebrating the freedom and liberty of whites while the majority of black people were still slaves? Only the slave could know what it felt like to be a slave, and the most powerful representation of those feelings resided in a passionate personal presentation by a former slave.

The founders of the black intellectual tradition found it crucial to use the personal to gain access to the rights of citizenship in this nation. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slaves began their search for freedom by establishing their selfhood through literacy, telling the stories of their experiences. Placed next to accounts of American slavery by black and white historians far removed from the time and context of slavery, the voices of the slaves are compelling testimony to the inhumanity of that brutal system.

As late-twentieth-century students grapple with racial, cultural, and other forms of diversity in their daily lives and prepare to enter a global village of many tongues and cultures, the personal narrative, in its many ways of commingling the personal, the political, and the scholarly, is one of the most effective instruments for teaching history, literature, and citizenship. As a black academic feminist who has had the enormous good fortune to wit-

ness and participate in movements that bring the histories and cultures of diverse women and men of color to the intellectual enterprise, I am convinced that the personal voice, used seriously and responsibly, has an important role to play in the education of young people.

NELLIE Y. MCKAY

*University of Wisconsin, Madison*

We must free ourselves from the comfortable practice, fashionable since the late 1920s, of defining the critic's mission as that of a research scientist. Hence, we might avoid the somewhat arbitrary tendency to treat a text as objective and separate from the creative process that informs it. For example, what are the complementary differences among the highly varied work by Houston Baker, Skip Gates, Joyce Joyce, and me? Scholars who have looked at Baker's *Journey Back* (1980), Gates's *Signifying Monkey* (1988), Joyce's *Warriors, Conjurers, and Priests* (1994), and my *Southern Trace of Black Critical Theory* (1991) have in turn read a cultural critic in his finest, most authentic hour; observed a closet structuralist impose a poststructuralist theory on a folk tradition; responded to an activist's claim that an American scholar must be accountable to the African American people; and followed a black southernist's mischievous search for a disturbing racial trace among Ivy League elites who only happen to be of color.

Among these critics, only Gates—who has traveled from Yale and Cambridge to Cornell, Duke, and Harvard—has neither studied nor worked at a state university. Baker graduated from Howard when it still educated the committed black elite during the fiery days of the civil rights movement, and then he taught at Virginia long before his years at the University of Pennsylvania. Joyce, who graduated from Valdosta State University in south Georgia, became in 1979 one of the first three African Americans to earn PhDs in English from the University of Georgia. I was one of ten blacks to integrate Rocky Mount High School (NC) in 1963, and I graduated in 1970 from the historically black North Carolina Central University and defended my doctoral dissertation at Brown University in 1973. So whose personal text should African American theory serve?

In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Frederick Douglass writes: "I already saw myself wielding my pen, as well as my voice, in the great work of renovating the public mind and building up a public sentiment which should at least, send slavery and oppression to the grave, and restore to 'liberty and the pursuit of happiness' the people with whom I had suffered, both as a slave and as a free-man" ([U of Illinois P, 1987] 240). Douglass's personal

writing is historical testimony, subsuming a powerful sacramental vision. Douglass would revise the American Declaration of Independence, approved by the Continental Congress on 4 July 1776, into the Emancipation Proclamation, of 1 January 1863, and eventually into the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. His fictive contemporary Linda Brent declared in 1861: "'The bill of sale!' Those words struck me like a blow. So I was sold at last! A human being sold in the free city of New York, late in the nineteenth century of the Christian religion. It may hereafter prove a useful document to antiquaries, who are seeking to measure the progress of civilization in the United States" (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* [Harvard UP, 1987] 200). Brent's irony inspires a timely reassessment of America and Americans. Whenever African American literary art has lost the Emancipation Proclamation as the metaphor from which to face existence, the writing has floundered for lack of imaginative power.

Today we are unable to distinguish between lasting quality and hype among African American thinkers. In 1968 Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* skyrocketed to the top of the best-seller charts because mainstream critics could not articulate criteria for African American excellence. What lasting discursive value do the popular deliveries of Cornel West and Michael Dyson or the introspective essays of Bell Hooks have? Ideally, autobiographies are figuratively shaped memories across time that record values of the communal past for the future.

R. BAXTER MILLER  
*University of Georgia*

Five years ago, I started a book-length project on the mother-daughter relationship in Asian American women's literature. Like some other minority feminist critics, I was not happy with the way mother-daughter relationships were characterized by Western feminist critics, such as Nancy Chodorow, Sara Ruddick, and Julia Kristeva. I wanted to see why Western models did not work for my Asian American texts and to present a characterization that was more culturally based and certainly non-Western. About two years into the project, I found it no longer important to challenge Chodorow, Ruddick, Kristeva. Trying to find my ideas through their work had led me away from what interested me: explaining relationships between Asian mothers and Asian American daughters, including my relationship with my American-born daughter and my Asian mother.

What started as a critical text evolved into a personal narrative of my life. Originally, I had not planned to speak of my mother and daughter except perhaps in my

preface or introduction. Once I began to write, however, I was surprised to see how passionate I became in examining my relationships with them and finding out about myself through them. Now I have expanded my personal narrative to my grandmother. In the process, I found my story did not fit the patterns I had identified in Asian American women's literature. To my daughter, I have perhaps resembled the immigrant mothers described by Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan. Yet to my mother, who still lives in Korea, I have been one of those rebellious daughters in Asian American literature. I locate myself between my American daughter and my Asian mother, constantly shifting between the roles of mother and daughter, and now I see that betweenness is a collapsing, miscible, immanent space.

I by no means negate the importance of scholarship. Nor do I proclaim the virtues of the personal style. What has evolved in my project is a trope that combines scholarly usage and my style. Usage is the speech that is current ("the social phenomenon through which a system of communication manifests itself" [Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984) 100]), whereas my style is my personal way of belonging to the subject and translating what I know into what I have become. Combining usage and style in a fluid structure, I begin with scholarship, work through the complexities of Western and non-Western formulas, and finally test these formulas in my relationships.

For minority writers, the personal narrative is a means of resolving public and private identities. For writers from the dominant culture, who have the freedom to move back and forth between private and public realms because these writers' public identities are assured, the personal narrative is more a luxury than a necessity, a convenient mask that does not oppose or subvert the status quo. When Benjamin Franklin presents himself as a boy carrying a loaf of bread on his back in a Philadelphia street or when Henry Adams crosses the boundaries of his chosen society, their public identities are not dislocated; their show of suffering is a strategy for enhancing a public image. In contrast, the minority writer, for whom public and private are one, lacks a public identity and so loses the private one as well. For the minority writer, personal narrative is a means of survival—to use a term of Certeau's, a "tactic" (as opposed to a totalizing strategy) for seizing the initiative of utterance. This tactic risks the writer's marginalized status, but the risk is worth taking because the rewards are liberating. When a mother transmits her story to her daughter, for example, the utterances are an opportunity for the silenced to seek a voice, identity, space.

Ultimately, the personal serves the goals of scholarship by elucidating inaccessible corners of ourselves. My personal narrative in a scholarly book on mothers and daughters in Asian American literature exposes different aspects of the mother-daughter relationship and casts a new light on both the Western and the Asian American models. My personal narrative suggests that we can free ourselves from the errors of established paradigms and norms. The personal questions the boundaries of scholarship and seeks to extend them, benefiting scholarship and scholars alike. Listening to one another's voices is a task that we can anticipate with a certain joy.

JOONOK HUH  
*University of Northern Colorado*

Increasingly, I realize that my scholarship and teaching are grounded in my immigrant existence. An outsider to the culture of the United States, I have consistently problematized students' and even some of my peers' notions of themselves and of Americanness. What motivates my challenges may be an intuitive repulsion against essentialism: I believe that even a scholar from another culture has as much authority to teach and write on American texts as those born in this country. In fact, my position as an "alien" offers me additional insights into American culture, which evolves in relation to what are alleged to be outside influences—"savage" Native Americans in the colonial period; Puritans, with their theology emphasizing human sin and Satanic forces; women and minorities; the Europeans of the Old World. I seek a new synthesis of the American self and its other by teasing long-suppressed "alien" elements out of key representations of Americanness, oftentimes drawing on noncanonical texts. Ultimately, with my American students I seek to study United States culture as a foreign culture.

The oppositional tone of my position goes beyond a mere imitation of the current counterhegemonic trend in academe; it stems from my personal experience as an immigrant. Throughout my academic career in this country, as a graduate student and then as an assistant professor at a teaching college and at a research university, others have defined me by my personal identity in ways that trivialized my professional achievements. They have always seemed to perceive in me what I can best describe as an "apples-and-oranges" incongruity, which has kept me down from the start. In graduate school, as I sarcastically wrote in "Asian Immigrant: Confessions of a Yellow Man" (*English Studies / Culture Studies: Institutionalizing Dissent*), I spent "eight years in the English Program . . . learning when and how to use the definite

article 'THE.'" I was denied a graduate teaching assistantship for years and was hired instead as the "movie man," the unofficial title for the media assistant. I have long suspected that the job was reserved for students from non-English-speaking Asian countries, which my successors proved to be. The job of the movie man involved transporting in the elevator a seven-foot fully enclosed black metal rack installed with a TV monitor and a reel-to-reel projector to rooms specified by professors and TAs. I remained stranded in this job while the majority of graduate students, American and European alike, moved on to better teaching positions in the department. One year I included a short poem, "Sisyphus," in the ritual TA application. The opening of the poem went like this: "Tied to a big black box / Rolling it up, only to roll it down again. . . ."

The "apples-and-oranges" perception worked against my effort to obtain a teaching assistantship because an Asian like me appeared to belong to East Asian or comparative literature programs. It is interesting to note, furthermore, that quite a few comparative literature PhDs who are East Asian took jobs in East Asian programs teaching primarily Asian languages. Comparative literature does not find these job candidates genuine enough either. With my dual research interests in Asian American and Holocaust literature, I continue to suffer from not living up to people's either-or expectation. In conferences on the Holocaust, I often feel misplaced as the only Asian. Nor do I sense welcome among Asian Americanists toward a foreign-born Asian consistently critical of the representation of Asian immigrants in Asian American literature. In fact, a leading Asian American writer once called my article juxtaposing Asian and Asian American cultural attitudes an exercise of comparing apples and oranges. In every instance, the possibility of a hybridized apple-orange that exists on its own merits is cursorily dismissed.

When I completed my graduate studies and received an offer of a tenure-track job, a female colleague commented, "Oh, you got it because you're a minority," an identity I had not taken seriously until then. For this woman, the *Asian* technician who showed films for her classes turned miraculously into a *US minority* when he landed a job. I must admit that in the desperate months of job hunting, I toyed with the idea of becoming an Asian American minority. In the CV I originally prepared for interviews at the 1989 MLA convention in Washington, DC, I Anglicized my name as Sean Ma (an Irish-sounding name is better than an Asian-sounding one), but Wallace Williams, the professor in charge of graduate students' mock job interviews, set me straight. I still recall the scene when he stood outside the English

department office, lifted high in the air the draft of my résumé, which I had just left in his mailbox, and hollered down a long corridor that echoed to this moment, “Sheng-mei, you misspelled your name!” I was thoroughly crushed in front of all those professors and graduate students. When I whispered my motive, he gently said, “You shouldn’t do that.” Because an accident took his life months later, I never had the chance to thank him for teaching me one of the most valuable lessons I learned in graduate school—my name.

Now that I know who I am, an Asian American immigrant whose expertise happens to include Holocaust literature, I fully expect additional Sisyphean experiences in my career. And I intend to make a career out of them.

SHENG-MEI MA  
*Michigan State University*

Like so much frontal nudity on television and in the movies, the personal in a professional context forces us to engage in an intimacy that strikes us as inappropriate and embarrassing. Such intimacy is not becoming to the distant and often cooling professionalism we try to foster in our departments. When personal tragedy and hardship are turned into something resembling art, we all benefit. But while there are many personal stories out there, few are without the raw material of experience that reminds us of both pain and pleasure. These personal stories touch us where we’d like to be touched and move us to create scholarship with the self as a mirror.

Arnold Krupat’s stunning description in *Ethnocriticism* (1992) of the removal of the homeless from Tompkins Square Park and Karla F. C. Holloway’s clandestine epilogue in *Codes of Conduct* (1995) about her sons’ incarceration are examples of how the personal can provide a metanarrative that tells more about the genesis of an intellectual project than the preface allows. The personal is also dangerous to use—the most well-meaning disclosures can get away from us and be used against us. However, it can bridge the gap between scholarship as practiced by each of us and the world beyond the page, so that our work can have meaning outside a tight circuit of scholars and conferences. More important, as we find the academy continually under attack for its intellectual narcissism, the personal can be used as a vehicle to return our work to the original definition of scholarship—work that has the community in mind.

We also have to be aware that discussions of the personal in scholarship reflect on the changing face of department faculties. I find it no coincidence that the nature of the personal in scholarship is being challenged as the academy begins to reap the benefits of a decades-long

agenda of “diversity” on college campuses nationwide. University administrators, colleagues, and students who once believed that “diversity” meant numbers and not voices are struggling with the way in which the increased presence of underrepresented groups is changing the institution. In the face of these developments, there is a cry to return to traditional models. Suddenly gone from our intellectual agenda is the notion that scholarship should bring about great change in the reader’s mind, and instead there is nostalgia for the good old days and a commitment to maintain tradition. The presence of diverse voices has shifted the intellectual terrain. So who should be having the conversation about whether or not the personal is appropriate? What is the cost to our research and teaching if we continually tell students that the personal obstructs the quiet glow of scholarly writing and replaces it with the neon lights of Vegas?

I know of no better way to discuss the personal than to describe my struggles with this genre of writing. While I was in my first year of graduate school, my father died from a self-inflicted wound, and suddenly my academic life was overshadowed by the threat of the personal. No longer able to live in anonymity, I felt marked by death and shadowed by the opinions and questions of those around me. The suicide moved me to research on images of the dead in Native American and African American fiction, but years later I struggled with how to integrate my father’s death into the book that grew out of my dissertation. It became obvious that I was going to have to relate in the preface how the project came about. The disclosure was almost too much to bear in a work that I had tried to compose as a piece of scholarship without “unprofessional” personal content. Wrestling with my book manuscript proved to me that some intellectual projects originating in the personal cease to make sense to an audience unless they refer to the lived experience behind them.

The personal has the potential to change criticism, by allowing scholars to read not only texts but also lives. To disclose the essence of our lives makes us vulnerable, but introducing the personal into academic scholarship compels us to redefine both the personal and the scholarly in terms of what matters most to us. It also helps to restore a bit of our humanity.

SHARON P. HOLLAND  
*Stanford University*

Pondering “the place of the personal in scholarship” has not been a problem for me, perhaps because my articles have originated most often as oral presentations. Speaking to listeners, I never abandon my personal self—the I

or the *me* or my experiences—for an “objective” third-person *one* as observer or discussant. Even my few years’ participation in discourses of contemporary critical theory have not destroyed my confidence that the personal has a place in scholarship. However seriously I regard discussions that would return critical focus to the “universalized” person, produced by the fulfillment of “fundamental ontology[’s] ‘dream’”: “to precede cultural identity” (disparaged by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in “Acting Bits / Identity Talk,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 [1992]; rpt. in *Identities*, ed. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. [1995] 173), I agree completely that Philomela should not be universalized before she “has been met as female” (Patricia Joplin, “The Voice of the Shuttle Is Ours,” *Stanford Literature Review* 1 [1984]: 25–53; qtd. in Nancy K. Miller, “Arachnologies: The Woman, the Text, and the Critic,” *The Poetics of Gender* [1986] 282); that understanding homosexuality in different historical and contemporary contexts fulfills national cultural, intellectual, and political needs (Martin Duberman, “Hidden from History: Reclaiming Gay/Lesbian History, Politics and Culture,” *About Time: Exploring the Gay Past* [1991] 436–67); that information directly from the experiences of black women in our time might move us closer to genuine community; and that by reading the personal, intellectual, and spiritual history of Rosemary Radford Ruether, a contemporary revolutionary white Catholic woman whose “first feminist writings . . . focused on a criticism of . . . Catholic views of sexuality and reproduction” (*Disputed Questions: On Being a Christian* [1989] 118), millions of people might become courageous enough to accept themselves and others. For us members of the academy who are not part of the white male heterosexual norm established as the only true example of *Homo sapiens*, the personal experiences of others are often the only models that let us see our possibilities. The lesbian poet-professor Minnie Bruce Pratt seems to confirm this view when she gives the credit for her writing skills to “talk among women, among suppressed peoples, a talk that has yet to receive its due as part of culture and of art. . . .” To continue working, she “need[s] all the voices of the women who have been destined for despoliation, anonymity, or death, but who defiant, have survived, and lived to tell their triumph” (“Books in the Closet, in the Attic, Boxes, Secrets,” *Crimes against Nature* [1990]; qtd. in *Network* spring 1996: 26).

At the juncture of shared real experience and twenty-five years of academic debate on centers, margins, difference, objects, subjects, agents, agency, voices, silences, identity, authenticity, and “situated” and “universal” knowledge (Sara Suleri, “Woman Skin Deep: Feminism

and the Postcolonial Condition,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 [1992]; rpt. in Appiah and Gates 135), “the place of the personal in scholarship” invites serious consideration. Dictionary definitions of *academy*—for example, “a group of acknowledged authorities and leaders in a field of scholarship, art, etc. [who are] influential in maintaining traditional standards, dictating methods, etc.” (*Random House Dictionary*, coll. ed., [1968])—suggest that scholars might be hostile to the nontraditional colleagues and students who reject or do not know the standards and traditions of the academy and who are so unprofessional as to project their ideas personally. These “others” within the academy, among whom I belong, are often survivors of and witnesses to the realities of sexism, racism, and homophobia seldom admitted in traditional scholarship. If we who know from the inside don’t harness ourselves and our work and the help of willing friends whose scholarship is traditional to reveal and address these writhing heresies against human dignity, who will? Our lives are the “subjective structures” that “can . . . give objective truth” (Spivak, *The Post-colonial Critic* [1990] 66).

AGNES MORELAND JACKSON  
Pitzer College

As modern has modulated into postmodern, an infectious skepticism about the authority of analysis and evidence has probably led many critics and scholars to think that their experiences and intuitions are as reliable a guide to shifting truth as traditional principles and procedures. This may be arrogant; it is certainly romantic, perhaps the scholar’s equivalent of the feel-good curriculum. But in many cases the practice that follows from this belief seems to humanize the writing. As readers, we understand that what such work offers is not just another stolid block in the great pyramid of objective scholarship but a probably flawed contribution to a continually interesting dialogue, whose end is less to reveal the truth than to advance and configure an exchange of views and insights about a common intellectual interest.

It makes sense for scholars or critics to declare how they came to be involved in a subject, especially now, when the multiplicity of subjects is so striking. Even within your particular field your work may sound more gripping if you offer the reader a partial history of your engagement with the topic, especially if you can be as charming about it as Stephen Jay Gould or Lewis Thomas. If you can find an incident as striking and as apposite to the theme of your book as the one Stephen Greenblatt uses in the epilogue to *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, you have given your critical perceptions an additional dimension.

As the contributions to *PMLA*'s Forum on interdisciplinarity show (111 [1996]: 271–311), literary scholars do not follow one route to their profession, and they are eager to declare the differences—which may include age, gender, race, country, region, education, character, outlook, sexual preference—that drew them to the ostensibly objective enterprise of literary studies but disposed them to practice it differently, to study different segments or areas of the common wordscape, or to bring to bear on it different mixes of disciplines. This procedure seems especially inviting as we recognize how little in the world depends on our readings' being "responsible." If our structures collapse, they will crush no bodies, and what we are searching for will never be as definite as DNA or a cure for cancer. All we need to succeed is approval by some court of reading peers, so, like courtiers, we have only to please and imitate the notables of the court we have elected to join, but to do so in a style that is marked by our own distinctive take on our subject and methods.

Except for one recent article, my own scholarship has rarely made use of the personal, but as I grow older and become less anxious about the correctness of the procedures I follow (this at least my essays have in common with the rule-breaking great late works of masters like Michelangelo and Shakespeare and Yeats), I find that to interject some personal reminiscence, observation, or judgment into an otherwise well-behaved argument or footnote may lend a pleasing casualness to the otherwise fairly methodical work I do. If I tell how I chose this topic, what serendipitous encounter with book or friend put me onto this approach, what headaches it gave me and mine, what I learned from the spaniel's howl or the plumber's retort, from the lightning strike or the misplaced voice, I am only following lines laid down by Augustine, Montaigne, Coleridge, Keats, Woolf (and Booth and Brée). All of them brought richly inflected lives to the texts or professions they mused on, and it has helped the rest of us to read more wisely that they declared some of their personal baggage at the gate.

Still, there are dangers, from which only the integrity and good sense of editors and publishers can protect us: that the scholar will be shamelessly self-indulgent in flaunting a past irrelevant to the immediate issue, will offer a personal reason for overlooking the obvious, or will succumb to the bad poet's temptation of believing that "anything interesting to me will be interesting to them." It's easy, too, for a scholar entranced with the personal genesis of a theory to regard this kind of support as outweighing the obligation to mention contrary evidence. Finally—take it from me!—the foregrounding of personal testimony may turn out to be nothing more than

an appeal to another kind of authority: my conclusions must be true because I believe them.

GEORGE T. WRIGHT

*University of Minnesota, Twin Cities*

## Problems with Personal Criticism

In 1989 I entitled the preface to my *Women of Bloomsbury: Virginia, Vanessa, and Carrington* (Routledge) "Personal Criticism: A Matter of Choice." In that book, I invited the reader to participate in "the interweaving and construction of the ongoing conversation this criticism can be." Personal criticism, as I thought of it, was not only about one's autobiographical self but also about a lived and written warmth of approach, opposite to the impersonal. It was not just confessional, did not imply more narcissism than any other criticism; it included and dialogued with the other. It did not spring like Venus fully from some seashell onto the text but rather evolved its own kind of knowledge as it went along. It was a speaking criticism whose rhythms sounded as truly as its substance. It was nearer to the politics of the personal than to the self-involved recounting of "my" personal history.

In the intervening years, it has become apparent that the word *personal* needs more work than the word *criticism*. I had envisioned a mosaic of interrelated artistic, personal, and working matters on which we could share our concerns, but there remained a ticklish distinction between first and second persons, singular and plural, the *I* and the *we*, neither necessarily including the other. Wanting out of the mere *I*, some of us had the disturbing realization that opting for a larger-scope pronoun did not guarantee a more generous criticism. Some of us had believed with the surrealists that changing a vocabulary might change things, at least partially. "Our world depends on our ability to enunciate it," we had said with Gaston Bachelard, and with André Breton we had thought that "the imagined turns out to be the real." And then suddenly we could no longer say it the same way: the personal-pronoun problem, singular and plural, still lurks at the heart of this matter, insoluble.

Yet what disabled me was the tentativeness in thinking and writing that had been bred in me. In the South I knew, we didn't talk of such things as alcoholic fathers, and relatives died in their rocking chairs instead of admitting they had not enough to eat. In my South, you didn't let on you had a brain. My grandmother, a fine artist, suggested I not use long words, my mother that I speak