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## **Overcoming Rhetoric: Forced Disclosure and the Colonizing Ethic of Evaluating Personal Essays**

**WHEN STUDENTS ARE ASKED TO WRITE ABOUT THEIR PERSONAL** experience in a graded environment, instructors of composition are on shaky ethical ground. The question of a disclosure-based classroom has circulated heavily in our field since the rise of expressivism (Connors; Bleich; Hood; Berman; Gere), but while many have theorized the potential of personal essay writing regarding the big three identity markers (race, gender, class), the often invisible identity marker of disability remains inadequately examined. In this essay, I will argue that personal essay writing, due to its tacit invitation to write about traumatic experience, is troublesome for a student with disabilities. If, indeed, there is an association between successful personal essays and engagement with traumatic experience, what are the implications for a student who identifies as disabled? A potential result is a reproduction of a rhetoric of overcoming, one in which the student feels both invited to entangle disability with trauma (problematic) and compelled to deal with that trauma in a way that re-enforces the “normal” body. To prevent this reproduction (which I see as colonialist on the part of the instructor), disability must be addressed as a critical modality in all composition classrooms. Critical attention must be paid to disability as socially constructed in an effort to deconstruct the demand for overcoming. As this essay deals with some highly unstable terminology, I will begin my argument by asserting my definitions of three key concepts upon which my essay relies: disability, personal writing, and trauma. After examining these definitions, I will make clear the tacit connection between personal writing and trauma narrative followed by an analysis of two major debates regarding disclosure in the writing classroom. Finally, I will investigate the role of the instructor in facilitating personal writing that deflects a rhetoric of overcoming and resists the colonialist tendencies the permeate discussions of ablebodiedness and disability.

## **Defining Key Terms and Concepts: Social Models of Disability, Personal Essay Writing, and Trauma Studies**

As with most of the “naming” in our world, definitions of disability are usually revelatory of the institution (and ideology therein) sponsoring that particular definition. Many legislative definitions of disability in the United States are embedded in programmatic discourse. Barbara M. Altman, former president of the Society of Disability Studies, addresses the rhetorical situations of particular definitions in her article, “Disability Definitions, Models, Classification and Schemes, and Applications.” She writes, “For programmatic administrative purposes, disability is usually defined as situations associated with injury, health, or physical conditions that create specific limitations that have lasted or are expected to last for a named period of time” (98). The Americans with Disabilities Act, passed in 1990 as a civil rights law aimed at ending discrimination based on disability, divides disability into three categories (initially established under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973): an individual who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, has a record of such an impairment, or is regarded as having such an impairment.

Many disability theorists both rely on and reject programmatic definitions of disability, striving to address the socially constructed nature of disability and working in opposition to medicalized, individual-centered definitions. Susan Wendell, in her book *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability*, defines disability as “any lack of ability to perform activities to an extent or in a way that is either necessary for survival in an environment or necessary to participate in some major aspect of life in a given society” (23). She both echoes and complicates the definition espoused in the ADA. While she retains the word “lack,” she attempts to qualify it with an attention to the particularity of a given environment. Her definition reflects her response to the shift from a medical model of disability to a social model of disability. British disability author and advocate Mike Oliver coined the phrase “social model of disability” and Carol Thomas, in her essay “Disability Theory: Key Ideas, Issues and Thinkers,” summarized the central premise of this model: “The social modelist idea that disability is the outcome of social arrangements that work to restrict the activities of people with impairments through the erection of social barriers” (40). The emergence of a social model of disability would serve as the founding moment for Disability Studies. Historically, up until this point, disability, as a subject of research, had been relegated to medical professionals. Oliver, a leading researcher/campaigner for the social model, identifies two main problems with the medical model: “Firstly, it locates the ‘problem’ of disability within the individual and secondly it sees the causes of this problem as stemming from the functional limitations or psychological losses which are assumed to arise from disability” (3). This critique supplied the necessary fodder to understand disability as a socially constructed

ideology that placed certain individuals in a socio-political position of lack. Within the last decade or two, a band of disability scholars (mostly disabled themselves) began to push for a critical, interdisciplinary response to the social shift (Davis; Albrecht et al.; Linton).

An analysis of the implications of social models of disability for personal writing in the composition classroom requires that I draw the boundaries of personal writing itself. For the scope of this essay, personal essay writing will be considered any textual performance of meaning that takes the identity and lived experience of the author as its central focus. The phrase personal writing can encompass assignments commonly referred to as personal narratives, personal essays, or autobiographical writing. When I refer to personal writing throughout this piece, I refer not only to traditional textual essays but also multi-genre projects (Moulton; Mack), multi-modal writing, aural assignments (Selfe), and performative assignments (Fishman, et al.). This paper will assume that most personal writing assignments ask the author/student to make (explicitly or implicitly) some commentary on a greater issue; that is to say, an assumed goal of personal writing is to convey a collective message on how experience reveals or supports particular larger institutions. For example, a personal essay that relates the experience of overcoming the trauma experienced as a foster child should make some social commentary that applies to a greater issue such as underprivileged circumstance, fostering, adolescent development, abuse, etc.; the part (personal experience) should relate to the whole (collective experience). This part-to-whole relationship becomes a key component of any analysis of personal essay writing in that it resists an individualistic presentation of experience. While it may seem oddly contradictory to argue against individualism in personal essay writing, the encouraged resistance advocates contextualized attention to audience.

When students are asked to deploy personal experience in writing, any number of identity markers will most likely be present in a student's work.<sup>1</sup> Typically, our field recognizes and theorizes the big three identity markers: race, gender, and class. Other less visible<sup>2</sup> identity markers include sexual orientation and disability. Many have theorized the invisibility of both sexual orientation (Khayatt; Malinowitz) and disability (Brueggemann, et al.; Mossman) and more work is needed to understand what invisibility means for our students

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1. It cannot be denied that there is no such thing as writing free from personal experience. However, for this essay, I intend to limit my discussion of personal writing to the generic convention, rather than the social construct itself. While most composition instructors would consider every assignment to be grounded in the personal (mediated by a number of identity markers), it is useful here to focus specifically on the assignments explicitly referred to as personal writing.

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2. When I use the metaphor of visibility, I refer to an absence of examination or study, following the work of Brenda Brueggemann, Johnson Cheu, Patricia Dunn, Barbara Heifferon, and Linda White.

who consider these supposed deviations to be primary markers of identity. Taking personal writing as a site of analysis, it is important to theorize the rhetorical implications of engaging the identity marker of disability for an assignment that frequently invites students to recount traumatic experience.

What then does it mean to write trauma? In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud would refer to trauma not as something inflicted upon the body but as something inflicted upon the mind. Whereas Freud assumes a distinct binary of body/mind, Cathy Caruth defines trauma as an infinite negotiation of material experience and reconstruction of self. Caruth theorized trauma, especially the narrative of trauma, as “a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (7). To fully understand Caruth’s concept of double telling, it is useful to explore an example of traumatic experience. In the case of the trauma of rape, a survivor of sexual assault will forever negotiate two narratives: the memory of the event itself and the infinite re-storying of her life in the present as a result of that traumatic event. That is to say, surviving rape means re-conceptualizing everything once thought to be safe, normal, expected, displayed, and so on.

In the composition classroom, disclosure of trauma can be defined as the narrative recollection of any event that inflicted an intense emotional response that required some healing or recovery. When composition instructors assign personal essay writing, they frequently offer gentle reminders to their students not to disclose anything about which they cannot handle critique (through both peer review and instructor evaluation). Personal essay writing carries heavy potential for an engagement with trauma and therefore necessitates great ethical responsibility on the part of the instructor. Before I can make this argument, however, it is first necessary to establish the tacit premise that personal writing assignments engender trauma narratives.

## **Tacit Invitations: Privileging the Trauma Narrative**

To fully understand the argument that personal writing tends to evoke a disclosure of trauma, it is useful to examine the genre’s history in composition classrooms. In 1987 Robert J. Connors published an article in *College Composition and Communication* that traced the historical emergence of personal writing, claiming that the genre emerged as an accepted form in the composition-rhetoric classroom in the 1890s and has managed to retain its position in contemporary college classrooms (177). Connors concludes his discussion of personal writing by mapping the debate about personal writing’s place in college curriculum onto the overarching debate over the purpose of education itself. He states, “It is easy to feel that one’s teaching is not striking the balance well between making writing meaningful to the student

and making the student meaningful to the community” (180). Again, the part-to-whole emphasis in personal writing is made clear. Connors addresses the seduction of personal essay writing claiming that “the seductions of an emotional ‘knockout punch’ are no less real for teachers than the seductions of a well-planned and carefully done research paper” (180). The emotional punch to which he refers further demonstrates the tacit connection between personal writing and trauma. Emotion and impact are closely bound up in a way that suggests the best way to move an audience is through pulling heartstrings.

In my own experience as a student at both the undergraduate and graduate level, I embodied this exact connection in each of my personal writing assignments. When asked to write a personal essay regarding a literacy sponsor, I responded to that call with an emotional essay about my relationship with my father. When asked in a graduate course to write a personal narrative, I wrote the story of my high school sweetheart who died tragically in a car accident during our freshman year of college. I believe that I associated an assignment of personal writing with trauma for two reasons. First, I recognized that some of my most profound lessons in life had come during moments of overwhelming loss and suffering. Second, I considered the heavy weight of tragedy the best conveyor of thoughtful and “good” writing for my professors.

In my own experience as a teacher, I have seen the exact same association (between personal writing and trauma) play out in my own personal essay assignments. Here at the University of Oklahoma, the core curriculum of English 1113 places personal narrative as its final major essay in the assignment sequence. In my experience teaching this assignment, the majority of my students have written about how a traumatic experience shaped their understanding of language, taking topics such as death, injury, loss, oppression, abuse, and addiction as their subject matter. Grading these essays is ethically burdensome in that I feel torn between wanting to express compassion for the bravery of putting trauma to page while also striving for fair and objective assessment of their ability to meet the criteria of my writing assignment. How can I ever put anything but an ‘A’ on an essay in which a girl recounts her experience with an abusive father?

In 1985, William F. Coles and James Vopat published a collection of 48 student essays, each responded to by 48 renowned scholars in our field, including Richard Ohmann, Susan Miller, James Britton, and David Bleich. Lester Faigley performed a rhetorical analysis of the Coles and Vopat collection in the essay “Judging Writing, Judging Selves,” published four years later in *College Composition and Communication*. In this article, Faigley contends that composition instructors privilege “honest” representation of the self in academic discourse and criticizes the essentialist notion of authenticity for its inability to empower the student. He writes, “The student selves we encounter in *What Makes Writing Good* are pre-

dominantly selves that achieve rationality and unity by characterizing former selves as objects for analysis, hence the emphasis on writing about past experience rather than confronting the contradictions of present experience" (411). While I agree with Faigley that writing the past typifies personal writing, I would further map the healing script on top of that propensity. When students write about past experience, they frequently write the trauma of past experience in a linear manner that results in a lesson learned or therapeutic resolve.

According to Anne Ruggles Gere in her essay "Revealing Silence: Rethinking Personal Writing," the essays in this collection "typify the prose that falls into the category of personal writing" (204). The student essays deal with events such as infertility, car accidents, and family/childhood trauma. The Coles and Vopat collection reveals instructor responses to personal essays that deal with trauma in a profoundly positive manner, stating that such writing is "moving" and "honest" (qtd. in Gere 204). Gere goes on to argue that composition instructors privilege personal writing that deals with traumatic experience.

In understanding that success in personal writing is closely tied to an expression of traumatic experience, it becomes necessary to theorize the implications of this connection for students with disabilities. The tendency in personal writing to disclose or deal with trauma troubles me as a scholar who is suspicious of required disclosure and who is also an advocate for disrupting the rhetoric of overcoming that pervades much discussion of disability. The pressure to deal connotes treatment, to take action against something in an effort to eradicate it. Associating the purpose of personal writing with treatment evokes a healing script, one that operates through a linear progression that ultimately leads to a cure of the abnormality—the wound. To make clear this problematic, it is useful to present a hypothetical example. If a student with vision impairment feels compelled to write about how their personal experience with disability has been difficult but they have overcome the hardships, what is missing? What is left out when this healing script (grounded in disclosure) reproduces a rhetoric of overcoming for the instructor? The resulting essay might neglect to recognize that vision impairment is mere difference, only relegated to hardship when set against the "normalcy" of full sightedness. If the instructor has not engaged disability critically and herself operates within a constructed notion of disability as trauma—how then is the student capable of reaching beyond personal experience (the individualistic representation of how disability got dealt with) without affirming the teacher's own desire for the student to overcome his/her hardship? The teacher might then applaud that student's ability to overcome, hence simultaneously reproducing a rhetoric of overcoming and continuing to privilege disclosure.

Recognizing this absence of critical examination puts pressure on the instructor of composition, indeed on the field itself to fully engage Disability Studies. While Disability Studies is certainly on the rise within the field of Rhetoric and Composition (e.g. Bruegge-

mann, et al.), its lingering invisibility as a critical modality in composition classrooms is undeniable. And here is my primary concern: if critical disability awareness is invisible and we ask our students (with disabilities) to write about their identity, and there is an implicit connection between successful personal writing and trauma disclosure, are we laying the groundwork for an equation between disability and trauma? Are we constructing a writing context that invites students to overcome their disability as a response to the Western healing metaphor's call for closure? I believe that we are and that we will continue to do so until we make disability visible both for ourselves and for our students. If we don't do so, we will simply perpetuate the able/disabled hierarchy. Making disability visible also means opening up its possible meanings and its revolutionary power.

*Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*, written by Simi Linton, is a leading text in Disability Studies. In the opening chapters of this book, Linton describes a *rhetoric of overcoming* that pervades much discussion of disability in American culture. She articulates several common interpretations of this rhetoric, such as that the individual who overcomes is no longer limited by their disability and that the person has "risen above society's expectation for someone with those characteristics" (17). The common deployment (and subsequent internalization/interpretation) of overcoming as it relates to an individual with a disability is troublesome for Linton because it is often physically impossible to overcome a disability (17). She writes, "An implication of these statements is that the other members of the group from which the individual has supposedly moved beyond are not as brave, strong, or extraordinary as the person who has *overcome* that designation" (18, emphasis her own). The reproduction of a *rhetoric of overcoming* places all responsibility for change in the individual with a disability.

Representing disability as trauma might seem a common sense connection, but an analysis of published disability narratives proves revelatory in understanding the reversal of this ideology. Susannah B. Mintz combines disability theory and feminist autobiographical study to analyze the work of eight contemporary disability authors in her book *Unruly Bodies: Life Writing by Women with Disabilities*. Her central argument is that disability should be written as trauma not "to demonstrate the damaging effects of disease or impairment but, rather, of the cultural mythologies that interpret those conditions in reductive or disparaging ways" (Mintz 1). As previously stated in Carol Thomas's critique of the medical model of disability, when students encounter the social model (i.e. when they begin to critically examine the socio-culturally constructed notion of disability) "the effect is liberatory, enabling them, perhaps for the first time, to recognize most of their difficulty as socially caused" (40). In other words, this shift in defining disability shifts the attention from how the individual has survived their affliction to how the individual has survived the ways in which others have constructed their affliction.



Is incorporating disability as a critical modality in the composition classroom enough to validate the ethic of asking students (able-bodied and dis/abled alike) to disclose? Disclosure in and of itself is fraught with ethical issues. Therefore, it is useful to understand the debate surrounding disclosure in writing classrooms before positing specific solutions for students with disabilities. In 1993 an article appeared in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* entitled "Requiring Students to Write About Their Personal Lives." This article, written by Susan Swartzlander, Diana Pace, and Virginia Lee Stamler (one English professor, two psychological counselors), pointed out the unethical practice of asking students to self-disclose in personal essay writing assignments, discussing such implications as gender, grading, and re-traumatization. Students become fearful that if they do not disclose personal trauma, the evaluation they receive from their instructor will negatively reflect their inability or unwillingness to tackle the "tough" subjects. Though the authors address the ethical implications of such fear for marginalized groups, as is often the case, students with disabilities are not addressed. Swartzlander, Pace, and Stamler have one key point, however, which is central to my own argument: they express concern regarding an absence of ethical responsibility and adequate attention to personal writing in the composition classroom, arguing that genres of self-revelation are treated too casually by instructors.

In 1995, *College English* published "Collaboration and the Pedagogy of Disclosure," wherein David Bleich applauds Swartzlander, Pace, and Stamler's attention to ethics but disputes the abandonment of the potential of the personal in the composition classroom. A responsible pedagogy of self-disclosure was needed, one that used collaboration and collective disclosure to create a classroom environment of mutuality. According to Bleich, a pedagogy of disclosure means that "because each member of a classroom actually has an individual history, habitual and scholarly reference to it becomes part of the process of presenting opinions, interpretations, and reports of other things . . . pedagogy of disclosure asks each class member to announce, sooner or later, the *terms of membership* in the class" (48, emphasis his own). Bleich goes on to offer a list of examples of membership, which includes class, race, gender. Yet again, disability is absent from a key list of identity markers. To fully understand my critique of Bleich's lack of attention to disability, it is useful to examine how his pedagogy of disclosure might affect a student who considers disability as an identity marker. If a student identifies as autistic but has no desire to self-disclose, will Bleich's emphasis on announcement and history further alienate this student? Might it force this student to deny a primary identity marker? If a student identifies as dyslexic or developmentally challenged, what motivation does she have to announce her disability as a way to fully engage with both her peers and her instructor?<sup>3</sup>

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3. I am only offering examples of disabilities that are potentially invisible; these students are capable of passing as able-bodied.



Bleich's examples deal primarily (and provocatively) with issues of race. He argues that "self-disclosure changes the vocabularies and the discourse styles of our classrooms [and] provides an unambiguous address for individuality while showing the deep implication of each individual in a series of groups, communities, societies, and political constituencies" (60).

Bleich's solution for handling disclosure in the classroom is insufficient in that he first fails to acknowledge the close relationship between disclosure and trauma. He further fails to explore the ideological hierarchy that often results from disclosed and multiplicitous identities; implicating an individual within a group often affirms one group while denigrating another. Without careful critical attention to this potential of defining *against*, a pedagogy of disclosure can *reproduce* rather than disrupt the dividing lines of personal and political identities. Furthermore, a pedagogy of disclosure suggests that a composition classroom is fertile ground for the seeds of therapeutic recovery, which is especially troublesome for a student who identifies as disabled in that it might imply a need to overcome one's disability (indeed one's identity).

Can personal writing ever serve both a therapeutic purpose for the writer (student) while also being ethically evaluated by the reader (teacher)? In 2001, Jeffrey Berman published *Risky Writing: Self-Disclosure and Self-Transformation in the Classroom*, arguing strongly for the power and therapeutic value of students' self-disclosures in writing courses. Reviews of Berman's work applaud his insistence on the therapeutic value of narrative disclosure and testify to his deft negotiation of how best to minimize risk such as re-traumatization and shame (Bracher; Harris). In fact, many of these reviews echo his therapeutic rhetoric, attesting to the powers of trauma narrative as healing and curative.

Berman's insistence on the therapeutic merits of personal writing in the classroom was not free from critique. In 2005, Carra Leah Hood published the article "Lying in Writing or the Vicissitudes of Testimony" in *Composition Forum*, in which she posited a fairly scathing critique of Berman's insistence of the inherent value of disclosure, observing that many students, especially those who have themselves experienced a significant trauma, will revert to lying in writing—directly resisting the forced disclosure for which Berman insists. Hood goes on to further complicate the ethical issues surrounding forced disclosure by analyzing the nature of the universal requirement<sup>4</sup> and the complicated relationships between writing in a classroom relationship and writing in a therapeutic relationship. Hood points out that even when students are not required to write trauma, they do so inevitably due to the influence of the cultural connection between the personal and trauma. Both Berman's insistence and Hood's subsequent resistance reflect the field's desire to engage the personal as political in

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4. Hood refers to the problem of assigning a disclosure narrative in a course that is required (such as first-year composition), pointing out the elective courses carry less of an ethical burden regarding forced disclosure.

the classroom and also the field's hesitation to encroach on the ethically shaky ground of requiring (and grading) disclosure narratives.

The question then remains: what happens when this therapeutic writing (narrative disclosure of trauma) happens in a classroom environment? Trauma Studies has pointed out that remembering, reflecting, and re-storying is a stage of the recovery process (Caruth; Herman; Zehr). However, the relationship between writer-reader in the recovery process is that of writer-ally or writer-witness. Judith Lewis Herman describes this role in her book *Trauma and Recovery*: "The choice to confront the horrors of the past rests with the survivor. The therapist plays the role of a witness and ally, in whose presence the survivor can speak the unspeakable. The reconstruction of trauma places great demands on the courage of both the patient and therapist. It requires that both be clear in their purpose and their alliance" (175).

Herman situates the entire context of trauma reconstruction in the choice of the survivor, demonstrating that the relationship between the writer of trauma and the reader of trauma must be free of coercion. Consequently, it can be concluded that if one follows Herman's theory of trauma narrative and adheres to her stipulations regarding its therapeutic value, choice is mandatory. For the composition instructor, this means any personal essay assignment would have to be optional.

Furthermore, Herman's discussion of the role of ally becomes obviously problematic when one attempts to position a composition teacher as witness. There is no way for a teacher to simultaneously occupy the dual roles of ally and evaluator. This would be analogous to a psychologist assigning a letter grade at the end of a therapy session. Not only are composition instructors not qualified to analyze the "therapy" session, it is highly unethical for them to ask for the revelation in a graded environment.

## **The Colonization of Dis/abled Bodies: How Personal Writing Reproduces Rhetorics of Overcoming**

While it is certainly problematic to complicate the notion of teacher as therapist and to speculate on the troublesome ethics of defining the student-teacher relationship as therapeutic, the problem of pedagogy remains. If personal writing is not to be thrown out (and to be clear—I'm not suggesting it is), and the instructor cannot take on a role of therapist or witness without operating in an ethical black hole, what role should the teacher/reader occupy?

bell hooks warned against the racial and gendered relationships at play in a disclosure-based classroom, describing the colonizing impulse that may occur in the reader:

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in such a way that it has become

mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk (152).

If composition instructors create a personal writing assignment that places an expectation of overcoming for a student who identifies as disabled, they act as the colonizer of bodies. Through privileging a student's ability to overcome his/her hardship, their trauma, instructors validate his/her own position as able-bodied. To respond to personal essay writing reliant on overcoming and reproducing a medicalized notion of disability, constructs disability as a problem of the individual afflicted rather than as a symptom of the greater

“constructs disability as a problem of the individual afflicted rather than as a symptom of the greater culture”

culture. One might interpret hooks “telling back” as the instructor endnote on a graded personal essay. If a student with a disability writes an essay that deploys a rhetoric of overcoming—testifying to his/her ability to prevail over the trauma of their heavy burden—and the instructor<sup>5</sup> applauds this effort as evidence of therapeutic healing, she colonizing that student's identity. She makes it her own. The student has only written what she thinks the professor needs to read—the suppression of difference—the

triumph over freakery—the return to normalcy. What needs to be overcome is the tendency to ask for healing. The appeal to uphold the hegemonic discourse of ablebodiedness must be critically examined to prevent just such imperialist desires.

If personal writing for the student with disabilities is likely to reproduce a rhetoric of overcoming and I argue for a critical examination to prevent that colonization of dis/abled identity, what does that look like in terms of writing curriculum? First and foremost, it requires that every composition classroom that requires personal writing (even personal writing that doesn't explicitly ask for trauma narrative) include critical examination of disability narrative. The work of Nancy Mairs is often used for just such a task (Mintz; Garland-Thomson). Furthermore, all graduate programs in composition, rhetoric, and literacy need to incorporate disability studies in their reading list. The invisibility of disability must be dealt with, and I argue for its inclusion at the graduate level because of the high number of graduate teaching assistants in composition classrooms. Furthermore, many first-year composition core curricula call for personal writing in their major essay sequence. The absence of critical

5. A major limitation of this essay is its tacit assumption of the ablebodiedness of the professor. Much scholarship addresses the instructor embodiment of disability (Lindgren; Krefling; Kleege; Kuusisto; Chrisman).

training in disability is perhaps the main contributor to the colonialist tendencies I have pointed to throughout this essay. Throughout the course of my own experience as a rhetorical scholar interested in Disability Studies, I all too often am confronted by the invisibility of disability—in reading lists, in the work of my peers, as concentration in programs, in textbooks, etc. Thirdly, personal writing assignments that take disability as subject should be dealt with reflectively and critically. Jacqueline Rinaldi, in her article “From Rhetoric and Healing: Revising Narratives about Disability,” suggests two important pedagogical moves: incorporating disability into the classroom and revising “typical” disability narratives. While I unwaveringly support the former, I find the latter to be only the first step in structuring personal essay writing that examines disability. While Rinaldi certainly attempts a revisionist and reflective examination of the clichéd metaphorical description of dis/abled experience, she still affirms the healing power therein. She writes, “In a final writer’s memo accompanying this reflective and revisionary paper, students could comment on the difficulties and satisfactions of consciously trying to revise narratives and discourses to achieve a sense of personal and cultural healing” (205). Again, the desire for overcoming (for healing) is evident. Might disability be written in a way that doesn’t demand healing? Might it affirm dis/abled experience as preferable? While this may seem a radical claim, the tendency to read “disability as preferable” as radical is representative of the ideology of able-bodiedness. Examples of persons with disabilities who have stated their preference for their disability include Mark Zupan, Aimee Mullins, and many in Deaf communities. Instructors might deliberately present disability narrative examples that illustrate healing as well as disability narratives that function as affirmation for purposes of juxtaposition and critical dialogue.

While integrating disability in graduate courses and bringing disability into the classroom are integral moves towards preventing the uncritical perpetuation of a rhetoric of overcoming, listening and learning from students with disabilities is critical to understanding and empowering. While I certainly feel that the teacher/student power dynamic creates particular responses in personal writing, it is important not to neglect the agency of the student. How might they resist particular rhetorics? Might they use silence (Gere), lying (Hood), or anti-writing (Neel)?

If composition classrooms retain the inclusion of personal essay writing, disclosure isn’t the only ethical issue on the table. Understanding how particular disclosing rhetorics either impair or empower is paramount to constructing a critically conscious classroom environment. Not only do teachers need to be crucially aware of the ethical issues surrounding evaluating personal writing that discloses identity performance through trauma narrative, they need to be theoretically versed in the rhetorical consequences for particular subaltern groups. A rhetoric of overcoming pervades Western culture itself and to privilege student

writing that heals only serves to falsely aggrandize the instructor as playing some pivotal role in a falsely therapeutic process. Only through a decisive analysis of our own desire for a reproduction of the able/disabled binary will we critically facilitate (and ethically evaluate) the personal writing of our students.

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