

Review of *Body Work: The Radical Power of Personal Narrative*

Ellen O'Connell Whittet

Abstract: A review of *Body Work*, memoirist Melissa Febos's newest craft essay collection, dismantles several of the prevailing ideas around both writing and teaching personal writing. Although this is not a traditional craft book, *Body Work* works to legitimize the genre, and makes a case for the vitality and unique potential of asking students and others to write their personal narratives.

Ellen O'Connell Whittet is a continuing lecturer in the Writing Program at UC Santa Barbara. She studies creative nonfiction, media, dance writing, arts writing, trauma, and community writing. Her memoir, *What You Become in Flight* (Melville House), was published in 2020.

Keywords: queer studies, feminism, creative nonfiction, memoir, autoethnography

Body Work, memoirist Melissa Febos's newest craft essay collection, dismantles several of the prevailing ideas around both writing and teaching personal writing. The book's particular interest is memoir, and Febos clarifies in her Author's Note at the beginning of the book that this is neither manifesto nor manual, nor is it "a craft book in the traditional sense." In fact, in this review, I argue that it's not really a craft book at all; I came to it hoping to find pedagogical inspiration, but without exercises, tools, frameworks, or prompts, I instead found permission to take my own autobiographical writing more seriously, and further justification to encourage my students to do the same. Indeed, I would not assign this entire book to a class of undergraduate writers, though I plan to assign the first essay, "In Praise of Navel-Gazing," to help beginning writers think through the place of memoir in an academic setting. But it did legitimize the genre, which often feels like it needs defending in institutional contexts, and makes a case for the vitality and unique potential of asking students and others to write their personal narratives.

Febos's own positionality as writer of this text is explicit. Readers who are familiar with Febos's first three books, *Whip Smart*, *Abandon Me*, and *Girlhood*, will see *Body Work* as an expansion of her work as a queer, feminist writer and teacher and a former sex worker with substance use disorder. By borrowing from fields including philosophy, ethics, feminist theory, religion, and disability studies and applying much of her research to her lived experiences, she makes the case that writing is "integrated into the fundamental movements" of her life, "political, corporeal, spiritual, psychological, and social."

I came to *Body Work* as a feminist teacher of writing and rhetoric who has published a memoir as well as an extensive body of creative nonfiction. Over a decade of teaching memoir to

university students has led me to a series of questions about best practices to teach writing and collaborating when it centers trauma, questions which I brought to my reading of *Body Work*. I often wonder, how do instructors encourage students to write about difficult personal experiences? How do instructors create an environment that fosters safety and vulnerability in personal writing? What ethical issues might arise? How do we evaluate these stories?

I'd argue the collective trauma of the recent past-- the pandemic, various prejudices, the mental health crisis, and the myriad ways in which late-stage capitalism have made post-college prospects more uncertain--are major motivations for students to continually fill creative writing classes across college campuses. My writing students have turned increasingly to processing their most painful experiences through writing. This ability to collapse material with interpretation and perspective, and to act as both researcher and subject, allowed students a proximity to their own writing and research that made for more emotional, engaged writing. In 2021, Jackson and McKinney published a new edited collection on autoethnography in writing studies which discusses the use of autoethnography in the writing classroom as both a research method and a legitimate way of knowing. When students learn to write as autoethnographers, which is to say, "as both subject and researcher" of their own work, "they both produce and analyze the data, thus closing the gap in interpretation between a subject's and researcher's perspective" (Jackson and McKinney, 7-8). Autoethnography is recently emerging as a methodology of feminist rhetorical research, as can be seen in Peitho's pages: Sarah Keeton's "Tracing the Past to (Re)imagine the Future: A Black Queer Pedagogy of Becoming" and Tracee Howell's "Manifesto of a Mid-Life White Feminist Or, An Apologia for Embodied Feminism."

In *Body Work*, Febos zeroes in on the question of *why* we have this urge to write our personal narratives at particularly challenging times, and how our own stories can help us heal.

The most significant aspect of Febos's craft book is her focus on whose stories are silenced, and how various hegemonic forces contribute to this silencing. The strongest chapter, also her opening, "In Praise of Navel-Gazing," focuses on the ways in which victims of trauma and storytellers and writers from marginalized backgrounds are particularly harmed by the dismissal of memoir. Febos cites Dian Million's article "Felt Theory: An Indigenous Feminist Approach to Affect and History," in particular Million's "case for remembering and understanding the impact of Canadian First Nation women's first-person and experiential narrative on white, mostly male mainstream scholarship." That *felt experience*, Febos points out, is "a collaboration between colonization, racism, and sexism, which all understand the political power of rich stories and their threat to existing colonial social structures." In other words, by resisting the stories of lived and felt experience, culturally and institutionally, and minimizing that particular form of meaning-making, we are participants in resisting justice.

Febos herself initially resisted memoir, reluctant to write her own story of sex work (the sub-

ject of her first memoir, *Whip Smart*). She braids her own decision to write her personal narrative with an examination of her wholesale dismissal of the genre to explore her own initial decision to censor herself, and who would have benefitted from that erasure. In Sarah Minor's *Creative Nonfiction* essay "The Braided Essay as Social Justice Action," Minor asserts the braided form of this style of writing allows choices to soften their rigid and often binary ideas. "Metaphor helps challenge the stultified pathways of our neural networks and test the elasticity of thought. Two ideas. One time. The brain resists new ways of thinking, but resistance is an important political tool." Febos's dedication to the braided form of essay writing allows her to connect herself to the rest of the world through her research and makes a case for personal narrative to resist the idea of "navel gazing."

Febos draws our attention to sex writing in Chapter 2, "Mind Fuck," by giving an example of an exercise she uses to get her students to think about how they write sex, and then lists her "unrules" for writing sex scenes. "In the world of your writing, no sex is a punchline unless you make it one," she writes. "There is no marginal erotic unless you sideline it" (67). Her call to action, to rethink the rules we have learned about our own sexuality and proclivities, asks readers to think not only about their writing about their sex lives, but about their sex lives themselves, to rewrite various scripts we have inherited about what pleasure might look like. This essay is the closest to a traditional craft essay in *Body Work*, since Febos details not only *why* we should write better, more authentic sex, but also *how* we might do this.

Febos dedicates Chapter 3, "Big Shitty Party: Six Parables of Writing About Other People" to one of my students' favorite topics: how to write about others in our personal narratives. Febos says this is the most common question people ask her, too, and her response, "that there are no living people in [her] work, only characters" is a process of "radical reduction." She decides to use her own experiences writing and publishing to demonstrate how others might develop "their own moral compass around the issue" (81). While she reaches a thesis I disagree with—that the "radical reduction" of other people in her work makes them characters rather than real people (after all, there may still be real people who live with consequences of being written about in memoir)—I'm persuaded by her argument that "cruelty rarely makes for good writing" (84), and that the memoirist's necessary focus on self is an ethical positioning.

In Chapter 4, Febos is most successful at using other writers to build her own argument—something she excels at in her other books—rewriting a line from Robert Gibbs's *On Ethics* to craft her thesis: "Writing is learning go know yourself again, to find your own agency in the actions you have committed" (132). She calls on thinkers from Jewish philosopher Maimonides and poet Natasha Tretheway to anti-racism activist Resmaa Menakem, to situate writing as a sacred and spiritual act, full of possibilities for confession, healing, and transformation. By the time the writing finds an audience, "the writer's relationship to the past is irrevocably changed. The writer is changed" (139). The act of writing, as Febos experiences the process, has the power to

change the life of the writer.

David Mura published *A Stranger's Journey* in 2018, a series of linked essays arguing for more deliberate and critical awareness in the complex issues surrounding racist habits of thought and craft in memoir writing as well as racist literary representations, much like Febos argues here for readers and writers of memoir to break some of their conditioned responses to memoir. Febos asserts there is room for stories that readers might want to read, and that writers want to write, and writers must rewrite the scripts around the importance and power of personal narrative on both an individual and societal level. I hope this review shows how researching *why* personal narrative benefits students, rather than *how* to teach it, can enrich conversations in the field, and bring creative nonfiction into center ring. The book's ideas have certainly validated my own ideas of personal narrative's primacy in many of my classes, making it just as important for my pedagogy as my own scholarship and life.