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I have struggled for years with the institutionalized binary separating the academic from the personal, and I struggled for days with first few lines of this review. I wanted to begin with a personal anecdote, as I have begun so many of my academic essays. I wanted to begin with an anecdote that would demonstrate that personal evidence can function rhetorically in academic discourse. But because I was trying so hard to find just the right piece of experiential evidence, the enterprise was perhaps doomed from the start. I could narrate a story from the first-year writing course that I’d framed around this very binary between the academic and the personal in 2003. I could tell the story of my being asked by a member of the profession to open an essay with something a bit more concrete, perhaps a personal anecdote, and my initial shock at the request—I’d always thought of my writing as so concrete, yet here I was being asked to be a bit less theoretical. While each of these experiential anecdotes concretizes the binary between the academic and the personal, none quite captured the point I wanted to open this review with: that the primary significance of Candace Spigelman’s new book is its insistence on separating the category of personal writing “from its status as an epistemological category” and reframing our disciplinary understanding of personal writing as “a rhetorically forceful construct” (30).

This is an important move because, as anybody with an interest in personal writing in composition knows intimately, the disciplinary discussions of personal writing have become rather stagnant, mired in challenges to the autonomous, stable self. Spigelman provides an excellent review of the history of the debates in composition, the persistence of binaries such as objectivity/subjectivity, personal/social, narrative/argument, and mind/body in chapters 1 and 2. In chapter 1, “What Is Personal Academic Writing?” Spigelman introduces us to Michelle, a first-year student whose writing will frame this and the remaining chapters. Michelle’s writing comes to represent what Spigelman believes is a forcefully rhetorical use of experience as evidence in her writing. Particularly insightful in this first chapter is Spigelman’s observation that personal writing in writing classrooms remains controversial in large part “because those on either side of the debate aren’t answering each other’s questions but are instead passionately speaking past each other” (3). Spigelman sets herself the task of putting advocates and opponents of personal writing into conversation with one another. She understands her audience to include not just proponents of personal writing but groups on both sides of the
spectrums, for each group can benefit from understanding the other’s position. For opponents of personal writing, Spigelman wants to legitimize its rhetorical force; for proponents of personal writing, she wants to expose “the scholarly and political complexities of experiential discourse” (3). Chapter 1 sets the stage for Spigelman’s interchangeable use of the terms personal writing, experiential writing, and personal narrative (6) and the choice of the term “personal academic argument,” which can be understood as an argument that relies for evidence, at least in part, on the writer’s personal experience. Spigelman analyzes Lynn Worsham’s contribution to Feminism and Composition, “After Words: A Choice of Words Remains” as a particularly satisfying example of personal academic argument, yet Spigelman also recognizes that Worsham’s stature in the field contributes a good deal to her audience’s willingness to hear and trust her story. The one thing that both proponents and opponents of personal writing seem to agree on, Spigelman writes, is an “apprehension that disclosure of personal experience risks self-indulgence or exploitation” (17). And Worsham’s essay, along with Michelle’s developing essay, models the use of personal experience as evidence rather than as confession or catharsis.

This move away from an understanding of the personal as the confessions of a coherent self and toward one of the personal as rhetorically forceful evidence is the subject of chapter 2, “The Personal Is Rhetorical.” Shifting personal writing from the category of epistemology to rhetoric allows Spigelman to provide an overview of the binaries that have shaped Western philosophical thought and to argue for understanding how personal writing can function to effect social change (34). To demonstrate her claims, Spigelman examines a variety of texts, including Lillian Bridwell-Bowles’s “Freedom, Form, Function: Varieties of Academic Discourse”; Laurie Grobman’s “Just Multiculturalism”; an essay, written by a student named Devin, titled “Subverting Ideologies and Understanding Racism”; and Alice Walker’s “Beyond the Peacock.” Each of these writers’ uses of personal writing demonstrates not their coherent, stable self, but their “biases, fragmentation, and subject-construction” (51). These writers are using personal writing, in other words, to challenge the primary complaint opponents have voiced about personal writing. Spigelman closes the chapter and opens the next with more detailed analysis of the ways Michelle’s essay is evolving as she juxtaposes her own experience with that of Annie Dillard and Louise Erdrich. Spigelman observes that, ultimately, the challenge for proponents of personal writing is to address the question of “whether we are willing to allow the experiences of Dillard, Erdrich, and Michelle to coexist in the same essay on the same page” (56-7).

In chapter 3, “Constructing Experience,” Spigelman once again draws on the work of a variety of both published and student writers in order to demonstrate the degree to which the very concept of personal experience...
is a construct, dependent on an interplay of cultural, social, and political mediations. Experience is a made thing. It is not self-evident, unmediated truth. Understanding this can help both teachers and students approach the construct of personal experience as rhetorically purposeful rather than innocently cathartic. Central to this project is Spigelman’s treatment of the question of textual “authenticity” or “truth.” Spigelman shifts this epistemological question once again to the question of the rhetorical effect of personal experience in an academic essay. This is not to say that the distinction between fact and fiction doesn’t matter. Rather, Spigelman argues that what matters is an understanding of the ethics of representations—for both writers and readers.

In chapter 4, “Valuing Personal Evidence,” Spigelman begins by summoning the authority of Aristotle to argue that the personal “can make the kinds of logical arguments privileged by Aristotle and by many present-day academics” (84). While it may seem that Spigelman’s reliance on Aristotelian logic would contradict her central claims that personal experience can serve as rhetorically forceful evidence, Spigelman reminds us that Aristotelian logic was dependent on an understanding of the persuasive force of narrative. More significantly, Spigelman draws on the work of both Kenneth Burke and Walter Fisher to assert that the use of personal experience as evidence allows writers to frame their subject both narratively and deductively, a move which leads to what Spigelman calls “surplus,” a term she borrows from feminist theory. Surplus “helps to explain how the fusing of orientations promotes, for writers and readers, a more complicated process of meaning making” (92), and it is this complicated meaning-making process that simultaneously enriches our understanding of the function of personal experience and muddles discussions of how to evaluate students’ uses of personal experience. Spigelman reviews the relevant literature on the question of evaluation and argues that the most effective way to approach such evaluation is to interrogate the assumptions upon which the narrative relies. To demonstrate this approach, Spigelman analyzes the assumptions at work in two essays dependent on narrative: Ellen A. Laird’s “Daisies” and Raymond Carver’s “Creative Writing 101.” Spigelman’s analysis of these two essays is particularly persuasive for its insistence on considering each author’s assumptions both about writing pedagogy and about the effects of writing pedagogy on young writers. This analysis functions as evidence for her claim that the interrogation of assumptions is a sound approach to evaluating the use of personal experience at the same time that it demonstrates Spigelman’s fluency in pedagogical theory.

In chapter 5, “Teaching Personal Academic Argument,” Spigelman provides concrete suggestions for two pedagogical approaches to including personal experience as evidence. The first approach involves teaching students to make personal essays serve the functions of academic argument by incorpo-
rating “academic conventions of paraphrase and quotation” (113). The second approach involves teaching students to make academic essays more personal by considering the ways that their own experiences might complicate or enrich their claims. As she does in other chapters, Spigelman provides rich analyses of student writing at various stages.

Ultimately, the value of Spigelman’s work lies in her willingness to enact the kind of rich, detailed analysis that she advocates. Spigelman demonstrates the persuasive force of personal experience by shifting the defensive discourse that has characterized composition studies’ discussions of the personal to a rhetorical discourse characterized by force and effect.

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