ABSTRACT

REVISIONARY RHETORIC, SOCIAL ACTION
AND THE ETHICS OF PERSONAL NARRATIVE

by Stephanie Weaver

This thesis tracks the use of personal narrative through a variety of rhetorical contexts, including scholarship in the field of rhetoric and composition, eco-activist texts of the American South, and the first-year composition classroom, exploring the ways that personal narratives may be used to flatten out the complexity of identity, place, or representations of others. Specifically, this paper seeks to bring up some of the ethical considerations that are frequently left by the wayside as compositionists and activists search for ways to make personal experience matter in the public sphere, from academic settings to public policy making by examining works by Southern eco-activists Barbara Kingsolver, Wendell Berry, and Al Gore. Finally, this paper presents a revisionary pedagogy that strives to teach personal narrative both as a potential means to make an argument and as a method for disrupting preconceived notions and ideologies in the classroom.
REVISIONARY RHETORIC, SOCIAL ACTION, 
AND THE ETHICS OF PERSONAL NARRATIVE; 
OR, A LONG STORY ABOUT BEING A SOUTHERNER

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Advisor_____________________
Dr. Jason Palmeri

Reader_____________________
Dr. Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson

Reader_____________________
Dr. Katharine J. Ronald
Table of Contents

Preface … 1
1. They Don’t Write Them Like That Anymore: The Place of Personal Narrative in Composition Pedagogy … 5
   The Rhetoric, Ethics, and Ideology of the Personal Narrative … 7
   Ecocomposition and Narratives of Place … 13
   Multimodality and Digital Storytelling … 16
   Some Notes on Methodology … 19
2. My Dear Old Southern Home: Complicating Southern Identity and Location-Based Ethos … 23
   Kingsolver and the Romanticizing of the South … 24
   Berry and the Primacy of the Land … 34
   Gore and the Everyman Story … 41
   Some Conclusions … 47
3. When Labor Calls: Reflections on Classroom Practices … 49
   The Assignment … 49
   Sam and the Appropriated Narrative … 52
   Andrew and the Issue of Genre Conventions … 55
   Charlotte and the Complication of Identity … 58
   In Hindsight … 61
   Some Conclusions … 63
Coda … 66
Works Cited … 68
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Preface
I’d like to begin this thesis about personal narrative with a couple of personal narratives of my own.

My freshman year of high school, Mrs. Bradford (my favorite English teacher) wrote a list of phrases on the board for us to use in the argumentative papers we were working on. Some of these were standard transitional words and phrases (“however,” “nevertheless,” “on the other hand,” etc.) but some of them were intended to help us make our own position in the paper clear, phrases like “I think,” “I believe,” and “in my opinion.” I began using these phrases extensively in my own writing; it was empowering to say “I think” because it meant that my opinion mattered, that Mrs. Bradford was actually interested in hearing what I had to say. We went over these phrases again when I was a junior and we were preparing for the Tennessee standardized writing exam. I’m pretty sure that was the same class day when Mrs. Horde told us to make up facts and statistics for the actual exam to show that we knew how to use them. My senior year, though, marked a change in my writing; that year I took a dual enrollment first year composition course with a local community college. The instructor returned our first set of papers without grades because, she said, we didn’t want to know what our grades would be. She had drawn heavy red lines through all my beloved “I think” type phrases; in fact, every time I had used the word “I,” it was scratched out. “You don’t need to say ‘I think,’” she said, “because if you’re writing it, then I already know that you think it.” She was right, of course, and one of the lessons I learned that day, to be less tentative in my own writing, helped move my writing forward. But the other lesson, that “I” wasn’t allowed in my writing, began my belief that this faux neutrality was the One Right Way of writing – a belief that was only reinforced by the norms of the literary criticism essays I would write later in my career.

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My dad likes to send emails with articles or blogs that he finds interesting. He has recently become a fan of a conservative, Christian academic named Mike Adams, a columnist for Townhall.com. In a post titled “The Joke Ban,” Adams criticizes the University of Northern Colorado for its efforts to prohibit “bias motivated incidents.” Adams marginalizes hate crimes and speech by equating “bias motivated incidents” with “inappropriate jokes.” Adams lists a number of dangers in enacting this kind of policy, the most important one being that
it empowers people to trump the speech of others by simply becoming offended. So it really protects and defends the speech of those least able to protect and defend their own speech through reasoned discourse. It is not often that the speech of the emotionally frail has much merit. People who fall apart emotionally in response to protected speech are unlikely to have the intellectual firepower needed to articulate ideas from which the rest of us can benefit. They are simply being empowered to trump the speech of their emotional and intellectual superiors.

When I first read this, I was angry and hurt; as someone who has struggled all her life with an anxiety disorder, I have often been one of the “emotionally frail” that Adams disenfranchises. And though I doubt that my father agrees with everything Adams writes, I still felt like my dad was telling me that I don’t have the “intellectual firepower” to come up with any ideas worth consideration by him or other “emotional and intellectual superiors.”

And yet, I realized that I had no way to rebut Adam’s claims that would fall into what Adams probably imagines when he says “reasoned discourse.” Of course, Adams’s own example of “reasoned discourse” isn’t that reasonable; his response to UNCO’s new policies was to suggest that students send the following joke to the dean of student affairs in hopes that someone would sue:

Q: What do you call an Irish communist?
A: O’Bama.

While I could criticize Adams for his unreasonableness by utilizing the discourse of the academy, I couldn’t truly argue for the “intellectual firepower” of the “emotionally frail” without also revealing my own frailty even as I fired my rhetorical cannons at Adams. I felt like my hands were tied.

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And so, this was the baggage I brought to grad school, in particular to Dr. Jason Palmieri’s seminar “New Media and Composition Studies” in the spring of 2010. I was learning a whole new set of discipline-based genre conventions as I made the shift from literature to composition and rhetoric and was feeling quite surprised by the amount of freedom that writing in this new discipline offered. I mean, people were writing about themselves all the time; there were “I”s everywhere, even in some heavily theoretical works. I was also lucky enough to end up
in a department with a lot of interest in embodied and feminist rhetorics, and the combination of these influences brought me back to the “I” in my writing.

Of course, that “I” itself was in limbo. Moving to the Midwest put my Southern self in sharp contrast; I don’t have much of a Southern accent, but I caught myself making an effort to sound like the Midwesterners around me, only to have people comment on how I don’t sound like I’m from the South (and they meant it as a compliment). I went out with some other grad students one night, and somehow ended up telling them about frog gigging: you go out to a pond at night with a flashlight, a gig (sharp pointy metal stick), and a bucket. After you find a frog, you shine the light in his eyes to blind, then stab him and put him in the bucket. Later you skin him then cut the legs off and fry them for a delicious meal. The other grad students at the table stared at me until someone said, “Remember, she’s from Tennessee.” A collective “Oh” of relief swept around the table and the conversation moved on. On another occasion, I explained how instead of buying cough syrup, my dad would just douse a spoonful of sugar with whiskey and give it to seven-year-old me, and a colleague exclaimed, “You can’t give whiskey to a seven-year-old!” In short, I never realized how weird the South seems to others until I left it, but I also didn’t realize how much leeway for weirdness the South is given simply by being the South.

When Jason asked us to design a multimodal composition assignment and then complete it as a midterm project, I had a pretty good idea of what I wanted to do. I wanted to do a project that would involve my voice, accented or not, and I wanted to include storytelling as a rhetorical means while steering away from the pathetic appeals that often mark the genre. After watching a few digital stories, I began designing my own, a narrative about funerals in support of green burials, the practice of placing a body in the ground with minimal chemical treatment and in a container that will deteriorate fairly quickly so that the body can decompose naturally. I spent quite a bit of time in the funeral home across the street from my grandparents’ grocery store when I was a kid and was on a first name basis with the undertakers, so in my narrative I talk about my unnatural intimacy with death and how it has led me to believe that keeping around bodies through chemical preservation and metal boxes is just weird when the funeral is really for the family and friends who have to live with the loss. I used pictures from the funeral home I grew up so close to, of my favorite undertakers, and images from creative commons. (You can watch my video here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dfMQ9fHggJc)
I’ll admit, I was pretty pleased with the finished product. After hours of fiddling with audio recordings, getting permission to use music, deciding on images, and putting it all together, I thought the video looked pretty good. It was a while before I began to question what I had done. I mean, telling my own story was one thing, but I had made the local morticians into characters of some kind of romantic childhood tale of discovery and death. Had I represented my hometown fairly, especially since I was feeling an increasing distance from it? As I’ve continued with my education, I’ve moved farther and farther out of the “typical resident” category. And since I never named a particular location for my narrative, might someone assume I was trying to speak for the entire South? Was it possible that I had in fact presumed to speak for the entire South? For that matter, exactly how Southern was my narrative? Could I even talk about a distinctly Southern narrative?

These worries about the ethics of what I had done turned into this project, an exploration of the use of personal narrative in eco-activist texts from the American South and from my own classroom. In Chapter 1 I’ll be summarizing some of the ways that personal narrative has been used and talked about in composition pedagogy and scholarship, along with its potential when combined with multimodality and ecocompositionist practices. In Chapter 2, I will examine the use of personal narrative in the works of three well-known Southern eco-activists, Barbara Kingsolver, Wendell Berry, and Al Gore, in order to develop a theory of the most ethical way to utilize personal narrative. In Chapter 3, I will move into the classroom, analyzing student works from a multimodal personal narrative assignment and revisiting the assignment itself. Finally, in the Coda, I’ll be returning to the video that I made to reevaluate my ethical dilemma.
My English 111 students are working in small groups, reading their short personal narratives aloud while I circulate around the room. I overhear one student, Gerry, break from his reading to say, “Dude, I totally made that up.” His friends glance around furtively as they realize I’m eyeing them. The excuses begin immediately; Gerry begins explaining that the part of his narrative where his mom gave him a lecture about sexism in advertising never happened because he never watched television with his mom so he wouldn’t get that lecture. “It’s true even though it didn’t happen,” he claims. “I mean, it would have happened, so I can leave it in, right?”

After reassuring Gerry that he won’t be penalized for fudging the details, I begin thinking about the way that Gerry is approaching his personal writing. Granted, I’m asking my students to craft personal narratives that make arguments, but Gerry is clearly not having any trouble with the “truth” or any inclination toward using this work as a means of self-discovery. The personal narrative has been made un-personal for Gerry; instead he’s creating a story that’s not quite fiction but not quite fact for a specific purpose. This reflection leads me to consider the ways personal narrative was used in the academic articles I had recently been reading. Jane E. Hindman (2001) and later William P. Banks (2003) both craft articles that enact their arguments about the importance of the personal in their scholarship while confronting how their positions as a recovering alcoholic and a white, gay, Southern male, respectively, influence their research, their reactions to the scholarship of others, and even their physical interactions with colleagues and students. In a collective College English Symposium, Deborah Brandt et al (2001) address issues of when the personal is relevant in scholarship, the fear that including the personal in scholarship will lead to minority compositionists simply explaining themselves as a minority to the hegemonic discourse, and the ways that reactions to personal revelations are dependent on audience and arena. Yet, in none of these articles does the author address the ways that he or she has shaped the narratives he or she tells or the effects that these narratives are designed to have on the audience. Instead, these narratives are frequently presented as a kind of truth about the

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1 “Gerry” was quite aware of himself as a character, as one of many versions of himself, throughout the class. He even chose his own pseudonym when I asked for permission to talk about his work.
writer that the audience needs to understand, as a practice of situating necessary for “ethical” scholarship.

While a key ethical question of a personal narrative concerns the truth or actuality of the events, an equally important but less frequently discussed question addresses the representations of others within the narrative, the cast of supporting characters or surrounding community. This issue of representation is especially important when the storyteller and those represented are in an unequal power relationship, such as when politicians tell stories about the folks back home or anytime a writer crafts a published narrative without the others involved getting a chance to tell their own side of the story – in short, most times students encounter published or publicized personal narratives, as distinguished from the routine sharing of information through storytelling. Furthermore, students often don’t consider their own representations of others in their personal narratives because they often think that their stories will never leave the classroom; for many of them, a narrative does not appear to be an effective way to make an argument, not a viable way of getting things done in the real world or in academia.

I begin this project, then, with one premise and two goals. The premise: The personal narrative can be effectively used as a consciously constructed rhetorical text that resists “quick closure and easy answers,” as Candace Spigelman says (Personally Speaking 124). The two goals: to complicate the personal narrative by demonstrating that it is always geographically situated and to call attention to the ways the “others” of personal narratives are represented as stereotypes or erased from consideration by the narrative. In order to develop a theory of the personal narrative that takes into consideration location, I will be focusing on the use of personal narrative in eco-activist texts of the American South, particularly those stemming from rural areas. After reviewing some of the scholarship on personal narrative, I will examine alphabetic forms of personal narrative by contemporary Southern authors, specifically essays by Wendell Berry as well as Barbara Kingsolver’s Animal, Vegetable, Miracle, focusing on their crafting of ethos as well as their representations of other individuals and of particular locations. I will also be looking for moments of erasure, where these writers ignore their own class privilege and participation in a capitalist economy as they mount their critique of industrial food production and farming practices. I will then examine the use of personal narrative in multimodal and digital eco-activist texts that arise from and represent the American South, especially Al Gore’s documentary An Inconvenient Truth. I will be focusing on the use of audio and images,
especially those of the author and of others, paying special attention to uses of stock footage and
generic representations of groups of people, such as the images of tobacco workers in *An
Inconvenient Truth*. In my final chapter, I will reflect on my own pedagogical practices relating
to personal narrative, offering analysis of multimodal personal narratives created by students in
my English 111 class related to rural communities and environmental concerns.

**The Rhetoric, Ethics, and Ideology of the Personal Narrative**

Many scholars working to reclaim the personal narrative as a socially informed genre
question the presentation of expressivism made by such social constructivist scholars as James
Berlin and others. Berlin (1988) identifies expressivism as “the descendant of Rousseau on the
one hand and of the romantic recoil from the urban horrors created by nineteenth-century
capitalism on the other,” concerning itself solely with the individual as both creator and judge of
created work (484). Berlin argues that even as expressivism claims to oppose societal norms, it
reifies a social hierarchy by suggesting that when individuals fail to attain positions of agency,
the fault lies not with societal constraints such as race or gender or class, but with “their own
unwillingness to pursue a private vision” (487). Most dangerously, this idea is a widely accepted
explanation among the disenfranchised for their inability to succeed in the academic arena.

After Berlin presented expressivism and social constructivism as very distinct
approaches, the so-called Bartholomae-Elbow debate of the 1980s and 90s continued to coax out
some of the nuances in the positions of social constructivist David Bartholomae and expressivist
Peter Elbow and, consequently, their respective camps. For the purpose of this project, what is
striking in the 1995 exchange is the acceptance by both scholars of “personal” writing in the
classroom; the example essay that the two men use to illustrate their differing practices is one
written by a student about her parents’ divorce. Rather than banishing personal writing from his
classroom or criticizing it in the scholarship of his peers, Bartholomae instead acknowledges the
constructed, rhetorical nature of the personal narrative, arguing that scholarship that abandons
traditional academic forms for more personal approaches “are not examples of transcendence but
of writers calling up, for a variety of purposes, different (but highly conventional) figures of the
writer” (“Writing with Teachers” 67). In his response to Bartholomae’s essay, Elbow also
acknowledges the socially constructed nature of his students’ writing. What is at stake here, then,
is not whether or not personal writing has a place in the classroom, but what we as teachers
should do with it. While Elbow chooses to allow students to maintain individual authority over their narratives, Bartholomae encourages students to place their personal stories in the context of culture, to recognize the ways their stories fall into predictable narrative structures shaped by the same ideological forces that shape the students themselves, and to put their own stories in conversation with the published work of others, much like the social expressivists who follow.

Social expressivist scholars responded to Berlin’s version of expressivism by questioning his assumption that expressivism is apolitical and unconcerned with the ideological realities of writers. In *Romancing Rhetorics*, Sherrie L. Gradin suggests that “one of the reasons expressivist and romantic theories are so easily placed in the position of the ‘other’ is that they are perceived to contain many aspects of what our culture has identified as feminine: a focus on the personal, the emotive, and expression for the self (or a private domain) as well as for a public domain” (13). Gradin reexamines the expressivists indebtedness to the Romantics, most specifically Wordsworth and Coleridge, while positioning these poets as proponents of social change, especially in the area of education. She traces their influence into the field of public education through John Stuart Mill, Matthew Arnold, and John Dewey, pointing out that the educational philosophies of both Coleridge and Wordsworth call for the training of the imagination along with “a more traditional approach of mechanical exercise, memorization, and analytical reasoning” (26). Gradin connects the social concerns of the Romantics with the atmosphere of social revolution during the 1960s out of which expressivism was born and ultimately calls for a pedagogy of “social expressivisms that focus on the self in the world and on writing for change, [...] that envision subjects both acting and being acted upon” (40).

Karen Surman Paley (2001) also engages the political environment out of which expressivism was born, using personal narratives to situate herself as a young woman and student trying to find a voice for change (16-7). In her critique of excluding personal writing from the classroom on the basis of it being apolitical, she articulates how personal narratives are imbued with tensions of race, class, and gender, and the power struggles that ensue from such tensions, noting that “[t]hose who sever such stories from the political beliefs of their students miss out on their pathos and intellectual energy and fail to help their students make important connections between their personal lives and the society at large,” echoing in some ways Bartholomae’s opinion of what should be done with personal narratives in the classroom (20). In
his 2003 article in *College English*, William Banks expresses this tension quite succinctly when he writes,

> If English studies is to be an *ethical* discipline, one concerned with the *ethos* of the writer, then we should think carefully before exiling “personal” writing, for such writing more so than any other format I can think of, offers us and our students spaces to think through all those multiple and shifting signifiers at work on us so that we come up with a sharper understanding of ourselves and those around us. (38)

Gradin, Paley, and Banks demonstrate that personal writing is, in many ways, necessary to develop a social-constructivist sense of self, for without these personal experiences, how can the individual see her relationship to social institutions? Personal writing, these scholars argue, does indeed have a place in the social constructionists’ world view. However, for Gradin and Banks, the personal narrative remains a form of personal discovery, of uncovering deep truths about oneself. Paley, on the other hand, begins pushing the personal narrative into a more public arena, but without questioning the complex relationship between identity and personal narrative or the ethical dilemmas that arise when a rhetor presents others as characters in her narrative.

Beyond creating a sense of self, several scholars have looked to personal narrative as a means for underrepresented rhetors to create agency by establishing authority based on personal experience. Lorraine D. Higgins and Lisa D. Brush record working with female welfare recipients to shape their narratives with audience reactions in mind. In particular, Higgins and Brush spotlight the stereotypes against which their participants are working and the types of narratives – the “hero narrative” and the “victim narrative” – that play into those stereotypes and harm the *ethos* of the narrator. This focus on *ethos* marks a complication in the overly simplistic formula that getting to tell a story equals agency; Higgins and Brush contend that agency may only be gained through a narrator’s relationship with her audience. Juanita Rodgers Comfort moves some of these discussions into the classroom by proposing the use of readings by black feminist writers as models for students as they create their own embodied voice. Comfort writes, “Like all rhetors (student writers included), black feminist essayists must invent effective ways to answer readers’ fundamental question: Who is this person and why should I believe what she says?” (542). She argues that mere academic writing is no longer sufficient for student rhetors and her approach to modeling personal-for-rhetorical writing gives students a new way of presenting expertise while nudging them away from the repetitive personal stories that frequently
dishearten teachers. However, even as these scholars push toward a consideration of audience in the shaping of a narrative, they fail to acknowledge the power of location over how a narrative is shaped and received. Though Higgins and Brush encourage participants to move away from the stereotypical stories, the hero and victim narratives, they do not challenge these women to question the ways that their position as welfare recipients has been constructed by capitalist and patriarchal ideologies until they are reduced to hero or victim narratives.

Candace Spigelman continues this discussion in her book dealing with the rhetorical value of the personal as evidence in academic discourse, detailing the instructional process she used with her first year students to teach them how to integrate personal and academic writing. She advocates making students explicitly aware “that personal writing is not a reflection of a true, authentic self but is a representation of the most appropriate version of a writer for a particular text” and encouraging them to “play at and with subject positions” (Personally Speaking 126-7). She acknowledges that this process and the final product may be messy and unresolved, but ultimately we must “help students to live with uncertainty and irreconcilability in their writing, even as they seek quick closure and easy answers” (124). However, Spigelman’s erasure of those represented in student narratives in fact offers a point of quick closure.

While these scholars point to the personal as a way for writers to develop agency, other scholars express concerns in validating viewpoints that may be racist, sexist, or classist in nature. Gradin acknowledges the difficult terrain a teacher has to negotiate when dealing with personal writing. She calls on her experience at the University of Mississippi, where the student body is predominantly white and middle- to upper-middle-class and teachers frequently deal with remarks that are racist or sexist in nature. However, if we silence our students, “they play the game,” says Gradin. They give us the answers they know we want to hear without ever striving for the “democratic ideal,” barricading themselves “against the onslaught of ‘yet another bleeding-heart liberal’ teacher” (119). Instead, Gradin encourages us to see that our students need to articulate who they are and what they believe before they can begin to wrestle with how they came to hold those beliefs.

Susan C. Jarratt (1991), on the other hand, approaches this issue from a different direction. Writing out of her experiences at Miami University, she argues that “affirming the voice of a white, middle- or upper-middle-class student often involves teachers rationalizing a future in corporate anonymity, in endorsing the clichés or competitive self-interest that
perpetuate a system of racism, sexism, and classism still very much a part of American culture” (109). She also notes that female teachers and students risk “double castration” if they make a practice of Elbow’s “believing game,” reading with a text, because they force themselves to read along with work that potentially subjugates them by its very nature (117). Instead, Jarratt argues that the classroom should be a place for conflict in which students from their various positions speak out against racist and sexist discourse, especially if that discourse is coming from their classmates. While Jarratt is coming down against the personal narrative, I see this work as a call for more careful consideration of the ethics of personal narrative and the appropriation of others that goes on in almost every narrative in order to address the issues that Jarratt raises.2

A few scholars have begun to do this work of questioning the ethics of the personal narrative. Bronwyn T. Williams’s article “Never Let the Truth Stand in the Way of a Good Story: A Work for Three Voices” questions the ways we appropriate others in our narratives and our readiness as readers to accept a writer’s presentation of an individual or group. In three distinct sections, Williams speaks from three distinct writerly positions he has occupied – journalist, fiction writer, and teacher of writing – as he addresses the issue of representation by examining the maxim “Never let the truth get in the way of a good story,” supposedly a favorite of his father. He asks an important question: “Whose story am I allowed to tell? And why am I allowed to tell it, simply because I am a writer?” (297). He describes the difficulty of complicating truth in an undergraduate writing class and of convincing composition scholars that we might not be as ethical as we think when it comes to how we represent students or others in our scholarship. Like those scholars who advocate the use of personal narrative to create agency, Williams understands that being the teller of a story puts one in a position of power, especially when this story involves others; he sums this up nicely when, in his journalist voice, he writes, “Their words. My story” (293). Of course, “their words” even comes into question when Williams reveals at the end of the article that his father never actually said, “Never let the truth get in the way of a good story.” However, Williams offers few solutions to the problem of representation other than to insist that students put themselves in the shoes of those they represent.

2 Based on my experiences teaching personal writing as a graduate teaching assistant at Miami University, I can attest to the validity of Jarratt’s concerns.
In his article “The Nervous System,” Richard E. Miller asserts that we need to move beyond arguing for or against the use of personal narrative to examine the system of cultural capital behind what may be termed a personal preference. At the beginning of the article, Miller plays with the tropes of confessional narrative by describing his father’s suicide attempts, but rather than expecting these narratives to add something to his argument, Miller asks readers to evaluate their own responses, encouraging them to think of culture not only as present in a series of intellectual debates carried out in the academy but also in the varying registers of taste and distaste physically experienced in the body [in order] to take down the cordon separating the public and the private and to recognize that all intellectual products are always, inevitably, also autobiographies. (285)

By bypassing the usual debates, Miller makes space to examine the ways that “personal” writing (in this particular case, confessional poetry) is “already organized by publicly held narrative structures,” echoing Spigelman’s statement that personal narrative only matters if both writer/rhetor and reader/audience agree on what the narrative means, an agreement usually found through a commonly understood structure. Miller, though, furthers the implications of this structuring by aiming toward “an investigation into the ways that institutional forces manifest themselves in the realm of personal experience” (276). Miller is, in his own way, reaffirming Gradin’s and Paley’s claims that the personal narrative is an important stopping point for understanding the social forces at play in one’s writing. At the same time, he complicates the notion that the personal is a more ethical or even feminist means of building an argument since the personal is governed by the same institutional forces as the academic.

Though Williams’s and Miller’s articles seem to have little in common at first, I think that the two of them speak to an ethical and ideological gray area in the use of personal narrative in composition scholarship and pedagogy. Both articles imply that a that there is a construction that goes on in personal narratives, sometimes beyond the rhetorical choices that Spigelman points to; as Williams anecdotally describes the many ways “hard facts” can be transformed into a fictional work or a newspaper story, Miller is arguing that personal narratives are constructed twice: once as the writer recalls the experience and the actual, “true” events that are shaped by the writer’s memory, ideologies, and pervasive genre conventions; and again as the writer shapes the experience for the particular audience. It is also interesting that for both of the scholars, the question of ethics lies with the truth or perceived authenticity of personal narratives. While
Williams is grappling with how the “truth” has been constructed, who that truth might hurt, and how others might accept as fact a narrative that has been adjusted for rhetorical purposes. Miller is concerned with the way that the inclusion of personal writing with scholarly work is viewed by some to be more authentic or ethical even though, Miller argues, personal writing is shaped by the same institutional forces as academic prose. While I appreciate the critiques that both scholars raise, I feel that Williams’s concern with individuals hides the way that personal narrative often relies on stereotypical representations and that Miller’s focus on personal writing as shaped by genre expectation ignores the influence of an individual’s ideological viewpoint, or way of seeing as Fleckenstein would put it. I hope that I can add to this body of scholarship by addressing these issues.

Ecocomposition and Narratives of Place

Since I am looking at the connections between place and narrative, I began to research in the area of ecocomposition, a subfield that explores the ecological properties of and influences on writing. As Christian R. Weisser and Sydney I. Dobrin write in the introduction of the collection *Ecocomposition*, “ecocomposition is about relationships; it is about the c oconstitutive existence of writing and environment; it is about physical environment and constructed environment; it is about the production of written discourse and the relationship of that discourse to the places it encounters” (2). Ecocompositionists frequently stress how the rhetorical concept of context (audience, purpose, situation, etc.) is, in fact, an ecological one; successful writing “must grow from location” (Dobrin 37).

While some ecocompositionists identify themselves through a commitment to the environment and a desire to encourage critical thinking about environmental issues in their students, others work against conflating “environment” with “nature,” such as Mark C. Long, who writes that “[e]nvironmental education […] seeks to do more than integrate environmental content into the curriculum. Its explicit goal is to encourage students to see the world in certain ways and to consider the moral and political implications of their life-style” (133). Long wants to push ecocomposition away from a particular content toward a particular way of seeing or not seeing: “Environmental literacy requires the far more difficult capacity to determine when our established habits of observation and principles of understanding do not apply to particular cases, to be able, when the conditions insist, to imagine alternative ways of living in, and learning from,
the world” (136). David Thomas Sumner also expresses concern for the ways that ecocomposition might be limited by its own ideological foundations. After reviewing a number of syllabi for courses identified by their instructors as ecocompositionist in nature, Sumner concludes that in general these courses either do not take writing as their main focus or they encourage writing instruction through the modes, resulting in essays with no rhetorical context – which, I might note, goes completely against the focus on the ecological nature of writing. Sumner instead proposes an argument-based ecocomposition course that encourages students to search for stasis, points of unresolvable complication in their arguments/essays, rather than repeating a party line – a practice that reflects Long’s call to complicate our ways of seeing.

Julie Drew also expands the realm of ecocomposition as she explores the classrooms as a politicized space. “What may be problematic […] in our current thinking about the place of discursive learning,” she writes,

is that students often exist for compositionists exclusively within the classroom, when the material reality of their lives, and the spaces they inhabit, would suggest that this is only a partial picture at best. And if the places of discursive pedagogy are not only multiple, but in conflict as well, then the classroom itself may be a more complex, and simultaneously less effective as a location of learning than we might have assumed. (41)

Drew encourages teachers to think of students as travelers, as fluent speakers of a number of languages outside the classroom, but also encourages teachers to make students aware of themselves as travelers as a means of helping them acquire a better understanding of rhetorical context. Though not explicitly, in some ways Anis Bawarshi also encourages us to think about writers as travelers as he describes genres as ecological systems that influence and are influenced by writers; he writes that “genres […] are the sites in which communicants rhetorically reproduce the very environments to which they in turn respond – the habits and the habitats for acting in language” (71). Consequently, genre becomes a site that we visit, a topos, but also becomes an ideology that we carry with us. The conventions of the genre are also reaffirmed every time a writer follows those rules, which returns us to Miller’s assertion that our life stories are automatically coded into genres. If a writer’s story does not adhere to the conventions of the narrative genre – if it does not have rising action, climax, and denouement – then that story somehow feels inauthentic even though the details might be true. Yet every time a writer organizes the facts into the accepted mold, it reifies the idea of one correct construction of a
narrative. Bawarshi contends that this interplay between writer and genre is the same as the symbiotic connection between organisms and ecology.

If we can imagine genre as ecology, then an examination of the interplay between writer and physical location is equally important. While these following works do not identify themselves as ecocomposition texts, they are born out of an emphasis of examining writing in the context of physical location. While some, most notably Katherine Keller Sohn, have examined literacy in the American South, their work seems to define “literacy” in a very narrow way without questioning the potential urban bias in the institutional forces that define what constitutes “literacy.” In *Rural Literacies*, however, Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen E. Schell interpret “literacy” much more broadly; “[r]ural literacies,” they write, “[…] refers to the particular kinds of literate skills needed to achieve the goals of sustaining life in rural areas – or […] to pursue opportunities and create the public policies and economic opportunities needed to sustain rural communities” (4). They go on to assert that “rural experiences are erased, denied, or deemed unimportant, where those who are rural are seen as having less ‘experience skill or wits’ rather than having those of a different kind” (14). The example that follows this statement, a comparison of navigating country roads to reading a subway schedule, highlights the ways that some urban skills count as “literacy” – note the word “reading” used with the subway schedule – while the corresponding rural skills do not.

Donehower, Hogg, and Schell proceed to address different issues of rural literacy from different geographical standpoints, Donehower from North Carolina, Hogg from Nebraska, and Schell from Washington, working against a tendency to collapse rural areas into one homogenous group. In their push toward sustainability, they frequently emphasize that “[u]nderstanding the interconnections between the local and the global is important not only for fostering in our students the literacies they need for global citizenship but also a way to understand and, where appropriate, resist, critique, and imagine alternatives to the official logic of neoliberalism” (10). In short, much like Long, Donehower et al want for students to understand how their lifestyles affect both the areas where they live and areas they may never see.

In her book *Living Room*, Nancy Welch echoes this concern about neoliberalism and its effect on public rhetoric. Though not explicitly calling attention to her physical location in Vermont, Welch frequently describes acts of public rhetoric that her students enact in their environment – hanging posters on street signs and building a shanty town – as ways of
encouraging teachers to think more about students’ available means. Welch expresses concerns that students and other potential rhetors will find themselves silenced by hegemonic forces that repeatedly tell them they do not have enough authority or expertise to speak. She calls attention to the political situations that are part of our everyday lives, arguing that these experiences give us both right and authority to speak, especially in an increasingly privatized world, and extolling teachers to make the means of using these experiences available to students.

The work of these ecocompositionists and advocates of place-based composition has been an important starting point for this project for two reasons. First of all, much of the work of ecocompositionists is moving from a pedagogy focused on the environment writ large to a pedagogy that encourages students to understand their place in a web or community that holds other humans, yes, but also animal and plant life, architecture and infrastructure, economics, politics, etc. A student’s “environment,” then, becomes not just “nature” but whatever locations she frequents as well as interconnected locations she never actually sees. Secondly, looking at both ecocomposition and place-based rhetoric gives me a framework for placing the environmental issues I will be discussing into the physical locations which they concern, a framework to address the way that environmental rhetoric is shaped by location and shapes public perception of those locations.

Multimodality and Digital Storytelling

I am interested in combining personal narrative with multimodality/multigenre work as a pedagogical practice for two reasons: the potential of multimodal/digital texts to reach an audience outside the classroom and the fact that multiple modalities and genres might allow students to view their narratives from multiple viewpoints. Digital storytelling, or the practice of combining an audio narrative with digital images or video using widely available image or movie editing software, has become more common in humanities classrooms. In their praise for the practice, many scholars have pointed to digital storytelling’s potential to be shared with others outside the classroom and get students involved in “something that will make a difference in the lives of others,” (Fletcher and Cambre 111), to help students engage with course material on a deeper level (Sadik), and to give marginalized students the tools for speaking out (Benmayor; Hull and Katz). However, few scholars have examined digital storytelling as a rhetorical genre or complicated the ethical concerns of such texts.
Glynda A. Hull and Mira-Lisa Katz’s study of the use of digital storytelling at DUSTY (Digital Underground Storytelling for Youth), a technology center in Oakland, CA, is fairly representative of the way most scholars are presenting digital storytelling. They focus on how digital storytelling “helped to position these participants to articulate pivotal moments in their lives and to assume agentive stances toward their present identities, circumstances, and futures” (44). Hull and Katz articulate one of the tensions of social-expressivism as they describe their framework on agency, noting that “our sense of self-determination” is molded by our positions in social, cultural, and historical contexts and arguing that “people can develop agentive selves, using the unique repertoire of tools, resources, relationships, and cultural artifacts [...] that are available at particular historical moments in particular social and cultural contexts” (47). Hull and Katz present the case studies of two participants, recording how the storytellers appropriated images, audio, and even genre for their own purposes and worked through revisions to come to conclusions about what they wanted to say. However, Hull and Katz seem to be simplifying agency into something a rhetor gains merely through composing rather than the more complicated idea Higgins and Brush put forth of agency as a relationship between the rhetor and audience.

While she does not specifically reference digital storytelling, Kristie S. Fleckenstein has spoken widely about the intersection of visual rhetorics with alphabetic texts. I owe a great deal of credit to her book Vision, Rhetoric, and Social Action for informing my understanding of the ways that image can be combined with text in the context of social action. She begins by emphasizing the interplay between human and environment common to ecocomposition: “Bodies cannot exist without an environment that not only contains bodies but also affects the constitution of those bodies” (35). Rhetorical habits and visual habits, she argues, are inextricably linked to location: “Any system of visual habits, rhetorical habits, and place serves to endow some segments of a community with agency in a particular arena (such as women in the kitchen) while withholding agency from others (such as women in the public sphere)” (42). Fleckenstein proceeds to give detailed descriptions of three different “symbiotic knots,” each made up of a visual habit, a rhetorical habit, and a location, as well as the types of discourse that are typically found working within these symbiotic knots, using the metaphor of the knot to articulate the difficulty of separating rhetorical habits, visual habits, and locations. Most notable for this project is Fleckenstein’s contention that asking students to combine their textual projects
with images can lead to self-reflection on the breaks between visual and rhetorical habits, creating new spaces and contradictions to explore. Furthermore, Fleckenstein argues that “[b]ecause so much of the work in composition studies focuses on helping students know what to say or helping students, in Welch’s words, ‘to be heard,’ we need to pay more attention to helping students know how they see (or are seen) and how those visual habits affect what they say (or cannot say)” (149). While Fleckenstein does explore the potential for combining images with memoir for self-discovery and invention, I want to extend her work by exploring the ethical complications of engaging students in crafting multimodal personal narratives to make rhetorical arguments in the public sphere.

In an earlier article, Anne Frances Wysocki also comments on the potential of visual habits to reveal our cultural and ideological positions. Wysocki’s “With Eyes that Think, and Compose, and Think: On Visual Rhetoric” offers reasons and strategies for using images and visual rhetoric in the composition classroom as she writes that “I want us to be aware how the [visual] strategies we choose reinforce (and can perhaps help us be aware of and question) values, habits, and structures of our places and times” (184). This idea of reinforcement recalls Miller’s contention that all life experiences are organized in genres when recollected as well as Bawarshi’s notion of genres and those who use them reinforcing each other. I would argue that the break between visual habits and rhetorical habits that Fleckenstein offers as such a ripe location for reflection and complication is what happens when one attempts to adhere to the conventions of multiple genres, be they visual or rhetorical/textual. In this light, combining a genre so steeped in stereotypical forms as personal narrative with visual representations can create productive disruptions in what might otherwise be a monologic text.

Julie Jung also advocates setting multiple genres next to each other, though her work deals with primarily alphabetic text. She argues that “juxtaposing genres within a single text disrupts readers and delays meaning making, and that such disruptions can result in reader responses that forces writers to revise more deeply” (3). Defining revisionary rhetoric as “a rhetoric of relationship,” Jung “draw[s] attention to the fact that all human relationships, including those that exist between readers and writers, enjoy moments of intimacy, closeness and connection, but they also involve inevitable separation, loss, misunderstanding, disappointment, and pain” (9, 16). Jung’s revisionary techniques rely heavily on Krista Ratcliffe’s idea of rhetorical listening and encourages writers to make space for a reader to speak back to the text.
both metaphorically and literally, to create disruption first in the writer’s potentially monologic argument and then in the expectations of the reader. Throughout Revisionary Rhetoric, Feminist Pedagogy, and Multigenre Texts, Jung offers several examples of multigenre work, abutting personal narratives with theory, inserting sections of interviews with colleagues and students, and including diary entries from her younger self as she seeks what it means to be a feminist writing teacher in an attempt to disrupt traditional thinking on the subject, both her own and others’.

Some Notes on Methodology

These multigenre/modal approaches to composing that use juxtaposition to generate disruptions in expectations and thinking have greatly informed the construction of this text itself. Jung writes that a “common type of easy response found in our professional scholarship is the defensively critical one. This is easy because it allows a listener to be critical of another without obligating her to consider the way she participates in the very thing she critiques” (17-8). As I was formulating my early ideas for this thesis, I caught myself falling into the trap of being defensively critical, and, given the genre I’m working in, a defensively critical response to texts that are quite clearly classist would be appropriate. However, I wanted to resist this impulse. I wanted to open up spaces to talk back to myself, to allow for my multiple, often contradictory viewpoints to emerge as I discuss the use of personal narrative in texts that I feel like I have some kind of stake in. I wanted to delay my own meaning making, especially when I’m dealing with texts that I have such emotional reactions to, like Gore’s An Inconvenient Truth and Kingsolver’s Animal, Vegetable, Miracle. I wanted to make space for myself as a Southerner and a storyteller as well as an academic. As Fleckenstein writes, “the suture marks between life lived and life represented provides a space for marshaling a resistance to representation, a resistance to imposed silence” (64). At the same time, I wanted my work to be informed by the fifteen strategies for a situated scholarship that Lisa Ede presents in the final chapters of Situating Composition, especially her admonitions to “always historicize” (192), to acknowledge our “passionate attachments” (195), and to allow personal experience to inform and interrogate scholarly work (203). I wanted to make clear to my audience that my thoughts and feelings about the texts and issues I’m dealing with are not fixed in any sense, but rather have changed over time and continue to change.
In the proceeding chapters, then, I will be following Jung’s multigenre approach, inserting personal narratives and some critical reflections on those narratives to interrupt the “academic” prose. I have included these moments especially at points where I felt uncomfortable with the assertions I was making as an academic or when I realized that my emotional reactions were interfering with my intellectual judgments. I have also included descriptions of how my thinking about certain issues has changed over time and how my “passionate attachments” to particular locations, ideas, and representations have influenced the way I view the work at hand. I hope to show how personal narrative may be used not only to make an argument or situate oneself, but also to disrupt expectations, to delay meaning making, to complicate what might be straightforward rhetorical analysis.

Given the nature of this project, it seems especially important to position myself, not just ideologically but also geographically. I’m from Gordonsville, TN, a small rural town with a population of around 1,100. Most of my grandmother’s thirteen brothers and sisters have lived in Smith County (where Gordonsville is located) their entire lives. Many of my cousins live in the surrounding areas, in about a 60 mile radius extending from this epicenter. My mom met my dad, whose family is from the Knoxville area, at the Pill Box, a local pharmacy. After they married, they moved to Alabama, back to Tennessee (where my brother and I were born), then to northern Georgia, where we spent the next ten years before returning to Tennessee.

Smith County was primarily an agricultural community with an extensive zinc mining operation, though that is changing as it is in many rural communities across the country. Its largest town and county seat, Carthage, was built on the main water thoroughfare, the Caney Fork River, but as river travel died out, so did Carthage. On the “official” maps of what counts as Appalachia, such as the one in Katherine Keller Sohn’s *Whistlin’ and Crownin’ Women of Appalachia*, Smith County lies on the edge of what is considered Appalachia. In fact, Smith County lies in the Highland Rim, the relatively flat region between the Nashville Basin and the Cumberland Plateau that marks the beginning of Appalachia. This borderland quality plays out in how Smith County natives talk about the area; for example, when I asked my brother if he considered Smith County Appalachian, he said that northern part of the county feels Appalachian but the southern part of the county (where my family lives) doesn’t. My friend Alex, whose family lives on the northern side of the county, says that if we have to debate whether or not Smith County is Appalachian, then it’s not. To him Appalachian is something certain. It seems
that many residents of Smith County take pride in the county not being Appalachian; we tend to make those counties east of us, toward Appalachia, the butts of our jokes, while the counties to the west and the more urban Nashville area are more desirable.

This identification of Smith County – and consequently myself – as or as not Appalachian is probably more important to me than it is to this project. Identifying myself as not just a Southerner but a particular kind of Southerner has taken on a particular urgency since I’ve left my home, and not just to me but to the other Southerners I know. For example, when my new Midwestern boyfriend was explaining to a friend that he was dating a girl from Tennessee, the friend immediately asked, “Is she a hillbilly?” When I told one of my Tennessee friends about this later, he said, “You’re not a hillbilly; you’re a redneck. Hillbillies live in East Tennessee” (and again we see the distinction between Appalachia and Smith County). But even the term “redneck” isn’t enough, because people in my area frequently distinguish between good kinds of rednecks, or “good ol’ boys,” and bad kinds of rednecks, just plain “rednecks” or “white trash.” And, of course, Jeff Foxworthy has created a whole other taxonomy for redneck-ness with his “you might be a redneck” jokes. Since I grew up making these kinds of distinctions between different rural groups I was surprised to realize that Donehower is right when she notes that all rural areas tend to be marked with the same stereotypes as Appalachia, to all be collapsed together into one homogenous group. I understand that it is important for Southern people to make these distinctions among themselves to fight this kind of homogeneity, but these fiercely defended groupings only serve to other us even more from the urban norm, or even justify urban assumptions about rural people, even as they reinforce stereotypes based on race and class.

Yet even as I write this, I worry that I’m falling into the same trap of trying to avoid complication by dividing, categorizing, or perhaps even romanticizing. I also wonder at the many competing goals I want to accomplish with this description of Smith County: establishing my ethos as a Southerner, giving a backdrop for the stories I’ll tell, and showing others a place that I love so much (yes, I’ll admit, I love telling people about Smith County). At the same time, I feel like I can’t tell or show enough in this short space to avoid in some ways relying stereotypes and assumptions. I find myself attempting some kind of neutrality, sticking with geography to avoid telling the personal things, like how I always felt somewhat wealthy compared to the other kids at my school because my grandparents owned the only grocery store in town and my brother
and I both got cars for our sixteenth birthdays. And I don’t want to tell this because it will be admitting to the class differences between myself and the others that I will be representing in my stories, not to mention the education divide as well. Much like Williams, I find myself asking, “Why do I get the right to represent these people just because I’m a grad student?” But admitting these things is at odds with my goal of establishing ethos. And already, my personal experiences have become a problem for the genre and expectations of the “thesis.”
Chapter 2

My Dear Old Southern Home:
Complicating Southern Identity and Location-Based Ethos

I should begin with a disclaimer: my reactions to the texts I am exploring are complicated, convoluted, and contradictory – especially as I am finding myself to have much in common with these rhetors since my own Southern identity has been thrown into sharp contrast during my time in the Midwest. I cannot separate my “academic” thoughts from my “personal” feelings; my rational and emotional inform each other, and so I’ve included both. Mind you, I am not presenting my experience as The Southern Way of Life, but rather a Southernness, one that is complicated and multi-vocal, in response the limited/limiting presentations of Southernness in the texts I am analyzing.

In this chapter, I will be discussing several texts, including Barbara Kingsolver’s memoir *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (2007), three essays by Wendell Berry (1969, 1985, and 1989), and Al Gore’s documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), texts of the eco-activist genre written/presented by Southerners (Kingsolver and Berry hail from Kentucky, Gore from Tennessee). My intention in setting these rhetors next to each other is to highlight a number of similarities that affect the design of their narratives: all are “returning” to the South, whether physically or through memory; they all in some ways use spectacle in order to construct idealized versions of location; and in general, these writers erase their own socioeconomic situation through stereotypical representations of Southern farming culture. What I hope to show is the way that a “mono-identity,” such as the Southern farming façade that Kingsolver and Gore both take up as well as Berry’s well-deserved ethos as a farmer, easily allows a rhetor to utilize stereotypical representations of other people or locations or erase other aspects of his/her own identity by using those same stereotypical representations for themselves. Meanwhile, I hope the multigenre nature of my critique demonstrates the potential of personal narrative that acknowledges the complex – and sometimes contradictory – relationship between identity and location.

In analyzing these texts, I’ll be use the theory of spectacle as outlined in Kristie Fleckenstein’s *Vision, Rhetoric, and Social Action in the Composition Classroom*. Locating spectacle in a “symbiotic knot of silence,” Fleckenstein argues that it has three devastating
effects on agency: “the tyranny of the immediate, the erasure of expertise, and the promulgation of a false sense of unity” (52). Quoting French media critic Guy Debord, Fleckenstein writes, “Spectacle is not just a collection of images, though it embraces imagery; instead ‘it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images,’ producing a reality of image-events inextricable from consumer culture” (52). This idea that images mediate relationships between people seems especially important when those images are of people themselves, and spectacle gives us a way to talk about the connections that develop between stereotypes and the images of stereotyped groups. The “tyranny of the immediate” results in spectacle being ahistorical, unsituated in cultural or historical context and even erasing the possibilities of the future, and Fleckenstein argues that spectacle discourages belief in personal expertise as we passively watch state appointed experts. As viewers are focused on an immediate moment and learn to distrust their personal experiences, a false sense of unity develops that disallows dissenting opinions or multiple viewpoints. I have found this idea of spectacle especially useful in understanding how rhetors work to present stereotypical representations as actuality.

For the remainder of this chapter, I’ll be analyzing my selected eco-activist narratives using Fleckenstein’s framework as well as a variety of rhetorical theories and my own personal experience and observations. I have opted to begin with Kingsolver’s work since my critique of her work is fairly straightforward and lays a groundwork for dealing with the more complicated relationship with Berry and his place-based *ethoi*. Finally, I will move into the multimodal by analyzing the ethics of representation in Gore’s audio-visual narratives.

“The greenest, kindest place in all this world”: Kingsolver and the Romanticizing of the South

Barbara Kingsolver’s 2007 release *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* follows in the footsteps of Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*. The book is largely touted as a memoir: Kingsolver and her family commit to eating locally for one year, growing their own fruits and vegetables, raising their own poultry, or buying from other farmers in their area, and Kingsolver records the triumphs and frustrations along the way. However, Kingsolver frequently blurs the lines; she writes just as much about agriculture science and industry as she does about her own life. This combination of journalism and memoir certainly reflects the feminist cry “The personal is political!” but it also highlights the rhetorical nature of Kingsolver’s narratives.
Kingsolver begins the memoir by recounting what exactly led the family to uproot themselves from Arizona and permanently move to the Virginia farm where they had spent their summers. After this initial situating of the narrative, the memoir continues along in a chronological order, beginning with the month of April when asparagus first appears and ending in the following March with the hatching of turkey poults. Following Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford’s complication of the distinction between audience addressed and audience invoked, I would argue that Kingsolver’s work displays a contradiction between the two: Kingsolver’s addressed audience would most likely be those people who already read her work, are environmentally conscious, and are interested in greener and local food production. However, Kingsolver’s invoked audience is a group of complete novices who know nothing about where food comes from, either geographically or biologically. M. Jimmie Killingsworth and John Krajicek’s discussion of the ideal audience of nature writers seems especially pertinent in this situation:

The rhetoric of irony turns on the development of what has been understood as a *triple persona*. The First Persona is that of the alienated author, the first-person “I” of the discourse. The author’s ideal audience can be viewed as a Second Persona, a character that plays the role of the intimately address second-person “you” for the author’s knowledgeable “I.” For Thoreau and for followers like Dodge, the Second Persona is the aspiring novice or fellow initiate into nature’s chosen few. The development of an ideal audience or Second Persona already hints at an excluded audience, a Third Persona, which stands as “they” to author’s “I” and to the ideal audience’s “you.” Identification forms between the First and Second Persona as together they ironically contemplate the ignorance of the Third Persona: “You and I can see how stupid and misguided they are. It’s up to us to save the world.” (49).

The three personas of *AVM* become quickly apparent: Kingsolver as the First Persona addresses those environmentally conscious local foodies who compose the Second Persona concerning the Third Persona of the ignorant masses who buy their food out of season at the grocery store. However, often Kingsolver’s pronouns tell a different story: “We don’t know beans about beans,” she writes. “Asparagus, potatoes, turkey drumsticks – you name it, we don’t have a clue how the world makes it” (11).
I was a little offended when Kingsolver began announcing the relationship between food and “us.” Excuse me, my little internal respondent says, but I spent many summer vacations picking and breaking beans with my grandparents and great-grandmother. I know something about beans. I know that vegetables come out of dirt and meat comes from animals. I’ve taken calves to the sale barn knowing full well that someone was going to buy them and fatten them up, then kill them for someone to eat them. Once I accepted the premise that Kingsolver was not, in fact, writing for those readers who were raised in rural areas, I felt less threatened by her “we” statements; I was, in effect, not part of the “we.”

Kingsolver’s use of the pronoun “we” here seems to indicate a desire to include all Americans in this ignorance, but it also alienates the Second Persona, those who do know where beans come from, and most rural readers – especially important given that these are the people she is representing throughout the work. In fact, it was very common in the Amazon.com reviews of the memoir to find readers who were annoyed with Kingsolver’s didactic tone and said the book presented them with little to no new information, but still gave the book four or five stars because they agreed with its message. Kingsolver’s invoked audience, then, seems to comprise those urban dwellers in the anecdotes she presents early on, the editor who thinks pineapples grow on trees and the inner-city kid who thinks spaghetti might come out of the ground like carrots (11-12).

This conflict in audience has interesting effects on how Kingsolver develops her ethos. She makes a point of locating her ethos in the land itself, a move that is especially important since she has been gone from the South for so long. Though originally from rural Kentucky, Kingsolver traveled the world and spent two decades in Tucson, AZ, before returning to her roots. “In my adult life,” she writes, “I’d hardly shared a phone book with anyone else using my last name. Now I could spend Memorial Day decorating my ancestors’ graves with peonies from my backyard” (3). This note serves a purpose for her urban audience as well as her (presumed) rural audience. As she later explains, “the first question [rural people] ask one another is not ‘What do you do?’ but rather, ‘Who are your people?’ Commonly we will spend more than the first ten minutes of a new acquaintance tracing how our families might be related” (209). For her rural readers, this announcement of connection to the land through the bodies of her ancestors is
an important part of establishing an *ethos* to speak from this particular location. These kinds of
generational roots mark her as an “insider,” albeit one who has been absent for many years.

However, if we accept the premise that Kingsolver’s invoked audience is not the rural
group she speaks of but is instead the urban dwellers with little knowledge of farm life, then I
would imagine that she goes through the ritual of location as a means of meeting the expectations
her urban audience would have about how a southern writer would establish her *ethos* in relation
to place. The common stereotype of rural people’s emphasis on familial relations (from the
lighter side of asking “Who are your people?” to the more problematic depictions of casual
incest) has become one of the primary tropes through which outsiders “understand” the South.
As such, Kingsolver adheres to these stereotypes and can therefore speak as a “Southerner”
rather than as a person situated in an amalgamation of locations.

*When I was waitressing at a local family-owned restaurant in my hometown, I had a set
of repeat customers: an elderly man and woman who were always impatient, always dissatisfied,
and always poor tippers. I tried my hardest to please them, brought their drink order to their
table before they told me what they wanted because they always ordered the same thing, but
nothing seemed to help. One night, my family came into restaurant and sat in my section while
this elderly couple was there, and apparently my mom knew them. As they chatted, Mom
identified me as her daughter and consequently “Mrs. Georgia’s granddaughter” (my identifier
with the most cultural capital in the area). After that, I always got a good tip from them.

I would like to say that the family ties stereotype is vastly overused or a marker of the
past, but based on my own experiences, such as this one, it hasn’t completely died out. In fact,
while I’m not worried about figuring out how I’m related to people, I do want to know if a new
acquaintance has brothers or sisters, where they fall in the line of siblings, if they are close with
extended family, how many of their grandparents are still living, whether their parents are
separated or still together, and on and on. Why? I guess I like seeing people in relation to other
people. I like thinking about communities or groups in family terms.

Of course, I can’t help but notice the way that I just
represented the couple that came into the restaurant, the way I
have shaped them into one-dimensional caricatures for the sake
of making my point. In one sense, I feel okay with this because one-dimensionally was really the only way I knew them; I am adhering to the truth of the experience as I experienced it. On the other, I am performing the same stereotyping that I’m critiquing. Promises, promises.

Candace Spigelman notes how the invocation of location to aide a writer’s ethos has been oversimplified, summing it up as “the listener or reader then has an opportunity to judge the speaker or writer by understanding who she is and where she comes from” (36). Spigelman counters this viewpoint, writing that “we do not reproduce ourselves in writing; rather, as Aristotle suggests, we select strategically the most appropriate versions and representations to complete our rhetorical purpose” (44-5). If the writer is constructing herself in the most “appropriate version,” then who she says she is and where she says she is from are both choices rather than authentic statements. Kingsolver, who has several biology degrees, chooses to construct herself as a Southerner rather than a Scientist, evident in the way she describes the life cycle of asparagus in the language of love – “The fresh stems have the tight, shiny sex appeal of dressed-up matrons on the dance floor of a Latin social club, but they lose their shine and crispiness so quickly when the song is over” – rather than the language of science (30), even when addressing an urban audience which is not stereotypically plagued with the same distrust of intellectualism as a rural audience. If rhetoric is, as Richard E. Miller puts it, “an activity whereby we remake ourselves in the image of those in power,” then Kingsolver remakes herself in the image of the Farmer, with the common sense attitude this figure is supposed to embody (282). Kingsolver writes, “It is not my intention to lionize country wisdom over city ambition. I only submit that the children of farmers are likely to know where food comes from, and that the rest of us would do well to pay attention” (8). Kingsolver proceeds to recount the ways that farmers have lived for years, culminating in her description on an Amish farm in Ohio. In short, Kingsolver’s entire book is a positioning of “country wisdom” over “city ambition,” in contradiction to her claim otherwise.

But Kingsolver’s celebration of the Farmer with his generous helping of down-home common sense is perhaps not as progressive or radical as she would like to make it out to be. Victor Villanueva writes that “common sense maintains elements of previous hegemonies,
reflecting current forces while containing previous forces, reflecting past ideological struggles as well as present ones, reflecting past social relations and current relations” (124-5). AVM embraces both the ideology of local community as well as the ideology of rugged American individualism, insinuating that all one needs to free oneself from the Industrial Food Complex is neighbors and know-how. As many amateur reviewers of the book have noted, Kingsolver presents a lifestyle that is unattainable for many Americans; her old fashioned work ethic belies the start-up cost of such a project, which would easily run into many thousands of dollars, even if one already owned suitable land for farming. When Kingsolver does question the value of this rugged American individualism she exemplifies, it is not a question of economics as much as a question of usurping traditional cultural practices and thus usurping the ideology of local community. In her comparison of the fierce loyalty of European food culture to the “bad taste” of Americans, she sarcastically writes, “We came [to America] for the freedom to make a Leaves of Grass kind of culture and hear America singing to a good beat, pierce our navels as needed, and eat whatever we want without some drudge scolding: ‘You don’t know where that’s been!’” (4). While ignoring how her family’s decision to remove themselves from the Industrial Food Complex in fact falls very neatly into our “Leaves of Grass kind of culture,” Kingsolver lauds the (sometimes oppressive) food mores of foreigners and frequently gripes that America doesn’t have its own food culture (not so, says my “foodie” colleague; we have apple pie).

Despite this erasure of her personal financial positioning, some of Kingsolver’s narratives do deal directly with the economics of food, such as her story about growing up in a tobacco county. Kingsolver describes how the financial welfare of the entire community, not just those who grew tobacco, depended on the crop and her dismay at discovering in college that not all people understood that growing tobacco was often more a choice of financial viability rather than bad morals. Kingsolver writes,

Yes, I do know people who’ve died wishing they’d never seen a cigarette. Yes, it’s a plant that causes cancer after a long line of people (post farmer) have specifically altered and abused it. And yes, it takes chemicals to keep the blue mold off the crop. And it sends people to college. It makes house payments, buys shoes, and pays doctor bills. It allows people to live with their families and shake hands with their neighbors in one of the greenest, kindest place in all this world. (74)
Kingsolver goes on to say that “most tobacco farmers wish they could grow something else,” recalling the family of a childhood friend who attempted to make a living off green peppers instead of tobacco and lost a year’s earnings as a result. Her final point is that if people paid more for vegetables, tobacco farmers could farm vegetables instead of tobacco.

In my undergraduate Advanced Composition course, I wrote an essay exploring my complicated relationship with the Smith County zinc mine, which polluted the Caney Fork River, turned former farmland into something that resembles the surface of the moon, and helped send my mother, my brother, and me – and countless others – to college. I understand the point Kingsolver is trying to make here, even as I cringe at the use of “greenest, kindest place.”

Again we are reminded of Kingsolver’s status as a “Southerner,” but not in a general or stereotypical way; rather, she presents a variety of “Southerners,” the town kids and the farm kids, people from a tobacco county as opposed to people from, say, a mining county, a move which complicates her own identity. However, once again, Kingsolver “lionize[s] country wisdom over city ambition” as she describes the South as “one of the greenest, kindest places in all this world,” a romantic notion that causes her move toward complexity to fall flat. I would imagine that Kingsolver realized that she was getting close to breaking the romantic vision of rural life that she has constructed for the “urban people who live rural life vicariously,” as Amazon.com reviewer Sam Thayer writes. Kingsolver’s more complicated ethos isn’t the only thing that falls flat here; the complicated relationship between grower, packager, buyer, public perception, and public policy that Kingsolver attempts to illustrate through this narrative ends up in binaries: the kids of the tobacco county versus the “well-educated” college students, the friendly tobacco farmers versus disgruntled non-consumers, the uninviting college atmosphere versus “the greenest, kindest place.” As several Amazon.com reviewers note, Kingsolver’s defense of tobacco farmers contrasts sharply with her condemnation of shipping food over long distances; like the farmers who are working to support their families and have few choices for how to do that, people who work in the shipping industry are often in similar situations.

Miller notes that publicized narratives are personal experiences “already organized by publicly held narrative structures” (276). This comes through perhaps most clearly in Kingsolver’s final narrative on the book, a story of burgeoning sexuality, unrequited love, the
sacrifices of motherhood, and the new hopes and dreams that come with each new generation...as told through turkeys. Kingsolver recounts the difficulties she has first getting her turkeys to mate, then to go broody on the nest, as she tries to establish a breeding flock for her family’s sustained consumption. After increasing anxiety that all might have been for naught, that the turkey poultS are dead before hatching, the book concludes with Kingsolver and her young daughter witnessing the hatching of ten little poultS. A picture-perfect ending.

Consider, though, how the mood of the book, and the stability of the argument Kingsolver is making, would have shifted if the turkey poultS had, in fact, been dead, representing the failure of the local eating systems, or perhaps its murder by the Industrial Food Complex which has given us turkeys with little to no mating and/or mothering instinct. Consider, also, that this is where this story ends, rather than Kingsolver continuing to tell us exactly how many of those poultS survived to adulthood (my own experience with raising farm fowl makes me incredulous that all survived).

Much of Southern storytelling puts the punch-line in the middle, and not just in humorous stories. My mother, recounting her latest dealings with any kind of customer service representative, will get to the main point about the representative’s actions (or lack thereof) then continue on as if that wasn’t the main point. I never realized this until my Midwestern boyfriend said something about how my mom’s and my brother’s stories tend to go on and on long after the story is told. But the story isn’t told entirely just because you get to the main point; there’s a certain amount of revisiting and restructuring that goes on in the way that my mom continues to give details even after the point has been made. In short, our stories don’t follow the typical plot diagram. Thinking about this returned me to my freshman year of college and the group of friends I had then; several of them were from “elsewhere” and had ended up in Middle Tennessee for one reason or another. It wasn’t uncommon for me to tell a story and afterwards have someone respond, “That was a terrible story. What was the point? It took me a while to realize that my friends thought my stories were so terrible because they didn’t come to a point in the way my listeners expected.

I feel slightly hypocritical when I present this idea to my students, the idea that personal narrative must be arranged in a
familiar narrative form in order to feel “real” or “authentic.” It’s a kind of catch-22; I want their experiences to be valued as evidence, but I also understand that sometimes, the only way for those stories to be valued is to shape them according to a narrative form. I want to teach them an effective means of making an argument, but I also want to teach resistance or skepticism of narrative forms. I resist telling my students about a “right” way and a “wrong” way, but I feel like they often simplify my talks about rhetorical situation, about audience-based choices, into this binary.

Kingsolver’s participation in spectacle is complicated; though her text does not include images, I would argue that many of her descriptive passages have ekphrastic qualities, such as the chapter in which she details her family’s visit to their Amish friends in Ohio (159-69). These romanticized descriptions of farm life distract from the complicated economic and political situations of rural communities even as Kingsolver strives to shed light on the economic and political forces that shape food production. Her work displays another characteristic that Fleckenstein associates with spectacle: the creation of a false sense of unity (50). Kingsolver’s descriptions of rural places do exactly what Donehower, Hogg, and Schell warn against: coding all rural places as the same while ignoring the specific political, economic, social, and even geographical features that inform the issues of each location. In the case of AVM, this collapse centers around food production, with Kingsolver primarily presenting rural communities having only one way of generating income: farming. Now, this is a reasonable rhetorical choice, given the nature of her argument, but it reinforces stereotypical assumptions about rural areas as well (see Schell for actual statistics about rural income).

I have to admit, I kind of like that romanticized farming version of rural areas. I like thinking about how green and spread out my home county is, how there are big pastures separating my parents’ house from their closest neighbor, how you’ll see tractors with huge bales of hay chugging along down the highway. But I also understand that I have to temper my own idealism with the recognition that most people I know make their living working at the Bon-L.
manufacturing plant or at the zinc mine or any number of other small businesses in town or in the neighboring counties.

As Kingsolver’s didactic tone conveys that she is an expert here to clear away all misconceptions about food production, she seems to anticipate what Fleckenstein would call “rhetorical compliance” – seems to expect readers to put down her book and immediately go to the nearest farmers market. She leaves little room for contradictory viewpoints, such as when she ridicules many arguments for vegetarianism, even then correcting misconceptions about the humaneness of vegetarianism, pointing out the many animals and insects that die in industrial food production (222). I think, though, the most striking example of the rhetorical compliance resulting from this text is in the Amazon.com reviews. I’ve already noted that many reviewers levied some of the same critiques at Kingsolver that I’m making here, yet still gave the book high ratings because they agreed with the book’s argument. This contradiction between the book’s argument and the way the argument is presented recalls Fleckenstein’s assertion that “if the goal of social action is compassionate living, then the symbolic acts designed to effect that change must possess elements that align with compassionate living” (6). Instead of insisting that the means must line up with the ends, many reviewers of Kingsolver’s memoir seem to have accepted that this is the best they can hope for, following the prescribed formula of giving a high rating to the book in hopes that others will read it.

What I take away from Kingsolver is a certain caution about the superficial way an identity can be constructed through a careful selection of narratives. For all her good intentions toward small farms and local agriculture, Kingsolver has created a text that unfairly homogenizes all rural locations into agricultural areas and seems to be arguing that all rural people should be farmers. I also think that this text shows us the central role that the invoked audience plays in the construction of narratives, and the potential of those narratives to fall flat if the invoked and addressed audiences do not line up. Finally, I’m left wondering how the people of Kingsolver’s community feel about how they are represented in this work, especially if she is profiting from simplistic or stereotypical representations.
“Such history as my family has is the history of its life here”: Berry and the Primacy of the Land

It is, perhaps, impossible to talk about eco-activism in the South without talking about Wendell Berry. The Kentucky native’s name has become almost synonymous with a certain agrarian ethos; Michael Pollan notes in the introduction to Berry’s collection Bringing It to the Table how little is said in our new national conversation about food that Berry didn’t say sometime in the 1970s and 80s. Moving from Luddite to prophetic voice, from backwards farmer to chic name to drop at your next locavore-themed dinner party, the shift in the public perception of Berry seems to have little to do with his writing itself and more to do with cultural capital of his name and story as a farmer/writer who uses no electricity, no typewriter, no computer, no farm equipment that isn’t pulled by animals, and no chemicals. In short, Berry’s street cred is through the roof.

While Berry’s reputation as an activist is thoroughly justified – the 76-year-old recently participated in a sit-in protesting mountain-top removal at the Kentucky governor’s mansion – the conservative values upon which much of his writing rests might come as a surprise to some of those locavores who so readily drop his name. Consider, for example his 1989 response to several letters he received regarding an essay in which he explains why he chooses not to use a computer, why instead he writes his work by hand, then gives it to his wife to type up on a typewriter. He rebuts the angry feminists who claim he is exploiting his wife by arguing that women who work outside the home are just as subjugated to men as women who work inside the home, which many feminist might agree with. However, given that many of his essays that touch on the issue of marriage seem to assert that marriage as an institution is failing because husbands and wives no longer work together inside the home, Berry is not in fact arguing for a change in the way women are treated in the workplace but rather for an abandonment of the workplace altogether by both men and women, a view that seems distinctly archaic when placed against the ideas of other Southern eco-activists such as Gore and Kingsolver.

I have long admired Wendell Berry as a man who lives the life he recommends for others and for his ideas about community and a person’s need to feel some kind of responsibility for a place. However, the more I read of his work, the more I began to feel that he is perhaps quite out of touch. He seems to feel that this sense of community is only possible through a rural lifestyle that
is now incredibly outdated while ignoring the loyalty that urbanites feel toward their block or neighborhood. But then I begin to wonder if I am myself losing touch with what’s real. Am I getting too drawn into my own digital lifestyle to understand Berry’s attachment to an older way of life? Is my life too much in flux right now to be a real part of a community? I’m left thinking about all the events, protests, and issues that have been part of my Miami community over the last couple of years that I didn’t take part in simply because I’m here for such a short period of time. I keep telling myself that things will be different when I settle somewhere, but I’m beginning to wonder if I’m learning a kind of insularity that keeps me from having to take responsibility. After all, for me, settling isn’t happening any time soon.

Berry’s use of the personal narrative is sporadic and frequently employed as a way of connecting man and his behaviors to nature, like his brief account of Maximilian sunflowers in Kansas as a means of illustrating the importance of community. One sunflower had grown apart from its fellows and had consequently grown too much; with so much space the branches had grown to the point of breaking. “The plant had indeed realized its full potential as an individual,” Berry writes, “but it had failed as a Maximilian sunflower” (“Men and Women” 138). Berry connects this to his argument that people need communities more than they need autonomy.

Berry’s narratives often follow this form: I was out walking and saw this thing in nature which is a metaphor for this thing in human society. These stories reinforce his reputation as a man in tune with the natural world as well as an adept observer of human behavior. However, these stories have less to do with Wendell Berry the man than they do with nature; rather than being personal narratives, they are nature narratives written from the first-person.

I’d like to focus on three essays of Berry’s as I examine how personal narrative works in his writing. The first, “A Native Hill,” was written in 1969 and is, in many regards, the Wendell Berry origin story. In this essay – which has been labeled a “Geobiography” – Berry records the events surrounding his decision to leave New York City and return to Kentucky as well as working in his trademark trope, the relationship between man and land (The Art 1). The second essay, “The Pleasures of Eating,” is the culmination of a series of lectures Berry presented about the food industry and was first published in 1990 in EastWest. In this essay Berry describes some of his own eating practices, especially regarding meat, as he argues that the best way for individuals to affect the way their food is produced is to learn more about the process and be
more selective about what they buy. Finally, I’d like to look at essay of Berry’s that does not deal explicitly with the land, “Men and Women in Search of a Common Ground,” presented at the 1986 Washington Sunstone Symposium, in which Berry argues that human relationships cannot be separated from the physical locations in which they take place, that those physical locations are what gives a relationship history and a sense of permanence. Given the extent of Berry’s oeuvre, I should explain my reasons for choosing these particular essays, especially since I will be analyzing Berry’s texts and his ethos, both of which have changed over time. My choices were further complicated by the way that Berry’s essays have been republished multiple times in multiple collections, often without any revision or note of the essay’s original exigency and rhetorical situation, perhaps playing into spectacle’s focus on the immediate. Consequently, Berry’s ethos at particular rhetorical moments have been perpetuated over time even as new essays have presented a changing ethos and his position in one location has offered a constant in his identity. Hence, I have chosen these essays both for the ethos they presented in their rhetorical moment as well as the ethos they present in their republished form (conveniently, all three essays have been republished together in the 2002 collection The Art of the Commonplace). I have also chosen these essays for the different ways Berry uses, or does not use, personal narrative in making his arguments.

In “A Native Hill,” Berry begins building his ethos much like Kingsolver: connecting family and land. After explaining where his farm sits geographically in the Bluegrass region of Kentucky, Berry recounts his family’s history with the place, “back to [his] mother’s great-great-grandfather” (3). “And so,” he concludes, “such history as my family has is the history of its life here […] and there is a sense in which my own life is inseparable from the history and the place” (4). The difference is that Berry does not signal the importance of this connection to place as Kingsolver did, indicating perhaps a very different invoked audience than Kingsolver’s. It is at this point that one must recall that Berry’s reception in 1969 was very different from his reception today; while now it seems feasible to imagine the same people reading both Kingsolver and Berry, at this point in his career, Berry’s public perception was in flux. Berry had made the decision to return to Kentucky only a few years earlier in 1964, and in many ways, Berry’s purpose in “A Native Hill” seems to be to justify and explain his decision to leave his position at New York University and commit what many would consider social suicide (again, much like Kingsolver, though her choice to move was more widely accepted by her peers). If we consider
the possibility that Berry might be using this essay to explain himself to those NYU English faculty members who discouraged his return to Kentucky, this opening invocation of history and place is perhaps not that different from the traditional invocation of the muse found in epic poetry, a move that would be readily recognized by his literati audience. In fact, this invocation of place as muse highlights one of the key conflicts Berry addresses in this essay, the false binary of rural and intellectual life. “There was this belief, long honored among American intellectuals and artists and writers, that a place such as I came from could be returned to only at the price of intellectual death; cut off from the cultural springs of the metropolis, the American countryside is Circe and Mammon,” Berry writes (6). However, invoking place as muse is still an acceptable practice: “What lay behind one had ceased to be part of life, and had become ‘subject matter.’”

When I talk to my fellow graduate students, I often feel like I’m in a minority: I love small town and rural life. While my friends discuss the different cities they’d like to live in, I fantasize about a small farm with no one living a stone’s throw away. Perhaps that is why I am so enthralled by the story Berry breaking away from his urban intellectual circle to make new possibilities for writers and academics who don’t feel the same pull toward urban environments.

Berry breaks ranks by choosing to actually inhabit his muse, and much of the rest of the essay is a series of narratives and descriptions about the place that is his muse, his Kentucky homestead, demonstrating that the rural place that one inhabits may also be lucrative subject matter. Thus Berry’s personal narratives in “A Native Hill” may be taken on the whole as the proof of the effectiveness of his chosen lifestyle. In its republished form, however, this essay serves a very different purpose, that of locating Wendell Berry’s ethos in the land itself to create a kind of permanence of credibility (though I would readily admit that Berry’s prose has merit divorced from its rhetorical situation). Its position as the opening essay in The Art of the Commonplace reinforces its new function as an introduction to Berry and his lifestyle.

While “A Native Hill” does offer some one-dimensional representations of academics, Berry’s criticism is of an ideological system rather than academics themselves. In “The Pleasures of Eating,” on the other hand, Berry’s positioning of himself as a selective meat-eater depends on setting himself against ignorant “urban shoppers” and “industrial eaters” who are characterized as being completely oblivious:
For [most urban shoppers], food is pretty much an abstract idea – something they do not know or imagine – until it appears on the grocery shelf or on the table […]. The industrial eater is, in fact, one who does not know that eating is an agricultural act, who no longer knows or imagines the connections between eating and the land, and who is therefore necessarily passive and uncritical – in short, a victim. (228)

Against this “urban shopper” Berry sets himself in terms that continue to negatively represent the Other; “though I am not a vegetarian,” he writes, “I dislike the idea that some animal has been made miserable to feed me,” and his phrasing almost suggests that the “urban shopper” is incapable of the same empathy (233). He continues to explain how he only eats meat if he knows and approves of the circumstances under which that animal was raised and the responsibility man has for the animals that he eats. “Some, I know, will think it bloodthirsty or worse to eat a fellow creature you have known all its life,” he writes. “On the contrary, I think it means that you eat with understanding and with gratitude” (234). The problem here is, of course, that Berry fails to acknowledge the material limits of raising one’s own meat, especially in urban areas (sure, you might get by with a few chickens, but someone is going to complain if you set your cow to graze in the local park). Furthermore, Berry ignores the complicated relationship between food choices and income, the fact that local food choices are often more expensive and thus often out of reach for working class families, glorifying the immediate moment of the food purchase over the complex system of class oppression in this country. Finally, Berry seems to be assuming that ignorance of food production is solely an urban problem, perhaps “lioniz[ing] country wisdom over city ambition” and homogenizing rural communities into agricultural communities, showing the same false sense of unity that Kingsolver’s work displays. Beyond these somewhat superficial critiques, I add this: this 1989 essay has been republished twice in the past decade (2002 and 2009) without revision, though the burgeoning farmers’ market culture has changed and continues to change how urban and rural eaters view and purchase food. This lack of revision, or even revisititation, is especially glaring in the 2009 collection *Bringing It to the Table* with Michael Pollan’s introduction lauding Berry as an agricultural visionary.

*I find myself feeling very frustrated with Wendell Berry as I think about this lack of revision, especially given my own sense of the time that has passed since this essay was first published. I was born in 1988, and the idea that Berry the socially-constructed author is still adhering to
ideas about urban shoppers that are as old as I am seems to me to be the same as if I published my first book “My Cat Fluffy,” with its red-and-blue marker drawings and stapled-together pages, without situating the work, positioning it as happening at a particular moment in my life and in cultural history. As focused as Berry is on situating everything in terms of physical location, he seems to rarely do the same with his own work. While I understand that these republished essays result from a complicated relationship between Berry, his publishers, and imagined potential readers, I feel like this lack of revision gives Berry a mono-identity that only enhances his appearance as a conservative traditionalist at best, an out-of-touch Luddite at worst. Of course, he might like being thought of that way.

While Berry does, much like Kingsolver, neglect to acknowledge how his position as published author and landowner facilitated his initial move to Kentucky and his continued dual existence as writer and farmer, the number of decades he has spent in one place, committed to a particular lifestyle, helps smooth over the fact that he continues to participate in a capitalist print economy and that his writing works by exploiting stereotypes about “urban” and “rural” people. However, I do find it troubling when he ventures from issues of the land with the same surety that he displays in his discussions of agriculture.

I’m conflicted as I write this because, to me, one of Berry’s strong points as a cultural critic is the way he relates our assumptions about the land to other social issues. At the same time, though, I have in the past really bought into Berry’s romantic representations of “the” land, a kind of homogenized landscape so similar the landscape that I was attached to in my hometown. Now I’m looking at that same landscape but from a different window and it’s looking a little too much like it came out of the Hudson River School.

Often, Berry uses a kind of universalist approach to nature that erases his own gendered position. To return to an earlier example, the story of the Maximilian sunflowers appears in “Men and Women in Search of Common Ground,” an essay in which Berry argues that modern marriages are failing because husbands and wives so frequently work outside the home instead of working together to build and maintain a homestead. While Berry has little trouble turning to nature for illustrations, he does not take examples from his own life, his own marriage. I think looking at
this essay in depth will show how Berry’s emphasis on the land and his relation to it often hides his relationships to other individuals and society writ large. Berry begins the essay by announcing his own inexpertise:

I am not an authority on men or women or any of the possible connections between them. In sexual matters I am an amateur, in both the ordinary and the literal sense of that word. I speak about them only because I am concerned about them; I am concerned about them only because I am involved in them; I am involved in them, apparently, only because I am a human, a qualification for which I deserve no credit. (135)

In this opening, Berry is in some ways enacting Nancy Welch’s argument in *Living Room*, that experience gives us authority to speak. As a reader, I expect for this essay to hinge on personal experience and narrative given that Berry is establishing his *ethos* in his identity and experience as human. At the same time, this statement makes Berry sound detached from his subject matter, like his own participation in these matters seems strange to him. Yet even as he treats his own position as human – note that he does not gender himself in this statement – with a level of abstraction, he soon makes a very clear argument against the abstract as he defines what he means by “common ground”:

The danger of the phrase “common ground” is that it is likely to be meant as no more than a metaphor. I am *not* using it as a metaphor; I mean by it the actual ground that is actually shared by whatever group we may be talking about – the human race, a nation, a community, or a household. If we use the term only as a metaphor, then our thinking will not be robustly circumstantial and historical, as it needs to be, but only a weak, clear broth of ideas and feelings. (138)

While Berry is still arguing for the place-based thinking that is his trademark, he never names any particular location from which he is speaking, and though one might assume that a reader would already be familiar with his identity as a Kentuckian, his proceeding discussion of the modern household, one might expect Berry to acknowledge his location in his own household. As Berry criticizes modern marriage by stating that “in [the house], the married couple practice as few as possible of the disciplines of the household or homestead,” one might anticipate him drawing examples of these disciplines from his own household (141). When Berry critically suggests that in the modern “‘home,’ a married couple are mates sexually, legally, and socially, but they are not helpmates; they do nothing useful either together or for each other,” he might
have drawn examples from the mutual helpfulness one might assume he and his wife share. The fact that Berry never even acknowledges his position as a husband limits the effectiveness of his ethos of “involvement,” as he terms it, because he demonstrates no familiarity with the issues he addresses whatsoever. Instead, he pulls out this story about sunflowers, hiding the complicated relationship between marriage, gender roles, and identity in a nature narrative that is seemingly gender neutral. Furthermore, Berry erases centuries of domestic oppression of women and their struggle to work outside the home by speaking of a “married couple” that is presumably completely equal, both inside and outside the home. My point is that with all his concern that using metaphor will hinder “robustly circumstantial and historical” thinking, Berry’s thinking here is quite ahistorical. He seems to be relying on his public persona as farmer and cultural critic to carry through this argument that has little to do with his perceived field of expertise.

While Kingsolver and Berry carry many of the same identity markers (Southern, well-educated, agriculturalist, etc.), their respective works operate very differently. Kingsolver seems to be relying on narrative to establish her Southern, and consequently “agricultural,” ethos whereas Berry’s narratives often serve as illustrations since his identity is so grounded in his physical location. Perhaps symptomatic of this, Kingsolver’s narratives frequently depict stereotypical characters or communities (especially the unnamed community in which she and her family live); Berry’s concern for place, on the other hand, often shows in the way he identifies individuals and specific locations in his narratives or tells narratives that only feature himself and the land. Yet, while Berry’s narratives almost always deal with specifics, he often speaks in the abstract using universalized images of “the married couple,” for example, or “urban shoppers,” and both writers fall into the trap of relying heavily on a homogenized, agricultural rural stereotype to carry their claims through.

“It’s just human nature to take time to connect the dots”: Gore and the Everyman Story

Shortly before the publication of Kingsolver’s memoir, director Davis Guggenheim teamed up with Al Gore to create a film version of the “slide show” that Gore had been presenting around the world for several years. An Inconvenient Truth is itself an interesting

3 Of course, one could read this sunflower story as a tale of a husbandman setting boundaries on the growth of his passive (read feminine) sunflowers, passing judgment on what constitutes a success, but I don’t want to get into the implications of that.
multigenre text; large parts of the film show Gore in front of a live audience presenting his slide
show. At other times, we see film footage of Gore in more “personal” moments: working on the
slide show in the back seat of a car, traveling through an airport, answering phone calls in an
office, doing research on his Mac. We also watch archival footage of Congressional hearings,
presidential speeches, and other political gatherings. However, most interesting for my project
are the moments of multimodal personal narrative: Gore tells stories of his childhood and his
personal search for climate justice as voice-overs with slide shows of images and video.

My relationship with Gore and his narratives is a complicated one. When, in An
Inconvenient Truth, we ride along with Gore as he drives out to his family’s farm in Smith
County, Tennessee, I cringe a little because the interstate exit he takes is the same interstate exit
I took almost daily for many years of my life. I know the roads he drives because they are the
same roads that lead to my family’s farm, just a few miles from the Gores’. My grandfather used
to tell stories about how he and his friends would play practical jokes on the city boy that didn’t
know anything about living in the country. I’ve heard alternate versions of the stories that Gore
tells from my mother and grandmother and from members of the community along with the
alternate stories presented on right wing radio programs about Gore’s hypocritical energy use
and the like. Consequently, I feel very aware of how the facts of these stories are, in some ways,
inconsequential compared to the ways the facts are shaped for one purpose or another.

Gore’s place in Smith County has always been complicated, as he notes when he calls
attention to the fact that he only spent four months out of every year on the family farm; the rest
of his time was spent in Washington D.C. While Gore has his fair number of supporters in Smith
County, many people feel exploited by the way his “down-home” appeal is based in a place
where he is not a contributing member of the community in the same way that most community
members are. He does not run the local funeral home. He does not pick up their garbage or
dereliver their mail. He is not the president of their bank. Instead, he is an empty house and a face
on the television claiming to be from a place where he doesn’t appear to make any material
contributions. I feel this exploitation myself; while my grandfather and grandmother worked
their way up to owning a small business, Gore had an excellent education handed to him. At the
same time, I admire the work he is doing to raise awareness about climate change, though I am
discouraged by some of the means he uses.
When looking at Gore’s relationship to his narratives, it is helpful to think about the idea of the King’s two bodies as examined by Ernst Kantorowicz. The medieval king had both a natural body, a body in a physical place, and a political body, the body as an eternal representation of the state. This is not to say that the king had a “private” body and a “public” body; “public” and “private” have, of late, become obsolete terms, and with good reason. Rather, we can think about Gore’s natural body, the body that experienced the narratives he tells, and his political body, the body that is presented through different shapings of the narratives, the body that is marked by his rhetoric, the body that will continue long after Gore’s natural body dies. Gore’s political body also imbues these narratives with the necessary ethos to make them relevant; it is his position as a political figure that makes his natural body and its experiences important.

I would like to look at one narrative in particular. A little over an hour into the film, Gore tells a story about tobacco, the primary economic crop in Smith County for many years. He recalls working in the tobacco fields in the summer and how even after the surgeon general’s warning about tobacco came out, his family continued to grow and sell it. But once his older sister died of lung cancer brought about by smoking cigarettes, his father stopped. As Gore says, “Whatever explanation had seemed to make sense in the past just didn’t cut it anymore.” Gore relates this to our country’s reluctance to enact policies to positively affect climate change, acknowledging that change takes time but warning that waiting may have serious consequences.

On one level, this narrative presents itself as a kind of everyman story. In fact, Thomas Rosteck and Thomas S. Frenz have illustrated the ways that An Inconvenient Truth neatly falls into Joseph Campbell’s monomyth, giving it this everyman quality. The narrative is vaguely located; we know it is in Carthage, TN, but where/what exactly is Carthage? We know it is a rural area, but the Gore farm is seemingly isolated from the rest of the farming community. Gore refers to “this river” earlier in the film when talking about the family farm while an image of it appears on the screen, but he does not identify the river as the Caney Fork, the river that runs by the Gore farm. Rather than being a personal narrative, a story constructed around Gore’s natural body, it is only an archetypal story of a generic man failing to take responsibility and consequently suffering through some kind of karmic recompense.
And this very well serves Gore’s purpose; this story serves as a warning about protecting what we hold dear by taking action sooner than later. With a kind of Burkean identification, placing the story in an unspecified farming community allows Gore to paint a mythic picture of “America” and the hardworking people in it, a kind of people far removed from the sneaky politicians and business tycoons who always lay the blame somewhere else. Gore’s change of clothes – from a suit to jeans and a work shirt – suggests that Gore is himself the elusive hybrid of Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, the honest and responsible politician who never forgets the little people because he’s one of them.

The opening images of Gore’s narrative set a tone of nostalgia; the blurry cows in the green field and the sunlight coming through the slats of a barn wall suggest a warm memories of childhood as Gore says, “I don’t remember a time when I was a kid when summertime didn’t mean working with tobacco.” Gore’s nostalgic story continues as the images shift. As Gore tells us that “[i]t was during that period when working with guys on the farm seemed like fun to me,” we see a black-and-white video clip of a man cutting tobacco. Here we see a break in the myth Gore is creating; we are given a glimpse, brief and generic, of the men who were doing the real work that Gore pretended at doing.

We then see Gore at present day standing in the shade of the barn where the tobacco would have been hung to dry. He wears jeans and a work shirt and looks directly into the camera. However, the sunlight behind him makes it hard to see Gore’s face; this shot has a feeling of spontaneity and consequently verisimilitude. He explains the surgeon general’s warning about the connection between cigarette smoking and lung cancer, but before he tells the audience that his family continued to grow tobacco, the visuals return to the generic man harvesting tobacco, reminding us that Gore’s body was not the body doing this work and perhaps even passing on the blame from one body to another while not actually denying his own connection.

Gore’s voice continues, but now it returns to being prerecorded; his present day body disappears again. Instead, we see a black-and-white picture of his older sister Nancy putting young Gore in a life jacket as he tells us she was his “protector and [his] friend at the same time.” We see another old picture of the Gore family with the barn in the background as Gore tells us that Nancy “started smoking when she was a teenager and never stopped. She died of lung cancer.” Gore’s adult body returns as we watch him open the gate to a cow pasture so he can drive his vehicle through as his voice says, “That’s one of the ways you don’t want to die.”
As the voice begins to explain that “[t]he idea that we had been part of that economic pattern that produced the cigarettes that produced the cancer, it was so…it was so painful on so many levels,” we are taken from images of Gore’s body to a video of another generic body, a woman working on a cigarette assembly line, her hands in gloves picking up double handfuls of cigarettes for packaging. We are again reminded that it was not Gore’s body that did this work. In fact, both this woman and the man picking tobacco are doing double duty; first, they performed the labor, and now they have been appropriated by Gore to perform rhetorical work as well.

As Gore tells us that his father quit growing tobacco, we see images of the Gore’s land, noticeably free of tobacco. We return to images of Gore in the drying barn, staring into the distance, as the voice-over says, “It’s just human nature to take time to connect the dots. I know that. But I also know that there can be a day of reckoning where you wish that you had connected the dots more quickly,” reminding us of the connections between our commercial practices and government policy and climate change that Gore is trying to get us to make now. The alternative versions of this story that I have heard from older community members typically go something like this: “Oh sure, Al Gore Sr. quit growing tobacco, but he rented out the land to someone else who did.” I think it’s fairly obvious why Gore would leave this detail out of his story, if it is in fact true; rather than exiting the “economic pattern” that eventually results in lung cancer, the Gore family just moved up the hierarchy a bit. But with the visuals, Gore does seem to be suggesting that the onus of this issue lies with the manual laborers; that the images return to the generic figures of the man cutting tobacco and the woman packaging cigarettes whenever Gore discusses his own family’s involvement in this process shifts the blame in a very real way to people who perhaps have fewer economic options than the Gore family.

At this point, I think it is important to return to the idea of Gore’s political body as constructed by his campaigns, speeches, political decisions, etc. Gore’s political body has marked him in different ways for different people, depending on their own political viewpoints and personal beliefs. Because of this previous experience with Gore’s political body, this story of Gore’s natural body is affected by Gore’s political body, both in its construction and in its reception. Remember that, as Spigelman notes, we select representations of ourselves suitable for our purpose. So, as Gore constructed this story, he would have deliberately shaped it to parallel his political body as presented in An Inconvenient Truth. At the same time, viewers reshape this
narrative according to their own perceptions of the relationship between Gore’s political body and his natural body, so that my reception of this story was very different from, say, my colleague from Michigan since we had very different ideas and experiences with both Gore’s political and natural bodies.

*My boyfriend was at first quite surprised by my vehement reaction against Gore, though he soon came to understand how complicated my feelings were. He had to warn his parents that Al Gore was not polite dinner conversation when I was around. As I began formulating ideas for this project, I watched *An Inconvenient Truth* for the second time; my first viewing had been in a communications class as an undergraduate, oddly enough the only undergrad class I had that actually included rhetoric. As I tried to view the documentary as an objective academic, I quickly began to realize how much my initial viewing of the film had been colored by my perception of Gore’s ethos as I knew it, as a man who twisted the truth to suit his purpose. I also must acknowledge how much more liberal my leanings were at the time of the second viewing compared to the first; my conservative upbringing definitely influenced my initial opinion of the film’s data and assumptions. The discrepancy between my first and second viewing experience led me to believe that this text was ripe for exploration from my particular situation; as Anne Wysocki writes, “Whenever I experience pleasure and offense so mixed, I know I have a good opening into critical work – no matter where it leads me or how strange” (“The Sticky Embrace” 149).

Again, I’d like to return to Fleckenstein’s “symbiotic knot of silence,” especially the aspect of spectacle, a category into which *An Inconvenient Truth* falls neatly. Fleckenstein writes that “spectacle attributes social significance only to the immediate, and through that immediacy, it outlaws history” (52). In outlawing history, I would argue that spectacle also outlaws the cultural and ideological situating that many scholars have come to see as important to ethical discourse. The valuing of immediacy reduces a complicated story of Gore’s natural body to a generic everyman story, a story with a single consciousness that rejects the surrounding context. Even as Spigelman justifies the rhetorical fashioning of the self, she articulates the importance of “acknowledging as post-modern thinkers our inability to access a stable, singular psychic core,” a social-constructivist acknowledgement that we are, in many ways, the sum of our experiences.
Gore simply fails to do this; he does not explicitly acknowledge his or his family’s position in this narrative as economically upper class, as able to drop tobacco farming because they had another source of income, as having more education and more resources than the average community member of Smith County. Instead, he presents this everyman story with the “everyman” automatically coded as white, male, and upper class. Of course, very few personal narratives, whether accompanied by stock images or not, will not in some way be appropriating or representing other individuals as characters in the narrative, and while this should always be an ethical concern, it becomes a real problem in situations where the storyteller and those s/he appropriates are in an unequal power dynamic. In a way, appropriating these images disembodies Gore’s narrative, moving it away from “that embodied writing [that] is more socially responsible […] because it requires writers to foreground their sense of self at the same time they consider the social implications of this gesture” (Banks 35).

**Some Conclusions**

After spending some time with these texts, I have become certain of one thing: a personal narrative is never straightforward. While I am reaffirmed in my belief that the personal narrative can be an effective rhetorical device, I’m troubled by the many nuances that seem to be left to the wayside in its use. Most troubling is the representation of others, both stereotyped groups and individuals, who have little to no say in the way they are represented. Even though Berry frequently erases his own position as a white, land-owning male, his narratives rarely represent others and instead focus on his own relationship with the land. However, the fact that he fails to situate himself, to historicize or acknowledge “passionate attachments” (Ede) when representing others in the abstract in terms of race or gender (or lack thereof) is equally problematic or perhaps more so, since Berry’s presentation of his ideas in the abstract rather than as personal universalizes his representations of others. While Kingsolver and Gore both present homogenized versions of rural areas and people, they at least have limits on who and what they are representing. And I can’t ignore the fact that relying on a stereotypical representation can be an effective rhetorical strategy, especially when one doesn’t have the time or space for adequate situating due to constraints of medium or audience attention span. I also can’t ignore the fact that while I’m so determined that common perception of rural people needs to be revised, I’m happy
to continue on with my notions that most politicians are only out to serve themselves, an equally harmful assumption.

And even as I write this, I’m sitting here thinking, “But they ARE only out to serve themselves!” which just indicates to me that (a) I’m just as guilty of adhering almost violently to stereotypes, and (b) changing minds about rural people is going to be hard. I’m reminded of the way my grandmother speaks about non-whites, not in a violent or angry way, but in a way that shows the traces of her era, the racism that was accepted at the normal way of seeing colored skin. But after listening to my great-grandmother’s stories about African Americans, I can see a progression forward in my grandmother’s words, and another step forward in my mother’s. These things take time. Though I’ll continue to be extremely distrustful of politicians.

I’m also left still puzzling out the problem of the mono-identity, using personal narratives to construct one coherent ethos rather than acknowledging the multiple places from which one speaks, and this becomes even more complicated when dealing with public figures. In An Inconvenient Truth, Gore constructs a history for himself, attempting to line up what he studied in college and the political moves he made as a U.S. representative, senator, and vice president into one narrative of environmental activism. Kingsolver does somewhat the same thing, returning to childhood narratives about vegetable gardening and harvesting wild asparagus with her father, but Kingsolver is also an extensive essayist, like Berry. Her collection High Tide in Tucson, for example, presents a variety of identity positions from which she speaks, though without ever acknowledging this fractured identity. Of course, I’ve already discussed the collective effect of Berry’s essays on his ethos, how the multiple positions he takes get recycled without revision with each new collection of his work that is published. What I find troubling about the effect of multiple positions in multiple essays is its ahistorical quality; it is almost as if Berry and Kingsolver feel no need to redress or revise past positions even if they have changed their minds on particular issues, a sign of the valuing of the immediate so key to the symbiotic knot of silence.
Chapter 3

When Labor Calls:
Reflections on Classroom Practices

In this chapter, I’ll be discussing a personal narrative assignment I used in my own English 111 class, looking at a few sample projects, and making comments about incorporating personal narrative into multigenre pedagogy both as a means of making an argument and as a means of disrupting or complicating an argument. I decided to do a personal narrative remediation project after limited research in personal narrative pedagogy; however, much like Spigelman and Paley, I was interested in seeing how my students would shape their narratives into arguments, in offering them another means of making an argument. I didn’t come across Jung’s multigenre pedagogy until the completion of the semester and, consequently, I didn’t consider the idea of using personal narrative as an interruption, as a way to question or delay assumptions by examining personal experiences or to complicate a one-dimensional view of oneself or by extension others. Thus, this chapter is a description of the assignment, an analysis of student work, and a whole lot of hindsight, especially since I did not realize many different and equally effective ways personal narrative could be used nor the many ethical dilemmas it entails until after going through this project with my students.

The Assignment

As part of the remediation unit of Miami University’s first year composition curriculum, I asked my students to create digital personal narratives consisting of an audio narration of a story accompanied by creative commons or personal photos and music of approximately 2:30 to 3 minutes in length. Students were remediating the public discourse paper they had just written, taking the argument that they had made and telling some kind of story about it, stories that ranged from being rear-ended by a texting driver to making changes in eating habits to coping with family members with addictions. We began the unit by reading personal narrative essays by a few different “professional” writers as well as some letters to the editor in the Miami Student

4 Specifically “Stone Soup” by Barbara Kingsolver, “Mother Tongue” by Amy Tan, and “Shooting an Elephant” by George Orwell. I chose these particular essays for the varied amount of personal narrative in each; for example, “Shooting an Elephant” consists of only narrative with little strictly argumentative text while “Mother Tongue” and “Stone Soup” move from short narratives to sections of argumentative prose quite smoothly. I also chose “Mother
newspaper and discussing the ways that a personal narrative can be used to make an argument, how it can be used to add to the credibility of the speaker or to provide examples and illustrations for the rhetor’s argument. We spent some time breaking the essays apart into separate “narrative” and “argument” chunks, looking at the ways these authors used narrative to support their arguments. We spent one class day doing a workshop on iMovie and MovieMaker, the software most students would be using for the project, and another class day for peer workshopping drafts of narratives, with students reading their drafts aloud to get a feel for the sound of it. We discussed issues of tone in the “professional” essays, looking at how the tone might shift between the narrative and argument sections, then talked about how their own voices or the music they chose would also affect tone. My own example video brought about a lively discussion of the different voices available as my students had a hard time believing the soft Southern voice in the video is actually mine since I spoke so differently to them in the classroom. After a few weeks of work, students brought drafts of their videos into class for the entire class to view and critique. Students also created circulation plans detailing how they would get their video to their intended audience, including where they would post the video, how they would tag it, etc. This way, students were more likely to choose audiences that they could actually reach; it made “audience” more concrete.

An important part of making this assignment work was the negotiation of the rubric. I chose six categories that I wanted to grade the project on: Narrative, Argument, Images, Ethos, Circulation Plan, and Technical Quality. I explained that I was looking for them to find a narrative that either explained why their issue was important to them or offered support to their argument, and that while the argument might not be stated explicitly in their video, I should be able to tell what they were arguing and to whom, and if I couldn’t, in their reflections they should detail why they had chosen a perhaps obtuse way to present their argument. I also

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Tongue” because we had read it earlier in the semester when discussing literacy narratives and because I wanted to return to our discussion about how each individual has multiple ways of speaking as students began deciding the voice that they wanted to use in their videos.

5 Especially effective for getting this discussion going is a genre of Youtube videos in which the author takes video footage from a well-known movie to make an “if this movie was another genre…” movie trailer by changing the music and either adding new voice-over or title screens. Some of the most striking include *A Goofy Movie* as made by David Lynch, *Mary Poppins* as a horror movie instead of a children’s musical, and *Dumb and Dumber* as a drama.

6 I had originally, and with a certain air of superiority, assumed that I would be able to understand any video my students might make, but a few students quickly revealed my limitations by showing a video that they thought had an excellent narrative/argument, the Nike Basketball commercial “Lebron Rise” in which understanding of the
explained that I would be grading images on how well they fit with or complemented the narrative and that I was also expecting them to have very good reasons in their reflections if they chose to use copyrighted images. While full credit for technical quality depended on having a video that worked, audio that was comprehensible, and images that were not pixelated beyond recognition, the “Ethos” category was a bit more complicated and, admittedly, experimental. I had been thinking a lot about how hard it can be to create credible ethos on YouTube, where many of my students imagined posting their videos, when the author is really just a username that anyone could have created. Basically, I put this conundrum to my students and asked them what they thought would add to their credibility as rhetors in this particular online space and to discuss it in their reflections. After I explained what each category included, as a class we decided how much each category would be weighted (since the two classes I was teaching did not agree on exactly the same percentages for each category, I pulled rank and adjusted things by five percent here or there to make them match), and students found videos on YouTube that they thought were good examples of “A” material for one or more categories. This process, along with lots of feedback while students were drafting the script for the video, I think really made my expectations clear to the students.

Students turned in their final videos to me via Blackboard, and we had a showcase day where everyone who wanted to share their video with the class could. While some students chose to eventually put their videos on the internet, many expressed discomfort with putting their stories in such a public space for a number of reasons. One student who wrote about the illegal drug use in horse shows said that her story being public could hurt her future in equine business, her chosen career field. Other students didn’t offer specific reasons, but there was a general sense of embarrassment and anxiety about sharing these stories beyond the space of the classroom where everyone was required to make one, which I would attribute to both the personal nature of the project as well as a feeling among some students that class work should stay in the class.

What I’d like to do now is look at three student videos that I think represent some of the more interesting outcomes and issues that went with this assignment. After receiving informed consent from several students in the class to use their videos and reflective writings with the narrative hinges on knowledge of Lebron James’s recent desertion of the Cleveland Cavaliers. (Obviously, I’m not a basketball fan.)

7 Some chose to focus on technical quality, others included personal details like hometowns, and others still used reliable secondary material much like in an academic essay.
optional assignment of pseudonyms, I have chosen these particular videos because they deal with place-based issues as well as representations of rural areas and people and also reflect several different directions that a student might take a digital personal narrative assignment.

**Sam and the Appropriated Narrative**

Throughout the semester, Sam’s essays had centered on the Emerald Ash Borer, a species of beetle that is decimating the ash trees of the northern Midwest, especially Sam’s home area. It is a problem with no easy solution; most ways of combating the beetle, whose larvae burrow under the bark of an ash tree and eat away at the tissue underneath, damages the trees and surrounding ecosystem as well. In fact, the most effective way of keeping the EAB at bay is quarantine, since the beetles can only fly short distances and are usually transported by humans, and in his public discourse paper Sam argued that campers, hikers, and other outdoors enthusiasts need to be more conscientious about not transporting firewood, tree branches, or other forms of untreated wood from state to state or even from park to park as much as possible.

Sam begins his video by asking “Have you ever heard of the story *The Giving Tree*?” and showing a Wordle image he created using the text of the children’s book. He gives a brief summary of the book, leaving out the ending, as he shows some of the illustrations from the book before showing an image of real trees and saying, “This story was a favorite of mine as a child.” He then recounts how his understanding of the book changed over time, explaining how the virtues of love and generosity were displayed by the tree while the boy only showed greed and selfishness. “This children’s book is surprisingly similar to what we as humans are doing to our own environment,” he says and lists some of the many things that we get from trees, showing pictures of the wooden skeleton of a house under construction and fruit hanging on branches. He then shows an EAB larva and says, “Just like the boy we rely on trees for so many things in our lives, yet we let millions of trees die every year to insects.” It is at this point that Sam shares the ending of *The Giving Tree* in which the tree has nothing left to give the boy as a warning of what will happen if we fail to be more conscientious of what we take from the trees, showing a field of

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8 In order to avoid students feeling pressured into participating or worrying that this might affect their grade, two individuals came to class to distribute and collect consent forms, and those forms were held by my adviser, Jason Palmeri, until grades for the semester had been submitted.

9 I had shown students Wordle.net earlier in the semester. This free program allows you to turn a quantity of text into a “word cloud,” an image in which the number of times a word appears in the text is represented by how large the word is in comparison to the others. For example, the largest words in Sam’s image are “boy” and “tree.”
stumps. “Humans must protect the trees from dangerous pests,” he says while showing an image of an EAB adult, “so that we may continue to use their wood, branches, shade, whatever else we may need one day.” Sam interrupts his warning with a rhetorical question: “But won’t they always grow back? Can’t we just always plant more?” He answers with a resounding “No” and explains that the rate of destruction of trees by parasites and deforestation is moving too quickly to just plant more while showing images of the damage caused by the EAB. He then connects the parasitical nature of the boy in *The Giving Tree* with the parasitical insects that are his focus. He shows another image of an adult EAB while saying, “ Millions of trees every year are in jeopardy, while we remain ignorant to this serious problem. Instead we help the spread of bugs while moving infested firewood.” Sam ends his video with a call to consider the effects of our actions on future generations, showing first an image of children then an image of the earth from space.

In his reflection, Sam talks about how much he enjoyed “present[ing his] otherwise boring environmental topic in a fun new way.” His enthusiasm for his topic shows as he talks about not only putting his video on YouTube, a given for most students, but trying to post his video on some of the websites that he used in his research, such as Illinoisarborist.com. “If I was successful [in getting the video posted on this website],” Sam writes, “they may then possibly show it when giving presentations at local schools or community events. This would a fantastic way to get many people involved.” Sam has a clear idea of where he wants this video to go beyond the classroom, and his hopes for the venues where this video may be shown has shaped the way he views his audience, which he references when he talks about why he chose to work with *The Giving Tree*. Sam seems to be hoping to reach an audience beyond children and young adults who knew the book as children, but he then points out the many ways that this project is geared toward those Sam’s own age who remember the book from childhood: “As children, we do not realize how detrimental the boy is to the tree throughout his life. I wanted to show my audience this side of the story because it is overlooked when we are younger. If the audience is able to see the book in a new light, I hoped they would be able to see their everyday day actions in a new light as well.” While Sam has a very specific audience in mind, he seems to be suffering from a young rhetor’s desire to appeal to everyone. This inability to accept the dismissal of some possible audiences in favor of others was something that I was trying to avoid with the circulation plan, and while Sam does talk very specifically about how he intends for his choices
to affect his audience of young adults and children, he still feels compelled to make a “but it
doesn’t appeal to just children” statement (though I agree with Sam that his video may appeal to
many adults).

What I find especially interesting about Sam’s project is that he doesn’t actually tell a
personal story. Instead, he appropriates a story from his childhood which he then interprets to
suit his rhetorical purpose. The appropriation of a published story brings up a couple of issues,
the first being a rather superficial question of copyright law, but the second, more interesting
issue being the way that childhood stories become personal narratives. The retelling of a favorite
childhood narrative can say something about the personal situation surrounding the
understanding of the story; after all, every time we tell a story, what we tell as important says
something about our own values, memories, ideologies, etc. In reinterpreting the story of *The
Giving Tree*, Sam is also telling a story of a personal awakening, a new awareness of his
immediate environment that he is trying to convey to his audience through showing them an old
story in a new light. I worry, though, that this message may be lost in the extended metaphor that
Sam has created, that perhaps he might have made a stronger argument by using a “real”
personal narrative, such as describing the destruction of the trees in his favorite wooded areas.

What I take away from Sam’s project is an expansion of the idea of personal narrative,
the idea that the personal may only come through as subtext rather than explicit narrative. I am
reminded of Richard Miller’s assertion that all writing, even strictly academic prose, is also
personal writing since it reflects either what the writer deems important or the constraints placed
on the writer. This kind of expansion of the genre of personal narrative, I think, allows for more
of the reflective reconsideration of personal narratives called for by scholars such as
Bartholomae and Gradin. Asking students to question the personal narratives behind the writing
they produce, asking them to journal their writing process or even insert personal narratives in
their prose such as I have done here, might be one way of encouraging them to think about the
institutional influences that shape what and how they write.

10 Though Sam largely summarizes rather than quotes from *The Giving Tree*, he does use illustrations from the book
without the expressed permission of the illustrator or publisher.
11 For example, this thesis is personal writing for several reasons. On the one hand, I have included personal
narratives, reflections, etc. On the other, this text reflects what I feel is important or value as a scholar. Furthermore,
the fact that I am writing according to the genre conventions of a thesis with (let’s be frank) an audience of three
thesis committee members also tells a story about my position as a graduate student with certain constraints placed
on her as she attempts to play the game, if you will, until gaining some autonomy in academia.
Andrew and the Issue of Genre Conventions

I was often torn between deciding that Andrew was just a class clown and deciding that he was more aware of the institutional forces surrounding the act of writing in a compulsory composition course than I gave him credit for. In a short writing assignment about audience for his public discourse paper, Andrew indicated that I, Stephanie Dianne Weaver, was his intended audience and since I was a young person, he chose to use satire in his essay about farm animal abuse because, as Aristotle says, the young are fond of laughter (this was one instance where being just a few years older than my students was a real disadvantage). After his classmates agreed with my suggestion that his satire was a bit over the top, Andrew revised his essay in a more traditional format, but I find it interesting that he did so only after having some fun with the unspoken classroom expectations (i.e. pretending that the teacher is not the audience of your essay).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Andrew’s video plays heavily on pathos as he shows images of abused livestock with sentimental piano music playing in the background. He opens his video with an image of a large steak on a plate, asking, “Have you ever wondered where your food comes from?” He shifts to an image of a stereotypical red barn and asks, “Have you ever thought about what really goes on behind those barn doors?” We then see a skull and crossbones as Andrew says, “I don’t think you even want to know.” Andrew then identifies the issue he is addressing, animal abuse, while showing an image of a cow with its head caught in the side of a crudely made cage. The mood shifts as Andrew shows a picture of a small boy with a duck and says, “This brings me all the way back to my childhood.” He identifies his hometown as a suburb of Akron, OH, and mentions a small farm down the street from his house where he and his sister would go to look at the animals. Andrew tells how the farmer would hit the cows when he wanted them to move. “Of course, I was too young then to realize that was abuse,” he says, “but now when I look back to that point in my life, I really wish I would have realize that was animal cruelty, and I wish I could have stopped it.” As he shows an image of the earth held in a pair of hands, Andrew says, “So now I feel a certain responsibility to protect farm animals from such terrible cruelties.” Andrew then shifts to discussing a hidden camera video recorded at an Ohio dairy farm by activist group Mercy for Animals. He shows some images from the video: scrawny chickens crowded into cages, cows being beaten with steel bars. “It’s just downright sick,” he says, “and it happens every day in the United States.” Andrew then calls for more regulation for
dairy farms before saying, “How would you like it if this was happening to you,” and showing more images from the Mercy for Animals footage. As he shows the word “Responsibility” he says, “It is 100% unethical for farmers to abuse their animals and it needs to be stopped. It is up to us to help defend these innocent animals from the danger that lies behind the doors of dairy farms.” Andrew ends the video by asking his audience to write to their Congressman asking him/her to “put a stop to animal cruelty,” then showing an image of two healthy dairy cows in a green field with “We can make a difference” across the bottom and saying, “We can give these animals what they truly deserve.”

In his reflection, Andrew readily acknowledges the pathetic appeals of the video: “I constructed my narrative to be as emotional as possible. I wanted the viewers to emotionally feel obligated to take some sort of action to help stop animal abuse in dairy farms, even if all they do is tell their friends.” He extends this commentary to the music in the video, which had been debated by the class when he presented his draft, saying, “The music I used also brings a sad mood to the video, and the truth is that animal abuse is a sad thing and I think it will help touch the emotions of the viewer.” He talks about matching the “soft piano music” with the tone of his voice, indicating that Andrew was thinking about the pathetic appeals available in all the media that he used. I am, however, a bit surprised that Andrew does not comment further on his tone of voice in the video, given that he originally intended to use a fake Southern accent because he felt like it gave him more credibility to talk about farm animals. I tried to explain to him that making that choice seemed to say that all Southerners are farmers, one of the most frequent stereotypes of Southern people; that using a fake accent was an unethical way to establish ethos; and that, quite frankly, his Southern accent wasn’t very good. The assumptions that Andrew seemed to be making about dairy farmers suggested that while this was an issue that he cared about, it wasn’t exactly “personal” for him. His experience with farm animals was in the realm of spectacle, of watching animals rather than participating in the complicated relationship between animal and farmer. His idea that a Southern accent would make him into more of an expert is an example of a false sense of unity – the same one that Kingsolver, Gore, and even Berry capitalize on – further displaying the spectator relationship Andrew had with his topic. While Andrew did

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12 In the interest of full disclosure, I did in fact lose my temper a bit with him. I often feel that biases against Southern and rural people go unnoticed, and Andrew’s lack of conscientiousness, as well as the way his suburban classmates found the whole thing hilarious, really got to me. In short, my students thought I made a big deal out of nothing, and, in retrospect, I should have handled the situation very differently.
record his narrative in a voice close to his normal speaking voice, he still slips in his Southern accent when he says “This brings me all the way back to my childhood,” another moment, I believe, of Andrew showing me that he does not buy into these classroom conventions that he is forced to adhere to in order to get the grade he wants.

One of the things I find most interesting about Andrew’s reflection is the way he places his video in a certain genre: “My video actually reminded me of some of the special interest commercials that are on television that are for or against the healthcare bill, climate change, and even abortion.” And while Andrew’s video does not have the same technical quality, it is very similar to an ASPCA commercial in terms of the tone of the music, the tone of Andrew’s voice, and the kinds of images he shows of abused animals. His appropriation of genre even touches his personal narrative, a story of innocent childhood in pristine nature marred by the cruelties of man. This appropriation of genre is, perhaps, both a success and a problem. On the one hand, Andrew has mimicked an authority in his chosen genre, creating an appropriate rhetorical self for his given situation, remaking himself in the image of those in power in this genre, as Richard Miller would put it. I find this especially interesting given how often in the class, Andrew seemed to be trying to disrupt unstated expectations, yet here he creates something so close to the genre of the public service announcement. At the same time, by following the genre so closely, Andrew has not complicated his audience’s or his own understanding of the situation at hand; he has, instead, repeated a party line. Even his call to action at the end, asking his audience to write to their congressperson and demand an end to animal cruelty, is so vague as to be ineffective (but still bears striking resemblance to the messages in ASPCA-type commercials, such as “donate some money and we’ll do something with it to help save animals”).

This reflects the way I presented personal narratives while teaching this unit. As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, I hadn’t yet started thinking about personal narrative as a way to complicate or disrupt thinking. Instead, I had encouraged students to shape their narratives according to genre conventions since often unconventional narratives are widely dismissed. I had been thinking about rhetorical personal narrative and expressive personal narrative as a binary rather than questioning the mushy part in the middle, the part that I tried to explore in the last chapter. Consequently, I thought of myself as teaching students another available means, another tool to stick in their rhetorical toolbox/workbasket, and I don’t necessarily think that was a bad thing. After all, my students now have some experience in
considering which personal narratives are most appropriate for particular rhetorical situations, in combining words, images, and music to create and argument, and in making audience-based choices in light of the affordances and pitfalls of their medium. At the same time, I realize that at no point in time did I ask them to reevaluate their positions on their topics, to consider how their personal experience lined up with, worked against, and influenced their positions.

Charlotte and the Complication of Identity

As a rural native in a class of mostly suburban students, Charlotte frequently expressed that she felt a bit like an outsider at Miami University. After a rocky start in my class, she told me that she felt like her rural high school had not adequately prepared her for university-level work, a sentiment that I shared my first year at my undergraduate institution. For three of her projects in my class, Charlotte worked with issues of rural education and stereotypes, producing a video intended to complicate the idea of rural people as uneducated and illiterate even as she argued that many state and federal education programs are not adequately tailored to rural schools. Even though the audience for her video was people from urban and suburban areas, such as many of her classmates, Charlotte was very reluctant to share her video outside the mandatory peer review session.

Charlotte begins her video by commenting on how different she feels from most Miami freshmen; “When I am home,” she says while showing an image of herself with a friend wearing identical clothing, “I feel comfortable and just like everyone else.” The image changes to one of Miami’s campus in the fall as Charlotte says, “When I came to Miami in the fall, I realized that I was actually very different from the other 4,000 freshman students. I was from the country.” She shows an image of an old covered bridge and tells about how her accent was an immediate identifier and how some people asked if she was from Alabama, even though her hometown is only two hours away from Miami. “As the weeks went by,” she says as she shows an image of road sign, presumably a major thoroughfare of her hometown, “I did become more comfortable with who I am, and I grew to appreciate my hometown. However, it has bothered me that many stereotype rural people negatively,” she continues as she shows an image for a diploma from “Redneck University,” complete with small Confederate flags. “I’ve noticed some people believe we are illiterate or unintelligent individuals.” She mentions some of the more superficial markers of rural people, such as ways of speaking and dress, then continues to describe one individual of
her hometown who frequently experiences unfair stereotyping, “a local family friend, John.” Charlotte shows an image of John’s barn and explains that “his farm connects with my grandpa’s, and he hosts the annual Simon’s Sorghum\(^\text{13}\) festival, an event attracting local community members as well as people from out of town.” Over the image of a line of overalls drying, Charlotte explains how John’s costume of overalls and work boots reflect his identity as farmer, entrepreneur, and bluegrass musician. However, Charlotte explains, John also “has his PhD and teaches behavioral science classes at the local college,” showing an image of Shawnee State University. “Dr. John Simon,” she says, showing a picture of the man himself, “is an excellent example of being judged by rural qualities.” Charlotte offers another example, her step-father Dr. Tracy Murray. After showing Dr. Murray in his dental office and explaining that this local dentist provides two days of free dental care to the local community every year and that he has been recognized “as the best dentist in the tri-state area for his incredibly high-tech and updated facility,” she reveals, as the image of Dr. Murray in scrubs zooms to his feet, that he wears cowboy boots almost every day. “Truthfully, I too was a little alarmed when I first met him and noticed the boots,” Charlotte says, “but it’s just one of those things that defines him and makes him unique.” She closes her video by showing an image of a young woman holding a sign that says “I am a person so I must be stereotyped” as we hear Charlotte say, “I understand that to many these two examples may seem absurd and only encourage further harsh judgment, but I merely want you to see the humor in these people’s characteristics and understand that making judgments on one’s outer appearance is never a sufficient or fair way to stereotype people.”

In her reflection, Charlotte addresses her image choices very specifically: “The images I chose were a direct reflection of not only my opinions, but of me as a person. I wanted my audience to see the ‘Rocky Fork’ road sign and the covered bridge because they are really close to my house and it truly reflects me.” Her desire to show her audience representations of herself extends to the images of other people as well: “I selected the pictures of Tracy posing in his pink scrubs because I think it is funny, and he was more than willing. That picture is also a representation of me because he is part of my family now.” She also explains why she chose the individuals that she did:

\(^{13}\) As very few people in the class were familiar with sorghum, Charlotte had to explain, another point that marked her as being different from her classmates. Sorghum is a type of grass that is used as grain and fodder and in the making of gluten-free beer and molasses (sometimes calls sorghum syrup).
I chose to include the people I did because I have personal ties with them and I know their “stories”. I know that my friend John is an intelligent and educated man and that sometimes he is not treated with the respect he deserves […] I chose to include my step-dad because I honestly still find his cowboy boots to be hilarious, especially paired with his pink scrubs. I know that Tracy has worked very hard to become the person he is and I thought he would be a great example for my video.

Given the concern I felt about how Charlotte seems to undercut herself at the end by pointing out how absurd these two men may look to outsiders, Charlotte’s explanation about how funny she finds her step-dad’s boots and how she hopes her audience will find them funny as well allayed my fears that Charlotte was still feeling uncomfortable with her own rural identity. In fact, Charlotte’s reflection helped me realize how short-sighted I was being about the best way to convince her urban and suburban audience that rural people are not uneducated or illiterate. While I might have chosen to show individuals who did not fit in to any rural stereotypes or to deemphasize their rural characteristics, Charlotte instead tears down the rural-educated binary by showing individuals who are both.

“People are more likely to relate to my video and be open-minded because I am able to use two educated rural people who do great things for the community,” she writes in her reflection, “but still hold true to their rural characteristics as examples.” I think that Charlotte’s choice to acknowledge how humorous and absurd some rural characteristics may seem to outsiders (or even to insiders) builds a greater sense of identification with her audience even as she stands firm on her claim that rural people are not collectively uneducated or illiterate.

Charlotte’s video, more than the other examples I think, displays the power of personal narrative to complicate or disrupt dominant narratives. She does not present her rural hometown in a romanticized light; though she talks about individuals who contribute to their community, there is none of the “greenest, kindest place” in Charlotte’s video. Rather than making sweeping statements about rural people (and consequently homogenizing rural people once again), Charlotte talks about individuals in a specific community. This emphasis on specifics can be seen in her images as well, as she uses primarily her own photos of locations and people in her community rather than creative commons images or stock photos. At the same time, however, Charlotte still homogenizes Miami students into only urban and suburban natives while failing to acknowledge that Miami is itself in a rural setting, even as a little bubble seems to exist around the student body. In short, while Charlotte manages to complicate her audience’s sense of rural
people, she does not complicate her own sense of location, of the lines between rural and urban or suburban. At the same time, I would argue that the success of Charlotte’s video lies in its very specific location, in the fact that she is truly speaking from personal experience unlike Andrew. Charlotte is embracing the location to create a rhetorically sound project and one that I think she found especially empowering to work through.

**In Hindsight**

In the process of writing this thesis, I’ve had a lot of time to think about this project, what I think worked well, what I want to change in the future, etc. What I’ve realized is that I could do this project two different ways, but that those two different ways represent two different pedagogies that are often competing in my teaching philosophy. The way that I imagined and taught this digital personal narrative assignment this time is representative of what I think of as a “rhetorical tools” pedagogy, the kind of teacher I am when I want to show students how to make effective arguments in many genres and mediums so they have options to choose from when confronting injustices in their non-academic life – a starting point, I think, for many young teachers given its straightforward objective (i.e. master a tool, then move on). On the other hand, a multigenre approach intended to disrupt conclusions and question preconceived notions falls into “revisionary” pedagogy, one that encourages students to confront difficult ideas and reconsider beliefs that they’ve held as fast and true (“revision” as re-seeing being the keyword here). This is the kind of teacher I am with Jung in my head. While I understand that these two approaches are not mutually exclusive, that I can incorporate both into my teaching philosophy, I also have to consider the amount of time I actually have with a given set of students and prioritize. Since I have both of these goals, in this statement of “what was not but could be if,” to borrow a phrase from David Berman, I am aiming to find ways to incorporate both “rhetorical tools” and “revisionary” pedagogy.

To begin, I would probably alter the order in which these major assignments happen. This time around, I had students write a typical argumentative paper which they then remediated into a digital personal narrative after the completion of the public discourse paper. Instead I think I would like to use the digital personal narrative to disrupt the argumentative paper, having students complete a draft of the essay then asking them to consider how their own personal
experiences match or contradict the argument that they are making. Additionally, I would like to use the digital personal narrative like Fleckenstein uses storyboarding in her memoir assignment in *Vision, Rhetoric, and Social Action*, as she asks students to match images to different parts of their narratives as a way of helping them see the way they are seeing, looking for places where the choice of image indicates something about the position a student is writing from or incongruities between image and text. My hope is that by using the digital personal narrative to interrupt the argumentative essay, students would come to see their position in the argument as a personal thing, one that is influenced by their upbringing and social situation as well as whatever *logoi* they might be using in their essays.

While I felt like we paid adequate attention to the text of the narratives, looking at word choice and sound, we did not spend enough time doing the same kind of detailed work with the images, which would be important if I wanted to use this project for revisionary purposes. Getting students to question their ways of seeing would perhaps mean asking of every single image, “Why did you pair this image with this section of text?” both at the draft stage and in the final reflection, something that I rarely asked when I did this assignment previously. I would also consider a short classroom exercise like showing students images and asking about their reactions in order to discuss how some associations with a particular image are cultural (like a dollar sign being indicative of money) and some associations are personal (like the way walkways hanging from the ceiling always make me think of the sale barn where cattle were auctioned off) and how the same image can mean different things to different groups of people or even have multiple meanings to one person (like the Confederate flag). I might even consider in peer review showing student videos first without audio and having students record their reactions to the images and before showing the video with audio (this would also give students a feel for the accessibility of their videos for the hearing impaired and, hopefully, suggest that sometimes many mediums should be considered when creating an argument). I hope that these activities would help students see how they represent others in their videos and, by extension, their argumentative papers.

Even as I would like for students to use this project to re-see/revise their positions, I’d also like for them to develop an understanding of genre conventions and narrative structure, how

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14 I am entirely indebted to the many conversations I’ve had with Alison Welch about multigenre texts and disruption as we’ve worked on our theses in libraries and coffee shops.
to work in those conventions and when to break them. While I used “professional texts” to show students the ways that narratives and arguments could be part of the same text, we did not discuss the ways that these narratives were structured and what that structure added to or detracted from the argument. Unlike Andrew, who seems to have stumbled into making a video according to genre conventions because it felt right, I’d like for students to consciously choose whether to follow or not follow the conventions for particular texts and particular groups. In short, I would like for students to attempt to create texts that are ready for audiences beyond themselves, my hope being that by crafting this video for a specific audience (as detailed in their circulation plan), students might begin rethinking the way they’ve conceived their audience for their argumentative paper, an assignment where a specific audience is often harder for students to pinpoint. I would like for this project to be both invention and final product, both a revisionary activity and a way for students to learn specific rhetorical skills.

**Some Conclusions**

While the videos my students produced reaffirmed my belief that the personal narrative can be effectively used as an argument, they also highlighted some of the ethical issues that need to be incorporated into any discussion of a published personal narrative. I’ve already pointed out how Charlotte’s video reduces Miami freshmen to a homogenous group, but some prejudices are more subtle. For example, Andrew’s video includes only one image of an animal and a human interacting in a non-abusive way, and that image is of a small blonde boy and a white duck. I am struck by the fact that in the world of Andrew’s video, all farmers are abusive to their animals; he never presents an alternative relationship between the dairy cattle and their keepers to the one seen in the hidden camera footage. Admittedly, I probably would not have noticed this without having read some of Andrew’s other work and spoken with him in class discussions, where his misunderstanding of some of the realities of rural life and rural people came to light, but this is a moment when questioning Andrew’s way of seeing farmers might have led to a moment of self-reflection. At the same time, Andrew’s choice to not show farmers and animals in non-abusive relationships could also be considered a rhetorically sound one, indicating to me that teaching rhetoric and teaching the ethics of rhetoric are perhaps two very different things.

Yet, even as I begin to advocate the teaching of the ethics of representation along with the teaching of rhetoric, I left with one uncomfortable question: Whose ethics? Just as I become
uneasy with the aspects of ecocomposition that intend to inundate students with environmental awareness, I am also uneasy with the idea that my own prejudices would affect which groups I asked my students to question their representations of. As a matter of fact, I almost did not notice and, after noticing, almost did not note the way that Charlotte homogenizes Miami freshmen because her statement reflects my own feelings about the Miami student body, primarily because I am also a rural person, with (ugh, do I have to admit this?) a bias against urban and suburban people. To admit that I myself am guilty of what I would be trying to teach students not to do makes me fear that rather than teaching them to be more ethical, I’ll just skew them in a different direction. The ethics of rhetoric are rhetorical; hence, I’m in an ethical dilemma. At the same time, I’ve begun asking these questions, and I’ve forced myself to admit my own bias to a group to whom it matters, and if I can get students to do the same, perhaps they can continue to question themselves and the ways they are using or representing other people.

Finally, I’d like to note how this project has affected my ways of seeing my own teaching. In working through this chapter, and even the rest of this thesis, I’ve realized how often I’ve divided my teaching goals into different, seemingly incompatible categories rather than letting them work together. I have frequently chosen the “rhetorical skills” category because it seemed practical and the most immediately relevant to my students – much like I’ve frequently opted for the straightforwardness of “academic” prose even though I felt uncomfortable with the role I was playing. Just like expecting my personal experiences to be valued by the academic community seemed like a pipedream, teaching my students how to re-see themselves and their positions in the community seemed idealistic and out of touch. The process of composing this thesis as a multigenre text and rethinking this particular assignment has helped me see the possibilities in letting different genres and different pedagogical practices work together, especially if they don’t fit together seamlessly.

Yes, yes, I realize that with that last paragraph, I’ve turned this whole text into one big narrative of self-discovery, one big story about how I started out so clueless and full of questions and how I’ve finished, still full of questions, but a little wiser. Blah blah blah. I know. BUT, if we ourselves don’t learn something from the scholarship we undertake, then what’s the point? And if we ourselves don’t acknowledge the learning that went on in the process, if we don’t account for the personal story that went along with the scholarship, are we perhaps misrepresenting
ourselves as experts, as authorities? And if we continue to represent ourselves as authorities, aren’t we contributing to the system that Nancy Welch decries in Living Room, the system that says that you have to be an expert in order to speak on a subject? Frankly, I don’t know, but I do know that I’m honest enough (I hope) to admit my own naiveté, to acknowledge that I am a young teacher and that while this moment of self-discovery may seem self-evident to some, it was hard-won by me as I try to navigate the different representations of feminist teachers, of young teachers, and of Southern teachers that I see. I, for one, will joyfully proclaim from any rooftop that this wasn’t just a useless step in my path through the academy, that I LEARNED something in this process.
Given that I’ve spent so much time criticizing everyone else, I think it is fitting to return to this project’s starting point, the video that I made about green burials, and reevaluate my “success.” Upon my re-viewing of the video, I was struck by how I never name my hometown. I don’t even specify a state or region. While my peers who reviewed my video discussed the Southerness of it, I’m not sure the video is necessarily marked as Southern, though I am. At the same time, though, I do use images of my hometown’s funeral home and undertaker and include the names of both. I find it interesting how much my narrative works like Gore’s: while I am dealing with a very specific location, I don’t situate that location geographically, culturally, or ideologically, and in doing so, I’m also creating a potential “everyman” story.

I also now realize that I have set up a green burial/undertaker binary within my argument, though it was never my intention to do so, nor do I see the two as being opposed or mutually exclusive. However, because I was focused on using personal narrative to make an argument rather than complicating my audience’s or my own understanding of the burial system, falling into binaries was easy. I also felt like the medium itself didn’t necessarily lend itself to complication; a two-and-a-half minute video isn’t exactly enough time to fully explore the complex relationships between people, communities, and death. Furthermore, I feel like my images are a bit exploitative. While I chose creative commons images, I’m still troubled by the fact that I included so many pictures of dead people, often in black and white, to represent a system of dealing with the dead that I argue is, in very blunt terms, inhumane. I contrast these pictures of someone’s loved one against somewhat abstract images of nature meant to represent green burial. In fact, I’m almost using nature to erase the fact that there is a human being as part of this burial process. I find this troubling because I genuinely feel that the body is more present in a green burial because of its potential to sustain other life, yet this disjuncture between my images and my opinions suggests two possibilities: that I made this distinction based on the assumption that my audience would find the absence of bodies in the images associated with green burial comforting, and that I’m not as comfortable with dead bodies as I make myself out to be. This discrepancy between what my opinion and my images also suggests to me that sometimes I perhaps assume too much about my students’ ideologies when sometimes the issue is a miscommunication between rhetor and audience.
At the same time, I remember some of the complicated feelings that surrounded making this video. I remember feeling excited about getting to tell a story about my life and my home for a cause that I care about very much. I remember the sense of encouragement when Jason got so excited about the project and started talking about the possible directions it could go. And I love the fact that this one little video has erupted into a year of study and reading and writing. I’m brought back to Sherrie Gradin’s premise that we can’t understand how we’re socially constructed or constructing until we tell our own stories. Though this video has its faults, it became a springboard for something much larger, and if my students can use their stories in the same way, then I can handle a few stereotypes.
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