Introduction

Laura Gray-Rosendale

A thickish, liquid smell of pine pollen and pitch fills the air. Tall ponderosa pine tops sway against the gusty breezes above me. A Northern Flicker with a buff, spotted belly sits on the edge of one birdbath. A Steller's Jay with a flippy-strange mohawk, blue-black plumage, and eerie pale-blue eyes makes squawking noises in a juniper next to me. Several Pygmy Nuthatches inexplicably walk down the ponderosa trunks. A mass of twittering yellow Pine Siskins circles the long bird feeder filled with Niger seed. A Rufus Hummingbird alights on one of the red feeders filled with sugar water, takes a long sip, and then zips off to a treetop nearby, carefully watching the food stash that he has just claimed.

I HAVE JUST GLANCED UP FOR A BRIEF MOMENT. To look at me here in my backyard in the sun with my worn flip-flops, ratty shorts, T-shirt, and humungous floppy hat, you might not know what I'm doing. This computer on my lap is the only giveaway. I'm teaching one of my summer graduate classes in narrative and creative rhetorics titled Adventures in Memoir. Right now, I am running several discussion groups simultaneously. I am grading blog entries and response papers. And I am answering e-mails related to my teaching.

Though I still regularly teach face-to-face and have very happily directed a face-to-face writing program for "at-risk" students for the last twenty years, quite a few of the other classes I now teach are online. These online courses afford me an altogether different, though just as valuable, teaching experience. It used to be that I always taught in a classroom with a white board and audiovisual equipment. My students sat in a circle at their desks. When I graded their work, I did so all at once and always at my desk, in my office, and sometimes if the weather was conducive, with an open window and light breezes whooshing through. But with my laptop and my online classes, I can also be found teaching while sitting in my

backyard as I am right now or, when summer fades and the weather grows colder, while walking on my treadmill and typing on my makeshift treadmill desk. There was a time when I always wore either dresses, or skirts or dress slacks with blouses, when I taught. Now, when I teach online, I am just as likely to be found in these shorts or in yoga pants. My teaching and grading often happen around the clock now—in the very early hours of the morning, deep into the night, and in the spaces in between. And, during my waking hours, there is rarely a time when I am completely off-line and not, in some sense, available to my students. Though we are not in the same room together, there is a way in which I am with them even more in online classes than I would be in a face-to-face class. My students now have similar educational experiences, ones that were scarcely imaginable let alone available in the past. In their online classes, they have ready and constant access to like-minded intellectual communities. And they can and often do live in places where no educational experiences such as those which I can provide for them are available. They live on ships. They live in foreign countries. They hold down full-time jobs. They raise families. They travel constantly for work or for pleasure.

How we educate our students—and, more specifically, teach writing—has changed radically in recent years. Online teaching is just one small part of this. Social media has also impacted the ways in which we teach writing. So have mobile phones—our ready access to photos, video, texting, e-mail, and the web. So has Twitter. So has Instagram. So have blogs and vlogs. And the list goes on and on. The way in which students perceive their own identities has shifted radically as well. While our students might be exploring multiple, diverse, and distinctly fluid identities online at any given particular moment, as John Palfrey and Urs Gasser indicate in their book, *Born Digital: How Children Grow Up in a Digital Age*, "the net effect of the digital age—paradoxically—is a potential *decrease* in a person's ability to control her social identity and how others perceive her" (20).

The idea for this book first occurred to me after I published my memoir *College Girl*. I was traveling around the country and talking with various students and faculty. We spoke about many things related to writing and teaching while we visited, and among them was how exactly we can and do teach personal writing of all forms (an increasingly popular genre of writing)—including the memoir—in the digital age. I began to see that those of us who teach personal writing these days find ourselves in very similar situations. We are forced to contend with a whole new range of

issues and questions. Among them are the following: How do we approach teaching the personal essay in an era in which the personal has become so overexposed on the Internet, so large a part of people's lives, and yet our face-to-face interactions have dwindled and altered so much? What kinds of valuable personal writing are we doing now within our classrooms and communities? How can and do we bring multiple literacies and voices as well as multimodality and digital media effectively into the arena of teaching personal writing? How might we best understand as well as politicize the landscape of personal writing in the digital age?

I began considering what various thinkers had to say about these issues. While there are many excellent books written on personal writing and many more written about the effects of digital technology, there are as yet very few texts that have brought these two arenas together. When they do so, they often look at theories and practices around online identity, but rarely examine such things in light of the kinds of specific multimodal exercises we are utilizing with our students. I dreamed of a book that did so. As a result, that became the main purpose of this project.

But, before I get to that, it is important to mention just a few of the texts in these areas that have shaped my own thinking on these issues as well as the approach that this volume takes.

Personal Writing as a Genre

> *The squirrels chase each other round and round the ponderosa*
> *pine trunks, their claws scrabbling against the bark, as I look*
> *up from my computer. My Doberman dog, D'Artagnan,*
> *circles the bottom of the trunks, trying to keep up with their*
> *looping paths, leaping and whimpering and barking, his*
> *small tail wiggling furiously. If only. If only he could fly.*

There are many useful texts about personal writing as a genre that continue to impact my own perspectives. Some examine personal writing as a fairly wide-reaching genre. I have found Phillip Lopate's *To Show and to Tell*: *The Craft of Literary Nonfiction* to be invaluable. Though some thinkers have separated the personal and digital technology, in foregrounding the personal essay, Lopate does not relay that personal writing which utilizes digital technology is necessarily problematic. It does, however, sometimes raise questions of exposure and relative value.

> I do not want to represent Facebook as some sort of opponent to the personal essay when it could well be an ally . . . With the paucity of publishing outlets for personal essays, we should welcome the bloggers or Facebook writers who are trying out their ideas without necessarily getting paid for them. (Some of them have already figured out a way to get paid, the lucky devils.) Eventually, quality will sort itself out: that is already happening to some extent. (130)

Rather, using digital technology to write the personal is itself a viable option, even though it may utilize different forms, reach different audiences, and have different effects.

When teaching the personal essay, no one should be without Dinty W. Moore's *Crafting the Personal Essay*: *A Guide for Writing and Publishing Creative Nonfiction*. It offers our students ways to approach the essay in its many forms. Moore covers how to write many sorts of personal essays, with chapters on everything from the memoir to the travel essay. He also has a chapter on blogging. As he writes, "Combine discrete sensibilities with the endless possibilities of meaning and connection and extremes of playfulness and flexibility, and you are pretty accurately describing what some of the best bloggers do" (208). Increasingly, Moore urges that digital technology and the personal can and must work together. And Carl Vandermeulen's *New Writing Viewpoints*: *Negotiating the Personal in Creative Writing* makes abundantly evident how critical personal writing can be within courses that take up writing creatively. He writes that not only should such classes fundamentally focus on navigating the personal but that "Because students become writers largely through relationships with and responses from both teachers and peers, and because the writing our students do matters to them, to teach creative writing is also to negotiate the interpersonal" (xi). Social interaction, then, in all of its forms, is a key part of writing the personal as well.

Some see the genre of personal writing as a crucial place for viewing both differences in ourselves as well as how our relationships to one another operate. Vivian Gornick's *The Situation and the Story*: *The Art of Personal Narrative* has been another essential text for my own understanding of the personal narrative, and the memoir in particular. She notes that

> In nonfiction, the writer has only the singular self to work with. So it is the other in oneself that the writer must seek

and find to create movement, achieve a dynamic. Inevitably,
the piece builds only when the narrator is involved not in
confession but in this kind of self-investigation, the kind that
means to provide motion, purpose, and dramatic tension. (35)

As Gornick indicates, the best of memoir becomes about the discovery and
tracing of the other in the self. To do this is to also recognize the many
ways in which our multiple selves are always operating simultaneously and
sometimes in conflict with one another.

I have also been drawn for a long time to William Zinsser's edited
collection *Inventing the Truth*: *The Art and Craft of Memoir*. In his intro-
duction, he notes that "Good memoirs are a careful art of construction," and
that "Memoir writers must manufacture a text, imposing narrative order
on a jumble of half-remembered events. With that feat of manipulation
they arrive at a truth that is theirs alone, not quite like that of anybody who
was present at the same events," and that simultaneously there is "multiple
ownership of the same past" (6). Memoir writing is always about multi-
ple players and multiple pasts. When we write the personal, we are never
just writing about ourselves and our own experiences. We are always also
writing about others and must understand the extent to which we are con-
structing their experiences as well.

Some see the genre of personal writing as a reflection of our current
historical moment. I have also found Thomas Larson's *The Memoir and the
Memoirist*: *Reading and Writing Personal Narrative* to be quite helpful for
my own teaching and research. He notes that memoir's mainstream pop-
ularity can be attributed at least in part to the following:

What's fallen from our lives—at least from the lives of those
who have left the patriarchal behind—is our parents' rectitude,
its belief in an authoritarian center. In its place is personal
inquiry, individual knowing, moral relativism. This is not a new
endeavor; there's a long tradition of using literary forms to press
social inquiry. Memoir is judging the paradoxes of private and
public truth-telling in our time much as the essay inquired into
the claims of science and philosophy during the Enlightenment,
the novel critiqued the expanding bourgeois class in Europe in
the early nineteenth century, and the slave narrative demon-
strated the ghastliness of African bondage before the Civil
War. (190)

Within personal writing—and the memoir genre specifically—we are seeing crucial insights being made about our culture. This kind of writing is also necessarily being shaped in very significant ways by our culture and the accelerating changes within it.[1]

Writing the Personal and Identity

> *A new Black-Chinned Hummingbird approaches the feeder. He has not noticed the bold Rufus above on the end of a pine branch, watching, waiting. The new hummingbird takes a perch and then a long, slow drink. He has been flitting from feeder to feeder, flower to flower all day. He can finally rest his wings. But before he can anticipate, before he can imagine, a whir of wings screams down on him, beats him off the feeder. He zooms away to another tree nearby. The original Rufus flies back to the feeder, sits on his perch. But he does not drink. He is watching, waiting, claiming anew this feeder that is his and his alone.*

There are also many superb books out there specifically on personal writing, the history of autobiography, and constructions of identity. I think especially about Leigh Gilmore's *The Limits of Autobiography*: *Trauma and Testimony*, a book that has long influenced my thinking about personal writing. As Gilmore writes, in autobiographical writing, we are always already dealing with the concept of multiple selves.

> This is a strange and absolutely characteristic feature of auto-biography: the self becomes oddly multiple just at the time one might think it was most organized and coherent—the moment of telling its own story. It is precisely this organi-zational task of autobiography—the effort to set it all out in writing—that reveals how the self can never be quite where it ought, or where it is expected, or where it wants to be. (36)

Selfhood is itself infinitely complex, always changing and shifting even as we seek—particularly in writing the personal—to capture it and render it somewhat stable.

I think, too, about Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's important *Reading Autobiography*: *A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, a text I have taught through several editions in my graduate classes on memoir for many

years. They write that "the teller of his or her own story becomes, in the act of narration, both the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance, and contemplation. We might best approach life narrative, then, as a moving target, a set of shifting self-referential practices that, in engaging the past, reflect on identity in the present" (1). The "I" is never, ever one thing. It is always already many and varied. It slides into and out of the past and the present, the subjective and the objective—and inhabits all of the spaces in between. And the self is not something that can be discussed outside of context either. It needs to be continually contextualized—socially, politically, historically, and culturally. We cannot consider personal writing as a genre without recognizing this.

And I often consider Barbara Kamler's valuable *Relocating the Personal*: *A Critical Writing Pedagogy*, as well. She turns to various theories such as postmodern geography and poststructuralist feminism as she scrutinizes the various instantiations, functions, and operations of identity. As Kamler reveals, "writing about the self becomes an invitation to identify, analyse and critique, to understand the discursive practices that construct the self—which in turn offer possibilities for social change" (3). Once again, we cannot understand how to write the personal without seeing the self as itself quite complicated and as discursively constituted. To make sense of this complex self is to necessarily engage in crucial social and political inquiry as well.

Some try to bring the personal and the scholarly together—to recognize that the two are powerfully and inextricably connected. I have also greatly appreciated the work of Robert J. Nash in *Liberating Scholarly Writing*: *The Power of Personal Narrative*, in which he asserts the value of teaching personal writing for scholarly purposes with our students. More recently he has taken up the issue again, this time with Sydnee Viray, in *Our Stories Matter*: *Liberating the Voices of Marginalized Students through Scholarly Personal Writing*. Here the authors make an argument for the importance of teaching Scholarly Personal Narrative, especially to those many students who have been oppressed or marginalized students historically. Scholarly personal narrative "teaches them that their stories matter and, what is more, that their stories can be important to others. No longer do disenfranchised students feel the guilt, shame, and judgment of being 'the Other.' Now underrepresented students can position themselves at the center of scholarly discourse rather than always at the edges" (3). As part of this work, students are encouraged to look at "social location, social situation and social construction, under-representation, marginalization,

counter-narratives, individual stories of resistance and resilience, liberation and transformation, and academic memoirs" (7). They are taught concepts such as "'counterstorytelling,' 'naming one's own reality,' the 'multiple lenses of gender,' essentialism, White privilege, microaggression, performativity, heteronormativity, and the empathic fallacy" (35) as ways to create careful, scholarly personal narratives of their own. Looked at from such an angle, no longer are the personal and the scholarly rendered easily distinguishable, separable. Instead, they frequently shape and change one another. At their very best, they work together.

The Digital Age

> The Black-Headed Grosbeak family has arrived for the season. There are five or maybe six of them now. It's hard to get their numbers straight as they swoop around, nestle against one another, jostle for sunflower seeds. They sit together on the middle birdbath, a mess of orange and white and black. One dips in, shakes around, while water goes splashing up on the others. The Western Tanagers will arrive in a few days, their bright yellow-and-orange parrot-like plumage seeming to make a temporary jungle of these piney woods. They will seemingly travel together with the Grosbeaks, move in and out of the whispering treetops.

Having examined some key texts that have impacted my own ideas in the realm of personal writing, I now want to turn our attention to how we might characterize the digital age in which we are working and writing. There are some terrific books out there about working with and living within this time, our time, dominated by all sorts of forms of participatory media. There is, for example, Henry Jenkins's *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. He argues that we are inhabiting what he calls an "age of convergence," in which there is a constant "flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kind of entertainment experiences they want" (2–3). Since writing *Convergence Culture*, of course, Jenkins joined forces with Mizuko Ito and danah boyd for the publication of *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era: A Conversation on Youth, Learning, Commerce, and Politics*. They take Jenkins's argument further. In this text, they contend that "if we

are going to make meaningful interventions" in comprehending as well as utilizing the relative functions of a participatory culture,

> we have to go well beyond the myth of the digital native, which tends to flatten diversity and mask inequality. We need to engage more closely with the very different ways that young people encounter new media in the contexts of their lives that are defined around different expectations and norms, different resources and constraints, from those encountered by youth raised under more privileged circumstances. (59)

While participatory media is part of one's daily (hourly? half-hourly? moment-to-moment?) routine in our culture for many young people, participants simply do not participate equally within social media or in the exact same ways. Looking at why this is in fact the case is critical.

John P. McHale's *Convergent Media Writing*: *Telling a Good Story Well* is a book that is very well designed for students to help them "develop a critical understanding of quality print, radio, television, public relations, Internet, documentary, television and dramatic feature film writing" (vii). Much like Jenkins, McHale understands us to be living in a culture where media forms are constantly coming together, recasting and re-informing one another, where we are always already working intimately within a multimodal environment, one increasingly controlled by fewer and fewer corporate entities. McHale gives this example: "Convergence means that several modes of communication may be used together to impart mass media messages to the audience. When I am watching NFL, I can be online on NFL.com and I can get texts from my bookie about how much money I owe on a previous game." We don't just participate in various media forms at the same time within the digital age. One form necessarily leads to another form that leads to another form and so on.

There is also Frank Rose's important *The Art of Immersion*: *How the Digital Generation Is Remaking Hollywood*, *Madison Avenue*, *and the Way We Tell Stories*. He suggests that within our media forms a

> new type of narrative is emerging—one that's told through many media at once in a way that's nonlinear, that's participatory and often gamelike, and that's designed above all to be immersive. This is 'deep media': stories that are not just entertaining

but immersive, taking you deeper than an hour-long TV drama or a two-hour movie or a 30-second spot will permit. This new mode of storytelling is transforming not just entertainment (the stories that are offered to us for enjoyment) but also advertising (the stories marketers tell us about their products) and autobiography (the stories we tell about ourselves). (3)

And at the very same time that our culture is becoming ever more highly mediated and this new form of narrative is operating—one that plunges us into the worlds it creates for us, we are also gaining a more boundless thirst for the "real," "the Truth," and "the personal." As Rose puts it, "People today are experiencing an authenticity crisis, and with good reason. Value is a function of scarcity, and in a time of scripted reality TV and Photoshop everywhere, authenticity is a scarce commodity" (315). The major turn toward the personal at this time is not simply incidental, then. It's a direct result of our contemporary media conditions.

We might also turn to *Media Criticism in a Digital Age*: *Professional and Consumer Considerations* by Peter B. Orlik. In this book, he outlines crucial methods and approaches for students to enact contemporary media criticism—looking at everything from television to social media—while also encompassing the consumer and business aspects of working within the digital age. As Orlik argues, his book indicates that "radio, television, and online content can all be analyzed both as definitive texts and as art. Therefore, the material heard and seen over digital media is worthy of serious critical consideration by industry professionals, the consumers they seek to serve, as well as serious students of the general discipline of criticism" (xviii). Having the critical skills to examine contemporary media representations and their effects on us is increasingly important. Doing so fully, though, will require that we not only look at textual productions but also their receptions and the institutional structures that produce them.

There is Jane Utell's *Engagements with Narrative* and her valuable chapter "Stories beyond the Page, Stories on the Screen." Utell notes that

In some cases, we're engaging with narrative through several different media at once. This *multimodal* engagement can be listening to the soundtrack of a movie or game as you watch or play; it can be thinking about how the words and images go together in a comic book; it can be interacting with friends in the digital world by clicking a thumbs-up, a heart, or

> a retweet button; it can be using a game console or swiping
> an iPad to keep the story moving and make choices that lead
> to different possible resolutions. (83)

For Utell as well, in the digital age multimodal interaction is not some anomaly—it is our common condition. And it constantly impacts the various stories or narratives that we are exposed to on a minute-by-minute basis as well as the very ones that we can tell and the specific ways in which we can tell them.

Joanna Thornborrow's valuable *The Discourse of Public Participation Media*: *From Talk Show to Twitter* examines this issue of storytelling in detail from another angle. She particularly emphasizes the troubling nature of various forms of social interaction in the digital age. Thornborrow argues that "ordinary identity is increasingly being 'authored' by the media, rather than 'mediated,' giving broadcasters a powerful role in the constitution of participant identities for their own ends—that is, the proliferation of profitable formats in what is now a global market" (2). In this media-saturated landscape, we don't choose our identities, or how they are deployed or received. Rather, they are continually constructed and disseminated for us. It seems that people are simply no longer operating as "public citizens" in the world, but rather as "public spectacle" (15). Reality formats "now put stories into the hands of the media professionals rather than into the voices of 'ordinary' people" (188). She contends that participants are now involved more often in a detailed process of "evaluation, rather than of narration." And, as Thornborrow notes, increasingly reality formats are fora "for commenting and judging, not for storytelling" (189). So, even at those moments when we may think we are in control of the narratives we are producing about ourselves or the narratives we are using, we are not. They are constituted for us, giving us less and less authority over them, less and less room to move.

Some other authors are examining the far-reaching effects of this new media on our contemporary society. In Alec Charles's *Interactivity 2*: *New Media*, *Politics and Society*, he indicates that these technologies have provided us with many things, including "an almost inexhaustible supply of ill-informed opinion, hardcore pornography, pictures of kittens, adverts for products and services nobody needs or wants, and video recordings of people doing things at which they are a lot less talented than they seem to think they are" (3). This is the rather humorous side of digital technology's ubiquity. However, according to Charles, the new forms of media also have

other potentials, some of the same ones that concern Rose. As Charles asserts, "it is increasingly difficult to tell what is real and what is not—insofar as the real itself is defined by those processes of mediation . . . Having appropriated and shifted the benchmarks for normative reality, reality television programme formats and practices have, in their attempts to court audiences immune to the appeal of the merely ordinarily extraordinary, grown ever more eccentric" (20). Much as Rose suggests that "reality" is ever more scarce in this highly mediated world and therefore there is an ever-greater need for it, Charles contends that even what is considered "reality" is itself never "real" enough somehow. We want to get back to some authentic reality, as if that were possible. We keep searching for it. And it keeps eluding us.

Digital Studies, Multimodality, and Teaching Writing

> *An unkindness (yet they seem plenty kind enough) of Common*
> *Ravens descend on the suet. There are two. Then three. Then five.*
> *It's late afternoon now and the light is crawling up the hill toward*
> *Buffalo Park, leaving only scattered patches of sun coming through*
> *the treetops. This is their time. The rest of the yard clears out. They*
> *leap up on the suet with their claws and rip out big chunks of fat,*
> *gobble them down. They carry pieces of stale bread and muffin*
> *from our neighbor's yard and dunk them in the birdbaths.*

Living in this digital age as we do, there has also been an ever-greater focus on the importance of teaching multimodal composing in our Rhetoric and Composition classes especially. For example, in Tracey Bowen and Carl Whithaus's edited collection *Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres*, the contributors "consider how understandings of genre and media can be used in classrooms to help facilitate students' development" (3). The editors and authors are concerned that student writing that takes a multimodal stance is itself "reshaping genre boundaries and changing what counts as academic knowledge. Faculty, students, and writing program administrators are responding to these new forms of literacy by creating in them, by writing in them, by pushing concepts and practices of what is possible to accomplish and create in a college writing course" (4). It is not simply that we are adopting multimodal approaches. These very approaches are changing how we write, how we conduct research, and even how we imagine ourselves.

Likewise, in Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes's *On Multimodality*: *New Media in Composition Studies* the authors assert, too, that not everything in media studies is happening within strictly written approaches or modes, that we need to increasingly account for this fact, and that "any approach to new and multimedia must become cognizant of the rich rhetorical capabilities of new media so that students' work with those media is enlivened, provoked, and made substantive" (19). They specifically draw on "histories of queer and avant-garde media" to show "one way to expand our sense of the rhetorical capabilities of media" (21). Their book represents a valuable turn in the research around multimodal composing and teaching.

There is Adam Banks's crucial *Digital Griots*: *African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age*, a text that makes the very important argument for bringing African American and digital rhetorics together in the persona of the "digital griot," often mingling together a variety of digital, oral, as well as print methodologies. According to Banks, this will entail "building assignments that invite students not only to work across modalities but also to link those multiple modalities, individual assignments, and assignment cycles and in critical examination of the power relations and material conditions inscribed in technological tools, networks, and discourses" (165). If we are to engage in multimodal work, then, this must be done while also looking at how issues of oppression and marginalization shape and are shaped by what we do.

Finally, I appreciate Jody Shipka's *Toward a Composition Made Whole*, too. She wants to interrogate and to expand the concept of multimodality itself. As she contends, "A composition made whole recognizes that whether or not a particular classroom or group of students are wired, students may still be afforded opportunities to consider how they are continually positioned in ways that require them to read, respond to, align with—in short to negotiate—a streaming interplay of words, images, sounds, scents, and movements" (21). According to Shipka, "composition and rhetoric scholars must resist equating multimodality with screen-mediated texts" (84) alone. Instead, we also need to incorporate those other technologies—ones outside the screened sphere—that we too often leave behind.

There are also a range of quite teaching-focused contributions to this conversation. In Cynthia L. Selfe's edited collection *Multimodal Composition*: *Resources for Teachers* she includes a useful DVD that contains both audio and video essays, samples of multimodal compositions that teachers can readily utilize that will inform their teaching. In their chapter 1, "Thinking

about Multimodality," Pamela Takayoshi and Cynthia L. Selfe argue for the importance of students' need to continually compose various multimodal texts and not just to simply passively consume them as they may do in their day-to-day lives. They also contend that our understandings and conceptions of literacy practices themselves need to greatly increase and expand, encouraging use of "still images, animations, video, and audio" (4). The book is truly a critical tool for all teachers teaching writing in the digital age. Similarly, *Writing New Media: Theory and Applications for Expanding the Teaching of Composition* by Anne Frances Wysocki, Johndan Johnson-Eilola, Cynthia L. Selfe, and Geoffrey Sirc advances detailed methods for utilizing new media within all of our writing courses. They too outline specific activities that teachers can try out with their students in their classrooms. Finally, Kristin L. Arola, Jennifer Sheppard, and Cheryl E. Ball's hands-on *Writer/Designer*: *A Guide to Making Multimodal Projects* teaches students how to use various modes in their work, including "the linguistic, the visual, the aural, the spatial, and the gestural" (5–13). The book takes students through a series of crucial stages, including how to take up various technologies, designing and creating their own projects, the process of drafting them, and then getting these projects out into the larger world.

Writing the Personal in the Digital Age

> *The ravens have gone. And the Eurasian Collared-Dove couple whoo-*
> *shes in, a flapping of pale gray wings. They coo and call to one another.*
> *They sit on the edge of the bird bath, preening their feathers. They*
> *arrive at about the same time every evening, their nightly tradition.*
> *I don a light jacket, close my computer for the day. Enough teaching*
> *for now. It still sits on my lap like a fat cat, warm and whirring.*

I have mentioned key texts that have focused on personal writing, key texts that have focused on the digital age, and key texts that have focused on teaching writing in the digital age. But there are far fewer books and journals that have traced the connections within and between the concepts of the personal and the digital age.

Nancy K. Baym's *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* importantly notes that "One of the most exciting elements of new media is that they allow us to communicate personally within what used to be prohibitively

large groups. This blurs the boundary between mass and interpersonal com-
munication in ways that disrupt both" (4). She describes that the digital
era has ushered in new identity categories such as "disembodied identities"
and "disembodied audiences" (118–23). Increasingly "self-presentation" and
"the influence of platforms" also become issues (124–40). Still, within this
new digital universe, not all is lost for personal interaction and personal
writing. As Baym writes,

> We develop and appropriate technologies as means of fostering
> meaningful personal connection. Along the way there are di-
> versions, distractions, disasters, and delights. What kinds of
> connections we foster with what kinds of people evolves. Like
> everyone who's come before us, we don't know what the future
> holds for our relationships. But when I look at how quickly
> and effectively people took over networks of digital signals
> that were never meant for sociability in the service of our need
> to connect, I am optimistic that we will navigate our way
> through innovation without losing hold of one another. (179)

Baym does not want to see the personal and the digital as distinct from one
another. Instead, over time, and as technologies continue shift within the
digital age, one will necessarily change and impact the other.

There is also Anna Poletti and Julie Rak's wonderful edited col-
lection *Identity Technologies*: *Constructing the Self Online*. They note that

> Self-representation online challenges the tendency to read
> for narrative, which has been a hallmark of auto/biography
> studies, and demands a consideration of how researching iden-
> tity online causes us to rethink the basic assumption that has
> animated the field to date. One example of this tendency is
> the persistence of narrative as a frame for understanding how
> online identity is formed. (7)

Instead, of relying on narrative only as the key way to read and understand
digital texts, they take up Smith and Watson's focus on "'autobiographical
acts' to describe non-narrative or even just commonly circulating ways of
self-representation." In this way, they hope to examine "how the disruptive
features of identity-formation and attempts to normalize these disruptions
operate in digital media" (10). For Poletti and Rak, we must see identity

construction online as always necessarily embodying a series of shifting autobiographical identifications and look to those moments when identities challenge their very constructions.

There is also the important edited collection *Metawritings*: *Toward a Theory of Nonfiction* by Jill Talbot, in which the writers reveal the extent to which increasingly our digital world demands that the personal itself be taken up and achieved performatively and extremely swiftly. For Talbot, metawriting is a particularly compelling by-product of this new world. As she states in her introduction, "the current fascination with documenting and sharing, with self-awareness, may perhaps be linked with the influx of metawriting and the dissolving barriers between experience and the representation of that experience . . . Everyone now, not just writers, creates a written, published persona on a daily (hourly) basis" (xxvi). The personal—and the continual reinforcement of the representation of the personal—has become essential to how we think of ourselves not only as writers but as people in the global sphere.

Finally, the Spring 2015 issue of the journal *Biography* "Online Lives 2.0," edited by Laurie McNeill and John Zuern, has also been an important contribution to my thinking about issues of identity and personal writing in the digital age. In this issue writers revisited an earlier 2003 journal issue about online identity and carefully considered how people are now, many years later, "mobilizing online media to represent their own lives and the lives of others on the Internet" (v). McNeill and Zuern argue that with the appearance of Web 2.0, the

> boundaries between online and offline life—and as a consequence, the boundaries between private and public life—have become even harder to discern than they were in the early days of the Internet, and that this conflation of private and public space has created a climate of exposure and risk in which identity becomes not only something we are constantly compelled to construct but also something we are constantly compelled to safeguard against threats to its integrity and security. (vi)

They note that the various contributions to their special issue examine "practices of shaming and norming in response to online lives," while also revealing "other stories of social media and its benefits" (x). Many of the pieces in the journal take up issues associated with the auto/biographical, exposing how certain issues concerning "preserving and sharing material

about a life for (self-)reflection, remain in place, but on a scale impossible to manage" (xiv). Essays examine such concerns as living virtual lives in video games, online stalking and identity, blogging and adopting fake identities, identity and Wikipedia, YouTube and online testimony, online diaries and constructing the self, life-writing on-line, and constructions of selfhood on personal web pages.

The Chapters

> *And then the doves fly off to their roost for the night. I take my laptop under my arm and walk inside, slide the screen door closed behind me. Tomorrow it will begin again for us all. I will be out here once more teaching my class and grading my students' work. The birds will come back, one by one. And I will be but a witness to their lives, their comings and goings—myself living within and between the digital world and this other world.*

Until now, however, no books have specifically examined the impacts, effects, and issues associated with personal writing in the digital age. No books have specifically brought together theories about personal writing and digital media with suggestions for classroom and community applications. No books have so fully featured students' and community members' own work in this vein. And no books about such subjects have included pieces that in their very compositions deliberately challenge the idea that creative work and scholarly work are distinct or separable. And, this book aims to make these contributions.

The book begins with "Part I: Personal Essays, Digital Compositions, and Literacy Narratives." Chapter 1 is written by Ned Stuckey-French and titled "Teaching the Personal Essay in the Digital Age." He leads readers through an exciting course he teaches within the Editing, Writing, and Media track of the English degree at Florida State University, touching on critical concepts, key readings, and video components. In the course, his students learn both about elements of the genre of the personal essay, as well as crucial aspects of the history of the digital age, creating pieces that utilize various forms of new media. For their final projects, Stuckey-French's students produce a wide range of texts. As his syllabus states, a student's final project "might be a video essay, a multi-media piece created with InDesign, a Google Maps essay, a contribution to a digital archive,

some kind of remediation of one of your blog posts, or anything inspired by the pieces we'll be studying during the course" (10). Stuckey-French also provides numerous ways for readers to access what his students have accomplished so that they can try out his strategies within their own classrooms.

Chapter 2, "Writing the Way Home: Creative Nonfiction and Digital Circulation in a Veterans' Writing Group," is composed by Eileen Schell. She describes a thriving community writing group she cofounded with Ivy Kleinbart that aims to serve both military veterans and their family members. Schell is careful to suggest that veterans utilize the group for many distinct and different reasons—not all of them simply "therapeutic." Using both face-to-face interactions and Facebook posts (as well as their group website), veterans consider why they feel compelled to write (or to not write) and/or to relay their military experiences to one another as well as to others outside the group. Employing a "creative writing workshop method," veterans also come to discover both the various problems and possibilities of "going public" with their experiences (25). Through the frameworks of both community literacy scholarship as well as digital rhetorics, Schell thoughtfully addresses exactly what a community writing group can accomplish on both personal and political levels.

Chapter 3 is "Essaying to Understand Violence" by Amy Robillard. Robillard's insightful piece examines the value of teaching, reading, and writing the personal essay in an age marked by otherwise rather impersonal interactions, impersonal interactions that often include and/or result in various forms of violence. Weaving together more traditional scholarly writing with creative writing in her essay, Robillard contends that the personal essay genre is essential in the digital age because it invites us to re-understand some crucial issues for our students and ourselves, especially the true importance of being fully regarded by and regarding one another. As she writes, "students' appreciation for courses on the personal essay evidences a desire to understand the ways we are all trained not to see one another, not to say the things that might make us seem vulnerable, not to hear others' confessions of vulnerability" (46). The personal essay as a genre and the classes we teach about it, then, have the capability of enabling us to embrace our common humanity at a time when this is what is most needed.

In chapter 4, "Digital Portraits: Engaging Students in Personal Essay Writing through Video Composition," Michael Neal investigates how the personal essay has worked historically both as a writing genre and within our writing classrooms. As part of moving this history into the digital

age, Neal encourages his students in his three workshop courses—"Visual Rhetoric," "Advanced Writing and Editing Workshop," and "Rhetorical Theory and Practice"—to conduct their essay projects using varied multi-modal approaches. In his chapter, Neal takes us into a number of students' projects for these classes. He then analyzes in detail how they negotiate their own personal writing situations in particularly intriguing ways through employing forms of digital video composition. For Neal, the digital video essay assignment is especially important because it helps students to "connect the personal with audiences they can both imagine and experience in online, networked communities" (62).

Chapter 5, "Stories within Stories: Three Reflections on Working with the DALN," is cowritten by Ben McCorkle, PD Arrington, and Michael Harker. This chapter explains the various impressive ways in which the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN) has been used to foster greater understanding and awareness about literacy issues as well as other concerns related to personal writing. The DALN is often referenced these days to aid in our teaching, to promote innovative research, and to foster community engagement. The authors also explore the ways in which the DALN has made publicly available not only the personal narratives of every-day people but also those of various notable figures, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter among them. As the authors express toward the end of their chapter, "The stories we've shared here demonstrate different ways of working our way through the archive: we've re-seen ourselves and others in terms of where we've come from, how we've worked our various ways through the world, and the legacies we can help leave behind for others" (89).

"Part Two: Blogging, Tweeting, Texting, and Online Classes" begins with chapter 6, "Living the Expressivists' Dream: Writing Meets Blogging as Theory Meets Practice" by Bonnie Sunstein. Sunstein's intriguing essay traces her own initial suspicion of using blogs in her teaching and then how she came to employ them with students who hoped to become teachers of writing in a course called Approaches to Teaching Writing. As Sunstein notes, "The course is what educators like to call 'praxis-driven': students study the theories of teaching writing by being both writers and teachers, by acknowledging and documenting what they do, by recognizing who helps them and what they do to help others, and by identifying how they understand as they revise" (97). She also started being a blog participant in the class herself. Throughout her chapter, Sunstein shows just how much insightful reflective work she and her students accomplished through using

blogs. In the end, Sunstein argues that blogging is itself a certain form of "expressivist" writing, a form that is reminiscent of ancient work in rhetoric as well as crucial aspects of the essay genre.

In chapter 7, Brian Oliu writes about "Rapid Organicness: Using Twitter to Expand Young Writers' Creativity and Their Sense of Community." Oliu describes the many interesting ways in which he has come to utilize Twitter within his creative writing classrooms. As he writes about his students, "it allows them to realize that there is an active writing world beyond their classroom, it fosters community within the classroom as well as the literary world, it allows for creative expression and experimentation without the pressure to craft perfect work, and it gives writers an extended sense of their writing audience which helps form good artistic habits" (109). Using Twitter, a crucial format for personal writing that he believes encourages equality, Oliu asserts, helps him to professionalize his students, to encourage them to understand themselves as valuable writers in the world, and to create new kinds of writing and knowledge for other writers.

Chapter 8, "Old Pond: 127 Ways to Look at Texts with Tweets" by Michael Martone, is a creative piece that also makes a series of scholarly suppositions about the role of texting in our own and our students' lives. As he writes, "The new instruments of writing are so handy. They're so hand-held. These new devices have, perhaps, defamiliarized the hand, the hand-made" (129). Told as a series of beautifully written tweets, Martone explains how his students use texting in their daily lives, how he utilizes texting with audiences when he gives readings of his work, and how his students employ texting in his classes. He also encourages students to use their phones to write poems to other people around the globe. And Martone asks students to take something that is relatively odd to them—like post-cards—and to use them to convey distinctly new meanings about what might be construed as old or familiar environments.

Chapter 9 is "#Because Social Media: Personal Writing and the Brave New World of Digital Style" by Paul Butler. Beginning his essay with a rich, creative piece about his time spent as a student in France, Butler then turns toward a thoughtful investigation of the connections between the personal and how new media can operate in a variety of different contexts. As he writes about his chapter, Butler first turns to "classroom settings, in the form of video, and the 'Concept in 60' assignment developed at Ohio State University." Here Butler takes us through how he rethinks and then re-presents the set of experiences he had in France for a multimodal