

## Problematics, Risks, and Interrogations: Rethorizing Personal Writing

*Personal Effects: The Social Character of Scholarly Writing*. Ed. Deborah H. Holdstein and David Bleich. Utah State UP, 2001. 392 pages. \$32.95 (paper).

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In their introduction, “Recognizing the Human in Humanities,” co-editors David Bleich and Deborah H. Holdstein position their collection, *Personal Effects: The Social Character of Scholarly Writing*, as a contribution to the growing interest and assertion of “the full range of human experience into formal scholarly writing” (1). The scholarship in this collection does indeed speak to the range of personal and professional issues related to the study and act of personal writing. Bleich and Holdstein seek to interrogate, problematize, and position personal writing beyond its conventional position as “self-centered” or “narcissistic.” Through an explication of both their frameworks for the collected essays and their own investments in personal writing, Bleich and Holdstein invite scholars in rhetoric and composition to participate in the reflexive processes advocated by many contributors to the collection. This dialogue with readers begins with their suggestion that “[t]his volume collects essays that, taken together, try to show how fundamental it is in humanistic scholarship to take account, in a variety of ways and as part of the subject matter, of the personal and collective experiences of scholars, researchers, critics, and teachers” (1). By the very fact this work is a collection, we readers expect some rationales for the material and its arrangement, but the convention is quickly deconstructed through their own acknowledgement that “[w]e waited for the essays [after a call for papers] to arrive and to see what they said [. . .] we tried to withhold judgment about what we wanted to accomplish in collecting these essays, rather than decide beforehand and instruct potential contributors on what we envision” (2).

Their desire to step back from the project and let it emerge is emblematic of the kind of risk-taking and problem-posing defined by many authors within the collection. From explicit discussions of classroom practices to methodological explorations of personal writing to mixed genre pieces exploring issues of gender, race, class, and sexuality—this collection encourages readers to reflect upon our own teaching and research practices. In addition to asking us to think through complex emotional and social relationships, the collection disrupts the construction of personal writing as a sentimental, unified act of individual achievement or genius. Transgressing the boundaries of conventional first-person accounts to achieve complex, shifting, and quite startling works, the authors in this collection resist the temptation of imposing a single definition of personal writing. To the benefit of those of us who engage this text, we find, then, a provocative set of essays that are loosely gathered under the category of “personal writing.” Bleich and Holdstein develop a set of operational, rather than prescriptive, categories for the articles in this collection that include “Ideals and Cautions,” “Self-Inclusion in Literary Scholarship,” “Teaching and Scholarship Face to Face,” “Teaching and Scholarship Public and Private,” and “The Social Character of Personal Narrative.” These five categories cover the range of 17 chapters of the collection with works by Margaret Willard-Traub, Jeffrey Gray, Brenda Daly, Paula M. Salvio, Susan Handelman, Louise Z. Smith, Madeleine R. Grumet, Karen Surman Paley, Diane P. Freedman, Rachel Brownstein, Joycelyn K. Moody, Kate Ronald and Hephzibah Roskelly, Victor Villanueva, Katya Gibel Azoulay, Morris Young, Christopher Castiglia, and Richard Ohmann.

Bleich and Holdstein provide insight into both their own struggles to incorporate personal writing in their academic work and their desires to engage scholarship that has defined personal writing as personal, expressive, and hybrid. From these framings, they assert that this collection contributes to “[s]cholarly uses and examinations of personal experiences help to articulate relationships among a variety of disciplines, as well as interestingly unarticulated links between composition studies and literary studies” (5). This allusion to building connections across boundaries is a strong undercurrent among the works in the collection. Citing Sylvia Molloy, Bleich and Holdstein posit “[i]n view of both the problems and new opportunities it [personal writing] offers, personal-scholarly writing represents a new direction for academic work” (6). The essays in the collection keep this promise of offering new directions.

As with others in our field who argue for more careful consideration of categories and alternative views of our otherwise normalized practices, Bleich and Holdstein ask us to engage with intellectual and personal commitment the range of readings in *Personal Effects*. Chal-

lenging the ways personal writing has come to stand for uncomplicated subject positions of “coming to voice,” these co-editors and their contributing authors provide notable readings for those of us teaching, researching, and theorizing rhetoric and composition pedagogy at both undergraduate and graduate levels.

