Chapter 9

Writing that Matters

Writing that Matters: An E-pistolary Dialogue

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Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres is Professor Emerita of German and Women Studies at the University of Minnesota, where she worked from 1976 until her retirement in 2013. She is the 2004 recipient of the University of Minnesota's Ada Comstock Distinguished Women Scholars Award. In addition to authoring many articles and book publications on feminist German Studies, language and genre, feminist studies, and writing, she also co-edited *The Future of Scholarly Writing: Critical Interventions* (2015) with Angelika Bammer and served as co-editor (together with Barbara Laslett) of *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* from 1990–1995 and of the *Women in German Yearbook* from 2002–2004

(overlapping with the editorships of Patricia Herminghouse and Marjorie Gelus).

Preface 1: To Ruth-Ellen (from Angelika)

Dear Ruth-Ellen,

Sitting down to write you again, as I have so many times before, evokes a flood of memories and a deep awareness of times shared—and time passing. I remember how we started out (so many years ago now ... I lose count!), excited to the point of giddy, to discover that we were kindred spirits in many ways. We discovered that we both believed passionately in the creative potential of academic writing and that we both wanted to do what we could to increase that potential. We decided to work together toward that end. The piece below tells of how we started. It was the beginning, not just of deeply rewarding collaborative work, but of an equally rewarding growing friendship. As friends we shared in the ups and downs, the joys and griefs of our private lives. When we had something to celebrate, a loss to mourn, a puzzlement to sort out, or just a story that needed telling, we would call or write or send a message. But whatever life concerns we shared, we never stopped talking about writing. Work and life for us, in writing, were inseparable.

We didn't set out to write a book, but somewhere along the way, a book emerged. Over countless emails, many long phone calls, and occasional visits to our respective homes—you came to Atlanta, I went to St. Paul—our book, *The Future of Scholarly Writing: Critical Interventions*, started taking shape. I'll never forget how proud and happy we were when it was finished and we finally held the product of our work in our hands. It was beautiful and it felt meaningful. Not only had we made it together, but it reflected our vision of what academic writing could be, freed of the constraints that inhibited its flourishing.

This Festschrift to honor and celebrate you returns me full circle to our beginning, to the first piece that you and I co-wrote. And it turns a setback into our good fortune. For, as it happened, that first piece we wrote was never published. It didn't fit the criteria of the existing scholarly journals: it was either too personal (to wit, "not scholarly enough"), or too unconventional in form, or the length was wrong.

We finally realized it would remain unpublished unless we found a fitting venue someday. When the call came for this Festschrift in your honor, I knew we had finally reached that day.

Looking back over the duration of our work together, I see how profoundly it has shaped what I do. It clarified and deepened my commitments: to intellectual work that nourishes creative energies; to a feminist politics that honors process; to the life-sustaining power of friendship. The future we envision lies in those commitments. That future is one you helped me see.

With love and abiding gratitude,

Angelika

Preface 2: To Our Readers (from Ruth-Ellen and Angelika)

The following piece began as a presentation at the annual meeting of the Coalition of Women in German (WiG)—a professional association of feminist scholars and teachers in the field of German literature, language, and cultural studies—in October 2007. One of the sessions at that year's conference was on "The Creative Possibilities of Academic Writing," a subject in which both of us were passionately interested. We had questions about scholarly writing throughout our academic careers; we had taught courses and published on the subject. This was a chance to extend that inquiry and focus it through the lens of gender, bringing a feminist perspective to bear on the discussion. We quickly realized that we had much in common—we were asking many of the same questions and approaching them in a similar way—so we proposed a joint presentation for the conference session.

The form, we decided, would be a dialogue. Not only was it a practical way to exchange ideas, back and forth, but it was also a form that struck us as much more compatible with a feminist approach—a process of what we called "thinking together," allowing different voices and perspectives to intersect—than the conventional academic form of a monologue. And so, a lively email exchange began with Angelika writing from Atlanta (where she taught at Emory University) and Ruth-Ellen writing from St. Paul in the Twin Cities (where she taught at the University of Minnesota). We easily agreed on our framing questions: (1) How did gender inform *the things we wrote about* in our work as scholars (our assumption was

that it did)? (2) How might a feminist approach affect *the ways we wrote* (could it offer an alternative to normative forms of scholarly writing, or at least as a productive critique)?

With that, we were off and writing: our e-pistolary dialogue was underway. We began almost immediately with stories, with comments on our experiences as academic writers and editors over the years, and with the growing realization that bringing a gender perspective to bear on these matters was not only timely, but critical. Our initial stories soon gave way to a broader discussion on a number of topics that were as universal and sweeping as the stories had been particular: the complex relationships between thinking, knowing, and writing; between who we write as and whom we write for; between the art and the science of scholarly writing; between writing and our sense of self. We shared the conviction that writing intentionally, both as feminists and as women, was not just critical for us professionally, but necessary for us to survive. We drew on a range of critical theories, but the rich reservoir of thought and debate within Second Wave feminisms on issues like power and the gender of language, the notion of a feminine or womanly form of writing (or, as French feminists called it, an *écriture féminine*), and the creative potential of *writing otherwise*. The work of writers, theorists, scholars, and poets like Adrienne Rich, Hélène Cixous, Barbara Christian, Alice Walker, Sheila Rowbotham, Christa Wolf, and Luce Irigaray (and there were many others) had inspired and challenged both of us to think critically and creatively about what we write about, how we write, and what our writing does: what it does for our readers, what it does in the world, what it does to us. We both agreed that this work was not done yet. Its potential had not yet been realized, and its critique not yet fully absorbed. That's where we began.

By the time we realized that we had to stop and collect our thoughts into the shape of a conference presentation, we had over seventy typewritten pages of emails. We edited them so that our framing questions could create a sense of coherence among the parts. At the same time, we wanted to preserve the particular modality of email discourse: sometimes fragmentary, often discontinuous, ranging across different voices as well as different registers and modes.

Sometimes we were analytical, sometimes emotional, sometimes theoretical, political, or philosophical. But always, in one way or another, what we wrote was personal. For that reason, we kept our emails as we had written them (albeit in redacted form), including the chronological order in which they had been written.

We kept this dialogue form for our conference presentation. Standing side by side, each with our own microphone, each reading from her own email, we addressed each other: "Dear Ruth-Ellen" … "Dear Angelika." When we were finished, there was a moment of expectant silence, followed by tumultuous applause, as people jumped to their feet, clapping, cheering, laughing, and even crying. Afterwards, they lined up with one or the other of us to comment and continue the discussion. Clearly, we had touched a nerve. For us this marked the beginning of a journey—intellectual, personal, and professional—that would lead to new ways of writing, new ways of teaching, and new ways of advising and mentoring.

The dialogue we had begun continued, expanding over time to include colleagues, in our own and other fields, at our own and other institutions, in our own country and abroad, on scholarly writing, the norms and conventions of academic disciplines, and the creative possibilities of writing differently. What had begun as a dialogue between the two of us eventually became a multi-voiced dialogue among a group of scholars in a broad, multidisciplinary range of fields. In 2015 we published it as *The Future of Scholarly Writing: Critical Interventions.*

In a way, with the publication of our book, we had come full circle, returning to the questions that we had begun with when we wrote our conference proposal: "What makes our writing powerful? What makes it true? What makes it pleasurable?" But in another way, we had expanded the discussion to explore ways of writing that we hadn't yet thought of or hadn't yet dared to try. This piece is part of that exploration.

Carolyn Steedman concludes her contribution to *The Future of Scholarly Writing* with a reflection on the future from her perspective as an academic scholar in the field of history. "I must find a new way of writing history that I don't yet know," she writes and her love of poetry notwithstanding, it will not be poetry. The constraints, the limitations, are real: "I will not now write in a condition of freedom," she goes on, "(how could I have thought I would?)." Yet while freedom as such still remains a utopian ideal, the horizon of possibilities lies open. And within that scope, Steedman concludes, "I may, with great good fortune, find the means to write … in a form that I do not yet know" (226).

That we find such means, whether with "great good fortune" or through trial and error and the courage to experiment, is our wish for all of us—ourselves, and you, our readers.

Atlanta, September 11

Dear Ruth-Ellen,

I'm just going to jump in wildly and start writing. There's no obvious place to begin. It's late, after midnight already in Atlanta, but the conference is just five weeks out and I'm aware of time fleeting. When on earth will we have time to write our piece, much less write it in ways that matter, if we don't start now?

So, let's start writing, get a stream of emails going and trust that something will emerge and take shape in the process. I'll begin with a story to get things going.

Today in my freshmen class we were discussing a short story by Ursula LeGuin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," when one of the young women in the class said very spontaneously that she "loved the way LeGuin writes." "So, write like that," I responded. They all looked at me and I could see them wondering, is she serious? I was. "If you find ways of writing that you like," I said, "why not write that way yourself? Or some other way that you might like to practice?"

Most of my students know how they are supposed to write. They've been taught the rules. So have we for most of the things that we write. Yet I often think that this way of writing by the rules kills something in us. Something dies along the way when we write just by the rules, something alive and vulnerable and true within us, and in its stead comes this dead-weight language where the thoughts and feelings have become like something petrified. Heavy, wooden, lifeless, frightened.

Perhaps that's why I've always had this somewhat guilty obsession with reading acknowledgments and dedications. There's a prurient interest of course—it's the academic's pared-down version of the gossip column—but it's more than that, I think. It's often in the acknowledgments that I get the clearest and most vivid sense of why this was written in the first place, whom it was written for, and what it took, what it cost, to write it. We like to theorize about writing from the margins, but we want to be at the center as well. So, it's often in our more personal, less conventionally "academic," writing that we come closest to our truth. It's a risk that you and I are taking in these emails. Instead of relegating our reasons for writing to the

periphery—the call for papers, the proposal, the prefatory thank-yous—we put why and how we write front and center. There's a gender dimension to this, but I'm not yet able to identify or name it.

I'm tired now. More soon. Write back and I'll respond. We'll see where all this takes us.

Love, Angelika

St. Paul, September 13

Hi, my dear,

Now that the morning emergencies have been tended to, I am finally able to sit down and respond to you! What a wonderful feeling that is. What you wrote set off resonances in me because much of what you say I think and have thought too. Especially about acknowledgments: I have been reading them for years and go, in fact, first to them when I open a book. Maybe some of this is the result of something that happened to me with the Louise Otto book I did for Fischer in the 80s. I wrote a long acknowledgment talking not only about my relationship with Louise Otto over the years but also about the complexities of doing that book, which got even more fraught in the last summer before it was due when I broke my foot badly and spent the summer going up and down the stairs on my bottom at the Institute for Research in the Humanities in Madison where I had an office space, and being dropped off and picked up by Erhard, still a husband at that point, sitting sideways in the back seat of the car, which was the only way I could fit with the huge cast.... Anyway, I eventually sent the manuscript off to the editor, who got back to me with the recommendation that I have a native German speaker go through my language since it seemed not academic enough to her. So I went, for some unknown reason, to a German colleague of mine, who agreed to help out but who in turn got back to me with the news that he certainly didn't like the acknowledgments at all and had taken out all personal elements. I was too scared about the whole project to object, and just went with his recommendations (which, in the case of the German, involved mainly sticking in words like *plakatieren*, which I had never heard of).

Your story to start this dialogue off is perfect. In fact, that you begin with stories is indicative of what we are talking about: "stories" are as "marginal" to academic writing as acknowledgments; they are considered anecdotes, a word that is often used in contempt, not in

admiration. Anecdotes are by definition particular. Yet they pull me in, make me think, help me to respond and to understand. And isn't that what we are supposed to be doing?

As to a gender dimension, I guess we immediately run into essentialism, don't we? My colleague's transformation of my chatty acknowledgments into something totally freed of the personal might have occurred had a female version of him been working on my language, but I still suspect that most women—eek, here I go—would get what I was about in those acknowledgments and mourn the change, the complicity that I then engaged in by permitting such a change.

love, re

Atlanta, September 18

Dear Ruth-Ellen,

Women get into this language power game as much as men do. Your story reminded me of something I experienced at a feminist conference organized by women some years back. It was in Hamburg, Germany, May 1986, the Third Annual Women in Literature Conference. I had been invited to give one of the plenary addresses. The title of my talk was "Dissolving Beards and Bearded Women: Power, Authority, and Academic Discourse" ("Schmelzende Bärte und bärtige Frauen: Macht, Autorität und akademischer Diskurs"). The beard image came from Roland Barthes. In "Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers" Barthes describes how adopting the persona of "professor" makes him feel. It feels, he writes, as if he has glued a fake beard on to look the part, but when the performance of professor starts—when he has to give a lecture or stand in front of a class—the spit from his words runs down and the beard comes unglued and he stands there, a beardless object of ridicule, exposed as a fraud.

I talked about the power trips that academic language fosters and how we as feminists needed to be aware of and ready to critique this power. For without such critical self-consciousness, I argued, we risked turning language as a weapon against ourselves, using it against—not for—one another.

Before I left for Hamburg, when I was writing my talk, feminist friends back home had (first jokingly, then seriously) suggested that

I wear a fake beard when I gave my plenary, gradually letting it come unglued while I was talking until I would stand there at the end, exposed—as me! I had actually considered it, but in the end (and I must say I've always regretted this) I felt too vulnerable. And I didn't want to let that show.

Yet I remember looking out at that huge roomful of people, mostly women, and thinking—*knowing*—that what I was saying was true. And it felt important to say it. I thought of the feminist thinkers who had inspired and taught me, showing me new ways to think about language, writing, and voice. There was Audre Lorde, Christa Wolf, Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, Verena Stefan, Monique Wittig, Sheila Rowbotham, and Hélène Cixous. And always, like a light in darkness, there was Adrienne Rich. They wrote of speaking truth to power, of writing that could save our lives, of using language to express our selves. The response to my talk was overwhelming. Everyone stood up when I was done, and they clapped and clapped.

Yet from the conference organizers, afterwards: nothing. No comments, no response, absolute silence. It was eerie. They said nothing about my presentation, and I felt a huge sense of shame. It was as if I'd been crossed out. And in a sense, I had been. The talks were supposed to be published in a journal, but when I submitted mine, it was relegated (in abridged form, no less) to an internal newsletter of the sponsoring organization, *Frauen in der Literaturwissenschaft* (Women in Literary Studies).

So now, as you raise the question of how and if the relationship between language and power is a gendered one, all of this comes back to me and I think, yes, of course, it is. But it's not a matter of identity (man or woman) or positionality (who I am speaking as). Rather, it's a matter of underlying systems of value and institutional structures of power that are themselves, from the get-go, gendered.

I play with power when I talk or write and make choices: say, to use verbs instead of nouns, shift to an anecdote, use affective rather than merely analytic terms. One set of choices can make me feel credentialed, empowered, authorized, while another can make me feel the opposite: uncredentialed, of questionable authority, naked. That's where fear and shame come in. Of what exactly? Of being inadequate, not having what it takes? Perhaps to some extent. (There, we're back to the glued-on beard....) But I think it reveals a deeper ambivalence. On the one hand, we want to be recognized and rewarded: the pat on the head for the smart girl. On the other hand, we resent the price we have to pay for that pat.

The difference between talking *as* someone and talking *to* someone is relevant here. When I talk *as* someone, I'm not talking to anyone in particular. I am posturing, assuming a persona (who may not even be me). But when I talk *to* someone, the focus changes. I am aware of the other person listening. It's not just about me, or even just about them. It's about the possibility of communication between us.

I often make my students address their papers to a particular audience. To somebody. "Anybody," I tell them. "Just not nobody, as if you didn't care if anyone were listening." At that moment, when it becomes intentional communication, that's where fear—but also the excitement—of writing comes in. For I am putting myself out there as the person writing this, exposing what I think and value and feel. And when I write that way, I want you—who are reading—to listen and hear me.

Of course, that's also when my writing makes me feel vulnerable. What if it's seen as petty, or stupid, or offends someone? Would that mean that I'm a petty, stupid, or offensive person? No wonder theory is so seductive. We can hide our small, subjective selves behind some big, impressive words and feel protected.

St. Paul, September 20

Dear Angelika,

You write about "gender" in your story about the Hamburg conference or my story about the editor and for some reason, the word "betrayal" comes to mind. I am sure you are right that the academy trains us all in what constitutes power. I also know that no matter how infuriated and almost speechless I become when I read about academic men being rude or dismissive in their displays of power, I expect it somehow. Whereas when the editor or the *Frauen in der Literaturwissenschaft* organizers do what they do, I am overwhelmed by something far stronger, a sense of betrayal. I feel abandoned, alone.

There is not only gender in all of what we are writing about, there is also politics. Whom do we want to reach with our words? Is it possible for us to write and to be heard and accepted/validated by academics AND others? And isn't that vital contact and connection what academic feminists in particular should be striving for?

Yesterday I participated in a demonstration for the AFSCME workers who are on strike. A lovely sunny day. A large group of students and faculty and a few workers gathered in front of the main administration building where the Prez sits. He had complained that he couldn't get his work done because of all the noise outside. We gathered, hoisted signs, whatever, and were absolutely silent for a half hour. No words, just sounds of birds and a breeze—it felt like a Quaker meeting to me, I had time to think, to ponder, to look around. At some point, two young women just began to dance. We had been told to yell as loud as we could for one minute following the silence. That was also glorious. Then somebody began banging a drum and we all chanted FAIR PAY for awhile. And then I went back for my office hour and my seminar. By the time I got home, I was too tired to do anything.

But I do remember one thought I had. When the young women began to dance, I felt like weeping, not out of sadness so much as reacting to something beautiful. And I thought about what we do in the best of ways: we point out beauty, we get people to pay attention to it in all its forms, verbal and otherwise.

Atlanta, September 20

Dear Ruth-Ellen,

A lot of writing that I come across, especially standard academic writing, is so dispiriting to me for the very reason that it's so unbeautiful. It not only lacks any sense of beauty, but it also doesn't even seem to miss it or feel that something is wrong. Writing that matters, I think, should be beautiful in a way that was true to what it was saying. What this means is that beauty isn't about being decorative, a pleasing appearance. It's about getting at the truth, cutting to the heart of things. And that kind of beauty can make us feel like crying ... as you did when you saw the women dancing. Yet everything that I've been taught about what matters in academic writing is the opposite: you're not supposed to touch or move people. You're not supposed to be funny. And God forbid, you should make them cry. The aim is not feeling but thinking. Craft your argument, make your point. That's it. Writing that refuses such an

either/or choice, that wants to make us feel and not just think, is—within this framework—considered suspect, if not embarrassing.

St. Paul, September 22

I remember a conversation where you used the word "seduction" to describe the effect of theory on you, and I realized then that we are different in that way. I was happy to see Barbara Christian splitting up "theory" and "theorizing," because I do see great usefulness in talking about ideas and working out things together. But I am super-sensitive to even the sound of theory, or maybe more accurately the jargon of theory. Much of it is such harsh and ugly language. Most of all, I cannot make what feels like the requisite step of withdrawing from the world to engage in what I see as the practice of something so often separate from that world. I can't think of anything much in my life that can be just for fun, like a pastime, which is what purely theoretical discussions frequently sound like to me. Especially since 2000 I have become increasingly grim when I look around me and see all that is wrong, evil, when I see encroaching fascism in this country, hardly even "encroaching," so close it's almost here. I find theory so far from seductive, I cannot tell you —

Atlanta, September 27

Dear Ruth-Ellen,

There's something about the need for connection that's at issue here. What I love to read is writing that acknowledges me as a participant. That invites a response. When I'm reading certain kinds of theory, or writing in a very abstract mode myself, it feels like the opposite. There is no interlocutor, no other position outside the text itself; it is contained within itself, a disembodied monologue. When I have written like that, I have caught myself thinking, "I hope no one reads this."

Of course, that sounds completely absurd (why am I writing if not to be read?), and even as I'm thinking it, I realize the absurdity. But it makes emotional sense: a certain kind of language can feel so removed from the person I experience myself to be in other contexts, that what I'm writing (the words and thoughts that I'm putting down) and what I'm thinking can feel disconnected, as if a cord has been cut. The words almost seem to generate their own

thoughts, like a code that someone else programmed. I don't own my writing anymore and don't know if I want to claim it. It's as if the person I feel I am has been replaced by some other person I think I ought to be and I'm adrift in a sea of words I no longer control. I no longer know what I wanted to communicate when I started writing. Instead of writing with a sense of a relationship between myself and my imagined readers, I am writing as if no one is listening anymore. My writing has become a performance, and I'm worried about how I'll be perceived. How will I sound? What will they think of me? How will they judge me? No wonder I wish that no one were looking.

Yet I know that there are other ways of writing that create connection. The way you and I are writing here is one example.

Another is an experience I had some years ago, when I went on a trip to South Africa. I had been invited to give a talk on my work on history and memory and difficult pasts at the famous District Six Museum in Cape Town. I was trying to write my talk and it wasn't going well. I felt blocked and was getting more and more nervous until I finally froze up completely. Not a single word was coming out. I would sit at the computer, despairing. I had no idea anymore why they had invited me, what I might want to tell them, or what they might want to hear. I had lost any sense of connection between me and them. I kept thinking, why would they care about what some white European woman academic had to say about history and memory and difficult pasts, when they were struggling with their own past, engaged in the work of making history now? I imagined them looking at me with polite disinterest. Why *would* they be interested in me? All I saw was myself in the spotlight. And in the glare of that spotlight, I froze.

Something had to give. So, one day I decided to imagine what it would feel like to meet these people in District Six, people whose work as anti-Apartheid activists I had read about and admired deeply. I imagined them taking the time to come to the museum and hear me talk that evening. I imagined being in the same room with them, talking with them, hearing their stories and sharing mine, learning more about our different histories. At that, something fundamental shifted: as I changed perspective, I was no longer focused on myself and on what I might have to say. Instead, I was focused on them: on what they might be interested in hearing me talk about, on what I had that they might find useful. I went to the computer and started writing. "Imagine this," I began, as I told them the story of a memorial I had come across by accident in Berlin and

what this discovery had meant to me. Suddenly there were all these things I wanted to tell them, and I was eager to hear what they had to say. It was about a relationship between us, our shared interests across different histories and what we could learn from each other along the way.

St. Paul, September 28

My dear Angelika,

What you are saying is that without a recipient, an interlocutor, whatever, we are writing into an empty place. That's one thing. But it is the other part that you slide into that grabs me, namely, writing with no aim of communication seems to occur when we are embarrassed in some way, self-conscious, not in a consciousness-of-self good way, but rather in dread, embarrassment, in a deep concern NOT about what we are saying, but about what the others will say in response and how we will be perceived. The implications of that have my mind leaping about, from John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* on how women act and how they are perceived, how they look and how they are looked at messing up their minds—to my own enormous connection with what you are saying.

And think of the sadness of it all: that our living, which involves communicating all the time with others, students and colleagues, can be so marked by a sense of wanting not to be seen, of wanting to hide, while at the same time—and here, at least in me, is where the falseness comes in—wanting to please those who are being addressed. Saying the right words—using the right jargon—trying not to provoke. Lord. I can barely even write all this down, I am stumbling along here, feeling more than thinking.

And all of this is vitally connected to writing that matters! It would seem, in fact, that writing that does not matter is that which is not written to others, that which either mouths others in ways that erase ourselves or is so timid and cautious or well-behaved that whatever we actually think disappears.

Thank you for this, my dear.

Atlanta, September 28

Dearest Ruth-Ellen,

We are getting at something here that feels deeply and frighteningly true, and it has to do with gender, with that perverse dimension of our learned behavior that has us, on the one hand, wanting "to please ... trying not to provoke," and, on the other hand, "wanting not to be seen ... wanting to hide." Your email from earlier today takes us back to these words about the ambivalent authority of power that Roland Barthes explored in his essay, "Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers," and that I tried to expose in my Hamburg talk on the word beards we don to gain recognition. I can't stop thinking about Barthes's words and what they mean to us as academic women. What they evoke for me—in such a vivid way that I can almost *see* her—is a girl who is confused and frightened. She wants to please. She wants to avoid provoking (at least no more than she is already doing simply by being there, taking up space, taking up time, speaking her mind, saying what she knows and wants and notices). But—and this is the kicker—she doesn't just want to please by being a good and dutiful girl and saying what is expected of her, she also wants to hide, to remain unseen, to go unnoticed. Is she afraid of what will be done to her if she attracts attention? Which should she choose: being punished because she's too much out there or being ignored because she can't be seen? Either way, she's at risk. She does not feel safe.

What have we touched here? Our talk about writing has led us somewhere dark and twisted. Perhaps this is where our previous thoughts about fear, shame, and betrayal in relation to writing link up with other sets of experiences—of danger, abuse, and neglect—that in some deep and unconscious way inform the experience of being female in our culture.

Atlanta, September 29

Dear Ruth-Ellen,

In your email this morning—after the worrying time with your sick kitty Marlitt, your meddling neighbor and her callous comments, and the painful phone call from your son—you mentioned (twice in fact) that you felt bad to be interrupting our correspondence for these life issues. Your words startled me. Initially, they reminded me of the insistence, voiced so strongly and angrily in Second Wave feminist

thought, that our work was not only constantly interrupted, it was *structured as interruptible*, and it was for this structural reason, not because of some fault of ours, that we could never fully focus on it, devote our full attention to it, put *work* above the annoying intrusions of *life.* The reason we couldn't excel and advance like men—this was the feminist argument at the time—was because we were continually being interrupted by all this life stuff: a suffering pet, a troubled child, an aging parent. Moreover, we were complicit in our own lack of discipline (which is how our interruptibility was, of course, perceived) because we permitted it: we had been socialized to be caretakers and be available when others needed us. That was the womanly way. One feminist response to this socialization was to reject it. We should refuse to always be available, always interruptible, to arrange our time according to others' needs. Attending to others, while ignoring our selves ... this had to stop!

But you know what? I've never really wanted to stop it. Taking the cat to the vet, making a birthday special for my children, mentoring students who needed extra guidance ... all of these things of course took time. And you could say that they took time away from what we academics like to describe as "our own work"—our research and writing work (as if the other things we do were someone else's work!?). But that's not how I experienced it. And who determines which work is the work that matters, anyway?

That's why your words, your almost-apology for interrupting our work to address "life issues," startled me. There was nothing "bad," as you put it, about that interruption. On the contrary. One of the things about our correspondence that I've particularly loved is how the many aspects of our lives—the professional and the personal, the political and the philosophical, the mundane and the sublime—were all part of our reflections about writing. They all informed our sense of what kind of writing mattered and what mattered to us as we wrote. In the process, *we created a new form of writing*. Double-voiced and non-linear in structure, operating on several different planes at once, it pursues its inquiry in a discontinuous, interruptible form that allows for sidetracks, backtracks, interjections, and what in film are called jump-cuts, even as its main line of inquiry stays focused. And to me this kind of writing, as we have been practicing it here, is made richer by the interruptions, not poorer.

When I described what we were doing—structuring our paper in the form of emails—to a friend of mine in Anthropology, she said that a book in her field had just been published that used email form. It's

called *Improvising Theory* and I've just ordered it. Perhaps a new genre is emerging and we are part of the process. The horizon of possibilities lies open.

St. Paul, September 29

Dear Angelika,

Work is often the thing that saves my life these days, mainly because it distracts me from other less good things. I know I am confusing the issue here, and I know exactly what you mean about seeing the things that interrupt us in our work as being somehow bad, the reason for our not being more stunning scholars or whatever—but maybe it is because I really had to fight to get a job in the first place, finishing my PhD at a time when there were no jobs or postdocs in our field and moving then to Madison with my then-husband, who had found a job, and feeling as if the things that interrupted my work were now the dominant and most important things in my role as a wife and, by then, a mother. And I was enormously unhappy for quite a while. Some of that no doubt has hung on in me—but my saying that I regretted interrupting our exchanges with my cat Marlitt's decline was speaking the truth. Only this *work* we are doing feels like a lot more, something increasingly vital and essential to me.

Atlanta, September 29

I don't remember exactly when and how we decided to call this dialogue between us "Writing that Matters," but I know we were inspired by Arthur Kleinman's book, *What Really Matters: Living a Moral Life Amidst Uncertainty and Danger*. Your emails this morning took me back to that sense of urgency with which we started, when we were asking fundamental questions about our work, in particular our scholarly writing: what it promises us, what it costs us, and what it gives. In a way, this is where we began our exploration of "writing that matters" and I wanted to revisit that starting point. So, I re-read Kleinman's first essay. "Given the manifest shakiness of our lives," he writes, "what is surprising is that we act, think, and write as if we were in control of ourselves and our world. It is our assiduous denial of existential vulnerability and limits that is extraordinary...." (7).

St. Paul, September 29

... The “manifest shakiness of our lives,” indeed. Every day feels manifestly shaky to me, and not just right this second.

This backing up, this looking at the whole business of writing that matters, from what is going on in our heads when we are writing, how our thoughts leap hither and yon, from fear to betrayal and who knows where else, seems to have given me the chance for a perspective that I tend to lose sight of once I am actually writing. I suspect I have been hiding for a long time, even from myself: I have focused less on what I am actually thinking, far more on how to write it down.

St. Paul, October 7

Dear Angelika,

There is a way in which our emails flow, not necessarily always on track or in any clear linear fashion, but they take their good time and things emerge that delight me, stories that fit, touches of elegant language, everyday matters that had to intervene. At the same time, I remember how I once gave a graduate seminar for Women’s Studies on women’s personal narratives—it was in connection with a research cluster which ultimately presented the conference on personal narratives that produced a good book. The seminar was intended to pull in graduate students from a variety of fields and so we read all kinds of personal narratives, not just the obvious types of biography and autobiography. Anyway, among others we read Marjorie Shostak’s *Nisa*. A considerable number of the students disliked it enormously, felt it was a white girl’s take on an African life—made all the worse because she arranged the material from her transcript into individual chapters with individual topics whereas the transcript itself was chaotic, messy, but—to them—far more “real.” I don’t remember how the discussion went beyond that, but I do know I asked at one point whether they knew of a publisher who would have published seven-hundred pages of raw transcript.

As to how we are writing here—in addition to the beauty/ugliness, trust/betrayal, connection/separation, fear/shame/pleasure themes, I was struck by other recurrent issues: life/death; power (repeated perhaps more than any other word, is that possible?); theory (standing all by its pristine self—but connected with words like bunker, currency, jargon, neurosis, scorn, ugliness,

deprecation); invisibility/ingratiation, connected somehow to pleasing and not provoking with our writing and probably with our speaking as well. There are more. I also noted the way in which we incorporated texts/citations—a sign, I guess, of what it is that we do in our work. Others' writings are what stimulate and restore us, but I also think there is a point at which they too will fade, and we will be faced with the rawness of ourselves and our own words even if, as we know, everything is borrowed from somewhere.

Enough! I need to do other stuff now, but I repeat myself: I am so happy we are doing this. I feel alive again.

How I appreciate you!

Love, Ruth-Ellen

Atlanta, October 7

Dear Ruth-Ellen,

I, too, have been reading through our emails, seeing how we can put them in order for presentation. We will make that order. But even as I am working to think analytically—checking for sequence, coherence, continuity, clarity—I am responding emotionally, laughing and crying as I read. Why? Because at the heart of it all, before and beyond the various issues we discussed, we discovered that what matters, what makes writing matter, is the promise of being heard. Writing that matters always involves more than the writer; it involves her reader. One speaks and the other listens. A connection is made. A dialogue affirms that connection, as our correspondence did. I wrote, you responded. You wrote, I responded. We listened and we heard each other. Writing that matters, then, is writing that signals the desire and willingness to be heard. "Can you hear me," it asks, "will you listen? I am here. Where are you? Are you out there?" When we read writing informed by this sensibility, we can respond, as you so movingly and beautifully did, "Yes, I hear you. I am out here and I am listening." I laugh and I cry, because I think that this is what makes life sustainable. That is certainly the case for me. And maybe it applies to all of us as human beings. I think of those stories I've read, of research that shows how people—infants, children, old people, any people—who are ignored, not paid attention to, not heard or noticed, shrink into themselves and emotionally, even physically, die. So, when we write in a way that shows our willingness and need to be responded to, and our willingness

and need to respond in turn, we are affirming the very essence of our desire to live.

I wish you and Marlitt a good night and send love to both of you.

Angelika

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