

REVIEW ESSAY: TEXTS, TALK, AND WRITING IN RECOVERY: IMPLICATIONS FOR COMPOSITION STUDIES

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Daniell, Beth. *A Communion of Friendship: Literacy, Spiritual Practice, and Women in Recovery*. Studies in Writing & Rhetoric. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003.

Jensen, George H. *Storytelling in Alcoholics Anonymous: A Rhetorical Analysis*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000.

This body of research responds to the questions postprocess composition studies should be concerned with: Why and how do people in our culture read and write when they are not compelled to by the state, what are the functions and forms of these various literacies, what do these practices mean to the participants, to college students, to composition studies, and to the wider culture, and how do those meanings vary from this group to that?

(Daniell 6)

As the demographics of the university population has shifted over the past century from predominantly affluent white males to an ethnically diverse study body of men and women from all socio-economic backgrounds, a greater breadth of topics has become valued for study. As women and ethnic minorities have

gained entrance into university classrooms, as both students and teachers, scholarly interest in non-traditional topics has risen in response, with contemporary scholars questioning and critiquing academic worthiness of both the tradition and the everyday.

In composition studies, the emergence of the expressivism movement propelled intellectual curiosity in—as well as teaching philosophies supporting—the use of personal writing in the classroom, subsequently fueling numerous discussions—such as the Bartholomae/Elbow debate—about the value and appropriateness of this form of writing instruction. Judith Harris claims that “although personal writing as a means of self-exploration and political insight has been successful in many classrooms, there has been a surge of opposition to approaches associated with Don Murray and Peter Elbow” (671). Harris’ claim that writing teachers who have found personal writing as a tool for “self-exploration and political insight” to be beneficial reminds us that to renounce the personal from the academic is to deny that language has power in everyday life, as well as in institutionally sanctioned arenas.

The relationship between writing and personal change has received considerable attention recently, authorizing research that directs itself towards finding answers to how people use the pen for transformational purposes. George Jensen’s *Storytelling in Alcoholics Anonymous: A Rhetorical Analysis* and Beth Daniell’s *A Communion of Friendship: Literacy, Spiritual Practice, and Women in Recovery* look to the twelve-step recovery programs of AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) and Al-Anon to interrogate the ways in which their members use texts, talk, and writing to effect change in their daily lives. These complementary ethnographic studies serve as useful guides for gaining an understanding and demystifying the culture and discursive practices of both AA and Al-Anon, respectively, providing an archive of language practices utilized by the earliest twelve-step programs. Due to the ethnographic nature of their studies, each conveys in depth how the historical complexity and rhetorical intertextuality motivate emotional and spiritual transformation for its members.

Prior to moving to a Bakhtinian analysis of the rhetorical power of oral traditions of AA on/for members, Jensen provides a thorough history of the archetypical discourse community that would eventually influence the American epistemology of self-improvement and recovery. AA was founded in 1935 by Bill W. and Dr. Bob, two alcoholics who found that through confession to each other and prayer they could remain sober and so looked for others to join in their fellowship; thus, AA grew as alcoholics found salvation from their addiction through talk. In 1939—at which point AA had approximately 100 male members—the twelve steps to find and maintain sobriety were introduced to members in the foundational text *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism*—also known as the Big Book.

Storytelling in Alcoholics Anonymous focuses primarily on the oral traditions within AA, concerning itself with the power of language to create solidarity and community as well as to (re)create the self. In order to contextualize the role of texts and talk in AA, Jensen draws on Walter Ong's work on orality and literacy and Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of autobiography, *carnival*, and the relationship between the author and the hero of a text to show how members act rhetorically upon themselves to move from the old identity of an egocentric "practicing alcoholic" to the new identity of "recovering alcoholic."

Jensen dedicates a significant portion of his analysis to the importance of the ritualization of rhetorical conventions, such as the utterance "I am an alcoholic." This act of self-naming is argued to be a key component in the process of transformation that members achieve through "working the steps." To illustrate how such rhetorical acts have constructive power, Jensen uses the example of the opening salutation that is used in meetings. Speakers begin by introducing themselves by name as well as admission to their powerlessness over alcohol. If Bill W. were to speak at a meeting today, he would begin by saying, "Hello, I'm Bill. I'm an alcoholic." According to Jensen:

[This initial exchange of greeting between the speaker and audience] establishes a dialogue that is repeated again and again as roles shift, as one of the audience becomes speaker and speaker becomes one of the audience—as each person, in turn, identifies himself or herself as an alcoholic. [...] They read the exchange into the text, ritualizing the story, bringing it to life, imagining themselves at a meeting with Bill W. before them, hearing their friends in the room. (2)

Bill W's story—as *written* in the Big Book—though not truly an oral form in modern day AA meetings, is cathartic and reassuring to AA members as it “enables other alcoholics to interpret their own experiences” through the lens of a fellow alcoholic's experience (9). Genre theory reminds us of the socially reflective (Swales) and socially constructive nature (Miller; Devitt) of genre to do work on and in discourse communities, as the examples provided by Jensen illustrate how genres, such as AA stories, have the power to both construct community as well as be constructed by it.

The intertextuality between the written and spoken texts of AA is central to understanding the rhetorical implications of this discourse community, such that the story of Bill W. in print is “both like and unlike the stories that one hears at meetings” as it reads like an autobiography—chronologically and thematically structured—as opposed to the fragmentary, incoherent, and incomplete stories that are spontaneously told in meetings (10-11). Jensen argues that “storytelling in AA is part of an oral tradition that cannot be fully captured in print,” further contending the interconnectedness between orality and literacy, as AA stories that have been committed to texts—which are often read aloud in meetings and ritualized—display the qualities of both oral and written narratives: the story committed to paper reads like an orally-told tale, yet simultaneously exhibits coherence and completion commonly found in written stories such as autobiographies (2). Jensen claims:

Although AA stories have autobiographical moments, they are much more and much less. They lack the completeness of autobiography or of a full narrative, so the hero remains unfinished, never fully captured or defined. Bakhtin would say that the hero is not consummated. (71)

Relying on Bakhtin's model of the author and the hero, we can see how the storyteller in AA resembles the author who is "still working through the unfolding events of a life in progress," unlike the hero whose life story has already been written and thus reached completion. Jensen claims that an analysis of AA stories shows that the stories have certain generic features: speakers tell how they used to be, how they became involved with AA, and how they are now. These stories are fragmented and unfinished: "tales about learning to live with uncertainty" (73). It is this constant reworking of the narrative through talk and writing that allows for members to utilize the conventions of AA to establish a transformation of self as described here:

To speak about one's story within the culture of an AA meeting is to live the tradition and culture of the organization. The speaker uses the values of that community to interpret his or her life and construct the heroes to whom he or she will answer. (112)

The transformative power of language is ever-present in Jensen's analysis, with members telling their stories and integrating the values of the community into their constantly revolving narrative of self, with the speaker constantly negotiating between the identity of the drinking self and the sober self. *Storytelling in Alcoholics Anonymous* allows us a glimpse at the ways in which exclusive discourse communities utilize narrative conventions to [re]create a more desirable/necessary self.

In *A Communion of Friendship: Literacy, Spiritual Practice, and Women in Recovery*, Beth Daniell shows “how six women use reading and writing [in Al-Anon] to re-form themselves” (1). She looks to the work of composition scholars invested in everyday writing to remind us of the worth of such research. Drawing on John Trimbur, Daniell argues that an examination of “how individuals and groups engage in self-formation, not as an autonomous activity but as a practice of everyday life” enriches other work in composition studies (1). Quoting from Anne Ruggles Gere, i.e., the “need to uncouple literacy and schooling...to consider the situatedness of composition practices, to focus on the experiences of writers not always visible to us inside the walls of the academy,” Daniell claims that research into what Gere refers to as the “extracurriculum of composition” can reveal both the gate keeping function of literacy as well as the transformative nature, thus allowing for a wider view of composition (qtd. in Daniell 154).

Like Jensen, Daniell also introduces us to the historical background of the fellowship that was established in the likeness of AA prior to examining the meaning of literacy in this recovery group. In the 1950s wives of AA members, who understood that alcoholism was a family disease, founded Al-Anon. By using the twelve steps used in AA they too could find sanity and repair the damage done by living with an alcoholic. Although early Al-Anon members consisted solely of the wives of alcoholics, modern day members include friends and family members of alcoholics; all that is required for membership is that an individual has been affected by another person’s drinking.

In this ethnography of literacy, Daniell rises to the challenge set out by Trimbur that the task of researchers and teachers in composition should be “to connect rhetoric both to sign systems and to lived experience in order to understand the ‘logic of combination’ by which individuals splice together a sense of self from the textual shards of the most mass-mediated culture in human history” (qtd. in Daniell 153). By focusing on the social, communal literacy of the Mountain City Al-Anon women, readers

are exposed to the ways in which human beings join with one another through language to “come to voice and self.”

Daniell locates her study within a feminist framework, opening with her research goals:

This book is about women’s literacy. More specifically, it is about the literacies used by one group of women in their spiritual practice. [...] it is about the literacy of real women who live in our culture [...] Thus, this book is mostly about private and personal uses of literacy, practices allowed to women because such forms of reading and writing have typically been regarded as less important than the more visible and public literacies used by men. (1)

Certainly, the choice to focus specifically on women in Al-Anon in order to make visible discursive “practices allowed to women” is a worthy endeavor, particularly in light of the traditional gendered nature of Al-Anon. Interestingly, the personal literacy practices presented by Daniell are the same as those used in AA, and therefore allow us to question what the implications are surrounding both men and women engaging in “private and personal uses of literacy,” especially since both groups—which are no longer gender specific—utilize what Daniell refers to as feminized discursive practices.

Daniell proposes that the women in her study find power in the intersection between literacy and spirituality and thus serve as a useful site of study:

When scholars in rhetoric and composition discuss writing and power, they most often mean economic or political power first, intellectual or social power second—power over others. Perhaps it is time for us to include spiritual power. It is time for us to see all the multifaceted ways actual human beings use literacy to compose power in their daily lives. (76)

Daniell advocates looking to personal writing, such as that done by the Mountain City Al-Anon women, to understand how language and power are negotiated in multiple arenas, as well as used to heal the self and negotiate identity. She asserts that the Mountain City women do reading and writing to engage in self-formation, to become agents in their own lives, to make sense of their lives, and to establish community.

Surprisingly, although Daniell looks to the language of a recovery community, she does not advocate spiritual or therapeutic writing techniques to be used in the classroom, but rather suggests that these types of writing “may and perhaps should go on outside of the academy” with consenting adults, while advising those interested in such writing to look to the self-help section at their local bookstore. In Daniel’s opinion, assigning true-confessional papers, as opposed to personal narratives, in the composition classroom is irresponsible pedagogy, because English instructors are not trained to intervene in their students’ psyches and must be aware of the stakes in this type of writing instruction.

Daniell claims that her most important implication for pedagogy “lies in the powerful combination of reading and writing and talk” (157). Furthermore, she argues that “seeing how and why writing and reading are used by people outside of the academy will, I hope, enrich our sense of what literacy is and can be in our culture” (36). In addition to explicitly addressing the stakes of her research, she also points to the consequences of not assessing scholarly value to the discursive traditions of non-academic communities. She claims that “when whole areas of people’s lives are closed off as unworthy of academic attention, the academy misses important information” (150), and therefore through revisiting notions of the spiritual and the religious, those of us in the academy can profit from scholarship pertaining to the literacy practices of members in recovery groups such as Al-Anon. Daniell asks the question of greatest importance: What are we to learn from this study of actual women reading and writing for spiritual development? She answers that “paying attention to how

actual people use reading and writing in a particular time and place for specific purposes, under specific material conditions, expands our academic views of literacy, of texts constructed and construed, and of the human beings who read and write" (150).

Storytelling in Alcoholics Anonymous: A Rhetorical Analysis and A Communion of Friendship: Literacy, Spiritual Practice, and Women in Recovery allow us opportunities to explore how everyday people in recovery communities use discursive practices for self-transformation, utilizing rhetorical conventions, which serves to inform our understanding of the complicated nature of texts, talk, and writing. These books—taken together or alone—present the composition teacher with examples of everyday uses of rhetoric that can be applied to a variety of teaching approaches, including, but not limited to, a site for the study of narrative, genre studies, and writing the self.

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