

## Introduction to Pixelating the Self: Digital Feminist Memoirs

by Alexandra Hidalgo

*Pixelating the Self* is in many ways the result of an academic fairytale. The extraordinary pieces you're about to experience are reworked versions of the final projects for a graduate course titled "Academic Memoirs Across Media" that I taught at Michigan State University's Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures in the fall of 2015. If this information makes you wary of this edited collection, bear with us a little longer. I promise you won't be disappointed by the work these women produced.

Yes, they were all women. We had ten women in the class. Five of them were women of color. Most of them were nontraditional students in a variety of ways. As the summer unfolded in sweltering greenness, I would check the course list and there they were, the names of the women who would be spending three hours a week with me in the fall. I couldn't help but plan the course for them.

Months earlier, Malea Powell, my mentor and our graduate associate chair, had invited me to design my dream special-topics graduate course. My dream was a course where we would look at how different media—print, hypertext, podcast, and video—shaped the ways in which academics, particularly those in rhetoric and composition, used their own lives as the basis for scholarly pieces. In my own path through the field, I've used filmmaking to explore my and my family's lives in general interest documentaries and academic video essays like the one you're currently watching. I wanted to develop a better understanding of the ways in which my fellow rhetoricians blend personal storytelling, theory, and various media in their scholarship. As I chose and arranged the course texts, the names and faces of my future students, most of whom I already knew from interactions in and outside the classroom, played in my mind.

By the time I walked up the three flights of steps to our classroom, I felt as if I was coming to a potluck with an experimental, much labored-over dish that I wasn't sure my fellow guests would enjoy. Ten minutes into the class, I realized that we were going to have a semester that would shape the way all of us thought of memoir, pedagogy, and feminism for years to come.

Even though the course wasn't explicitly feminist in its description, I told them that we were going to do our best to have a feminist classroom, starting by figuring out what our version of feminism should be. Because many of the course texts were published in open-access digital journals and inspired the students to create their own digital scholarship, we were attracted by the fourth wave of feminism's emphasis on the importance of online spaces to feminist activism. As Kira Cochrane explains, "it's increasingly false to draw a line between what

happens online and offline." She goes on to argue that engaging in feminist conversations and activism in digital spaces "allow[s] people who might otherwise be marginalised by disability, distance, or caring responsibilities to take part." Our class experienced the value of digital access as one of the students, Les Hutchinson, who had a baby over the summer, participated through Skype, sometimes with her baby girl in her arms. Everyone took turns holding the extra laptop I brought to class to make it possible for Les to join us in the elongated circle we created for our discussions.

We returned to some questions over and over. How do we turn to those who shaped us—family, friends, those who have hurt us—and ethically weave their stories with our own? What is the role of theory in memoir? How do we use theory to help our stories join disciplinary conversations, as well as start new ones? In what ways does the digital enhance and/or limit the stories we tell about ourselves? Besides our own voices, we had outside help as we tried to untangle these issues. Victor Villanueva, Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés, Steph Ceraso, and Erin Anderson, whose scholarship was part of the class, joined us over Skype to discuss their work and their approach to creating it. Besides the scholars who visited us, we engaged with the ones who courageously shared their personal stories with us through a variety of publications that we experienced week after week. You can find this blend of complex, innovative scholarship on the [course website](#).

Having such a variety of voices in our class helped enrich our understanding of intersectionality, another tenet of the fourth wave that became key to our class discussions. Kimberlé Crenshaw developed the term in 1989. As she explains, intersectionality "'bring[s] people into movements, or into political spaces, with a broader capacity to see how their issues are connected.'" (qtd. in Cochrane). In other words, as Cochrane argues, intersectionality invites us to "pursue liberation, not just for women, but for those oppressed by class, race, sexuality, age, ability." Because we were a blend of women of color and white women and some of us had experienced discrimination due to our race, sexuality, class, and disabilities, it was impossible for us to talk about our lives without addressing intersectional issues.

Conversations around intersectionality are messy and at times painful. Trying to step out of our own perspective is hard work. Audre Lorde argues that white women and women of color "need each other for support and connection and all the other necessities of living on the borders. But in order to come together we must recognize each other" (92). And when we recognize each other we must at times recognize aspects of ourselves that we may not like: our blind spots, our prejudices, our failures to empathize. In the foreword to the second issue of *This Bridge Called My Back*, which features work by feminists of color, Cherríe Moraga explains that a feminism that brings together women from

different backgrounds “has proved to be much easier between the covers of a book than between real live women. Today the dream feels more remote, but this is precisely when the real work begins” (257). In spite of the difficulties we at times had in recognizing each other during class discussions, we came through this course with a stronger sense of why in order to achieve our particular feminist goals, we must also listen to those whose goals and needs are different from ours and find ways to work with them.

Much like *This Bridge Called My Back, Pixelating the Self* brings together the feminist work of a variety of women who come from different backgrounds. It is perhaps because we were able to make this kind of feminism work in the (albeit limited) universe of our classroom that we feel that our own collection, like *This Bridge Called My Back*, will provide a tapestry of separate yet connected experiences about gender, race, class, and ability, and about how those aspects of our identity shape our relationship with ourselves and with others.

Unlike *This Bridge Called My Back*, our collection does not live between book covers. The authors' words are accompanied and emboldened by images, sound, and hypertext. The pieces you're about to experience are inspired by the work of scholars like Sarah Arroyo, Jody Shipka, Marc Santos, and Trisha Campbell, who blend the digital with personal storytelling. As a class, we pondered Jonathan Alexander's question, “What does it mean to compose, to assemble, to remix, and to reconsider not just the available means of persuasion, but also the available resources for meaning-making in the 21st century?” Janet Hoskins argues that “a life history is not only a recital of events but also an organization of experience.” When composing digital memoirs, decisions made for organizing our personal experiences are not only related to selection and sequencing but also to what medium is used to include each piece of the story. In her digital family memoir “The Olive Project,” Erin Anderson explains, “[my] design choices function to place you in a similar position to the one that I inhabited at the outset of the project, in which I gathered together diffuse bits and pieces of my grandma's memories and tried, sometimes unsuccessfully, to draw meaning out of the spaces between them.” Like Anderson, the authors in this collection explore their lived experiences by creating digital spaces, whose design and navigation embody the ideas and emotions they're hoping to convey.

And the ideas and emotions presented here are complex and profound. One misgiving people may have about a collection like this one is the youth of the contributors. After all, good memoirs are often the result of years of reflection on past experiences. However, as these pieces show, there is a resonant immediacy to making sense of our experiences while they are unfolding.

One reason for the nuanced way in which these authors engage with their own

experience is that they invite other voices into their narratives. As Cynthia Franklin states, “personal narrative, even when embodied in one of its most conventional genres, need not simply reproduce American ideologies of individualism” (10). The authors blend their own experience with video and audio interviews, as well as recipes and letters written by those who have shaped who they are. By allowing their relatives and friends to add their own voices to the stories, the authors provide examples of intersectionality at work, taking opposing perspectives into account when making sense of their own beliefs and identity.

My sole regret about this edited collection is what is missing from it. Of the ten pieces produced at the end of our class, eight are showcased here. The two that have been omitted are not missing due to their being any less powerful or intelligent than the ones featured here. It was a matter of fit. One of the omitted pieces was an alphabetic-writing essay that didn't work with the digital aspect of the collection. The other was a video that drew exclusively from Latin@ and Chican@ studies, lacking the connection to rhetoric and composition. I have a sense that we'll see those two excellent pieces published somewhere soon. Even so, I tried to find ways to frame the collection so as to allow for everyone in the class to be published together. I couldn't figure out how to make it work, though. Like all feminist endeavors, this collection is an imperfect attempt at equality and inclusion.

In spite of what I was unable to include, *Pixelating the Self* will broaden readers', viewers', and listeners' understanding of the exciting possibilities that arise when blending memoir with the digital as we explore the stories of eight women and their families. Brooke, Les, Jaquetta, Lauren, Shewonda, Mirabeth, Naomi, and Suban open countless digital and physical doors to deepen and complicate our understanding of what it means to be a human being who is constantly transformed through interactions with others. I have no doubt that these pieces will also transform viewers' sense of their own lived experience and of the exciting new dimensions that the digital opens to us.

The collection opens with Brooke Chambers' "Sonic Memories: Stories from My Listening History," which traces her lifelong infatuation with recording herself and others. Through podcasts featuring audio tapes she recorded as a child and interviews with her mother and sister, Brooke examines the ways in which her parents' requirement that children be seen and not heard shaped her identity and her scholarly infatuation with sound.

Les Hutchinson's "Working with Loss: An Academic Memoir About Evoking the Act of Memorializing" blends photography, video, and archival materials to explore the loss of two of the most important people in her life over the course of one year: her grandmother and her best friend. As she uses images and

language to bring to life the two women she lost, she also provides a meditation on the ways loved ones' absence can be as influential in shaping who we are as their presence.

Jaquetta Shade's "Alisdayhv: A Cherokee Foodways Memoir" provides a history of her family through their approaches to procuring the ingredients for and preparing traditional Cherokee dishes. By blending recipes, photos, newspaper clippings, and video, Jaquetta theorizes the ways in which food and the cultural rituals related to it help shape our lives and define our identities.

In "Living Oklahoma: A Memoir About Trauma and Rebuilding in Academia," Lauren Brentnell creates a website that through photography and hypertext invites us to understand her relationship with trauma and healing by visiting the geographic locations where she's lived and where her difficult and regenerative experiences have unfolded.

Shewonda Leger's video essay "Making Space for Myself While Making Space for My Students" features footage of her semester teaching for the first time. Through her narration and footage of her teaching at two different institutions with different pedagogical approaches, we watch her begin to develop a personal pedagogy that meets her needs and those of her students.

In "Untangling a Beating Archive of Happiness: A Memoir," Mirabeth Braude uses photography and audio interviews with her parents to map out her life from childhood to graduate school, focusing on how her understanding of happiness, her main area of scholarly study, has matured and evolved through her education and familial relationships.

For "Woman in Relation: Sisterhood, Self, and Marriage," Naomi Sweo uses photography, video interviews with her mother and sisters, and screen captures of a feminist wedding blog in order to examine how she went from someone who was brought up with marriage as the most important goal to aspire to to a woman who values her career and her ability to explore her sexuality.

In "Hoygaygii waa halkee: A Nomad Seeking the Sensation of Home," Suban Nur Cooley uses photography, performance art, video, and audio to bring to life the experience of being the child of Somali exiles who has lived in Switzerland, Kenya, Australia, and the United States. As she explores how navigating a variety of cultures can shape our identity, she also argues for the vital pull of familial ties when our geographical location is constantly changing.

As our students and faculty become as diverse as our nation, we need narratives that will help us theorize what it is like to inhabit and make our way through the world from varying perspectives that until now have been mostly

absent from the stories we tell in rhetoric and composition. As these daring and innovative pieces show, blending the digital with analyzing and theorizing our personal experience results in vibrant, generative scholarship. Welcome. I know you will enjoy your passage through the eight worlds the authors have crafted.

## Credits:

Director, Cinematographer, Writer, Editor  
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Additional Photography  
NATHANIEL BOWLER  
SHEWONDA LEGER  
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Soundtrack  
"Sad Saz" and "Twill"  
by Poddington Bear

Downloaded from soundofpicture.com

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"Academic Memoirs Across Media" Website: [msuwra891fall2015.weebly.com](http://msuwra891fall2015.weebly.com)

*Pixelating the Self* logo design by Hannah Countryman.

Thank you to participants at the 2015 and 2016 Conference on College Composition and Communication and at the 2016 Cultural Rhetorics Art Exhibition and Reception at the REACH Art Studio. I filmed footage featured here at those events.

**Many thanks to:**

Michigan State University  
Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures  
College of Arts and Letters  
Malea Powell  
Jeff Grabill  
Bill Hart-Davidson

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