

Surrender as Method: Research, Writing, Rhetoric, Love

Jessica Restaino, with Susan Lundy Maute (in memoriam)¹

Abstract: *This essay examines challenges to research and writing in feminist rhetorical studies in the context of terminal illness. Drawing on qualitative data from a two-year ethnography project I conducted with my friend, Susan Lundy Maute, who was living at the time with stage IV breast cancer, I explore divisions between knowledge-making in the humanities and social sciences, and the stakes of emotionality, love, and friendship in the research relationship. I argue for the necessity of feminist methods and research in rhetorical studies rooted in unpredictability and uncertainty.*

Keywords: *illness, medical rhetorics, feminist research methods, ethnography, breast cancer*

Since we don't have time, we must rescue time by putting it into our discourses and holding it there, learning to speak and write not argumentative displays and presentations, but arguments full of anecdotal, personal, and cultural reflections that will make us plain to all others, thoughtful histories and narratives that reveal us as we're reaching for the others [. . .] the world wants speed, efficiency, and economy of motion, all goals that, when reached, have given the world less than it wanted or needed. We must teach the world to want otherwise, to want time for care.

Jim Corder, "Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love" (1985)

In the summer of 2012, I taught a class titled "Rhetoric of Sport" in which I aimed to explore the ways rhetorical concepts and terminology might serve as access points for understanding how we define athleticism, athletes, and competition. The course syllabus posed a series of questions linking language and physical accomplishment, including: "How are athletic 'heroes' constructed in words? In what ways do athletes rely on language to explain or even understand their own bodily performances?" (Restaino syllabus). When I look back now on what first inspired me to ask those questions, I realize that I was awestruck, moved completely, by the fact that I was, at the time—literally—running alongside an athletic marvel, my friend Susan Lundy Maute. Sue and I were teammates in a women's field hockey league, playing most months of

the year, indoors during the winter. She was the core of our team; a former division I scholarship athlete; our center midfielder, she commanded the field. Most striking and yet most unapparent about Sue: she had been diagnosed with stage IV breast cancer in 2009. This serious diagnosis came after a long journey following the birth of her fourth child when she was just 35 years old;



surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy had ultimately not produced a cure. As of this writing, it's now been 12 total years of breast cancer for Sue and these last months have been particularly hard. But in the summer of 2012 she was anything but "sick" and I wondered how she reconciled her athleticism and her disease, her physical strength and agility with the diagnosis of terminal breast cancer. To what extent was Sue's orientation to her physical body—a body that exists on the fault lines of exceptional prowess and terminal illness—a rhetorical one, hinged to words as a means by which to understand, to endure, and even to master

her experience?² As my students and I explored rhetoric as a link between the body's striving and the mind's interpretation of such effort, I knew that Sue had a crucially important story to share. I invited her to visit our class; she accepted. And so began a project of writing and talking, of journeying alongside Sue as her ethnographer these last two years. This is a project that has continued even as—and maybe because—Sue's condition has become more complex and more threatening. Ultimately what emerges here is a story, one that has unfolded between us, which threads together the personal with the professional, the need to understand the human experiences we share with the scholarly tools we have at our disposal.

Given its roots in terminal illness, in relationship, in intimacy, the central project of this essay is to raise questions about how and why we do research in rhetoric, to push on the pulse points I see as central to research and writing. In what ways, I ask, can feminist methods for knowledge-making sustain us in explorations of that which we can never fully understand, like illness and love? To what extent is our work in feminist rhetorical study rooted in a willingness to merge the struggles of our lives with the goals of our work? How might care, love, and intimacy serve as spaces in which research might be reinvented and re-envisioned? While the arc of this work is sustained by much that has come before in feminist scholarship—an interest in materiality and

rhetorical embodiment, an urgency to disrupt traditional qualitative methods, an openness to collaboration and also care—I want nevertheless to cast this project as something of a necessary anomaly, a story that stands on its own but that, I hope, might serve as a framework for others interested in exploring rhetoric at the edges of intimacy, illness, and love. I have written this piece in constant conversation with Sue and hold her as my collaborator, teacher, and inspiration.

In my efforts to organize hours of recorded conversations, many pages of my transcription of those audio files, numerous written texts between us (personal writing that Sue decided to share, written responses to questions I had posed, email exchanges early in our project), I am able to chart three major periods of this work. For each, I will offer some comparative scholarly touch points in the field that will serve at once to demonstrate influences and alignments, while also operating as markers for just how far Sue and I have traveled together. We began with a more reliable, traditional frame, one with roots in the goals of my course syllabus and which positioned me as “researcher” and Sue as “participant.” As our interviews rolled open into conversations, our discussions became both more exploratory and also more mutually reflexive: What questions do we share? What are the limits of what we can each understand about where the other sits? What are the boundaries of our common ground in bodily experience, in our questions about illness, and in our ability to learn from each other? This middle period ultimately delivered us to where we exist now, which I hope to characterize as a state of transformation (on my part, for sure, as a researcher and as a person), tremendous connection, and mutual understanding.

These three major periods have coincided, too, with an increasing intimacy of place. We began in my classroom, among students, and then moved into my office at my university; but soon we were whispering at Sue’s chemo treatment, recorder balanced on a footstool. She has made room for me beside her in hospital beds; I have curled up on the couch where she rests at home; and I have swept strips of her hair up off her kitchen floor. Throughout any given week, we typically have an “off the record” conversation running via text message chatter, and we have spent countless hours together without any formal recording or note-taking process underway. In other words, the moments when we are “doing” and “not doing” this project have sometimes collapsed, or the fact of the project itself has seemed either less or more important as illness and our connection to each other has taken center stage. The inclusion here of these most intimate spaces and moments is perhaps my great risk in this essay, as I want to argue that such intimacy has its place in the most textured kinds of rhetorical research and analysis. I believe, too, that existing feminist scholarship has long-provided the necessary groundwork through which

such boundary-pushing work can happen without exploitation or sensationalism, and in a spirit of reflexivity and respect.³ My goal, again, will be to inspire questions about how and why we do research in rhetoric and writing, and to imagine some new or extended avenues for feminist approaches to analysis, collaboration, and knowledge-making.

Tradition and Structure

I have titled this section with some hesitancy, as there seems embedded in the naming—tradition and structure—an element of confidence and certainty that I am sure I lacked at the project's beginning. I can say that I did rely to a certain extent on a more formalized framework that I built based upon my original course syllabus. Still, I felt great uncertainty about what ultimately the project might yield and also real trepidation about my questions being burdensome to Sue who is, by nature, a generous spirit. As I review my course description once again, a few key questions designed to focus the class itself also invite Sue's initial connection to this work:

To what extent is our competitive drive bound up with our self-definition, with who we say we are or who we want to be? [. . .] How are athletic 'heroes' constructed in words? In what ways do athletes rely on language to explain or even understand their own bodily performances? To what extent is our definition of what makes someone an 'athlete' rhetorical—persuasive, symbolic, and convincing—and to what extent can this language be confining? Conversely, can it be expansive and inclusive? (Restaino syllabus, May 2012)

I had given this description to Sue in advance of her visit to class. In response, she prepared a short piece of writing for my students that provided them with the basics of her medical history along with some grounding in her orientation to the questions of our course. She began this essay with the words, "I've been an athlete my entire life" (Maute 5/12). This identity, of course, offered a way of seeing and orienting to her terminal cancer diagnosis: "I've decided to channel my competitive energies into not only surviving, but thriving in my life."

The room to articulate a purpose and to assign a value to athleticism as a mode of survival is at the core of Sue's first writing for my students. I want to suggest, too, that the closing of Sue's piece might be read as both parallel to and predictive of where—or at least *that*—our work together would go forward as an unfolding process or evolution, complete with a refusal to operate within expected boundaries:

As I continue to walk through this journey, I find myself fascinated by the amazing ability of the human body [. . .] I feel stronger than I did

15 years ago. The fact that I can keep up with a bunch of 20 some-things on a hockey field at the age of 45, with all that I've been through mentally and physically, makes me believe anything is possible. I have become incredibly in tune with my body so I know when something is not right. My doctors don't know what to do with me because I have pushed the limits on what is expected given my diagnosis. I do things most healthy people can't do [. . .] And it will continue. It's a process. For me, it's a way of life. (Maute 5/12)

Students found this piece of writing inspirational and, to a certain extent, I think, mind-boggling since Sue's terminal diagnosis likely predicted someone who might appear ill; yet, she sat before them looking well and vibrant. At the time, she was using her body in ways that exceeded the behaviors of an average person without her diagnosis, and so she was in all respects a boundary-pusher in flesh and also in mind. This piece was ultimately coupled with a wonderful classroom conversation with Sue, and together we made many connections to the various foundational rhetorical concepts we had been studying all semester.

Sue and I spent the next months following her visit to my class talking informally about her situation and some of the questions the class opened up between us. We stood around after games and we talked about her latest health news, and our monthly hikes with a group of friends turned into longer, more emotional discussions about what Sue described candidly as the "mind fuck" of terminal cancer. We agreed tacitly on the "value" of the big questions that had emerged between us, that there was more to explore beneath and around them, though I could not have articulated at the time a clear position on what this "value" might have been to Sue. She would nod and say, "I'm an open book. Ask me whatever you want." And as interested as I was in pursuing some of the initial threads that emerged in our class conversation, in Sue's first piece of writing, and through the discussion that these first experiences seemed to sustain, I struggled immensely with what I perceived then as the triviality of my interests in light of Sue's struggle for survival. Quite frankly: who gives a shit about rhetoric, about language, about how bodies are made and lived and shared in words, when you are fighting for your life?

In order to better illustrate where we began, then, I want to cast our start against the undeniable structure of the traditional qualitative research project. My aim here is not to undermine or question the value of research traditionally practiced in the social sciences, for example, and I acknowledge there is a place for this genre of scholarship in rhetoric-composition, particularly in work that pursues data which can help us codify and understand sweeping trends or the perspectives of many participants at once. But I believe my collaboration with Sue affirms the value of something entirely other in scholarly

work. In fact, my initial trepidation towards the work, my uncertainty about the usefulness of my questions, or the potential contribution such engagement might stand to make in Sue's life signal much of my divergence from where the responsible social scientist might begin. This hit me with utter clarity at a panel presentation on "big data" at the 2014 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) as I listened to an insightful talk by Jason Swarts, which heralded the importance of Peter Smagorinsky's 2008 essay, "The Method Section as Conceptual Epicenter in Constructing Social Science Research Reports." In this piece, Smagorinsky laments the many poorly executed studies he has reviewed over the years and isolates their roots as such:

Authors go awry when they either pose no research questions, or pose different questions at different points in the manuscript, or pose questions that are not answerable through the data, or pose answerable questions but present results that appear unrelated to the questions. In my experience, studies work best when an author poses a limited set of answerable questions and then designs the paper around them. (405)

That it took Sue and me until the spring that followed my summer class to sit together in my office for our first recorded "interview," despite our months of rich conversation, speaks to the likely absence of the linearity Smagorinsky describes. I have retraced the opening of this first recorded conversation, listening and reading again, and it begins with my asking Sue to reread the piece she originally wrote for my students months before. I then prompt her, "So you just read that . . . how would you add to or revise it now?" (Interview 5/13). Given that this piece of writing was, originally, a response to the questions posed on my course syllabus, my thought was that this could be a fine starting place for extending and building upon those initial framing questions.

Sue's response, however, quickly pushed us beyond the confines of that preliminary frame. She begins by stating, "Well, I wouldn't go back and change anything, but I would add more to where this ended about where I am today" (Interview 5/13). "Today," Sue explains, involves an added "spiritual and emotional piece," which perhaps was always there but which her illness has brought into a "culmination." Again, hanging on to my focusing questions—though clearly off any kind of script—I ask: "So, does this more spiritual component impact your relationship with your body? Where do you locate yourself in your body?" My goal here was to be responsive to what Sue had to say, while working to pull us towards the initial framing questions that motivated my course and Sue's first piece of writing. This move is not unprecedented, and in her major work on feminist methodology, *Liberating Method*, Majorie Devault

advocates for “involvement” as an “element of method” in the interview process that, ultimately, might deliver feminist scholarship towards a “more disciplined use of the personal” (71).

Already, then, in Sue’s responses and even in my questions during our first recorded interview, I feel the pull away from solid ground and Smagorinsky’s urging that we pursue “answerable questions.” On the heels of my questions about her relationship to her body and her “location” in it, Sue answers:

From early on, I didn’t get angry at God. It was never ‘Why me?’ but ‘Why not me?’ Disease and tragedy are non-discriminatory. I’m not angry at God. I do believe in free will. It may not exactly be what was supposed to happen [. . .] I feel like I’m learning how thoughts affect the body, down to the cellular level. Thoughts get changed into chemicals, hormones, throughout your body . . . so that’s a daily struggle. There’s always a kneejerk reaction, but when I’m able to step outside of that [. . .] I can step out and analyze. (5/31/13)

Here Sue operates between the conceptual and material, working to articulate a relationship that might give me some sense of her “location” somewhere in the middle, or somehow composed of both the abstract and the concrete. This, of course, has been a subject of great scholarly interest and, ultimately, navigating some of this amorphous in-between space came to characterize much of our work together as our research developed. I am reminded of the epigraph from Judith Butler that Sharon Crowley uses to open her “Afterword” to *Rhetorical Bodies*: “I could not fix bodies as simple objects of thought [. . .] [they] tend to indicate a world beyond themselves, but this movement beyond their own boundaries, a movement of boundary itself, appeared to be quite central to what bodies ‘are’” (quoted in Crowley 358).

While I will give more attention to this component of our work in my discussion of the next period, in the first months I did aim to articulate, in collaboration with Sue, boundaries for our project. After transcribing our first three recorded conversations, I decided that we should take a fresh moment to reassess comparatively—and blindly—our respective understandings of “what” exactly this research project was about and for. This move was influenced by a number of foundational voices in research ethics, including those of Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater, Thomas Newkirk, and Patricia Sullivan. In her essay, “Ethnography and the Problem of the Other,” Sullivan questions: “Who is telling the story, the researcher or the researched? After all, whose story is it to tell?” (104). My sense, as our work unfolded, was that around the very same project, Sue and I might each have a story, one which evolved differently, and which held different meanings and value given our respective positionalities (Chiseri-Strater).

Accordingly, I composed a set of questions to which we would each write responses privately and then share. I opened this document with, again, the course description from my original syllabus as a point of reflection. In response to my first question, which asked each of us to explain our “initial understanding of the purpose of our conversations,” Sue writes, “I came with a completely open mind and decided to let your questions guide the dialog” (Maute 8/13). This response positions me clearly in a researcher role, a role with which I was already struggling. In my own response to the same prompt, I write, “I’ve found myself asking questions for which I knew perhaps neither Sue nor I had any simple answers (or perhaps any answers at all), and so it’s fair to say that in some ways we’ve moved away from focused research and more towards a kind of investigative, conversational journey” (Restaino 8/13). This first prompt was followed by a question about personal meaning in the work. Given that I had worried initially about whether the project might merely be burdensome for Sue, I felt compelled to ask: “Can you describe the value, if any, of our conversations to *you*? What purpose or point might they serve for you?” (Restaino 8/13). While I wanted to make room for Sue to claim that the project did not carry personal meaning for her, I was concerned that she might tend too much to my feelings and not answer this question honestly. I thus added a caveat, “(It’s okay if the answer is ‘none’ beyond ‘helping Jess with a project’)” (8/13). Sue’s response instead affirms her own stake in our work together:

Having come with no expectation, I have to say I was blown away at how much I got out of our conversations. It’s very hard to see what I look like from outside of this body and mind without having some kind of external feedback. From my perspective, I’m just doing what I need to do with what I’ve been handed, nothing more. (8/13)

In an email in advance of this writing, Sue offers: “I enjoy sharing all of this, it helps confirm for me that there is more to all of this than me being just another victim of the big ‘C’” (6/13). These two texts were the first to indicate that our work together—talking and writing—had some potential value for Sue beyond the scope of my original course design. Along the way, its value for me, too, began to shift and expand. My multiple roles—researcher, writer, friend—are now often in motion, moving back and forth between us. I might say they function in synthesis, each role rooted in the other. *A desire to understand, to witness (and be seen), to be with, to question, to document, to put words to experience*: these are acts of writing, research, and friendship for us, all at once.

Reflexivity, Disruption, and Our Bodies

In her introduction to *Rhetorica in Motion*, Eileen E. Schell describes “feminist rhetorical methods and methodologies as movement, as motion, and as action,” which, for Patricia Bizzell, require “methods which violate some of the most cherished conventions of academic research, most particularly in bringing the person of the research, her body, her emotions, and dare one say, her soul into the work” (quoted in Schell 4-6). For my purposes, I want to consider the role of material, of our bodies and the senses, and the ways such materiality pushed Sue and me towards a depth of rhetorical exchange that exceeds words alone. My move here follows on the heels of more feminist scholarship than I can rightly acknowledge, but I owe a primary debt to Debra Hawhee’s efforts to explore the historical roots of rhetoric as an art of “the body as well as the mind” (144).⁴ In her examination of the interrelatedness of athletic and rhetorical training, Hawhee isolates “the three Rs [. . .] rhythm, repetition, and response” (145). Most notable is the extent to which these three factors ensure both structure and unpredictability concurrently. Hawhee explains through analogy:

It is the interrelation between the generalized path of the riverbed with its interruptive rocks and sediment on the one hand, and the force of the water’s current on the other, that produces the eddies and swirls, the sudden shifts in direction within the general flow—herein lies the rhythm. Rhythm therefore produces distinctive movements within a generalized direction; it combines fixity with variability. (148)

The pattern—and lack of pattern—that Hawhee highlights here functions similarly as a shaky blueprint for Sue and me in our collaboration, particularly as our conversations have happened around and about and through a body that exists in a state of uncertainty. This balance of “fixity and variability,” informed by athleticism as Hawhee’s work predicts, serves also as a means by which Sue understands her relationship to her cancer. The second period of our project illustrates the ways such rhythm—and our ability to physically feel and hear it—became a methodological tool for deeper rhetorical analysis.

Spring rolled into summer, and July 2013 brought Sue increased hardship: the tumor growth on her liver was on the rise and she lost a very dear friend who shared her exact diagnosis. We had, at this point, recorded several hours of conversation—one that took place during a chemo treatment—and logged reflective writing about our work together. Unprompted, Sue sent me a piece of writing she titled, “Rough Times July 2013,” in which she expresses her anguish over her friend’s decline, and her worries for her own family; she also

describes the fight and uncertainty she faces in light of her terminal status. At the time—and as it had been from my first introduction to Sue—she also continued to compete as an athlete. In this case, she uses a recent tennis match as a metaphor for her struggle against this “horrible disease.” She begins her description of the match as follows:

Anyway, it was a grueling match. I was on the defense the entire way, and starting to feel my mental state break down again. I was starting to give up in the middle of the match. The weekend away must have made a difference because I found some strength to tell myself to just stay in it. Keep fighting. Don't give it away. Make her work for it. So, that is what I did. (Maute 7/13)

She ultimately won the match and goes on, later in the piece, to give me news of a recent doctor's appointment—I had been eagerly awaiting this update and skimming the lines to find it—which ultimately was positive: recent growth of the tumor on her liver had been slightly abated by the current chemo treatment, and her tumor markers were down significantly. As Sue puts it, “THAT is huge” (Maute 7/13). She closes this piece with a reflection on athletic competition as a metaphor for living with terminal cancer:

I walked out of his office feeling good. Not great. Just good. It's hard to get excited over these things because at the end of the day, I still have cancer on my liver [. . .] and like any humble athlete knows, on any given day you can find yourself on the other side of this victory. So you take the 'win' for what it is and you don't over celebrate it or rub it into the opponent. We will meet again, and all you can hope for is that you have done all the preparation and training so that you can find yourself on that 'winning' side once again, and once again, respect and acknowledge the fight that the opponent has brought to the table. (Maute 7/13)

In this writing, we hear an emphasis on repetition, “we will meet again [. . .] and once again,” and yet—in such repetition—the expectation of surprise and unpredictability since, “on any given day you can find yourself on the other side of this victory.” This combination is wisdom “any humble athlete knows,” and it reverberates clearly with Hawhee's examination of the blending of athletic and rhetorical education in an ancient wrestling manual: “the opponent's moves and the attention to specificity they require introduce difference to the repetition, demanding a new move in between each of the throwing directives. Stylistically, the manual captures the difference between repetitions, demanding and producing its own kind of rhythmic response” (149).

My initial response to Sue's "Rough Times" piece was tremendous gratitude and humility: she had written something *for* me, in a sense, and without my asking, though—of course—she also must have written for herself. Was the impulse to write something for me to read borne of our conversations together? Did she previously consider herself a writer? What—to draw on Hawhee—was *our* emerging rhythm and what might be my response? By education, Sue is a mathematician and computer scientist, and when we met four days after she wrote "Rough Times" for a recorded conversation, I asked her about her motivation to write. Her response was pivotal in driving our work forward: "I hadn't talked to you and I was in a really bad place. I felt like I gotta get this down. And I wanted to get it down before I got my results. Because I didn't want my results to change or affect how I felt that day" (7/13).

Two utterly crucial factors are at work in this response. First, I become here synonymous with communication—in talk and in writing—and I am an expected recipient: "I hadn't talked to you [. . .] I felt like I gotta get this down." Since we hadn't spoken verbally, Sue created a written text which she immediately sent to me and that, just days later, became the focus of our next verbal dialogue. My role—researcher? confidant? reader?—had moved into a central position dedicated to the processing and sharing of information about Sue's status and her experiences, both physical and emotional. Second, in her response, Sue models an inevitable wrestling to separate mind and body, a struggle with which we all—regardless of the severity of our medical conditions—contend with by virtue of operating in thinking bodies, "I didn't want my results to change or affect how I felt that day." As Sharon Crowley argues, post-structuralism's "displacement of body/mind into a continuum" serves us by "open[ing] a space for thinking about the relations that obtain between body and mind, and for speculating about the difficulty of distinguishing the limits of either in relation to the other" (359).⁵ While Sue's motivation to write stems from a desire to isolate her feelings from the reality of her body (whatever the results of her latest scan), in fact this text comes to exemplify the very continuum Crowley describes. Sue's cancer is as much a physical experience as it is an intellectual one, and her writing is a work of synthesis.

There are myriad challenges and riches around this shift in our project and its value to each of us, and as a person I felt (and continue to feel) the pull of our dynamic in both heart and mind. I am willingly on the rollercoaster ride with Sue—sometimes recorder and notebook at my side, sometimes not—and my responses have been typically both intellectual and emotional. From a methodological perspective, the task before me as a researcher has been, essentially, to surrender to the pull of the work and to the evolving connection between us. Interestingly—though perhaps not surprisingly—Sue's challenge, too, has been at certain points to surrender her own struggle for control, even

as she has pushed herself in her fight. In one of our early recorded conversations she explains, “We don’t have the control we think we do. Surrendering—again—is about learning not to worry. I don’t let it take another day from me” (6/13).

For sure, order and procedure have their rightful place in the research process, and certainly in the one Smagorinsky describes. But the challenge posed in my work with Sue has been to recognize that this collaboration demands the opposite. This relinquishing of control is founded upon a willingness to hear and feel what emerges rhetorically and to continue to follow even in uncertainty. To an extent, work in rhetorical listening—including Cheryl Glenn’s work on the poignancy of rhetorical silences—speaks to the need to be open to what is not immediately clear, to what does not present unequivocally.⁶ Lisa Mazzei’s 2004 essay, “Silent Listeners: Deconstructive Practices in Discourse-Based Research” models this practice in the context of qualitative research in education. Mazzei describes her study of teachers’ racial identities in which her conventional training in research methods proved a mismatch for what she ultimately found in the voices—and the silences—of the teachers she studied. Perhaps this emergence, too, was fostered by Mazzei’s tendency to “introduce[e] very few prepared questions,” preferring instead to build her facilitation on the insights raised by the teachers themselves during group discussions (29). The data generated seemed to call for an equally unscripted approach, as traditional methods “resulted in a troubling resistance” and reading transcripts cut her from the experience of the teachers’ voices (29). Mazzei goes on to ask, “How was I to establish intimacy with the conversations of participants in the absence of their voices?” (30).

Interestingly, this notion that intimacy is a necessity—“How was I to establish intimacy?”—is certainly not universally important, even in some approaches to feminist scholarship that work to disrupt traditional methods. After reading her transcripts “quickly as one has to do to ‘get through’ a massive amount of material,” Mazzei ultimately decides to sit, eyes closed, and listen to her recordings in order to “live with the narratives” (30). Here she draws on Derrida: “something [. . .] calls upon us and addresses us, overtakes (surprises) and even overwhelms us, to which we must respond, and so be responsive and responsible. Endlessly” (quoted in Mazzei 31). The experience of being “overtaken” and “overwhelmed” has threaded through much of my work with Sue, and I have been grateful for all of it, as a person. But what are the dangers to research when the researcher is moved beyond words, brought—emotionally—to her knees?

In 1997, Patti Lather and Chris Smithies published *Troubling the Angels: Women Living with HIV/AIDS*, a work in which Lather operates as researcher, following support groups facilitated by the social worker, Smithies, for women

living with HIV/AIDS at a moment at which this diagnosis still meant, for most, a life cut drastically and quickly short. Lather and Smithies ultimately construct a book that resists easy reading and refuses to privilege any singular voice—researcher, participants, scholarship itself, the women’s narratives—with pages broken into competing blocks of text. The reader must move from one block to the next around any given page: a woman’s narrative; a piece of health information for HIV/AIDS patients; writings by Lather as academic and by Smithies as social worker facilitating the groups. Reflecting on Lather’s work, Mazzei takes seriously this warning: “I am reminded by Lather (1993) to be attentive to the methodological perils involved in such a practice, to be attentive to how I might use the ‘deconstructive move which avoids simple reversal and simple replacement’” (32). Mazzei goes on to clarify, for her purposes, with a question: “In other words, ‘To what do I unknowingly give preference [. . .]?’” (32).

While the initial challenge here is of course to be deeply reflective as a researcher, for Lather the next steps are twofold: first, that there exists no “privileged” voice, as illustrated in the textual construction of *Troubling*; and second, and perhaps even more poignantly, that the reader be denied the greatest intimacies of the work, its deepest and inevitable emotionality be kept private, off limits, and preserved. In “Postbook: Working the Ruins of Feminist Ethnography,” published four years after *Troubling*, Lather describes a “methodology of getting lost,” one in which “the practice of failure is pivotal for the project of feminist inquiry in negotiating the crisis of representation” (203). For Lather, *Troubling* is designed to enact such a failure of “knowing”:

[T]he book reflects back at its readers the problems of inquiry at the same time an inquiry is conducted. Such a practice strikes the epistemological paradox of knowing and not knowing, knowing both too little and too much in its refusal of mimetic models of representation and the nostalgic desire for immediacy and transparency of reference. (205)

Interestingly, and particularly frustrating for Lather, is that readers’ curiosity about representation extended to her own emotional experience of conducting the research. In “Postbook,” she describes the experience of being asked by readers if she cried over the struggles and ultimate loss of participants throughout the duration of the project:

Why the need to know I cried? [. . .] Seeking some undramatized, largely effaced narrator versus the ‘Oprah-ization’ of this era of confessional talk has been complicated by the effort to both deny the tidy text and yet appeal to a broad public horizon [. . .] I sought an authorial presence that was both embodied and yet avoided the

'nostalgia-provoking, emotional-yanking' sort of narrative move that is used to sell everything from empathy to hammers. What I have come to call the 'validity of tears' brings me great discomfort. (211)

Multiple factors are at work in Lather's discussion here, and surely her association of emotionality with "selling" is of particular importance. In fact, the association of "confessional talk"—"Oprah-ization"—with commercialism—"used to sell everything from empathy to hammers"—suggests that any such move on the researcher's part endangers the ultimate seriousness of the project itself, shifting it from intellectual work to something made cheaply for public consumption. This is further enforced by Lather's term, "the 'validity of tears,'" which threatens to affirm the "value" of scholarship not by its academic rigor and contribution but rather by the emotional effect of the work on the researcher.⁷ For Lather, such a move would be understood as a show, a mere performance put on to foster interest and perhaps book sales.

I want to be clear on a couple of fronts in light of Lather's discomfort. First, I find integrity in her protectiveness of her study participants and in her conviction that her own emotional modesty is necessary to extending their privacy. At the same time, I take seriously Lather's very own charge in "Postbook" that "ethnography becomes a kind of self-wounding" in which we must be "accountable to complexity, thinking the limit becomes the task, and much opens up in terms of ways to proceed for those who know both too little and too much" (202). Accordingly, as we contemplate the future of research in feminist rhetorics, I pose (and take up) this challenge: might there be some necessary place to which we can travel, somewhere beyond the scope of "emotional-yanking" and performativity, where the fact of intimacy and even the presence of tears, have their rightful place in communicating the limits of what we can understand?

Collaboration, Surrender, and Love

March and April 2014 were months of unexpected joy for Sue and those who love her, in large part because the preceding late fall and winter months had cast her into an increasing state of liver failure which a risky radiological procedure performed in December was ultimately able to interrupt. From December through February Sue rarely left her home, as she convalesced from this procedure and awaited its results. Our time together was nevertheless consistent, though mostly I left my recorder and notebook behind during my visits. It was, interestingly, during this "gap" in our formal project that our collaboration's fuller value came into clearer focus, marking yet another and, essentially the ultimate, shift in our work together. During this time, I sometimes did my own reflective writing following our visits as I tried to make sense of Sue's struggle, and I routinely anguished over my own perceived uselessness.

While Sue herself had put an initial, early stop to my disciplinary self-doubt (“Who gives a shit about rhetoric [. . .]?”), when her abdomen swelled painfully, we sat together in despair and words failed me. Much in the way Mazzei discovers, however, in this quiet emerged new purpose and new rhetorical tools—material, emotive, and transformative—which, I argue, open and extend avenues for knowledge-making in the depths illness and love.

On my way to Sue’s house one cold day in February, I was equipped with an unusual present. Our teammates had organized a “care package” for her, and we were each to include some “inspirational” quotes to help lift her spirits. Before I arrived at her house to drop off my contribution to the care package, I received a short text message from Sue: “Sitting here wondering if it’s time to shave my head” (2/14). It had been years since a chemo treatment had rendered Sue bald, but the latest treatment was doing just that. When I arrived, she was sitting on her couch, balls of hair in her hands. I sat next to her and we laughed quietly, an easier alternative at the time, at the many pieces of hair that now clung to me as well. We discussed the reasonable move of just shaving it all off, and then tabled the possibility so I could present my addition to the care package: inspirational quotes *from her*. The document I prepared had a note to her at the top, explaining, “I wanted to share with you some of the things you’ve said over the past year and a half that have especially taught and inspired me” (Restaino 2/14). These quotations from Sue talked about surrender and control, one of our recurring topics of discussion, as well as the “glory” of the underdog in sports. Most striking among these, for me, was a quotation from June 2013, before winter had rendered her so ill, in which she expresses a faith, ultimately, in collaboration:

I get feelings of like, I’m going to be ok. I feel like—generally—we’re here to love each other and grow together and serve. And that’s why I always want to give back, to use my experience to help someone else. Just take that first step. Talk to one person. (Maute 6/13)

When Mazzei reflects on what was “missing” in her initial approach to her treatment of interview data, she recalls the following experience: “In a conversation with one of my peer reviewers she remarked that, by the time she began to write the analysis section of her study, she had practically memorized her tapes” (30). Mazzei goes on then to lament her own lack of familiarity and—of course—“intimacy” with her participants’ voices and particularities. In the process of preparing my care package contribution for Sue, at a moment when I was certain I had nothing to say (and quoting others felt equally superficial), I discovered I had memorized her words after hours spent listening and transcribing and reading, that they were there exactly in my mind and, perhaps, the only words that were just right. I knew where to find certain

statements she had made; I wanted to use the words that shook me the most. These words, in particular, challenge this notion of what it means to “be ok,” suggesting that human togetherness and service might determine such status in ways that the measure of a lifespan cannot.

While the impulse to mirror Sue’s words back to her served us both in a non-academic context, I want to suggest that at root here is in fact a kind of intellectual practice that has its place in our research and writing, as well. Towards the end of that emotional visit in February, Sue finalized her decision: we would shave her head. Actually, the work took two of us: her husband operated the razor while I scooped and gathered her hair up off the floor for the garbage. It was, really, the only option and the experience was a hard one, which Sue handled with resolve. Later that night, I wrote the following reflection on the experience: “There was nothing else to do but sweep and shave in long strips, to follow the threads of hair exiting your scalp. The choice was singular, to merely honor the pace, to recognize the dissent [. . .] descent [...] of your hair. *Let’s jump*, you said” (Restaino 2/4).

The significance of hair loss is particularly high in the context of terminal cancer, and while it wasn’t lost on Sue in this moment—“the last time it was like, it’ll grow back, but this time [. . .]”—she modeled that day a kind of aware, even controlled, “surrender” which was not about despair or chaos (Restaino 2/14). I tried to describe this later in my reflection:

You made a joke. You made a plan about springtime, coaching your daughter’s lacrosse team again. You told a story completely unrelated to the strips falling to the floor [. . .] You joked about looking like an old man, no hair and a big gut. You laughed more. You hugged me and then went upstairs to take a shower so you could wash the rest off. (Restaino 2/14)

I quote my own reflection on the experience here at some length for the sake of illustrating in lived, bodily experience, the work of surrender which Sue has modeled in ways that are at once informed, deliberate, and also honest. This very material experience, one that could occur only in the confines of intimacy and facilitated by the inevitability of hair loss, has come to function more broadly in our collaboration and, perhaps surprisingly, to instruct me as a researcher and a writer. I am, undoubtedly, one person through which Sue has fulfilled her goal to “use my experience to help someone else” (6/20/13).

In 1985 Jim Corder published “Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love,” a lyrical essay in which he stakes out the bold position that our most “flushed, feverish, quaky” conflicts, those that “[don’t] seem to give us opportunity to reduce threat,” demand an openness that exceeds resolution (24). Corder goes

on to illustrate a degree of conflict and conviction so stark that traditional tools of negotiation and rhetorical persuasion inevitably fall short:

[W]here we are beyond being adversaries in that strange kind of argument we seldom attend to, where one offers the other a rightness so demanding, a beauty so stunning, a grace so fearful as to call the hearer to forego one identity for a new one. (24)

I have discovered, in these months of my collaboration with Sue, our talk and writing about this awful thing that will not be cured, a nearly seamless fit with Corder's call. In this space of terminal cancer, a space in which I have been honored to sit with Sue, we have relied on a rhetorical practice that exceeds the boundaries of fixing, formulating, or merely answering. For Corder, "Invention wants openness; structure and style demand closure. We are asked to be perpetually open and always closing" (29). Much as Hawhee's wrestlers must respond, expecting a rhythm at once repetitive and also disrupted, so too must collaboration and rhetoric in spaces of illness and love operate within recognizable boundaries while also exceeding and dismantling them. This practice unhinges us from where we sit, forcing us to see each other and ourselves newly in a privileged, if fleeting, moment. Corder explains, "Invention is a name for a great miracle—the attempt to unbind time, to loosen the capacities of time and space in our speaking" (29). That we are inevitably bound to time, of course, we find ourselves necessarily moving back and forth, as Corder describes, between space and structure, alternatingly open and closed. In this willing fluctuation, we embody Corder's ultimate argument: "Rhetoric is love" through which we might "[learn] to speak and write not argumentative displays and presentations, but arguments [. . .] that will make us plain to all others, thoughtful histories and narratives that reveal us as we're reaching for the others" (31). With this move, perhaps, we might exceed the kind of final impasse imposed by truly irresolvable conflicts, by terminal cancer, by time itself.

For Sue, as for all of us, time rolls on. Mid-March 2014 brought surprising news: the risky radiological procedure, performed three months earlier, had produced optimal results in her liver, destroying many of the tumors that had overtaken it. While Sue remained terminal, this procedure gave her liver the opportunity to heal enough that it could become more functional once again. Days before this news, she sat in the passenger seat of my car and, while we waited at a red light, pulled her lower eyelid down, "Look! No yellow. I think I'm getting better." Indeed, it was true—to my shock—all I saw was white where once there was yellowing, a clear mark of liver failure. When a CT scan showed, days later, her liver's tremendous response, Sue and all those who love her rejoiced, even within the context of terminal cancer. What was imminent death opened into possibility, time. Moved and grateful, Sue decided to

write an email to the many people who had helped her over the hardest last months—"you have laid in bed with me, have cried with me, and have been with me through some dark days"—and she went on to list as many of the gestures of generosity she could remember (Maute email 3/20/14).

What Sue especially wanted to share in this email was a video in which a cancer patient's female family and friends surprise her by shaving their heads in solidarity. She offers the explanation for her choice, "[D]o not mistake my sharing this with any particular need I have," but rather the woman's reaction "is exactly how I feel with all that you do for me" (3/14).⁸ Over the course of this four-minute video, women old and young are visually transformed as their heads are shaved so that, by the time the woman in treatment—Gerdi—arrives, bald herself, they are nearly indistinguishable from each other. There is a visual beauty to the women's sameness and, for my purposes here, a demonstration of the kind of transformation for which Corder calls, where we are "beyond being adversaries [. . .] where one offers the other a grace so fearful as to call the hearer to forego one identity for a startling new one" (24). In the context of terminal cancer, the women surrounding Gerdi cannot live her disease; they cannot be, bodily, in her shoes. But in the act of visual solidarity and bodily transformation, there is a crossing over, a desired transgression of the impasse of their stark, oppositional locations (healthy versus ill) into a solidarity that only, for Corder, "emergence" and "love" can deliver.

I could not wait for our next recorded conversation following both Sue's groundbreaking medical news and her email of tremendous gratitude, which I received while in Indianapolis at CCCC 2014. One of the first questions I had for Sue was about the difference between her reaction to the medical news and that of those around her. Were there gaps in how she and others interpreted this news? She explained:

I've been here before so it's like...part of me is like, ok, I got this good news but [. . .] you learn that it's such a rollercoaster that I don't get over the moon. And then I was like, but don't deny yourself [. . .] the joy [. . .] you know, grab it while you have it. You know that's a learning curve for me. Because I've learned to not get too excited when things are good. And then I've learned to not get too low when things go bad. Because [. . .] it's a dance you have to do and learn not to set yourself up in a way. (Maute 3/24/14)

Once again this notion of a "dance," steps at once learned and yet also unpredictable, echoes of both Hawhee's wrestlers and Sue's tennis match: each operate rhythmically and responsively. But I was curious, as Sue is surrounded by a large network of family and friends, about just how attuned others might be to the necessity of her dance. For some, did the latest news erroneously

suggest a cure? And if so, was this confusion between the sidestepping of imminent death and “cure” frustrating for her, particularly as she would continue to live and struggle in treatment? In response, Sue first reflected on the observations of her cancer counselor:

[That’s] what [she] always accuses me of: ‘You make it look easy for people. You don’t wear it.’ And I’m like, I know [. . .] but it’s just funny [. . .] and some people just need this for their own sanity: she’s cured. It’s done. You know what I mean? Because it’s like they can’t imagine something so uncontrollable and stealth and unpredictable, with no rhyme or reason, could just pop up like that. (Maute 3/24/14)

Indeed, existence amid great uncertainty defines much of Sue’s experience, and for Corder, the project is similar: “We can learn to dispense with what we imagined was absolute truth and to pursue the reality of things only partially knowable” (28). Methodological “surrender,” which most fully characterizes the third and current period of our collaboration, must be willing, as Sue has said of her own practice of surrender, to “let go of the outcome” (3/24/14).

Closing Thoughts: How and Why We Do Our Work

Surrender, risk, and love—which ultimately shape my collaboration with Sue—have a rightful place in the study of rhetoric and in our writing, as a function of method. This is not a one-size-fits-all practice, and my intention is not to suggest that research and writing grounded in the “partially knowable” is optimal for every research agenda. I am not writing here in generalized ways, nor am I attempting to posit Sue’s story as a tidy “victory narrative,” nor my role in this work as heroic. Rather, there are embedded here potential, perhaps private, lessons about what and how we write and do research. These lessons open big questions about the role of research and writing in feminist rhetorical studies. Most essentially, in what ways does our scholarly work, our methods for research and writing, offer us avenues for understanding and exploring the most inexplicable and yet most constant corners of our lives, those of illness, intimacy, and love? When I asked Sue, in our recorded conversation in late March 2014, about writing her “gratitude email,” she spoke about her experience from a place of wonder:

That one [. . .] I couldn’t tell you [. . .] that one just came out of nowhere [. . .] And cancer’s taught me this: it’s not about me. It’s about allowing people to give and it makes them feel better. They’re doing something and they’re part of something. And I get that now. I get that more than I ever did [. . .] and when I saw that video, I was like, this is it [. . .] that’s when it was divine. Like I didn’t [. . .] I couldn’t

[. . .]. I don't know if I could rewrite that again [. . .] it just seemed to fit right. It just worked. And I just let it go. (Maute 3/24/14)

In my own experience as a researcher in this project, which, if pressed, I would call an "ethnographic rhetorical analysis," I have been challenged to routinely "let it go" and I hope to have the courage for continual release. Smagorinsky's predictions for the worst kinds of research in the social sciences—"different questions at different points [. . .] questions that are not answerable"—are all fully at work in our collaboration, in my process as a writer and researcher, and in my willingness, in this role, to follow Sue's example and just "let it go" to places that exceed the boundaries we might otherwise have drawn. This, I would argue, clears a path by which we might exist in Corder's "beyond" where, even if for a moment, we might "loosen the capacities of time and space into our speaking" (29). I had to cut our recorded conversation short in late March due to a meeting back on campus. On the audio, I can be heard apologizing and lamenting the narrow timeframe; we had so much, after all, to discuss. Sue responded, encouraged by her recent medical news, "I know [. . .] well, we'll continue. We'll have time" (3/24/14). For Corder, yes and then, again, no: we never really have time, but we can embrace the "partially knowable," which is a linguistic, rhetorical space in which time is held captive between us.

While, at the time of this writing, Sue has experienced continuous ups and downs, hospital stays interrupted by periods of increased energy, April 2014 was a month of some steady progress. I arrived at her house one afternoon, recorder and notebook in tow, and she surprised me and suggested we go out for lunch. I had become accustomed to her more limited mobility, to kicking off my shoes and settling into her couch for our conversations, recorder between us and notebook on my lap. So when we arrived at the restaurant, I realized I had left my "research tools" in my car; we were suddenly just two friends out to lunch, something we had done many times before. We ordered food and started to chat when she interrupted: "I just remembered something I wanted to mention, related to what we discussed last time [. . .]" (4/14). She pulled her bag onto her lap and began to dig through it. Suddenly she handed me a pen and two narrow strips of paper, her bloodwork reports from her last chemo treatment: "You can write on the back." She went on to describe the difficulty in trying to operate in her life while ill, balancing involvement and relationships with the limits of her body. In my notes I have quoted her, "I'm not good at that in-between thing" (4/14). These two strips of paper have become tremendously dear to me; in fact I carry them in my wallet rather than risk losing them in the large file of notes I have accumulated during our project. Double-sided, one side a quantitative medical report, the other my scribbles while we talked, these two strips of paper embody much of our dynamic together, our perpetual "in-between" dance, back and forth between the reality

of illness and the room to interpret, the intimate pull to make sense and to question all that we can only “partially know.” This is rhetorical work, much as Hawhee uncovers among the Sophists: “This manner of learning entails ‘getting a feel for’ the work—following and producing a rhythm. The body itself becomes a *sundromos*, an intensive gathering of forces [. . .] Entwined in the body in this way, rhetorical training thus exceeds the transmission of ‘ideas,’ rhetoric the bounds of ‘words’ (160). It seems to me our field has thus long-known the riches of surrender, the methodological release into which words, conceptual and material, might find their fullest expression, and I encourage work that seeks and explores the fault lines of what we can fully understand. I look forward with hope and anticipation for expanded, extended, and continued feminist scholarship that might boldly trace and reinvent the rhythms of rhetoric as love.

Notes

- 1 I hold Sue Maute as my “verbal coauthor,” as I wrote this piece while in constant conversation with her, and she reviewed a draft upon its completion. Sue passed away on August 29, 2014, just over two months following submission of this essay for review. I dedicate this work to her memory and have left all references to her in the present tense, as her influence on me and the conversation that runs between us in my mind continue today. She was tremendous in every way, and I hope this work might communicate some of her great light.
- 2 Scholarship in Disability Studies has much to offer this question and yet, while I did read in this area as I worked, references to Disability Studies are notably absent from this essay. Sue did not identify with the term “disability,” and thus its absence from this essay stands as an extension of our collaboration, my effort to represent her in ways consistent with her own self-conceptualization. This absence further opens some room to consider the inevitable disconnects between the uniquely “personal” and the relatable trends or more generalizable concepts of any given scholarly focus area.
- 3 While worthy scholarship to this end is too abundant to cite comprehensively, Jacqueline Royster and Gesa Kirsch’s *Feminist Research and Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies* (2012) is a recent and integral contribution. See also Peter Mortensen and Gesa Kirsch’s (eds), *Ethics and Representation in Qualitative Studies of Literacy* (1996). Issues of feminist ethics in qualitative research practices extend to Nel Noddings’s “ethic of care,” which has been long discussed, critiqued, and revised. For a useful and refreshing angle on

ethical decision-making and persuasion in the research process, see Ellen Barton's "Further Contributions from the Ethical Turn in Composition/Rhetoric: Analyzing Ethics in Interaction" (2008).

- 4 For a foundational collection on rhetoric and the body, see especially Crowley and Selzer (eds.), *Rhetorical Bodies* (2000); see also Susan Wells, *Our Bodies, Ourselves and the Work of Writing* (2010), and Rebecca Moore Howard's excellent bibliographic entry, "Embodiment and the Posthuman."
- 5 The influence of post-structuralist theory here is substantial and exceeds the bounds of this essay. Again, Selzer and Crowley (eds.) provide a solid overview of the uses of this work in rhetorical studies.
- 6 I am not giving deserved full attention here to foundational work by Krista Ratcliffe, Cheryl Glenn, and others; however this work continues to be key in informing my own thinking.
- 7 Recent scholarship on empathy is both emergent and exciting, and I am unable to give it due attention here; see especially Lisa Blankenship's 2013 dissertation, "Changing the Subject: A Theory of Rhetorical Empathy."
- 8 Video, "Anything for Love," available at <http://vimeo.com/88160637>.

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