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Surrender: Feminist Rhetoric and Ethics in Love and Illness

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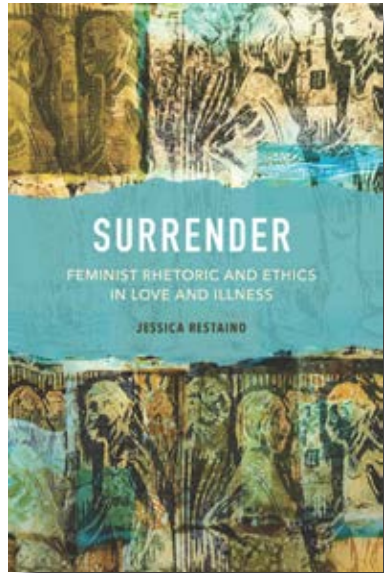
Jessica Restaino

Southern Illinois UP, 2019, pp. 188

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Jessica Restaino's book, *Surrender: Feminist Rhetoric and Ethics in Love and Illness*, challenges scholars to see and write past the limits of their own methods and knowledges. She advocates for writing not only about what we know about rhetoric, but what we don't know. Restaino frames herself as a writer and researcher who is figuring out how to move forward after the loss of her friend Susan Lundy Maute to cancer, recognizing how experiences and people change us and deepen our understanding of ourselves and our ways of knowing and being.



Restaino's writing values narrative in scholarly discourse, embracing the idea of emerging as a presence to readers; this idea manifests in her work because she writes as a witness to the declining health and death of her friend. Restaino draws on the works of Jim W. Corder often in her book, and her writing reminds me especially of his argument that emergence is a risk of going out alone in writing, an exposure of ourselves and our narratives to the other. He writes that this kind of writing "requires a readiness to testify to an identity that is always emerging, a willingness to dramatize one's narrative in progress before the other; it calls for an untiring stretch toward the other, a reach toward enfolding the other" (Corder 26).

Restaino demonstrates Corder's idea of argument as emergence in her writing, but she also forwards a key concept attached to this process that comes from feminist theory, the notion of surrender. She explains that we have to let go of a facade of wholeness, to render our subjectivity and knowledge for what it always already is: fragmented. She further describes how, when we face illness and death, we reach the unknown, and we have to let go, or release, "not only of what we know how to do (practice) and what we think we know (epistemology) but also of our subjectiv(ies) as writers and researchers" (13). In her own release of these things, Restaino works to come upon a different way of knowing and being after loss that she communicates to us as readers in the themes of her book, which I outline in this review.

Through the narrative of her relationship and loss of her friend Sue, Restaino gives those of us who identify with the field of community writing a frame for how we approach our position as researchers and writers, and by extension, how this impacts our view of our community partners, collaborators, and students. She reminds us to pay attention to these constituents as fully realized subjects, to bear witness to their lives, and to think critically about how we represent them and ourselves in writing.

Restaino structures her book using the stages of cancer, choosing to begin at what would be seen as the most critical, Stage IV, and progressing backward to the diagnosis of cancer, “In Situ.” Between her chapters, she includes alternative genres—a letter, text messages, and an interview transcript—from her research collaborator, Sue Lunde Maute. This structure reminds us that academic writing is often nonlinear and may give way to other forms. The structure, in many ways, mirrors Restaino’s argument of surrender and accepting uncertainty as a researcher, writer, and reader.

Rather than reviewing the argument of each distinct chapter, I’m going to highlight the ways the book has made an impression on me as a reader. In other words, I’d like to explore how the book has changed the way I think about research and scholarly writing in rhetoric and composition. In this sense, I will draw upon quotes and concepts from the book holistically rather than chronologically.

This is one of those rare books in the field that I believe should be read, thought about, and encountered slowly; not attacked with a taste for blood, but wandered through, strolled around in like an autumn afternoon. By the phrase ‘a taste for blood’ I am referring—though somewhat obscurely—to Restaino’s opening of “In Situ: Love as Frame” where she discusses Elizabeth Ervin’s loss for the “taste of blood” as a scholar and how, as she matured in her thinking, she was more open to the ways of her mentor, Jim Corder, who practiced a “slow, patient, meditative” kind of rhetoric and writing (135–36).

The book begs to be read as a journey through love and illness, and as a reader, I suggest you surrender to it rather than conquer it. I am arguing that you give the book (and, by extension, Restaino) “room,” (and time) so that it (she) can be “present, disruptive even,” and that you, as a reader, can wrestle with the “messiness and nonlinearity” of writing about the end of knowledge, about death, and about what we don’t know (31).

Restaino’s reflections bring readers to her realizations that there is no holding back the tide, that there is no control—though we might want or wish there to be—when our bodies fail us and we begin to die, and there is very little that separates an ill person from a healthy one. Some of the most poignant and emotional moments of the book are when Restaino describes co-writing Sue’s final wishes and helping to take care of her physically toward the end of her illness. She writes how these experiences brought them closer together, and in some ways destabilized Restaino’s role as a researcher (112). Restaino describes, in detail, how she tended to Sue’s port—an open wound in her stomach that functioned to allow the drainage of excess fluid from her body due to a failing liver (120–22). This moment allowed for a shared vulnerability between the two women, and Restaino reflects on how touch is one vehicle for identification and its opposite:

Touch, then, . . . invites us to *let go* of notions of the superhuman, the ever-so-different, by putting us in contact with each other's physical vulnerability, need for care, indeed our fragile beings. This fragility can be communicated—with attunement and respect—in ways that not only illuminate difference (that is, I understand, in touching your body, what my own body is not) but also put us in contact with our own physical vulnerabilities, the uncertain status of our own bodies at any moment in time. (121-22)

I think this passage captures an essential idea of the book: we have a desire to share feelings and experiences and to be with other human beings. At the same time, the separation of bodies (and experience) is real—we can't feel another's pain. Restaino wants to emphasize that the capacity for being with someone who is dying, to touch the dying body, allows us to understand our potential and limits for being with another—and at the same time—for knowing ourselves.

Restaino, then, applies this need for shared experience—and the inevitable feeling of separation—to the process of research. Some central questions the book tackles, deriving from the experience of identification and its lack, are: “What does it mean to work from a place of loss, or at least with or amid the threat of loss? What might we create and build on the other side, moving into and working out of those spaces that render us uncertain or scared or weak in ways we had not been before?” (51). One answer, for Restaino, seems to be about how we must surrender to new methods, writing, and experiences in the field that value uncertainty—the next major theme of the book.

This book poses timely opposition to contemporary outcome statements, scholarship and textbooks in rhetoric and composition that wish to reify boundaries around what we know as a discipline and the writing that can happen as a result. Our discipline, like the body, is and should be seen as being unpredictable—we don't know how long we will be healthy, and in the same sense, our writing and research may not follow a known path. Restaino summarizes the book as an “exercise in subjecting what we otherwise might imagine to be stable—our belief systems, what we ‘know’ for sure, our methods, our values, our bodies/texts—to the possibility of devastation” (148). This “devastation” is a form of deconstruction, a tearing down of the comfortable notions of what a healthy body is and looks like, what academic writing is and looks like, and what a writerly voice is and sounds like.

Restaino asks the reader to surrender a sense of normativity in order to embrace a different epistemology in research and writing, one that relies on exceeding limits and boundaries and accepts that the best laid research and life plans fall apart (79, 128–32). In many ways, this type of surrender demands that emotions—as scary and difficult as they may seem—be a central part of our work as researchers. Those of us in community writing know all too well what she is trying to name in her descriptions of a different epistemology because we see how in our successful partnerships with community members there is often shared intimacy, flexibility, and reciprocity. Sometimes, when we are conducting an interview, or co-hosting an event, or co-writing an article with community members one throws the rule book (disciplined knowledge) aside and allows things to fall apart so they can be put back together in a

new way, as Restaino describes. This type of surrender allows practitioners in community writing, and in rhetoric and composition at large, to open a space “. . . for broken methods and contradiction, for creativity and too much feeling, for blurred genres and for doing the work that scares us” (12–13). It is in this space, too, where we might entertain the emotion of love as an essential form of knowing.

Love, in the puzzle of this book, is the essential piece—it is an unflinching commitment to acknowledging the irrationality and uncertainty of our work in community writing and writing studies. Restaino demonstrates love in writing about her friend’s illness and death and the inevitable loss she experiences, and advocates for its place at the center of our disciplinary work.

There is more than love in Restaino’s book and she never traffics in kitsch. She demonstrates that writing is about facing the shit of life, in investigating what is or can be bad—such as the experience of cancer. She argues that we have to stay, “in situ,” in bad places and with bad emotions like loss, to break through to something new in our writing and research, and perhaps to remake ourselves into something new (141). She poses some questions to work through in this epistemology of badness and intimacy, and when you read these questions, I hope you see how they are essential for our work in community writing in particular: “What is my place right here and right now? How did I arrive? How and where might I yet travel? What don’t I know? In what ways am I potentially wrong? What is my fear? In a sense, this is a rhetoric for reflexive transformation, a reverse persuasion of sorts, though a persuasion nonetheless” (144). These questions about the self and about the self as researcher allow for a real push toward the virtue of humility and being okay with not having the answers, or even recanting your past beliefs and certainties.

Restaino argues, further, that when we allow emotion to flow through our work, we can embrace love as a research method, one that acts as a form of transgression, it is “. . . *the* transgression that unlocks all the rest: it is the vehicle that makes subjective transformation possible” (156). Loving rhetorics allow us to embrace irrationality; it is the essential ingredient to contend with our losses, with our lack of disciplinary knowledge, and with our contrasting sense of selves.

Restaino persuades readers that love and magic are essential in understanding identification(s). To deny this idea is to reify the boundary between knowledge and limits, between ourselves and others. Indeed, as researchers and writers, we have to break down boundaries, to “testify to our losses and our pain, to our utter confusion, to our shit” in order to practice “loving rhetorics” that will allow us to get to another way of knowing and being—only then do we have a chance at truly embracing the other (155). I hope we all can learn to practice rhetoric and community writing with love and humility at the center.

Works Cited

- Corder, Jim W. “Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love.” *Rhetoric Review* 4 (1985): 16–32.