

In Defense of Informal or Embodied Writing: A Note to Editors Half my Age

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The kinds of writing I have published after prior careers in journalism and songwriting can be grouped into three areas: cultural analysis (including literature and film criticism), writing studies scholarship informed by General Education curriculum reform in second language contexts, and since 2014, creative writing, both literary nonfiction and fiction. My focus here is on the implications of a struggle to include more personal, reflexive, or even literary kinds of voice in scholarship about writing. That includes both the pedagogy of teaching writing, and the study of writing as a field. My writing about educational contexts has been forged by an ongoing argument with academic editors. I have been *pushing back* against demands for an impersonal style by journal editors since the 2013-2014 academic year. That year in Saudi Arabia, where I designed and implemented a new freshman English curriculum, was a sort of rubicon in several ways. I'll name four influences which have shaped my resolve to prioritize *writing well*, and to help fashion the communicative cultures of writing studies as a resource which could be used for all those in higher education who want to broaden their audience.

After leaving Riyadh, and becoming an English professor in Puerto Rico, my view of the kinds of writing I wanted to practice and teach, and my “stance and engagement” towards academic editors, evolved. First, I dove into a history of argumentation in “rhetoric and

composition.” As I navigated the theory wars, and began submitting pieces for publication, I realized that much of the writing in rhet-comp was just as constipated as that which I had come to detest in much of the humanities and the social sciences.

Second, I taught Creative Writing every semester. In *creative writing studies*, I found people who, like Wendy Bishop and Doug Hesse, argued for coexistence between rhet-comp and creative writing. Creative nonfiction in particular has attracted students and administrators from other disciplines, who wanted tools for communicating outside of specialist bubbles.

Third, it became evident that I was not doing rhet-comp, but Writing Studies as a “disciplined interdisciplinarity.” Educators such as Bazerman and many creative writing scholars insisted that we should resist the temptation to speak the narrow language of disciplinarity. This broader approach to writing has been aided by a re-organization in 2014 by the Modern Language Association. There were five different streams within “Rhetoric, Composition, and Writing Studies,” according to the MLA: creative writing, history and theory of rhetoric, history and theory of composition, literacy, and writing pedagogies. The result has been to *decenter composition*: to refocus on writing in education, and in post-academic contexts, as a collaborative effort in which composition studies was neither centered nor excluded.

Fourth, looking for allies outside the “social justice” tribe, I have been inspired by Academic Literacies. This transnational body of research and practice, pioneered in the UK, has proponents in South Africa and Australia. A key tenet has been the late Brian Street’s arguments against the “deficit model.” Students are not “empty of literacy,” vessels that we can “fill up” with the right kind of literacy. Students, returning adults, and other “non-traditional” learners

bring their own pre-existing literacies, Street and his colleagues argue. In version of “lifespan writing” articulated by Bazerman, and practiced in Academic Literacies, it is crucial to recognize the various literacies that learners bring, and to integrate these into a package of literacies that can serve as “transferable skills” in inter-disciplinary and post-academic contexts.

Culture is at the bottom of any re-thinking of writing, literacy, and the broader purposes of education. Academic Literacies pioneers have often utilized ethnography as a way to understand the literacies of those in our classrooms. The Anthropology of Writing has also had much of value to say about re-thinking writing and education in a more cultural sense.

The preceding overview grew out of a sort of hand-to-hand combat with editors. In fairness, there are a growing number of editors in journals such as *Intraspection* and *Writing on the Edge*, who have carved out space for hybrid writing. What follows, a view from the trenches, was written with a certain throwing of elbows, in order to clear out some writerly space.

The Author’s Note

The following “Author’s Note” was envisioned as an Afterword to my essay “Foucault’s New Clothes: Revisionist Perspectives.” I was responding to comments from editors of *MASKA: Anthropology, Sociology, Culture* (Feb. 2016). They flagged about 25 instances of “informal” writing, which they wanted changed to a formal, academic style. Most of this response was not published in the journal’s public version of my essay. But it has served as a baseline referent for me. I began to recognize that *pushing back against restrictive notions of proper writing*, in an educational/academic context, *had become an emergent genre of writing*, in its own right.

I wrote these comments not merely in response to the editors of the Polish-based journal *MASKA*, who were after all brave enough to print what some may take as attempted theocide (of a theoretical god). Interference with my writerly style has become routine, and I suspect that this is a widely shared experience. I came to realize that most of these editors were half my age. (The allusion to the Jamaican answer songs “Half My Age” and “Twice My Age” is intentional). It seems that a new generation of editors who tried to straighten out my prose were unaware of debates about reflexive, situated, or embodied writing. More seriously, prior generations of social scientists who wrote with style and flair were not even a distant memory. The new journal editors I encountered seemed to take neutered academic writing as the norm.

When I came out of a year in Saudi Arabia in 2014 I was determined to publish a range of my writing and research, on topics as diverse as curriculum reform, film criticism, race relations, social theory, Latin American cultural studies, and creative nonfiction. An editor of the *World Arab English Journal* wrote detailed instructions on how I should employ a certain mode of non-personal “one might conceivably suggest” nonsense. I waved Ken Hyland at him and he acquiesced. But I added a new framing device, justifying the use of the “I.” Such prefatory material, it seems to me, is becoming a genre of writing in its own right. I.E., *why current debates allow me to use readable English as a legitimate form.*

I wrote a piece called “Arguing With a Monument,” published in 2015 by *Comparative American Studies*, but not before prior editors had given me unsolicited advice on both style and content. One recommendation: that I cite a list of other Frederick Douglass scholarship that I had

already explored in my Cambridge UP book, *On Racial Frontiers*. Maybe they presumed they were giving valuable advice to a very green, newly minted PhD barely half *their* age.

Wrestling with editors half my age has become the norm for me. For instance there was a bout of trench warfare with the line editor for a journal publishing my piece “Sacrifice, Faith, Mestizo Identity: Three Views of Che Guevara’s ‘New Man’.” This editor was particularly intrusive. I fired off yet another letter defending my style—insisting on my right to retain a narrative that flows, and has vision. I was willing to not publish, rather than to make all the suggested changes. Again, people higher up the food chain came to my defense. But some younger scholars may not realize that they can fight for their style, and their vision. This is why I’m presenting the present “Author’s Note” as an essay in its own right: I hope to hear from/read about other scholars who are doing hand-to-hand combat with editors in the effort to keep their writerly style intact. 2

In the case of *MASKA*, I decided that this was something of a “teachable moment” for cross-generational dialogue. It informs the sort of reflexive writing I now encourage in grad students. Here’s what I sent them:

“Author’s Note” From “Foucault’s New Clothes: Revisionist Perspectives” in *MASKA: Anthropology, Sociology, Culture*, Vol. 28

The following essay criticizes the abstracted, disembodied, theoretically constipated writing of Foucault and his followers. But to oppose disembodied writing infers an allegiance to embodied writing. Readers will note a good deal of allusive (and embodied) language in my

writing: I teach creative writing and literary nonfiction, after all. The editors of *Maska* have flagged numerous expressions as “informal,” and requested that I formalize them.

As a senior scholar who practiced journalism and songwriting long before he entered grad school, by now I have not only my own writerly voice, but well-developed arguments for my form of “embodied” writing, and reasons for why I want readers to meet me in something other than the dry, neutered style of academic prose. This did not originate with Foucault, but has certainly been made far worse through Foucault’s afterlife with grad students, in particular.

I am conscious of writing, most immediately, to graduate students and young scholars whose first language is, in most cases, not English. During my year as an English professor in Saudi Arabia, I attended academic conferences in Istanbul and Tunisia; there as well as in Riyadh, I got a steady dose of variants of “Global English.” I hear and read this lingua franca every day in Puerto Rico. It has become clear that communicating successfully with global audiences nowadays requires new thinking about how we use words, images, sound, etc.

There are three good reasons for maintaining those “informal” styles of expression that many editors have suggested that I iron out—especially editors working with “Global English.” First the subtitle of this journal: *Anthropology, Sociology, Culture*. I am always happy to begin with anthropology, because through ethnography we find the strongest argument for reflexive writing—and for engaging cultures on their own terms, not merely through theory. Bronislaw Malinowski famously pitched his tent in the midst of a Trobriand Islands village. He went off the beaten path, because the whites who had been living there for years lived apart, and knew nothing about the local culture. This story has been told many times, and was re-told by Ryszard

Kapuscinski towards the end of his book of lectures, *The Other* (2008).

Obviously the story needs retelling, because the message hasn't reached most academics. I seek readers willing to *go to the culture*, and listen to that culture in unsanitized form. A second reason: when I go to literary masters such as Gabriel Garcia Márquez or Carlos Fuentes, and read their political commentary (in Spanish), I expect not only astute analysis, but a literary style that can bring me joy, or make me smile. Sometimes their language may be over my head... but because I have to reach for it, I grow. I could say the same about Shakespeare, or the Greek dramatists, or Cervantes. Much of their prose is not only "informal," but allusive, and at times magical.... And so after I read them, their words come back to me, like music. I don't understand all of this between my ears. Most of our understanding of culture is not merely intellectual.

Finally, the academic arguments for the value of reflexive or embodied writing are by now well-developed. Even social scientists are teaching techniques to their students learned from Creative Nonfiction, because they want their students to be able to speak beyond their specialty, in the workplace, in their everyday life. We insist that academic writing needs to be able to travel, to be open to new views embedded within idiomatic expressions.

When I use a phrase like "to swim with the big theoretical fish," I am thinking of many things, including Hemingway's fisherman who went "out too far" in *The Old Man and the Sea*. But you, my readers, may see something entirely different. That would be what I would hope for: in my revisionist reading of Foucault, I am asking the same thing of you that I would expect you to ask of me. To remind each other that "We grow by moving from the known into the unknown," and that the unknown always requires, to some degree, a new language.

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