REPELLENT CULTURE

An unarmed Brooklyn man waiting for a taxicab was shot and killed outside a bar on Eighth Avenue in Midtown Manhattan early yesterday in a scuffle with three undercover narcotics detectives, the authorities said.

(Rashbaum, "Undercover Police")

An unarmed man slain by a backup narcotics detective outside a bar on Manhattan’s West Side flew into a rage, punched an officer, ignored shouts of "Police!" and was shot when he grabbed the detective’s gun . . . .

(McFadden)

About two dozen witnesses have been interviewed. Physical evidence—a gun, a bullet, bloody clothing—has been bagged and tagged. As always, police officials have promised a full and fair investigation.

(Barstow)

Five days after an unarmed man was shot and killed by a narcotics detective outside a bar on Eighth Avenue, investigators are focusing on two widely divergent versions of the events that led up to the shooting of the man . . . .

(Rashbaum, "Accounts Diverge")

On a day of solemnity and outrage that degenerated into violence, Patrick M. Dorismond, the unarmed son of Haitian immigrants who was shot to death in a confrontation with the police on March 16, was carried across Brooklyn, eulogized as a martyr . . . .

(McFadden and Kelley)

At a contentious hearing, police officials and city lawyers yesterday denied that the Giuliani administration broke the law in releasing the sealed juvenile record of Patrick M. Dorismond after he was killed by police last month.

(Flynn)

Are we our culture? There are only two ways to answer this question (excluding Maybe, an answer of no interest to classroom teaching founded upon committed positions, a subject

Jeffrey Carroll, Associate Professor of English at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, has published two writing textbooks, a novel, and several essays on composition theory and practice. He has completed a book on the rhetoric of the blues.

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of this essay). Stasis theory would have us define our terms before going much further, refining them to such a degree that those involved in the discussion can answer yes/no interrogatives like this one simply and directly. Even if we drastically reduce the audience (and the we of our question) of such a discussion to, say, teachers and scholars of composition, we are cast within the very concept, culture, that we are being asked to define.

This is as difficult a task, it would seem, as the self defining the self. Indeed, it is this latter task that has launched millions of personal essays in our classrooms that we, as “teachers and scholars of composition,” have so earnestly christened and have seen, with both agony and serenity, disappear without a trace into the depths of academic oceans. But composition studies is awash with culture as culture. It is mostly a virtuous thing, like community, in that it contains the material production of our citizens, our artists and thinkers, our workers, the everyday rhetoric of our newspapers, our children—in short, what we have been able to cram between the pages of a thousand classroom readers for which culture is the buzzword for a quick sale in the textbook aisles of our college bookstores.

The titles of these textbooks are clearly celebratory. They produce critical yet committed prose in our classrooms, serious debates on serious issues. These textbooks assume that culture is the substance of the collective community of our nation. They proceed upon the warrant that composition today is not only the expressive, self-driven enterprise it may have been for an earlier generation of a well-intentioned but sadly uninformed American public—but that the collective American experience (or the social experience of the everyday historical metronome of our lives) is the true measure of composition’s worth. In short, composition has recovered its sense of rhetoric; the kinds of rhetoric it espouses—epistemic, social, expressive, transactional—are not so interesting as the medium in which they swim: the culture ocean, out of which (and into which) all our messages and questions come and go.

But is it a good thing, this culture medium? Does it embrace and welcome us all, as teachers, scholars, writers, thinkers? Does the multicultural answer our fears of privilege? Is the me–culture interface a sufficient plane upon which to build a dominant view of composition? Are there alternatives to culture—if we can find anything outside of culture? Is culture bad for us, after all? If so, do we run back to—where?

Is this essay yet another reactionary whipsaw against prevailing ideologies in composition studies? A glance at the title would indicate so, but it would be difficult to find anything in our composition research of the
past quarter-century that was not a reaction to prevailing wisdoms: we regularly pit anecdotal or idiosyncratic findings against accepted fundamental truths, powerful rhetorical gestures from other disciplines against our fragile self-image, and accept the dialogical or dialectical nature of this “conversation” of positions as the essential growth principle needed to spur any subject into a better, more advanced state of being.

F. Scott Fitzgerald once suggested in his notebooks that one could always make a mark in the world by intentionally stating the unpopular as if one believed it. He would carry out this maxim in a decidedly gentle manner, by being fitfully scandalous in his novels and stories—to scandalize was to rudely surprise one’s audience with image, issue, argument that had already been relegated to the dark rooms of our consciousness. We might try to believe, for the sake of this essay’s contention that culture needs more than “critique,” that Fitzgerald’s advice is borne of a psychological need to purge what has been repressed for unspecified reasons, and that in the purging may be found—after all—materials, substances, refuse, that may have value in and of themselves.

For composition studies, we might point to the recent critiques of process that have sent our just-recently established sense of orthodoxy into a now predictable reel. Whatever one takes for granted—watch out! There would seem to be, already, some Fitzgeraldians at work in the field. Of course, in academic circles, this procedure is simply known as analysis, critique, the testing of theories, the weighing of alternatives. We accept the critiques, of course, but it is still astonishing to many how quickly a truism withers and flames into ash, as if by some discursive electricity we are all shocked into a new wisdom, an eye-opening blast of knowledge that, amazingly, was not present in our minds just a semester before. And there are not only straight lines of fire, of course. The expressivist rhetoric so effective in the late 60s and early 70s, for example, took near-mortal hits from a Marxian rhetorical cannonade in the 80s—but it comes as no surprise to many of us to see the rebirth of the expressive as a newly historicized “essay” genre, armored with literary gloss, as the inevitable answer to the immovable “ideological” pedagogy so influential in composition circles.

These are recent examples of how composition throws itself at new answers, enjoys the romantic fires of solution—and then often backs away in Puritan disgust at its own folly. It is a “process” we do not talk about in our classes; as a dialectic it is not the virtuous Marxian one, nor the Platonic dialogue, with accompaniment from a grove of singing cicadas, that levers us ever higher toward a celestial formalism of truly better
Ideas. One has no ultimate, unassailable research to back claims of superiority of one hypothesis over another; we are all still operating under the cloud of a prior claim that still obtains: students aren’t writing any better than they used to—yet.

The field wants “human results,” as one theorist puts it (Miller 186). We see these results every day in our work and yet, somehow, those results never seem to play, or force, their way into society; they don’t multiply and make themselves clear to society itself—or if they do they cannot often be attributed to writing classrooms in colleges and universities. We are too buried in a complex cultural production of texts to discern what stroke, chip, trace, or scrawl is our doing. This is a problem for composition: finding our work in the finished product. No wonder that for so many years product was a bad word. Better to ascribe a fluidity of movement to our cultural contributions—better because we then do not have to locate a fixed result, but only an “impression” of change, a “literacy” of discernment, critical thinking, and socially responsible response. Such are the platitudes of the aims of composition studies today.

Culture allows us to connect our work to the everyday, to bust out of academic restraints—the classroom’s four walls, charges of ivory-tower blindness, to make relevant our work, especially in contrast to the stodgy historical/textual worries of literary study. Culture is everything we can know with our senses, it is what we consume on the weekends, it is what consumes us all week. It is what we produce; it is what produced us. It is, apparently, Everything—and, thus, Nothing—about which we can say anything precise. Yet the word dominates composition studies as much as process, collaboration, or across-the-curriculum ever did.

If one simply chooses a definition of culture—all or a part of that definition in the preceding paragraph, for example—one is free to carry on a writing task, a writing curriculum, a writing theory. This is the freedom of the textbooks, and the freedom of all syllabi that refer to social critique, dissent, response, critical awareness, and so forth. We are rotating our attention through all levels of social discourse and situation, applying critical skills to those frames, and responding with a sense of cultural indebtedness—we are joining the debate, while simultaneously representing it with those sign-systems culture has provided us.

Such a theory of writing instruction, worked out more fully perhaps, with the details of classroom work that demand an almost momentary rationale, would create little more than a shrug from most composition specialists. Such is the orthodox world in which we operate; many of us would, in fact, happily or not, substitute world for culture. It is, after all,
so demanding, so full of itself, that one is not about to question what is beyond the bounds or limits of our imaginations, which are, of course, themselves matrices of cultural energy.

We are stuck, then, with culture, and even if we could run from it we could only find ourselves in a situation of blindness, of mute stubborn negation—a condition that some teachers might swear is in fact the position of many students, but which we are hastily denying with every day of our semester that passes, with every journal entry, every paper and grade. It is not a pretty thing, surely; culture, once it is subjected to ideological lenses that insist on skepticism, critique, change, overthrow, becomes a wasteland of injustice, repression, violence, horror. It can only be borne thus by its analysts—our first-year students, for example—for its experiential truths. Our students already know these horrors; these cultural objects become fascinating for having been dragged into the classroom in body bags and opened up and dissected on every desk. And we would never stop at mere expository texts; the critique and argument must follow, and it is here that the ethics of cultural work in composition is wrapped tightly about the political lance: it is all about injustice, after all. What better to discover in culture, what better to lance, to dissect, and to abhor? And to answer with a visionary solution?

I can’t remember ever asking for an argumentative paper, or receiving one, that wished to say, in effect, “I just love things the way they are!” The closest one may come to such a sentiment is the hopelessly antiquated expressive essay on boyfriend, girlfriend, old playground, free lunch, graduation party, or favorite yogurt flavor. This wallowing in the personal happiness of the author is mostly forbidden these days; instead, we give out the kinds of news presented in capsule form as the opening quotations to this essay.

The Patrick Dorismond case, for the purposes of this essay, is a cultural phenomenon that, in its representation in language, becomes one example of composition’s challenge to those who believe that writing about culture is a dirty, distasteful business—and a defense of those that believe culture is whatever shining medium, or context, one wishes to make it. This essay’s opening quotations, all taken from The New York Times, surely a cultural voice without parallel in the American experience, are the lead sentences from articles filed with the Metropolitan Desk from March 17 to April 1st, 2000, a period of two weeks—two weeks that saw the Dorismond shooting turn from a local to a national event, from a police shooting to a political storm. In those two weeks most Americans became aware of the events surrounding and following the shooting; the
instruments of that knowledge are many, of course, ranging from friends to television to newspapers to newsmagazines to radio. Culture hums and vibrates with the consequences of its own energy; the Dorismond shooting, coming far from the front end of a sequence of police shootings—and coming far from the conclusion of a Senatorial race—became a nexus of cultural debate about, to quote from the excerpts themselves, *unarmed man*, *authorities*, *police*, *versions*, *violence*, *solemnity*, *outrage*, and *law*.

Somewhat like literary discussions about the elements of genres like the novel or drama, discussions about American cultural drama often utilize these italicized words; we could construct a thousand such scenarios, like the semiotic games of Roland Barthes, in which there are such things as nuclei and catalysts tumbling our texts along. The nuclei are those words underlined above; we could, like Barthes, say it is not really Patrick Dorismond who is shot in the back, but Billy the Kid, or even John Kennedy. The American experience of the *unarmed man* is deliciously folkloric, and reaches down into our national core for the principles of freedom and risk, equality and privilege—and the darkly romantic twists of a John Dillinger, a Patricia Hearst.

We know the signs, somehow. We know that the theater opens daily, and that versions is the writing, speaking—the rhetorical—cue that launches a million opinions, in which somewhere is embedded the truth, perhaps. The *authorities* enjoy one of those god-positions that composition has espoused, without question, to be the end-all of one’s writing accomplishments: the assumption of authority. It is not usually asked, “What is the good of authority?” But we might ask it now given the cultural outcome of most authority, which is a response of skepticism or, worse, disbelief. Given our love of truth, however, and our still-firm (if contested) belief in the existence of rhetorical means to produce it for others, we do still adhere to Plato: “As being is to becoming, so is pure intellect to opinion. And as intellect is to opinion, so is science to belief, and understanding to the perception of shadows” (*The Republic*: 281; VII, 534-535). Still, it might be interesting someday to poll our students, “Who would like not to be an authority?” But we know better.

Opposing every unarmed man is *police*, and for every knee-jerk sympathy for the former, one expects just as many knee-jerk rejections of the former, in as many comedic or tragic settings as are there theaters to hold the American adversarial relationship of freedom to *law*—our finest philosophical dialectic of individual right and social contract launching a million cultural dramas, some mere literary creations like novels and
movies. Most, however, are the very stuff of our everyday lives, secret and Emersonian in their desperately repressed, civilized kind: whether to speed on the highway, toss a wrapper, yell at a child, cry at the bank. Culture needs shared moments, yet these moments cannot only be privately acknowledged, like desire. They have to be enacted on cultural stages, like Eighth Avenue in Midtown Manhattan, so that versions sprout across America in rhetorical replications of that moment. This is how we know ourselves.

How is that knowledge conveyed inward, home to the community, the family, the self? With outrage and solemnity. These are words of good use to novelists; we can hear William Faulkner intoning them as prelude to a devastatingly resonant conclusion about the importance of, say, loyalty and honor. Yet now, in this cultural drama, it the outrage of thousands, the solemnity of thousands, and millions as the news spreads of rioting and repression. These are words conveying the emotions of public and private selves, of introvert and extrovert, of a bracketed human heart that has no farther to fling its feelings than where outrage can go, that can cover itself in a shielded, guarded invisibility of solemnity, of weight and waiting.

It is all a violence, this story, even in these brief excerpts, these semiotic spikes of its rhetoric. Violence is an endlessly toyed-with word and idea in our culture. There is probably, somewhere, a discussion of a "violence culture" that all of us could understand in terms of games, art, and politics. It has been a term associated with American history—indeed, with America itself—ever since the rest of the world knew that there was such a place so-called. America will always be the Wild West. The less usual meanings of violence have to do with radical change, radical expression in which there is an intent to break, sever, alter the object of attention. One can do violence with ideas, words—the physical is not necessarily present.

For rhetoric, violence is the wild energy of the speaker intent on disrupting the normal flow of events, of decision-making; it is the attack on a gestalt carefully nurtured over the centuries of the democratic dialogue, a nicely oscillating figure of almost mathematical precision that brings about change. Rhetorical violence can operate on an audience much like propaganda can: it abuses forms, institutions, ideals, with the intent to overthrow. As one quotation indicates, violence is something that is the result of degeneration—a diminution of normal communication, of the everyday truce of peace that we have with the world around us. The shooting of an unarmed man is violence; the rhetoric that follows, and the
actions that follow, are also violence: a funeral, a march, and the airing of sealed legal records by a city administration.

We are caught, as we analyze culture in our classrooms, with such arrayed violence; the ability to discern reason, the Aristotelian fundamental, is very difficult. We expect our students to wade into the unfortunate news of our culture and weigh causes and consequences, to somehow step over or jump above the violence of so much of our cultural news. We expect there to be good work—both in itself, i.e., the process of study is the process of learning, and in the product of such work, which should be a clearer sense of our abilities to think clearly about our place and time, to gather our wits in the face of these cultural attractions and distractions, and to transfer (or husband) these wits in order that they make us stronger, more critical, more wary of the powerful, violent struggles that occur around us, perhaps not always in the culturally orchestrated light-show of a police drama in Midtown Manhattan.

One does not like to question the motives of public servants, which most teachers of writing are, although, as David Hume reminds us, there is always an element of self-interest in even the most generous actions. To open oneself to culture as the primary medium of our learning is justifiable on grounds of its easy access, its multiple sign-systems, which encourage different literacies, and its relevance to our lives as citizens. Yet it is also unjustified (or “dis-justified”) on very similar grounds: easy access requires no work, multiple sign-systems are a cover for watching movies and TV, and relevance is a unreasoning destroyer of history, of tradition. One may adopt the profound skepticism of certain ages and indict our current generation of writing teachers for surrendering to their students’ lack of interest in what is not there. Or one may celebrate the refinement of tired, privileged methods of apprehending and espousing ideas into a socially equable, and daily, occurrence.

Beyond the either/or is the both/and, Kenneth Burke reminded us. As much as Burke is a god to many scholars of the late 20th and early 21st Centuries, we can argue that the “cake-and-eat-it-too-ness” of Burke’s maxim is no more striking than Dr. Benjamin Spock’s argument that one can discipline a child without him or her knowing it. The spoiling of differences through even rhetorically provocative means like identification and consubstantiality are ways of bridging conflict, of ending violence in a place where, perhaps, the original violence occurs: the sense of you and me. This condition of living in a rhetorically lapsed world, in which everyone must contribute at threat of invisibility, is grist for the
feminist mill of the phallogocentric: the instinct to fill space with words is no better than the instinct to kill.

The postmodern composition class is cake-and-eat-it, too; indeed, the postmodern mood of much academic intercourse is one of fluidity, of movement or progression/regression in which the forked tongue is a virtue. The right-wing critics of the past, having had their field day with MLA and CCCC paper topics, have attacked the lack of morality, the disappearance of ethical argument in academic circles. These circles, the critics say, are more like spirals that turn ever more tightly upon a cultural gyre of trivial texts and even more trivial analyses of those texts. To many, it is academic culture that is repellent for its simultaneous rejection of, and dependence upon, a national culture that it chooses to define in the terms that textbooks, movies, and television view as commodified dramas of violence and pleasure.

One can escape from the either/or debate—like that over the competing rhetorics of expressivism and the social-epistemic—and adopt the both/and position, and mix or juxtapose the two in no particular sequence, but with a generous eye toward accommodation, itself a principle of our culture (if not a reality, as in immigration disputes). Is there a third way for those who find both a championing and/or challenging of culture unnecessarily wearying, beside the point, or downright destructive? In other words, is there a way to acknowledge this repellent culture, and move away from it to a place where there are other "things" to write?

Writing-about-culture textbooks tend to draw a line between personal and cultural; if such a line exists, then answering the question above is, seemingly, simple. We would ask our students to write about their persons. But what "about"? Other than descriptive experiments—say, the look of one’s bathroom or the specifications of one’s automobile—even the most “personal” writing is grounded in the nonpersonal, in the social or political or cultural context. The most committed expressivist might soon grow impatient reading papers on “The Happiest I’ve Ever Been” or “Where I Go to Feel Most Like Me.” These papers, to many composition teachers and scholars, represent the worst kind of evasion: they are inconsequential bellybutton-gazing work of no value whatsoever to the academy other than the practice of spelling, mechanics, and style. But before this essay veers into the ever-popular debate over the kinds of writing best for writing classrooms, it is better to admit that even the most “expressive” of writing tasks is cultural as well (and vice versa),
because the medium of this task—the English language—is itself a cultural energy, added to and taken from, reshaped daily, even by the moment. Choice of words, or diction, is culturally determined, and despite personal subjects like favorite sandwiches and grandmother’s rocking chair, what teachers will read are cultural texts about food, comfort, family, and the picturesqueness of American aging. The personal/cultural divide is a fiction, designed to preserve, particularly for textbook authors, a shot at a larger audience.

If the very medium of our writing is culturally determined, is there then no recourse for those (like the writer of this essay) who find culture a mean, repellent figure in its everyday guise as news of the unarmed man, the solemnity and the outrage, the versions of authorities, the law of and under violence, and the police we ask our students to become as regulators of our culture’s horrors and wonders?

One answer, although provisional in any writing class, is to value more highly the spoken word. To refrain from writing in a writing class is a temporary, self-conscious gambit, but resorting to the spoken word exclusively (for a week or two) allows for a more immediate expression of thought and feeling, students finding that idiolect—if not required as authentic to each student—is, rather than the hand, closer to the mind of the maker. Our literature classes are run this way, generally, and do engage students in discussions of cultural matters (called “stories”) at least as vivaciously as do writing classrooms. But writers need to write, of course, and this delay of fingers to keyboard is only a hedge against cultural expectations of a policed flurry of responses to a textbook essay on, say, the entrepreneurial spirit of Gulf Coast Vietnamese shrimp fishermen.

A second approach is to adopt a metaphorical struggle of death and life in the powers of our cultural “news” to reach us as either noose or lifeline. Encourage students to see culture, and all its material manifestations—from trading cards to the American flag, from comics to the Constitution—as texts that kill and create, doom and save, illuminate and blacken. This approach is a dualistic analysis, to be sure, rooted very much in the critical thinking movement that informs much composition theory today, especially that with a political or social interest. But the extremes of the death and life metaphors of noose and lifeline may create a dissonance, much like that created by an ungrammatical sentence, that allows students to exchange their writing for their culture. The unsealing of court documents—mere writing—triggers a riot of violence. A single word may stop it—why?
This concept of *exchange* is a third answer to the question of recourse for those of us who seek a way *through* culture (to some better invention). Exchange is part of an anthropological definition of culture; anthropology has certainly had its day as an influence on composition studies, most notably in the ethnography. But to think of writing as exchange says nothing about the kinds of writing one can do in, say, a first-year writing class. Instead, discussions and discoveries of exchange are other ways of finding out what the “things” of culture are:

- What is traded for what?
- What do we give for what we want?
- What have we traded for what we don’t want?

For a discipline, and *zeitgeist*, still very much in a mood of fluidity, transition, and movement, exchange is a comfortable activity, limited to a degree by our realizing that we “deal” the resources of our lives, including writing, for “stuff.” What is an unending process for many writing assignments becomes a shorter amplitude, a movement between giver and taker, as concrete as an Elbovian contract for a good grade, as conceptual as racking up points for admission to Heaven. In its most inclusive sense, exchange can be seen as the source of change itself.

This free thinking about a single conceptual term like exchange can become gooey New Age philosophizing when divorced from some ready practice. The Dorismond case, for example, provides writers with a vivid set of exchanges that can first be identified and then evaluated for their worth or value:

- What is the price for going unarmed in our culture?
- What is the price for going armed?
- When you become one of the authorities, what do you give up?
- What do you get?
- Emotions like solemnity and outrage—what good do they do, and what harm?
- Is violence ever exchanged for something good? When?
- Where?
- When a person represents the law, what has she given up—what has she gained?

By encouraging students to see their *writing* as a part of this exchange—for example, trading their texts about the Dorismond case for an *understanding* of the interpenetration of politics and police work—students can be actively critical of culture while increasing their freedom of movement within it. This last point is familiar to writing instructors; it is the cornerstone of many “writing-about-culture” classrooms. But the
noose and lifeline metaphors dramatize the in-culture "factness" of much writing, its consequentiality, rather than the seductive pleasures of its speculative realm. What is not encouraged in such an approach, however, is the brief but real pressure of authority; instead, we can ask students to exchange their writing for wisdom, whose effects are necessarily beyond the view of our classrooms—and rightly so, given the culturally (to some) offensive, further development of this writing work as investment. Students, after all, have already paid their money—a vivid transaction made much less so by middlemen and various banking institutions. One only wonders what the effect would be on writing instruction if students laid out dollar bills on their teachers’ desks at the beginning of each class.

The call for "human results" might be degraded by such realities; yet this simple fact of exchange’s position at the heart of the educational enterprise does not dissuade any of us from transforming our everyday work in the classroom into goals that are generous and, in our best moments, undeniably valuable. Culture, however repellent, however beautiful and enabling, can be seen as essentially business, as easily seen as some academics see all human activity as essentially exercises in power. But we need to move through culture, move beyond the mere ghastly spectator sport it can be, and find in our writing classrooms the stuff of new culture. In this way the intelligence and wisdom of our students will have been offered at a fair price.

Honolulu, Hawai‘i

Works Cited


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