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Irrigation: The Political Economy of Personal Experience

Carol Reeves and Alan W. France

As teachers of writing, we have inevitably formed our professional identities around a central ethic—that composition is neither a stepchild nor a bastard of the traditional arts curriculum. It bears instead an honorable lineage, intimately related to the highest goals of the liberal education. The writing classroom as a crucial curricular space where students might make sense of their lives, where they may use writing to articulate a self out of the undifferentiated flux of remembered experience. Composition is always more than writing, always more than a way to “get ahead” in school and work, always more than an institutional requirement. Composing is an intentional act.

Yet the traditional repertoire of liberal arts virtues and the critical practices fostering the goals of a humane education have come up against the world our students will inhabit: the brave new illiberal—or neoliberal—world of intense global winner-take-all economic competition. More difficult, as well, because the very media of communication in which we might conduct traditional, reflective humanistic inquiry have been subsumed and commodified. The modernist discourse of the self, in other words, has suffered a hostile takeover. Who a person “really is”—and of course what it means to write a personal experience narrative—can no longer be considered self-evident. We are all now, in Haraway’s sense, cyborgs: amalgams of electronic media and personal histories. And only the most disciplined of critical practices stand any chance of isolating the substance of the self from these complex compounds.

To do the educative work of self-articulation entailed by the precept “know thyself,” our students need to learn certain critical practices that are not part of the traditional repertoire of liberal arts virtues. And so, although our teaching returns for nurture to the faith that self-knowledge is liberating, it is not an easy or placid faith. In the essay that follows, we will try to map out one path this faith has taken: an assignment that works with the narrative representation of the self by attempting a disciplined and critical interrogation of selfhood’s social origins.

In our essay on this pedagogical work—its origins, its development, its relationship to critical theories of discourse—we will be distinguishing three authorial modes (or “voices” as we usually say): Carol’s, Al’s, and our collaborative persona. We will use explicit textual directions to help our readers know who is at the authorial helm. In the two sections that follow, first Carol, then Al will write about Carol’s “Irrigation: An Essay,” the originating point of our collaboration on this essay. Carol will reflect on the essay’s composition and on the larger implications for the writing process itself. Then, in the next section, Al will recount his reading and appropriation of the essay.

Carol: Writing as Irrigation

Water flows out to the parched crop rows from ditches or pipes running from a pump, electric nowadays, but in the old days, diesel. Big GMC or Oldsmobile engines without bodies, without mufflers, raging into the night, pull water up through hundreds of feet of bedrock and loamy topsoil. The water is cold when it comes out of the ground and foamy with minerals—calcite, sodium, selenium, magnesium. It flows eagerly to its destination, picking up an occasional rat or water moccasin, moving down a slope so subtle that only a careful surveying will find it. The flatness is real, of course, but nothing is ever entirely flat. There are always gradations, slight depressions and calm slopes. Much of the water evaporates in air so dry it is electric, charged with positive emptiness (you know exactly what will happen if you walk in the dust and touch the side of your pickup truck). After you set the tubes and stand on the far bank of the irrigation ditch, you can watch the water moving down the straight rows of wheat or cotton or soybeans or sorghum—doing its work—and you have this feeling. You watch the water stumble over the sod, wiggle like a tiny finger through the jungle of leaves, and you look up at the dusky sky, slightly brown with dust, and you know plenitude. It is a fleeting knowledge in this country.

Seamus Heaney has a poem, “Digging,” in which he pays tribute to his father’s farming life while setting up a metaphor between “digging” the earth

and “digging” in one’s consciousness for the material for art. Annie Dillard relates writing to chiseling rock (3). We must all find ways to explain to ourselves why we have chosen not to live as our fathers lived, why we write, why it is so hard, and why we keep turning back to what we thought we had left behind for those explanatory metaphors.

In his approach to teaching writing, Al has reminded me to connect my own needs as a writer with those of my students. Aren’t we all searching for metaphors? Aren’t we all forever finding a name for that experience or place that we wanted to leave but that continues to haunt us? If I can’t stop wondering why my ancestors would have wanted to settle in such a drab, harsh landscape, and if I can’t forget the sound of an irrigation pump, and if I continue to hold a clear vision of water flowing down a crop row, then surely, they have their pasts to irrigate imaginatively as well.

In my own teaching, I have too easily fallen into the pragmatic as an end in itself. They need to know how to write a solid thesis, how to defend it solidly, how to use solid evidence, how to document sources. Yes, yes, yes. But we need to nudge them toward the water, no matter how murky, of their lives.

As I was writing the irrigation essay, I was also writing a scholarly essay on the language of AIDS. As I was writing the irrigation essay, I was also drafting guidelines for our college professional standards committee for tenure and promotion proceedings. As I was writing the irrigation essay, I was teaching Aristotle in a befuddling way to befuddled students. And each time I sat down to work on the irrigation essay, I had this feeling. As I watched the words flow so easily from the bedrock of me, my fingers feeling the territory of a blank screen, I knew plenitude. And that is a fleeting knowledge in this country.

Al: Reading “Irrigation”

When I first read “Irrigation: An Essay” (shortly after publication during a Thanksgiving visit at Carol’s), I didn’t think about pedagogical applications. I thought: in the twenty minutes it took me to read this essay, I’ve come to *know* someone—already a friend—better. This first, *personal*, reaction is probably closest to authorial intention. The essay allowed Carol and, over her shoulder, her readers to make sense of how a person came to be who she now is. I liked the essay most immediately because I know Carol and know therefore how finely the essay worked. But because of what I do, it’s impossible merely to enjoy a good story. Its “effectivity” must be identified.

“Irrigation” worked so well, it seemed to me, because it “rationalized” a bundle of characteristics and idiosyncrasies that I knew as Carol Reeves—

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knew well enough already to say to mutual friends things like “That sounds like something Carol would say!” “Irrigation” explained how a selfhood had emerged out of “material culture” by placing “personal experience” in its historical context. It did not just “express” that experience; it *accounted* for it by supplying what Michael Bernard-Donals has called “structures of experience” (259). As an aggregate, these experiences are called by discourse theorists “subjectivity”; but of course as an aggregate, experiences are useless to someone writing—or reading—an essay. However, by supplying both the experience and its structuring context—the dancer and the dance—the essay allowed me to say with conviction that I could *understand* Carol (better) as a person. And composition is in the understanding business. So my assignment sequence began with a close reading, in class, of “Irrigation.”

To the teacher of writing, most anything we read has potential for “pedagogical application,” and it didn’t take me long to see that “Irrigation” did exactly what I wanted my students to do when I assign them to write a personal essay. So I quickly appropriated Carol’s essay as a model for an assignment in an advanced composition course. More recently, I’ve begun to use it in my introductory courses as well.

“Irrigation” has, for me, two great virtues. First, it contains a dense—to some perhaps overly so—concentration of rhetorical and literary techniques: note, for example, how descriptive detail is marshaled in the opening four sentences to produce a powerful, unified, and multiply-allusive theme—a motif, actually. Second, and most important to me, “Irrigation” shows how to historicize experience. It illustrates a process by which a person writing reflectively in the present can discover—recover, actually—the social and economic determinants of identity, which is to say culture’s transparent sculpting of the self.

Now, it is time for you, our readers, to read Carol’s essay yourselves. In the following section, then, we reproduce the text of “Irrigation: An Essay” as it was originally published in *The Flying Island*, a little literary magazine, in 1994.

IRRIGATION: AN ESSAY

For years, the irony was preserved: a sea of tall, dry, yellow grass sitting atop an underground sea enclosed in bedrock. Above, bleached bones, prickly pear, dry creek beds with red sand, weathered, dry-land wheat farmers with hard scrabble psyches to match the land they farmed. Below, a swelling surge of cool water with nowhere to go.

Nowhere to go, that is, but up, once farmers discovered they could drill wells and water their crops and plow up more dry grassland and

pump more water and change the texture of that country and their lives forever. Back before the settlers, tall grasses—blue stem, switch grass, and Indian grass—covered the flat plain, and you could look out across the West Texas plains in the early fall and see the silver tips of grass folding and dipping in the wind. You'd have to look away or become dizzy. Old timers say that the grass was high enough to tickle their horses' bellies. There was always danger of grass fires that made the sky black for days.

By the time I was born in the fifties, and especially by the time I was old enough to help out on the farm, our pastures contained no more tall grasses, only short grasses—Blue Grama, Side Oats Grama, and wild rye—because cows can graze them down bare as a table-top, and they'll come back with a good rain. The remaining land was in long furrows of rich brown loam extending on the flat plane of the land toward infinity. You'd get dizzy if you gazed down them too long and hard. Bordering the fields were irrigation ditches, about two feet deep and four feet across, from which water ribboned smoothly through the milo and corn and cotton. Huge muffler-less diesel engines, with their ear-pounding roar, pumped the water from the ground. Where I grew up, fives miles west of the Caprock, thirteen miles south of Silverton, twenty miles north of Floydada, thirty-five miles east of Plainview, a good seventy miles northeast of Lubbock, the land was so flat that in the evening when the clouds rolled in, I'd pretend they were mountains. I'd look out over a flat field of young cotton and pretend I was a giant treading through an ancient forest. Those irrigation ditches were oceans. Blowing sand was really blowing snow, clean and pure. So much imaginative freedom can be oppressive.

In the summers, there was nothing like slipping into the icy water of the ditch and allowing the currents to push you from one end of a field to the other. Ditch surfing, we called it. We'd be hoeing a cotton field, the air so dry and hot that you couldn't sweat, the sun broiling the back of our necks. At the end of a complete row, we'd jump in, settle our bodies into the neat V, and let the murky water move through our clothes. Anyone coming upon us would find five mud-smearred, sunburned heads lined up down the middle of the ditch like mud puppies keeping their bottoms in the water, their tops to the sun. Naturally, we weren't supposed to be swimming in the ditches because there was always the danger of hitting a tube and causing it to lose suction, or worse, breaking holes in the dams.

Changes in the flow of water running down one field row would

change the water level through the rest of the field; water running into the road next to the field caused a real mess. Dad always got angry when he discovered we'd broken a dam, not necessarily because water was being wasted, for we all thought the Ogallala was everlasting, but because of the time and trouble involved in repairing broken dams.

Irrigation farming in the sixties was incredibly labor intensive. You had to check the well pumps because they were always running out of diesel, always needing minor adjustments and repairs. You had to check the flow of the water every four hours to make sure that some sudden change in the water level had not broken the suction.

They needed special adjustments, and sometimes the water pressure would just increase suddenly, causing water to spill over the tops of the dams. The tubes, three-inch aluminum pipes that fed water from the ditches into the crop rows, had to be reset often because they'd lose their suction with the movement of the water or the bump of an occasional rat or ground squirrel. Dad would tromp out in waders just before 9:00 PM to set tubes, sometimes leaving again at 3:00 AM, then again at 6:00. To set a tube, you had to stand with one mud boot in the crop row, the other just close enough to the dam to get leverage, and bend low, filling the tube with water. They you'd hold one hand over one end of the tube and while the other end was still in the water, you'd swish the tube back and forth. The trick was to swish back and forth and then, in one swift move, take your hand from the end of the tube and place it down in the row. If you did it right, water would flow from the tube. I was never very good at it, so Dad always followed behind me, patiently resetting every tube.

No one ever gave a thought to the amount of water that was lost to evaporation. It didn't matter because there was plenty of water down under the surface, a huge water-bearing formation, 300 feet deep in some places, that stretched up to Nebraska, a geologist once explained to my father. That explained and somehow justified our barren lives on the surface: never mind, we lived over an ocean. An endless ocean that had made our lives golden.

Before irrigation, back when my dad was a boy, every crop was dry land, which meant that you planted your seeds in hard scabble and hoped for the best. You planted wheat because if you got enough moisture, you could graze your cattle on it during the winter. You were a gambler to plant cotton or soybeans or corn. They all required too much attention, chemicals, water, cultivation. And even if you did have grasshoppers or careless weeds, you didn't spend money on

chemicals, because what would be the point in spending money for chemicals if you didn't get rain? In the good years, you knew exactly what to do with abundance: you dried it, stocked it, canned it, ground it, stored it, sold it, cherished it because you expected not to have the same kind of year next time. And in the bad years, you lived off what you'd stored from the good years; you sold off most of the livestock, you managed. There was no such thing as bumper crops that couldn't be used. Life was hard and honest and predictable, not golden.

And then came all that glorious water. Suddenly there were no longer any quiet drives down the country roads because every half mile you heard the blaring roar of those engines. Suddenly, all the sons of the old hard scrabble farmers were driving new Ford and Chevy pickups and building new ranch-style brick homes and filling them with new furniture from the showrooms in Amarillo and Lubbock. Our new home was Read-built, the latest in construction technology, according to the pamphlet. On the day they brought it out to us, all put together, a house on wheels, a sandstorm blew in. We waited out by the mailbox anyway. Mother's new dress getting sandblasted and grandmother standing slightly behind us, clutching a new patent leather purse, as if she half expected that Dad would need a loan. She never carried more than eleven dollars at one time. Then we saw it come floating down the newly paved country road in all its pink-shingled glory, sliding helter-skelter on its trailer like a pink whale resigning itself to the force of the ocean. In my new bedroom several nights later, I imagined we were moving still, traveling to some place with trees and mountains.

That water changed our habits of mind, our vision of ourselves. We became hopeful. What we imagined might actually be possible. My great-grandmother's collection of Harvard Classics wouldn't have to sit rotting on the shelf because one of us from the "irrigated" generation might read them for college, and we wouldn't necessarily study agriculture. I thought I might move out to live with my cousin Jerry who lived in Los Angeles and who had been on American Bandstand.

With the first irrigation well he dug in 1953 and the first Cummins engine he used to pump the water to his new crops, my father became an agri-businessman. He experimented with new crops: sunflowers, kocia weed, highly specialized seed crops, the latest hybrids. Every year, he bought a new pickup, always posing next to it while Mother took his picture. Every few years, he'd move up to a more powerful tractor, from the little blue Ford to the revolutionary John Deere 4010 in

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1962 to the 4020 to the 4430—all with radios in the cabs—to bigger plows, from two-row to four-row to eight-row, to the latest in chemical treatments. That operation was the epitome of modern farming technology and productivity. Between 1965 to 1970, land prices in the area jumped from \$1150 per acre to \$1500 per acre.

My mother became the wife of an agri-businessman, which meant that she didn't keep chickens or a cow, didn't spend long, sweaty hours at the cannery stocking up the summer's produce. We always had a garden, of course, but Mother didn't can much, preferring to freeze, which was faster and easier. She didn't need to sew our clothes, and she certainly didn't work in the fields or drive the trucks filled with wheat to the local co-op. But while Dad was challenged to keep up with the latest agricultural developments, Mother became restless, suddenly free to reinvent a totally different farmwife identity but with no models to imitate. The only woman in our family who had divorced her husband and left the farm was Aunt Ike, and there were rumors that she had become loose in Lubbock. For a while, Mother sold Wonder Bras to every woman in our church, all of whom sat in their pews with their new wonderful secret under their jersey dresses. She took ceramics and needlepoint and flower-arranging classes, and when those activities didn't satisfy her cravings, my mother began to dream of becoming a single-mother-working-in-the-exciting-city-with-an-exciting-career. So she left Dad, and we moved to Amarillo where she worked as a convenience store clerk because that was all she could get, a person with no job experience and little formal education. And no credit. Irrigation couldn't change every landscape. My dad suddenly had to live alone in the newly remodeled Readi-built with wall-to-wall shag carpet that he allowed to get clogged up with dirt and cowdog fur.

You just think the water will keep coming on up, year after year. It's the one thing you count on. Even when you have to dig your wells a little deeper every year, even after these occasional moments when water pressure slows to a dribble, you don't allow yourself to think the unthinkable: the ocean is drying up. That's impossible; it's an ocean after all. All the young farmers were taking courses in irrigation technology at Texas Tech; surely this meant something. Plus, my dad and the other farmers in the county had educated themselves about water conservation, replaced the old ditches with pipeline irrigation, which took care of the evaporation problem, and used more efficient engines that ran as quietly as dishwashers.

Still the water level dropped. There is an underlying formation below the Ogalala called the Red Bed which geologists had claimed also held water, and several farmers decided to try pumping it up. Mr. Ferguson was the first to try, bringing a sample of the salty water to the Gin Office where everyone had to taste it for themselves. G. W. Lee decided to pump it up anyway and blend it with Ogalala water to dilute the salt, but everyone else just decided to continue pumping from the Ogalala until their water ran out; then, they'd go back to farming the old way.

The water started running out on my dad's place in the mid-seventies, and the wells have gone bone dry on all but one half-section of land. Now there are no more ditches or even pipelines; those who still have some water under their land have gone to drip-irrigation. Now, instead of planting corn and milo, Dad plants wheat and a hybrid of the old tall grass, Blue Stem, that turns bluish red in the summer and silvery in October and will tickle your horse's belly if you've a mind to ride out across it. Dad is no longer really an agribusinessman, and his land is now worth \$200 an acre. He says things like, "If we don't get rain in the next few weeks, we're going to lose our hay crop," and "Even if it rains this week, it's too late to save our hay crop," and "Every day that goes by is a day closer to rain—it may be next year though."

Now, in mid-October, if you wait until just before sundown or sunup, drive down the road that borders two of my dad's pastures, get out of your car, stand in the middle of the road, and look out across that sea of silver-tipped Blue Stem, folding and dipping in the wind, you can get dizzy. But there won't be any sea beneath your feet.

Al: Teaching "Irrigation" as a Model

As indicated earlier, I selected "Irrigation: An Essay" as a model of the writing process that I wanted to teach to my students in undergraduate composition courses for two basic reasons: its rhetorical and literary accomplishment and its success in understanding one person's experience in its social and historical context. But two other advantages to this project suggested themselves as well. First, I knew the author and knew that I could prevail on her to speak—actually, to write—directly to my students. Teaching "Irrigation" allowed me to reanimate the author function, so to say, and to let students see a real person, using the medium of writing and the genre of the personal essay, doing for herself exactly what I wanted them to do for themselves. When I first used Carol's essay as a model, three years ago in a

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basic writing class (without any of the elaborate incremental steps I've since added), I just mailed copies of student essays to her. A week later, a long email turned up with personal comments for each of the students in my class. They were transformed. While we were reading "Irrigation," students had complained that it was "long and drawn out." She could have said all this stuff about the water and the divorce in one page, they said. Suddenly, though, this abstraction, the author, had become a presence, explaining to them by name exactly why they needed to "draw out" some vacant generality or some cryptic allusion. Writing had, in short, become a living, dialogical process. They responded to Carol's comments—her encouragements to elaborate—much more positively than ever they had to my teacherly marginalia. Carol was more than a teacher; she was an author(ity).

A second advantage to using "Irrigation" as a model for a personal essay had to do with the essay's topicality. On one hand, the historical and geographical setting of Carol's essay is, for my metro-Philadelphia students, unfamiliar, not to say exotic. The attention "Irrigation" pays to reproducing the ambient detail of agricultural life on the West Texas prairie requires students to look much more closely at—to de-familiarize, really—their own backyards and front stoops, at least if they are going to reconfigure their experience as the assignment asks them to do. And it's not just detail for detail's sake. The central insight of "Irrigation," I think, is that part of who we are is encrypted in the detail of our historical setting and that detail itself offers one referent—the literal—of a metaphor that can "recover" that figurative essence of self by which one's culture reproduces itself. The invention of the irrigation metaphor enabled Carol to "emplot" (in the sense Hayden White uses the term) her autobiography as a story with a real—that is, historical—referent. Because the social context of Carol's childhood was so foreign to them, they could see more clearly the power of "irrigation" to explain essential features of her biography. And my hope was, therefore, that they themselves might find such a metaphor to understand their own biographies.

In teaching "Irrigation," then, it is necessary to focus on the trope of *antithesis*, which actually organizes the essay into sets of binaries: dry and wet, past and present, "hard scrabble" and "agri-business," privation and abundance, the provincial and the metropolitan, tradition and modernity, necessity and—perhaps, whatever it might mean—freedom. The central metaphor of "irrigation" serves as a kind of semantic trunk-line, shunting and transforming meaning between domains, from one pole of a binary to the other. In the course under consideration here, we spent four hours reading "Irrigation," one on the first two paragraphs alone. An experienced

reader will easily see why: not only is the opening image crucial to establishing the antitheses; its language actually *performs* it. For instance, consider the fricatives (“bleached bones, prickly pear”) of the sea above are placed in opposition to the sibilants (“a swelling surge”) of the sea below. And notice how the text dissolves that “irony . . . preserved” by the bedrock. In the transition from the first to the second paragraph, water with nowhere to go becomes water with “Nowhere to go, that is, but up, once farmers discovered they could drill wells. . . .” The crescendo “Nowhere to go, that is, but up” actually produces the effect of the water rising through the pierced bedrock. Throughout, “Irrigation” requires—and repays—this kind of close reading to give up its underlying tropological unity and to make its techniques available to less experienced student writers.

We now reprint the assignment sequence that Al used with his class. It attempted to help students conceive and write a personal essay like Carol’s “Irrigation” by breaking the invention or prewriting process down into a series of ascending incremental steps, which could be synthesized finally into an extended exploration into the “political economy of personal experience,” as we had begun to call this project.

The Assignment Sequence

The following weekly assignments and the instructions for the major essay, “Writing Project #1: Environment and Identity,” were handed out together with a photocopy of Carol’s essay with the syllabus at the beginning of the 1991 fall semester.

Assignment #1: Write a short interpretation of Carol Reeves’s “Irrigation: An Essay.” This means that you should explain what you see as her central point—her *purpose*—or what she seems most interested in telling us. Use some short quotations to illustrate your interpretation.

Assignment #2: Make a picture in your mind of a place that had a strong positive or negative meaning for you when you were growing up. Look at it carefully in your imagination, take notes on it, and then write a description of it (about two pages), using some of the techniques Reeves uses in her essay, “Irrigation.”

Assignment #3: Create a metaphor for your essay (comparable to Reeves’s “irrigation”). Your metaphor should be a word or phrase that describes both your physical environment—as in last week’s assignment—and the effects or influences of that environment on your

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personality: the person you have come to be. Explain how the metaphor expresses your personal history and how you feel about it.

Assignment #4: Email a personal letter to Carol in which you (1) explain your interpretation of her essay, and (2) using your metaphor, explain how your environment—your past experience—has influenced or shaped the person you are now.

Writing Project #1: Environment and Identity: Carol Reeves’s “Irrigation: An Essay” is a model for the kind of explorative personal essay this assignment sequence is asking you to write. Essentially, you are examining the relationship between the social and material world and the person you have come to be. I call this process “explorative” because each person has a different environment, and none of us can really know how that environment—the landscape, the architecture, the religious and moral traditions, the racial and ethnic composition, the social class, the family interrelationships among many other factors make it impossible ever to really allow us to follow Socrates’ dictum to “know thyself.” Nevertheless, the goal of a liberal arts education is for each of us to work toward the deepest and most honest knowledge of ourselves possible. For Reeves, “*irrigation*” is a metaphor—a concept that expresses *not only* the hydraulic technology of watering fields *but also* the changing social relationships that have shaped—in a way “*irrigated*”—her imagination, her view of herself and of the world she has come to inhabit. The same kinds of forces that shaped Carol Reeves’s life have also shaped yours (and mine). And the purpose of this writing assignment is to help you do for your own life what Carol Reeves has done for hers: come to understand it better by explaining it in the form of a written text, an *essay*. Having worked through the four preparatory weekly assignments, it is now time to use them in writing an extended essay (5–6 pages). Your metaphor (Assignment #3) should give your essay a central, unifying point (a “theme”), and you can use it for your title, as Carol has done.

AI: The “Irrigation” Assignment Sequence

Students’ attempts at the first two incremental assignments—interpreting and describing—were naturally impressionistic and fragmented. At least they were compared to the objectives of the “Environment and Identity” project. Their interpretations of “Irrigation” tended to focus on the essay

as cautionary tale. Some read it as a warning of environmental catastrophe: “taking resources for granted will lead to us having nothing,” as Melissa put it; others, like Karen, as a moral warning against “materialism [that] eats away at our sense of family.” There was little evidence that students were making causal connections between the two domains of Carol’s controlling metaphor, her “turn” from literal irrigation—the ditches, pipes, and water—to the nourishment of imagination and intellect entailed figuratively by references to the “irrigated generation.” Nor was there much appreciation of the inherent contradiction in Carol’s ambivalence toward the new irrigated order, exhilarating but disorienting (“dizzying,” as she puts it several times).

With few exceptions, the students involved in this writing project were long removed from the rural—perhaps even preindustrial—agricultural past that Carol re-calls to life in “Irrigation.” For my students, all that remained of the traditional social organization of “hard scrabble” family farming were bromides and pieties from the likes of *Little House on the Prairie*. Their lives and mine were lived in the greater Philadelphia metropolitan area, our work around the place likely limited to mowing the lawn or walking a pet.

For all of us, though, the threat or experience of family breakdown that seemed to be set in motion with the advent of irrigation was real. In their letters to her, a number of students asked Carol for more details about the divorce: “How did [the move to Amarillo] really affect you?” or “Did your mother ever think she made a mistake to leave your Dad?” But the student interpretations of the essay that made the divorce the climax of the narrative (roughly half) did not link it to the socioeconomic changes Carol describes. The culprit was “materialism,” as Wendy pointed out: “irrigation” could be understood figuratively as a “washing away” of family bonds and boundaries, a concomitant effect of abundance that caused people to “forget their commitments to each other,” thus confounding as well as awakening the irrigated generation.

In the majority of students’ descriptions (Assignment #2), the larger social and economic contexts of experience were absent, no matter how obvious or inevitable they had seemed to me. The “inner city,” the suburbs, or the rural “ex-urbs” were, for the students, strictly extrinsic elements of setting for their memories. The differences between Karen’s “woods behind my house” and Mike’s “EA” (the Eire Avenue section of North Philadelphia) were entirely accidental. One was clean and quiet, the other dirty and noisy; one supported tree forts, the other street gangs.

Only when students began to search for metaphors in Assignment #3 did the causal relationships start to appear. Some students struck gold early in

the process. Adrianna began with a literal grapevine that knit together the backyards of the neighborhood where her extended Italian American family lived in door-to-door row houses. The grapevine, of course, stands figuratively for family intimacy and solidarity and as well, Adrianna suggests, for overly assiduous business-minding. In any case, the call of upward mobility—a suburban home with multiple bathrooms and its own half-acre lot—proved too much of a strain. Her parents' move out of the old neighborhood created family dissension, although Adrianna suggests that the figurative grapevine still lives in the close relationships among those of her own generation. Steve also hit upon a fruitful metaphor: the basement of his grandparents' house as "a place with strong positive or negative associations." The child of what he calls a "dual-income lifestyle," Steve uses his metaphor to link the material objects of family history, the faded photographs and toy soldiers, with his sense of alienation from a living past and with his deep desire to reconnect with it.

In the rest of this section I would like to recount in more detail the process by which two students, Wendy and Malik, worked through the assignments and formulated insights that they themselves believe they could never have done without considering the real-world contexts of their lives. These exemplary "case studies" of students working their way through the "Irrigation" assignment sequence represent, in my judgment, strong arguments for the pedagogy Carol and I are proposing here: teaching a more "comprehensive" (in the sense of complete and of self-reflective) approach to writing the personal essay by including the historical and material agents of private experience.

In her interpretation (Assignment #1) of "Irrigation," Wendy was the only student to focus on the causal link between economics (broadly construed) and the familial tensions Carol relates in the final third of her essay. Wendy, who grew up in rural Missouri, read Carol's central metaphor of irrigation as a washing away of traditional knowledge, as if the water coursing up from the Ogallala were instead from the River Lethe, dulling the soul's memories for the afterlife. As Wendy put it, "the discovery of the water had 'irrigated' the minds of past knowledge, and almost made people ignorant." The result, she wrote in her letter to Carol (Assignment #4), was

an eye opener for everyone, including the reader. Realizing how little things can come between people, and tear families apart. Usually the culprit is money, but not always. I also came to the realization that it is the small things that count in life, not the big things. I guess I am trying to say we live in a materialistic world, and people have to [lose] things before they realize how important they really are. The

misuses of the land, your mother's reaction with your father's obsession with farming, and how you became stuck in the middle of everything. It really was quite sad.

The personal history underlying Wendy's interpretation of "Irrigation" became clearer in Assignment #2 as she worked to describe a significant place or "scene" from her memory. Her paper, "Radio Waves," focused not on a traditional locus of habitation—what I guess we expect when we assign descriptions of the familiar—but on a *network*, a system of interstices between places. For Wendy, it was the interstices, not points they connected, that were most memorable.

I chose radio waves for my title [she explained to Carol], and focused my essay around my parents being divorced since I was about six years old. I call it "Radio Waves" because the trips made in my dad's Volkswagen Beetles were memorable times from my childhood, and the music I heard along the way still remains clear in my mind. As a matter of fact, they are some of the few memories I have of my childhood. I discussed the feelings I felt in the Beetle, and the transmission of the music and myself from point A to point B. The hour and a half transmission was that made between my parents' houses on Interstate 29 in Missouri. The Beetle hosted a place for my father, brother, and I to make a relationship that would be made and broken throughout my childhood, and now into my adulthood.

As it is for many of us and for many more of our students, experience becomes increasing "ungrounded." There is a greater and growing sense of participation in networks like the interstate, the Internet, and the media of popular entertainment. It is, in a word, postmodern. For Wendy, as for many of us, the networks (the radio waves) represent *both* connectedness or togetherness *and* separation, isolation, loss. As a reader of Wendy's emerging essay, I learned how much—and how little—culture studies and postmodern theories of discourse explain one person's experience. And it is perhaps not too much to claim that Wendy learned a lot about herself by "theorizing" (contextualizing) her experience.

A more traditional response to the "Irrigation" assignments—one with a distinctly urban flavor—was Malik's. While Wendy distrusted "materialism," as she called it, as corrosive of family and community, Malik's interpretation of Carol's essay stressed the positive side of "irrigation"—especially the opportunities that abundance offered to *escape* social dysfunction and disorientation—which he called "moving up the ladder of success."

What had been the decisive event in Wendy's interpretation, the divorce,

Malik ignored as a kind of “opportunity cost.” For him, Carol’s narrative had a happy ending.

Also different from Wendy’s interpretation was Malik’s specificity of place. He drew a map of the exact “crossroads” (the precise geographical intersection in West Philadelphia) from which he drew the vehicle or literal referent of his metaphor. Until he was eight, Malik’s family lived on Whitby Avenue, north of Cobb’s Creek Parkway,

a run-down part of the city. The streets were filthy, the walls written on, and there were dealers and hustlers everywhere.

The southern part of Whitby Avenue was the suburb. Once you cross Cobb’s Creek Parkway, you travel through a small set of woods and you would be in paradise. This was the same street I lived on . . . about a ten minute drive down the road. . . . The houses were nice, the streets were clean, and everyone had a lawn and a swimming pool.

The tenor of Malik’s metaphor, the figurative “Crossroads” of his title, was a reversal in fortune between his cousin’s family and his own. His cousin’s family, who had lived in the relative paradise of Cobb’s Creek Parkway, foundered on the urban perils of drugs and prison. They had “to move into a cheap apartment complex for low-income families . . . in the neighborhood that I was accustomed to.” Meanwhile, his father’s promotion allowed Malik’s family to move up—to cross the intersection—into the suburban “paradise” that his cousin’s family had just had to abandon.

Malik did not hesitate to call his “Crossroads” essay a “rags to riches’ story” and compare it to Carol’s “escape” from the rural nowhere of the West Texas prairie. His narrative valued, much more than Wendy’s, Carol’s achievement if not of riches, then of professional success. Malik’s life on Whitby Avenue north of Cobb’s Creek Parkway was all there was “for a lot of people I knew,” he wrote, “but I always wanted more.” His essay realizes his personal commitments to upward mobility, achievement, and the material indicators of social status as a measure of escape from the lower rungs of the ladder of success. While Malik’s “success ethic” is probably as much a postmodern cultural formation as Wendy’s “Radio Waves,” I would speculate that the residual bonds of African American culture—admittedly and obviously strained as “Crossroads” attests—offer some protection from the more disorienting (“dizzying”) effects of social disruption and anomie that afflict many of us from the dominant white “mainstream.”

Malik’s and Wendy’s essays are the two pieces of support I intend to offer for my claim that historicizing personal experience can help our students uncover the social dimension of their perceived selves (see my “Dialectics of

the Self” for an extended argument that this is an important objective of a liberal education). It remains now for Carol to explain what we both perceive (I only after extended conversation with her) as an inherent problem with the “Irrigation” assignment: it imagines, quite naively, that, as Gary Tate once put it in jest, “students might write their way out of ignorance.”

Carol: Evaluating the “Environment and Identity” Essays

When I replied to Al’s students’ letters (describing their own evolving attempts to follow the model of “Irrigation”), I told them that my essay had not resulted from any assignment, that it had come instead from my own sense of guilt and wonder at my present incarnation as a college professor. I was raised to be a farmwife: I learned to cook for the hungry, to can peaches so that they retain their fresh color, to grow tomatoes and corn and okra, and to keep myself busy at all times. But by age eighteen, I considered the farm life to be about as fulfilling as a career at the county dump. I ran from the dust, the hailstorms, the literal and physical flatness, sought a life with trees, maybe even mountains, and longed for a time when a rain just meant a rain and not the make or break point in the year’s profits.

But once I got what I wanted, I looked around me and saw that I was very different from my colleagues who had grown up in cities, among educated people, and whose speech and mannerisms fit their professional status perfectly. I have a thick, West Texas accent, a “howdy, ya’ll” friendliness that doesn’t quite suit the intellectual persona. I was even advised by someone interviewing me for a position that I ought to consult a speech therapist. Pretty soon, the dissonance I felt made me uneasy, like I was balancing on the top rail of a fence, with the farm and the farmwife on one side and the university and the professor on the other. The person sitting on that fence had become a stranger. So I began to write, with no intention of crafting any controlling metaphor, or as Al says in his assignment, “a concept that expresses not only the hydraulic technology of watering fields but also the changing social relationships that have shaped—in a way ‘irrigated’ her imagination, her view of herself and of the world she has come to inhabit.” He’s right about what eventually grew out of this fence-sitting, but the call to write was simply a raw despondency. And it was a call, not an assignment.

So, unlike me, Al’s students were nudged toward that fence by something extrinsic to their life experience. Some of them, like Josh, have no fence to sit on. They are quite prepared to tackle such an assignment as an intellectual exercise; they are already polished intellectuals who seem to suffer from no conflict between their home culture and the university. Josh, whose fa-

ther is a doctor, grew up in a lovely valley “between two farms adjacent to the Brandywine river in the township of East Fallowfield.” His childhood was “void of the pressure and insecurities we develop later in life.” Josh offers me a sophisticated interpretation of my essay:

Your metaphor, irrigation, led me to believe that your essay was not only about your childhood, but was also about reliance and change. Reliance on irrigation provided a material and imaginative existence. Change was simply the realization that irrigation shaped the landscape and the people on the land from one existence to another, and because of change we have impermanence.

But Josh is not sitting on the fence. So while he can intellectualize and interpret, even appropriating Al’s own language—“material existence”—his own “material existence” has led quite naturally to the place where he is now.

On the other hand, there is Amy. I recognize Amy as coming from a background that may eventually collide with—if it hasn’t already—the demands of academia. She reveals, in her interpretation of my essay and in her description of her own essay, a dissonance of which she is probably unconscious. In her interpretation, she struggles with the academy, wrestling with its language, its critical terminology. She tries to discuss the essay using analysis and critical terminology, the way she thinks a good student should:

In the story you wrote, I do not believe it was foreshadowed or dealt with by the mother or father real well. There was drama in that implement that you added What I did appreciate was the lengthy descriptions of the whole process of how the family operated. The comparison of how intense the work was, and how it became fruitful, in addition, was also the time frame which was made reference to. . . . The use of colors . . . and technological terms was a real plus to this piece.

But when she tells me about her essay, she clings defiantly to the values and habits of home, including its speech patterns. She reveals an interpretation of my essay that differs from what she provided in her (assigned) academic voice. Here, she says that my essay explains “that the family did the best they could do no matter what happened.” And she “talks” to me in the language of her home:

In your essay you explain the photo that was taken every year of the brand new truck. I finally got my “brand new” car. We had those times too. When my brother got his first car, he took pictures. And Lord,

we knew the art of labor. We were always taking pride in some aspect of our home. Whether it was washing the car, mowing the lawn, planting flowers, digging post holes, cleaning windows . . . , we worked. And we worked together.

Here, she equates family, hard work, and the reward of material possessions. But she doesn't seem to understand the irony in my essay—that material gain can somehow become a personal loss. But there is a hint that she is beginning to climb the fence when she uses the past tense in the last sentence: “And we worked together.”

Al wanted his students to find a metaphor that would, like mine, explain the tensions between their past and their present, would illustrate “the social and economic determinants of identity.” But many of the students, both those whose college career was a natural progression from an upper-class, suburban childhood and those who entered college as aliens because of their working-class or urban-poor family lives, were unable to do what Al wanted them to do because of that very identity that he hoped they would explore. On the other hand, students with better academic preparation who can conceptualize permanence and change, as did Josh, can be agents of their academic experience. But without the tension of two competing worlds, they aren't experiencing the agony of competing selves. While self-expression can be liberating for these students, their own selfhood has not yet been challenged by a culture that tells them they don't really fit in. Other students, who know very well that they don't fit in, and who struggle to do so, have either run for their lives from a suffocating home culture, never looking back, so they resist looking now. Or they try to play the game of being a good student, as does Amy, while remaining rooted in a worldview that does not prepare them to be Al's good student who can critique material conditions as he contributes to identity. A few students—like Wendy and Malik—managed to do what Al wanted, but many of them, despite his careful teaching and his careful assignment, were just not ready to critique their current self-assured identity or to explore the roots of the conflicts between home and the demands of college life. They either had no fence to sit on because their experience lacked dissonance, or they had a fence and had not yet climbed up. We try to use our assignments to nudge them toward these discoveries, because, after all, that is what we have—assignments. We look through their papers for those nuggets, those sentences thrown off like old clothes that say more than the writer intended. We look for movement, if only the slightest ripple, on the calm surface of their attempts at academic writing. In the end, our faith is in them, in their ability to discover, and in writing as a route to those discoveries.

Carol and Al: Irrigation and the Cultivation of the Self

Paul Kameen's recent review essay, "Re-covering Self in Composition," notes in the four books it considers a "general unease with the extent to which those keystone terms of expressivist approaches to teaching writing [*self, voice, experience, the personal*] have been exiled from our disciplinary discussions for too long" in favor of social-constructionist, "audience-based conceptions of composing . . . and poststructuralist critical theory" (101). While we are in sympathy with most of these "neoexpressivists" (Donna Qualley and Kathleen Blake Yancey, in particular), we don't believe it desirable—or possible, for that matter—to return to the golden age of yesteryear, to a prelapsarian innocence before there was "theory." We have tried here to make a persuasive case for the advantages of assimilating cultural/critical theory, appropriating it for our pedagogy, thus making its insights available to our students in a form they can use to accomplish the traditional self-reflective, self-revelatory purposes of a liberal arts education. We have applied a theory of human consciousness that generally asks us to question the very idea of "knowing thyself" as a consciousness separate from the prescriptions of class, gender, and race consciousness. We have applied a general theoretical perspective that questions the idea of the intending subject, and we have done so in order to engage our students in conscious acts of self-revelation and intentionality.

But what was the outcome of that engagement? Some students could consciously employ a metaphor to explain their past life as it contributed to their identity. Some students unconsciously revealed a cultural identity that problematizes self-revelation in an academic setting. Some students' attempts at what they think is dutiful writing for an English teacher reveal a cultural dissonance they were not yet prepared to acknowledge or explore. Some students exhibit an uncanny ability to think in just the way we hoped, who came to us already prepared to fulfill the demands of any assignment given by an English professor. Did all three groups of students recognize the cultural dimensions of their identity as Al had hoped? Perhaps. Did any of these students come to see composing as an intentional act, as a way to "articulate a self out of the undifferentiated flux of remembered experience," as we put it at the beginning of this essay? Perhaps. Perhaps not.

Still, teaching writing is an act of faith. Our writing assignments, though emerging from our own intentions, are the rituals through which we hope to engage students as agents in the academy and in their lives. Our assignments stand in for the impulse to explore the roots of identity and self, but in standing in for organic impulse, assignments may lead students—we hope—to the impulse, to the need to write.

[Alan France died September 19, 2001. Al's colleagues are indebted to him for his careful yet passionate scholarship on the politics of writing and teaching and on the centrality of composition in the liberal arts, his students for his tireless efforts to teach them to write and thus to become agents rather than subjects in the grand battle with culture for personal identity. We will all miss his warmth, generosity, humor, and loyalty, and we are all better people for having known him. —C. R.]

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