Personal Effects

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In his introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay*, a nearly eight hundred page anthology from the classical to the contemporary era, Phillip Lopate writes, “The personal essay is the reverse of that Chinese set of boxes that you keep opening, only to find a smaller one within. Here you start with the small . . . and suddenly find a slightly larger container, insinuated by the essay’s successful articulation and the writer’s self-knowledge” (xxviii). This capacity of the personal essay to open itself up, the way it relies on an implied induction to be realized in the mind of the reader, makes it a versatile genre that can embrace many modes of discourse and can communicate a social significance that extends deeper than the folds and crevices of one human navel.

I want to affirm the value of personal narrative, of writing about the self in the context of family or community, in a climate in which it has come under sharp criticism by social constructionists and Marxists. The tendency to view essays about the self as “inconsequential,” to borrow a word from Susan Miller, outside the classroom overlooks the fact that, for example, the family system is a site both of individual development and political consciousness. It is often the place where individuals experience abuse and oppression. Familial mistreatment may establish a tolerance for and lack of questioning of racial, class, or gender oppression outside the family. Those who want to frame their composition classes with a cultural studies approach but who diminish the importance of family-based narratives are overlooking the connection to the very cultural studies they imbue with such significance. Students usually feel both welcome and important when we invite them to write about life experiences (ones they feel comfortable making public). By either excluding or quickly jumping over these types of essays, I think that some compositionists fail to see how the family might function as one of the many capillaries through which power and powerlessness circulate. Or, as Bonnie Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater put it, “To understand someone’s culture, we often need to understand the person’s family, too. Through the individual we come to understand the culture, and through the culture we come to understand the individual” (216). The Chinese boxes open either way.

Disrespect for people of color and for people of different religions was something I learned from my mother, long before I went to school, watched television,
or read the newspaper. By the same token, I learned about gender roles by watching my father go to his retail business seven days a week and my mother work in the home even after there was almost no work left to do there. Adrienne Rich tells us, “[My father] demanded absolute loyalty, absolute submission to his will. In my separation from him . . . I was learning in concrete ways a great deal about patriarchy, in particular, how the ‘special’ woman, the favored daughter, is controlled and rewarded” (650). Ideology is wrapped up in the family system and, in many cases, these systems are impacted by a variety of unhealthy behaviors including substance abuse. Those who attempt to diminish the importance of family-based stories or sever these stories from the political beliefs of their students miss out on their pathos and intellectual energy and fail to help these students make important connections between their personal lives and the society at large.

Social constructionists who do make use of autobiographical writing may do so in a way that seriously constricts its expression. Categorizing the personal essay as “sentimental realism,” David Bartholomae called the genre “corrupt” in 1995 (71). Apparently attempting to repair it, in the fifth edition of Ways of Reading (1999), Bartholomae and co-editor Anthony Petrosky continue to include autobiographical writing assignments. However, the assignments in “Autobiographical Explorations” are not spontaneously written narratives which might be guided by the false purposes of “display or self-promotion, or to further (rather than question) an argument . . .” (802). Unless student writers follow the editors’ assignment guidelines, they are at risk of “producing each week only more of the same, the same story written in the same style” (803). Instead, in the book’s introduction Bartholomae and Petrosky direct the student “to imagine [his] own familiar settings through the images, metaphors, and ideas of others” (4) and this directive is later mystified as free topic choice. The clause “you can write about anything you want” (804) is qualified by the parenthetical statement “(but you would be wise to stay away from childhood experiences and to stick with more adult experiences)” (emphasis mine, 804). The ruling out of childhood experiences as topics is not explained; the student whose mind did drift there might feel ashamed, as s/he has been judged as not “wise.” Neither do Bartholomae and Petrosky see any need to explain the ban. Using a pedagogy that is at once classical in its imitative purpose, and controlling in its injunction to avoid childhood occurrences, the editors seek to shape the representation of experience with models they feel are appropriate. “[Y]our job in this assignment is to look at your experience in [Richard] Rodriguez’s terms, which means thinking the way he does, noticing what he would notice . . . seeing through his point of view . . .” (805). Why can’t students frame whatever experiences they select in the way they choose, and then write a revision framing it from Rodriguez’s perspective?
The purpose of this essay is to critique the misrepresentations of pedagogies that affirm the teaching of personal narrative, misrepresentations that are based largely on published writing as opposed to classroom observation. The case against “expressivist” pedagogy derives from written discourse outside the classroom, in texts such as Peter Elbow’s *Writing without Teachers* and William Coles and James Vopat’s *What Makes Writing Good*. As Thomas Newkirk writes, social constructionists’ objections “proceed in an empirical vacuum” (89). Through excerpts from Kathleen Cassity’s unpublished ethnographic study of Peter Elbow, who is largely regarded as one of the founders of “expressivist” pedagogy, I will complicate the assumptions of what can transpire in a classroom identified with this pedagogy.

In the last ten years, social constructionists like Lester Faigley and marxist James Berlin have launched a campaign against what was once seen as a progressive movement in education. Social constructionists, according to Patricia Sullivan, “regard knowledge as a function of language, as a product of consensus achieved through communal discourse, and [the theory] locates the ‘real’ in a web of social interactions and symbolic transactions” (“Social” 950). In *Fragments of Rationality, Rhetoric and Reality*, and *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*, Lester Faigley and James Berlin construct an image of those they have come to label “expressivists.” As Thomas O’Donnell puts it, these constructs “become unrecognizable (to me at least) as anything expressivist teachers are actually invested in” (425). For example, it is as if “expressivists” are so naïve as to believe that the authors of personal narratives are unquestionably writing in *propria persona*. Somehow we are so passionate in our beliefs that, like the Maoris in the film *The Piano*, we confuse drama with real life and jump on stage to prevent a villainous murder.

I will examine the way Faigley and Berlin discuss “expressivism” in their own texts. This critique will take us through major issues in composition theory today: coherence of the self, “authentic voice,” the social significance or insignificance of writing about the self vis-à-vis the family or community, and whether the purpose of peer groups is to reinforce “the private vision” of the individual writer or to construct meaning and purpose in community.

**WHAT IS AN “EXPRESSIVIST”?**

While I have chosen to use the word “expressivist,” I might have easily chosen any number of other words. In a review of three teacher texts, Mariolina Salvatori writes,

> [T]he practices of the personal go by many different names, often used as if they were interchangeable: personal criticism, autobiographical criticism, narrative criticism, personal narrative, self-writing, life-writing, auto-graphy (Perrault), confessional
criticism (Veeser), rhapsodic criticism (Lentricchia). Although such a varied nomenclature may be taken to indicate the richness of the genre as a “category in process” (Perrault), or its need and right to self-definition, I suggest it might also be taken as a sign of a certain anxiety about its functions and possibilities” (567).

I concur with Salvatori: the sheer circulation of so many synonyms or near synonyms may be indicative of anxiety about the personal in the academy. On the other hand, the multiple names may reflect the versatility of the form itself.

Let me offer a working definition of “expressivist” pedagogy. Influenced by James Britton’s notion of expressive discourse, “expressivist” pedagogy is a theoretical bent that affirms the use of personal narrative without necessarily saddling it with the kind of constraints indicated above in *Ways of Reading*. Personal narrative takes the writer’s own life as its focus. It involves the use of a narratorial “I” which seems to be the actual voice of the person who writes. Sometimes the narrator may appear to isolate individual consciousness and sometimes s/he may represent the self in one or more social contexts, such as the family. The narrator may or may not explicitly link the particular situation with those experienced by others. Additionally, the pedagogy many include many forms of academic discourse, including a range of first-person writing. For example, Lad Tobin, Director of Freshman Writing at Boston College, is identified with “expressivism.” He reports that by the winter of 1997 he had studied about 650 syllabi for courses in which nearly 10,000 students have been enrolled. Only 25% of the assigned writing in his program falls into the genre of personal narrative. The rest of the assignments would be considered cultural criticism, argument on public issues, and response to texts. Yet he qualifies his comments by reminding me of the kind of hybrid papers he sees in the freshman writing program at Boston College where elements of personal narrative mix with exposition or argument in the same paper.

**FAIGLEY: THE SELF IN DISCOURSE**

In 1992 the University of Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture published Lester Faigley’s *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition*. In 1994 it received the Outstanding Book Award from CCCC for making an outstanding contribution to composition and communication studies. It contains such an impressive body of knowledge about the history of composition, post-modern thought, linguistics, and computer assisted instruction that, had I been a member of the Outstanding Book Award Committee along with Alice Gilliam, Cheryl Glenn, Betty L. Hart, Frank Littler, and Charles I. Schuster, I might have concurred with the decision. And I might have done so despite deep reservations about the chapter entitled “Ideologies of the Self in the Writing Classroom.”
In this chapter, Faigley uses a postmodern orientation to deconstruct the merits of the personal essay in the writing classroom. According to Faigley, this genre proclaims “the existence of the rational, coherent self and the ability of the self to have privileged insight into its own processes,” (111) both of which are questioned by postmodern theory. “Expressivist” writing is guilty of what Catherine Belsey calls expressive realism, a naïve assumption that language is somehow ahistorical and apolitical, that it provides a transparent window into the empirical world (112).

Faigley is also troubled that the field of composition shows signs of being biased toward personal narrative. Despite a broad range of contributing faculty to William Coles’ and James Vopat’s *What Makes Writing Good* (1985), a collection of what these professors felt to be excellent responses to their assignments, the bulk of the writing samples are personal experience pieces. “Not one essay resembles the frequently assigned ‘research paper,’” according to Faigley (120). Moreover, when writing teachers use “authentic voice” as an assessment criterion, they assume the reader can “distinguish the true self” (122). Faigley argues that because of the unconscious, we cannot know if something is being repressed and, therefore, we cannot assess the sincerity of the writer (127). Additionally, the apparent freedom students are given to choose autobiographical topics in writing classrooms conceals “the fact that these same students will be judged by teachers’ unstated assumptions about subjectivity and that every act of writing they perform occurs within complex relations of power” (128). In short, the contributors to *What Makes Writing Good* do not explore the institutional context of personal narratives “and how that setting is implicated in the production of ‘honest’ and ‘truthful’ writing” (129). They naively assume that the rhetorical situation is neutral and that the pressure of representing oneself to an authority figure has no impact on the content of these essays.

In spite of this avalanche of arguments, it is to Faigley’s credit that he sees some value in personal experience essays. He tells us, “The many varieties of autobiographical writing have provided sites for resistance to dominant discourses....” (129). However, I am surprised that, given his support for cultural studies, Faigley does not elaborate on the phrase “resistance to dominant cultures” or provide any examples of such writing. Personal narrative has been historically associated in this country with African Americans and with women who are writing against oppression and producing what Foucault has called subjugated knowledge. Additionally, essays about what Faigley calls “difficult family situations” can also resist dominant discourses (121). In fact, I read narratives about childhood abuse as acts of resistance against an oppressive and unhealthy power structure within the culture of the family, one that may mimic
capitalist relations of power and authority. In critiquing the limitations of Freud’s discussion of his “hysterical” patient Dora who was distressed by her father’s affair with her governess, Catherine Clèment describes his “ideological misunderstanding” in *The Newly Born Woman*. “The family does not exist in isolation, rather it supports and reflects the class struggle running through it” (152). In the same text, Helene Cixous describes Dora as “the one who resists the system . . . It is the nuclear example of women’s power to protest” (154). Faigley’s limited reference to this type of writing is puzzling.

In my critique of Faigley’s chapter, I want to comment on his preference for a certain type of research essay as well as his assumptions about a unified self and “authentic voice” in “expressivist” pedagogy. In the process I will point out gender bias in Faigley’s lack of intellectual respect for a particular student essay.

Faigley is disappointed in the overrepresentation of personal narrative in the selections in *What Makes Writing Good*. He writes,

> [T]he range of contributors is not matched by a similar range of student writing. By my count, at least thirty of the examples in the collection are personal experience essays—twenty of them autobiographical narratives—and several of the remaining eighteen include writing about the writer. Only four examples are in the genre of professional writing (two letters and two reports). Four examples briefly discuss works of literature, but there is no literary analysis paper of the kind described in rhetoric texts. Only two essays present sustained analyses of other texts . . . Not one essay resembles the frequently assigned “research paper.” (120)

Faigley has a clear vision of what he refers to as “the frequently assigned ‘research paper.’” Since there are no essays that resemble it, but there are many that feature or at least contain “writing about the writer,” it follows that Faigley does not consider that the personal figures in “the frequently assigned ‘research paper.’” Perhaps he is correct. If he is, then Jeanette Harris may be wise to promote hybrid texts that combine expository prose with the writer’s experience in order to avoid “the anonymous sterility that frequently characterizes discourse that is exclusively based on information” (187). She is not alone.

In the eighteenth century, George Campbell taught us that the audience requires some kind of gratification or it will cease to pay attention. “[N]othing tends more effectively to prevent this consequence, and keep our attention alive and vigorous, than the pathetic, which consists chiefly in exhibitions of personal misery” (113). In the nineteenth century rhetorician Alexander Bain admired elements of poetry in historical writing. He writes, “There is always a powerful attraction in human personality—man’s interest in man” (176). He praises Plato for “reliev[ing] the severity of philosophical discussion with
touches of general human interest. Plato adopted the form of the Dialogue to introduce the action and re-action of personalities... The debate is interrupted by dramatic displays of personal feeling” (202).

In the last decade many scholars have advocated creative nonfiction that blends first person singular narrative in with more traditional exposition. For example, Mathew Wilson describes a required course he taught in research writing. “The texts were interesting and ‘relevant’, the students earnest, the class discussions lively, and the papers uniformly dull” (242). Not only were the papers dull, but they were imbued with the positivist notion that we can ascertain objective truth. In these papers there is a denial of ambivalence and no discussion of the act of writing itself. “Most college research writing involves ‘carting dead bones from one graveyard to another’” (247). Thus, if it is the case that what Faigley calls the “frequently assigned ‘research paper’” is author evacuated expository prose, we are encouraging the production of very modernist texts that assume the possibility of objective truth. I will return to this point.

Why is Faigley so intellectually unhappy with personal narratives? His thinking rests on one of the now almost foundational “truths” of postmodern thought: there is no such thing as a rational, coherent and unified self, the persona that is always already in personal narrative, according to its critics. Personal essays that exhibit rational, coherent, and unified selves constitute a naïve ignorance of both the complex human consciousness and the social context of the writer and his or her persona.

There seems to be a double standard in his analysis. In his book *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*, Thomas Newkirk comments on a contradiction or what he calls “a strange schizophrenia” regarding narrative in English departments. “On the one hand, [English Departments] are built upon the narrative—it should come as no news that students become English majors to get academic credit for reading narrative fiction. Yet in writing classes there is a sense that narratives are relatively easy to write and academically suspect” (20).

Moreover, while devaluing a rational, coherent, and unified self he sees in student texts selected as examples of good writing by many of his colleagues, Faigley apparently values such a persona in academic writing. More specifically, nowhere in his book, *Fragments of Rationality*, does the narrator, Lester Faigley, actually present a fragmented consciousness. The argument and point of view are consistent and clear throughout. Faigley celebrates the postmodern notion of the self in his title yet the celebration is not actualized in his writing. Why is it permissible to present oneself as rational and coherent in one mode of discourse but not another? Why can Faigley present a rational, unified coherent persona in an expository book on composition, but students who do so in personal narratives and professors who affirm these essays are missing the latest boat in terms
of theory? Eleanor Kutz, who offers ethnography as an alternative to the traditional research paper we assign our students, describes the voice in one student’s ethnography. “This is not a distanced academic voice, and it does not pretend to an objectivity that would always remain unrealized” (355). There is such a presumption of objectivity in *Fragments of Rationality*.

I wonder, too, about the representation of “expressivist” pedagogy as an open invitation to produce testimonies of coherent selves. Times may have changed the positive regard for a unified persona during the seven year lapse between the publication of *What Makes Writing Good* and *Fragments of Rationality*, but perhaps not. What I can say is that I was involved in two English departments that social constructionists would not hesitate to call “expressivist.” I was a graduate student at the University of New Hampshire for over a year and a lecturer at Boston College for six years. During my employment at Boston College, I taught seven sections of the Freshman Writing Seminar and two sections of Prose Writing. I have been to many staff meetings where we discussed sample student papers. One problem we have attended to is the personal narrative that reveals some rather disturbing circumstances regarding a family member but closes with an often pat, unsubstantiated conclusion that undermines the very testimony of the narrator. It is not atypical to read such a paper with an ending, “But I know my father loves me” or “I love my brother in spite of it all.” The majority of composition faculty I have known at these two “expressivist” departments admire ambivalence and unresolved conflict in the character of the narrator in personal essays.

What many of us may share with the contributors to the Coles and Vopat collection is an acknowledgment of honest voice, one that hints at integrity (Faigley 121). However, respect for a voice that has integrity does not imply belief in “the true self,” but instead demonstrates the persuasiveness that accrues to a narrator who achieves ethos. It is a staple of Aristotelian rhetoric to have the speaker convey ethos, i.e. to appear credible, moral, honest. When an evaluator labels a text as “honest,” “authentic” or written with “integrity,” in my opinion it is a strong indication that the narrator has convinced the audience of her reading of a situation. She has persuaded. In fact, I would argue that the logos of expressive discourse, of personal narrative, is its ethos. As Aristotle puts it, “the speaker’s character may be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses” (emphasis mine, 1329). I read Aristotle as saying that the audience is persuaded because of the credibility of the writer. When Faigley dismisses the notion of “authentic voice” as a belief that the author is writing in propria persona, he is confounding an alleged naivete of the “expressivist” reader with the ethos of the writer.

Yet how can we determine the credibility of the author when we have author-evacuated prose, the kind of prose that is currently the standard of
credibility in academia? If we take into consideration Faigley’s approval of Greg Shaefer’s essay, “Thucydides: The Historian as Creative Artist,” along with his disappointment with personal experience essays, we can conclude that he prefers author-evacuated prose. Faigley compares Shaefer’s well-written expository piece with Norma Bennett’s personal narrative about her family. Faigley asks his audience, “[W]hy is writing about potentially embarrassing and painful aspects of one’s life considered more honest than, say, the efforts of Joseph Williams’s student, Greg Shaefer, who tries to figure out what Thucydides was up to in writing about the Peloponnesian War?” (121).

Shaefer has been directed to “compare and contrast the first two speeches in Thucydides’ History” (Coles and Vopat 305) and that is precisely what he does. His essay is lucid and well argued, but ventures no opinions. Schaefer writes, “The Corinthian argument failed because for an imperial power like Athens, justice is not a very strong controlling force,” (309) but we do not know where he stands in either the dispute brought before the Athenians or in regard to Thucydides’ representation of speeches he never heard.

Norma Bennett, on the other hand, does take a risk. She chooses to write an essay which exposes her family to the public eye in response to an assignment by Erika Lindemann that does not ask for any kind of exposure. “The assignment asks you to write an essay that is primarily descriptive but that makes its point by comparison and contrast.” When I read Faigley’s summary of Bennett’s essay before reading the essay itself, I imagined the piece to be maudlin and self-pitying, and I imagined that the narrator was so upfront with her emotional pain that I would feel embarrassed reading it. I felt contemptuous toward her mother and repulsed by her father from his reconstruction. After reading the essay itself, I no longer feel any of these things. Here is Faigley’s summary:

Norma Bennett’s paper is a narrative of a summer vacation spent with her two divorced parents who now go to different resorts. Her mothers [sic] wears her PTL (“Praise the Lord”) jacket (in the days before Jim and Tammy Bakker’s fall) and spends much of her day sleeping or sobbing. Her potbellied father also spends much of the day sleeping—passed out drunk on the beach with a twenty-five-year-old woman in a white string bikini while Norma babysits for the woman’s young child. I have a great deal of sympathy for students like Norma Bennett, who must cope with difficult family situations as well as the pressures of college.... (121)

After reading Faigley’s representation of the Bennett essay, I have negative feelings toward her mother who is a member of the religious right and who sleeps and sobs most of the day. Yet my experience of this woman is different when I read Bennett’s own account. While her mother’s religious affiliation
does emerge in the text, the description does not play on any anti-fundamentalist biases of the reader. Norma’s mother rises before dawn each morning to walk to the beach and collect shells. “My mom . . . praises God for his magnificent creation, and photographs her favorite sanctuary” (Coles and Vopat 159), activities that feel decidedly ecumenical to me. Moreover, there is no indication that, as Faigley puts it, “she spends much of the day sleeping or sobbing.” Norma tells us only that when her mother returns from the beach, “her eyes are watery, her cheeks are red, and her nose is runny. I’m not sure if it’s because of the cold wind outside or if she’s crying about my dad again or if she’s been overwhelmed by the presence of the Lord. Maybe it’s all three.” (159). Faigley condenses Norma’s speculation to one word, sobbing, thereby reducing the representation of the mother from a spiritually active person who is experiencing an appropriate grief reaction, to an emotional mess. In doing so, he short-circuits the kind of compassion we feel for her after reading Norma’s account. Nor do we have any evidence that she spends much of the day sleeping. Norma writes, “I give her a hug and grumble about getting up. She laughs and teases me about being lazy. My mom won’t go out on the beach in the middle of the day. She goes back to bed while I go lie with my friends. Late every afternoon, just before dinner, we go out on the beach together, carrying sand buckets and shovels. Like a couple of kids, we sink down in the sand and start building a castle” (159). Because Norma’s mother goes back to bed in the morning and does not go out on the beach in the middle of the day, Faigley assumes she is the “lazy” one. In the absence of any account of her activities, probably something that Norma herself is not privy to, he concludes that she sleeps away the day.

I am troubled by Faigley’s representation of this woman. It leads me to identify against myself as a woman. Drawing on a theory of Judith Fetterley, Patrocinio Schweickart puts it this way: “Androcentric literature . . . does not allow the woman to seek refuge in her difference. Instead, it draws her into a process that she uses against herself” (42). After reading Norma’s essay, I realize I had been drawn into collusion with Faigley, that I had adopted a contempt for Norma’s mother and other women who are working through losses, a contempt that borders on misogyny.

Faigley reads Norma as writing about “potentially embarrassing and painful aspects of [her] life” (159) but I do not feel her embarrassment, I do not think she burdens the reader with her pain, and I do not think she asks for our sympathy. She treats both of her parents with respect, something that may be hard to do in relation to a father who does appear to “spend much of the day sleeping—passed out drunk on the beach with a twenty-five-year-old woman in a white string bikini” (Faigley 121). Yet Norma does not display this kind of contempt for her father either. She concludes her essay:
My Dad yells and says for me to look after David [his girlfriend’s son]; they’ll be back late. Tears come to my eyes. Dad has lost his sobriety, his family, and his God. I wonder how long it will be before his foundation is washed away, and his castle is level with the sand.

I love my mom and my dad both. My dad has many friends and many good times, but he is too miserable to enjoy them. My mom is a loner. She has quiet times and peace of mind. As I look at my own life, I search for a castle—up high, away from the shoreline—far away from the destruction of the tide. (emphasis mine, Coles and Vopat, 160)

I feel the narrator’s pain here but I do not feel her reaching out for pity from the audience. There is maturity and an ethos evident as she stands apart from her parents wanting none of the “destruction of the tide” in her life. She writes that her father has “lost his sobriety.” Faigley and other readers may be unaware that she is using what ethnographers call “insider language” from Alcoholics Anonymous, bringing not embarrassment to the story but a view of her father as a man with a disease who has gone into relapse. I believe she maintains her father’s anonymity in print by not being more specific. What “lost his sobriety” means in this context is that he was abstinent from alcohol for a period of time in AA, but that he lost that abstinence and the peace of mind that can come from working the program’s suggested steps. I feel only her sadness at this relapse.

Perhaps it is Faigley who feels embarrassed by the story. The absence of any sort of self-reflexivity in this particular chapter further weakens his arguments against autobiographical writing. Edward Said advises theorists to declare their personal investment in critical projects. Influenced by Antonio Gramsci, he suggests that we develop a consciousness of who we are as products of “the historical process to date.” These processes have left many marks but no inventory. “Therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory” (qtd. in Said 25). I wish Faigley had done so.

THE BERLIN WALL: IS WRITING A PRIVATE VISION?

Many of us who teach writing have been influenced by a taxonomy of the field of composition established by James Berlin. Berlin shapes a history of what he calls expressionism beginning in the early part of the twentieth century but with historical roots in romanticism and further back in Plato. “The ideal of liberal culture indirectly encouraged the development of expressionistic rhetoric through its philosophic idealism and its emphasis on the cultivation of the self, both derived from its ties with Brahminical romanticism” (Rhetoric and Reality 73). Berlin’s reasoning is slippery here. By declaring an “indirect” link between “expressionistic rhetoric” and “the ideal of liberal culture” with its
“philosophic idealism and its emphasis on the cultivation of self,” two characteristics derived from romanticism, Berlin makes these characteristics of liberal culture appear to be attached to expressionistic rhetoric. The indefinite pronoun “its” is used three times in the sentence further blurring liberal culture/romanticism and expressionistic rhetoric.

What Berlin calls expressionism is almost always associated with notions of encouraging the student to develop his or her own “unique self” in writing, writing that avoids and even disdains connection with the material world. This disdain for the external world is nowhere documented by Berlin but is apparently to be taken on the good faith of the implied reader who is willing to accept the connection to Plato. Berlin refines his view over the course of four frequently cited articles or books, sometimes referring to his earlier publications as the only evidence for arguments in later works. These are “Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories” (1982), Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900–1985 (1987), “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class” (1988), and Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures published posthumously in 1996. Publishing his view over a fourteen-year period, Berlin had plenty of time to see if his conclusions were being practiced in classrooms. If he had, he might have seen a range of pedagogies, some more overtly sociopolitical than others depending on the comfort level and belief system of the teacher. As it is, Berlin limits himself within the methodology of his own choosing.

Furthermore, Berlin seems to either ignore or misunderstand the importance of group interaction in process pedagogy. As Peter Elbow puts it in the introduction to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of his first book, Writing without Teachers,

A highly respected scholar and historian of composition, James Berlin, does write briefly of my epistemology, but it’s hard to believe he looked carefully at what I wrote. For he says that I am a Platonist who believes that knowledge is totally private, whereas I make it clear that both the teacherless class and the epistemology of the believing game can only function as group processes, and that their validity derives only from people entering into each others’ diverse and conflicting experiences. I argue specifically that the meaning of any spoken or written discourse is entirely dependent on groups and communities (see p. 156 for what I wrote). The teacherless class and the believing game are completely undermined if one tries to function solo. (Emphasis mine, xxvi–xxvii.)

Elbow’s notion of meaning making discourse communities does not sound so different from what Berlin calls epistemic rhetoric. In Rhetoric and Reality
(1987) Berlin tells us, “The epistemic position implies that knowledge is not discovered by reason alone, that cognitive and affective processes are not separate, that intersubjectivity is a condition of all knowledge, and that the contact of minds affects all knowledge” (165). Thus, for both Elbow and Berlin, meaning making is a social process.

In “Contemporary Composition” (1982) Berlin lays out a taxonomy that basically remains the same for him in later publications, although he does revise the names. Berlin expounds on the Platonic vision, how the “ultimate truth can be discovered by the individual, but cannot be communicated” because it is “beyond the resources of language” (771). Berlin sees the interactive group process in expressionism as similar to dialectic but its purpose is not to construct meaning or knowledge. “The purpose is to get rid of what is untrue to the private vision of the writer, what is, in a word, inauthentic” (772).

In Rhetoric and Reality (1987) Berlin takes a harder line on this type of group process. “For the expressionist, solitary activity is always promising, group activity always dangerous” (emphasis mine, 145). Berlin does make an attempt to undercut this essentialism by allowing for “varieties of expressionistic rhetoric” (145) including a few that approach epistemic. “[I]n this view language does not simply record the private vision, but becomes involved in shaping it” (146) But alas, this group of expressionists also runs amuck “because it denies the place of intersubjective, social processes in shaping reality. Instead, it always describes groups as sources of distortion of the individual’s true vision, and the behavior it recommends in the political and social realms is atomistic, the individual acting alone” (146). Among the expressionists who follow what he calls the “latitudinarian” view are Ken Macrorie, Donald Murray, Walker Gibson, William Coles, Jr., and Peter Elbow (146). Berlin’s conclusions are as inflammatory as they are unsubstantiated.

After closely studying Berlin’s text, I do not find any support that these five men either view group process to be dangerous or recommend acting alone. There are only two references to the expressionists and group processes, or what Berlin calls editorial groups, in the section. He writes, “[T]he purpose of editorial groups is to check for the inauthentic in the writer’s response (Berlin, “Contemporary Response”)” (152). His source for this conclusion lies not in any of the five expressionists he called our attention to, but in his own prior article. I might add that neither does he offer the reader a page citation from this article. The second and final reference to editorial groups is in relation to Elbow or, as he puts it, “Elbow’s camp,” and it concludes the section.

It is not surprising, then, that Elbow’s version of the editorial group was influenced by the methods of group therapy and of the encounter group (121). Finally, at the start of this discussion, I said that Elbow’s approach is not overtly political. In the last
analysis, however, for Elbow as for other expressionists, the personal is the political—the underlying assumption being that enabling individuals to arrive at self-understanding and self-expression will inevitably lead to a better social order. (154-5)

While Berlin does refer back to one thing he said at the beginning of the discussion, that is, Elbow’s work not being overtly political, he does not refer back to his initial inflammatory remarks, “For the expressionist . . . group activity is always dangerous . . . The behavior it recommends in the political and social realms is atomistic, the solitary individual acting alone” (145-6). Berlin has not provided one shred of evidence for these initial assumptions. The notion that the personal is political has become something of a slogan in various theoretical circles, most noticeably some feminist ones. Berlin does not agree with his own definition of what the slogan means, that individual change precedes social change. Moreover, he seems rather obtuse about the workings of “the editorial group” and the process of meaning making that goes on in it. Of course these groups make meaning and they are, in their own right, discourse communities. Even if he is correct and some “in Elbow’s camp” saw their purpose as solely to help the individual clarify and strengthen her writing, that does not mean that they encouraged an atomistic life style. I find the opposite to be true: by sharing one’s work in a safe community where there is both encouragement and constructive, non-shaming critique, there is a breakdown of individual isolation.

Even more importantly, these groups have the potential for creating bonds across racial and class lines. In my ethnography of Boston College, I-Writing: the Politics and Practice of Teaching First-Person Writing, a white teacher develops a relationship with the only student of color in her course that is strong enough to help the student workshop an anti-racist essay and become an active member of the community. In another instance, when one of my students workshoped an essay about his aging grandmother, he and several other students in the class became emotional. Because they were in the same developmental stage, many of the students were facing similar losses, including one student who had just learned the evening before that her grandmother did not have long to live. Berlin advocates “intersubjectivity” (Rhetoric and Reality 165) in the construction of knowledge, but “it is important to remember that intersubjectivities require subjectivities, and vice versa” (Cassity 179).

Berlin reduces the dialectic in expressionist editorial groups to one function: “to enable the writer to understand the manifestation of her identity in language through considering the reactions of others—not, for example, to begin to understand how meaning is shaped by discourse communities” (153). What kind of meaning gets credit for being shaped in discourse communities in the Berlin worldview? He never specifies. When students come together to
help each other write more forceful essays about racism on campus or about the loss of a loved one, isn’t this making meaning within a community? Doesn’t this kind of bonding break down the distrust, cynicism, and competitiveness that accrues in academia, a bonding that could carry over to all kinds of collective support, whether for “overtly political” causes such as organizing to stop the spread of racist graffiti or for overtly personal causes such as supporting one another through loss?

In *Romancing Rhetorics*, Sherrie Gradin takes on the false binary personal/political with her neologism “social-expressivism” and provides a different rendering of the legacy of romanticism than Berlin does. She tells us that “expressivist theory evolves from a tradition [romanticism] that recognizes the economic, social, and political conditions of existence,” but acknowledges in response to Berlin that “the practitioners of expressivism can certainly fail to incorporate this tradition into their pedagogy” (109). There are, as Berlin himself tells us, “varieties of expressionistic rhetoric” (145). Perhaps some classrooms are less overtly political than others depending on the degree to which individual practitioners are comfortable with the potential for heated debate. Individual differences notwithstanding, these do not constitute a concerted and monolithic theory either of avoidance of such issues or infatuation with “the private vision.”

In “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class” (1988) Berlin argues that “the ruling elites in business, industry, and government are those most likely to nod in assent to the ideology inscribed in expressionistic rhetoric” because it reinforces “individualism, private initiative, the confidence for risk-taking, the right to be contentious with authority (especially the state)” (487). Furthermore, Newkirk sees a logical fallacy underlying one of Berlin’s conclusions, namely that expressionism nurtures the capitalistic spirit in its students. He faults Berlin for making similarity appear to be causation. Referring here to *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures* (1996), Newkirk writes,

To paraphrase Berlin, there are attitudes and values fostered in expressionist pedagogies that *resemble* those that a capitalist system seeks to foster in consumers (the self-gratifying enjoyment of “choice”) and in entrepreneurs (private initiative). Because of this similarity, expressivist teaching causes students to enter happily and even successfully into that system.

This argument is so loose that it could easily be used against the cultural studies approach [of Berlin and others]. One could easily imagine how corporations could profit from the critical skills students develop when they “problemitize” seemingly self-evident arguments and positions” (89).

Because two things appear to be alike, it does not follow that one causes the other. Newkirk does not see how Berlin has proven that expressionism fosters
an accommodation to capitalism. I would add that any pedagogy that results in grading students, ranking them in their class, and providing the basis for records that go out to future admissions officers or employers is part of capitalist relations of power and authority. Grading and ranking trigger competition whether you are teaching the canon, grammar, personal narrative, or some form of cultural studies in which students are encouraged to see how representations of the empirical world in the mass media work to maintain a class system (as Berlin suggests in two model courses in *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*.) Most teaching in our system perpetuates divisions and hierarchy.

In *Rhetoric, Poetics, and Cultures*, a book that was published posthumously in 1996, Berlin does not explicitly debunk expressionism, but he does come to a surprising conclusion. There is only one reference to expressionism and it is indirect. The proposed course “Codes and Critiques” is put forward as a foil to an unnamed but behind-the-scenes pedagogy. He uses some coding himself here that the Berlin reader should have no trouble recognizing. “Unlike classrooms that insist that each student look within to discover a unique self, this course argues that only through understanding the workings of culture in shaping consciousness can students ever hope to achieve any degree of singularity” (124). Berlin advocates singularity, a word that means being one of a kind or having a trait marking one as distinct from others. It is surprising that Berlin’s goal is for the individual to see herself as “distinct from others” as it seems to represent the very “private vision” this cultural critic argued against over a fourteen year period.

**IN SITU: THE POLITICAL ELBOW**

Berlin and Faigley have perpetuated a characterization of a certain type of pedagogy that has come to be known, largely through their efforts, as expressionist or “expressivist.” I have found their arguments to be frequently unsubstantiated and misleading. By way of contrast, I want to turn now to the only ethnography, to my knowledge, of the work of Peter Elbow. Reading Kathleen Cassity’s study is a way to get a sense of the culture of Elbow’s section of English 100: Expository Writing, a required course for incoming students; it brings us closer to lived experience than either critical commentary on texts or generalizations about imagined classrooms. The study was conducted at the University of Hawai‘i in Manoa during the spring of 1996, the year Elbow was a Visiting Professor. As an MA student, Cassity had an opportunity to take a course with Elbow and then observed his Expository Writing class as the basis for her MA thesis. He had been looking for someone to give him feedback on a new grading contract he was implementing that semester.

Like myself, Cassity is troubled by the association of “process/expressivist” approaches “with rugged individualism, with naïve and simplistic concepts of
‘self,’ and with epistemological frameworks that shortchange social, cultural and historical contexts” (15). She ultimately finds in Elbow’s teaching something that looks like the radical approach of Henry Giroux, “border pedagogy.” Giroux believes we should give students more opportunity to write about their own personal experiences with and emotional reactions to issues such as race rather than have them only “articulate the meaning of other peoples’ theories” (Giroux 11).

The focus of Cassity’s ethnography is Elbow’s grading contract. In this contract the student could choose what grade s/he wanted based on workload. Many students found the workload necessary to achieve an “A” to be burdensome even after he modified it twice. My interest in her study, however, is in the evidence Cassity provides for her initial statement that the representation of “expressivist” pedagogy as shortchanging social, political and historical registers is false.

Issues of race and ethnicity are prominent. Of the nineteen students in Elbow’s class, Cassity reports that fifteen are Asian, Pacific, or mixed ethnicity and four are Caucasian (9). Six of the fifteen students raised in Hawai‘i indicated that their primary language is Hawaiian Creole English or pidgin (7). In one of many lively group discussions observed by Cassity, the students complain about the perception of Hawaiians by outsiders.5 “People are so stupid, they actually think we live in grass shacks and stuff . . . You tell them you go to the University of Hawai‘i and they’re, like, surprised that people in Hawai‘i even study” (65). Their discussion reminds Cassity of her graduate seminar in colonialism.

The first written assignment began with a freewrite on “any aspect of your group identities” (70). Of note is the fact that the assignment does not encourage students to write about their individual, unique identities. After the freewrite became a homework assignment, it was then to be revised into a more public form. Students would pair up and their collaborative projects were to include library research. Sue, a shy eighteen-year-old Chinese American, read her paper aloud in conference. When asked to write about her “group identities,” Sue selected the topic of racism toward Chinese people.

She discusses the slurs used against those of Chinese descent in Hawai‘i and recites one of the derogatory rhymes she heard other kids chanting when she was little, rhymes feeding into the stereotype that the Chinese are “cheap.” Breaking away from her text, she tells Peter as an aside, “I don’t really believe it, you know.”

“Right,” says Peter. “But it’s sort of like some of the rhymes black kids have had to hear—some of the slur—nowadays it’s outlawed, but you’ve still heard it. It’s still in there.” (70-1).

The discussion here is not about one private experience but the more general experience that people of color face.
The use of Hawaiian Creole English or pidgin surfaces in the class. Cassity does not address the theoretical influences on Elbow here, but from what I can see of his pedagogy, he is in line with suggestions made by both Lisa Delpit and Eileen Oliver. Delpit tells us that “each cultural group should have the right to maintain its own language style.” However, we must tell students that “there is a political power game that is also being played, and if they want to be in on that game there are certain games they too must play” (292). They must learn the dominant register both to understand and to change the power realities (293).

Elbow apparently values both native and the dominant dialects. Cassity demonstrates the pedagogy here through Elbow’s work with Kerry. This student was worried that her primary language is non-standard English. Here are some excerpts of either oral or written dialogue between student and teacher on the subject.

Kerry: I’m afraid my pidgin English will get in my way. You didn’t write anything about pidgin English on your contract.

E: Feel free to write in pidgin.

E: (responding to an essay written in multiple linguistic registers) I like the pidgin section a lot. In my view, it’s important to learn to write in it. As you say, it’s YOUR tongue, your “mother tongue”—and so it’s got the most “juice” in it—and you can put the most of YOU in it. You need to write in standard English; but it’s my belief that your standard English might improve if you let yourself sometimes write in pidgin.

K: (responding in a process letter) I am very pleased that you don’t discriminate against my language.

Cassity tells us that Kerry received an “A” in the course, even though she had said at mid-semester, “I give up.” “The more Elbow not only accepted but encouraged Kerry’s ‘mother-tongue,’ the more she wrote in both Standard English and pidgin” (141). Language is clearly an aspect of group identity for Elbow and his students.

The issues of ethnicity and gender emerge with an apparently defiant young man named Gary. Cassity describes a conference.

Gary interrupts again, launching into another monologue. Peter urges him to talk to his collaborator. “If you want to make these arguments about gender and ethnicity, if you want to say all these don’t affect who you are, I want you nevertheless to take account of the fact that it looks to a lot of people like they do. I want you to take into account the opposite point of view” . . . I wonder if [Peter] feels frustrated as I do. If so, he doesn’t reveal it in either his facial expressions or body language. (74)
I do read frustration in some of Elbow’s written comments as he challenges viewpoints he disagrees with. He writes to Dave and Brad: “When you talk about the rise in wages for women compared to men, you forget to mention one little fact: that women still get paid much less than men for the same work!” (89). To Karen and Gary, he writes, “There’s something quite weird about your paper. Every example of racism that you talk about is an example of thinking or behavior by members of a targeted group, blacks or Hawaiians. Nowhere in your paper do you ever give an example or seem to acknowledge the more pervasive racism of groups with more power . . . as though you think only blacks and Hawaiians are racist. Did you mean to do that?” (89). To Adam and Mark, he notes, “You make a bunch of statements that are kind of illogical—that no one you know is gay. (You better not be so sure.) That everyone you know who is gay is messed up. (I thought you didn’t know anyone.) That once someone is gay you can’t see them the same. (Well how can you trust your perception when you know you go into this gear?)” (90).

In spite of Elbow’s disagreements, he is still able to make positive comments on some aspects of each of these essays whose perspectives clearly trouble him. However, Cassity informs us that to Adam and Mark (who wrote on homosexuality) “the best he can come up with is ‘I’m glad you enjoyed working together—and that you did substantial re-arranging and changing’” (90). From her perspective, he was struggling to find something positive here.

Let us recall that Elbow and other white people were in the minority in this classroom. After reading the first draft of this summary of her work, Cassity, who is herself of mixed ethnicity, responded, “Obviously, if you come cruising in here with a white superiority attitude, you will soon be cruising back out, probably with a black eye. Peter was well liked by his freshman students so I think that says a lot about what kind of attitudes he displayed in class toward differences.”

After having had this privileged peek at a small slice of Elbow’s teaching practice, I can only conclude that race, gender and sexual orientation are fair game for this “expressionist’s” classroom. Not only does Elbow appear not to find the last word in any private vision, as Berlin has repeatedly told us, but he seems to have no inhibition whatsoever about challenging his students’ visions when he disagrees with them.

**Representational Psychotherapy**

Is it possible to change? Can we stop playing Extreme Representation?

When a composition teacher who aligns herself with Bartholomae, even insists that everyone use *Ways of Reading* in her composition program, read an early version of this essay, she asked me to make light of the ways “expressivists” have been represented. I did not then and I have not now.
We live in a world that fibrillates daily with ethnic conflict (and the outbreaks would be even more plentiful if many of us stopped sublimating our xenophobia with sports team fanaticism) and I see a version of this type of destructive Othering in the discipline of composition and rhetoric. (My guilt does not elude me; I, too, sublimate my introjected racism with sports mania and I have broken some kneecaps in this essay.) We have to stop and look more precisely at what our colleagues are saying in print and how the text is dramatized in classroom practice. I am not asking naively, “Why can’t we all just get along?” but rather I am saying, “Let us look more carefully before we write each other off.”

Revising concepts of a lifetime is not easy. I am a Jew currently teaching in my second Jesuit university. “Now you’ve gone too far,” (says my diseased mother from her grave) as I conduct an ethnography of a class in Liberation Theology taught by Father Tom, a real priest. We talk, we argue, I notice things that strike me as anti-Semitic in the reading, he says they are not meant to be. Why do I bring this project up? Because immersing myself in the theology of another religion no longer produces a sustained flinch. After seven and a half years, I no longer feel the horror of centuries of pogroms and forced conversions and exterminations with each annunciation of the word “Christ.”

Can we stop our theoretical flinching in composition? Can we stop kicking our colleagues to the curb? Perhaps we can think of such a change as a lesson in what Robert Schreiter calls “intercultural hermeneutics” in his book *The New Catholicity*. In Schreiter’s discussion of the differing needs of a speaker and a hearer, he offers the example of a missionary couple who went to North India to evangelize. Unfortunately they owned a cat, an animal the villagers associated with witches. “[T]he appearance of the missionaries’ pet cat caused the evangelistic message to be lodged near witchcraft in the hearers’ world, rather than near salvation” (35). Just because some composition teachers valorize writing about personal experiences, it does not follow that economic, ethnic, and religious differences are reduced in status in our classrooms and in our students’ texts.

I have analyzed commentaries by Faigley and Berlin that were based on “expressivist” texts. In an effort to encourage a larger project in composition studies, where theorists take a look at the opposition’s classrooms before publishing critiques that then become hypostatized as actual situations, I have borrowed from an ethnographic study of someone who has become associated with “expressivism.” It has been my intent to disrupt the essentialized misrepresentation of those teachers who encourage both personal writing and writing that would be seen as cultural criticism. O’Donnell argues that “expressivist bashing” (423) has flourished perhaps because of a failure on the part of expressivist teachers to articulate the theories underlying their
practice” (425). It is my hope that this essay will enter a gradually growing body of work by researchers such as Kathleen Cassity, Thomas Newkirk, Sherrie Gradin, Thomas O’Donnell, and Christopher Burnham, who are taking the time for some needed theoretical clarification.

NOTES

1. According to Karen R. Melton, the Director of Marketing for Bedford/St. Martins, more than a quarter of a million copies of Ways of Reading had sold as of December 2, 1999. This total “makes it one of the most successful readers on our list (an impressive feat) and in the industry as a whole.”

2. W. Ross Winterowd traces a similar genealogy. “Plato represents and is the father of a tradition that sees the goal of composition as helping the writer develop his or her own ‘voice’ or expressivity, just as Aristotle is the ultimate source of composition as entering a discourse community” (xii).

3. Susan Wall points out that Berlin’s critique of expressionism emerges from his responses to scholarly texts and not from “qualitative research that might contextualize expressivism in specific teaching situations.” There is a certain irony in a social epistemic critique which fails to examine context because of “its own theoretical claim that discourses . . . are socially constructed and politically interested, shaped by specific and historically contingent material circumstances” (252).

4. Again I am not alone in my objections to Berlin’s work. Cassity notes that, writing in 1987 (Rhetoric and Reality), Berlin only comments on Elbow’s first book Writing without Teachers (1973) and ignores Writing with Power published in 1981. Wall argues that “in the expressivist works [Berlin] critiques (publications of the sixties and seventies), the authors do not generally define the self as isolated or knowable apart from language. . . ” (241).

5. In contrast to Berlin’s characterization of Elbow’s groups, Cassity writes, “The small groups were not designed for the purpose of assessing any writer’s ‘authenticity’ or ‘sincerity’; instead, the techniques of showing, telling, summarizing, pointing, and relating ‘movies of the mind’ (all described in Writing without Teachers) allowed for reader response and negotiation of meaning between readers and writers” (171). In short, they were dialogic.