"Ce Que J'eprove:" Grainstacks, Writing, and Open Spaces

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An Allegory

On a crisp winter day in 1890, Claude Monet stood at an easel, painting one of the grainstacks in the field behind his house. The sun moved and he noticed a shifting effect on the stack. He demanded that his stepdaughter run back into the house to get another canvas. As soon as she had prepared one canvas, slogged into the backyard and delivered it, he'd ask for another. "Another," he demanded, "another again," and his stepdaughter spent the day running back and forth, stretching and tacking canvases and lugging them out to him while he painted what he saw in the shifting light. [1] (Tucker)

Issues of gender and servility aside, Monet's artistic vision broke the very rules which had governed his art. *How Monet looked determined what he saw, and what he saw determined how he looked.* He shifted his view with the shifts of natural light—in his subjects, in his techniques, and in his renderings. Maxine Greene writes that when artists shift their views in innovative moments, they build their creations by breaking the rules of their disciplinary histories: "There is a sense in which the history of any art form carries with it a history of occasions for new visions, new modes of defamiliarization, at least in cases where artists thrust away the auras, and broke in some way with the past." (130)

What happened as the sun offered Monet another view of each grainstack? What disciplinary histories and artistic auras did he throw away in order to capture his new visions on canvas? What visions prompted him to envision multiple canvases? And how did he invent a process for rendering those impressions? During the winter of 1890-91, Monet produced twenty-seven paintings of grainstacks (Tucker, 77). With each grainstack, he painted its unique features as it sat in the field at a particular time of day. With each canvas, he built on the knowledge of the previous one. He wrote to his sister Alice, "I felt that it would *not* be trivial to study a single motif at different hours of the day and to note the effects of light that from one hour to the next as they modified the appearance of the buildings . . . I see motifs where I did not see them at first . . . I find my first studies very bad; they are laboriously done, but they have taught me to see." (Gordon, 9)

Monet discovered the complexities of a single motif as he looked more and more closely. And how does this moment in art history offer an allegory for us in education studies? Our own disciplinary history is shifting now to include contexts—the spatial, the historical, and the human influences—inside which students learn. Greene observes that as we build "new modes of defamiliarization" we reconfigure our art. Our disciplinary history becomes our art, notes Elliot Eisner, when we apply our private educational connoisseurship to the "artful science" of educational criticism; what he calls "connoisseurship with a public face" (1991, 86). We rely on context to understand ourselves and others, Elliott Mishler reminds us (1979, 2). His studies of workplace narratives (1990, 415) argue that "trustworthiness" is a form of validation in research. Our very knowledge about learning has enabled us to re-define the spaces in which people learn. To study those spaces, as Greene describes of artists and Mishler of contexts, we break our own disciplinary rules, "thrust away the auras," and create new ways for rendering what we see.

Monet wrote to his friend and biographer Geffroy that in his art he was trying above all to render "ce que j'eprove." The verb "eprover" has no real equivalent in English. "To experience," "to demonstrate," or "to feel" are close, explains art historian Paul Hayes Tucker. But the implications in French are thicker, deeper, more complex. The term means *participation in* or *perception of* an event and those feelings directly associated with it. But Monet's term evokes a whole range of sensations, with "things revealing themselves slowly so that they become known in their fullest dimension. So it is a heightened emotional awareness that is stored in the depths of one's unconscious as well as what one sees and feels in the present." (87)

As he shuttled between grainstack and canvas, Monet's recursions allowed him to study an object in its natural context. The shifts in light, the influence of space, and the very passage of time displayed infinite artistic instants, each one a subject for another canvas. Although equipped with a lifetime of drawing lessons and apprenticeships to painters, he invented his procedure as the artistic instant presented itself.

For those of us who teach and study sites of learning, how we look determines what we see, and conversely, what we see determines how we look. In my field of composition study, for example, the past twenty years has taught us how people produce written texts—like the grainstacks, the objects in our own backyards. We studied writers in schools of all ages and professional writers in their studios. We studied written texts. We examined our western legacy in rhetoric and we analyzed the act of composing. We investigated and re-examined the habits and rules of discourse patterns: in

linguistics, psycholinguistics, and sociolinguistics. We explored the function of talk. We watched novice and expert writers write their way *out of themselves* and into their imagined audiences. We studied how readers received texts and learned a lot about the connection between the writing "self" and the reading "other." Workshop classrooms, writing centers, collaborative response groups, computer networks, even portfolio collections are sites for the study of writing which we simply didn't have twenty years ago. Composition, as a disciplinary history, built those spaces.

Ethnographic study offers ways to render what happens inside such sites. Like Monet, the closer we look into our backyards, the more we'll see. Like the grainstacks Monet's neighbors made, writers' texts—and other products of learning—are objects created *by* people, *for* other people—some formulaic and utilitarian, some ingenious and artful. But like the artists who preceded Monet, we didn't pay much attention to the natural conditions that surrounded the writers we studied and how those surroundings affected what those writers were writing. With each light cast from a reader's response, each space and moment which leads to a draft, each point in a person's literate history, each writer will appear different.

With studies which employ qualitative, and particularly ethnographic methods, we can shift now to looking at those differences. Recent composition studies, for instance, highlight students' written objects and their writers as they stand inside time, inside a natural setting (McCarthy, Chiseri-Strater, Di Pardo). Students' texts are objects of human production: ingenuity, intersubjectivity, collaborations in time and space. For Monet, it was not enough to paint a neighbor constructing a grainstack. For those of use who study the processes of writing, it is not enough to study a writer as she produces a text—or just her text itself. Ethnographic studies of people composing texts include the conditions, both spatial and historical, under which those texts are produced. With these methodologies, we can study our subjects in open spaces and shifting light, and then, like Monet, attempt to render them in artful ways. Clifford Geertz observes: "ethnographers have to convince us . . . not merely that they themselves have truly "been there," but that had we been there we should have seen what they saw, felt what they felt, concluded what they concluded." (1988, 16)

In this article, I offer Monet's art as an allegory to frame a discussion of my own ethnographic process as I studied teachers writing—and then wrote about it.[2] First, there was a tension, as a critic of Monet noted, "between the instant and the procedure." When we study writers in context, we enter their spaces for *an instant* of their writing lives—perhaps a semester, a year—in the case of my study, adult teacher-writers in one intensive three week course—and we collect their verbal productions. But *the procedure* of making connections is long and meticulous. The rendering of the research itself becomes the union of the informants' writing, our observations of the event, our theory and methodology, as well as our aesthetic and rhetorical choices for painting it on paper. Monet explained in his letter that the surroundings modified "the appearance of a single motif" which was not, in his mind, a trivial exercise. With ethnographic methods, as we document effects of context on a single person writing, we can see how those surroundings produce shifts both in her writing and in her knowledge of her own literacy.

Second, I illustrate my own attempt to render "ce que j'eprove." My study was multi-layered; grainstacks and canvases dropped like scrims on a stage set. My subjects were teachers in a three-week summer writing program, most of whom were away from home and work. Day and night, they wrote, read, talked, and thought about writing. In order to document the experience itself, the felt sensations and gleaned insights as my informants were writing, to achieve that sense of "being there," I worked carefully with a range of verbal data. The teachers built their grainstacks with conversations, notes, drafts of writing, books they were reading. Their natural world for three weeks was one peopled by other teachers who were interested in writing.

With each other and with me, these teacher-students examined and re-examined their personal histories as readers and writers and their classroom practices with reading and writing. My purpose was to investigate the shift in process and self-discovery teachers reported, and my task was to document the nature of the temporary cultural event in which it happened. The light shifted as the three weeks unfolded, and I watched carefully as each instant offered me another view. The natural context was the culture they composed; their writing came out of one another's work and talk.

A Paradox: The Instant and the Procedure

Writing about the grainstack series, one of Monet's critics observed, "There is something contradictory about Monet's increasing insistence on *the instant* on one hand and his increasingly long-drawn-out and labored *procedure* on the other . . . To unravel its meaning is in a sense to enter into its making." (191) When we unravel meaning we enter into making. As we watch someone writing somewhere, how do we capture the instant? And how do we render the spaces we study? These were my questions.

In an ethnographic study, the participant-observer joins her subjects in time and in space, sensitized to the environmental conditions that produce the objects of learning: experience outside the classroom, contact with other people, personal history. In short, the researcher must enter her informants' head, heart, home, and history as well as the

spaces in which the informant writes and the texts the informant produces. And then she writes. The researcher must remember herself and document her perspective as she enters her informant's.

Monet wrote that he labored through his early work; he knew what he was seeing was not trivial. With each of his series—the grainstacks, Rouen Cathedral, the waterlilies, the river Seine, the buildings of Parliament—like a good ethnographer, he *got down and dirty*, canvas after canvas, sitting in rowboats early in the morning, losing easels overboard in ocean waves, burning his head in the hot sun, freezing his whiskers, slushing in boots through the rain, brushing snow off his palette. He lived with his motifs at different times of day and from different vantage points in order to render them as he learned more about them.

I lived in dorms and attended classes and social events with my informants. I collected data day and night—crates of their formal papers, drafts, journals, and notes, disks full of my own fieldnotes and analytic memos, scores of audiotapes and photographs—a cacophony of ethnoverbiage, I came to call it. I wanted to learn how the culture of the three week program supported the knowledge and comfort these teachers associated with teaching writing. I wanted to look at their personal development as writers. I wanted to see what paradigms were disrupted, what dissonances I might find, where the points of tension were. But in the ethnographic process, participant-observation is merely the data collection phase. We observe in and out of classrooms, catalogue our impressions and assumptions, watch and interview, study drafts and record conversations. That is, in the words of Monet's critic, "the instant." Monet collected his landscape data as his beard froze and his head burned, but then he worked long and hard and alone in his studio. He didn't finish a canvas on site. He painted and tinkered and revised in his studio for months afterward.

I wrote for a year, about myself and about my subjects. I experimented with forms of text and invented other forms. After we collect our data, our analysis and our renderings demand careful technique, revisions, and writing decisions—"the procedure," away from the site. As anthropologist George Marcus writes, attention to the language and form of an ethnographic text is the way we synthesize our fieldwork and our theory, an act of "deskwork as opposed to fieldwork." (in Ruby, 171)

When Monet's artistic decisions contradicted the laws of nature, those decisions involved his aesthetic desire to have the pictures operate on levels beyond descriptions. In our work as researchers who collect the objects of peoples' learning, we need to acknowledge ourselves as reflexive participant-observers. We must constantly ask ethical questions, "Whose text is this—mine or my informant's?" Our work, too, must operate aesthetically, beyond description as we guide our readers into our site. Jerome Bruner describes a productive paradox in any artistic creation. The effort of beholding art is its own reward, he observes, or the reward itself is the achievement of a unity of experience offered by the interplay between the art, the artist's intention, and the beholder." (1979, 67) In ethnographic composition research, the productive paradox is that we're *writing* our culture. As writing teachers writing about writing, we're allowing our art as writers into the writing we study. We are unraveling meaning to enter into making and we are entering into the making in order to unravel meaning.

A "Flash of Communitas:" Composing a Culture

In my study, the "instant" lasted for a flash of three weeks of twenty-hour days, the "procedure," for over several years. My stance as an ethnographer both expanded and limited what I saw, and so did my years of experience as a teacher of writing. I am a writer, a writing teacher, and a teacher of writing teachers. There had been a few studies of teachers who have attended summer programs, but those studies focused on classrooms after the teachers had returned to school (Wilson 1994, Bishop 1989, Gomez 1990). I wanted to see what actually happened in the summer—to them—while they were there.

I saw this three-week event as a total culture, complete with commonly understood narratives, what Bruner calls the "stuff of folk social science." (1990) Teachers were reading and writing, talking and listening, day and night. They enacted rituals and adapted language that had developed in previous summer programs, and they offered their own contributions to that particular summer's culture.

I documented the culture borrowing rhetorical and aesthetic strategies from a range of disciplines. I offer here two short comments from teachers as they described the experience of the three weeks. As I analyzed the two transcripts, I tried ethnopoetic notation[3] and discovered that the repetitions of phrases foregrounded their thinking, in Frank's, for example. And both teachers'[4] oral descriptions offered me interpretive frames when I rendered their words poetically:

Frank:
The first week is
"Holy shit. I'm a wreck."
The second week is
"I don't know if I'm alive or dead
but I think things are starting to come together."
And by the third week
it's
like
"I'm a writer."

Susan:
I'm understanding
that to read is to write is to listen;
(they're all the same thing)
But what is this?
(I almost felt as though I was in a little bit of a cult)
I got an uncomfortable feeling after a while
because I thought,
"These people are teaching us more than this stuff!!
Unless I make
a deep change,
I'm not going to be making
any change at all"
That is scary for me
I didn't know it until
I thought about it
just about two days ago.

By the end of the third week when I collected these comments, Frank and Susan were both surprised; they were both resistant to and delighted with what was happening. For them, it would be months, maybe years, as it would for me, before it all sorted out. And so it would for me.

The three weeks offered teachers "liminality," a term used by Victor Turner to describe a state of "betwixt-and-between" which humans construct to mark important periods of reflection and growth (1982). And public events like this one, often temporary in time and limited in space, are occasions that "re-present" a culture to itself, that "refract multiple visions of the possible . . . inversions of social reality" which can cause participants to question an existing social order. (Handelman, 1990, 49)

Over time, as I proceeded to render what I'd seen and heard, I learned that they needed this temporary culture, this "flash of communitas" (Turner) to begin to reconstruct their personal theories about teaching and writing. The "flash" of time for them was the instant, like the light shifting on a grainstack. It offered teachers reflexive glimpses of themselves as learners, as readers and writers. Then it offered them "communitas," a chance to project those glimpses toward their own teaching as they worked with their colleagues. In short, the very structure of the event itself re-presented, to a teacher, a new way of looking at herself in the culture of school. And, ironically, I studied them as they worked with their own productive paradoxes. The liminal time gave them a literate "instant" as well as a "procedure" for rendering it.

With each grainstack, Monet saw motifs where he hadn't seen them before. The more he looked, the more he saw. At each instant, his procedure became longer and more meticulous. In a letter to Geffroy, he wrote: "I'm grinding away, sticking to a series of different effects . . . I'm becoming so slow in working as to drive me to despair, but the more I go on, the more I see that I must work a lot to succeed in rendering what I am looking for: "instantaneity."" (Tucker, 3)

How would I capture the instantaneity of a writing culture? In this case, writing is the method as well as the subject. "In composition studies," write Gesa Kirsch and Patricia A. Sullivan, "writing is not only the medium we use to make discoveries and import findings to others but the very 'it' we search for." (1) As an ethnographer, I was working inside a well theorized discipline of making knowledge, collecting data from a carefully designed plan. My informants offered me their histories and their experiences. Their experiences were like mine but not like mine. I collected the "instant" as I (and they) experienced it. With each teacher I observed, each conversation I taped, each story I reconstructed, I discovered webs of difference, complex details, unique narratives: what Thomas Newkirk has called "particularity" (in Kirsch and Sullivan, 133). But my other challenge was the "procedure," what I would offer the reader. As I did with Frank and Susan, with each subject I rendered, I chose a theoretical, aesthetic, literary, or discursive device that would best represent its particularity.

My subjects had done a lot of writing, and I'd collected it. They wrote, they read, they listened, they talked, they performed. I wanted *them* to speak, I wanted to preserve their original voices and their intentions—*their* texts—inside *my* text. These were people experiencing important shifts in their thinking and articulating those shifts eloquently, the shifts of light which alerted me to each person's particularity. With each subject, I needed to decide how to foreground her own voice instead of mine, fold her into my narrative, and capture the instant on paper. For each person, the play of time and space was different. The history of composition research taught us that when we work with writers, it is *not only* the final piece of writing that offers information, but the jumble of words—written, spoken, thought, and heard—that lead to a final written product. It is *ethnoverbiage*, the cacophony of verbal data that calls out the clues to the contextual complexities that happen when people write, read, talk, and revise.

On the following pages, I offer two small samples from larger case studies, of two very different instants in time and space. Each led to a polished poem through a complex web of oral and written texts. For Joyce, one persistent nagging theme over three weeks, for Therese—a twenty-four hour obsession. For me, each person in an instant in her life, the instant I happened to collect. For them, the instant led to a self-discovery which had implications for their literate lives and their teaching. And on paper, each piece became a different rhetorical rendering—a folding of my text with theirs, as I chose the techniques I would use to write about it.

Therese: Into Wishin' about Intuition

For Therese Deni, the "instant" I offer was one day in her literate life, one poem she wrote, a string of thoughts she didn't even realize she had. For my reader, it is about four pages, about three percent of my published book. For me, it represents days of documenting, hours of transcribing, weeks of analyzing, and a month of writing. I call it *Breaking the Rules in Style: Into Wishin about Intuition*, a line from a class session she attended and a poem she wrote, but it is the very idea that obsesses her over twenty-four hours.

I had spotted her the first day. She looked insecure, asked a lot of questions. I was intrigued with what she was wearing, how she moved her head and mouth. I threw lists of details into my fieldnotes and expanded them that night. Months later, I polished my lists with background information as I constructed my narrative to tell her story. Here is how it came out on paper:

> I notice Therese sitting in the circle with the other high school teachers. She is nervous, squirming like a student. Her brown eyes, large and terrified, follow each speaker around the room. She looks down occasionally, clasped hands covering her mouth and nose. Her head moves slowly from side to side, and her dark hair moves with it; her tiny white earrings peek out from under the curls. She is wearing a pink cotton top and crisp white shorts. She crosses her feet at the ankles; her pink socks are cuffed like a little girl's. Her long, sinewy legs seem out of place. She introduces herself, a teacher from California, entering her second year in a very traditional high school. "I don't know how to teach. I am frustrated. I want to convey my love of literature to them, and I don't know how."

When I interviewed Therese for the first time at the end of the first week, I learned more about her from looking around at her room, her reading material, and talking with her. Here is what I culled from my fieldnotes, her words from my transcribed interview, her journal, and my analytic memos:

> It is 10:30 p.m. on the fifteenth, the Sunday night after the first week, when I knock on Therese's door and open it a crack. The beam of light from the hall hits her in bed. Her eyes pop open, and I wonder if she'd rather sleep. "Oh no, it's fine," she croaks and switches on a light, "I really wanted to talk with you." The air is muggy, and she has no fan. It's okay, she tells me, because she's taken two showers. Her nightgown is buttoned up to the lace around her neck. She arranges the limp sheets around my tape recorder as I plug it in. I notice a Bible angling out from a corner under her bed. An iron stands on the shelf next to a few folded cotton shirts; a skirt, two blouses, and several pairs of shorts line up on hangers. Her shoes are placed in pairs on the floor of the wardrobe closet: running shoes and a pair of white high heels. Her desk is set up neatly with notebooks, paper, and writing utensils. Her required textbooks are ordered by size on the shelf above. "Make yourself at home," she invites me, "take off your shoes." When I flip off my sandals, I have an urge to place them in her neat shoe-line.

I noticed that Therese needed rules and structure in her environment as well as her learning. She needed ideas folded and ironed and lined up, just like her belongings. During the one twenty-four hour period I offer here, she begins to question the purpose of rules, finds pleasure in breaking them, and looks at her own literacy as a writer and a teacher. This particular twenty-four hours happened halfway through the three weeks. Therese was obsessed about learning about *intuition*—what it meant, why she didn't have it, how her lack of it affected her classroom, and how she might acquire it.

I'll begin with the end. The moment ended with a poem Therese wrote. In order to see what led to it, I studied everything I had collected from her in those twenty-four hours. One night, I found a note under my door in the dorms: "Dear Bonnie, I had a blast writing this in Tom Romano's session today. I had to share it! Sincerely, Therese" Attached to the note is a page of explanation to her writing class:

> . . . An alternate style of grammar . . . plays around with structure and syntax, and breaks the standard rules of style on purpose. The writer delivers a message through the unconventional use of grammar. Don't worry—Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman did it also . . .

In this note, Therese described teacher-instructor Romano's classroom examples, her own failure with her American literature class, a five week workshop she had attended at another university, her enthusiasm and her failure upon her return to school. "I normally don't use swearing in my writing," she ended the note, "but I'm normally not realistic about things either. These were my seniors. This is how they talked." And she offered this poem:

Crash Course in Reality

UC. I don't see.
Oh God. Fourth period. They're coming in the door.
Why did I eat yogurt for lunch? Why did I eat anything?
OK. OK. Calm down. Clam up. The hand-outs are in order.

The note to the students
The sillybus
The Writing Goops

Oh God. You got Deni? HaHaHa.
Talk to last year's fourth period. She'll work your ass off
—no kidding. She has a thousand hand-outs.
Hand out the note first. Don't rush—don't talk too fast.
Remember last year's fourth period. Write—Right.
UCLA...Integration...Intuition...Into wishin'

Here she goes. The first hand-out of the year.
Handout. Hand up. Question.
"Miss Deni, I have a question about the sillybus."
Hand up. A question—Oh God help me—a question.
"Will you give us the writing topics?"
Complain. Explain. It's plain. They don't understand.
"No. You see, it's like baseball." (But we play football).
"I'll pitch out the stuff. You catch what you want."
I pitch. You catch. We match. (I thought).

What the hell is she talking about?
"I don't understand what you're talking about."
I catch? You pitch? You bitch. (He thought).

The Writing Goops. Explain the Writing Goops.
Writing? I thought this was literature.
Integration. Into wishin'
I wish I was out of here.
It's all so simple.
UC. I don't see.

This poem hadn't just happened. It wasn't a poem from nowhere, as she had described it. I traced it through an audiotape of the workshop session called "Breaking the Rules in Style" (Weathers, 1980; Romano in Newkirk, 1990). Tom Romano offered samples from students and teachers, gave a few directions, and urged "Give it a shot, let go, be licentious on the page! . . . There is no pure language, there is no pure grammar. These are options for composition." That night I, had found the note under my door.

I linked this to a conversation Therese had with an older teacher, Alison. In my research, I had photographed them in conversation. I had grabbed a note out of the wastebasket, and dated it earlier the same day. The conversation was about intuition. Looking through her journal, I noticed a reference to "intuition" dated the night before. So I checked my interview transcription from that night. I used Therese's own word "intuition" to re-trace her thinking over that period of time. This is how I later combined it all into my text:

> Therese delights in breaking linguistic rules to express a frustrating school situation. She told me in an interview: "You have no idea how many times I cried over that situation. And then as I wrote that poem—It will never be the same again. I'm telling you, now I look back, I think of that first day. But see, the things I talked about in that poem happened over and over again. I was too thick-headed to figure out what to do about it. So what did I do wrong last year? Did I have definite strategies in mind? Some. But was it student-centered? I don't think so, or I would not have had such severe "Crash Course in Reality."

The night before she had written the poem, Therese wrote in her journal about another teacher-instructor, "Terry Moher just told me that I was a wonderful student—a perfect example of my lack of intuition. It is me, you see, not my students. I need to get in touch with myself, because I know my lack of intuition—spontaneity—etc. is all related to my fear."

Terry Moher had talked about writing conferences in class that day: "The purpose of the conference is to get rid of the kid—to give him a reason to go back and write," she'd said. Therese had been upset when class ended. She wanted to continue, had more questions to ask. Her older colleague Alison had scribbled a note and passed it to her. I'd noticed Therese nodding her head as she returned another note, and later I asked permission to take it out of the wastebasket. "It's not physical, I think." Alison's note said, "It's an attitude. You sort of have to give yourself permission to screw up a little—because no matter what, they're writing. It's practice—Let's talk?"

Therese's return note said: "Oh, I'd love to. But listen, I talked last summer, too, but then the kids came in the classroom, and I SCREWED UP. It was dictatorship. My way of control. But yes—let's talk." They sat alone together in Terry Moher's classroom through lunch with my tape recorder between them. And what was the subject of their talk? *Intuition:*

Alison: What do you mean you screwed up when you tried conferences last year?

Therese: I never had intuition. I was going to ask her what to do if you don't have intuition.

Alison: But I bet *you do* have intuition. You just haven't practiced it a lot. You haven't let yourself get in there and listen and ask questions. I mean, human beings have intuition. You've been teaching how many years?

Therese: I'm going into my fourth . . .

Alison: So what happens in a conference if you say you don't have intuition?

Therese: It was pitiful. It wasn't pitiful in terms of giving them directed attention, but there were no questions, because I had already told them what to write.

Alison: So what if you just stop talking? If you start right off with a dialogue instead of a lecture, the atmosphere will shift . . .

Therese: I'm too structured. I don't blame them. There is not flexibility, I struggle with that . . .

Alison: What are you afraid of, in the structure?

Therese: Chaos.

Alison: Assignment chaos?

Therese: Yeah, but it lacks the essential element, the stuff is in there but . . . the atmosphere is not relaxed.

Alison: But it might come down to the whole issue of trust. Think about why you don't trust them, what will happen if you let some of that stuff go, and just sort of mush that around in your head for a while.

Therese "mushed it around in her head" for twenty-four hours. So, with the help of Terry Moher's class, Alison's collegial support, and Tom Romano's session, the summer program invited her to explore her self-image as a teacher and her perceived failures with her classes. While she considered these themes, she played with language and "broke the rules in style" for poetic effect.

The following week, Therese reviewed those twenty-four hours to herself. As she thought about the poem, she theorized that learning comes from language play and how it fit her curriculum:

> . . . Relaxed rapport happens for me the last six weeks of school. And it's BECAUSE it's the last six weeks of school that it happens. And like, you know, well I can afford this now. The big stuff's over. I can talk to them. I can hear what they have to say. It's a shame. A real shame because they're human beings and they have so much to share. You know, this poem is humorous but there's a seriousness behind it.

In her quiet journal reflection, she re-considered what that "big stuff" was that occupies her during the year, and what her students had to offer. But behind this little journal entry, as behind the poem, Therese clocked twenty-four hours of critical self-examination inside a community of caring peers.

By capturing this instant in time, I can see that this one vignette supported what I discovered about Therese in other instants, and my picture of her as a writer and a teacher became richer. Her texts attached to my texts when I paid attention to as many pieces of verbal data as I could find, connect together, and fold into the most appropriate text I could design.

Joyce: Three Weeks and a Verbal Cacophony

Like Therese, I had found Joyce Choate in class on the first day. She volunteered as a subject for my study, but she told me she wouldn't last long. Her face was flushed from the summer heat and tear-streaked; she was thinking about driving back home to her husband. She was forty-ish, had been teaching high school English for fifteen years. She attended a summer writing program ten years earlier. She was "professionally weary," in her words, there for a "shot in the arm, a "professional kick in the pants," she said. She was an avid reader, an eloquent talker, a drama buff, and she enjoyed being with people. One of her classmates remarked "Joyce, you speak in final drafts."

But Joyce had a problem. She was terrified of writing. She was guilty that she hadn't taught it enough. She had no need to solve her personal problems through writing, thank you, she told me in an early interview. She was here to learn how to incorporate writing into her teaching. "I'm letting an entire area of my teaching go," she admitted, "because I am anxious about it. Very anxious about it, in my own life and in the life of my students . . . I hope I haven't done anybody a terrible harm over the last ten years, but I have not done them a great service either."

I discovered that I must interview Joyce often. She was not writing. She was blocked and couldn't supply me with drafts. She had talked to herself on tape during her two hundred mile drive to the university. I offered her a tape recorder so she could talk to me at night when she was feeling writing anxiety. By the end of my data collection period, I had fifteen tapes of her eloquent talk, hundreds of scraps of jottings and journal entries, and only a few pieces of finished writing. I didn't discover until I analyzed all these tapes that she worked with the same three themes for all three weeks: the problem of competition in schools, her personal learning history, and a fierce determination to overcome her writing apprehension.

The first night she asked "What do I bring to my teaching that comes from my first day in kindergarten?" Although she resisted thinking about her personal school history, this theme would recur for three weeks and she would transform it. Her transformation would reflect her own confidence in discourse: from talk to reading to personal notes to a poem. Although she didn't know it, she worked away at one motif for three weeks. And although I didn't know it, the motif would act as my analytical light as I rendered her experience.

On that first night, as she agonized about writing, she discussed her need as a child to speak and sing: "Somewhere along the line, my speaking was reinforced," she told me, "my mother spent a lot of time with me . . . Wouldn't it be wonderful if someone had asked what I liked about school—and I would have said 'Music.'"

A week later, I joined her at twilight, sitting on a rock with a colleague from her writing group. I listened to their conversation. Joyce had finished reading Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, and her colleague Bob had read John Mayher's *Uncommon Sense*. Both books are investigations of "the system," public values as they determine the structure of public schools. As these two teachers talked about their reading, they reconstructed their personal school histories and investigated their beliefs about their teaching. Bob clarified his insights:

> John Mayher is helping me to see why [the system] operates the way it does on us. Well, you know, common sense education is 'We are paying those teachers . . . they've got the knowledge, they've got the answers. You sit and shut up and we'll impart that to you. . . . have students sit there and be consumers of education. We can't have them visiting among themselves because that will waste time. That's inefficient. On the other hand, in order for students to become articulate users of language, they've got to use language. One cancels out the other . . . . every page is loaded with ideas I'm connecting with my own education.

As they continued to discuss both books and public education, Joyce remembered making butter with her class in kindergarten, and then gradually learning:

> . . . the challenge to be the first one . . . getting so I could be the first. In fifth grade I was shamed by my reading teacher into the knowledge that I was not reading. . . . I did a report on a little bunny rabbit . . . a book for first or second graders. I didn't want to do a book report. And my teacher asked us all to stand in front of the room . . . and when I gave mine, there was a silence, palpable. And the teacher just looked at me with a very deadpan expression, and I read from his face, 'If this is where you want to stay all your life, help yourself, but you've got to realize you are not growing up . . . I saw from the look on his face, the blame was on me.

Joyce had no other memory of that year. She had "read" her teacher's face. His talk and his expression were clearer to her than words on a page, and it spelled failure, blame, and competition. Her school memories, as she told them to Bob that evening, fell into the two categories: learning in groups to create, and learning alone to compete. By sixth grade, she had mastered "the system."

> In that class I learned that getting a hundred on a spelling test meant I could give the next week's test from the front of the room. And now I begin to see where I enjoy that aspect of teaching—being at the front of the room. I learned to organize, I learned to study and memorize, and in January and June we had exams just like they did in the high schools. And if you had a ninety or better, you were exempt. And I worked every fall into the winter so I could be exempt from exams . . . I was very proud . . . That was my elementary school education . . . What was I learning to do? Be proud of memorizing . . . I was learning the system.

As I taped Bob and Joyce talking, I noticed Bob gaze through the sunset toward the dorms, where shadows of teachers traded papers and books. Sharing reading is something teachers rarely have time to do. For Bob and Joyce, at this instant on a rock, a moment in their middle-age, reading triggered personal memories which allowed them to understand their teaching. Months later, I decided to render this discussion in dialogue as it actually occurred:

> Bob: Learning is the very thing that imprisons us. Learning how to put the bars around ourselves.
>
> Joyce: Yes. Yes . . . I nailed in my own coffin nails, you know.
>
> Bob: We victimize the victim. We blame the victim for his or her learning problems. . . . I failed first grade.
>
> Joyce: And what impression do you think that made . . . on your life and your education?
>
> Bob: Well, given how young I was . . . I don't think it hurt . . . Although, who knows? You know, I still bring it up, don't I?
>
> Joyce: I learned my lines. I had no soul in my lines, but when I sang my songs, I wowed them. Again, non-academic. . . . From tenth through twelfth grade, I hated school . . . It was totally competitive. And that was it for me. I paid my dues, I got my fees . . . I became anonymous . . . They called me 'Kuhn.' They called us by our last names. And if you didn't answer the question in about five seconds, they went on to the next.
>
> Bob: Why did they do that to us?
>
> Joyce: I have no idea. Was it post-World War II? Was it post-Korean? Was it male-military system? (She snaps her fingers and swings her arm in a rhythmic, marching cadence.) We put 'em in rows. We march 'em out. We produce 'em. . . . Okay. Kuhn, when was the American Revolution? When did it start and what were three causes? You didn't get it? Okay. We'll go on to Welch.
>
> Bob: (echoing Joyce's rhythm): Assembly line. Performance. Produce. Product. . . . How the hell did you end up wanting to be a teacher?
>
> Joyce (laughing): That's what my students ask me. I

> tell them I really can't answer that question. But we all sit there, we laugh together, and I say 'I don't think it's to inflict pain' . . . I think I'm searching through my teaching to find the love of learning.

As they talked, Joyce and Bob examined the histories they had created for their students. Reading sparked their talk. Later that week, the talk became the nucleus of Joyce's writing. As I interviewed her, Joyce told me how her writing finally formed:

> You and Bob helped me out of the rough there . . . I came in and I wrote: "I remember kindergarten, I remember first grade, I remember second grade," and I went on and on and on. And I was remembering very well . . . I was at least able to document what happened and how I felt about it. I may not have been putting down writing that was artistically done, but I thought, "I do not want to write. I don't know why. I don't want to do this." So I flipped my paper over and I wrote "What do I want to do? I want to show that the system has betrayed me, that it probably blotted out whatever creativity was starting by the time I was four or five years old." I wrote two or three more things on the side of the paper, then I drew a line down the center and on the right side I tried to crystallize all that, in images, and realized that if I had anything, I had a form. All I could do was try to crystallize it into one great expression of what I was feeling the first week . . . "

Reading *Lives on the Boundary* had supported Joyce. She had written some notes about the book: "Rose as a writer, student educator . . . Amazed at the contrast between Rose's desolate environment but his obvious alertness to all its details—the people, their jobs, their fatal flaws, his poor education....implication of the book for me: the need to review the patterns of my own learning—literacy—home-school-to have my students do the same, evaluate their literacy past."

Joyce had written a letter to her class, and I connected it to her notes: "Mr. Rose reveals the status of students in the latter 20th century. Horrified and hopeful, I read: 'Harold was made stupid by his longing, and his folder full of tests could never reveal that.' (127) The writer of II Kings tells how a lost axe head floats to the surface of the Jordan River, and I believe I've seen the miracle repeated several times this past week."

During the second week, Joyce's writing "miracle" took shape with complex invisible supports as she read, wrote, reflected, and talked. She wrote: "My response to reading Rose boiled down to a single reflection on my own elementary school education." For me as I studied her, what began as a taped interview pieced itself together—through conversations, observations in and out of class, responses to reading, the reading itself, descriptions of writing, and layers of drafts—ended as I uncovered a motif for analysis. What had begun on a Monday night as Joyce's little narrative list, her "I Remember," by Friday became this finished poem:

Winthrop Ave. Elementary, 1951

After kindergarten,
they took the brassy, flashy cymbals,
the silver, tinkling triangles,
the rolling, swaying, pounding piano music
and locked them away.

They handed me the scissors,
sticky with old paste,
stubborn like cold fingers
fumbling with a key.
Struggling for smooth, I cut ragged edges.

Then they took the scissors
And pushed a pencil in my hand,
a fat, leaden, pokey pencil.
My sprawling letters,
wayward and willful,
Strayed from the straight-lined path.
My mind did, too.
So they tied me
to the words
on the page
of a book.

Like a chain gang detainee,
I sounded off, in turn,
around the stumbling circle,
shackled with the words
they forced on me,
the links
chaining my thoughts
to theirs.

Being Alive in Open Spaces

As Joyce wrote, she brought to life the very system that had blocked her writing and her teaching. As Therese wrote, she learned ways to question the rules that had bound her; she uncovered her literacy history in order to recover herself. Both poems became artistic renderings of tangled stacks of words and thoughts, captured in an instant with a shifting light. As I wrote about them, my analysis revealed two

writers' discoveries inside a context of other writers as they did the same. My ethnographic constructions became artistic constructions as I made textual choices to create portraits. And in capturing an instant and struggling through a procedure, paying close attention to our shifts in time and space, each of us created a piece of art as we made new knowledge.

Monet wrote that for him the grainstacks "formed a magnificent group." For the beholder, they are silent representatives of human production, ingenuity inside a constantly shifting natural world, standing noble and alive in a world of open spaces and shifting light. Monet explained: "One canvas taught me how to look at the others; it awakened them to life . . . I wanted to be true and accurate. For me, a landscape doesn't exist as a landscape, since its appearance changes at every moment; but it lives according to its surroundings, by the air and light, which constantly change." (Gordon, 163)

With qualitative educational studies, we have shifted our pedagogy; we have entered the places in which people learn, and as we do, we reconfigure the way we write about them. How we've looked has determined what we see, and what we see determines how we look. And it is enriched by the discipline and the art of ethnography. Sociologist John Van Maanen (1988) considers the writing dilemmas of ethnographic research:

> Writing up fieldwork tales . . . brings discomfort to the surface. We edit, contemplate, and evaluate the disparate materials we have on hand: the action observed in the field, snippets of conversation, interpretive skills we believe we have developed, documentary evidence collected, stories we have heard, events we have participated in, bits and pieces of the relevant literature we have read, counts we have done, native category systems created and textualized, and so on. We assemble these originally unrelated segments into the dim shape of a representation and continue with our editing. . . . Slowly an analysis takes shape and a paper develops. We may even reach a final delusional state where we think that with perhaps one more rewrite, the paper will rise from mere perfection to beatitude and the representation will at last correspond to the world out there. But because of some wicked editor's deadline, classes that must be taught, the demands of a new project, the family vacation, the illness of a child, the visit of out of state friends, or the five minutes we have left to catch a plane, the form and content of the paper freeze. We know that our analysis is not finished, only over." (120)

Like the rest of us, as a professional making a living, Monet staggered along that paradox between his discipline's acceptable conventions and his own imagination. But as a contributor to the history, technique, and knowledge of his field, he disrupted his discipline's conventions and listened to his creative spirit.

Systematic inquiry and active teaching has allowed us to see writing and learning in new lights and more open spaces. We re-construct spaces in which we can watch our students as they look at their students. In composition studies, what we learned over twenty years made us look differently, write differently, and teach differently. Maxine Greene, in the *Dialectic of Freedom* writes, "Teachers, like their students, have to learn to love the questions, as they come to realize that there can be no final agreements or answers, no final commensurability. And we have been talking about stories that open perspectives on communities grounded in trust, flowering by means of dialogue, kept alive in open spaces where freedom can find a place." (134) Our ethnographic studies invite new ways to render "ce que j'eprove," alive in the very spaces we've designed for writing communities to grow. With each canvas, we learn to look at the others. And without a stepdaughter to serve us, we are multiplying our canvases.

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Footnotes

1. Another servile woman in a nineteenth century European story. We don't know, of course, whether the stepdaughter also had to bring his food and wash his clothes. Artists never experience epiphanies without help, and neither do writers or ethnographers.
2. I conducted this study at the University of New Hampshire's Summer Writing Program during July, 1990. The excerpts I use are from my recently published book *Composing a Culture* (Boynton/Cook, 1994)
3. Ethnopoetic notation is a procedure for analyisis of transcripts of oral speech. Rendering speech on the page into poetry leads to closer analysis. Spaces and line breaks suggest repetitions and pauses, often highlighting important segments of thought. It was developed by folklorist Dennis Tedlock (1983) for the purposes of studying Navajo speech, and most recently adapted by sociolinguist Deborah Tannen (1989) for studying conversations of college students in the U.S.
4. All informants have chosen pseudonyms, but the teacher-instructors' names are their own.

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