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Wiggle Room and Writing

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Virginia R. Dominguez: Wiggle Room and Writing

To dance in place, to move and shake, to wiggle. I increasingly like the image as a way of capturing what we do in writing, editing, teaching, and coaching writing in the current U.S. academy. We move and we stay in place.

I have been teaching in the social sciences for nearly 30 years, and I just spent the past 5 years editing a prestigious scholarly journal, the *American Ethnologist*. Neither my students nor I could have succeeded at all without writing a great deal, and the *American Ethnologist* would be a set of blank pages without the writing of others, my judgment about their writing, and my active intervention in the structure of their writing. But the longer I reflect on writing the more intrigued I am by an apparent contradiction that it is hard to know when to push for the reproduction of a form—and easy, nonetheless, to do so.

Much writing probably warrants a similar reflection, but I limit my remarks here to expository writing. Despite the play I wrote and directed in high school, creative writing is not my art form and I would be a very poor choice as teacher or coach of others trying their hand at it. But writing is still central to my work and attention to it key to my students' development as teachers, scholars, readers, researchers, and writers.

Indeed I live in a disciplinary world that cares about writing and that famously put the spotlight on its own forms of writing in the 1980s and 1990s.¹ The relation between the two is less known than the spotlight that James Clifford, George Marcus, and Clifford Geertz put on ethnographic writing in the mid-late 1980s in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986) and *Works and Lives* (1988). But there is much more to consider than that lively debate on writing as representation addressed, whether by design or happenstance.

I reflect here on four observations I have made over the past few years: first, that despite critiques of genres, realism, transparency, essentialism, and social or cultural representation recognizable forms of writing persist; second, that those recognizable forms of writing exist across several intellectual generations, including those just entering the profession; third, that while some attention tends to be paid to those forms of writing in graduate programs of study in the U.S. much of what is learned is learned informally and often only partially; and, fourth, journal editors and manuscript reviewers tend to notice the structure of those forms of writing in manuscripts submitted to a scholarly journal, identifying the presence or absence of expected elements and passing judgment on a manuscript at least in part because of the familiarity of its structure.

I am intrigued by what this implies about the social reproduction of value in a scholarly community or network and the forms of pedagogy that facilitate it. I am less interested in critiquing it than in identifying it and exploring its pros and cons. Indeed I have a hard time imagining teaching and editing without an awareness of inherited forms and of the choices we make to reproduce some (or many) of their elements when we coach the writing of others. But this is neither easy nor simple, especially in the social or human sciences that use writing as a means of communicating results and arguments but do not see writing as their primary goal, art form, or area of expertise.

Consider some examples from my own experiences with pedagogy and journal editing. I highlight three struggles. The first concerns the form of a journal article and recognition that seemingly simple goals like clarity and groundedness communicate non-referential value and do not just enhance the readability of referential content. Mastery of particular techniques that make writing look clear and grounded communicates the writer's participation in a community of readers, scholars, and writers that values those textual results. The second concerns the handling of writing by students or colleagues trained outside the U.S., both when the writing looks familiar and when it does not. At issue is the passing of judgment about quality when only some of the measures of worth are shared. And the third concerns the teaching of genres expected by others such as dissertation committee members and granting agencies, including the ethics of questioning the form and imperiling our students' chances of professional success. I highlight that each of these is a struggle or ought to be.

The Journal Article

When the national search committee looking for a new editor for *American Ethnologist* first approached me in the fall of 2001, I remember my honest and immediate reaction. I blurted out, "but you should know that I don't really read the journal!" I have, in fact, been getting the journal for 30 years, and was absolutely delighted when the second editor of *AE* (Richard Fox) accepted one of my earliest articles for publication in the journal in 1977. Yet I distinctly remember telling the chair of the search committee in that first phone conversation that I had come to think of the journal as something to put on my shelf, rather than something to read. I had come to think that all the articles it published just followed a formula and concentrated on too few topics (at the time mostly gender and nationalism). I could not imagine ending my subscription to the journal because I had long learned that it was the standard by which value and professional advancement were measured in social/cultural anthropology, but I came to think of it as a resource and not as a reading pleasure.

To my surprise and conspiratorial delight, the immediate comment at the other end of the line was not dismay but agreement: "I don't read it either, Virginia." He proceeded to explain that the search committee was committed to finding an editor who would shake things up and "open up" the journal. Then I added that I'd think about it but that he should know I would only take it on if allowed to make serious changes both to content and form. How extensive a set of changes I did not then

know. What would be enough? What would be too much? What would the national board of directors of the American Ethnological Society allow? What would the readership allow or embrace? Would manuscript submissions go down in number or quality if I “opened up” the journal both in form and content? I knew I wanted changes. I did not really know how the changes would be received by the board of the AES or, more significantly, the journal’s long-standing readership. I judged the risk worth taking and the potential gain important for the scholarly discipline of social/cultural anthropology and its many fellow travelers (both in anthropology and officially outside it). I was, however, in retrospect, much less aware of my own expectations and standards, my own values as a thinker and writer and how I would reproduce them. How much departure from “the form” of an old *AE* journal article would be too much for me? And why?

I discovered a pattern. I strongly disliked certain conventions of the American Anthropological Association (the journal’s official and legal publisher) that I thought made sense for a publisher of science but not for the wide and interesting mix of arts, humanities, and human sciences that social/cultural anthropology has become in the past 25-30 years. I did my best to counter them but did not judge all to be equally winnable battles. One seemingly small example is that AAA “style” insists on calling the major units of writing in its peer-reviewed journals articles and not essays. I think of essays as more varied in form than “journal articles” (especially in the sciences), potentially more philosophical or theoretical, less bound by the impetus to report research results, and more frequent in the humanities. Each of the 20 forewords I wrote referred to the essays in each issue, and each time my wonderful, substantive copyeditor (Linda Forman) would change it to articles, reminding me that AAA insists on calling them articles. I always yielded, but I also always called them essays the next time around; a small rebellion, perhaps, but a constant reminder to me and my copyeditor of my disagreement with the thinking behind that standardization and convention.

On the other hand, I found myself frequently reining in authors I thought strayed “too far.” The realization caused me to pause. Clearly I was at best a small rebel. I insisted that authors tell readers up front what intervention they sought to make in their essay, which scholarly debate or conversation they sought to affect, and ideally what argument their essay strove to make. I communicated the value of a specific form, not specific words or ideas but a structure nonetheless. I cared less about endings, though manuscript reviewers often cared more. I also cared much less than some of my predecessors about whether the material presented, analyzed, and interpreted in each essay was based on face-to-face participant observation, what many both in the discipline and outside it think is the heart of anthropologists’ ethnographic practice. I cared that there was something to think with—something offered as evidence much like in a legal proceeding, something that when ordered and narrativized aims to persuade the “triers of fact” that a particular argument is likely to be correct. But I cared quite a bit about openers and about the ability or inability of an author to identify his or her argument clearly and incisively within the first few paragraphs of any piece of writing I published. I told authors that this enhanced readability—readability within a community of professional readers

accustomed to those elements in anthropological journal writing. Some authors objected but typically caved in. To be published in *AE* is a feat not to be risked. I allowed wiggle room—telling some authors that 1-2 sentences somewhere in the first paragraph would suffice—but I realized in these exchanges with certain authors that I was insisting on a formal element against some authorial desires and values thought more literary in anthropology.

The typically pleasant exchanges—more like pleas than shouting matches—made me think more deeply about writing in relation to thinking. I think of writing primarily as expository and of readerships as people to intrigue and persuade at least a little. I realized I was convinced from personal experience and multiple conversations over the years that readers of scholarly journals in the human sciences browse through journals looking for something they might really want to read, rather than sit down and just read, and that it is scholars' reading practices that authors and editors need to consider in deciding just how creative or experimental to be with form. I wanted the essays I published in *American Ethnologist* to be read, not just published, and I wanted them to be read beyond the first few lines. I chose to insist on a form—to preserve and reproduce the value of that form—knowing full well that I limited the extent of changes I had anticipated making in *AE*. I put non-anthropologists on my editorial board, invited manuscripts and commentaries from scholars not trained in anthropology, and I published many more linguistic, medical, and cultural studies work in *AE* than nearly all of my predecessors. So I did “open up” the journal, but I held on to an element of form I do not think insignificant. In preserving a style of presentation I preserved the value of a kind of argumentation that aims to get readers to listen and consider following a line of thought presented by the author, drawing on some kind of research and some mix of material presented as evidence.

In the end I preserved more than challenged some of those values reproduced in standard texts on writing “research papers.” This comes as a bit of a surprise only because I find many of those texts too formulaic and not sufficiently self-aware and because, like many cultural anthropologists of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, I fancy being open to scholarly circles not formally identified with anthropology. Yet the similarity is clearly there between what I coached authors to do with their manuscripts and what writing texts say writers should do in their research papers.

Consider the following. It is from “A Guide for Writing Research Papers Based on Modern Language Association (MLA) Documentation.” It identifies itself as “prepared by the Humanities Department as part of The Guide to Grammar and Writing and the Arthur C. Banks Jr. Library Capital Community College Hartford, Connecticut,” one of many sites easily reachable in a simple Google search.

A research paper presents the results of your investigations on a selected topic. Based on your own thoughts and the facts and ideas you have gathered from a variety of sources, a research paper is a creation that is uniquely yours. The experience of gathering, interpreting, and documenting information, developing and organizing ideas and conclusions, and communicating them clearly will prove to be an important and satisfying part of

your education.²

There are many approaches to research—an essential part of every business and profession—and many ways to document findings. The library has books which will help you, and most English composition textbooks contain chapters on research techniques and style. It is important to follow consistently and accurately a recommended format that is clear and concise and that has been approved by your teacher.

Witness the tango here. We seek “a creation that is uniquely yours” but that follows “consistently and accurately a recommended format that is clear and concise and that has been approved by your teacher.”

Writing from outside the U.S.

An ethically thornier struggle concerns writing that comes from outside a set of institutions, often nationally linked, training students in ways that are valued and recognizable in each other’s institutions. It is too simple, and ultimately wrong, to make this coextensive with the borders of a nation-state. Students and colleagues in primarily Anglophone universities in Canada produce scholarly writings in my various areas of interest whose range looks quite familiar to those of us training and coaching writing in the U.S. Our Dutch, British, Israeli, and Australian colleagues also come close although, as journal editor, I found myself stopping and noting the form of manuscripts produced by colleagues located in the Netherlands, the U.K., Israel, and Australia more frequently than those located in Anglophone Canada. The farther from these settings the greater the difference I have noted over a dozen years.

It is not grammar I have come to note so much as syntax, balance, and goal of an essay. I note this in students I have who have received at least their first university degrees outside the U.S./Canadian set of institutions. I also note this in manuscripts sent to me for review from many parts of Latin America, the Francophone world, South Asia, former Warsaw Pact countries, Romance Language-speaking communities in Europe, and China. What is valued in the writing of an intellectual is often only partly the same around the world. Widely valued are thoughtfulness, mastery of an area of knowledge, and competence in the skills expected of an expert in such knowledge. But much of what we teach and coach in the U.S. academy in the early twenty-first century is not. Translators struggle with this daily in their work, as do students who move between countries or linguistic communities during the course of their training. I recall experiencing this myself as I grew up moving in and out of countries in the Western Hemisphere.³ All schools I attended taught English grammar or composition classes, and many taught other classes in English as well even when the overall medium of instruction was Spanish or the everyday language of sociality outside the school was Spanish. But each time I moved I found myself out of sync in my writing and having to adjust to something other than the rules of grammar. The short, direct sentences I learned to value in junior high school in New Jersey look lean and un-nuanced in Montevideo. And the very long sentences I learned to value in Montevideo, full of pause and reflection, caveats and multiple clauses, had to be

trashed in my college freshman English class. Annette Kolodny, my instructor at the time, fresh from a Ph.D. in English linguistics at Berkeley and new on the Yale faculty, did yeoman's work identifying the "problem" early on and working to fix it.

It is not clear to me whether writing in the biological and physical sciences differs this much across the world's linguistic, regional, or institutional communities. But I do see evidence of important differences in general intellectual writing, including much of the humanities and social sciences. Professional translators know the problem well as do U.S. readers of Foucault, Derrida, de Beauvoir, Lévi-Strauss, Irigaray, Borges, or García Canclini. To be too faithful to the original text is to lose much of their potential readership in English and to be looser—to enhance referential communicability—is to lose other messages, including those about writing itself.

As a teacher, writing coach, and journal editor, especially one with years of personal and professional experience studying and teaching in multiple countries and languages, the dilemma is ethical and political as well as practical. A manuscript with many ideas, one whose author clearly seeks to go public with numerous ideas rather than a sustained analysis of one point, is likely to be dismissed as unfocused by reviewers of major Anglophone journals. A manuscript whose argument anchors itself in 19th or early 20th century literature is likely to be critiqued by U.S.-based reviewers as too philosophical and unaware of current debates, even if it does so because it values those 19th century thinkers more than later 20th or 21st century scholars. And a manuscript that is rich in synthesis but lean in analysis and documentation and only 10-15 double-spaced pages long is very likely to be seen by reviewers, editors, and readers alike as too short to be a publishable research article, though plausible as a commentary.

When such manuscripts come across my desk, I have learned to sigh. A disproportionate number of manuscripts of this sort were submitted to *American Ethnologist* from outside the U.S., Canada, the U.K., and Australia over the five years of my 2002-2007 editorship. The acceptance rate of the *AE* is quite low. Authors from all over are accustomed to getting Decision Letters explaining why their manuscripts have not been accepted for publication and, on the flip side, nearly every issue of *AE* I published included articles written by colleagues outside the United States. My point is not that scholars from outside a particular Anglophone world get rejection letters from premier U.S. anthropology journals more often than others. It is that a very high proportion of those manuscripts submitted to *AE* and that I quickly judged to be unworthy of peer review came from outside those particular Anglophone circles. From continental Europe I received conference papers that had not been extended or further documented beyond the time frame allowed at a conference. One northern European colleague submitted the contents of his personal website. South Asian and sub-Saharan African submissions that I judged not worthy of peer review offered research findings—data—but did not situate their projects or findings in relation to intellectual debates or scholarly conversations that readers of Anglophone anthropology journals could recognize as current or even within the world of late 20th century anthropology. Absence of particular references was less the issue than the goal of these manuscripts and the form they took. Anglophone social/cultural anthropology values research and its

findings but greatly privileges those research projects and findings deemed to move a theoretical paradigm or debate forward or sideways. Absence of such framing in the writing itself made a number of these submissions look more like research reports than journal essays or articles.

Each time I confront such manuscripts I remember the struggle we face as open-minded scholars, teachers, coaches, and writers. Differences exist. Some are disciplinary, some linguistic, some pedagogical, some national or regional. I have chosen to note those differences and to coach the authors to adjust *some* part of their writing for the Anglophone anthropological readership they will have if published in *AE*. I do this regardless of the fame and stature of the writer, nudging and prodding as coach or colleague, stressing *reading* practices and habits and our overall desire to affect the journal's readership. And when I have judged the form of a manuscript just too different for the readership to consume with pleasure and value, I have indeed rejected it.

But each time I do so I think about it—noting the fault lines and the wiggle room I allow. I have come to justify the valuing of a certain form of writing, organizationally, syntactically, rhetorically, the same way I value learning the practices, desires, and expectations of different *speech* communities. Reproduction of too little of it hampers communicability. But communicability does not require reproduction of all the familiar elements of writing, any more than mastery of the verbal skills of any speech community requires simple adherence to stated or tacit rules of grammar or conversational style. After all, a skilled native speaker, or comfortable fluent speaker, plays with speech enough to maintain wiggle room within a speech community, and I think it is useful to keep this in mind when thinking of writing, even if only by analogy. Yet how much divergence from stated or tacit rules and practices can still look familiar enough to be read and heard, and how much is too much? Asking the question is not enough. As editor and teacher, I also draw lines, deciding on a case by case basis what is too much. Like all of us who teach any field requiring writing, I reproduce a form, at least in part, each time I determine how much wiggle room it currently allows or should allow.

Wiggle Room and Pedagogy

One of my favorite doctoral students in the 1990s wrote a dissertation draft I deemed ready for review by other committee members. I judged its writing to be lively, its chapters compelling in argument on their own and together, and its evidence well marshaled. When a colleague I respect and trust asked to talk about it over lunch, I expected feedback on substantive points to be clarified or scholarly references to be rethought. I still remember my surprise at the exchange we had when crossing the street on our way to lunch. He said that the draft read like a book and I replied with delight that I thought so, too, only then to sense his misgivings. He thought this dissertation should not look like a book.

The exchange was useful and illuminating, I think, to both of us. U.S. graduate schools require doctoral dissertations before awarding Ph.D.s and we supervise their production. On many campuses, we also participate as outside readers in the production of doctoral dissertations officially outside our own disciplines. Typi-

cally when we knowingly sit in as outsiders we sense differences in length, styles of presentation or argumentation, type of material analyzed or interpreted, and bodies of work cited. But it is just as interesting to reflect on intra-disciplinary expectations and the extent to which they are reproduced in our students' work. In the case I just described I valued the absence of a second chapter reviewing "the relevant literature," the incorporation of relevant literature throughout the dissertation, and the absence of a form that would allow a reader to identify the "data chapters" and distinguish them from the "theory" ones. The work remained grounded in face-to-face research conducted over more than a year and additional documentary, textual analysis. To a colleague in philosophy, political science, sociology, economics, and history the work would resonate but still look different. As an exercise in thought and research, it fit squarely in anthropology, and neither my colleague nor I doubted its value as anthropological scholarship. But we differed in our adherence to a form and our sense of obligation to coach our students to master the form before setting them loose as Ph.D.s.

Over the years I have seen all of us struggle with the form and its wiggle room. Sometimes it is a student who forces the question. In my field it is often the student who wants to be "more literary," or the student pursuing a second profession and already a practitioner of certain forms of writing, such as legal, medical, or bureaucratic. Sometimes it is the student who comes to a U.S. graduate school with one or two university degrees from a university outside the U.S. or Canada and the experience of writing a 150-300 page scholarly work already judged professional in a home setting. The student seeking to be more "creative" is usually conscious of the request to depart from a more expository form. The student coming from a different professional or scholarly setting is, in my experience, often less conscious of the differences in form of writing, research, and thinking, and more surprised at having to re-learn writing and writing genres. There is an ethical dilemma here. To allow a great deal of straying from the expected form—of a grant proposal, a thesis, a prospectus, or dissertation—is likely to keep the student from getting a grant or obtaining approval for a thesis, prospectus, or dissertation.

Sometimes I wonder if I toe the line too closely. I have never allowed a thesis—undergraduate, Master's, or Ph.D.—without a clear and stated argument at the outset, without some type of material to think with, without some analysis and interpretation of the material, without explicit critique, praise, and engagement with some other relatively current scholars, without an introduction, a formal division into chapters or subtitled sections, without a list of references cited and endnotes or footnotes, pagination, and a title. Is this good or bad pedagogy? It certainly involves the teaching of a form of thinking and writing that I value and that most colleagues in my intellectual networks value, and it helps students get grants, approvals, and jobs. But central to the question is the amount of wiggle room I allow and the motivation for doing so.

For example, over the years I have allowed a wide range of material to be used—from poems and songs to murals, census data, interview excerpts, graffiti, maps, photos, memoirs, fiction, and statistical tables. Some colleagues allow less, a few more. Similarly I have allowed final chapters that look like suggestions for further

thought or research more than summaries of the thesis' argument, and even final chapters that are so short they look more like epilogues. Not all of my colleagues do so. But in all of this I sense my own commitment to passing on a form of thinking and a type of intellectual work that is like detective work more than contemplation or moral reasoning, and that cares more about breadth and depth of understanding of a social, economic, or political issue than about consistency of method, the aesthetics of writing, or the perceived centrality of its concerns to others in the world of privilege and power. This commitment requires some adherence to values I deem current in much of social/cultural anthropology—and recognizing that some elements of the genres we teach our students reiterate those values and others are incidental.

Granting agencies ground us further. No matter how much freedom we may allow a student in his or her writing for a course or even a Master's thesis we try to help them get funding for their doctoral research and writing. Few parts of our pedagogy look clearer. To help them obtain funding we teach them to adhere closely to the requirements and guidelines of a granting agency or fellowship competition. Few academic moments require this level of scrutiny and close reading. Originality of thought is expected; originality in form gets applications thrown out. Some foundations like the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research years ago dispensed with the open-ended application, choosing instead a set of specific questions each applicant must answer and limiting the length of each answer with little wiggle room. The questions asked by the Wenner-Gren are terrific and their goal is to ensure that all applicants around the world, regardless of differences in training, include the type of thinking and writing the Foundation examines when making funding decisions. But in pulling out each element sought in the writing of a grant proposal the Wenner-Gren reminds us clearly that wiggle room is limited and reproduction of form probably more valued.

Hidden Values

I wrote at the outset that I now find it both hard and easy to know when to push for the reproduction of a form of writing. The issues are practical, ethical, and geopolitical as well as broadly intellectual and potentially visionary. I have offered several examples of arenas and encounters in which I struggle and where I see colleagues and students struggling. But a key element remains to be highlighted, and it concerns deeply hidden values.

Social and institutional mechanisms that stress reproduction more than intellectual difference, creativity, or dissent abound. Reviewing, grading, and evaluating practices come to mind, and those of us who write or advocate for particular types of reviews act as innovators and as reproducers at the same time. As an editor and a coach of student writing, for example, I know that I have come to stress a research orientation that is clearly captured by insistence on all of the following: statement of the research question, clarity of argumentation, engagement with existing literature, methodology to be employed or evidence marshaled in support of an argument, and the sustaining of a rhetorical point. Explicit here is a structure of argumentation and presentation, as I have already argued. Yet most generative in the long run are the less explicit values on which such a structure of argumentation rests.

A favorite but complex example is clarity. We teach clarity of expression and clarity of thought. We reward those who exhibit it and use their works as examples of good writing, perhaps especially in history and the social sciences. But why should clarity be a value? Other times and other dialogical communities may privilege wit, humor, the turn of phrase, the expression of empathy, recitation of past claims to knowledge, and the indexing of respect for past knowledge more than the desired creation of new knowledge, to mention a few alternatives. To privilege clarity over many of these other options is to privilege a desire for effective and presumably uncomplicated communication across time, space, social networks, and scholarly institutions. At one level, as a coach and teacher of writing, I can only applaud. At another, as a student and tracker of intellectual work—including the phenomenology, sociology, history, and politics of knowledge in the world—I watch with a desire to break out of the mold and call attention to the tacit but powerful ideologies that limit us as thinkers and innovators.

In this broader context then, like most of us who read, write, teach, and coach others to write, I clearly participate in the teaching and reproduction of intellectual work of only a particular type (or perhaps two). That I care about it matters. I would not pursue it nor teach it otherwise. Yet it is a sobering thought nonetheless to recognize how easy it is to participate in its reproduction and to note that one even values its reproduction.

Notes

¹ In the context of social/cultural anthropology today, those most attentive to writing and willing to experiment with it are colleagues often seen as leaning towards the literary, like Ruth Behar, Alisse Waterston, Paul Stoller, and Joao Biehl. And institutions exist that seek out, recognize, publish, and reward anthropological attention to good, powerful writing, among them the Victor Turner Prize for Ethnographic Writing and the *Anthropology and Humanism Quarterly*.

² Revisions to this Guide were made in May 2004 to reflect recommendations in the MLA Handbook's sixth edition (2003) and on the MLA's own Web pages.

³ I attended school in Havana, Cuba, through the third grade, fourth and fifth grades in New York City, sixth grade in San Juan, Puerto Rico, seventh and eighth grades in Glen Rock, New Jersey, and all of secondary school in Montevideo, Uruguay. I returned to the U.S. at the age of 17 to begin undergraduate life at Yale in September 1969.

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