

Golf Courses and Graveyards: What the Bayou City Teaches Us About Form

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Last month a car shot off a bridge, falling 21 feet into the bayou below. I heard the story on the news one morning while readying to teach class. The occupants of the car had yet to be identified. Witnesses couldn't say what had caused the car to veer out of its lane, into the guardrail. The driver, it seemed, had simply lost control.

The bridge is a block from where I live, just past Schlitzberger and Daughters Monuments and Caskets, Gege's Flowers and Gifts, and a life insurance company. The neighborhood, marked by one of Houston's largest cemeteries, is in the business of laying the dead to rest. I often describe the area to my freshmen composition students during our unit on place. It's not as bad as you think, I tell them. At least the neighbors are quiet.

The section of the bayou where the accident occurred is bordered by a cemetery on one side and a golf course on the other. To those unfamiliar with Houston zoning laws—or lack thereof—this may seem an odd pairing. Compared with the array of mismarriages making up much of the city, however, these two are oddly congruous—quiet, green

expanses visited by groups of two or three at a time, who come to release and escape, eyes trained on a hole in the ground.

On a recent Sunday—late October, the heat was just beginning to break—I came upon several cars parked along the bank, just off the main road. Further down the bank a group of three—two men and a woman—knelt in the dirt.



Watching them digging into the dirt with their ungloved hands, I remembered the car and the bridge, the reporter with no information on the driver, no *real* news to give. These three had a name in mind, a name they were giving a form, building a memorial of mismatched materials. One of the men held a bouquet of roses. The other a cluster of devotional candles and oranges. The woman was piling stones around a steel cross. Here, under a bridge where no one ever visits, just beyond the border of the *official* cemetery, where the plots and paths are paid for and sanctioned, they were marking a new space, right at the site, arranging incongruous objects that might somehow amalgamate a meaning for this otherwise unsayable event.



New forms arise when the old forms can no longer hold the meanings we intend. In teaching composition, we often rely on and pass down to our students the forms we have inherited through the academy. We do this without reflecting on what content such forms encourage and, more importantly, the content they preclude. We favor hypotactic forms, those in which connections are explicit and information ranked, over paratactic ones, those that allow the reader to make his or her own connections. (The Greek word *taxis* literally translates to “drawing up ranks for battle”) (Lanham 38).

The five-paragraph essay, a form taught frequently in composition classrooms and propelled by the ever-resilient thesis statement, announces to the reader, ‘all I have to say, all this essay will do, can be whittled down to a sentence or two.’ The remainder of the essay, with its triad of claims and self-congratulating conclusion, confirms this. Richard Coe says that “in [his] more cynical moments, [he] suspects that the better part of several generations of students have been socialized to believe that, at least in school, there are three reasons for (and/or three examples of) anything” (18).

My intention here is not to pick on the five-paragraph essay (it has suffered its fair share of abuse over the years). Order and structure are important. Rigid forms can be useful—they encourage a certain kind of thinking. Contemporary poets, after all, continue to turn to the sonnet, despite the evolution of free verse. Stabilizing one set of variables can free one up to innovate with others. What these poets know, and what we sometimes fail to share with our students, however, is that form is malleable. And further, must be in accordance with our intentions. Just as there are certain ideas that cannot be contained within the confines of rhyme and meter, there are ideas that cannot be contained in the hypotactic world of the five-paragraph essay with its unwavering faith in smooth transitions, topic sentences, a call to action that can be carried by a single paragraph.

Richard Lanham suggests that writing that relies on paratactic structures—looser connections—creates a more democratic relationship among the ideas expressed. To some extent, it becomes the reader, as opposed to the writer, who determines what in the essay should be given the most weight. By combining units of text that are incongruous, at least according to our traditional conceptions of unity, the writer creates spaces in which the reader might assume a more active role in the creation of meaning. A reader’s initial response to such a work—“These things don’t go together”—is quickly revised to, “How might these things go together?” The reader’s willingness to participate, of course, depends on her confidence—inspired by the writer’s attention to structure—that she is not merely being taken for a ride. When the reader is actively engaged in this connective work, she enters into a dialogic relationship with the text. Her

role as responder becomes as important as the writer's role as speaker. When I read such texts, I find myself filling the margins with notes—talking back. I am granted thinking room.



In the composition class I teach centered on place, I often start with an essay by Mark Doty describing his impressions, as a New Yorker, of our bayou city. Doty's essay opens as he sits in gridlock on Westheimer—one of Houston's main, and most historic, drags—noting the unlikeliness of the locales he passes—"a car wash by a cathedral, a museum by a bodega, an erotic cabaret by a RadioShack" (viii). As I read his descriptions aloud, my students nod and laugh in recognition, often adding their own observations from the parts of the city in which they reside. Doty continues:

The lack of [zoning] restriction seems metaphor for a larger kind of decenteredness. There's no real geographical center, no heart of things...There's no dominant culture and just barely a dominant language. In some areas the street and shop signs are in Spanish, in others, Vietnamese. A teacher friend told me there are some fifty-two languages in use here. In the classes my partner Paul is teaching, there are students named Gustavo, Bayta, Senait, Jameka, Blas, Rogelio, Vonda, Mohammed, Chitra, and Bobbie Lee. (viii)

What Doty concludes from all of this, however, is not that Houston is anomalous, but representative of the direction all American cities are headed. He writes: "If America has a ready made example of life in the twenty-first century, this is probably it: artificial, polluted, a little dangerous, and completely confusing, yes—but also interestingly polyglot, open ended, divergent, entirely unstuffy, and appealingly uncertain of itself" (IX). One student, upon hearing this rendering of the city he has called home his entire life, said he'd never really felt he had any reason to be proud of being from here. Doty, he said, gave him a reason. The student's final essay for the class took Doty's view and applied it to Houston's graffiti and street art scene. This, his essay suggests, is how one subculture, one generation, marks its divergent spaces.

Our cities reflect who we are collectively—our cultures, needs and values. It is no coincidence that the apexes of our cities' skylines are no longer churches but banks. Our skyscrapers, warehouses and bridges say

to our neighbors, we are innovators, we are laborers, we are connectors. *This*, our cities proclaim, is how we fill a blank page.

Changing populations, Doty suggests, change the spaces they inhabit. They push away from homogeneity toward “polyglot” spaces. If this is an accurate picture of the country’s future, this complexity will surely strain the official forms and sanctions enforced in so many American cities.

Geoffrey Sirc, in *English Composition as a Happening*, suggests the ways we teach writing in the composition classroom deny students their “native Main Street tongue,” more fluent in the discordance of the Vegas strip than in academic discourse (192). We “give them the blueprints for our temples,” Sirc says, “and demand they (re)produce their new (already colonized) cityscape likewise” (193). Students who have no stake in what they build will inevitably build structures that are neither useful nor relevant.

Encouraging students to assume ownership of the building process, then, requires reintroducing them to the role form plays in writing. By making this aspect of writing more transparent, we ask that they be more thoughtful about their moves on the page, creating both the blueprint *and* the building.

Julie Jung, in *Revisionary Rhetoric, Feminist Pedagogy and Multi-genre texts*, suggests students might work both with and against traditional forms to delay easy answers and simplistic renderings of complex subjects. She assigns a multi-genre project in her composition classes in which students combine emails, journals, in-class writings and other texts. The most successful work,

she suggests, disrupts clarity by delaying convergence between our intentions and our readers’ expectations (xii). Jung says rhetors, through what she calls metadiscursivity (self-reflective interjections throughout a text), “might forge new ways of listening, new strategies for fostering cross-boundary discourse” (55).

Nancy Mack also assigns multi-genre projects, in her case as a way of bypassing the “dumbed-down artificial research paper format” that “so often results in boring, plagiarized papers” (92). Students combine secondary research with fiction and interviews as well as imitations of newspaper articles, letters, textbooks, and other documents. Mack suggests such hybrid forms offer a means of teaching “critical analysis, documentation of sources and aesthetic unity” while giving students the opportunity to incorporate into their projects the skills and experiences they bring to the classroom. “Life is too short and too messy,” Mack suggests, “to teach phony formulas and students are too wonderful and insightful to be trivialized by pointless assignments” (98).

Mack finds the biggest challenge students face in completing multi-genre projects is figuring out how to connect the various elements toward a cohesive whole. “A few students ended up with a hodgepodge of interchangeable parts that had no particular order and did not lead progressive from beginning to end,” Mack says (96). While some found ways of unifying—one student used the conceit of going through a collection of family photos and documents—others failed to make meaningful connections.

Paratactic forms do not necessitate an abandonment of purpose, clarity or attention to structure. Winston Weathers suggests that a writer using alternative grammars “must

still be concerned with a rationale for his composition, a rationale that informs the composition, if not with 'order and sense,' then with 'interest and effectiveness'" (237). It would be a mistake to encourage students to arrange willy-nilly, write whatever they feel, abandon control of the wheel and let themselves spin into the bayou. Rather, the agency afforded through an understanding of form might allow them to steer their thinking in new directions, place each project they complete on a paratactic/ hypotactic continuum of sorts in accordance with their intentions as writers. They might also be reminded the world is not as easy to sum up as it would seem.

Here is where lessons on form might help students think further about the intentionality of the assembling work they are doing. To start, we need to reconfigure the way we imagine the relationship between form and content. Richard Coe suggests the problems we encounter speaking about form are connected, as I.A. Richards points out, to a problem in the metaphors we use to represent it. Form, he suggests, is not a container to be filled, but more like a "plant that has grown" (16). Form and content are inextricably linked. Ideally, form grows with content through the composing process. "There is no meaning without form," Coe continues. "Information is *formed* matter ... When you *transform* a message into a new form, as when you translate a poem, you have reformulated it, thus to some extent changing the meaning" (16).

Models in the classroom become useful, as they give method to such concepts that are challenging to grasp in the abstract. Students might try out alternative forms introduced by writers they study, collecting techniques that will contribute to their identities as writers. They will begin to

recognize that writers who use more paratactic forms do so not simply because they can, but because complex meanings grow out of complex forms.

Eula Biss's essay, "Time and Distance Overcome," opens with a description of the events leading to the introduction of the telephone into American homes. What a feat of the imagination, Biss suggests, to believe, as Alexander Graham Bell did, that "every home in the country could be connected by a vast network of wires suspended from poles set an average of one hundred feet apart" (3). Though the first half of the essay chronicles this odd moment in history—citizens and city officials alike would cut down the poles in protest of what they perceived as neighborhood blight—this is not Biss's subject. Rather, the essay is the first of many meditations in her collection, *Notes from No Man's Land*, on race relations in the United States.

Section two of the essay begins, "In 1898, in Lake Cormorant, Mississippi, a black man was hanged from a telephone pole. And in Weir City, Kansas. And in Brookhaven, Mississippi. And in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where the hanged man was riddled with bullets" (7). The next four sections continue in similar fashion, representing, through lists and anecdotes, the history of lynching. She interrupts with associative leaps: "The children's game of telephone depends on the fact that a message passed quietly from one ear to another to another will get distorted at some point along the line" (7).

What has been distorted, in Biss's essay, is a story that started as an innocent, even whimsical, account of the telephone's inception. What has been distorted by Americans from 1876 forward is the ideal that



we might all be interconnected. The question guiding her essay, as the title suggests, is can time (movement from our violent past) or distance (that which keeps us segregated from one another) be overcome, as Bell originally envisioned? Biss's re-imagined history moves from comedy to tragedy. We are reminded, in the end, of one of her early sentences: "Even now it is an impossible idea, that we are all connected, all of us." (3).

Biss designates varying levels of continuity through a set of visual cues to which the reader quickly becomes attuned. A section break suggests a greater thematic shift than a hard return, a hard return more than an indented paragraph. Weathers might call her loosely connected units of information "crots" (226). Echoing Lanham's definition of paratactic form, Weathers says, "the general idea of unrelatedness present in crot writing suggests correspondence—for those who seek it—with the fragmentation and even egalitarianism of contemporary experience, wherein the events, personalities, places of life have no particular superior or inferior status to dictate priorities of presentation" (226). To enter the discussion of racism in the United States is to contend with illogical assumptions, erratic behaviors, unanswerable questions and an increasingly complicated set of power relationships that permeate all facets of American life. By refusing hypotactic ways of ordering information, Biss reminds us of this complexity. There will be no answers by the end of her collection, only an ever-shifting camera angle and lens insisting there's much left to consider. We would be remiss to look away.

Gloria Anzaldua, in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, addresses the multiplicity of *Mestiza* identity. On the page,

she shifts between poetry, theory, memoir and other forms that enact that identity.

Her prose takes on the characteristics of the physical and metaphorical borderlands she describes. "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," for example, an essay widely anthologized, opens with Anzaldua in a dentist chair, resisting the dentist who has never seen anything as "strong and stubborn as her tongue" (75). She transitions from narrating a personal story to theorizing gender roles and language,—to defining varieties of Spanish(es). All is told in a mix of English and Spanish. All borrows from high and low registers.

When I introduce Anzaldua in the classroom, students—especially monolingual students—express frustration at her continual shifts between languages. I have heard praise by some bilingual students for Anzaldua's ability to express her identity so precisely and unabashedly and disapproval by others who chastise her for bastardizing both languages. Whatever the students' feeling toward Anzaldua, her essay opens up a discussion on form. What if, I suggest to the students, she wants monolingual readers to feel frustrated? What if she wants you to know how it feels to be on the outskirts? By shifting between languages and genres, Anzaldua enacts her argument about the impossibility of assimilating to a culture without sacrificing some part of one's self and the necessity of remaining connected to one's cultural roots. One student, during class discussion, said Anzaldua's essay represented how she would write were she permitted.

With Anzaldua, to write any other way, would seem contradictory to her message.

The question that must be asked here is *should* our writing, our elected forms,

mirror our experiences of reality? Why, for example, in a chaotic world, would we not want writing that suggests just the opposite: order, unity, cohesion? The truth is, sometimes we do. However, this idea too assumes stylistic choices are linked to what we experience. We come from a long literary tradition of shaping our language to match the shapes of our lives. I again turn to Weathers, who, in a discussion of what he calls the “grammar of style,” writes:

... if the illusion can be maintained by rhetoricians and stylists that the traditional grammar somehow matches and corresponds to an orderly universe or an orderly mentality, then surely a similar allusion can be posited that a variegated, discontinuous, fragmented grammar of style corresponds to an amorphous and inexplicable universe and mentality. More important than whether such a correspondence is “true” is the fact that it can be taught and maintained as a writing convention. (225)

Whether we want it to, whether we think it ought to, form argues, in an essay, alongside content. It is an essay’s second voice. Writers who recognize this have a greater range of ways through which to reach their readers.

To those who say students, especially first-year composition students, are not ready to consider form in their writing, I’d echo Wendy Bishop, who insists it is time we start believing in our students’ abilities to produce complex writing. We too often assume a do-as-I-say-not-as-I-do stance with our students, advocating worn-out, ineffective forms in the

classroom while we call upon forms, in our own writing, better suited to our arguments. “First,” Bishop says, “we must believe [students] can write. Fiction. Fact. Personal. Scholarly. The Works” (269).

By understanding form is malleable, as opposed to pre-set, students gain agency. They are better prepared to adapt to the writing projects they will face outside of the classroom. Further, they are better equipped to represent, in writing, their multi-registered, multi-genred experiences.

The cross on the bayou marks something that happened, in a particular place, to a particular person. Such altars, often through a collection of objects—old photos, soap, good tequila, wreaths, crosses, cookies, cigars—represent a lost life in ways the cemetery on the hill, the engraved monuments, the life insurance documents cannot alone. They suggest a person is not her epitaph nor a dash wedged between two years. A person is not a hunk of rock and a chisel, a signature on a form. Nor is a person the soap she uses, the tequila she drinks, the car she drives. A person is nothing less than all these things, all at once.

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