Reader Response

To His Nibs, G. Douglas Atkins—
Just in Case You’re Serious
about Your Not-So-Modest Proposal

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I am tired of pissing contests.¹

I am tired of literary scholars and nonfiction writers who scorn composition teachers.

I am tired of blusterers who pronounce prose written with the pen to be purer, more finely crafted, more “comely” than the words and images created on a computer screen.

I am tired of grown men who use overworked and underpaid women to do their typing and then have the temerity to posture about the democratic nature of their behavior. I am tired of essay writers who think that all the strength and vigor and pain of language could ever be contained in a single genre, in one holy form, in one blessed medium. That’s nuts.

I think you must be afraid, G. Doug.

Carole Maso has said this very thing about others who write like you. And I agree.

What you love is disappearing; what you do well is disappearing. And these sad events portend your own death. They show you the future—and you don’t like what you see.

jac 20.2 (2000)
"You want it to be ludicrous, the future, easily dismissable. Like me... . . . You can't see a place for yourself in it and it frightens you," Carole Maso writes (54).

Well, the future will come—regardless—and we will all die. But death and the changes it brings are no excuses for narrow-mindedness or intolerance.

Suck it up, and walk it off. Your arguments are lame.

You went to school and learned how to write essays. Terrific. And you can quote Montaigne, Pope, White, Barthes. That's swell. I'm with you so far. Their minds, their thinking, are well worth loving and honoring and studying carefully. And Dillard and Ozick, too, benefit readers who pay close attention. In fact, the luster of Dillard's words and the polish of Ozick's language lend brilliance to your own prose. Your writing is "muscular and comely"— truthfully. And I'll bet you're a great teacher.

You give good words, G. Doug.

But your heart is small and your mind is dark.

You admit to only one literacy and refuse so many more. You valorize one medium, one implement, when there are so many more.

With this mindset, you're sure to miss some very cool students who could give your Rachel Orr a run for her pen-nibbling money. And you are also sure to insult incisive and talented colleagues who might be willing—barring the dismissive characterizations contained in your proposal—to talk about productive ways to help students write.

To these folks, the apologetic quotation marks that are meant to distance your concerns, your methods, from those of common "compositionists" serve only to mark the chasm constructed by your fear.

Don't think we're fooled by your sham reluctance to "flog" these "opponents."

You must think you're better, G. Doug. You must think you're superior.
But your compositionist colleagues aren’t dumb. They’re also teachers of writing who struggle to help students wrest meaning from their lives, to blow carnival glass from molten experience.

Here’s a good example, G. Doug: Randy Freisinger, a colleague who is a compositionist and a poet and a nonfiction author, uses computers and pens to craft words, to reflect on experience. I think he’d also use a stick to scratch runes on a blessed piece of tree bark if that worked.

So why write, “The pilgrim-writer progresses when required to produce essays, personal writing that, instead of merely chronicling experience, makes meaning by deriving significance”?

Randy’s teaching, I think, declines to honor the gaps you construct with your not-so-modest proposal. His quietly inspired gift is the ability to help students find their own ways of making meaning, their own ways of wrestling with sinewy, concentrated strength of purpose—the complex intellectual demands of autobiography, poetry, memoir, journal, hypertext, collage, narrative, news reports, and essays. Each of these forms musters its own deft defenses; each crouches for the takedown, defying reach and will, slipping the hold of mastery. Each lures writers onto the mat with a different kind of promise.

Randy’s own writing, too, belies those six-foot genre fences you throw up in fear. Here’s a newspaper story/poem/essay by this talented writer-pilgrim who progresses not through one form, but many:

**The Catch**

Baby Hurtles from Tenement Window;
Ex-Tight End Makes Save
—newspaper headline

They say the Lord’s eye sees every precious thing, and she was that, even to a father blind with rage who stripped her from her mother’s grasp and, four floors up, threw her through the curtained window’s glass.

Something dark and ravening flew with that child into the first sluice
of Brooklyn’s morning light. Fear said: Cover your eyes! to a man looking up from the cankered street. Here, as always, said his rough instinctual hands.

Blank, absent, he made the catch of a lifetime. Sweet Jesus, Oh match struck at random in this catacombed night! Children still are falling, falling fast and something takes with black delight our marbled hearts for its repast.

Fated Savior, sate with gall this appetite. Fix us with your stony eye. Catch us with your bony arms at last.

As my grandmother said, it takes all kinds. Why insist that you, alone, know what a teacher of writing must do? By what particular path or genre a writer progresses? What technology a writer should use?

Why let fear take you to that ugly and arrogant place?

Who are you—you Levenger man, you nib licker, you essay pimp—to accuse your colleagues of being boring or dangerous to students? How can you—while squeezing out an “adumbrated” and describing a “blank page thus inclined”—think that your terminal elitism enacts less violence on the writing, the experiences, the development of students in Lawrence, Kansas, or anywhere else?

You may be right about some composition classes and some composition books being “leaden,” stupefyingly boring. They exist, I know. But not every nonfiction writing class is incandescent either; not every essay workshop produces writing that is supple or strong or compelling. Some of those workshops stink, too.

We work the threads of the same Gordian knot from different directions, G. Doug. So why diss a fellow laborer? Why succumb to this?

If the knot were so easy to untie—if there were one simple way to make it yield—I expect we’d have it untied by now.

Literacy demands not one approach, G. Doug, but many. Not one genre, but many.
And this love affair with the pen? It reeks of privilege.

A good pen is a "class act," you say.

These words vomit dollar signs. Stipula Sohos in resin and 18k gold at $650.00 a pop; the Omas Tiger Eye from Italy, $950.00; the German Mt. Blanc at $145.00; the Jorg Hysek Carbon Fiber Fountain pen with 18k gold nib and black leather case at $595.00; the Visconti Midnight Voyager with filigree cap at $325.00; the Montegrappa Aphrodite formed of precious metals and mother of pearl, $3,000.00; the Parker Duofold Platinum International, the "pen of pleasure," $340.00.

What worries me most about your arguments, G. Doug, is that you find it so easy to be insistent about personal choices—the pen, the essay, the paper—and that you are so quick to dismiss those who wouldn’t think of asking a secretary to type their writing, who wouldn’t ever choose to focus a composition class on the essays of Montaigne or Ozick or Pope, who couldn’t muster the hubris required to insist that students write with their own personal favorite technology.

Why do we have to choose? Not one literacy, but many. Not one tool, but many.

Who operates outside the field of your not-so-modest vision?

My colleague Marilyn Cooper—whose electron microscope of a mind pieces together the fragile DNA of arguments to form nuanced and subtle texts about the teaching of writing—works on an aqua, see-through Macintosh G3 that sits on a spray-painted, cast-off desk loaded down with pens and sets of architect’s blocks and crayons. Not one tool, but many.

My colleague Anne Wysocki crafts artful anti-essays by steaming rigid planks of argument over the flame of a white-hot intellect until they bend gracefully, aesthetically, to the forms of multimedia.

Your fear might prevent you from seeing the fine classical lines of texts that Anne fashions from channeled luminosity, dithered images, pixilated fonts, animated gifs; the dove joints she fits so precisely with space and image and form; the calculated cantilevering she constructs from the vigor of a line, the tenuity of shading, the silken trace of a modulated brush stroke.
You might not notice Vicki Crenshaw or Kristin Carlson or Aaron Weyenberg—unobtrusive students who, on a computer screen, sift and render the wonder, the confusion, the hilarity of human experience so skillfully and with such supple grace that the results suck the living academic breath right out of you in soft, wistful sighs.

You might not see Zhigang Wang or his Chinese friends who learn to read and write English in spaces so small and seemingly inconsequential that we often fail to recognize them as literacy-learning landscapes at all: the two-minute text of a Bible story read by an evangelizing church member, for-sale signs populating mall store windows, concert fliers, e-mail announcements thrown in the trash, recipes from a graduate student potluck dinner. Zhigang smoothes these texts, treasures them, turns them over and over, arranges and rearranges them, examines them for the insights they offer on the order of human experience. Then he anchors these bits of meaning to the rock of his own literacy—thousands of years of Chinese culture—and stands on a formation that stubbornly resists the conventional essayistic literacy you tout.

You might not see Nancy Barron, whose literacy practices and values—sedimented in a political understanding running deeper than the San Joaquin aquifer—are accented by the strange connected realities of East L.A. and Houghton, Michigan. The intricate unpacking of race theory that Nancy undertakes is shaped, in part, by her own experience as a Latina and, in part, by the history of the family narratives she inherits from Aguascalientes, Mexico, by way of Arizona and California. Her writing sculpts meaning from the bedrock of experience, not over the course of one lifetime or one essay, but over the span of generations, over the many tellings of multiple stories.

Not one literacy, many.

You might not notice Derek Juntunen who puffs on a blow tube to snug his wheelchair up to a computer station and then sends the breath of his body past a small opening to transfer letters onto a screen. Where else could Derek breathe the workings of his mind into existence on a two-dimensional surface? How else could he develop the analytical skills that make visible meaning from the living organic material of his own experience? What would we lose if he couldn’t teach others how he makes sense of this world?
Not one tool, many.

None of these writers works primarily with the essay as a form of engaged expression and reflection. Certainly, they do not adhere to the genre as Montaigne or Pope or Swift would recognize it.

Their worlds emit light waves that essays alone might not capture, so their writing seeks other means, other spectra, of expression. Their minds pursue other ways of ordering life.

And you might fail to pay attention to them because of this difference, fail to value their writer-designer-composer-pilgrim selves.

Instead, you might be wiping the nib of that pen, G. Doug. You might be distracted by "the slight rustle of paper," transported by the "smell of wet ink" as it dribbles out to form pale words on expensive cotton rag.

As your heart dwells on an essay elegantly penned by Rachel Orr, you might miss the beauty of the language/image/composition from Oscar Bay, or Escanaba, or Ishpeming, Michigan.

Here's the good news: we don't have to choose between pens and computers, between essays and other forms of reflective expression, between Rachel Orr and Anne Wysocki.

We know enough now to honor not one literacy, but many. Not one tool, but many.

Carole Maso writes, "nothing replaces this hand moving across the page, as it does now, intent on making a small mark and allowing it to stand on this longing surface" (70).

But print is not equal to good; essay is not equal to smart; and pen is not equal to artful. Lots and lots and lots of bad prose has been written with really good fountain pens.

And not everything composed on a computer comes out plastic. Some of it is smart, and cogent, and funny, and fascinating. Just like the people who write it.
Not one literacy, but many. Not one tool, but many.

You don’t have to fear multiplicity, G. Doug. You can appreciate essays and cherish fountain pens without worrying that intelligence and craft will vanish with you and the values you hold. You don’t have to turn everyone into you, everyone’s language into your language.

My smart engineering colleagues would say, “If your tool belt only has a hammer, every problem looks like a nail.”

Screens, too, can present a “longing surface,” can call forth cogent prose, careful thinking. Digital spaces can invite the precise stroke, the textured inscription, the evocative trace, the magnificently embroidered image.

These new surfaces and environments for making meaning are richly rendered in multiple dimensions. They are extensive. Neither you nor I ever have to worry about filling them, G. Doug. But those students born to the keyboard, the pressure pad, the joystick, the tongue mouse, the digital palette can begin wondrous work there, if we give them half an inch. And they can do so in other media too, in new ones we can’t imagine.

Many literacies, many tools, not one.

Carole Maso writes:

Wish: that the straight white male give in just a little more gracefully. Call in its Michael Douglases, its suspect Hollywood, its hurt feelings, its fear—move over some.

After your thousands of years of affirmative action, give someone else a chance—just a chance.

The wish is for gentleness. The wish is for allowances. (66)

Screw the allowances. Keep your pens and your essays. Move the hell over.

Coda: An Apology and An Explanation

My apology goes in advance to Professor G. Douglas Atkins. I suspect I’d like Professor Atkins. I am convinced he is a superb teacher, scholar, and writer—a good colleague. I don’t usually write in this way, especially to a colleague I don’t know. The experience has taken me by surprise. My
mother would not approve, but I have to admit to finding this response great fun to write. These things were liberating to say.

And that’s the point, I suppose. I am not writing to Professor Atkins personally. I am talking back to his proposal. I am also talking back to the people who make proposals such as this one, proposals that don’t recognize the value of other ways, other approaches, other voices.

So, I don’t really think Professor Atkins is a nib-licking, essay pimp, but I know that such people exist and that in the past they have made me—and some of my composition colleagues—feel bad about our own work.

I hear in this proposal the collective strains of established scholars—usually, but not always, men; usually, but not always, literary scholars—who imply that the work composition teachers do, with or without computer technology, is work to be dismissed, work that is done better, done smarter, by literary scholars or nonfiction writers or just about anyone else. I am talking back to them.

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Notes

1. This essay is a response to Atkins’ essay in JAC. The style of my response, and its primary message, is based on Maso’s essay “Rupture,” which appears in a collection featuring essays by literary writers about the technological innovations of our day. My thanks to her for showing the way and lending me the power of her voice. And my thanks to Danielle DeVoss for clueing me into a great writer.

Works Cited

