

SECOND EDITION

THE COMPOSITION OF
Our "selves"

MARCIA CURTIS

The Composition of Our “selves”

Second Edition

The Writing Program
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Marcia Curtis



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Finally, we invite all readers of *The Composition of Our "selves"* to join in future refinements and reconceptualizations of this course by suggesting other readings and writings to The 111 Team, Writing Program, 305 Bartlett Hall, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Massachusetts 01003 (E-Mail to Curtis @ acad.umass.edu).

Introduction

Although *The Composition of Our “selves”* is a collection of readings, the course it represents is in all respects a writing, not a reading, course. You will read the selections contained in this book, but you will not be expected to “learn” them, to memorize or be tested on them, the way you might be expected to learn the material in your sociology, history, or physics books.

The essays, memoirs, and short stories that fill these pages are all meant to offer you some ways to think about the power of language and writing that perhaps you have not thought of before. And so you will be asked to practice as you read them what one of these writers has called “connected knowing,” that is, the sort of knowing that comes to us when we put aside our own opinions for the moment and try to understand what a person is saying from his or her point of view. In other words, you will be asked to listen closely to these writers’ voices in order to hear the truths of their experiences, “truths” perhaps very different from your own.

On the other hand, the essays, memoirs, and short stories contained in this book are also meant to engage you in active dialogue with their authors. And so you will be asked to listen to them thoughtfully and then respond to their ideas with ideas of your own, drawing upon the truth of *your* experience and knowing that you will be listened to with equal care and thoughtfulness by other members of your class.

As a writer yourself, you will respond to the writers in this book through various forms of writing: questions you will ask and comments you will make in the margins of the text itself, “Exploratory Writings” you will follow, and longer essays you will develop out of your Exploratory Writing entries. Therefore, as you follow the curriculum set out for you in *The Composition of Our “selves,”* you will see that the writers contained in this book are not *the* writers in our course but simply the *first* writers in our course: the last word will be yours. Their writings only now—for now—make up *The Composition of Our “selves”*; soon your writings will fill nearly as many pages, and *The Composition of Our “selves”* will be yours.

The Readings

The readings you will encounter here are as diverse as the writers who composed them. There are short stories and memoirs, psychological case studies and sociological ethnographies, personal essays, academic essays, and political essays. The writers are poets, novelists, physicians, psychologists, journalists, teachers, and students like you. Their cultural and racial backgrounds are as diverse as their professional backgrounds; they range the political spectrum from “left” to “right.” They represent three generations of age and experience. But all of them are equally engaged in the attempt to interpret and make sense of themselves and the world through language. And all of them are similarly concerned with the power we have over language and the power language has over us: that is, with the degree to which we are *the Subjects* of the words we speak, constructing “truths” out of the world we daily encounter, and

the degree to which we are *subject to* the language that speaks through us and composes our “selves” as it does.

Marginal Questions & Connections

You will notice the margins of this book are wider than usual and headed with the phrase “Questions & Connections.” They have been set this way to invite you to make *The Composition of Our “selves”* yours from the start. Use these spaces to ask yourself and the author questions that arise for you out of the readings; use them to note connections you make with your own experiences and observations or with ideas expressed elsewhere in this text or in texts for your other courses; use them simply to summarize in your own words points the writer is making that seem especially insightful or questionable to you. Most important, establish a dialogue with these authors as you read them, a dialogue you can later expand in your Exploratory Writings, essays, and class discussions. The more you write in these margins, the more you will feel your own presence in the book. And the more present you are in your reading, the more rewarding your reading will be.

Exploratory Writings

Throughout *The Composition of Our “selves”* you will find various “Exploratory Writings” interspersed among the readings. Each set of Exploratory Writings contains two or more questions to prompt your thinking and writing about the respective readings, and to offer a structured approach to those readings. Some of the questions are short. Others are quite long, containing summaries of ideas from the readings and sometimes quotations from the readings before asking you to explore in your writing a particular line of thought. These longer questions are designed to help you become accustomed to the more exact and exacting sorts of writing assignments you can expect to receive in other college-level courses. They are also meant to give you a little extra help in comprehending some of the more difficult readings. And finally, many of the longest questions offer you models for beginning “academic” essays and for weaving quotations from other texts into your own. In fact, some long questions could function as ready-made introductions to essays, with your own answers making up the essays’ bodies and conclusions.

Many of the Exploratory Writing questions are also similar to the sorts of questions you might find on essay examinations for other courses, and answering them will no doubt provide good practice for essay-style exams. Exploratory Writings are intended, however, to function quite differently in this course. You will *not* be asked to do the Exploratory Writings *after* completing your readings, as you would be asked in a typical test situation. Nor will your answers be evaluated as “right” or “wrong.” Instead, you will work through the Exploratory Writings *as* you read, moving back and forth between reading and writing in a rhythm that

seems most helpful and comfortable to you. For there are no “right” or “wrong” answers to these questions; there are only your responses to them and the dialogue you establish with the various writers through the Exploratory Writing medium.

The questions posed to you in the Exploratory Writings delineate diverse routes of exploration, different ways into the readings that you might not have taken before. Each question represents the sort of questions readers ask themselves in order to take charge of their own reading experience and enter into an active relationship with another writer’s text, rather than struggling to memorize every word before them or passively floating with the tide of another writer’s thoughts.

Therefore, you will find some of the Exploratory Writing questions encouraging you to explore what might be called “multiple interpretations of the text.” That is to say, you will be asked to write from perspectives or points of view different from your own: from the point of view of the author, or perhaps one of his or her subjects or characters, or perhaps from the point of view of one of your own friends or relatives whose opinions differ from yours. Thus you will practice “connected knowing” and, at the same time, discover the new meanings, new “interpretations” that can open up to you when you engage in this mode of thought.

While such questions will ask you to walk for a while in another’s experiential shoes, other Exploratory Writing questions will ask you to test their “truths” against your own and add your “truths” to those presented. Together the two modes of thinking—the willing suspension of your own beliefs, on the one hand, and the willing assertion of those beliefs, on the other—will expand the meanings reading can offer and simultaneously lead you to explore a new direction in thinking and writing. At the end of that “new direction” will be the essay you will write, an essay drawn, not from the *readings*, but from *your readings*, your experience as a reader, thinker, and writer.

Thus the essays you compose for this course will develop directly out of the Exploratory Writings, but they will be entirely your essays, essays you develop out of your own encounters with the readings through the Exploratory Writings. For in the end you will find that the Exploratory Writing questions do not simply represent the sorts of questions *readers* ask themselves as they read; they also represent the sorts of questions *writers* ask themselves as they read their own as well as others’ texts. They are the questions that reveal to us a very special “truth”: the deepest meanings are neither “hidden” within the stories, memoirs, and essays we read, nor are they given to us in answers; the deepest meanings a text can offer us are “constructed” in our own acts of questioning.

Essays

Because the essays you write for this course will develop out of your responses to the Exploratory Writings, it is essential that you give the Exploratory Writings their full value. Spend time on each question, writing as much as you possibly can; moving back and forth

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between reading and writing, gathering from the texts and discovering within yourself all the ideas available to you; setting down in written form all thoughts and associations, however self-evident or far-fetched they may seem. And do not worry about grammar, spelling, or punctuation as you respond in your Exploratory Writings. These are the places where private, exploratory thinking takes place, and thinking is often a messy task!]

In most cases, your Exploratory Writings will contain the seed of your final essay; in some cases, an Exploratory Writing will contain an essay’s first or “rough” draft. Therefore, as you move toward completing the Exploratory Writings for a given unit and beginning its essay, be sure to read through your responses carefully looking for that seed or draft of an idea that you want to communicate publicly through your essay.

As you do begin to transform those initial private thoughts into the more public form of an essay, your *writing* will be treated as the *reading* that, indeed, it is becoming. When you have completed your “rough” draft, you will be asked to perform something called a “self assessment,” a selection of which is offered in the “Self and Reader Assessment” appendix of this book. Similar to an Exploratory Writing, it will ask you a number of questions about your own writing, questions intended to open your draft to new perspectives, interpretations and lines of development that you might follow as you “revise,” that is, as you compose a second, “midprocess” draft of your essay. At this rough-to-midprocess stage in the composing process, your essay will still be essentially private, and you will be led, through the self assessment, to be your own reader and actually *re-see* your writing as you *re-vise* it.

Once you have completed your mid-process draft, your essay will have assumed a more public form. At this stage, you will perform, together with a peer reader, a “reader assessment,” designed to let you test your writing’s impact upon at least one actual representative of your intended readership and, again, to revise your essay according to the information you receive. It is now, as you compose the last draft of your essay, that you will “edit” it, correcting any remaining grammatical or spelling mistakes, polishing your sentences, proof-reading for possible typing errors, and generally giving your essay its finished, fully public form.

The *Oeuvre*

As you proceed through *The Composition of Our “selves,”* each of the first five units will take you through the full composing process, from initial notes to final, edited draft. Unit 6—“*The Oeuvre*”—will mark the true end of your own composing process; the product of a semester’s worth of reading, thinking, and writing; the complete collection of all your essays, your “*oeuvre*.” This project will be explained in detail in Unit 6. For now it is enough to know that the *oeuvre* will offer you opportunity both to reflect upon and celebrate the writer you have constructed out of the writings you have composed.

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COMPOSING A STORY

CONSTRUCTING A SELF

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Preface

Unit 1, “Composing a Story, Constructing a Self,” is, in a variety of ways, an introduction. The essay you will write for this unit will serve as an introduction of yourself to your fellow writers in the class. But before composing your introductory essay, you will be introduced to four other writers—Astrea Young, John Edgar Wideman, Gianni Harris, Judith Ortiz Cofer, and Bernard Cooper—and you will have the opportunity to experience the ways in which these writers have chosen to introduce themselves.

As you prepare to introduce yourself, psychologist Maureen O’Hara and writer Walter Truett Anderson will also introduce you to new, “postmodern” ways of writing and even thinking about the self and what we mean when we speak of our “selves,” our “identities.”

“Welcome to the Postmodern World”

O’Hara and Anderson open their essay, entitled “Welcome to the Postmodern World,” by introducing to us three individuals, all of whom are seeking, through a wide range of spiritual, therapeutic and social experiences, a True Self, a True Identity. “All of these people are,” as O’Hara and Anderson call them, “shoppers in the great marketplace of realities that the contemporary Western world has become.” Even as they shop for their one True Identity or Self, they browse through and try on numerous identities, numerous selves, thus experiencing the thoroughly postmodern consciousness that no one True Self, in fact, exists.

Our identities are defined by our beliefs about the nature of the world and our own place in it. In the postmodern world as O’Hara and Anderson describe it, “people do not so much believe as have beliefs,” in much the same way we *have* possessions—clothes,

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cars, books—that we use, store away, or discard at will. To help us understand the implications of the postmodern world view, O’Hara and Anderson also describe the “premodern” and “modern” worlds that preceded it. People of the “premodern” world, they explain, did not choose among beliefs and identities, quite simply because they did not know such choices could be made. They saw their own images reflected everywhere around them, in nature, in society and in people who looked, spoke, and thought as they did. They knew no difference. To each individual, the natural and social systems in turn assigned a “clear role and reason for being,” a True and unquestionable place in the natural and social order. And individuals sought to make nothing different of themselves.

According to O’Hara and Anderson’s narrative, as technological advances in transportation and communication brought people of different social systems, traditions and beliefs into contact, the “modern” world was born. Citizens of this new world now knew difference. They knew that different people held different beliefs, and that beliefs about Truth were matters of choice. Yet still they believed that a single Truth existed and that their own choice was the True and Right one. Matters of choice thus also became matters of conflict, between societies and, increasingly often, among members of the same society.

Finally, O’Hara and Anderson tell us, “a society enters the postmodern age when it loses faith in absolute truth” and regards all beliefs as equally valid “social constructions of reality,” “stories constructed out of the human need...to provide order to what otherwise would be the chaos of our lives.” It is not an easy age to be in, nor are we yet in it fully. Though most of us sometimes enjoy the freedom to pick and choose our identities—to make something of ourselves—we often still cling to the modern age hope that one of the identities we choose will be our True one. Often too (or perhaps I should say “too often”), when our sense of ourselves and our world is deeply shaken by the overwhelming plurality of choices surrounding us, instead of embracing the possibilities they offer, we become caught in modern age conflict with groups and individuals who appear to have made choices different from our own, whose stories of life are differently constructed.

O’Hara and Anderson intend few value judgments: they present “Welcome to the Postmodern World” not as a prescription for life but as a description of it as experienced by contemporary Western cultures. Nor do they claim that, if we ever should fully

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acknowledge our religious, moral, political and even scientific beliefs to be but “stories constructed out of the human need to understand,” we would then stop constructing such stories. For “the stories are all we have,” they say, “in a sense, they are all we are.” And, in that same sense, “Welcome to the Postmodern World” is but another story.

The Other Stories

Writers are by definition story-tellers, and, in telling their stories, all the writers in Unit 1 explore issues of identity even as, in composing their stories, they simultaneously construct themselves and introduce those “selves” to us. As you read, you might find it interesting to think about not only the *particular* differences among these obviously very diverse writers but also the similarities among the *structures* or *patterns* of their experiences—and, just as important, the similarities to your own.

Writer Astrea Young, author of “Generations,” is a graduate of the University of Massachusetts Amherst and a former member of our writing class. Her story—really two stories—is drawn from her childhood on Martha’s Vineyard, a small island off the Massachusetts coast where her family, of old “Yankee stock,” has lived for “generations.” As you read Young’s story, you might think about the ways in which this particular writer transforms everyday artifacts into symbols, and uses those symbols to give coherence to her narrative and a sense of continuity, even constancy, to her life.

The next two stories you will read are also both by writers associated with the University of Massachusetts. The first of these is by John Edgar Wideman, who teaches fiction writing here. “Brother Tate,” a short excerpt from Wideman’s novel *Sent for You Yesterday*, tells the story of a loving relationship made all the fuller by the loss it represents. Just that sort of paradox, in fact, stands at the heart of this tale. Brother Tate, the story’s main character, is an albino black man: “But he wasn’t white, not white like snow or paper, not even white like the people who called us black.” Brother, the narrator tells us, had no color. He was the absence of color—by usual definition, the characteristic of black. And Brother, known in the neighborhood for his strange color and peculiar silence, had not spoken a word for nearly sixteen years, since the death of his young son. Yet as Brother’s whiteness wasn’t really white, his silence wasn’t really silent: “Brother made noises all the

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time...cracking his knuckles, patting his feet, boogeying so outrageously in the middle of the floor you'd hear the silent music making him wiggle his narrow hips and pop his fingers and wag his head like the sanctified sisters moaning their way to heaven.” It is this paradoxical man to whom the narrator finds himself linked, “by stories, by his memories of a dead son, by my own memories of a silent, scat-singing albino man who was my uncle’s best friend.”

“Brother Tate” is followed by Gianni Harris’s “Dragonflies.” Like Young, Harris, too, graduated from UMass and was once a student in our course. His “Dragonflies” represents another story about stories: stories that link this young narrator to the people and countryside of New Orleans, where he was born, and memories that both bind him to and separate him from the self of his childhood. Also an artist, Harris paints for us two landscapes in words. One is from his boyhood recollections; the other is the same setting revisited by a nearly grown man. There’s a change, no doubt, but whether the change is in the scene itself or in the writer’s varying constructions of it we can’t be sure. The surest evidence Harris can give is in the elusive dragonflies of his story’s title.

Born in Puerto Rico, Judith Ortiz Cofer moved with her family to New Jersey in 1955, when she was “not quite three.” Her “Silent Dancing” is in many ways a story of conflicts arising in a family as its members struggle to become—and not to become—assimilated into the new culture that surrounds them. It is also, however, about a writer’s struggle to fill the gaps of silence in her family narrative and, hence, in her own life. Therefore, as you’ll see, while all these writers are of different generations and cultures, Cofer has much in common with the others, perhaps most especially Astrea Young.

Finally, Bernard Cooper relates an experience that lasted barely a minute or two but the memory of which would last a lifetime. Sent by his father to purchase a newspaper, the eight-year-old boy encounters two high-fashion women, with Adam’s apples. Without the words to express it, he understands they are transvestites, “drag queens.” He understands something else, too: “Everything I had taken for granted up to that moment—the curve of the earth, the heat of the sun, the reliability of my own eyes—had been squeezed out of me.” He had visited the postmodern world, and his own universe would be changed forever.

WELCOME TO THE POSTMODERN WORLD

Maureen O'Hara and Walter Truett Anderson

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↓ Jerry feels overwhelmed, anxious, fragmented and confused. He disagrees with people he used to agree with and aligns himself with people he used to argue with. He questions his sense of reality and frequently asks himself what it all means.

He has had all kinds of therapeutic and growth experiences: gestalt, rebirthing, Jungian analysis, holotropic breathwork, bioenergetics, the Course in Miracles, 12-step recovery groups, Zen meditation, Ericksonian hypnosis. He has been to sweat lodges, to the Rajneesh ashram in Poona, to the Wicca festival in Devon. He is in analysis again, this time with a self-psychologist. Although he is endlessly on the lookout for new ideas and experiences, he keeps saying that he wishes he could simplify his life. He talks about buying land in Oregon. He loved *Dances With Wolves*. Jerry is like so many well-educated professionals who come in for psychotherapy these days. But he is not quite the typical client: he is a well-established psychotherapist. He conducts stress-reduction workshops nationwide; his current foray into self-psychology analysis is another attempt to find some conceptual coherence for his own work—and, of course, for his own life.

↓ Alec is also a client, but not a therapist. He's 42, single, and for most of his life has felt lonely and alienated. He's never cared much about politics, considers himself an agnostic, and has never found a hobby or interest he would want to pursue consistently. He says he doesn't think he really has a self at all. He's had two stints of psychotherapy; both ended inconclusively, leaving him still with chronic, low-grade depression.

Nowadays he's feeling a little better about himself. He has started attending a local meeting of Adult Children of Alcoholics. People at the meetings seem to understand and validate his pain; he's making friends there and believes he "belongs" for the first time since he left the military. But he confesses to his therapist that he feels "sort of squirrely" about it because he's not an adult child of an alcoholic. He is faking the pathological label in order to be accepted by the community, and he's not too sure he really buys their 12-step ideology, either.

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Then there's Beverly, who comes into therapy torn between two life-styles and two identities. In the California city where she goes to college, she is a radical feminist; on visits to her Midwestern home town she is a nice, sweet, square, conservative girl. The therapist asks her when she feels most like herself. She says, “When I'm on the airplane.”

[All these people are shoppers in the great marketplace of realities that the Contemporary Western world has become: here a religion, there an ideology, over there a life-style.] They, and millions like them, browse among a vast array of possibilities and in the process change not only their beliefs but their beliefs about belief—their ideas about what truth is and where it is found. They change not only their identities (I'm a woman, I'm a Jew, I'm a Jungian, I'm a liberal, I'm a Libra) but their ideas about what identity means. Some enjoy the freedom that can be found in this, some try to escape from the freedom and some are nearly destroyed by it. Meanwhile, new products keep arriving at the marketplace. If old-time religion doesn't do the job for you, perhaps Deep Ecology will.

Without quite noticing it, we have moved into [a new world, one created by the cumulative effect of pluralism, democracy, religious freedom, consumerism, mobility and increasing access to news and entertainment.] This is the world described as “postmodern” to denote its difference from the modern world most of us were born into. A new social consciousness is emerging in this new world and touching the lives of all kinds of people who are not the least bit interested in having a new kind of social consciousness. We are all being forced to see that there are many beliefs, multiple realities, an exhilarating but daunting profusion of worldviews to suit every taste. We can choose among these, but we cannot choose not to make choices.

Prophets of modernism used to predict that, with progress, old beliefs would simply wither away. But that hasn't happened: ancient traditions, from astrology to Zoroastrianism, are still around. Some contemporary prophets of neoprimitivism, fresh from a weekend of shamanistic drum beating, actually express their hope that the old beliefs will triumph and the modern ones will disappear. But that doesn't seem to be happening either; science and modernism are still alive and well. What does seem to be happening is that belief itself is changing. People do not so much

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believe as have beliefs. Look back over the brief anecdotes above—the stories of Jerry and Alec and Beverly—and you can see them moving through different belief systems, cultures, lifestyles, inhabiting them in rather tentative ways. You may disapprove of them for this, as they often disapprove of themselves, but it is hard to imagine a contemporary world in which people didn't or couldn't shop around among different realities.

Frequently these cultural/ideological/religious consumer choices become the “problems” of psychotherapy. They underlie family conflicts and identity crises; they generate deep uncertainties about what—if anything—is real.

The shopping is playful for some, deadly serious for others. People sample from the postmodern smorgasbord of belief systems looking for The Truth and hope it will help them to discover their own True Selves. Confused by the staggering variety of beliefs from which they may choose, clients come to therapy hoping for some sure guidelines. But frequently the therapist is as confused as they are.

People in “premodern” societies had little need to struggle with the kinds of questions about identity and belief that bedevil most of us. The premodern mind, whatever its pains and sorrows, saw itself mirrored in every detail of its world. There were psychic anchors everywhere: in the myths that explained the cosmos; in the environment of signs, symbols and metaphors that gave form to thought; in the rituals and customs that shaped decision and action; in the social organization that assigned to every person a clear role and reason for being.

It is quite impossible for the contemporary mind, no matter how strong the romantic tug in that direction, to return to such a premodern consciousness. We can playfully explore primitive ritual and art, but we do it with a 20th-century awareness of other rituals, other art forms, other ways of being. Nor can we ever truly understand what it was like to live in a world in which people did not have to *choose* what to believe—indeed, could *not* choose—what to hold valuable, how to be.

As long as there was limited contact with outside influences bringing different realities, premodern societies remained stable; some persisted relatively unchanged for thousands of years and produced generation after generation of individuals congruent with their cultures. Inevitably, however, contact with other cultures and