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## Chopped to Pieces, I Write Myself Together

*James P. Burns*

### Abstract

In this paper, the author reflects on being a writer in the academy in dialogue with writers who have been instrumental in the author's academic work: James Baldwin, George Orwell, Eduardo Galeano, and Michel Foucault. The author first contextualizes the paper in the current historical moment, characterized by resurgent authoritarianism, the COVID-19 pandemic, and mass non-violent protests in response to the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor to reiterate the importance of academic writers as public intellectuals. The author then reflects on the messy affects of writing in the academy, particularly as a pre-tenure faculty member, through four purposes, proposed by Orwell, that motivate most writers: sheer egoism, an aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse, and political purpose. The author concludes that academic writing comprises an aesthetics and ethics of the self as well as a political project of self-cultivation, the embodiment of truth, and care for the world.

*Keywords:* academic writing; technologies of the self; *parrhēsia*; aesthetics; art of living

### Introduction

Why does one write, if not to put one's pieces together? From the moment we enter school or church, education chops us into pieces: it teaches us to divorce soul from body and mind from heart. The fishermen of the Columbian coast must be

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learned doctors of ethics and morality, for they invented the word *sentipensante*, feeling-thinking, to define language that speaks the truth. (Galeano, 1992, p. 121)

When I submitted the first draft of this article in the late summer of 2019, the world seemed different. Discourses of temporal difference, may, however, obfuscate or disavow the underlying conditions of possibility of the present. One year later, the systemic shock of the COVID-19 pandemic and mass protests sparked by the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor have rendered a myriad of preexisting historic injustices even more grotesquely visible. My hope in these times, perhaps best expressed by Baldwin (1965/1998) through his prophetic writings on U.S. race relations, is that the crises we confront will illuminate the history on which many white people find themselves “impaled...incapable of seeing or changing themselves, or the world” (p. 723). In terms of education, specifically academic writing, the historicization of oneself and the world in a stubbornly ahistoric socio-political milieu (Pinar, 2012) resonates with a fundamental tenet of curriculum theory: self and social reconstruction.

Academics currently live, work, teach, and write in, and against, an era characterized by resurgent authoritarianism, economic precarity, a cult of irrationalism and hypermasculine violence, and impending environmental collapse. Globally, I see Eco’s (2001) *Ur-Fascism*,<sup>1</sup> an ever-present set of characteristics, around any one of which a “Fascist nebula will begin to coagulate” (p. 78), in operation. From post-truth propaganda to intolerance of dissent and academic inquiry—for example, attacks on gender studies (American Association of University Professors, 2018)—the academy faces some significant, perhaps existential challenges in the United States and globally.

Considering the importance of academic writing to the health of intellectual life, itself precarious in a society historically suspicious of intellectuals and driven by the practical social engineering demands of the business-minded (Hofstadter, 1962; Pinar, 2006), the question of what it means to be a writer in the academy, while always important, assumes greater urgency. Much as the COVID pandemic has magnified numerous institutional disparities, the responses of many universities to COVID have illuminated the academy’s complicity with the neoliberal project. What might a disaster capitalist (Klein, 2007) response by university administrators and governing boards to the COVID pandemic mean for writing as an expression of humanist inquiry and the embodiment of ethics of justice? As a pre-tenure faculty member, I often struggle with the tensions inherent in the technocratic obsession with metrics that purport to assign a market value to my scholarly worth. I fear that the increasingly gigified nature of the material conditions of academic work is further eroding already weakened principles of academic freedom, shared governance, and what remains of institutional commitments to writing as a political practice using, as Galeano (1992) suggests, language that speaks the truth.

In this essay, I engage with the messy affects of writing in the academy by grappling with a fundamental question: why and for whom do I write? I structure

my inquiry around four general motives—sheer egoism, aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse, and political purpose—which Orwell (1946/2005) suggests drive all writers in varying degrees according to the times in which they live. Framing this essay in Orwell's (1946/2005) analysis of writers' purposes and motivations, I place myself in dialogue with Orwell, James Baldwin, and Michel Foucault. These writers, each in their own way, discuss writing as a political, aesthetic, and moral practice, a way of being in the world deeply entangled with the subjective and the social, and an ethical commitment to seek and embody truth. Based on my engagement with Orwell, Baldwin, and Foucault, whose work has influenced my own, I understand writing as an art of self-cultivation in relationship with others through which I situate myself historically, socially, and politically and act on my emerging self-understanding toward reconstruction of the social world. I begin with Orwell's (1946/2005) first motive, sheer egoism.

### Sheer Egoism

Writers, Baldwin (1993) notes, “are said to be extremely egotistical and demanding” and their work, while they remain alive, “fatally entangled” with their personal fortunes and misfortunes, personalities, and the “social facts and attitudes” of their time (p. 182). For Baldwin (1993), the social facts and attitudes that inhere in his work revolve around “the question of color,” which, in the United States, “operates to hide the graver questions of the self” (p. xiii). Orwell (1946/2005) attributes writers' egoism to their “desire to seem clever, to be talked about, and to be remembered after death,” and he dismissed as “humbug” any pretension that egoism isn't a strong motivation to write (p. 4). He also suggests that serious writers comprise a “minority of gifted, willful people who are determined to live their own lives to the end” whereas many people tend to “abandon individual ambition” and succumb to the drudgery of living for others (Orwell, 1946/2005, p. 5). Both Baldwin (1993) and Orwell (1946/2005) imply that writers live in an egoistic paradox, which emerges from several conflicting, and perhaps generative, desires: to be immersed in their own subjectivities; to be affirmed by others; to attain immortality through being discussed, remembered, and even studied by others long after death; to live their own lives; and to embody truth as a moral practice.

The tensions and contradictions inherent in the writer's egoistic paradox flourish in the academy, which deftly plays to the professorial ego using both enticements and “subtle tactics of the sanction” (Foucault, 2015, p. 6)—promotion, tenure, merit pay, statistical hierarchization and differentiation—to leverage the production of specific scholarly subjectivities. I also sense a contradiction between the pretense of the academic pursuit of truth and post-truth discourses that resemble “Newspeak” (Orwell, 1949), the goal of which is to “limit the instruments available to complex and critical reasoning” (Eco, 2001, p. 86). Con-

sidering those contradictions, my integrity as a writer must, as Pinar (2006) suggests, include introspection into myself and principled critique of the institutions through which I move and of my own academic field.

Which brings me to the other side of the egoistic paradox: the importance of subjectivity to my ontology of writing. Interiority is a crucial thread through Baldwin's work, which he characterizes as a "state of being alone" (1962/1998, p. 669). For a writer, the state of being alone is "not meant to bring to mind merely a rustic musing beside some silver lake" (Baldwin, 1962/1998, p. 669). Rather, the aloneness of a writer is a state in which one contemplates truly existential questions:

The aloneness of which I speak is much more like the fearful aloneness of birth or death.... The states of birth, suffering, love, and death are extreme states: extreme, universal, and inescapable. We all know this, but we would rather not know it. The artist is present to correct the delusions to which we fall prey in our attempts to avoid this knowledge. (Baldwin, 1962/1998, p. 669)

As a writer in the academy, I feel great resonance with the state of aloneness described by Baldwin (1962/1998) as a politics of writing that troubles the intransigence of common sense, which so often reinscribes the injustices of the past onto the present.

Indeed, Foucault (2005) characterizes self-care as a conversion to self, a form of return that he explains through the metaphor of navigation, or a journey. The cultivation of self-knowledge is a technology of the self, a "privilege-duty, a gift-obligation that ensures our freedom while forcing us to take ourselves as the object of all our diligence" (Foucault, 1984/1988, p. 47). Thus, the ancient art of living associates care of one's body with the care of one's soul through self-examination of the principles inherent in the activities that one embodies, particularly writing. Foucault (quoted in Martin, Gutman, & Hutton, 1988) describes a hermeneutics of technologies of the self, which function in conflict with technologies of production, sign systems, and power, as practices that

permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (p. 18)

Writing, therefore, is a constant, complex "activity of speaking and writing in which the work of oneself on oneself and communication with others" are linked into "a true social practice" (Foucault, 1984/1988, p. 51), which forms a "system of reciprocal obligations" (p. 54). During the Hellenistic era, writing became an essential technology of the self that included "taking notes on oneself to be reread, writing treatises and letters to friends to help them, and keeping notebooks in order to reactivate for oneself the truths one needed" (Foucault quoted in Martin et al., 1988, p. 27). Unlike the renunciation of the self that characterized Christian asceticism, classical philosophy privileged "the progressive consideration of the

self, or mastery over oneself, obtained not through the renunciation of reality but through the acquisition and assimilation of truth” (Foucault quoted in Martin et al., 1988, p. 35). For me, academic writing, emerges from an ancient, complex set of practices associated with the art of living through which we care for, cultivate, and come to know ourselves both in solitude and with the guidance of others.

I often wonder if writing as a social practice is in danger of disappearing. It is possible, absent the context of his broad body of work, to misinterpret Orwell’s (1946/2005) suggestion that writers are motivated partially by sheer egoism and dismiss writing, and writers, as the windows through which we see and are seen. Considering the systems of governmentality formed by the “contact between technologies of domination of others and those of the self” (Foucault quoted in Martin et al., 1988, p. 19), I have developed a deeper appreciation for writing as a social practice of self-cultivation based on a system of reciprocal obligations. The complexities of subjectivity connect with Orwell’s (1946/2005) second motive to write, aesthetic enthusiasm, which signifies writing as an artform entangled with an aesthetics of the self.

### Aesthetic Enthusiasm

The return to the self through the act of writing signals writing as an ethics and aesthetics of the self, which transcends superficial contemporary expressions of self-help, authenticity, and “getting back to oneself” (Foucault, 2005, p. 251). The sense of writing as an aesthetic practice was perhaps best exemplified during the Hellenistic Age when “writing prevailed, and real dialectic passed to correspondence,” and care for oneself “became linked to a constant writing activity” (Foucault quoted in Martin et al., 1988, p. 27). It is that sense of writing that Foucault (2005) suggests has remained elusive in the modern era despite efforts to revive it. Part of writing as an aesthetics of the self lies in the pleasure derived from the intimacy of writing as a social practice, particularly the relationship “between the care of the self and philosophical love, or the relation to the master” (Foucault quoted in Martin et al., 1988, p. 26), which revealed the *ars erotica* imbricated with the cultivation of the self through writing. For example, Marcus Aurelius, in a letter from 144-45 CE to his master, Fronto, described his activities, health, mood, and conscience during a rural retreat to put Aurelius “in contact” with himself, and he expressed his love for Fronto in closing (Foucault quoted in Martin et al., 1988, p. 29).

Similarly, Baldwin (1993) discusses the aesthetics of writing as a continuous practice of self-examination:

I still believe that the unexamined life is not worth living: and I know that self-delusion, in the service of no matter what small or lofty cause, is a price no writer can afford. His subject is himself and the world and it requires every ounce of stamina he can summon to attempt to look on himself and the world as they are. (p. xii)

The necessity for a writer to live an examined life resonates with the sense of writing as an aesthetics of the self and Baldwin's (1962/1998) characterization of the writer as "that incorrigible disturber of the peace" (p. 669) with whom all societies have historically battled. Much as Foucault (2008) suggests that civil society is a governmental technology predicated on economic logics, Baldwin (1962/1998) portrays the purpose of society as maintaining order and habituating the people to traditions from which they derive their identity and, thus, governability. The writer's responsibility to society, and writing as an aesthetic act, is to "never cease warring with" society, for society's sake and for the sake of the writer (Baldwin, 1962/1998, p. 670).

Aesthetic enthusiasm, for Orwell (1946/2005), can reflect the "perception of beauty in the external world"; "pleasure in the impact of one sound on another, in the firmness of good prose or the rhythm of a good story"; and the "desire to share an experience which one feels is valuable and ought not to be missed" (Orwell, 1946/2005, p. 5). Importantly, Orwell (1946/2005) expressed the goal of his political writing as the elevation of "political writing into an art form," and he could not write "if it were not also an aesthetic experience" in which he took pleasure (p. 8). Thus, as an aesthetic practice, writing, by seeking a more complex understanding of personal and social history, can reveal the beauty of the world. Foucault (2003) might characterize the revelatory power of writing as genealogical inquiry that can uncover knowledges and traditions that have been eliminated from academic institutions as unsophisticated, non-erudite, and inconvenient to partial, yet totalizing white Western narratives. Baldwin (1962/1998) similarly embodies a politics of writing through which the aesthetic experience of writing helps one discover "that life is tragic, and, *therefore*, unutterably beautiful" (p. 671). Through my own writing, I have learned that beauty can exist in the tragedy of the truth, specifically in the stories of resistance and counter-conduct that we can uncover through our academic work. Further, part of the beauty of writing lies, paradoxically, in the willingness to speak the truth about ourselves, which is typically "at variance with what we wish to be" (Baldwin, 1962/1998, p. 671).

Writing as an aesthetic practice integral to the art of living, thus, forms a "whole field of experience" including detailed introspection and the development of a relationship "between writing and vigilance" in which one pays attention to the "nuances of life" (Foucault quoted in Martin et al., 1988, p. 28). Care of the self and the art of living are intertwined in a relationship to the self that is simultaneously imbricated with the presence of others who help us situate ourselves in the world and provoke us to act ethically (Foucault, 2005). The aesthetic impulse that I seek to cultivate transcends the superficial, commercialized sense of "finding myself" or accumulating a "bucket list" of pleasurable experiences and their associated artifacts. I do not seek to use writing instrumentally to quantify my worth to "the field" as an academic writer. Rather, I am attempting to embody an aesthetics of the self as an ethic of self-care and self-cultivation through a practice

of writing not merely for others, but in relationship with others who can guide me toward ethical action in the world. The practice of writing is an act of vigilance, of attending to myself as an ethics of caring for others and the world, which is entangled with an impulse to situate myself historically, to which I now turn.

### Historical Impulse

To enact an ethics of the self requires an understanding of oneself in the context of history. One of the tragedies associated with times like those in which we currently live is the historic inability to transcend such times. Instead, the discursive lack of historicity often results in the reinscription of the past on the present and the future. For example, present phenomena such as post-truth, authoritarianism, and police violence against persons of color emerge from extensive intersected histories. Yet, an ahistoric presentism often afflicts social, political, and educational discourses, which reduces the complexities of the present to a “flattened never-ending ‘now’” (Pinar, 2012, p. 227). Baldwin (1965/1998) reminds us, however, that history

does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally *present* in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities and our aspirations. (p. 723)

Thus, we can see the disavowal of the history white supremacy in discourses from “all lives matter” and “personal responsibility” to the devotion of many to neo-Confederate iconography, which purports that symbols such as the Confederate flag and statues of Confederate leaders are monuments to cultural heritage rather than to slavery and white ethnonationalism. In contrast to historical disavowal, Baldwin (1993) suggests that the aesthetic endeavor of an examined life requires a willingness “to free ourselves of the myth of America” (p. 11), a difficult task in a country that distrusts intellectuals precisely because they threaten to complicate or destroy that myth.

Orwell’s (1946/2005) historical impulse to write, and his political purpose, were contextualized in his experiences with British colonialism, fighting against Fascism in Spain, the aftermath of World War II, and the emerging Cold War. He wrote not to catalog facts and events, but to reconcile his “ingrained likes and dislikes with the essentially public, non-individual activities” that each age forces on all of humanity (p. 9). Orwell (1946/2005) also considered his historical impulse to write imbricated with the “construction of language,” which raised, for him, the “problem of truthfulness” (p. 9). Thus, Orwell’s (1949) “Newspeak” illuminated the danger of post-truth politics more than four decades before playwright Steve Tesich coined the term “post-truth” in 1992.

My scholarly interest in the effects of technologies of institutional power an-

imates my historical impulse to write. Foucault's (2003) method and tactic of genealogy has, therefore, inspired my politics of writing over the years. Genealogy couples "scholarly erudition and local memories, which allows us to constitute a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of that knowledge in contemporary tactics" (Foucault, 2003, p. 8). I have found genealogy crucial to my understanding of the production of knowledges that effect power, and also to excavate local knowledges—"what people know" (Foucault, 2003, p. 8)—which have been institutionally subjugated. The pursuit of writing as an aesthetic genealogical project in search of a more complex, truthful understanding of the present requires, as Baldwin (1993) suggests, questioning tradition. Genealogy as a method and a historical and political project illuminates the conditions of possibility that produce the present, which can help us see, as Orwell (1946/2005) suggests, not only things as they really are, but how the present came to be. Excavating different voices, knowledges, and memories resonates with an aesthetics of the self and may, as Baldwin (1965/1998) concludes, assess how history has subjectively formed us and recreate ourselves "according to a principle more humane and more liberating" (p. 723). Through such a project, which is inherently political, we might, in the language of curriculum theory, reconstruct ourselves and contribute to historical change.

### Political Purpose

We live, as Orwell (1946/2005) described his own time, in a "tumultuous, revolutionary age" (p. 4). At the very least, the current times have the potential to become such an age, hopefully in pursuit of a truly just society. Taken together, Orwell's (1946/2005) four impulses to write, sheer egoism, aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse, and political purpose, "must war against one another" and "fluctuate from person to person and from time to time" (p. 6). As a police officer in Burma, Orwell developed a hatred of imperialism; his impoverishment evoked his awareness of class struggle; and the rise of Hitler, participation in the resistance during the Spanish Civil War, and the Soviet counter-revolution illuminated the threat of totalitarianism. The times during which Orwell (1946/2005) lived impelled him to write for a political purpose, and he concluded: "It seems to me nonsense, in a period like our own, to think that one can avoid writing of such subjects" (p. 8). To avoid confronting the existential crises we currently face would be to abdicate my ethical and political responsibility as a public intellectual to others.

Baldwin's vast political project dealt with myriad aspects of race relations, both internationally and in the United States, a particularly interesting aspect of which was the complex relationship between the North and the South. His observation about race as an entanglement of power and sex (Baldwin, 1993), an overt reference to lynching and rape as a technology of domination, are as relevant today as ever. That observation reflects Baldwin's (1993) own genealogical thinking

through which present issues—police terror against communities of color; health, educational, and housing discrimination; economic dispossession; mass incarceration; misogyny; and the epidemic of violence perpetrated against Black Trans Women—emerged through technologies of power, including the persistence of academic discourses that sought to scientifically rationalize racial hierarchies (see Foucault, 1970/1994). Baldwin's (1993) politics of writing further extends to the "extremely dangerous luxury" in which Northern white people indulge: the illusion that "because they fought on the right side during the Civil War, and won, they have earned the right merely to deplore what is going on in the South" (p. 69). That political observation was also expressed by Martin Luther King, Junior's (1963/2000) disappointment with the white moderate "more devoted to 'order' than to justice" (p. 96). That critique remains pertinent today, particularly among elite establishment liberals who continue to deplore police violence and racism but engage in purely performative acts in support of racial justice.

To summarize the politics of writing that inspires me, I return to Foucault (quoted in Martin et al., 1988), who noted the Hellenistic linkage between writing as self-care and political activity. One tension that emerges from writing as a technology of the self and political activity centers on the question: "When is it better to turn away from political activity and concern oneself with oneself?" (Foucault quoted in Martin et al., 1988, p. 26). As a pre-tenure faculty member, I do sometimes struggle to balance my political engagement with the need to return to and care for myself so that I can continue meaningful engagement in the world. Thus, writing for me is both a journey of engagement and a return to myself.

Foucault (2011) also speaks of a *parrhēsiastic* ethics of truth telling as self-care through writing in which "the self is something to write about, a theme or object (subject) of writing activity" (Foucault, quoted in Martin et al., 1988, p. 27). Particularly in the current historical moment, I am concerned about the manipulation of language to obfuscate and dehistoricize rather than reveal truth. To embody the courage of truth as a *parrhēsiastic* practice, one must speak truth "without concealment, reserve, empty manner of speech, or rhetorical ornament which might encode or hide it" (Foucault, 2011, p. 10). One is also bound to the consequences of one's speech, which reflects the risks inherent in speaking and seeking truth, such as angering others, learning that one's beliefs are untrue, and even physical or political death. *Parrhēsia* is, therefore, a "way of being which is akin to a virtue, a mode of action" (Foucault, 2011, p. 25) rather than rhetorical techniques that conceal meaning. As a technology of the self, *parrhēsia* privileges the importance of others as interlocutors who can help guide one toward a better understand oneself, others, and the world. Writing for the political purpose of seeking truth helps situate oneself in and connect with the world, impels one to action, and establishes limits on one's actions (Foucault, 2005). I view my interlocutors in the *parrhēsiastic* "game" as my guides, the ones to whom I write, and the ones who impel me to reckon with myself (Foucault, 2005). Ultimately, I write, as Galeano (1989) suggests, for myself, as a

technology and aesthetics of the self, and a historical and political project through which I write for others as well.

### Concluding Thoughts

The question “What are we today?” introduced Foucault’s (quoted in Martin et al., 1988) emerging line of inquiry into the modern political rationality that seeks to mediate the tensions between increasing individuation and the reinforcement of the totality of the state, between the “social entity and the individual” (p. 153). The political technology of individuals—biopolitics—emerges from the reason of the modern nation-state, the paradox of which lies in the coexistence of “large destructive mechanisms and institutions oriented toward the care of individual life” (Foucault quoted in Martin et al., 1988, p. 147). The biopolitical rationality endemic in the police powers of the modern state focuses solely on the perpetuation of nation-states concerned with individuals only insofar as they have some productive utility. Thus, states aggregate individuals into populations, which is “nothing more than what the state takes care of for its own sake” (Foucault quoted in Martin et al., 1988, p. 160).

How does any of this relate to the messy affect(s) of writing in the academy? Political technologies of individuation function in all the institutions that comprise the modern state through extractive logics that render individuals objects of inquiry to produce knowledges that form useful self-governing subjects. Biopolitics is also a crucial analytical lens for my research, particularly the militarization of the carceral state, creeping fascism, white ethnonationalist violence, and increasingly onerous technologies of surveillance and propaganda. Importantly, I am interested in both sides of the biopolitical coin. The power of the nation-state, and all its institutions, including the academy, to foster life coexists with the power to disallow life, which Foucault (quoted in Martin et al., 1988) calls thanatopolitics. Concerning academic work, the logics of neoliberalism to which academic institutions have largely succumbed operate according to the same biopolitical rationality that concerned Foucault. For example, sophisticated data-driven technologies function as a form of police power to chop individuals into increasingly minute pieces of data and either foster or disallow their existence based on their quantifiable institutional utility. Inherent in the politics of individuals is the politics of life and death, a frightening prospect considering the last century of human history.

On the other hand, I wonder what one of Foucault’s famous strategic reversals might look like in the academy and in a biopolitical society. How might we reverse the biopolitical rationality that forms and fosters a reductive subjectivity based on the utility of individuals to institutions? How might we as writers in the academy embrace writing as an aesthetic practice of self-care animated by a *parrhēsiastic* ethic, which might subvert the extractive logics inherent in the academy, and society? I have no firm answers to those questions, but reflecting

constantly on the politics of writing, I believe, is essential to the work of academics as public intellectuals. Although the authors with whom I engaged in this paper emerged from different subjective positions, they all regarded writing as an aesthetic, ethical, and political act of authoring themselves. Writing, from that perspective, is more than *sine qua non* to the academy. Writing is also *sine qua non* to the art of living.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> Eco's characteristics of Ur-Fascism include: the cult of tradition; a rejection of modernism; irrationalism; intolerance of dissent; fear of difference; authoritarian populist appeals to the frustrated; an obsession with conspiracies, particularly regarding outsiders; a propagandized humiliation at the hands of outsiders; glorification of permanent war; scorn for the weak; the cult of death; transferring the will to power to sexual questions; the rejection of democracy; and the use of "Newspeak" to circumvent critical thought.

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