THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
WRITING PROGRAM

for

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

THE PROBLEM OF THE PROBLEM

Larry McEnerney

If an answer does not give rise to a new question from itself,
it falls out of the dialogue.
M. M. Bakhtin

ON THE FUNCTION AND VALUE
OF ACADEMIC WRITING

1a.   As a consequence of the "cost of sex," the theoretical probability of clonal and
        sexual co-existence is low; observation of co-existence in vertebrate taxa has been
        reported. Within the frozen niche-variation (FNV) model, the relevant parameter
        is difference in overall niche breadth.   A wider niche breadth for the sexuals than
        for the clones is predicted in performance in monocultures; performances in
        mixtures do not indicate such a relationship. Switching of behaviors or resource-
        use patterns between mixed and pure cultures may be the cause. The proposed
        study will examine this prediction of the FNV model.

1b.   As a consequence of the "cost of sex," the theoretical probability of clonal and
        sexual co-existence is low. Nonetheless, observation of co-existence in vertebrate
        taxa has been widely reported. Within the accepted model of frozen niche-
        variation (FNV), co-existence is explained by difference in overall niche breadth .
        However, although the FNV model correctly predicts wider niche breadth for the
        sexuals than for the clones, its predictions are inconsistent with reported
        performances in mixtures. The proposed study will examine whether the anomaly
        may be explained by the switching of behaviors or resource-use patterns between
        mixed and pure cultures.

MORE ON FUNCTION AND VALUE

Why People Write Essays

By definition, an essay is a structured, creative, written composition dealing with a specific subject from a more or less personal point of view. People write essays because it gives them an opportunity to analyze ideas, situations and people and to preserve them indefinitely. Not only does it ensure permanence of ideas, but it also ensures a degree of permanence for the writer. It is a way for the writer to understand more clearly ideas and concepts. It is a way for the writer to participate in the world by sharing his feelings. It is a way for the writer to sharpen thinking and organizational skills. It is also a way for the writer to enjoy the personal thrill and satisfaction of effectively communicating his own personal ideas and feelings on paper. An essay is a reflection of the author since it presents ideas, insights, emotions and attitudes that he alone possesses. His personality colors and shines through the finished product.

The Post-Modern Condition: A Report On Knowledge
Jean-Francois Lyotard

We may thus expect a thorough exteriorization of knowledge with respect to the "knower," at whatever point he or she may occupy in the knowledge process. The old principle that the acquisition of knowledge is indissociable from the training of minds, or even of individuals, is becoming obsolete and will become ever more so. The relationship of the suppliers and users of knowledge to the knowledge they supply and use is now tending, and will increasingly tend, to assume the form already taken by the relationship of commodity producers and consumers to the commodities they produce and consume--that is, the form of value.

THE FUNCTION AND VALUE OF
ACADEMIC WRITING

The main function of (nearly all) academic writing is to help readers understand better something they want to understand well.

This may seem obvious, but it can be excruciatingly difficult for academics to put it into practice. There are many reasons for this difficulty, but perhaps the most important is that most experts need to use the writing process to help their own thinking process. That is, if you're an academic writer you will usually use your writing process to help *yourself* understand something better. And once you've done this, especially if it has taken you considerable time and trouble, then it's easy to assume that the process that helped *you* understand better will also help your *readers* understand well. And, very often, this is not true at all.

The difficulties often lie deeper than you'd think. Most writers accept that once they've written a complicated text, they will need to adjust it, here and there, for readers. Writers will accept that they need to revise some sentences, maybe rework some paragraphs, cut some fluff, add some explanations here and there. And indeed, they may need to do all this. But the trouble typically goes much deeper. The writing process can differ from the reading process not merely in minor aspects, but in profound ways. The differences between your writing process and their reading process may go well past leaving your work needing a few tweaks. The differences can destroy your work altogether. That sounds absurdly pompous, but it is a stark fact: the differences between writing process and the reading process can mean that a piece of writing is wholly rejected: rejected for a degree, rejected for publication, rejected for funding.

What has happened? You generate a text that feels as though it creates a better understanding, and it does—for you. But your readers complain that the text fails to fulfill this function for them. (They usually do not say, literally: "This text fails in its function for me." They are much more likely to saying something like: "This isn't interesting." or "I don't see what you're doing." or "This isn't X-level work." They may even say something like; "This isn't persuasive." or "This isn't well-organized.")

So the most important tasks for an academic writer are: (1) to be sure that the writer's work does indeed fulfill its function of helping *readers* to understand better something they want to understand well; and (2) to be sure that the readers can readily perceive that the writing is doing its job.

THE FUNCTION AND VALUE OF
ACADEMIC WRITING

The main function of (nearly all) academic writing is to help readers understand better something they want to understand well.

As the rest of this handout will develop, this simple statement obscures a world of difficulties. Here are some of the difficulties.

First: *readers*. The function and value of your work will be assessed by quite specific readers. It is intensely **not** the case that function and value can be assessed by some undefined, unspecified, generic, reader. This comes as no surprise, in theory, to anyone steeped in the social construction of knowledge. It doesn't surprise many contemporary scholars that knowledge is produced in specific communities. But you would be amazed (or not) by the number of scholars who assert social construction in theory, but ignore it when it comes to their own writing. A remarkable number of scholars write as though the particulars of their readers don't matter. To take a simple example: when a scholar comes to us for help with the draft of an article, we immediately ask, "Who are your readers?" Astonishingly often, the scholar says: "I don't know yet" or "It doesn't matter: just help me with the basic structure and argument, I'll adapt it for a specific audience later." For us, the social construction of knowledge does not begin "later"—it's not the icing on the cake. We take the function and value of academic writing to be always within particular reading communities, right down to the 'basic structure and argument'.

To be sure, some scholars want to decide later who their audience is because they want to cut across disciplines, to engage multiple audiences. Writing across disciplines has obvious appeals. But a diverse audience is **not** the same as generic audience. Writing to two, three or four audiences is not at all the same as writing to a generic audience: it's a great mistake to think that writing to multiple audiences absolves you from thinking about particular audiences. On the contrary: writing to multiple audiences means that you spend *more* time thinking about the particularities of readers, because you have to think about the particularities of more than one audience. Think of a chess expert playing several games at once: she is not absolved from thinking about particular games, she must be able to think about multiple particularities.

Second: *understand*. In some fields, it can be easy for academics to lose track of the fact that the function and value of academic writing is to help readers *understand* something. This is quite different from writing in politics, government, business, law, etc., where the function of much writing is to persuade readers to *do* something. Some rare academic texts do both: they improve both understanding and action. But the function of academia is to improve understanding: if you chase the rabbit of action, you are likely to fail to serve the function of academic writing.

(Continued)   The main function of (nearly all) academic writing is to help readers better
                understand something they want to understand well.

Third: *something they want*. **"Something'' is not 'anything'** and **"they" are not
'you'.** Scholars of all levels of experience fall into the trap of assuming that they can
write about anything. Most of us, not surprisingly, want to write about what *we* want to
think about, rather than have to adapt to what other people want to think about.
Academics are particularly prone to this self-indulgence, not least because the academic
advertising often promotes it. Many very official looking documents say that the
function of scholars is to do 'original research. [period]" It's that [period] that is the
killer. The [period] can make it seem that anything counts as research as long as it is
original, as long as it has not been said before. The [period] can make it seem that as
long as the knowledge you provide did not exist before, then you can work on anything
you like.
      The self-centeredness can then be reinforced by the inspiring tales of certain
scholars and scientists who succeed, often the face of quite serious difficulties, by being
passionately, stubbornly, committed to what interests them. They did indeed write about
what *they* wanted to study, and ignored pressure to accede to what other people cared
about.
      Two points on this. First, it certainly can happen that an academic writer can
change what a community cares about. A single writer can make an entire community
shift from the something they previously cared about to a new thing that the writer wants
them to care about. There are even some writing techniques that can help accomplish
this. But second, this is not only rare and difficult but carries serious danger. If you
count on compelling an academic community to care about the thing that interests you,
you may be risking more than you realize.

Your readers do not—even remotely—want to read about *any*thing. To be sure,
different readers have different ranges of interests; and different fields cast comparatively
wider and more narrow nets. And some academic readers specifically see dangers in the
narrowness of their field's interests, and work hard to broaden the scope of the field's
attention. They may be many 'something's' that these readers want to understand better.
      Ironically, though, these fields (and these readers) can be the most dangerous for
writers. If a field has very narrowly drawn boundaries of interest, then at least it's clear
which something's they want to understand better, and which something's they don't care
about. But if a field does not have clear boundaries, or if they invite writers to ignore or
re-draw the boundaries, then it is especially likely for writers to fail. The writers take the
open boundaries as invitations to write about *anything* the writers care about, and they are
often very painfully surprised when the readers say: "But not *that*. We don't want to
understand *that*."
      In nearly all cases, academic texts succeed when the 'something' which is the
topic of the text aligns with something that the readers want to understand well. In the

rare, field-changing cases, a text causes reader to want to understand something they did not previously care about. In the great majority of cases, the text advances the readers' understanding of something they already cared about. As we'll see below, the task of aligning your work to the community's interest is sometimes easy and is sometimes very difficult. But it begins with recognizing that you always need to align to 'something'—you can't succeed with just anything.

Fourth: *better . . . well*. We'll look closely in this session at what counts as understanding 'better' and understanding 'well'. You won't be surprised that this varies from discipline to discipline. One of the obvious difficulties of writing across disciplines is that diverse readers may well have very different means of assessing what it means to understand well. It is again odd (or not) that many academics ignore this: they assume that the criteria for better understanding will be same across different communities. The key is who gets to decide what counts as a better understanding: readers get to decide, not writers. Your task is to know what *your readers* think will count as better.

Finally: *help*. 'Help readers' may make academic writing sound warm and fuzzy. It's not, not in the least. It's much closer to cold and stony. The rules for what counts as 'help' are rigorous and the methods are demanding. We'll take this up in the sessions on argument.

UNDERSTANDING *BETTER*:
THE FUNCTION AND VALUE OF
ACADEMIC PROBLEMS

Consider a simple before/after account of an academic text. For the text to serve its function, readers need to feel that they understand something better *after* they've read the text. This means that at some point in the process readers need to feel that there must have been something inadequate in their understanding *before* they read the text. To perceive that the 'after' situation is better, they must perceive that the 'before' situation was worse. Sometimes this is not difficult: sometimes, readers know that their understanding is inadequate on just the point that a text will address. But often, readers do <u>not</u> know. **It is often the case that the text itself must show readers the inadequacy in their understanding**.

This function of showing the inadequacy is what we'll call constructing the problem. Again: your academic text must serve the function of making your readers' understanding better. To do this, your text *itself* will probably need to show readers that their understanding is inadequate. You do this by constructing a problem: at the beginning of your text (and likely, at other points throughout the text), you articulate the readers' problem in understanding something that they want to understand. As we'll see, this articulating can be done in several different ways, depending on the readers: sometimes you merely remind readers of an inadequacy that they already grant; sometimes you must explain an inadequacy that they didn't realize; sometimes you must argue at length for an inadequacy that they deny. And many points in between.

But nearly all academic writing—to serve its function and have any value—must be responding to a problem of understanding. The function and value of an academic text is that it is the solution to its readers' problem of understanding.

Problem

↘
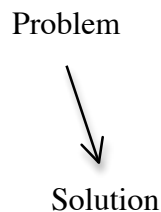
Solution

(Note that "solution" does not mean: "complete, final, definite solution". Many academic problems have no such solution. 'Solution' in this setting need not have the same sense as the solution to an arithmetic problem. Solution here means only that your work helps readers understand something better, even if the progress is tentative and incomplete.)

DANGEROUS HABITS

Unfortunately, many conventional models of introductions fail to show value. US schools for many years relied on a model of writing in which the function of introductions was **not** to establish value. This isn't surprising: as we've seen, students do not, in fact, need to use their writing to establish its value for their teacher/readers. The value is established in another way: the teachers are paid to read.

Instead of learning to establish value, many students learn a different function for introductions, a function that emphasizes creating a *stable base* for the essay. In this model, the chief function of the writing as a whole is to *explain*, and so the function of the introduction is to prepare the reader to *understand* the material. The imaginary situation is that the reader doesn't know much (or anything) about the topic, and so writer's job in the introduction is primarily to give enough background information about a topic so that readers could move smoothly to the main ideas of the paper.

Here are just three of the standard theories of introductions, note that none of them shows directly why the text will be valuable for readers.

Background	General	Definition, Method
↘	↘	↘
Thesis	Specific	Blueprint
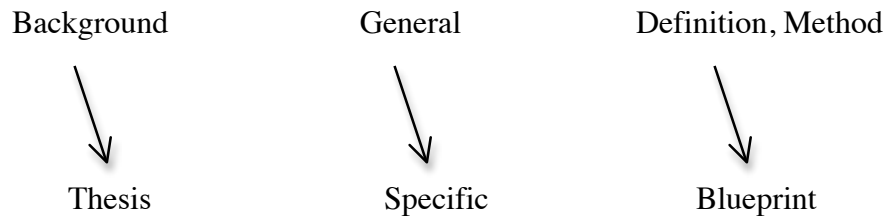
DANGEROUS HABITS

Such models for introductions are dominated by the techniques and language of stability. The writing reflects an underlying idea that in order to explain something, the writer needs to build on what is previously known. The underlying idea is that knowledge is cumulative: new knowledge is based on previous knowledge, and to explain something new, you need to show how it is grounded in what is already accepted. (Notice how the language reflects stability: "build on," "based on," "grounded in".)

An introduction under this model will typically use several devices to create this stability of knowledge.

(1) The most common technique is <u>background</u>, often the form of history: the writer gives a short (or long) history of the topic. The history creates a stable base from which the reader can understand a new situation.

(2) Many writers also create stability using <u>definitions</u>: the definitions are offered to create a stable base of knowledge,--the definitions are offered as a starting place that is settled, certain, uncontroversial.

(3) Another technique is to describe a <u>method</u> of thinking or analysis. This, too, is generally a technique of creating stability in that the writer presents the method as something the readers accept as an underlying certainty. If the method is legitimate, and the writer has used the method properly, then the new information will also be legitimate. This is a move of intellectual consistency—making the new information stable.

(4) Many students are taught to create stability by beginning with a <u>generalization</u>: they often begin their introductions by describing a general truth and they then present their own idea as an instance of this truth. Again, they have created *stability*: the generality provides a stable base from which they can explain the new information in their texts.

Please note: We are not arguing that these traditional techniques of introduction are somehow bad. On the contrary, they might be quite useful. But you may need to do something more in your introduction—something more important. In many introductions, you must meet a function that these techniques cannot fulfill. These techniques do not construct value.

DANGEROUS HABITS:
AN EXAMPLE

from a Dissertation (chosen at random): "Cyprian of Carthage"

Introduction

Tertullian is our only witness to African Christianity during the late second and early third centuries. While neither an impartial witness nor a normative representative of the African church during that period, he is a valuable source for this study. His writings provide a basis for defining religious diversity in the African church. We encounter religious diversity in many forms and in many communities during the second and third centuries. The cosmopolitan character of some communities such as in Rome resulted in a variety of customs and practices within one local church. In addition to this natural diversity resulting from the diaspora of native populations, the growth of different Christian groups such as the Gnostics, Marcionites, and Valentinians contributed to considerable theological diversity within the churches as well.

Sociologists tell us that there is a relation between the individual and the communal; the African church is no exception to this rule. The emphasis on the practical and behavioral demands of Christianity was not a purely individual concern in Africa but was the context in which ecclesiological issues were raised. While there are numerous sociological theories I could use to account for this interrelationship between moral and eccesiological issues in Africa, the persecutions occurring during this period provide a more immediate explanation.

While Tertullian's eccesiology and ethical imperatives were not normative for African Christianity during this period, the issues he raises from his particular perspective are crucial to the study of Christianity in Africa later in the third century. Questions about the nature and composition of the church, its status in the world, the role and place of martyrdom, and the moral demands of Christian life remain central in the disputes which arise later during Cyprian's episcopacy.

FUNCTION, NOT FORM

     The following introduction is a case study in a different kind of danger: the danger of reading for form, rather than function. If you notice only some very familiar forms of language, it can seem as though the introduction is very traditional, providing background and definition as a means of creating a stable basis for all that will follow. The introduction uses some standard, formal cues for creating stability: "Ever since Herodotus" is almost a caricature of a formal cue for providing history-as-background. "According to standard dictionary definition" is another near-caricature, this time for defining-your-terms.

     But note that while the writer is using these standards *forms* of the traditional introduction, he is not at all using them to fulfill traditional *functions*. On the contrary, he uses the forms of traditional stability to meet the very different function of creating intellectual instability. He is <u>not</u> reminding us of what we know very well, he is creating the classic intellectual problem that we don't know what we think we know.

William Sewell, "Historical events as transformations of structures: Inventing revolution at the Bastille"

Ever since Herodotus, historians have written about events. Battles, alliances, scandals, conquests, conspiracies, revolts, royal successions, reforms, elections, religious revivals, assassinations, discoveries: momentous events have always been the bread and butter of narrative history. But despite the prominence of events in historical narratives, the event has rarely been scrutinized as a theoretical category. Traditional narrative historians who reveled in the contingency and particularity of events generally refused on principles to engage in explicit theorizing. Meanwhile, historical sociologists, along with the minority of historians who turned to the social sciences in order to escape the hegemony of political narrative, generally disdained the study of mere events and sought instead to discover general causal patterns underlying historical change. This was true of the "Annales school" in France from the late 1920s forward and of the 'new social history" that blossomed in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. By the 1980s the old antagonisms between narrative history and historical sociology had begun to fade; yet theoretical work on historical events has remained relatively rare. . . .
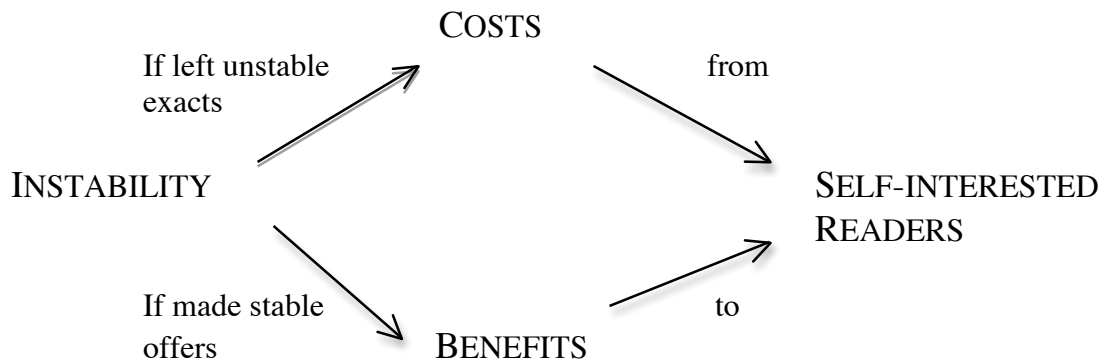
Events as a theoretical category

According to standard dictionary definition, the term "event" can refer to a happening or occurrence of any kind, but the word is more commonly used to signify an occurrence that is remarkable in some way – one that is widely noted and commented on by contemporaries. Great public ceremonies (such a royal entrances or military parades) might be designated as events even though they have no discernable effect on historical change. But when historians argue for the importance of events, they have in mind occurrences that have momentous consequences, that in some sense "change the course of history." It is historical events in this sense that I deal with in this article.

A THEORY OF PROBLEMS:
VALUE FROM INSTABILITY

Motivating readers is not just a matter of capturing the reader's attention for a few moments; it's a matter of justifying the entire work. A few academic writers motivate readers by making the very act of reading the text enjoyable, but most don't and most of their texts aren't. Readers are motivated (if at all) not because the text is entertaining, but because it is valuable. And the main standard of value among readers of all communities is that a text responds to a problem the readers care about.

For our purposes, a Problem needs three components:

1. **AN INSTABILITY**:

2. **THE CONSEQUENCES** of that instability, presented
   a. most often as the "**Costs**" of leaving the instability unstable;
   b. sometimes as the "**Benefits**" of stabilizing it.

3. **READERS** who constitute a community of discourse defined by their interest in a topic and who will accept or are open to accepting the cost/benefits.

COSTS

If left unstable exacts   from

INSTABILITY   SELF-INTERESTED
                                                         READERS

If made stable offers   to

BENEFITS

ALWAYS PROBLEMS?

As the question mark in the title implies, you do not need to state a problem in the introductions of every text you write. There are several situations in which you wouldn't need to state a problem.

First, you might have other ways of creating value for readers. If you're an extremely skillful writer, you may be able to reward your readers just by making the reading process so enjoyable that the readers want to read just for the pleasure of it. Or, more commonly, the readers may be so interesting in your subject matter that they are motivated to read about it, regardless of whether what you say has any costs or benefits. We can imagine, for example, readers who are so interested in astronomy that they would be happy to read a list of names of asteroids. Such a list wouldn't state a problem--it wouldn't show the readers how knowing the names of asteroids would be useful to them. But it's possible to imagine readers who wouldn't care whether the names were useful or not: they just want to know.

However, you run very significant risks if you rely either on your own ability to write entrancing prose or on your readers' obsession to know about your subject. Brilliantly engaging writers certainly exist within professional communities, but they are few and far between, and none of us should assume that we rank among the brilliant. (Interestingly, most of the writers who <u>are</u> widely ranked among the brilliant do state problems in their introductions. They do not use their skill at writing to replace problem-constructing; they use their skill to construct problems more powerfully.) Nor should you assume that your readers are as interested in your work as you are. We are obviously likely to overestimate our readers' interest in what fascinates ourselves. We almost always overestimate our readers' sense of the importance of what we think is important. Any time you decide to skip stating a motivating problem, you ought to look hard at whether or not your readers are so motivated that they will read your prose even if they perceive it to be useless to them.

There is a second situation in which you would not need to state a problem at the beginning of a text. That is when the readers already know the problem so well, and understand it so clearly, that they do not need to be reminded of it. Such readers make your job of writing much, much easier, because they already know what you ordinarily need to state. You usually get the gift of such readers only when you are writing within a small group of people who know each other well. For example, a memo that you write to four

ALWAYS PROBLEMS?

or five colleagues working on the same project. They may know the problem so well, they may know the consequences of the problem so well, that you don't need to remind them of it. Your memo to them just got shorter; your work just got easier.

Again: the however. You should always be wary of assuming that your readers know the problem so well that they cannot benefit from reading about it. Writers are so quick to overestimate their readers' knowledge and interest that they are most often wrong in deciding to skip the problem. Consider the worst case scenarios. If you state the problem when you don't need to, the worst that can happen is that readers read a few sentences, perhaps even a few paragraphs, that they did not need to reader. Certainly something that you want to avoid, but not catastrophic. But what's the worst that can happen if you do <u>not</u> state the problem? In the worst case, readers would judge your text as unimportant, insignificant, useless. They are very likely to stop reading. And such a reaction may indeed be, for you, disastrous.

THE GRAMMAR OF PROBLEMS (I):

INSTABILITY

If your readers will welcome the idea that they have a problem, your task is easy: you just let them know that they have one.

To talk about problems, we're start with the idea of instability. We claim that in order to perceive a problem, readers have to perceive that something is unstable: something doesn't fit; something is amiss; something is wrong; something is incomplete; something is unknown; something is unresolved; something is contradicting something else; something causing tension; something is causing conflict; on and on and on.

In this elemental sense, the problem is an instability and the text is valuable because it creates stability: something now fits, something is now right, something is complete, something is known; something is resolved; the tension is gone; the conflict is over; and on and on.

The text is thus positioned as solving the problem by stabilizing the instability.

Instability

Solution/Promise of solution
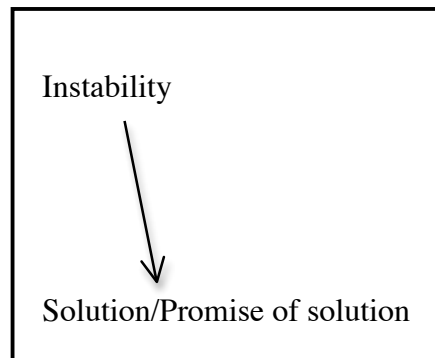
A.   It is a perennial paradox of Erasmus studies that neither the wealth

of autobiographical information that the Dutch humanist has left us nor the

enormous mass of scholarly literature that has grown up around his life

and works has ever given us a firm grip on the year of his birth and the

chronology of his youth. We do not know with certainty, for example,

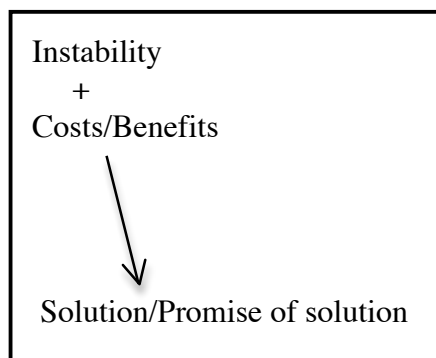how old Erasmus was when he entered Steyn monastery. ...

THE GRAMMAR OF PROBLEMS (II):

INSTABILITY
+
COSTS/BENEFITS

Not all instabilities are perceived as problems. It's very easy to imagine readers who do not value any given instability: what if they just don't care? Something is unstable: so what? Something is unknown: why does it matter? Some things are in tension: who cares?

Your task of establishing value gets harder when it is not obvious to readers why they should care about the instability. For those readers, you have to be able to persuade them that not resolving the instability has costs, that resolving the instability has benefits. And it is crucial, as we'll see later on, that these costs and benefits be perceived as costs and benefits <u>to the reader</u>. One of the most common weaknesses of writing is that the writer describes costs and benefits borne by the writer, not the readers. Why should the reader care about your costs?

The main point of the text is still positioned as eliminating the instability. The text solves the problem. All that has changed is that the readers are now better able to see the value of the text—for them.

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┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
│                                      │
│   Instability                        │
│       +                              │
│   Costs/Benefits                     │
│              \                       │
│               \                      │
│                \                     │
│                 ↓                    │
│   Solution/Promise of solution       │
│                                      │
└─────────────────────────────────────┘
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A.   What is missing [in the study of the international relations of the Caribbean] are the same things that are missing in the study of Third World or Latin American foreign policy and international relations as a whole: Most of what is written is country-specific or issue-specific rather than general and comprehensive; most is descriptive rather than theoretical. The challenge is to put together what we know into a plausible whole, within a suitable theoretical framework, as a first step in developing theory ...

But readers may well ask: Why is it important to ... to study Third World policy with some rigor ... Is it of any great significance ...? Apart from the obvious value of supplying knowledge to those who want it, the study of Third World foreign policy should assist in the building and refining of international relations "middle-range" theory. The sub-field of international relations that is most clearly linked to such study is that of comparative foreign policy ... Also of relevance is the field of decision-making ...the realm of process ...

THE GRAMMAR OF PROBLEMS (III):
INSTABILITY VS. DE-STABILIZING STASIS

In some cases, you can establish value by positioning your text to respond to an instability that readers already know about ("… it is a perennial paradox of Erasmus studies …") But in other writing situations, your readers may not know, or accept, that there is any instability. It may even be that the readers resist the idea that there is an instability. In such cases, you have still another writing task: you need to persuade readers that an instability exists where they do not already perceive one. You have to construct an instability. And the typical means of constructing an instability is to de-stabilize something the readers believe to be stable.

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Stasis
    +
De-stabilizing
    +
Costs/Benefits



   Solution/Promise of solution
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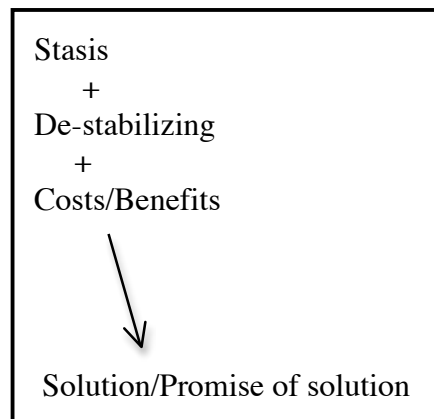
THE GRAMMAR OF PROBLEMS (III):

DE-STABILIZING STASIS

A.   In recent years several attempts have been made to discover an overall structural pattern in the book of Amos. Certainly inspired by the burgeoning interest in "literary approaches" to the Bible, these studies have divided Amos into a relatively small number of extended sections, each of which (it is claimed) has a high degree of literary integrity.[1] A comparison of these studies, however, soon reveals considerable diversity among them. Thus, to look no further than the authors mentioned in footnote 1, the following divergent analyses of chaps. 3-6 have been proposed:

> Hayes: [pattern #1]
> Andersen and Freedman: [pattern #2]
> Dorsey: [pattern #3]

The only points these scholars are all agreed on are that 5:1 begins a new section (although I shall argue below that in fact it does not) and that 6:14 closes a section (which has long been recognized by all commentators).

The main reason for this diversity, in my view, is that insufficient attention has been given to the criteria for making such analyses. In particular: (i) Formal criteria, such as introductory and closing formulas, have been given much greater prominence than they merit. (ii) Literary criteria, such as palistrophic structuring and *inclusos*, have often been employed too loosely and impressionistically.

In the present article, I shall offer a new analysis which, through giving particular attention to thematic considerations, will argue that Amos consists of a

...

THE GRAMMAR OF PROBLEM:
STASIS VS. BACKGROUND

You should note that the term "stasis" is deceptive: it's easy to confuse stasis with background. But for our purposes, the two are exactly opposite. Background is something you give the reader (if at all) because you think they need it as a reliable base for understanding what you will present. Background is something you give readers so that they can build on it. To be effective, it has to stay stable: you provide background so that your reader can accept it and agree with it. You don't want background to be controversial--it's just background. The last thing you want is for your reader to come to doubt background.

Stasis is exactly the opposite; in fact, "stasis" is ironic. Stasis works to establish value only if readers come to see that what they thought was stable, their stasis, is <u>not</u> stable. Stasis is <u>not</u> something you will agree with. It is <u>not</u> something you think is true. It is <u>not</u> something that you provide as a basis for your explanation or argument. On the contrary, you introduce stasis as a means to create instability, uncertainty, tension. You introduce stasis only in order to de-stabilize it. It might look stable at the beginning of the introduction, but by the end of the introduction, it is not stable at all. It is not a basis for stability; it is the source of a problem.

Again: It bears repeating that one of the most common errors of writing is to provide much too much background before showing value. There will be world enough and time for background <u>after</u> you've constructed a motivating problem. (Though it is worth noting that powerful writers never merely state background at any point in their texts. What they do is enrich the problem.)

THE DANGER OF GAP

Many academic writers try to construct a problem by identifying a gap in a community's knowledge. The move is simple: "Dear Readers: You are experts in field X, but there is a gap in your knowledge of X. You don't know about Y, which is clearly inside the field of X. My article will tell you about Y, so my article serves to help you, readers, understand X better."

And it is certainly the case that gap problems sometimes succeed. It sometimes is the case that if a scholar's work fills in a gap, the community values her work. But much more often than not, gap problems *fail* to establish function and value.

It understandable that so many young scholars adopt the language of gap.

First, the idea of gap-filling seems validated by the common language that what scholars do is 'original research', or language that what scientists do is create "new knowledge." The insidious words here are "original" and "new". These words can lead young academics to think that anything that is new, is knowledge; that anything that is original is research. But, of course, this is not so. A very great amount of original work does not count as research, does not count as knowledge, because it does not solve a problem.

But more often than not, a gap formulation falls prey to the challenge of cost and benefits. Remember, that academic success is no longer measured by the individual academic's command of an entire field. It is not the function of an academic to 'know everything'. (If it were, then gap problem would always work: if the academic's responsibility were to know everything in a field, then to identify something the academic did not know would be to construct a problem. But this is not the academic's function.) It is the function of academics to advance the community's understanding. And often—very often—filling a gap does *not* advance understanding because the gap has no consequences: leaving the gap unfilled has no costs for the readers; filling it has no benefits. Again: it is not the case that all original research counts as knowledge "for its own sake." In harsh terms: there is no knowledge for its own sake.

Second, many articles that use gap language actually construct what we'll call an 'error' problem. (See below.) There are several reasons why error problems are labeled 'gap': the most common is probably that the language of gap is more discreet. It is more tactful to tell readers they have a gap in their knowledge than to say that they are wrong. The pressure to be tactful can be especially strong on younger academics, and you may well find that you should be similarly discreet.

But this means that if you're trying to understand how someone else's article constructs a problem, you shouldn't assume that 'gap' means gap.

THE DANGER OF GAP

And please remember that gap formulations *can* work, and do, every day. There are plenty of instances in which an academic community believes that a gap is a problem. Gaps in readers' knowledge *can* have costs for them; your readers may very well think that filling a particular gap in their knowledge brings them important intellectual benefits. 'Gap' can be great.

But we include the warning about 'gap' formulations because they are so tempting to write, and they very often fail. Very often, an academic writer will count on a 'gap' formulation, only to find her readers severely critical. Even rejecting the text entirely (for the degree, for the funding, for publication), because the new knowledge doesn't seem significant enough, or doesn't even seem like knowledge at all.

('Gap' formulations can lead to emotionally fraught epistemological arguments about what, research, or knowledge, *is*. Many academic communities don't like to talk about their work in terms of value: they don't saying that a text fails or succeeds because it is less or more valuable. And these communities even more dislike talking about costs and benefits. So instead of saying "this research isn't valuable enough," they will say: "This isn't research at all." And hearing that can be not just baffling, but devastating.)

So if you're writing a gap problem, you should expect very heavy pressure on the cost/benefits language in your problem. You're likely to need to make a strong argument that if the community does not fill this gap, it will bear costs to its understanding of something <u>*the community*</u> *wants to understand well*. That is: you're likely to need to show that the community's gap in its knowledge of Y has the cost of prevent the community from understanding Z, and Z which needs to be something that the <u>readers</u> (not you) want to understand well.

And, very often, it will not be enough merely to *claim* that the readers will bear this cost (or gain this benefit). Very often, you'll need to make an argument to support the claim. Many academic communities are extremely skeptical of claims that every gap in their knowledge needs to be filled. You here bear the burden of previous gap formulations. Many writers have gone before you, claiming that if the readers would just give up their time to grasp the writer's pet interest, then they would be rewarded with a full understanding of the cosmos and would command the Key to All Mythologies. Somehow, it never worked out that way.

GAP VS. ERROR

In this very crude formulation: the main alternative to a gap problem is an error problem. Instead of saying to readers that there is a gap in their understanding, these problem claim that there is a flaw in there readers' knowledge. A gap problem claims that there is something outside the readers' current knowledge that they ought to understand; an error problem claims that there is something amiss in the knowledge that the readers think they have.

Error problem face less pressure on costs and benefits. If readers agree that there is a problem inside their current knowledge, then they are more willing to accept that they need to solve that problem: they need to read, and value, the text. But don't think that error formulations eliminate the need to think about costs and benefits. Not all errors of understanding are significant: there can certainly be error that are trivial. And a text that corrects a trivial error is … trivial.

Further: it is quite likely that a problem constructed so as to claim an error in the current knowledge is likely to face a different challenge from readers: the readers are likely to doubt that the error exists. Where gap problem often face an extra pressure on costs and benefits, and the writer must argue for these costs and benefits; an error problem is likely to face extra pressure on the very existence of the error, and the writer must argue that it is, in fact, a flaw.

So you should not assume that it will make your life easier to construct your problem as an error, than a gap. We point out the different not to recommend error, but so that you can predict the different pressures from your readers that each problem is likely to prompt. You choose between, in great measure, depending on which pressure you're best able to meet.

One key note: please don't take from any of this discussion that in order to have a function, and a value, in your writing, that you must tackle a BIG gap or a BIG error. It will be wonderful if you are able to resolve a major problem of understanding for your community, but the odds against this are long, and, more importantly, it is not the function of individual academics to do so. In general, academic communities advance because the many members of the community are making comparatively small advances in understanding. Some members, will, to be sure, make great strides—sometimes astounding leaps. But mostly, that's not how it goes. Mostly, each of us makes a small contribution, and the community as a whole stitches the contributions together into more substantial progress.

While it may be very appropriate, in the cost/benefits language of your problem, to show that your work affects the understanding of BIG issues, it is not the case that your problem—whether gap or error—needs to resolve the issue in itself. You must bear many pressures from the fact that you write within a community, but this is one of the advantages: you aren't in it alone. Don't deny yourself this advantage by forcing yourself to resolve it all yourself.

GAP VS. ERROR:
A PARTICULARLY INTERESTING EXAMPLE

We looked at Bill Sewell's introduction earlier, because it looks like traditional background/definition when it is actually problem constructing. Here's another bit of deceptiveness in the same introduction: it looks as though it is a gap problem, when it's really claiming a very substantial error.

William Sewell, "Historical events as transformations of structures: Inventing revolution at the Bastille"

Ever since Herodotus, historians have written about events. Battles, alliances, scandals, conquests, conspiracies, revolts, royal successions, reforms, elections, religious revivals, assassinations, discoveries: momentous events have always been the bread and butter of narrative history. But despite the prominence of events in historical narratives, the event has rarely been scrutinized as a theoretical category. Traditional narrative historians who reveled in the contingency and particularity of events generally refused on principles to engage in explicit theorizing. Meanwhile, historical sociologists, along with the minority of historians who turned to the social sciences in order to escape the hegemony of political narrative, generally disdained the study of mere events and sought instead to discover general causal patterns underlying historical change. This was true of the "Annales school" in France from the late 1920s forward and of the 'new social history" that blossomed in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. By the 1980s the old antagonisms between narrative history and historical sociology had begun to fade; yet theoretical work on historical events has remained relatively rare. . . .

Events as a theoretical category

According to standard dictionary definition, the term "event" can refer to a happening or occurrence of any kind, but the word is more commonly used to signify an occurrence that is remarkable in some way – one that is widely noted and commented on by contemporaries. Great public ceremonies (such a royal entrances or military parades) might be designated as events even though they have no discernable effect on historical change. But when historians argue for the importance of events, they have in mind occurrences that have momentous consequences, that in some sense "change the course of history." It is historical events in this sense that I deal with in this article.

BACK TO
WRITING PROCESS VS. READING PROCESS

The Revolution in Mexican Independence:
Insurgency and the Renegotiation of
Property, Production, and Patriarchy in
the Bajio, 1800-1855

John Tutino

The Hidalgo revolt of 1810 marked the commencement of conflicts that brought independence to Mexico in 1821 and then led to a series of revolutionary changes that endured for decades into the national era. As colonial rule ended the contested processes of nation-building began. Mexicans faced new links to the Atlantic economy: silver mining collapsed and struggled to recuperate; textile production foundered in the face of industrial imports, then began to revive with early industrialization in Mexico. A colonial state that was oriented to mediate conflicts gave way to a national polity in which diverse Mexicans struggled, and at times fought, to determine who would control the state and participate in national, regional, and local politics. Many villagers saw the postindependence era of conflict as a time to renegotiate production and labor relations. And beginning with insurgency in 1810, rural families forced radical transformations in agrarian production and social relations in the region that had been the engine of commercial development in late colonial Mexico: the Bajio, a fertile basin that lay north and west of Mexico City and the central highlands.

The interpretation just given challenges an entrenched vision of Mexican history: that for all their popular participation, the conflicts that began in 1810 and led to independence constituted a social revolution that failed, while the conflicts that began in 1910, with greater mobilization of the populace and radicalization of the elites, became a transforming national revolution. In accord with this vision, only in the twentieth century did landed elites face expropriation, while peasant communities found new life with

massive redistribution of land through agrarian reform. Only after 1910 did a self-proclaimed revolutionary state take power, with peasant villagers an essential political base. If Mexico's revolutionary tradition began in 1810, it was a tradition that was defeated and denied until the great mobilization of 1910.

This essay argues for a different interpretation. At least in the Bajio, it was the insurgency that began with the Hidalgo revolt that initiated an enduring agrarian and social transformation. . . . For one major estate, detailed evidence reveals a transformation of rural society that included challenges to patriarchy. . . . Analysis of the conflicts that remade agrarian society in the Bajio add a key element to a rapidly emerging vision of popular participation in the struggle for independence and nation-building. The result is a new understanding of Mexico from 1810 to 1855 that emphasizes popular power and contested transformations. . . .

A FEW TECHNIQUES
AND PITFALLS

1.   *The writing process vs. the reading process.* As the footnote in the Tutino article suggests, it is often the case that you can construct the final problem for your text only after you have researched and written much of the body of the text. This is a truism of writing: that you can write the (final draft) of the beginning only after you have written everything else.

But there is a terrible danger here. Very often, after you have written the bulk of your text, you are exhausted, sick to death of the paper, and in no mood to go back to beginning to rewrite. Further, you're like to be in one of two opposite places regarding the value of your work: either it is obvious to you that your work has created valuable new understanding, or it is obvious to you that your work is worthless. (Sometimes you go back and forth, perhaps many times in a day.) In either psychological state, you can find it very difficult to do what may be your most important work: constructing the problem of understanding that creates the function and value of your text.

We hope that this handout gives you some help with this: whether in euphoria or in despair, you can look in your own text for the words and structures of problem constructing: do you have words of instability, do you have words of costs and benefits, do you have words of stasis and de-stabilizing (if you are using this technique)? Please remember that the cues of problem can be extremely helpful in showing a text's function and value, but they do not *create* the function or the value. A text can be loaded down with cues but still have its readers deny that the text has value. And some texts can have no cues whatsoever, but still have its readers perceive the text's value. Nonetheless, if you go back to your introduction looking to see whether you should add the cues of problem-constructing, you may be able to overcome your exhaustion and your despair. It will likely seem utterly impossible to 're-think' your project: but it may seem manageable to apply the specific techniques of problem-constructing.

And John Tutino's footnote shows another very useful possibility: having other people read your draft. Again, it is a truism of writing that you should solicit feedback on your drafts, but notice the particular goal here. Very often, we give our writing to readers with a request like "Tell me what isn't clear." Usually this means that they speak up when they are bothered by something they see, when they do not understand some language that is *in the text*. But notice that Tutino crucially benefits when his readers tell him what is *not* in the text. He benefits when they tell him that they do not see the importance, the significance of his analysis. This is a different kind of response, and it is the rare reader who can see what is not there. If you can find readers who can tell you what is critically missing from your problem-constructing, then those readers are gold, and you have been very, very fortunate.

A FEW TECHNIQUES
AND PITFALLS

2.   *Problems in the world vs. problems in the readers.* It is very common in contemporary Humanities and Social Sciences writing to begin a text by describing an instability not in the readers, but an instability in the world. That is, the text will begin by describing a situation in the world which is unstable, in tension, in conflict, etc. What counts as the 'world' here depends on the field: historians might describe a conflict in history; anthropologists might describe anxiety in a family; sociologists might describe an instability in a community; a literature professor might describe tensions within a character, among characters, or even among images. All of these are instabilities in the world that the academics study.

What in important to notice here is that an instability in the world is **not** the same as an instability in the readers.

The function of an academic paper is not to resolve the instabilities in the academic's subject world. A history paper does not solve the conflict of history; an anthropology paper does not resolve the family's anxiety; an article on *Hamlet* will not solve Hamlet's problems. An academic exists to help solve the problems of the *readers* of the text, not the problems of the *subjects* of the text.

This is a pitfall for many writers because, as they do their research, they can be so drawn into the instability of the world they are writing about that they begin to write as though they can intervene in that world. They begin to write as though their text actually helps resolve the oppressive conditions of 19th century industrialization or shows how Oedipus could have avoided all those complications. This is not simply (or at all) a matter of objectivity: it is not a matter of being sure that you keep an appropriate distance from your subject. It is matter of function: the function of your writing is to help your readers understand something better. It is quite likely that if you slip into resolving a problem in the world, you will fail to fulfill your function.

Why then do so many writers begin by describing problems in the world? Because it is a good technique for a 'hook', for 'grabbing the reader's attention'. Because nearly all readers are susceptible to instability. Problem-constructing was not invented by academics: for thousands of years writers have gained the attention of readers by opening with conflicts. If you, as an academic writer, can begin with a problem in your readers AND a problem in the world, then your work has a double-layer of problem-constructing, and this is likely to enhance your work.

But you are lost if you forget that the value and function of your work lies in responding to the *readers'* problem of understanding. Many academic texts succeed brilliantly by constructing only their readers' problem, but describing no tension in the world. No academic text succeeds by describing a problem in the world but failing to address the readers' problem of understanding.

THE GENIUS OF SIMPLICITY

Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "An Unthinkable History: The Haitian Revolution as a Non-Event," in Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press,1995), 70-107.

Unthinking a Chimera

In 1790, just a few months before the beginning of the insurrection that shook Saint-Domingue and brought about the revolutionary birth of independent Haiti, French colonist La Barre reassured his metropolitan wife of the peaceful state of life in the tropics. He wrote: "There is no movement among our Negroes … They don't even think of it. They are very tranquil and obedient. A revolt among them is impossible." And again: "We have nothing to fear on the part of the Negroes; they are tranquil and obedient." And again: "The Negroes are very obedient and always will be. We sleep with doors and windows wide open. Freedom for Negroes is a chimera."

Historian Roger Dorsinville, who cites these words, notes that a few months later the most important slave insurrection in recorded history had reduced to insignificance such abstract arguments about Negro obedience. I am not so sure. When reality does not coincide with deeply held beliefs, human beings tend to phrase interpretations that force reality within the scope of these beliefs. They devise formulas to repress the unthinkable and to bring it back within the realm of accepted discourse.

La Barre's views were by no means unique. Witness this manager who constantly reassured his patrons in almost similar words: "I live tranquilly in the midst of them without a single thought of their uprising unless that was fomented by the whites themselves." There were doubts at times, but the planters' practical precautions aimed at stemming individual action or, at worst, sudden riot. No one in Saint-Domingue or elsewhere worked out a plan of response to a general uprising.

Indeed, the contention that enslaved Africans and their descendants could not envision freedom—let alone formulate strategies for gaining and securing such freedom—was based not so much on empirical evidence as on an ontology, an implicit organization of the world and its inhabitants. Although by no means monolithic, this worldview was widely shared by whites in Europe and the Americas and by many non-white plantation owners as well. Although it left room for variations, none of these variations included the possibility of a revolutionary uprising in the slave plantations, let alone a successful one leading to the creation of an independent state.

The Haitian Revolution thus entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened. Official debates and publications of the times, including the long list of pamphlets on Saint-Dominque published in France from 1790 to 1804, reveal the incapacity of most contemporaries to understand the ongoing revolution on its own terms. They could read the news only with the ready-made categories, and these categories were incompatible with the idea of a slave revolution.

The discursive context within which news from Saint-Domingue was discussed as it happened has important consequences for the historiography of Saint-Domingue/Haiti. If some events cannot be accepted even as they occur, how can they be assessed later? In other words, can historical narratives convey plots that are unthinkable in the world within which these narratives take place? How does one write a history of the impossible?

The key issue is not ideological. Ideological treatments are now more current in Haiti itself (in the epic or bluntly political interpretations of the revolution favored by some Haitian writers) than in the more rigorous handling of the evidence by professionals in Europe or in North America. The international scholarship on the Haitian Revolution has been rather sound by modern standards of evidence since at least the 1940s. The issue is rather epistemological and, by inference, methodological in the broadest sense. Standards of evidence notwithstanding, to what extent has modern historiography of the Haitian Revolution—as part of a continuous Western discourse on slavery, race, and colonialization—broken the iron bonds of philosophical milieu in which it was born?

. . .

Erasure and Trivialization: Silences in World History

I have fleshed out two major points to far. First, the chain of events that constitute the Haitian Revolution was unthinkable before these events happened. Second, as they happened, the successive events within that chain were systematically recast by many participants and observers to fit a world of possibilities. That is, they were made to enter into narratives that made sense to a majority of Western observers and readers. I will now show how the revolution that was thought impossible by its contemporaries has also been silenced by historians. Amazing in this story is the extent to which historians have treated the events of Saint-Domingue in ways quite similar to the reactions of its Western contemporaries. That is, the narratives they build around these facts are strikingly similar to the narratives produced by individual who thought that such a revolution was impossible. . . .

As this general silencing goes on, increased specialization within the historical guild leads to a second trend. Sant-Domingue/Haiti emerges at the intersection of various interests: colonial history, Caribbean or Afro-American history, the history of slavery, the history of New World peasantries. In any one of these sub-fields, it has now become impossible to silence the fact that a revolution took place. Indeed, the revolution itself, or even a series of acts within it, have become legitimate topics for serious research within any of these subfields.

How interesting then, that many of the rhetorical figures used to interpret the mass of evidence accumulated by modern historians recall tropes honed by planters, politicians, and administrators both before and during the revolutionary struggle. Examples are plentiful and I will cite only a few . . .