Foreword

Founded in 2004, the Expository Writing Program at OU celebrates its inaugural year with this selection of exemplary student essays. Among the 1200 essays that our students produced in courses such as Their America, Varieties of Radical Dissent, and Gossip, Rumor, & Urban Legend, these few have earned the distinction of representing a writing program that is devoted to the shaping of ideas into well-crafted arguments. Each of our freshman writing seminars is a topic-based course designed to generate frequent and provocative writing assignments, and each of the major essay assignments requires an extensive process of revision. The essays in this volume are proof of the passion and perseverance with which their authors engaged in this process—from initial brainstorming to the final edit. They display the attention to detail, the grasp of structure, and the fidelity to one’s sources that make for a successful piece of academic writing.

Of the seven essays selected for inclusion, two were written for the same assignment in one class (“Expect Justice Now” and “Defeating Polarities” for Varieties of Radical Dissent) and two were written for the same assignment in another class (“One Eye on the Market” and “The True Legacy of Edward S. Curtis” for Savages and Civilization). The former assignment hinges on the interpretation of a single phrase from Martin Luther King’s civil rights oratory; the latter calls for an assessment of a famous photographer’s magnum opus on both aesthetic and ethical grounds. The two pairs of essays reflect the range of possible responses to any given essay assignment in Expos at OU. They also demonstrate the value of bringing primary sources into relation with each other. In fact the primary sources featured in the other three essays—a domestic tragedy in “The Lesser Evil,” a Charlie Chaplin film in “A Rhetorical Analysis of The Immigrant,” and an urban legend in “Off ‘The Hook’”—become luminous only when they are placed in their respective historical contexts. These three essays are brilliant examples of the personal essay, the contextualized close reading, and the research paper, respectively.

Each of the seven essayists has grappled with a controversial topic in order to arrive at that most prized discovery in undergraduate writing: an arresting thesis. Such a discovery is a momentous change in the mental weather—a kind of meteorological disturbance in one’s thinking about things. It is the forked lightning of the argumentative essay, and a serious writer will go to any length to bear witness to its power. In that sense, essay writers are like storm chasers.

And Oklahoma is a good place to chase storms.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Edith Kinney Gaylord Expository Writing Program is indebted to the Inasmuch Foundation under William J. Ross and Robert J. Ross for their generous support of our curriculum. We thank President David Boren and his undergraduate advisory committee (Christian Kessler, Tara Stine, Kyden Creekpau, Mary Millben, Alex Ewing, and Eli Ewing) for bringing Expos to OU. For both the idea and the format of this magazine, we are indebted to the Harvard Expository Writing Program under Nancy Sommers and Gordon Harvey.

Several teachers in the Expository Writing Program at OU—Gary Hawkins, Tad Tuleja, Jim Zeigler, David Samper, and Lou Berney—made significant contributions to the selection and proof-editing of these essays. Jane Greene provided valuable administrative assistance. Jeff Pierce, Sherri Isbell, and especially John Lanig of University Printing Services saw the project through to publication.

We thank the artists whose works appear in these pages, including Edward Quigley, Marion S. Trikosko, Edward S. Curtis, Eugene Richards, and Roland Totheroth (Chaplin’s cameraman).