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COMPOSITION AND POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES

An Introduction

Across all disciplines, a growing awareness of the importance of minority and subjugated voices to histories and narratives that have previously excluded them has led to widespread interest in postcolonial theory. While quite diverse, this body of work coheres around an exploration of power relations between Western and Third World countries. More particularly, postcolonial studies has sought to expose the mechanisms of oppression through which “Others”—aboriginal, native, or simply preexisting cultures and groups—are displaced, eradicated, enslaved, or transformed into obedient subjects. Joining poststructuralism and postmodernism in challenging the concept of the unified founding subject, postcolonial studies has gone on to mount a stringent critique of the specifically imperialist subject. By the 1990s, postcolonial studies—drawing on gender theory, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, ethnic studies, and race theory—was exerting an influence on scholarship across the disciplines in unprecedented ways.

At the same time, scholars in rhetoric and composition led efforts to understand the ways in which students (and student writings) are variously constructed, subjugated, and turned into obedient subjects, both within and outside the academy, and to find ways of enabling resistance to such forces. For thirty years, in fact, compositionists have been in the forefront

of those advocating for students and for student agency, through open admissions programs (like the one famously attempted at CUNY) and increased access to and agency within higher education for all people (Maher). Rejecting the role traditionally assigned writing programs to “wash out” a goodly proportion of those admitted to college, composition scholars instead developed robust theories of writing that went beyond traditional formalism, created curricula based on Freirean principles, and built programs devoted to student writers and their goals (Flower et al., Shor, Bartholomae, Bizzell).¹ In addition, compositionists such as Schell and Stock have persistently addressed the material conditions affecting teachers in higher education, demonstrating graphically the position of part-time contingent laborers in composition and presenting cogent arguments for change.

Given the obvious connections and similar interests, it is perhaps surprising that scholars in rhetoric and composition and in postcolonial studies have not been, by and large, in dialogue with one another, nor have insights from one field been used systematically to inform the other. Several reasons for such a disconnection readily present themselves, however. During the 1970s and much of the 1980s, composition/rhetoric struggled to achieve disciplinary status and recognition within the academy, a struggle that distracted composition scholars from larger goals of access and equity and often led to a kind of embattled mentality and a concomitant insularity. Ironically, composition’s very focus during those years on access for and attention to students and their writing led to more than a little essentializing, as those in the field tended to speak of *the* student writer and his or her writing processes, with the unfortunate effect of erasing difference in many ways (Royster and Williams). In addition, this focus on *the* student writer was deeply ethnocentric, representing writers as generically American (Guerra). (It has taken over twenty years for composition to recognize and thoroughly critique such assumptions and, thus, to rethink the power relations that animate this field of study.)

For its part, postcolonial studies has focused, according to C. Richard King, “almost exclusively on Europe and its former colonies, primarily on British and to a lesser extent French endeavors in Africa and Asia, especially India” (King 3), thus largely ignoring the ways in which America can be said to be postcolonial. Postcolonial studies has also tended to erase or leave out student voices, to ignore the positioning of students, and to speak for

students. As Min-Zhan Lu points out in her chapter, “Composing Postcolonial Studies,” the recurring references to “student writers” in the collection point to a common oversight in postcolonial theory: recognition of the need of academic intellectuals to resist the temptation of speaking for “the student writer.” Perhaps most notably, postcolonial critics moved fairly quickly from examining material practices related to oppression to theorizing about those practices, thus dealing with such constructs almost exclusively in the abstract.

If postcolonial studies is sometimes charged with focusing too exclusively on high theory, composition is accused by others of consistently privileging practice over theory (Olson), a dichotomy that has also functioned to separate the two fields. But while such extremes surely exist, many scholars of writing have worked hard to create a dialogic reciprocity between theory and practice, and they have explored relationships between composition and literary theory (S. Miller, John Schilb), postmodernism (Harkin and Schilb; Faigley), cultural studies (Berlin; McComiskey; Fitts and France), multiculturalism (Severino, Guerra, and Butler; Walters and Moss), feminism (Jarratt and Worsham; Flynn; Phelps and Emig), and race (Gilyard, Royster, Logan, Villanueva). Scholars of composition have been particularly interested in pursuing concepts of resistance, especially in the classroom (Greenbaum; Giroux). This work is important for its emphasis on ways to call attention to and hence resist oppressive practices, but it too often fails to move beyond considering acculturation, accommodation, and resistance in terms of the disempowered. As Haivan Hoang has argued, scholars need also to examine the practices of those who are imbued with institutional or social power, to explore the ways in which accommodation and resistance can and do co-exist among members of both groups, and, most importantly, to study what she calls, drawing on Burkean identification and Bakhtinian centripetalism, the “self-conscious ethnic discursive acts that unite people for particular purposes and to enact particular values” (8).

Thus recent years have produced the beginnings of some productive cross talk between composition and postcolonial studies. A 1998 special issue of *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory*, for example, comprised a series of essays (some of which appear in revised form here) aimed at exploring issues of importance to both composition and postcolonial studies. In the follow-

ing year, Lynn Worsham and Gary Olson edited a series of *JAC* interviews, including one with postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha. More recently, Andrea Greenbaum's *Insurrections: Approaches to Resistance in Composition Studies* emphasizes connections between critical literacy theories and composition, arguing that composition should be fully informed and shaped by these theories.²

Crossing Borderlands seeks to further extend this conversation, complementing and grounding the insights gleaned from such previous efforts. More specifically, the essays collected here seek to build on composition's traditional concerns—for access, agency, and material conditions of student writers and their teachers—by situating these concerns in the context of postcolonial theory and in richly situated pedagogical practice. These essays consolidate some of the most important postcolonial work of composition and attempt to engage postcolonial scholars in issues related to students and student writing—and to the liberatory potential of teaching and practicing writing. We stress this liberating “potential” purposely, since writing, a system and a technology, is always engaged in some form of regulation: grammar itself is highly regulatory, and beyond that governing structure lie the imposing discourses of society, all of which exert pressure on writers and their messages. In spite of such pressures—or perhaps partially because of them—the authors in this volume look for ways to question and resist regulation and to build opportunities for students to realize agency.

The articles collected here insist on valuing the voices of students, of engaging those voices directly, and examining how students can come to voice. In addition, this collection moves beyond a Eurocentric view of postcolonialism, considering the position of Mexican Americans, African Americans, and Native Americans, and hence tracing colonialist economies of power in America. Equally important is the focus on the centrality of speaking and writing English. Given the hegemonic tendencies of English, understanding its ideology and power is of key concern. As Edward Said notes, “there is simply no use operating politically and responsibly in a world dominated by one superpower without a profound familiarity and knowledge of that superpower—America, its histories, its institutions, its currents and countercurrents, its politics and culture; and, above all, a perfect working knowledge of its language” (“Thinking”). This volume contributes to such a working knowledge and explores liberatory ways of using such

knowledge while also calling attention to the colonizing modes of English itself. In short, the interview and essays gathered here all seek to explore various borderlands and to contribute to a growing body of work on borderland pedagogy. *Borderland* is a particularly apt metaphor in which to ground these essays, because the concept allows for—indeed encourages—what may seem to be shifting and contradictory movements and claims, the kind that enable and value the “flexible rhetorics” identified and described by Hoang.³

The themes we have identified—resisting the urge to speak for students, valuing student voices and student writing, a focus on access and agency, attention to material conditions, and attention to the role of English and to the ways in which America can be said to be postcolonial do not together animate each individual essay herein. Indeed, these essays sound additional themes as well. In the opening piece, Min-Zhan Lu responds to the collection as a whole, interrogating the ways in which composition functions as an “ungrateful receiver” of the gifts of postcolonial studies. In a trenchant analysis of the “systematic ‘swallowing’ of the reality of composition in the world of the academy,” Lu argues that contesting the imbalance of power relations across many borders calls for the need to “make giving mutual between postcolonial and composition studies.” Following Lu’s analysis is an interview with Gloria Anzaldúa, one Lu reads meticulously and critically, often deconstructing Anzaldúa’s root metaphors while building her reading on Trinh Minh-ha’s metaphor of gifts and ungrateful receivers. Together, Lu’s theoretically rich reading and Anzaldúa’s extensive comments based on her own rhetorical praxis set the scene for the essays to come.

In “Terms of Engagement: Postcolonialism, Transnationalism, and Composition Studies,” Deepika Bahri treats “the confusions that have come to characterize both postcolonialism and the writing classroom in the current climate produced by transnationalism and economic globalization” by clarifying terms and concepts and showing in detail how a terministic reciprocity between composition and postcolonial studies may be effected. The following essays, by Gary Olson and by R. Mark Hall and Mary Rosner, both add to an understanding of theoretical terms and, especially, of the function of the “Other” in various discursive formations. Olson argues that the commonalities between composition and postcolonial studies move both fields toward a carefully articulated ethics of practice. Hall and Rosner narrow the terministic focus, following the path of Mary Louise Pratt’s con-

cept of “contact zone” as the term shifts and changes in several of Pratt’s own texts as well as in reviews and adaptations of her work. Hall and Rosner’s meticulous unpacking of the word “context” and their emphasis on what is missing from accounts of the contact zone (namely, the voices and perspectives of students) set the stage for a more effective and reflective use of this concept in both composition and postcolonial studies.

Susan C. Jarratt’s “Beside Ourselves: Rhetoric and Representation in Postcolonial Feminist Writing” participates in this narrowing of focus, addressing “the problem of speaking for others by looking at how ‘others’ speak.” Toward this end, Jarratt describes representational strategies of postcolonial feminist rhetoric and shows how those strategies can lead to the gradual transformation of singular subjectivity to “self-divided” subjects who are literally and figuratively “beside themselves,” and eventually to a position that enables students and teachers “to move collectively across the axes of metaphor/metonymy rather than silence/speech.” To make her case for such a new vision of collectivity, Jarratt applies postcolonial feminist strategies to the work of Gayatri Spivak, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Rigoberta Menchú Tum. Martin Behr’s “Postcolonial Transformations in Canadian Inuit Testimonio” follows from Jarratt’s discussion of Menchú Tum’s use of that genre, here drawing on new genre theory to help understand how the discursive features of testimonio function to create strategies of transformation typical “of a collective form of autobiography.” In his essay, Behr applies such an understanding of testimonio to the first book-length one by a Canadian Eskimo, *I, Nuliqak*, in which the speaker gives voice to the dispossession of his people through a western autobiographical form—without acquiescing to the colonizing powers of that form.

The next two essays focus on personal experiences of postcolonial subjects in the composition classroom. In “(Im)migrant Crossings,” Aneil Rallin employs what are now sometimes called “alternative discourse strategies,”⁴ including disjunctive pairings, notes, lists, and shifts of several kinds to evoke synchronicity and to make room for teachers and students to “inhabit multiple positionings.” David Dzaka, born and raised in Ghana, examines his own identity as a multilingual postcolonial subject, tracing his encounters with writing and looking at the many ways in which students in Ghana resist writing. As he came to understand the hollowness of injunctions to think critically and divergently, Dzaka learned to recognize the oppressive connection between “good writing” and “good students,” both of which

“toe the line” of their instructors. As he learned to tug at and then break this line, Dzaka also learned how to work with postcolonial learners whose “struggle with writing grows out of their own history, a history of miseducation, of misguided pedagogy, of domination and submission.”

In “Arts of the U.S.–Mexico Contact Zone” and “Hybridity: A Lens for Understanding Mestizo/a Writers,” Jaime Armin Mejía and Louise Rodríguez Connal turn their attention to Mexican American and Latino/a students. Mejía focuses on the U.S.–Mexico borderlands, describing a form of internal colonialism at work among a people fluent in both Spanish and English who have been systematically left unimagined by composition studies. Detailing the exclusionary educational practices that have marginalized these students, Mejía argues that teachers of writing must come to know the rhetorical and linguistic complexity characteristic of border texts such as corridos, dichos, and tallas, and not only to recognize but to value these features in student texts. Connal chronicles her own use of trans-cultural rhetorics that help navigate what she calls the “hybridized viewpoints that Spanish and English [. . .] can create.” Taking issue with Patricia Bizzell’s call to teach hybrid discourses, Connal argues that, rather than developing such hybrid languages, “we should select from the dialects and ways of knowing available to us [. . .] when dealing with political issues in our lives.”

The final essays in this volume deal explicitly with issues of race and related issues of multiculturalism. Pamela Gay’s “The Politics of Location: Using Flare-Ups to Spark Reflexive Dialogue in the Ever-Changing Classroom Text” describes a graduate course (Teaching Writing from a Postcolonial Perspective) that uses the concept of voice as a site of departure for an extensive listserv discussion, reads a “flare up” of texts produced on the listserv over multiculturalism and its place(s), and concludes that establishing a truly dialogic pedagogy requires not only recognizing and celebrating difference but actively engaging it as well. C. Jan Swearingen continues an examination of backlashes against the concept of multiculturalism, focusing specifically on the racist nature of parts of that movement. In tracing the controversy over the Oakland School Board’s Ebonics proposal and the less well-known debate over Eric Havelock’s linking of the pre-Socratic philosophers’ zero-copulative speech to Black English—as a way of arguing for the primacy of literacy over orality—Swearingen asks whether “multiculturalism” as a movement within American education has been brought to a “screeching halt.” Turning from overtly racist attacks on multiculturalism

to critiques mounted by members of the academy such as Henry Louis Gates, Swearingen ends on a note of hope, concluding that “the mindless celebration of difference for its own sake is not more tenable than the nostalgic return to some monochrome homogeneity. We all must search for a middle way and commit ourselves to its construction.”

Crossing Borderlands aims to participate in the construction of such a middle way, one that can move us toward an ongoing constructive exchange between composition and postcolonial studies. In addition, these essays contribute to the creation of a viable borderland pedagogy capable of making use of this exchange in creating a space for dialogic engagement and a theory of writing able to account for the multiply rich rhetorical practices of both students and teachers.