Postcolonialism and the Idea of a Writing Center

Anis Bawarshi and Stephanie Pelkowski

> We are mixed in with one another in ways that most national systems of education have not dreamed of. To match knowledge in the arts and sciences with these integrative realities is, I believe, the intellectual and cultural challenge of moment.
> —Edward Said
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> To teach writing is to argue for a version of reality.
> —James Berlin

The terms "remediation" and "Basic Writing" emerged at critical moments in the history of American higher education. Used originally to describe students who suffered from neurological problems, "remediation" became a popular designation in education journals in the 1920s in response to an ever-increasing number of under-prepared lower class and immigrant students who began to enter the educational system at the turn of the century (Rose 343, 349). These students' reading and writing "disabilities" needed "remediation" before the students were prepared to enter the academic community. Similarly, "Basic Writing" instruction matured as a field in the 1970s, the era of the G.I. Bill and the open admissions policy at CUNY. Open admissions prepared the way for thousands of non-traditional students "whose difficulties with the written language [Mina Shaughnessy tells us] seemed of a different order . . . as if they had come, you might say, from a different country" (2). These students, Shaughnessy explains, were indeed "strangers in academia, unacquainted with the rules and rituals of college life" (3). These racial and rural "strangers" whose "other" languages and dialects posed problems so great as to appear, in the words of their teachers, "irremediable"

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(Shaughnessy 3) had to be prepared for the university, and so Basic Writing became the shibboleth for the academically under-prepared.

Beginning in the 1920s and 1970s respectively, remediation and Basic Writing emerged as preemptive strikes, defensive moves as it were, at once to initiate under-prepared students into the ways of the university and to protect the university from the threat posed by the racial, rural, immigrant, underprivileged, under-prepared Other. Their purpose: to acculturate students who speak, read, and write Other dialects, Other languages, Other discourses, and initiate them into academic discourses. These remedial spaces—at once within and outside of the university (few, if any, provide credit hours toward graduation and many are located in peripheral and subterranean places such as basements)—accept, in the words of E. D. Hirsch, that "the acculturative responsibility of the schools is primary and fundamental" (19) and so serve that end.

Today, the writing center stands as the most accessible and visible place of remediation within the university. And true to the tradition of remediation it inherits dating back to the 1920s, the writing center is mainly a place of acculturation. Yet due to its physically and politically peripheral place—marginalized from and yet part of the university—we argue that the writing center is an ideal place in which to begin teaching and practicing a critical and self-reflective form of acculturation, what Edward Said calls "critical consciousness." Drawing from work in postcolonial theory, we posit that the writing center can become what Mary Louise Pratt has termed a "contact zone," a place in which different discourses grapple with each other and are negotiated.

Acculturation Versus the Goals of Critical Consciousness

Acculturation, as Min-zhan Lu and Victor Villanueva have argued, is driven by an essentialist and hegemonic pedagogical imperative that academic discourses are universal and empowering—that they are the discourses of inquiry, knowledge, and truth, suited to address issues fundamental to all humanity. As Lu has demonstrated, Geoffrey Wagner's *The End of Education* (1976), an apocalyptic book written in response to open admissions, posits just such a view of academic discourse. Wagner laments that "illiterate" students, whom he variously refers to as "dunces" (43), "misfits" (129), "hostile mental children" (247), and "the most sluggish of animals" (163) (he even describes one student as sitting "in a half-lotus pose in back of class with a transistor radio strapped to his Afro, and nodding off every two minutes" [134]), threaten to disrupt the rarefied air of the university. By introducing different dialects, different discourses, and different identities, these students threaten to introduce race,

politics, class, gender, and other social and political realities into academic discourses, thus infecting them with an ideology that ostensibly was not there before.

Acculturation, therefore, becomes a means not only of precluding the Other, but also of validating the academic culture to itself, a process, Edward Said writes, "by which superiority and power are lodged both in a rhetoric of belonging, or being 'at home,' so to speak, and in a rhetoric of administration: the two become interchangeable" (13). In short, acculturation becomes a means of administrating one's own power within one's own place. Said refers to such acculturation, academic or otherwise, as "affiliation." He claims that affiliative structures—the means by which knowledge, power, consciousness, and ideology are reproduced and maintained within a culture—are meant to appear as if they were representations of filial structures—the means by which human beings biologically reproduce, emotionally interact with, and construct personal relationships among one another (16-25). Said's point here is that hegemony succeeds when it convinces members of a culture that its affiliative structures—for example, the Eurocentric literary canon it privileges and teaches in the university at the expense of other, non-Eurocentric texts—are legitimate representations of natural, filial systems. Thus, affiliation becomes a form of representing on the cultural level the filiative processes supposedly to be found in nature—for instance, Matthew Arnold's notion of "culture" as the best that has been thought and said. So dominant culture becomes legitimized when it is made to appear as if it were based on certain natural, commonsensical principles.

When we encounter texts or any other forms of cultural production, Said argues, we are affiliated into the dominant culture. Academic discourse is no exception. In order to attain what Said calls "critical consciousness" (critical affiliation), we need to become aware of how affiliation and filiation cooperate. That is, we need to "arrive at some acute sense of what political, social, and human values are entailed in the reading, production, and transmission of every text" (26). Thus critical consciousness is about both being critical of discursive formations and how they are in the service of reproducing certain power relationships (filiations), as well as critical of one's own subject positions and social relations within these formations.

In this paper, we propose a writing center strategy in which under-prepared students, especially those marginalized by race, class, and ethnicity, are encouraged to adopt critical consciousness as a means of functioning within the university and its discourses. David Bartholomae and Mina Shaughnessy have provided us with what are now classic examples of the struggles basic writers face as they invent or write their

way into the university. But what has been overlooked, especially in the case of Shaughnessy, are the epistemological demands that such academic writing places on these students' ways of experiencing, ordering, and making sense of the world—in short, the subject positions and habits of mind that such academic discourses force them to adopt when they become acculturated into the cultures of the university. Such consequences are rarely if ever made explicit to students who find themselves labeled "basic" or, what amounts to the same thing, "Other." This is why we reject uncritical acculturation as both ethically and, as we explain later, pedagogically unsound, and propose instead a writing center-based pedagogy that allows basic and other marginalized students to become aware of how and why academic discourses situate them within certain power relationships and require of them particular subject positions. The goal of such pedagogy is *not* to subvert academic discourse or to suggest that students reject it, but rather to teach students how self-consciously to use and be used by it—how rhetorically and critically to choose and construct their subject positions within it. Ultimately, we agree with Said that "critical consciousness is a part of its actual social world and of the literal body that the consciousness inhabits, not by any means an escape from either one or the other" (16). Acculturation denies such consciousness, and, as we will demonstrate, also denies basic writing students, indeed all students, the opportunity to explore how discourse helps construct various subject positions and social practices. The critical consciousness we advocate invites students to consider how to "be in the world and self-aware simultaneously" (Said 29).

In "The Discourse on Language," Michel Foucault claims that it is on the margins of discourse—the margins of knowledge and knowing—that self-reflection is most acute because it is there that we can achieve what he calls "exteriority," a critical perspective that perceives discourse in relation to the various and often conflicting conditions of its existence. Because of its traditionally marginalized status, the writing center is a potentially rich site in which to achieve and practice this exteriority, a contact zone in which students and staff learn to negotiate multiple subject positions as they rhetorically negotiate multiple discourses within and outside of the academy.

The Traditional Writing Center

Those involved in writing center theory and practice are most likely familiar with Stephen North's landmark and now classic essay, "The Idea of a Writing Center" (1984). Suffice it to say, North helps legitimize the writing center by arguing that, instead of being merely a service branch of the composition classroom, the writing center can and

must become its own place, providing a unique holistic "participant-observer methodology" unavailable in the traditional composition classroom:

> The result is what might be called a pedagogy of direct intervention. Whereas in the "old" center instruction tends to focus on the correction of textual problems, in the "new" center the teaching takes place as much as possible during writing, during the activity being learned, and tends to focus on the activity itself. (North 239)

In his "new" version of the writing center, the emphasis is on the process, not the product, on the writer, not the text: "in a writing center, the object is to make sure that *writers*, and not necessarily their texts, *are what get changed* by instruction" (North 237; emphasis added).

Stephen North's assumption is that such a change in the writer is a good thing. At the very least, he assumes, as many of us do, that an ability to effect such a change in the writer legitimatizes the writing center, placing it on par with, if not above, the composition classroom in terms of writing instruction. Yet nowhere in the article does North actually critique such instruction.[1] Nowhere does he question the nature of academic discourse itself or what effect it has on the student writers who are "changed" by it. The basic assumption for North is that changed writers are improved writers because changed writers are writers who can better function within academic discourses and the university. Such transformation seems a natural and positive consequence of a "pedagogy of direct intervention."

But lack of critical consideration, as Said warns, often results in the kinds of affiliative social practices that assume a filial, natural foundation. Notice, for example, how North describes the tutor's role, a description echoed throughout the essay:

> [Tutors] must measure their success not in terms of the constantly changing model they create, but in terms of changes in the writer. Rather than being fearful of disturbing the "ritual" of composing, they observe it and are *charged to change it*: *to interfere*, to get in the way, to participate in ways that will leave the "ritual" itself forever altered. *The whole enterprise seems to me most natural.* (239; emphasis added)

The rhetoric in the above citation, even as we acknowledge North's well-meaning intentions, is unmistakably colonialist. The shift from a product- to a process-based pedagogy becomes an invitation to interfere with not just the body of the text but also the body of the writer—

his or her "ritual"—in ways reminiscent of imperialist practices around the world. We do not wish to belabor the issue here. We simply want to suggest that the colonialist language with which North unwittingly rallies his tutors to interfere with and ultimately change students' writing rituals as if such interference was a "most natural" enterprise betrays the acculturative and, as we shall see shortly, hegemonic agendas of much basic writing pedagogy.

In so far as it does transform students who seem unable to function within standardized academic discourses, the writing center should indeed be acknowledged as a formidable place within the university. And in so far as it provides a context for learning independent of what North calls the university's "external curriculum" (240), the writing center does indeed "help students revise their attitudes towards themselves as writers and towards writing . . . [by restoring] to students the sense of their own authority and responsibility" (Warnock and Warnock 19).[2] But should such transformations and revisions be lauded uncritically? Is the change the writing center produces in writers and their "rituals," especially basic and other marginalized writers, a positive change? The answer cannot be an innocent "yes." And it should certainly not be treated as a "most natural" enterprise. As recent postmodern and postcolonial considerations of discourse, particularly academic discourses, suggest, we need to question essentialist notions of writing as somehow ideologically innocent or even empowering—a means of translating thought into language. Such considerations ask us to take a closer look at what it means to teach standard academic discourses, and what is at stake when we introduce students to a particular academic style or genre or ritual. As such, they make us aware of the role writing plays in the construction of master narratives, narratives that define students' values, goals, and epistemologies, and that perpetuate power relationships and subject positions. There are serious political consequences, thus, to the kind of student transformations the writing center promises and is so often successful in achieving, consequences that have only recently begun to receive critical attention.

Acculturation and Colonialism

Both the "old" current-traditional and "new" process-oriented versions of the writing center as described by Stephen North are ultimately in the business of acculturation. Whether they are involved in changing textual features ("old" writing centers) or changing writers ("new" writing centers), the idea is the same: the change is meant to transform the student and his or her texts into the acceptable standard of the university. The writing center has traditionally been and continues to be generally

unconcerned with critiquing academic standards, only with facilitating students' participation within them.

And so acculturation continues. In her recent article "From the Margins to the Mainstream: Reconceiving Remediation," Mary Soliday argues that mainstreaming Basic Writers offers a better alternative to remedial courses. One advantage of mainstreaming, she contends, is that it encourages "students to use the unfamiliar language of the academy to describe and analyze familiar aspects of everyday language use and cultural experience" (87). This is accomplished by giving the students an opportunity "to raise issues about social difference and to explore these using conventional academic ways of thinking such as description, analysis, and interpretation" (87). Regarding her case study, Derek, a mainstreamed African-American Basic Writer, Soliday triumphantly concludes: "More *successfully* than in his past essays, Derek uses a formal language here which subordinates one idea to another to approximate his version of college-level discourse" (94; emphasis added). What, however, does Soliday mean by "successfully"? And perhaps even more importantly, what has happened to Derek's ideas in the process of his learning to subordinate one idea to another? The research Soliday presents tells us, for example, that prior to his being exposed to the concept of subordination, Derek had resisted taking a position in his writing, opting instead not to resolve contradiction. In the process of learning how to resolve contradiction and subordinate his ideas, what has Derek unwittingly been asked to do? How has his home cultural identity been transformed? Has he been forced to accept uncritically a different epistemology, a different way of experiencing and making sense of the world? And if so, what are the pedagogical and political implications?

Linda Brodkey and Min-zhan Lu would say, yes, his ideas have been altered, his home discourse has been silenced. As Brodkey's work with the "literacy letters" demonstrates, the rhetorical context of the university, its academic discourses, is constituted by and in turn constitutes the social and political agenda of the dominant culture. Academic discourses not only reflect the university's social and political formations; they also reproduce these formations. In short, they are affiliative. And when Basic Writing students, so called because they have yet to be acculturated into these privileged discourses, are taught how to function within them by such institutions as the writing center, they are not innocently being introduced to a new set of discourses; they are being constituted by these discourses. Derek's learning how to subordinate ideas to one another is not simply an example of his acquiring a new discourse into which he can "put" his thoughts. The very academic discourse in which he has learned to reproduce his experiences reconstitutes his experiences. The process of subordination, a seemingly innocent

rhetorical formation, alters the way Derek perceives his experiences—forcing him to order his experiences hierarchically (something he previously resisted doing), and determining to some extent what aspects of his experiences can fit into the subordination and what aspects cannot.

In the "Literacy Letters," Brodkey describes how discourses of power, in this case academic discourses, transform Basic Writers' experiences. She gives as one example a letter by an adult Basic Writer, a white working-class woman she calls Dora, written to a white middle-class male teacher she calls Don. In the letter, Dora, who up to this point had assumed the subject role of audience to Don's narrative, attempts to reverse this pattern. Here is a portion of Dora's letter as printed in Brodkey:

> I don't have must to siad this week a good frineds husband was kill satday at 3:15 the man who kill him is a good man he would give you the shirt off of his back it is really self-defense but anyway I see police academy three it was funny but not is good as the first two. (286)

Nowhere in the "Literacy Letters" is the struggle between marginalized narrative and the discourse of mastery more clear. Even as Dora attempts to introduce her own narrative—her home subject position—into the conversation, she cannot sustain her experience, her story, within the discursive practices of the academy. This is why as soon as she resists her academic subject position by telling her own version of reality, Dora quickly retreats into a subordinate discursive position and narrates her experiences in a way that Don has sanctioned as academically appropriate—she silences her own narrative about the murder (a real and complex event in her life) in order to write about what Don likes: movies. Commenting on this tension, Brodkey writes, "the abrupt shift from herself as narrator who reflects on the aftermath of violence to herself as the student who answers a teacher's questions . . . is, for me, one of those moments when the power of discourse seems the most absolute" (286). The way we use discourse constitutes our reality—what parts of our experiences we can narrate and conceptualize within the discourse and what parts we cannot.

Mainstreaming or acculturation appears to neglect that meaning is constituted, interpreted, and valued differently in different discourses. Soliday certainly assumes that Derek becomes a "better" writer when he learns to explore his experiences "using conventional academic ways of thinking" such as subordination (87). But at what cost? What does Derek have to give up in order to become a more successful writer? Soliday does not say. But we have learned from the work that Min-zhan Lu has done with basic writing instruction that the cost can be great. Not only can

marginalized discourses be silenced by academic discourses as we saw in the case of Dora, but as Lu argues, "mastery of academic discourse is often accompanied by a change in one's point of view" (332). A change in style can thus suggest a change in thinking—"in the way one perceives the world around one and relates to it" (Lu 332). Such a change in style, often accompanied by a change in place (i.e., academic discourse/university), demands a change in subject position. This is quite common. But the university and its discourse become dangerously hegemonic when they refuse to make explicit this change in subject position. Instead, they force marginalized students like Derek and Dora to consent to the discursive practices of education by first reminding them that they are Other and in need of remediation, and then convincing them that being academically literate is the most prestigious, most civilized state of being—that, in fact, the university is a place that emancipates them from their familiar subject positions by teaching them a universal, objective discourse which provides them access to culture, knowledge, and truth. Thus, the university, too often with the help of the writing center, imposes on students one more subject position to which they "willingly" consent because they are not conscious of it as being a subject position, a particular, politically embedded, and discursive way of experiencing and articulating knowledge and reality.

Like the appropriately named basic writing course at Indiana University-Indianapolis, the writing center truthfully ought to be called the "Access Center," a kind of "scholarly quarantine" (to use Mike Rose's phrase), in which those marginalized as Basic Writers are cleansed and prepared for the rarefied air of the university. As Gail Stygall explains, "paradoxically, the Access Center restricts and regulates access to the university" (327). Clearly, for those students entering the university from the margins, the writing center serves as a place offering training in how to operate as productive academic citizens. North himself admits, "[the writing center] cannot change [the rhetorical context of the university]: all we can do is help the writer learn how to operate in it and other contexts like it" (240). This is certainly a laudable goal. But without adding the adjective "critically" to "operate," the writing center runs the risk of becoming not much different, as we will see shortly, from traditional colonialist practices.

As a way of precluding this risk, we suggest that the writing center should become a site in which marginalized students can become critically conscious of how and why academic discourses construct various subject positions so that students like Derek recognize and contend with the threat to their home subject positions—their racial, class-based, gendered points of view and experiences—resulting from their mastery of academic discourses. At the same time, they develop what Gloria Anzaldua refers to as border residency/consciousness—a

consciousness resulting from occupying contradictory and ambivalent subject positions simultaneously, a "third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts": "a mestiza consciousness" (79-80).

Toward a Postcolonial Writing Center

North's landmark essay began a rich conversation about ways to move beyond the old version of the writing center as a skills fix-it shop or quarantine. Many subsequent participants in this conversation have borrowed critical theories from areas traditionally outside of composition studies to continue forging a new direction for writing centers. Betty Garrison Shiffman makes use of one such popular critical approach, that of feminism. In her article "Writing Center Instruction: Fostering an Ethic of Caring," Shiffman advocates an "overt awareness and acknowledgment that various factors, particularly social ones such as gender, race, class, economic or educational background, play a considerable role in everyone's learning and teaching processes" (2). The study begins to build on Brodkey's findings in the "Literacy Letters," but the methods of change Shiffman prescribes are potentially damaging. Shiffman cites the work done in feminist education by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule to describe the ideal teacher "who would help [students] articulate and expand their latent knowledge" (2). This and other statements that rely on the birthing metaphor for nourishing the student's ideas into the world of writing are based on essentialist assumptions which assume that thought develops separately from writing. The goal of the writing center, in this case, is to provide a comfortable environment in which students can "give birth" to their ideas. What is so dangerous about these assumptions, as Lu's work has brought to the forefront, is the belief that writing cannot alter thought. Under this assumption, when we ask students to write in the form of academic discourse we are asking them only to write in a different form from that to which they are accustomed; a change in genre cannot change thought since writing and thought are separate. Although Shiffman's approach recognizes that social factors are tied to learning, it still fails to recognize the effect writing has on one's subject position.

It is here that the field of postcolonial theory makes us aware of the effect that sanctioned academic discourse has on basic writers. Like feminist theory, many strands of postcolonial theory are practice oriented: the two are equally focused on helping people identify and resist hegemonic constructs. As postcolonial theory looks critically at the once heralded ideals of bringing a proper education and technological growth to a country in exchange for assimilation, the writing center should look critically at the changes we are asking basic writers to accept. As colonial

subjects usually had to learn to speak in a language different from their own, so basic writers are expected to speak an academic language foreign to them in many ways. The idea of the basic writer as a colonial subject certainly seems to be extreme, but when we speak of changing the student writer and his or her "ritual" in ways described earlier the university clearly becomes a site for an "exchange of services" in the spirit of economist Maurice Godelier. Godelier theorized that "no domination, even when born of violence, can last if it does not assume the form of an exchange of services" (151). In other words, the "exchange" is hegemonically constructed when dominance is called a service; in accepting the service (in this case, instruction in "good writing"), the oppressed consent to their own domination.

To examine just how this theory is put into practice, we can look to the work of Edward San Juan, who finds an appeal to this sort of "exchange" in the history of United States' relationship to the Philippines. As San Juan points out, William Howard Taft's policy toward the Philippines stressed a sort of contractual agreement, in which Filipinos would speak and write in English in exchange for decent jobs and protection by the United States (74). Most contemporary historians continue to view U.S.-Philippine relations as a failed *collaboration*, rather than a dependency imposed by the U.S. (70). But the Filipino response to American education demanded by the U.S. requires more than a simple shift in language use. If language could indeed be separated from thought, as Shiffman assumes, then the Filipino's "fit[ting] himself... in English" would indeed mean nothing more than fitting oneself in a different set of clothing, as Taft's turn of phrase implies (qtd. in San Juan 73). Renato Constantino presents a different version of this "exchange" in his retelling of his miseducation. As he tells it, "In exchange for a smattering of English, we yielded our souls" (46). This sort of immaterial cultural domination is the primary means of domination in the Philippines, more powerful than any tangible monetary "aid."

Certainly, parallel effects of imposing academic discourse on marginalized writers and calling it a "service" have been documented by Brodkey and Lu, as seen above. The colonial (or neocolonial) situation of the marginalized writer, then, leads to the following question: when presented with the choice of acculturation or of a complete rejection of the "exchange," which should writers choose? Many writing teachers have the understandable fear that students will not survive or succeed if they completely reject the exchange. This fear usually leads teachers like Soliday to concern themselves with the lesser of the two evils—acculturation—since the situation is thus presented as an either/or dilemma. However, as Anzaldua reminds us, there is a third option, a "mestiza consciousness." For this, we can look to those postcolonial writers who

choose self-consciously to write in the language of the colonizing country. Derek Walcott is one such author from the Caribbean, who writes in the stylistic tradition of English poets, but who does so consciously, which allows him to recreate the subject matter as he recreates his subject position. Speaking of himself and other poets who use the traditional Western form, he writes, "when these writers cunningly describe themselves as classicists and pretend an indifference to change, it is with an irony as true as the fury of the radical" (370). These "classicists" are clearly aware of the subject position they take on at any moment. The comparisons between the writers' detached irony and the radicals' aggression testifies to the power in this awareness. For Walcott, a complete rejection of the dominant/dominating genre and language is limiting. Nor does his choice of the "classical" form mean acculturation: it is instead an act of creation and of resistance: "it is this awe of the numinous, this elemental privilege of naming the new world which annihilates history in our great poets" (372). Walcott thus is able to appropriate as potentially uplifting and capable of redefining his experience a language that some see as synonymous with historical servitude. In this case, he uses the colonizer's discourse—a discourse used to impose on him a subject position— in order to redefine himself. To help writers far less experienced than Walcott achieve this mestiza consciousness—a consciousness marked by the ability to negotiate multiple, even contradictory, subject positions while rooted in dominant discourse—is the goal of the postcolonial writing center.

Mary Louise Pratt refers to mestiza or border sites as contact zones, that is, "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (35). Within such contact zones, "subordinated subject[s]" learn how power relations get played out in culture and how they can use "the colonizer's language and verbal repertoire" to "single-handedly give [themselves] authority" to recreate their subject positions (Pratt 38).

We propose that the writing center become such a "contact zone" within the university. Rather than treating the writing center as a space in which marginalized students can "engage in the trial and error of putting their thoughts into writing," we suggest it be transformed into another kind of space, one in which students such as Derek can engage in the process of assessing what happens to their experiences—what happens to *them*—when they begin to master academic discourses. The writing center thus becomes not just a place in which students are introduced to academic discourses and taught how to function within them, but also how to "describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others

have made of them" (Pratt 36). What we are suggesting, finally, is that the writing center, in addition to helping marginalized students function within academic discourses, should also make explicit how these discourses affect them—how these discourses rhetorically and socially function.

One way that the writing center can achieve this critical self-reflexivity is by making marginalized students aware of how the mastery of academic discourses affects their home discourses. To return to Soliday's example, Derek should be allowed the opportunity to examine how his learning to subordinate affects his point of view and experiences. This might mean that a tutor discuss with Derek those contradictions he has been asked to rhetorically smooth over in his restructuring through subordination. In such a scenario, Derek and his tutor might compare the rhetorical strategies of his two texts—the one that resists subordination and the one that uses subordination to achieve cohesion—in order to reflect on the social and political effects such strategies create. This scenario presents a unique teachable moment in which Derek can consider *why* he wants to maintain contradiction—what is at stake, that is, for him to do so and what he might lose (and gain) by learning to subordinate. Subsequently, tutors might help Derek understand why the resulting closure is sometimes valued in particular academic discourses, and consider whether or not this is important to him and why. If Derek is not satisfied with the subject position he is working from in the revised essay, tutors might help find a revision strategy that would maintain the contradictions of his first draft, but be suitable to academic discourse. (A difficult task, no doubt, but possible—think, for example, of some of the academy's most prominent theorists.) This type of revision would reflect a move towards mestiza consciousness, in that contradictory (subject) positions are not simplified and erased, but held in relation to one another and examined critically in that state.

Above all, we should let those who are entering the university from the margins know what is at stake—not to discourage them from entering, but to make them aware of the extent to which discourse constructs reality and their place within it. The goal here is not to encourage marginalized students to resist academic discourses or to have them privilege one discourse over another. Rather, the goal of the writing center should be to teach its students how "to *reposition* themselves in relation to several continuous and conflicting discourses" (Harris 275) so that they become more aware of the power of discourse and what it means to "write." Occupying a space both within and at the same time on the margins of the university, the writing center is in a unique position to teach marginalized students how to negotiate diverse discourses, to encourage them towards what Joseph Harris refers to as "a kind of polyphony—an awareness of and pleasure in the various competing discourses that make

up their own" (273). Aware of what subordination can do to his point of view, for example, Derek can learn how to perceive his experiences differently within different discourses, can learn, more specifically, how his version of reality is shaped and enabled by the discourse in which he tells it.

Such instruction can do more than solely teach marginalized students how to write "successfully." On the one hand, it teaches them that "success" in writing is contingent upon the kind of discourse they are writing, not some universal standard. That is, they learn that what a certain discourse community deems successful reveals much about its values, goals, and epistemologies, what knowledges it sanctions and why. On the other, it can teach them how writing does this and how they can manipulate writing in order to construct what Brodkey calls "multiple subject positions" (281). The point is not to discourage marginalized "Basic Writers" from functioning within academic discourses, but rather to teach them how to preserve their multiple, even conflicting social roles while doing so. As such, the writing center can, in a truly postmodern sense, become a structure within the university that examines and exposes its own structurality, a place that is continuously engaged in deconstructing its context at the same time as it functions within it.

As part of its postmodern position within the university, the writing center should encourage its students to examine the axioms upon which academic structures are formed—what assumptions lie behind the limits we impose on rhetorical conventions, and what social and power relations are served by such conventions. So, while the university, especially the English department, continues to perceive the writing center as a place in which students learn to reproduce particular features of academic discourses found lacking in their writing (with the help of an interactive, conversational, and process-oriented pedagogy, of course), a postmodern and postcolonial perspective allows us to reconceptualize the role of the writing center as a place in which students explicitly examine why and how certain features of academic discourse come to be features in the first place.

A primary goal of the postcolonial writing center, then, is to teach students how to retrace the formal and textual effects of academic discourses to their rhetorical and social sources, allowing them to look prior to and outside of these discourses in order to explore what it means to write. Marginalized students—actually students in general—are rarely if ever exposed to this kind of explicit instruction. Instead, they are told what the standards for academic writing are in composition classrooms (often in the form of a "grading criteria" handout, and more often in the margin comments of returned essay where teachers explain why the essay is *not* an academic essay) without really being told why the standards exist in the first place. In many cases, this act of withholding causes students

to treat writing as a code they must somehow crack—a guessing game—instead of something that they must participate in creating. Thus, academic discourses appear as stagnant, artificial, and arbitrary formulas to student writers, especially those for whom such discourses are not very accessible, rather than dynamic discourses that respond to and reflect the rhetorical and social contexts that create them.

Perhaps this examining of discursive conventions and standards also means that we might do well to give back to grammar *some* of the prominence it enjoyed in the "fix-it shop"-writing center, as another way of discussing "surface" changes to a student's writing and how those affect the student's subjectivity as well as a springboard to discussing other types of academic standards. Maybe part of what we are after is a way of employing North's "old" writing center in critique of his "new" one—that is, a critical examination of the stylistic techniques of change to expose the "new" writing center (as well as the acculturative impulses of the university), interested in changing writers.

Not only, then, should the postcolonial writing center aim to demystify writing processes by giving marginalized students insight into why certain conventions exist for certain discourses; it should also aim to equip these students with the skills necessary for analyzing conventions so that they can translate their knowledge into successful writing practices beyond the university community. Knowing not only what writing does, but also why and where it does it, allows these student writers to make more informed choices. Writing becomes no longer a guessing game in which the student hopes eventually to "figure out" what the teacher wants. Rather, the student begins to recognize that the act of writing invests him or her into a community's social pattern of action, and that the discourse he or she writes is an rhetorical dramatization of that pattern. More importantly, by making marginalized students aware of how writing constitutes them into a discourse community's social pattern of action, the writing center can potentially preclude any threat to these students' home discourses. They will still learn how to subordinate their ideas to one another, because such a convention is an important feature of some academic discourses. But having learned what it means to subordinate ideas and why such a convention is important to certain parts of the academic community, Derek and marginalized students like him not only will be better prepared to reproduce such conventions, but also will be more aware of how these conventions constitute only one out of many different means of reproducing experience.

Such an approach to discourse enables the writing center to expand a student's understanding of what writing does and where it does it, the goal being that such critical literacy will teach students how to analyze the discourses of their culture, and how, through their writing, to

become more effective participants in the communities to which they belong. Like Jacqueline Jones Royster, we too "see the critical importance of the role of negotiator, someone who can cross boundaries and serve as guide and translator for Others" (34). The postcolonial writing center can and should serve as such a guide and translator.

Notes

[1] Such critique is also absent in North's follow-up article, "Revisiting 'The Idea of a Writing Center'" (1994).

[2] When Warnock and Warnock laud the writing center as a liberatory place in which "faculty and textbooks are not the authorities: students are their own authors" (22), they seem to overlook the complexities of the notion of "authorship." Their notion of "self-authoring" is problematic because it suggests that students take on the responsibility of writing themselves into the academy. In this case, marginalized writers are given the "opportunity" to constitute themselves as willing subjects, to consent to their domination under the liberatory assumption that if they do it themselves, then they are free. Maurice Godelier, whom we cite later, refers to this "consent" as an "exchange of services," a hegemonic construct within which domination becomes renamed as a beneficial "service" rendered on behalf of the colonized.

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Anis Bawarshi teaches at the University of Kansas, where he coordinates the Minority Writers Program, a tutoring center designed to assist underrepresented students enrolled in writing courses, while completing his Ph.D. in composition and rhetoric with an emphasis on genre theory and the role of the writer. In the fall, he will begin as an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Washington. **Stephanie Pelkowski** is a graduate student at the University of Kansas, where she teaches composition and literature. Her research interests include postcolonial theory, writing centers, and audience theory.