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Renee M. Moreno

“The Politics of Location”: Text As Opposition

Foregrounding issues of race, ethnicity, and education, this article ties together two important issues in teaching (so-called) basic writing: how social and pedagogical issues in higher education shape possibilities for bicultural students’ writings and how these students can use their developing sense of literacy and their texts to explore identity.

Critiquing “general bourgeois education,” an education that socializes people to follow the rules of society, Ng̃ug̃ wa Thiong’o describes a system that mystifies “knowledge and hence reality:”

Education, far from giving people the confidence in their ability and capacities to overcome obstacles or become masters of the laws governing external nature as human beings, tends to make them feel their inadequacies, their weaknesses and their incapacities in the face of reality; and their inability to do anything about the [material] conditions governing their lives. They become more and more alienated from themselves and from their natural and social environment. Education as a process of alienation produces a gallery of active stars and an undifferentiated mass of grateful admirers. (56–57)

Thiong’o describes an educational system mired in a colonial past, where the only hope of dismantling this past is to reclaim native languages. I open with this quote because I am convinced that U.S. education for communities of

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people of color is similar to what he describes. Many scholars, including, Rodolfo Acuña, have described Latinos in this country as internally colonized subjects. Acuña has asserted in *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* that the process of education becomes another site in which this colonization happens. Similarly, Thiong'o asserts that language learning is a tool of control that colonizes the mind and body, and returning to a precolonized language (i.e., to his native language Gĩkũyũ) to decolonize the mind and the body suggests that literacy can also be used in "the service of liberation" (hooks "Narratives" 53). In a university, is the project of literacy (reading and writing) a tool for control and colonization, considering here that literacy in institutional settings is also used to socialize students to the uses of language and discourses in educational institutions? By reclaiming native languages that evolve over time, culture is created and hope for society is realized.

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To foreground issues of race, culture, and ethnicity in this essay and their connections to education, I am also thinking about recent research critiquing the constructions of race in the U.S.—like that of Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres who argue,

Those who are racially marginalized are like the miner's canary: their distress is the first sign of a danger that threatens us all. It is easy enough to think that when we sacrifice this canary, the only harm is to communities of color. Yet others ignore problems that converge around racial minorities at their own peril, for these problems are symptoms warning us that we are all at risk. (11)

Their term "political race" is helpful to me here because it sees an interconnectedness of Latinos/as', African Americans', or Native and Asian Americans' experiences with society's institutions and the unequal relationship these communities have to the powerful. To emphasize this fact, I situate my argument amid larger issues in educational institutions, such as the effort to eliminate basic writing in most four-year colleges and universities, and I also critique power differentials affecting Latino students. I am also thinking about past analyses of U.S. education, especially by James Baldwin who argues that if we are to realize the potential of U.S. society, we must undo much of the historical wrongdoing racial and ethnic minorities experience in school. His call is to engage students in classrooms and to recognize them as crucial sites of action and consciousness-raising. These analyses critique how the state educates communities of people of color; for these scholars, aptly named problems in

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education are those affecting us all. Although the histories of U.S. Latinos/as are very different from histories of African Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans, I argue that within institutions these histories are often collapsed; we are all “othered,” even objectified, our histories balkanized.

This concept of othering may, in fact, contribute to the problematic labeling that this essay evokes when referring to communities of people of color. I use the terms *students/people of color*, *bicultural students*, *marginalized groups* not to further complicate these notions but to emphasize the similarity of experiences of those living as historically marginalized groups in this country—Latino/a (immigrant and otherwise), African American, Asian American, Native American.¹ In this article, I discuss students who are pushed to the margins of educational institutions, whose mis-education in public schools has not necessarily prepared them for higher education (certainly not given them the kind of preparation that is required at elite U.S. colleges and universities). In *Culture and Power in the Classroom: A Critical Foundation for Bicultural Education*, Antonia Darder uses the term “bicultural instead of ‘minority’ . . . to designate students who identify themselves as Black, Latino, Chicano, Asian, Philipino, Native American Indian, and so forth” (22). Darder’s term encompasses “the experience of cultural subjects that are not allowed to live a fully multicultural life in a society which is, by definition and make-up, multicultural” (xiii). Darder’s term, therefore, is applicable to an extent to the students I discuss in this article. First, as people of color or bicultural subjects, we all carry linguistic and cultural capital that is not recognized by the institution, except through a “deficit” gaze/lens. The very nature of precomposition courses assumes a “less than” approach to the languages and discourses, both written and oral, that these students come to classrooms with and that these students are “assessed” to possess.² Second, in educational institutions, we all have to learn a standard language, a language that does not necessarily embrace students’ multicultural lives. Third, as bicultural subjects in institutional locations, we all have to deal with being the other.

Further, I want to move away from a black/white binary to show black, white, brown, and native bodies converging at a location. In his writing of history, Eduardo Galeano shows the interconnections of people and locations. Galeano does not separate stories or claim that histories happen as isolated

events. By telling history as stories, I assert that Galeano reimagines how identities are linked. This point is important in educational institutions—to rewrite the histories of linkage and connection and to describe how these play out in schools, despite efforts to keep people separated. I am especially interested in how, as bicultural subjects, students might begin to use textual locations to define and shape resistance, to define themselves collectively, and to unmask power when it is operating in the classroom and in pedagogy.

To this end, I will discuss ethnographic research conducted in a writing course, focusing on texts a student wrote. Raymundo, a Latino student, was enrolled in a precomposition course where the topic was race and ethnicity. In his texts, Raymundo explored the tensions of learning to write and the intersections of being socialized to a discourse community whose values are detached from the realities of his life as a working-class Latino. This article then ties together two important issues in teaching so-called basic writing to students: how social and pedagogical issues in higher education shape the possibilities for bicultural students' writings (and their education) and how these students can use their developing sense of literacy and their texts to explore identity—power relations, their social and political positions of race, class, ethnicity, culture, and gender. Pointed questions about identity might be directed at students or any of us who have started life in one position and then as a result of education moved into another. What happens to you as a result of becoming educated? What parts of an identity remain intact? What parts transform? How do you see yourself once you are “an educated person in this country” (Baldwin 3)?

I wonder, is it so hard to imagine (and perhaps even to permit) “basic” writers to write, to read, and to imagine themselves through their texts? This is my starting point, to examine the context of writing within an academic setting, to examine how writers respond, and to contextualize my argument with histories. Although I am interested in people's relationships to institutional spaces, schools and classrooms especially, text is also a location, and texts are produced in classrooms. Text can also be a fluid, contested space, one that can articulate something about people's “position in the hierarchy of power” (Kelley, “We Are Not What We Seem” 96), one that can also serve to replicate those hierarchies, and one that can resist those hierarchies. In this article, I want to suggest that writing and the texts that get produced in classrooms can serve as a means by which certain hierarchies, ironically, can be secured, explored, and unmasked and that all these are present

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at the same time, which is why a critical consciousness is essential. In my experiences teaching basic writing, I have observed that students' writings do have some potential to influence and change the way that writing is taught in the university. I am convinced that many students (Latinos, African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans) have much awareness to name power relations in this country, but they don't always have the words to define unequal distributions of power or the consciousness to define their own powerlessness. Through language, students have the power to counter stereotypical images of their bodies and socially constructed knowledge of their communities. The images that they present of their lives illustrate that they are reacting to and are aware of the institutional perceptions of themselves, and they are often eager to show that they are capable and competent students.

A race and ethnicity writing course

In higher education, the agenda is to socialize students from diverse backgrounds to the discourse community of the institution, though this is not overtly articulated. These socializing aspects of first-year writing courses can overwhelm students' voices, particularly if they are also trying to demonstrate language competency. The Latino/a and African American students enrolled in my course who were performing these dual functions were, on the one hand, caught up in that agenda and, on the other, trying to show their competency as writers. I was interested in providing them with a safe space (however institutionalized) in which to explore the topics of race and ethnicity and to experiment with language, and I wanted to create an "oppositional" space within this traditional institution. In the early 90s, race and ethnicity were broached as topics in the university, partly in response to the inclusion of people who were underrepresented in the university; therefore, there is an established body of research by scholars of color and progressive whites to draw on. We read articles about neighborhoods and violence and music and popular culture, including Mike Davis's "Death and Taxes: The Sky Falls on Compton" and "Legal Lynching in San Clemente," Thiong'o's "The Politics of Language in African Literature" from *Decolonising the Mind*, Leslie Marmon Silko's "The Border Patrol State," some selections from *Prism II* (a collection of students' writings published by the English Composition Board for the Martin Luther King Day celebration) by George Cooper, Robin D. G. Kelley's "The Riddle of the Zoot," and Luis J. Rodriguez's "Turning Youth Gangs Around." We also listened to an interview with the rapper Ice-T who appeared on the National Public Radio program *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross. The interview was conducted shortly

after the release of his controversial album *Cop Killer*. In the interview, Ice-T deconstructs the first amendment issues that surfaced as a result of the controversy and also analyzed his position as an African American vis-à-vis this controversy.

With the exception of Davis, these writers and the performer are people of color, and in their writing they experiment with the boundaries of academic writing through new methodologies and analytical tools. Davis, for instance, begins "Death and Taxes: The Sky Falls on Compton" with a quote from an "informant," Ricky Miller: "This sad-ass town has been dissed to death. Everybody wants to stab Compton in the back" (268). Miller then gives his perspective on some of the social issues affecting this neighborhood, including violence at the hands of the police and economic blight in the community. When we read this article, I asked the students to consider how Miller uses his own experiences to construct knowledge about his community. I also asked them to consider how the essay might be different if Davis had simply given the history of Compton without Miller's voice and the community's stories or if he had written a more traditional history about a neighborhood from the perspective of those in power, like the police or some of the city's leaders, of whom Davis is critical. Students understood I was making an argument through the assigned readings and responded insightfully without feeling they had to agree with the argument, as the discussion that follows illustrates.

One tension that surfaced in this classroom as a result of our reading writing that experimented with the boundaries of academic writing was what it meant to teach traditional, academic modes of writing, which the department dictated I teach and which were constructed long before I began teaching. The portfolios students were required to create were to contain traditional and academic modes of writing: an argument paper, an in-class essay (a timed writing), a personal essay, and a reflective piece (describing both the contents of the portfolio and assessing students' own progress with their writing). There was the potential, given these modes of writing, to have students construct portfolios that erased their voices and that only reflected institutional values. I was, however, aware that the kinds of tasks I was asking students to perform required that they adhere to these strictures but then use their own voices to create arguments, original sounding texts that demonstrated their competencies. Their essays needed to reflect standard academic English and academic arguments,³ which at a research university is a highly valued mode of writing; otherwise, the students would not go on to the next level of writing.

A conversation we had in class reflected these tensions. We had been

reading a short chapter from Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind*, a chapter in which he talks about particular schooling practices that erased students' native languages and replaced them with English. A student, Torrey, made the connection that day between what he called "robbing people of their voice," as Thiong'o also describes it, and what often happens in school when students' languages are deemed improper or inadequate,⁴ what was happening when I asked the students to write academic arguments. For a different course, Torrey was reading an article summarizing the court case *Martin Luther King, Jr., Elementary v. Ann Arbor School District* from James Crawford's *Language Loyalties*. He summarized the key points of the case for the class: students and their parents had sued the Ann Arbor School District, asking the district to acknowledge the students' home language, their "Black English," and to use this understanding as a starting point to teach standard English. The parents realized bridging the language of the school and the home language was essential to their children's success in school.⁵ To make his point, Torrey emphasized, "If they are right [as the court found], you should value our voices because it isn't right to impose one language over another. Like Black English should be respected as much as arguments we write in class. You should value our voice." The rest of his classmates nodded in agreement. Torrey's compelling point exposed the tension we were feeling as a class between the writing tasks the students had to do and the languages they were more comfortable with at home. Although I was trying to be explicit about what was going on in the classroom, I did not have much of an answer for Torrey and his classmates, but I know that standard academic English, much like African American vernacular

English, is only one repertoire in language resources students potentially can access.

I have always told students that we all have stories to tell, something to say, that the classroom is a place where we *listen* to these stories, where we begin to co-construct knowledge and meaning.

As Linda Christensen observes in her essay, "Whose Standard? Teaching Standard English in Our Schools," "As teachers, we have daily opportunities to affirm that our students' lives and language[s] are unique and important.

We do that in the selections of literature we read, in the history we choose to teach, and we do it by giving legitimacy to our students' lives as a content worthy of study" (131). The authors we read in class use story as a way to argue their points, which pedagogically taps into students' stories as well. Rodriguez's essay, for instance, tells the story of his son Ramiro and a friend who was a gang member and concludes, even though gang activity damages lives, we

should not give up on kids—something that resonated with the students in the course. Moreover, I have always told students that we all have stories to tell, something to say, that the classroom is a place where we *listen* to these stories, where we begin to co-construct knowledge and meaning. June Jordan, the late poet and director of the Poetry for the People program at Berkeley, reaffirmed for me the hopeful space of classrooms. She stated that when she tunes into her students telling and writing about their lives, the very act of listening constructs the beginning of what she calls “beloved communities.”

Raymundo's writing

In spite of or because of the tensions, the students produced a very rich body of texts. The portfolios for the course document how students found their way through the politics surrounding the institution and how they wrote “against while inside” (Kelley, “We Are Not” 82). In this section, I examine Raymundo's portfolio, which shows his concern with exploring and unmasking power relations as these played out in terms of his life at an elite research university. As a teacher, I am also interested in the process of recovering hope through language and literacy, of imagining a society that values different voices. In his texts, Raymundo also imagined hope through a critique, and he also resisted power differentials that mystify knowledge and reality.

Baldwin writes about recovering hope through consciousness in his essay “A Talk to Teachers”:

The paradox of education is precisely this—that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated. The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity. But no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around. What societies really, ideally, want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society. If a society succeeds in this, that society is about to perish. The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change and to fight it—at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change. (4)

In his texts, Raymundo achieved what Thiong'o describes as a “decolonized mind.” Freire's notion of *conscientizacao* also means unlearning and coming to a new understanding of those forces that shackle the mind and body. Other people have made similar observations—Malcolm X's politicization; Chicana

activist Enriqueta Vasquez's understanding of the inner workings of sexism within Chicano movement; Dolores Huerta's noting each sexist comment men made during UFW meetings, which started at fifty-eight, then down to twenty, and eventually to zero—all testify to coming to consciousness in the face of overwhelming opposition. (Huerta remembers, "They [men] eventually got it" and began to recognize that women contribute to movement.) This need to resist and to develop politicized critical consciousness and discourses is also echoed in bell hooks's *Yearning*: "Cultural criticism has historically functioned in black life as a force promoting critical resistance, one that enabled black folks to cultivate in *everyday life* a practice of critique and analysis that would disrupt and even deconstruct those cultural productions that were designed to promote and reinforce domination" (3, emphasis added).

Raymundo's writing also reflects that intersection of text with bodies—a material and a discursive merging, for the subjects he writes about have material consequences for his life. For Raymundo, the values of the institution stand in sharp contrast to the values of his community—the individuality of *me*, *I*, *mine* versus *community*, *our*, and *we*. His texts show him struggling with questions. Will he stand for community values or something else? Will he be a traitor to his community, like the cousin about whom he writes and whom the family tries to reclaim and rehabilitate? These values are important ones to him and his community, though not necessarily to the institution where we do become an *I*, where individual voice is valued over more collaborative ones. Though these negotiations are, of course, discursive and show an emerging critical consciousness, importantly, language humanizes his own experiences, contradicting how the institution emphasized his inadequacies as a writer.

As the titles from the four papers Raymundo included in his portfolio reflect, he is concerned about the intersection of bodies with text and about negotiating a "politics of location" (Kelley, "We Are Not" 96). In his argument paper "The Bashing of Unity: Language versus Family," he writes about what it means to have Spanish as his first language and the linguistic violence he faced in school. Raymundo writes,

It was hard for me to comprehend as I grew up why other people in Houston, Texas, did not have a big family. As a matter of fact, the concept of individualism and racism was new to me. In Nuevo Leon, Mexico, the community and family was something that I took for granted because in Texas, I always felt singled out in school. I noticed that many kids [in] school were use to being alone which was something I didn't like or know how to do.

In this essay, he writes about holding on tightly to his language and recognizes, like Torrey articulated for the class, the rights of other languages, like Black English, and our obligation to respect those languages, especially in courses like ours. In his second essay (an in-class, timed writing), based on our listening to a prerecorded interview with the rapper Ice-T, which Raymundo titles “More Ways of Destroying Us,” he writes about the connections between the materiality of people’s lives and language and culture: “Our language, it’s a black thing!” Ice-T said in a *Fresh Air* interview with Terry Gross. This truly does stand out in my mind since what he said is one thing that truly does exist. Today, systems of domination are still trying to disarm a community by trying to destroy its language.” In his third paper, he also writes about his growing awareness of his own precarious position in this society, a personal essay, “Establishing Oneself”:

I was brought up in a big family where family unity existed. My schemas revolve around the concepts of family unity; therefore, the way I look at the world is organized by my past experiences with my family which provide a cognitive framework for understanding my future experiences. I live by the family code. I have observed the certain people who do not live by the code usually fail in life. These people seem to be lost in thought or even confused about their sexuality.

His final text in the portfolio, “It Takes Time,” is a reflective piece of writing in which he assesses his own development as a writer. Raymundo discusses the difficulties and successes with his own writing:

Racism, what an interesting topic. I arrived at the University of Michigan with many people bombarding me with the word racism. To tell you the truth, when I arrived I did not believe the issue really existed. Even though I was raised in a Mexican family, the idea of classifying people by skin color to me was crazy. The closest I’ve come to classifying someone is by what country they are from. Being born in the United States, but raised in Nuevo Leon, Mexico, I considered myself as a **Mexican-American** not a Chicano, Hispanic, Latino, Spic, Wetback, etc. Sure I’ve encountered individuals that have called me a Wetback in Houston, but why should I be hurt by that name? I told my father of the first encounter with such an individual, and all he said was “*You’ll understand in time.*” My mother said, “*Mi hijo*, you will learn that there are many different people that have their own unique heritage, language, and culture.” Now I try to talk to people who are different from me before I make any assumptions about who they are. I took this course to learn other people’s background and to see why there is so much conflict between different people. As time rolled by, I learned about racism and how to write about it in an educated style. My writing techniques have changed dramatically since

the first day. Every piece of writing I wrote is unique and written to the best of my knowledge.

Consistently in these essays, Raymundo identifies language and culture as intertwined. One of the arguments he was developing for himself in the course, in his writing as well as in the conversations that we had as a class, was that language reflects culture and that if a system of domination takes away one's language, one's culture is also destroyed. This argument is expressed in his first paper, "The Bashing of Unity," in a section he subtitles Language:

Coming from a Spanish speaking family, the English language was hard for me to learn at the age of eight. I could have practically starved if I didn't know the phrase, "I'm hungry!" It was as if my language was being suppressed. This English language was forcing me to say *I*, *Me*, and *Mine* which are prime examples of individualism. Like Thiong'o, the English language was forcing me to stand outside myself to look at myself. Slowly but surely our [his rural Mexican migrant] community was being conquered. The theme of cooperation as the ultimate good in a community was being destroyed. In Kenya, the colonizers accomplished what they wanted by destroying the Kenyan's culture and philosophy. The only difference between Kenya and Texas was location because at the end the systems of domination were still using the same techniques.

Raymundo makes astute comparisons between social conditions in Texas and Kenya and between stepping out of a community (a collective) to being an individual, something the institution demanded from him. He also connects language with philosophies and values, and language with culture, and these ideas with specific examples from the chapter he read, for example, Thiong'o's statements about "cooperation as the ultimate good." As a writing teacher, this is the complicated text I want students to write and push them to write through readings, discussion, assignments, and so on. I also call this text oppositional because Raymundo carves for himself—his language, his cultural and familial values—the subject position that Darder refers to, a bicultural subject position in an institution that too often conflates people's experiences. In another part of the essay, Raymundo states,

The world I was now living in was trying to change me. Were they succeeding? Yes, to a certain extent. I'm still strong about my culture's beliefs, only now I'm trying to adapt to the whole world in general. I'm more open minded about subjects like sex than my father is. Still, others have been completely dissolved by the English culture. One of my cousins, like Leopold Sedar Sengar, a Kenyan, accepted the English ways, and the result? [My cousin] turned on us like a complete traitor. He acted like the schoolmates of Thiong'o who turned in each other for speaking

their native tongues. My family and I are at the moment trying to rehabilitate [my cousin] since now he's having suicidal tendencies. These systems of domination are winning some battles but they have lost some too. This war will never end.

In this section of the paper, he states his argument: if you lose your language or, more importantly, if you allow it to be taken away, then you will lose your culture and possibly your life, as the example about his cousin illustrates. As a bicultural subject, Raymundo reconciles the world from which he came, the world about which he reads, and the world in which he is attending school—engaging the texts and making them applicable to his life. This example from his text shows him making connections through literacy; reading and writing became starting points for him to write through what must have been a confusing time for him: the reconciliation between his enrollment at an elite, predominantly white research institution and his life as a Texan, a Mexican migrant worker, a reality no doubt detached from most of his classmates.

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In her essay, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” Toni Morrison describes a similar displacement and resistance:

In the final opening [of the novel, *Sula*] I replicated the demiurge of discriminatory, prosecutorial racial oppression in the loss of commercial “progress” of the village, but the references to the community’s stability and creativeness (music, dancing, craft, religion, irony, wit all referred to in the “valley man’s” presence) refract and subsume their pain while they are in the thick of it. (26)

Cultural practices in “The Bottom” allow the community to survive, to resist through the everyday (music, food, craft, religion, dancing) *and* through strategies grounded in language (humor, wit, irony), even speaking out to the face of power, as Alessandro Portelli describes in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*. It is, in fact, this resistance, to which Morrison refers, that becomes essential to survival and to development of critical consciousness and discourses grounded in community and institutions.

At the end of his essay, Raymundo articulates an important point about loss and ongoing struggle, and he comes to a conclusion in a section he subtitles, *Struggle*, which makes clear what he spent most of the semester developing. Although the dominant English language and dominant culture intentionally seeks to “bash communal cultures” like Mexicano culture, it is important to recognize that there are locations dominant society cannot touch; he writes:

Thiong'o has done us all a favor by reminding us that family unity is important. *I love my family to the death!* Up to this point, everything I do is for the welfare of the family. My getting an education at Michigan is for obtaining a highly paid job to support my family. Today's times are one when labor is hard to find since technology is wiping out human labor tasks with machinery. When Thiong'o said that cooperation was the ultimate good of a community, the memories of working on the fields popped into my head. Just this summer, we were working on the sugar beet fields of Minnesota. Even though it was hard labor, I spent twelve hours a day working with my family. Once on the fields, family issues were discussed such as our goals or plans for vacation in Mexico. Now I miss them and feel lost without them, but I must continue at this University, "*¡Por la familia!*"

Though there might be a tendency to romanticize these images of family talk and decision making amid work and the toil of stoop labor, memories of such talk, as he suggests, is an important site of resistance. He uses this memory to understand the demands of being a student, and he reveals why he is doing this (school) work, why he is making the sacrifice to be far away from his family—*por la familia*, for the family. In such moments, a counter-hegemonic textual location is created; however detached from the world of farm workers and their labor, he is, as he writes, at an elite educational institution so that he can

In such moments, a counter-hegemonic textual location is created; however detached from the world of farm workers and their labor, he is, as he writes, at an elite educational institution so that he can imagine a different life for himself and his family.

imagine a different life for himself and his family. His text shows that writing becomes the vehicle to reconcile the world from which he came with where he is. (This conclusion suggests that his cousin probably didn't have access to this way of writ-

ing oneself through difficulties, yet he holds out hope that the love and dedication of family will bring his cousin around.)

Raymundo, in remembering his life and family stories, resists the effort in composition courses to make his voice sound like so many other first-year students in composition courses; he resists the move to socialize him to use academic English in recounting images that are about family intimacy. Raymundo's voice is distinct, and yet his writings suggest that he used his compositions to transform personally and educationally and to acquire literacy. As John Langston Gwaltney observes in his landmark ethnography (his self-portrait) of black communities,

From these narratives—these analyses of the heavens, nature and humanity—it is evident that black people are building theory on every conceivable level. An

internally derived, representative impression of core black culture can serve as an anthropological link between private pain, indigenous communal expression and the national marketplace of issues and ideas. These people not only know the troubles they've seen, but have profound insight into the meaning of those vicissitudes. (Intro. xxvi)

Jacqueline Jones-Royster, speaking at a CCCC conference in 2001, describes this as "meta-knowledge," when one *knows* what (and why) one knows, the process of demystifying, speaking the unspeakable so that one has confidence in his/her abilities and capacities.

Merging social and pedagogical issues

Because educational institutions are social spaces that embody the concerns of society, the politics of location can also be used to analyze writing pedagogy that purported to level the playing field for students whose educational backgrounds do not prepare them for university writing. Although there were not always identifiable connections to social and political issues and composition, pedagogy that centered on moving students from silence to voice, from being nonwriters to writers through process approaches emerged from challenges to dominant paradigms. Early composition research focused on interpreting students' texts for clues about their preparedness and debating about what to do with the errors manifested in the texts of basic student writers. Moreover, these studies emerged because higher education was becoming a different place and, therefore, situated writing teachers within a changing institution. Embracing the social issues in the university and in composition, writing teachers tried to understand the mechanisms of educational institutions that have underserved and disenfranchised learners. Today, however, educational institutions are less and less interested in the needs of underrepresented students and the places from which these students come. As the institution is getting less attentive to the needs of the most vulnerable students (one effect of whittling away at the gains of affirmative action) and as services are being downsized, there is still a need to direct classroom practice to attend to the needs of these students.

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A climate of backlash followed more progressive movements to include people who were not/have not always been represented in the nation's colleges and universities. Flora Ida Ortiz and Rosa Gonzales report, "Although educa-

tional attainment levels have improved somewhat, Latino students continue to enter school later, leave school earlier, and receive proportionately fewer high school diplomas and college degrees than other Americans" (67). This section might be subtitled, "from process paradigms to backlash and exclusion" because in the relatively short span of twenty-five to thirty years, we have come full circle. Who has the right to attend the nation's colleges and universities? One of my concerns, as someone who came to California on a postdoctoral fellowship to UCLA and then as an assistant professor at California State University, Northridge (an institution identified as "Hispanic-serving"), is the disparity between the two systems. How the two systems view students and faculty, how resources are allocated and distributed, how and why students are assessed and tracked, how debates about "preparedness" are shaped and informed should concern us all. There is a master plan in California that could very well influence policy in the rest of the nation. A recent *Talk of the Nation* (25 Jan. 2001) addressed some of these concerns but also raised the issue that dramatic changes in educational institutions could result in a caste system.

The cutbacks or curtailing of affirmative-action policies in higher education, ironically the origins of which began at the University of California's flagship campus, Berkeley, has resulted in lower enrollments in the nation's prominent institutions.⁶ In another example, UCLA's law school admitted significantly fewer African American and Latino students for the incoming class of fall 2000. The so-called reverse discrimination lawsuit at the University of Michigan by the Center for Individual Rights initially resulted in drops in applications both at the undergraduate and graduate levels from students of color. We certainly have to wonder what effects the most recent court decision will have on graduate education there and across the nation.⁷

In the California State system, the state enacted Executive Order 665 that will eventually eliminate remedial English and math course offerings.⁸ EO 665 requires that incoming first-year students have one year to complete their remedial courses, and their failure to do so results in expulsion from the state system, though completion of the courses at a community college will re-enroll them. Many of these students in the California State University system are first-generation college students, second-language learners, immigrants or first-generation immigrants, students whose families have very basic educational experiences (Moreno, forthcoming).

Interestingly, the year 2000 marked the thirtieth anniversary of ethnic studies programs in California. The Chicano Studies Research Center at UCLA published the thirty-year anniversary issue of *Aztlan: The Journal of Chicano*

Studies. Reflecting on the thirty-year anniversary and assessing where we are today and what higher education has not done for the next generation of college students, David Hayes-Bautista states,

When *Aztlan* was established, Chicano studies was largely perceived by “mainstream” academics as a minor player on campus, interesting, perhaps irritating, but ultimately unimportant and irrelevant to the daily workings of a large research university. Thirty years later, this opinion is, for the most part, unchanged on university campuses around the state. Yet, off-campus, the world has changed around the universities. For one example, nearly two-thirds of all births in Los Angeles County are of Latino children, as are one-half of all births in California. I do not see the universities, public or private, capable of providing the intellectual experience these Latinos will need in eighteen years, when they are ready for college. Worse, I do not even see universities beginning to discuss that they might need to develop a new intellectual framework for these students. What little development has taken place is still largely seen as being foisted upon an innocent academy by politically motivated hotheads. (83)

Though this may be a rather pessimistic view of the state of ethnic studies in the academy, Hayes-Bautista’s questions are important: how do we, for instance, begin our work on “new intellectual frameworks” that might address the lived experiences of Latino/a students, especially those underserved students? What new theories might emerge from a changing demographic where Latinos/as are the majority? What is the call to action for institutions of higher education, public and private? Even though our communities are still in distress, the state of our educational progress as Latinos/as is still in need of advancement. For me, the most important call to action is to think about those students who are occupying our classrooms and to see classrooms as a hopeful space of transformation, as a location that might get us closer to developing those new intellectual frameworks to which Hayes-Bautista calls attention. Raising these questions and addressing these issues also moves us from hopelessness (or pessimism at the very least) to hopefulness.

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In this article, I argue that writing for many bicultural people is an important site of resistance and reconciliation. We, indeed, know the troubles we’ve seen and have been developing different strategies to deal with these troubles, but writing allows us to build meaning in troubling times, which

Raymundo writes about so poignantly. In these moments, it is possible to imagine ourselves through literacy. I am afraid that avenues for enrollment, not only at the nation's prestigious colleges and universities but also at the state level, are being cut off for students like Raymundo. Where we are right now socially and politically only concretizes discourse that blames victims. Although this may be an oversimplified argument, I am convinced that, as a society, we owe students an education, especially those students whose K-12 schooling has underserved them. No child should be left behind, as our president said recently, and I would go further, stating that every person does deserve to be educated; it is, however, the nature of that education about which more conversation is needed, along with shifts in policy. Literacy research is one avenue to move this shift along.

Notes

1. I agree with Ralph Cintron who wrote in a review of my manuscript that a phrase like bicultural "may block us from seeing how, for instance, Appalachian whites may have similar 'basic writing' problems." He asks, pointedly, do newly arriving immigrants, such as Asian students, see themselves as "people of color"? "Do newly arriving Mexicanos and others understand themselves in those terms?" My answer to these questions is "probably not" because immigrant students' experiences and histories are not the same as those groups who have been in this country for several generations. Moreover, Cintron also raises questions about the issues of blackness in Latino communities. Would Afro-Latinos necessarily see themselves biculturally? Interestingly, in spring 2000, I had a student, George, a Cubano, who identified as Latino first and made interesting, pointed criticisms of Afro-Latinos who would pass as African American. But I think these are interesting questions and, certainly, push to us to consider race, ethnicity, culture as not fixed.

Raymundo identified himself as a Mexicano, not a Chicano, which may have marked him in solidarity with another political generation. But I believe the engagement of different ideas, conversations, and readings in class provided him with an opening to critique much of his experiences as a Mexicano living *and working* in this country, to develop the words to name that nagging "it" of living in this country as a marginalized person.

2. At my institution, for instance, we were once provided with scores from students' SATs/ACTs and their scores on the university-wide English assessment test. Such information might be helpful, but I wondered why we were provided such information about students—to confirm what we already know, that they don't perform well on standardized tests? In this assessment-obsessed time, the institu-

tion values these numbers, and they are used to justify all sorts of mandates that cut off services to this group of students.

3. Incidentally, we often talk about argument as if we know exactly what that mode or genre is. But as I have been thinking about it, I realize that the genre is much more slippery. As Eduardo Galeano, Toni Morrison, and Robin D. G. Kelley would say, when we think about the politics of location or the disruptive remembering presence of the bodies of people of color, this genre can end up revealing a lot of tensions, especially because these writers challenge traditional modes of writing through their use of subjective texts. For instance, Morrison uses modes of biography and autobiography in her writing; Galeano in his work is challenging the way history is written. History for him is less about great white men doing extraordinary things and more about stories his mother and grandmother told him. Kelley looks at histories of resistance in the archives of a city's reports of problems on a bus, which reveal that black people were calling attention to discriminatory rules on city buses long before Rosa Parks staged her famous refusal to vacate a seat for a white person.

4. Frances Aparicio uses *testimonios* in a class that examines the politics of language. Written by Latinas, these short essays testify to early language experiences where English replaced people's native Spanish. Corporeal punishment and humiliation, the women report, was often used as a form of eradicating Spanish in even the most intimate spaces of people's lives. My mother also tells a story about being castigated for speaking Spanish. Because my mother has a light complexion and her maiden name is Davis, she was often mistaken for being white. When she was in the first or second grade, she recalls translating for a young boy who did not understand the directions given by his teacher. When my mother spoke Spanish to the boy, the teacher interrupted her, stating, "Florence Davis, I didn't know you were a dirty Mexican." Identity being what it is in the southwestern U.S., I don't think my mother would have identified herself as being Mexican because her family has been in Colorado for about fifteen generations. Thiong'o reports similar acts in Kenyan schools whose mission it was to teach English and eradicate native languages. Sadly, during the course of her early education, my mother did "lose" her Spanish. My father, whose own father emigrated from Mexico in the early part of the twentieth century, helped my mother maintain her Spanish. With my father's death, my mother didn't speak Spanish or teach it to my siblings and me. She did recover some of that language when she married my stepfather, whose college education enabled him to keep and maintain the language. Language identity is yet another complex issue for Latinos and, perhaps at some point, needs to be the subject of another essay.

5. See also Lisa Delpit's *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. Delpit's discussion centers around teaching the language of power to children whose languages do not always prepare them for educational success.

6. See "Secrets of the SAT," a PBS documentary on *Frontline*.

7. New forms of student activism have significantly changed the outcomes of the affirmative action lawsuits against the University of Michigan. The student-interveners have called attention to the fact that courts are political and have the ability to shape public policy by packing the courtroom hearings with spectators.

8. See, for example, a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article by Sara Hebel about a proposal from the New York City mayor to outsource remedial courses to community colleges. See also a series of exchanges on this topic in the *New York Times* and *ATF*: "Union Defends CUNY Mission Against Mayoral Attacks," *On Campus AFT* 17.6 (1998): 3; Karen W. Arenson, "New York City's College System Enters Unknown in Policy Shift," *The New York Times* 28 May 1998, National ed.: A1+; Emily Gold, "Two, Four, Six, Eight: Can't Afford to Remediate," *On Campus AFT* 15.3 (1995): 8-14; and Bob Herbert, "Cleansing CUNY: Fear and Loathing in New York," *The New York Times* 28 May 1998, National ed.: OPEDA29.

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