if he questions the way I connect the two, I expect to hear something both original and far from boring from him on these important questions he has raised.

New Mexico State University
Las Cruces, New Mexico

David Bleich and the Politics of Anti-Intellectualism: A Response

Raul Sanchez, Jr.

In his review of Lester Faigley's *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition* (*JAC* 14.1), David Bleich faults Faigley for excessive theorizing, unnecessary use of jargon, and too little attention to the lived experiences of students. Bleich argues that Faigley fails to make connections between the theory he describes and the practice that might arise from it. This might be a useful critique if the book's aims were in fact what Bleich believes them to be—or, more to the point, what he thinks they should be. It seems to me that Faigley's concerns, while certainly related to the theory/practice dynamic, are broader and more comprehensive than Bleich understands. What results, then, is an all-too-familiar critique of postmodern discourses that relies on facile appeals to common sense and on an anti-intellectualism that distrusts any attempt to incorporate outside information into the current conversation.

Such hostile sentiment seems to follow postmodern discourses wherever they go. Basically, it suggests that at some point a group of self-absorbed theorists got together and decided to play word games with the Western tradition. In the process, they managed to seduce other academics who were looking, apparently, for an intellectual thrill, a reason to get excited. We in composition should be familiar with this attitude; it is echoed in Maxine Hairston's complaint that writing teachers who confront political issues in the classroom divert students from the real business of learning to write. This disdain for the theoretical and the political in composition, when mistaken for serious intellectual activity (as it was in Texas), drains our field of the insights it has accumulated over the last decade or so, insights that have made our discipline one of the most exciting and useful in the university.
Bleich's criticisms suggest that time devoted to the difficult issues raised by postmodern discourses is better spent in the "real world" of the classroom and our students' lives. But what are our postmodernisms concerned with if not the problematica and politics of identifying, articulating, and improving the "realities" into which people find themselves thrust, more often than not against their will? As I see it, Faigley wants to know what happens to the relationship between theory and practice in a fragmented and fragmentary culture where, despite Bleich's beliefs otherwise, multiple subjectivities are the norm and subjecthood is often at the horizon of possibility, especially if you happen to be a woman, a person of color, or both. To argue, as Bleich does, for a definition of "subjectivity" as unproblematic as "the activity of one's mental life, what happens inside one's head" is to be unfamiliar with the contradicting impulses and signals that individuals experience in the public sphere. It is to be unaware of how the public sphere extends into the private, into consciousness, severely problematizing the very notion of the mind as a purely autonomous agent. Most importantly, such a desire for simplicity ignores the effects of a technologically induced cognitive turbulence, a constant demand from all sides to decide, to consume, to be. Look at your students, who have been raised according to the politics of mass media technological overload. Do they know where they "fit in" in this culture? Do they know if, who, or what they are? And if so, how much of their certainty might be another effect of the postmodern condition: a holding pattern maintained against the threat of "crashing," a safe haven from the threat of information? These are the issues Faigley's book addresses. They are profoundly social, profoundly political.

The resolution of these tensions and contradictions is not apparent. It may not even be possible, and Fragments succeeds precisely because it does not opt for easy answers. What Bleich sees as "the purely academic question of how to locate the subject" is in fact an unavoidable and difficult obstacle on the way to determining how best to deal with the issues of gender, race, and class. Bleich seeks simple solutions to complex problems, problems that do not lend themselves, if we mean to confront them honestly, to the kind of theory/practice distinction upon which he bases his critique. He believes that all this postmodern theory, with its fancy words and playful attitude, keeps us from discussing the "real" issues at hand. His frustration at Faigley's call for more theorizing is based on the assumption that theorizing itself is not a useful activity because we have enough of it already, as if we had topped off all the theory reservoirs as specified in our intellectual owner's manual. Bleich wants to know what to do now, and he faults Faigley for not addressing this imperative to his satisfaction. But Faigley wants to know, among other things, how we might get to a point where we can posit knowledge without doing too much semiological, cultural, or physical violence.

Bleich cites "the urgent needs of today's academy" and the "issues of collectivity" which he sees as largely ignored in Faigley's book. He writes, "I
think that if serious concern for practical collective issues doesn’t appear in a serious treatise such as this, then something is wrong with our academic ways.” I don’t dispute that there are many things wrong with our academic ways, nor that postmodern discourses have been put to uses that seem irrelevant at best and harmful at worst. But, that said, I don’t think *Fragments of Rationality* and Lester Faigley are guilty of these offenses. Bleich argues that in our zeal to adopt postmodernism, we have neglected “the human situation... of help for those interested in individual and social amelioration.” But it is precisely this “human situation” that postmodern discourses and books like *Fragments* seek to identify. Postmodern discourses do not, however, presuppose that certain conceptions of what it means to be “human” appear as if from a void; they do not assume that such semiotically loaded terms as “social” exist prior to or without benefit of our always interested interventions. A “human situation,” a “living connection,” “interpersonal relationships”—these are phenomena that take no meaningful form independent of our ways of talking about them. We cannot and should not simply offer them up as commonsense categories by which to measure and evaluate the compassion of others. We cannot and should not assume that the important mental work has already been done, that now is the time to simply take action. Theory and practice, if they are to inform each other meaningfully, must operate in a constant state of mutually transformative flux, and this is not the same as paralysis or aporia. Books like *Fragments of Rationality* help us begin to envision a future wherein such a relationship is possible. Reviews like Bleich’s remind us of mistakes we have made in the past.

*University of South Florida*  
*Tampa, Florida*