Terms of Engagement: Postcolonialism, Transnationalism, and Composition Studies

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As a professor of postcolonial literature and theory and a regular in the first-year composition classroom (by choice rather than obligation, I might add), I was pleased and intrigued to find a session on composition and postcolonial studies at a recent regional conference. Wishing to see how the speakers would apply postcolonial concepts to pressing issues in rhetoric and composition—or conversely, whether postcolonialism had something to learn and gain from the battles and triumphs of the latter, I arrived with a notepad at the ready. The session was indeed illuminating, both in its attempts to bring together a synthesis of ideas from postcolonial, composition, and cultural studies and in its unwitting betrayal of the confusions that have come to characterize both postcolonialism and the writing classroom in the current climate produced by transnationalism and economic globalization. Drawing, not surprisingly, on quotations and ideas from the expected triumvirate of Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, and Gayatri Spivak, the panel speakers made a sincere but sometimes confused attempt to find cognates from postcolonialism that could usefully address their pedagogic problems and theoretical concerns, an attempt that exemplified not so much the intellectual limitations of my colleagues but rather the shared poverty of our strategies when confronted with the demands of education and the academy in Anglo-America at the turn of the century.

The growing pursuit of relevance and socially responsible theory and pedagogy at a time when racial and class fissures are growing here and elsewhere; when new and often overlapping fields of inquiry (postcolonialism, multiculturalism, race, class, and gender studies) are peddled and exchanged as reigning commodities in the academic marketplace and attacked by conservatives, even as boutique multiculturalism flourishes in the world beyond the academy; when education itself is being subtly annexed into a new world order with indeterminate dimensions and dubious objectives; when boundaries and binaries are under attack by both postmodern theory and transnational economic maneuvers—at such a time, the pressures on the academic corps—particularly in its humanities wing—are many. The quest for alliance between postcolonial and composition studies—the former having come to stand in simultaneously for marginality, otherness, resistance, transnationality, and newness—appears to be indicative of a complex of responses to the circumstances of the moment.
that I have outlined above. This quest might thus be described as an attempt to understand and address otherness in a diversifying population and expanding global market, to capitalize on both the commodity value and the possibilities for ethical investigation offered by postcolonialism; and to explore the concordance and connections among disciplines not traditionally thought of as contiguous. As I will argue, however, it is from the potential for failure that is likely to attend this attempt, without due vigilance about the limitations and mystifications of postcolonialism, that we may learn the most.

Before we embark on that catalogue, it might be instructive to revisit the ways in which postcolonial studies connects with issues in rhetoric and composition. At its most obvious, postcolonialism enters the world of rhetoric and composition in the very person of the third world postcolonial, the authentically ethnic teacher who bears, wittingly or otherwise, the welcome flag of visible diversity. The growing numbers of expatriate, ex-colonized international academics, the coming of age of a sizeable population of immigrants of color in Anglo-America, as well as institutional goals of increasing visible diversity are gradually repopulating the once “color-less” halls of the academy. The presence of these individuals, along with that of a more diverse student body, at a time of growing interest in diversity is at least partly responsible for coloring the rhetoric and composition field in new ways.

Postcolonialism also enters this realm via the composition classroom and by way of “culturally diverse” readings in the growing number of multicultural readers that routinely circulate among textbook committees and arrive as free examination copies in our mailboxes. The readers will have noted the slippage between postcolonialism and multiculturalism in the preceding proposition, but more on that later. For now, suffice it to say that the postcolonial and the multicultural provide ready grist to the diversity mill. Interest in such matters coexists, to be sure, with resistance to anything non-canonical on the part of some, but by and large, through choice or a sense of obligation to departmental or university diversity requirements, many teachers are apt to be in favor of a more “inclusive” curriculum. Nudged by, but not always prepared for, the new mandate to educate students in cultural sensitivity, the composition teacher finds a ready ally in the lexicon and concept bank for dealing with otherness, oppression, resistance, and novelty that postcolonial theory has so obligingly provided in the last decade or so. Terms such as orientalism, subaltern, cultural tourism, colonization, neocolonization, monolithicother, difference, alterity, self/other, discourse, power, authority, speaking, agency, subjectivity (not necessarily unique to postcolonial vocabulary but gathered efficiently under its umbrella), allow the teacher to negotiate the rocky terrain of otherness with some modicum of theoretical guidance and support for teaching and classroom discussion.

It is not only the multicultural text, or the visibly ethnic student, however, that might occasion the deployment of postcolonial theory in the classroom. An interest in the larger question of the goals and effects of schooling might also lead the composition teacher to ponder the connections between the project of education and structures of power, between formal schooling and the cultivation of compliant subjectivity—issues that are dealt with extensively in postcolonial literature and
Increasingly, postcolonial theory deals not only with the impact of colonial education on individual and collective postcolonial identity, but also addresses the politics of education in the Anglo-American academy where many postcolonial critics now find themselves. Such discussions can be very relevant to composition studies which has been animated by issues of disciplinarity almost from the beginning. Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede's recent essay on "Representing Audience: 'Successful' Discourse and Disciplinary Critique," for instance, hints at the possibilities of a connection between their concerns in composition studies and the anxieties voiced by postcolonial critic Chandra Talpade Mohanty. Thinking back on their own educations, Lunsford and Ede recollect their "identification with schooling" and the destructive formula of individual success that prevails "throughout our culture, educational institutions, and scholarly disciplines," preventing both the possibility of resistance and the recognition of one's selves as "constructed subjects embedded in multiple discourses" (171; 173). Lunsford and Ede recognize the congruence between this realization and Mohanty's point that "if complex structural experiences of domination and resistance can be ideologically reformulated as individual behaviors and attitudes, they can be managed while carrying on business as usual" (qtd. in Lunsford and Ede 178n). Lunsford and Ede's reflections on the grounds of discursive success and the politics of location find a poignant echo in Mohanty's grim reminder: "the point is not simply that one should have a voice, the more crucial question concerns the sort of voice one comes to have as a result of one's location—both as an individual and as a part of collectives" ("On Race and Voice" 162). Moreover, the question of disciplinary "success," which Lunsford and Ede broach with insight in the essay, is one that is in turn very crucial to an evaluation of the potential of postcolonialism to deliver the radical critique it is thought to be so eminently capable of. I will return to this topic later in the essay.

Clearly, then, it is not only in the immediate scene of the classroom that the common tropes of postcolonism seem relevant. Composition studies has in general found commonalities between its concerns and those raised in postcolonial theories. The former's interest in rhetoric, discourse, and power; in the recovery of hitherto silenced voices; in the liberatory possibilities of advanced technologies; in the relation of the text to the social, finds echoes, and often counterparts, in the debates dominant in the latter. As Susan J. Jarratt argues, "questions about speech and representation concern not only postcolonial theorists generating them but indigenous US intellectuals as well. As US intellectuals heighten their sense of a global context for academic work, we ask ourselves the same questions: How should histories and analyses of literatures and rhetorics be conducted? Who can do this work? Who can speak for whom? How should we voice differences?" (224). Indeed, in the chair's address to the 1995 CCCC meeting, Jacqueline Jones Royster pointed to the challenges of a new century and concluded that "much ... depends on the ways we talk and listen and talk again in crossing boundaries and creating, or not, the common ground of engagement" (40). She notes that "from moments of challenge like this one, I realize that we do not have a paradigm that really allows for what scholars in cultural and postcolonial studies (Anzaldua, Spivak, Mohanty, Bhabha[sic]) have called hybrid
people—people who either have the capacity by right of history and development, or who might have created the capacity by right of history and development, to move with dexterity across cultural boundaries, to make themselves comfortable, and to make sense amid the chaos of difference” (37).

Recent global situations—large-scale world-wide migration and a new and confusing economic order—have required us to re-evaluate traditional categories and relations. At a time when “two percent of the world’s population no longer lives in the country in which they were born” (Mohanty “Defining Genealogies” 351), and global movements of labor, capital, and culture confound our sense of the world, Royster recognizes that postcolonialism offers a way of theorizing the chaos meaningfully: as I have argued elsewhere, “the hybrid, the exiled, the dislocated, the multi-located—the ‘postcolonials’ in many metropolitan definitions of postcoloniality—have stepped nimbly into the breaches and the flows of the new economic and cultural order, occasioning and creating a theory formulated from myriad strands and schools of thought to explain and themselves exemplify a plexus of disconcerting complexity” (“Introduction” 9). Postcolonial theory’s facility in engaging questions of transnationality and hybridity combined with its engagement with poststructuralism, its rearticulation of the questions of power and knowledge, and its persistent challenge to “western” modes of thought have all contributed to its success in the academy and to an interest in its relevance to other disciplines.

Turning to postcolonialism and composition studies in particular, we might say that both have a vested interest in examining issues of authority and power as sources of psychological and social conflict. Both are committed, moreover, to a vision of theory and teaching as intervention and to addressing the persistently problematic dichotomy between theory and practice. It is thus not surprising that references to Edward Said’s formulations of power and discourse or Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s discussions on supplementarity, otherness, catachresis, and strategic essentialism now routinely appear in discussions on histories of classical rhetoric, on questions of agency, and various other issues in rhetoric and composition. The considerable and indeed growing interest in Spivak’s ideas is admittedly attributable not only to her status as a postcolonial critic but to her standing as a theorist of some repute in the areas of feminism, deconstruction, and Marxism as well. Her position in these areas, however, is almost always refracted through the prism of “difference,” by now the hallmark of the “postcolonial.” Discussions on pedagogy and classroom techniques now include, as a matter of course, citations from postcolonial theorists or discussions of postcolonial texts while it does not seem strange to find within the pages of this very journal, an interview with Spivak, the (most) “highly commodified distinguished professor” in the field (Spivak 86).

It is already clear that postcolonial concepts and strategies can be very apropos to rhetoric and composition studies. In dealing with the question of audience, for instance, Lata Mani’s notion of “multiple mediations” can be very valuable in exploring questions of positionality and location. In response to audience considerations with regard to her work on Sati, Lata Mani’s recourse to “multiple mediations” as a strategy is instructive in its sensitivity to the complex rhetoric of theory: that it
is not only a when, but a where (38). The emphasis on the situated nature of her theory in variant contexts, in India, in the United States, in Britain, and the demand for expedient narrative, tonal, and positional strategies to cope with widely divergent audience reactions to the same topic can provide a valuable matrix for those teaching writing or theorizing the art and the economics of writing in different situations. Apart from his careful theorization of the concept of hybridity, Bhabha’s formulations of mimicry as a “discourse of ambivalence” that constructs “a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite” might be seen as useful in many ways: for those studying the rhetoric of public discourse; the politics of basic writing classrooms; the production of “educated” or “institutionalized” subjectivity; or the production of discourse in any of several situations where power conjoins with the production of knowledge but remains ambiguated by its own contradictions (86). The notion of “subaltern,” first appearing in the work of Antonio Gramsci and later popularized in postcolonial discourse, is also one that has seemed useful to many and already appears frequently in rhetoric and composition studies. It has served various roles in these discussions: to identify marginal student populations, to describe resistive modes of agency, or to tackle the difficulty of locating agency in the subaltern. On the topic of representation, which arises variously—in the context of the classroom, in the curriculum, on the faculty, in textual productions—postcolonial critics provide very useful taxonomies and discussions. 6 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin’s *The Empire Writes Back* contains several discussions on language use—the relation of standard English to its variants, the possibilities for resistance articulated through the abrogation of standard language, critical interventions through the insertion of vernacular words or through a re-grammatization of the standard language—topics that would be of obvious interest to compositionists. In essays and in fiction, Salman Rushdie provides both a theory and a praxis of inspired and radical uses of language. These “short takes” on some of the central issues in postcolonialism, admittedly suggestive rather than exhaustive, should indicate the prospects for further possibilities of its collaboration with composition studies.

But rather than continue to propose and detail further possible applications for composition studies—and it would not be difficult to spin out the narrative further in this direction—I will leave readers with a sense of the possibilities and return, instead, to the discordant note sounded in my introduction. I would like to focus now on the limitations of postcolonialism for the purposes of composition studies and the dangers of the decontextualized, desituated use of concepts. It is not my intention here to wag a finger at those who “misuse” postcolonial concepts, for indeed, there is much potential for a useful contract between postcolonial and composition studies, and it would be both presumptuous and dangerous to mandate “correct” pedagogic and theoretical applications. My intent, instead, is to point readers to the fissures within the theoretical constructs of postcolonialism as it has come to be articulated within multiculturalism and transnationalism, and to warn against their unreflective deployment. As such, this paper calls for a reappraisal, or at least a moment of clarity, before further explorations into the productive employment of postcolonial concepts.
in composition theory. Ultimately, I believe that it is with a full sense of the conflicts within postcolonial studies that composition theory can engage it to make its most meaningful interventions.

I have argued elsewhere that postcolonialism emerges in “an environment of institutional sanction for counter-narratives . . . notwithstanding its potential for challenging the system, it ultimately participates in a system of selections and elisions that replicate the technologies of power it is charged with exposing” (“Marginally Off-Center” 278). The “contained radicalism” of constructs such as the “postcolonial,” authorized by institutional sanction, and altogether too suspiciously welcome in the academy, should give those in composition studies more than a moment of pause. Many of the problems with postcolonialism are tied to definitional and analytic imprecision. Progressively more abstract and impossible to define, postcolonialism, it might be argued, succeeds not only despite, but perhaps because of, its ambiguities and contradictions.7 Arif Dirlik has gone so far as to charge that “postcolonial, rather than a description of anything, is a discourse that seeks to constitute the world in the self-image of intellectuals who view themselves (or have come to view themselves) as postcolonial intellectuals” (339). It appeals, Dirlik argues, “because it disguises the power relations that shape a seemingly shapeless world and contributes to a conceptualization of that world that both consolidates and subverts the possibilities of resistance” (356). Although I cannot subscribe to the entirety of Dirlik’s arguments,8 he alerts us to some of the problems in the field. In fact, in recent years, his has not been the only voice expressing discontent.9 Most fundamentally, his and other expressions of unease oblige one to ask, yet again, what is the “postcolonial”? (for this neologistic noun has come to acquire life along with the expected “postcolonialism”).

So what is the postcolonial? The postcolonial is a time, a space, the emblematically philosophic rupture with European modernity; it is a moment, a movement, a method, a message, a mirage, a misnomer because the colonial moment repeats and, yes, it is an alias and an alibi. Its many figurations and transmogrifications are akin to a gymnastic triumph of sorts. It is the condition of independence from colonization, of the relay into neocolonialism, of the vagaries of transnationalism. It is the possibility for resistance and a symptom of its failure. It is a word for the margin, an alias for the marginal; it is the dematerialized vanishing marginal stripped of reference, of history itself. If it is impossible to reign in these disjointed perambulations, it is because the “postcolonial” has been increasingly difficult to contain within dictionary definitions.10

In its literal sense, postcolonialism might be defined, according to Gauri Viswanathan, as “a study of the cultural interaction between colonizing powers and the societies they colonized, and the traces that this interaction left on the literature, arts, and human sciences of both societies” (“Pedagogical Alternatives” 54). The project of research suggested in the literal definition would entail the study of specific cultures, histories, and cultural productions in the postcolonial phase with a full sense of their context. Such an examination would require that one attempt to understand, to use a phrase that recurs in composition studies, “the deeply situated nature” of the
power relations being studied. Such a study would focus less on naming and identifying oppressor/oppressed and other binarisms and more on uncovering the dynamics of relations. It would dwell on the complexities of power relations, on power and resistance as multiply located, and on both being examined in specific historical and material contexts. This continues to be the methodology of many historians, notably in the Subaltern Studies group, and has been considered a far more useful mode of scholarship in third world feminist circles than the de-specified and monolithic characterization of third world woman as hapless victim. Scholars who subscribe to this vision of postcolonialism argue for a definition of the world “in relational terms” and for due attention to “our different, often conflictual, locations and histories” (Mohanty “Introduction” 2; 4).

In its more “popular” sense in the Anglo-American academy, however, the term and the concept invoke less the kind of scholarship described above than a general attribute of marginality, albeit radical. It is in this sense that the term has come to dominate the discussion on postcolonialism in metropolitan circles. Viewed as an “attitude or position” (“Pedagogical Alternatives” 54), the postcolonial becomes a very slippery configuration indeed, making itself susceptible to a wide array of interpretations and laying itself open to the charge of ahistoricism. Used thus, the lessons of postcolonialism are abstracted from their contexts and brought into discussions of marginality and victimage in domestic debates on diversity. To be “postcolonial” in this manner is to be marginal (yet somehow eliding the fact that the “postcolonial” is theoretically validated and authorized within the academy).

Much of the postcolonial theory and a great deal of the literature that circulates in the Western academy is produced by critics and writers who are resident in the West and who, despite their grounding in its universities, seem to float in some “other” space between it and the marginal worlds to which they can trace an origin or connection. I am not suggesting, by the way, that this location should be grounds for its dismissal or that the postcolony is necessarily a more “authentic” source of information but rather that it is the disavowal of location in the reception of the postcolonial that leads to its use as a dehistoricized category. The use of “postcolonial” as a generic term for the “other” within the Anglo-American academy is puzzling when one considers that there are specific groups that might be said to have suffered specific types of oppression in the history of these nations, that there are specific contexts in the present moment when power relations favor some over others, and none of them would fit the strict literal definition of postcoloniality. Why, then, should the term have gained such ready currency in contexts for which it was, at least originally, not intended?

Rather than insist on definitional purity, however, one would do better to ask instead, in what ways is the term being used? Why this explosion of articles, conferences and academic activity professing the postcolonial? If the postcolonial is a radical, resistive mode of investigation, should one assume from this proliferation that institutional appetite for discomfort is at an all-time high? I am reminded here of Spivak’s forceful rejoinder in a 1993 interview in response to my comment about the need for multicultural texts: “you say there is a demand for multiculturalism. I have
to find out who the hell is demanding this from me? Why the hell is there such a need?" (88). The status and demand for the postcolonial should prompt the same questions. It would behoove us to remember that given the systematicity of the institution, new forms of knowledge and perception are usually guaranteed a place only when they are introduced on institutional terms. Ella Shohat's experience in a multicultural international studies committee at CUNY illuminates the ironies surrounding the success of postcolonialism: "In response to our proposal," she recounts, "the generally conservative members of the college curriculum committee strongly resisted any language invoking issues such as 'imperialism and third worldist critique,' 'neo-colonialism and resisting cultural practices,' and the 'geopolitics of cultural exchange.' They were visibly relieved, however," she continues, "at the sight of the word 'postcolonial'" (99). If Shohat's anecdote alerts us to "postcolonial" as diversionary, let us not be afraid to pursue this uncomfortable suggestion. The alliance between market considerations and the explosion of interest in matters postcolonial, an enterprise that straddles global and local concerns while locating its address to/in the West, is not one that any of us can afford to ignore. The "success" of postcolonialism in the academic marketplace should thus cause at least as much suspicion as it does satisfaction. While it may legitimately represent a mode of transgressive investigation into the operations of power, and enable us to grapple productively with the confusions of a world in flux, it is a presence that should warn us of absences, a voice that should alert us to silences. If the work of postcolonialism goes some way toward undoing certain relations of power, it also functions as an alibi for other avenues of exploration where the task may be a good bit more challenging, the possibilities for intervention yet remote.

Postcolonialism as an alibi is certainly a problem for those in postcolonial studies, but it should alarm those in composition studies as well. The nexus of postcolonialism and multiculturalism, indeed the often unreflective slippage, should alert us to the role both have come to play—often through the engines of the composition classroom—within transnationalism. The enlistment of postcolonial texts within a liberal multiculturalist agenda is not without contradiction. If the purpose is to sensitize students to other cultures, there is certainly value in exposing them to a variety of cultural expressions. If it is also, as one assumes, to prepare them for dealing with difference in their own contexts, the postcolonial can actually serve as a distraction. It is the displacement of the local context, of local concerns, and of local struggles by the "postcolonial" on the one hand and the rechristening of local others with the abstract and historically voided category of "postcolonial" that concerns me. The net impact of the use of postcolonial literature in this fashion is to present the other as always beyond the local shores rather than in our very midst, and to privilege the notion of distant difference instead of examining the complex ways in which difference and marginality are produced in particular contexts rather than being inherent by virtue of category.

In a similar fashion, the "multicultural" usually (and euphemistically) means a generic name for the other by virtue of race, gender, sexuality, or physical ability, although the term itself would suggest a pluralism that is either not, at least conceptually,
to exclude white culture.\textsuperscript{11} Too, while it is not entirely clear what is meant by the term "culturally diverse," the diversity invoked is usually suggestive of some position of inferiority, marginality, or lack of access to resources more readily available to the mainstream.\textsuperscript{12} I am dwelling at perhaps unnecessary length on a point that should be clear by now: the naming of the margin in euphemistic terms is a way of reducing discomfort and diverting attention away from precisely those problems of marginality, otherness and of historical particulars that should be addressed. The resistive and radical potential of multiculturalism which is submerged within liberal dialogue on the subject, however, assumes a menacing face in conservative discussions which see it as a potent threat to Western civilization.\textsuperscript{13} In this discourse one might recognize what could have been a salutary threat so well "contained" by the liberal deployment of multiculturalism. But given the demonization of multiculturalism in the conservative media, the postcolonial can serve as a safer way of "doing multiculturalism" because its threats are even more efficiently managed and contained. The theoretical sophistication of postcolonialism and its links with elite (and largely Western) movements like poststructuralism and postmodernism, and its often conveniently abstract nature serve to reinforce its place within the academy while deferring attention to the operations of power and resistance in specific contexts.

Very commonly the site chosen by administrators for the transmission of ideas of tolerance, respect, and diversity, the composition classroom is saddled with many of these problems. It is all the more important, then, that the dynamics of the functioning of the postcolonial text within the multicultural diversity project be investigated. For a variety of reasons, often practical rather than necessarily dubious, the kind of postcolonial text that is likely to enter the classroom, the publishing industry, and the scholarly engines in the Anglo-American academy is apt to be allowed entry on the basis of the ability to "play up squarely on the green summer pitches of the Imperium in its neo-colonial phase," in Stephen Slemmon and Helen Tiffin's memorable analogy (xiii). Such texts (and some would argue much of the theory as well) are invariably vectored toward the metropolitan center which continues to serve as the organizing fulcrum of postcolonial studies. The capacity of such texts to be radical and interruptive is already contained by other criteria for selection. Rather than ungenerously charge editors and publishers with insidious motives, however, as some readers might reasonably assume at this point, I would submit that a complex of market and "intelligibility" considerations predetermine the selection of particular sorts of texts. The kind of literature usually introduced thus invokes either a dehistoricized, multi-located transnationalism or a culture that is geographically distant and events that may be far removed in time from the current context. I do not mean to suggest that there is no value in studying texts that emerge within a "foreign" context or belong to an older period—the scholarly pursuit of the productions and histories of distant cultures is a staple of educational systems—but to underline the danger of using such texts to fulfil diversity requirements ostensibly intended to sensitize students not only to other cultures but also to the others within. Moreover, there is little evidence to suggest whether these texts or multicultural readings produced within Anglo-America, for that matter, have been successful in promoting
greater tolerance and understanding, or even preparation for a diversifying global market. While they may legitimately provoke interest in "marginal" cultures for some students, they also have the potential to further reinforce stereotypical attitudes and may function as rationalizations and alibis for a lack of genuine investigation into other cultures, or into a complex understanding of the operation of power.

But once again, if the potential and problems of postcolonialism are evident in the classroom, they are also present elsewhere. Here I will begin by exhuming the problem of abstract generalizations to concoct, what Henry Giroux calls in reference to the use of Paulo Freire's work in the West, "a recipe for all times" (200), alerting us to a general tendency, facilitated, no doubt, by the definitional ambiguities of the term "postcolonial," to apply the term in any situation where a (sometimes resistive) marginality is sought to be signified. Such naming of the other ensures that the other remains nameless, the other's specificity and history thus being effectively erased. The lack of material particulars in such deployment of postcolonial concepts renders the discussion virtually immaterial for the purposes of a radical critique. The concepts of subalternity, colonization, postcoloniality can thus all be mobilized for initiating useful discussion but their value is curtailed if they are left to function as generic shorthand.

The displacing and proxy function of postcolonialism within Anglo-American politics is a matter that should concern us. Viswanathan warns that the "postcolonial' becomes a kind of replacement for other literatures, like Asian, African American without really dealing with the political challenges imposed by the other constituencies or other literatures" ("Pedagogical Alternatives" 58). Moreover, regardless of the other problems with affirmative action—most notably, its contentment with token hires and its failure to address the root causes of those who continue to have poor preparation for and access into the mainstream)—one of the most troubling is the recruitment of metropolitan imports from the elite ranks of erstwhile colonies in the name of affirmative hiring. Notwithstanding that such individuals may suffer real (or perceived) racism in the West, this kind of interruption in a trajectory intended to address problems of long historical standing within Anglo-America serves to further obfuscate the controversy over affirmative action. In the leveling mechanisms of liberal multiculturalism and affirmative action, all the others would seem to exist on the same plane. bell hooks points out that

the current popularity of post-colonial discourse that implicated solely the West often obscures the colonizing relationship of the East in relation to Africa and other parts of the Third World. We often forget that many Third World nationals bring to this country the same kind of contempt and disrespect for blackness that is most frequently associated with white western imperialism. (270)

The lumping of all the others into one contourless, indefinable category privileges their difference from the mainstream while denying their sameness with it at any level or their differences from each other in crucial ways. The flattening of postcoloniality into a "condition" of the moment obscures the economic and social particulars of the postcolony as well as Anglo-America, while creating a liminal zone of otherness that
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diverts attention from the fact that the others in Anglo-America do not all exist on the same terms. In effect, the easy recourse to postcolonial tropes and concepts serves to dehistoricize the local struggle, and prevents the development of specific strategies to cope with the particularities of the moment, whether in the classroom or in theory.

The use of postcolonial materials—the literature, the theoretical concepts—must be marked by a high degree of vigilance if it is to have any value at all other than to further careerism and a shallow interest in interdisciplinarity. Without discouraging the quest for concordance and intertextual referencing between postcolonial and composition studies, I would urge that practitioners explore possibilities together with limitations. I will detail below some reservations about the better known postcolonial concepts in the hope that other such terms are also brought under scrutiny.

Hybridity is one of the better known postcolonial concepts. If the concept of hybridity is useful in undoing binaries and approaching the complexities of transnationalism, as many would find in composition studies, I would warn that it also tends to avoid the question of location because it suggests a zone of nowhere-ness, and a people adrift in a weightless ether of ahistoricity. The association of the concept of hybridity with transnational figures such as Bhabha and Rushdie also tends to privilege transnational hybridity arising from an encounter with Western culture rather than allowing us to recognize the ways in which all cultures are complex and hybrid because they are diverse internally and not only for the purposes of oppositional figuration in a dialogue with Western discourse. The confusions of transnationalism and globalization, moreover, predispose us to attribute a diachronic flux and dynamism to cultures being produced by global movements of the present and toward the West—and to relegate the cultures of the postcolony and the “stationary” local to a state of synchronic stasis. Royster recognizes, quite appropriately I feel, that the concept of hybridity can be a tool to help us meet the challenges of our times. But the visible success of border-crossers like Bhabha and Rushdie can also create a dangerous illusion about the dexterity and comfort of “hybrid people.” The scores of underclass immigrants in Anglo-America and illegal border-crossers not only cannot “make themselves comfortable” with the same ease that other postcolonials have but also know that border-crossing can be dangerous and potentially fatal. The deeply racial and class segregated nature of our cities, moreover, should also alert us to the intransigent borders within, rather than the more glamorous cultural borders that metropolitan postcolonial celebrities invoke. Lastly, because of the overvaluation of hybridity and transnational border-crossing, the usual invocation of hybridity rarely addresses the issue of literal hybridity, i.e. the plight of racial hybrids in a black and white culture.

Another concept fraught with the potential for misconstruction is that of “Subalternity.” Certainly, it allows us to enter into discussion of a “general attribute of subordination...expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (Guha 35). However, the term subaltern can become meaningless when it becomes overused; Spivak, in fact, complains that “it has become a kind of buzzword for any group that wants something that it does not have” (“Subaltern Talk” 290). If the quest for subaltern voices predisposes us to listen to (and for) the
texts that are available and invite such a naming, however, we would do little more
than initiate a roll call, a ready identification of whoever approximates our sense of
the subaltern and needs to be produced as Exhibit A, B, C, etc. If we were content
with “the representation of subaltern voices,” and this would appear to be the premise
of so many multicultural readers, we would never learn that subalterns and subalternity
emerge in the silences and aporias of discourse. We would miss, moreover, the profound
significance of Spivak’s question, “can the subaltern speak?”

The notion of subalternity was never intended by the subaltern studies group
to be a project of identifying subaltern groups or individuals—because the very notion
of subalternity is characterized by “something of a not-speakingness” (291). It was,
rather, a project requiring painfully careful examinations of history and discourse to
uncover failed insurgency, continuously failing resistance, and the modes of such
resistance. The recovery of the subaltern subject has thus involved a reading between
the lines of texts whose gaps and contradictions must be excavated to suggest the
buried resistance of the subaltern. If we are not careful in our usage of this term,
however, we run the risk of turning an attentive historiographic quest into a version
of contests for “the worst victim.” Anxiety in the Western academy over lost subaltern
voices can turn into a frenzied quest for the genuine native, leading to a fetishization
of the extreme margin in terms of particularly abject otherness. “Handicaps” in the
categories of race, class, sex, sexuality, and physical ability can be turned into formulas
for subalternity, supplanting entirely the rhetorical dimensions of the operation of
power.

I will turn finally to one more postcolonial concept, one that can be linked to the
subaltern studies project of attentive examination of discourse and power. The notion
of “mimicry,” carefully elaborated by Bhabha, provides a way of articulating resistance
through the ambivalence of authoritative discourse. His contention is that the
colonial discursive system is internally riven, continually producing “its slippage, it
excess, its difference” in order to be effective (86). The native thus speaks through
the contradictions and ambivalence of a forked colonial discourse. I have suggested
earlier the ways in which this concept can be useful for those in Rhetoric and
Composition. Let me focus now on the potential problems of locating agency within
the ambivalence of authority. While, on the one hand, such a strategy would look for
resistance within the structures of authoritative discourse, on the other, it would locate
resistance only within the structures of a tradition of “speaking,” and belittle the many
kinds of resistance that do take place by implying that it can be found only between
the lines. The real challenge, then, is to be critical and wary of our discursive
productions while steering away from a tendency to over-privilege representation in
textuality and within established regimes of discourse.

While the strategic use of postcolonial concepts can be very fruitful indeed in
rhetoric and composition studies, its own agenda and concerns have led to the
development of several useful concepts that can, in turn, inform the debates in
postcolonial studies or any discipline where the study of rhetoric, power, knowledge,
and resistance are of importance. Concepts such as the hugely important and
fundamental idea of “process” (exemplified in the work of Janet Emig and Donald
Murray) and the new interest in social constructionism and post-process, the notion of the "paralogic" (associated with Thomas Kent), the distinction between "audience addressed/audience invoked" (developed by Lunsford and Ede), intimations of the need for a new kind of literacy in the "late age of print" (associated with Jay Bolter), the many useful reports from composition teachers in the pedagogic battlefield, and the growing and sophisticated discourse on electronics and communication (associated with Jay Bolter, Richard Lanham, and Stuart Mouthrop, among others) can provide a conceptual map which is particularly apt for our times because these discussions have come out of a field that might be said to have come of age in the last twenty-five or so years. The specifics of the composition classroom and the rhetorical studies of social and cultural phenomenon can both be very useful to those interested in seeing postcolonial concepts refurbished in topical and responsibly relevant ways. There are many besides myself who would welcome a full articulation of these possibilities.

I close in the spirit of collaboration and partnership between postcolonial and composition studies in tackling the challenges of the moment and of the future. If we can agree that the task before us all in a time of cultural chaos and a changing economic landscape is to conceive of a project beyond binaries, of grappling with the challenging proposition that both power and resistance are dispersed and come from everywhere instead of being neatly segregated for our theoretical and pedagogic purposes, then we all need to address in more nuanced ways the abiding issue of differentials and privilege without tokenization, to resist commodification without abandoning ethical investigation, and to agree to a rigorous (self) invigilation in our scholarly pursuits and in the practice of our everyday lives.

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Notes

1 The subtitle of the CCCC’s 1997 conference theme, “Just Writing, Just Teaching: Reflection and Responsibility” captures this mood pithily. Robert Con Davis and David S. Gross outline the emergent imperative thus: “A significant development in recent critical theory...is a new and challenging sense of cultural ethos and the social responsibilities that definition entails as an alternative to the traditional Cartesian (masterful) subject of knowledge. This politically situated sense of cultural ethos—in particular, the formulation we will call the “ethos of the subaltern” challenges dominant cultural and political orders with ideologically subversive schemes. From this vantage, education, literary criticism, psychoanalysis, and gender relations can be identified as currently active domains of personal and political responsibility” (66). Meanwhile, textual productions of all kinds are increasingly seen as situated within particular contexts of production. As Vincent B. Leitch argues in Cultural Criticism, Literary Theory, Poststructuralisms, “Literary worlds are increasingly regarded as communal documents or as events with social, historical, and political dimensions rather than as autonomous artifacts within an aesthetic domain” (ix).

2 Academic acknowledgement of the importance of multiculturalism is signaled in Ronald Takaki’s 1989 essay “An Educated and Culturally Literate Person Must Study America’s Multicultural Reality” in The Chronicle of Higher Education. On a more cynical note, Spivak suggests “the stage at which transnational trade is now, world trade one should say, it is necessary for people in the United States to ‘know other cultures’” (“Transnationality and Multiculturalist Ideology” 82-83).

3 See, for instance, Guari Viswanathan’s Masks of Conquest; Ngugi wa Thiong’O’s Decolonising
Mind; Albert Wendt’s “Education.” Postcolonial texts that treat this theme include Simi Bedford’s Yoruba Girl Dancing; Jill Ker Conway’s The Road from Coorain: Recollections of a Harsh and Beautiful Journey into Adulthood; Tsitsi Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions; Merle Hodge’s Crick, Crack, Monkey; and George Laming’s In the Castle of My Skin.

"See, for example, Jarratt, Poulakos, Vitanza, Welch.

"Spivak’s ironic self-description in her interview, “Postmodern Calcutta, India.”

"See Chow’s Writing in the Diaspora (especially “Where Have All the Natives Gone?”); Shohat’s “The Struggle over Representation”; and Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?”


"For a robust critique of the essay, see Schwarz and Ray’s “Postcolonial Discourse: The Raw and the Cooked.”


"For the record, the second edition of the American Heritage Dictionary defines it as “of, relating to, or being the time following the establishment of independence in a colony.”

"This admittedly cynical and paranoid factoid on multiculturalism is at least devoid of confusion about the conceptual meaning of the term: “Multiculturalism is a malleable buzzword which serves to legitimize several different racially and culturally oriented cosmologies that are primarily exclusive (as opposed to inclusive). The term multiculturalism is also often used as a validation for the creation of a new cultural identity as well as the reinterpretation of alleged history for sectors of minority racial and religious groups that want (and desperately need) to constantly re-affirm their status as victims. Multiculturalism tends to be advocated by second, third, or fourth generation Americans as opposed to new immigrants. Multiculturalism equals monocentrism” (italics mine; A Primer on the Subject of Multiculturalism)."

"A July 1994 issue of the journal Counseling Psychologist carried an article titled “Disability as Cultural Diversity”; as I pondered the title, it occurred to me that it would not, perhaps, be unfair to suggest that our culture, in an ironic reversal, perceived diversity, particularly racial and sexual, as disability.

"Visit the following site for a sampling of conservative responses to multiculturalism: http://www.olywa.net/alan/essay/cultural.html.

Works Cited


