Reader Response

Stuart Hall and the Problem of the Postmodern in “Cultural Composition”

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I have, of late, heard even those most thoroughly influenced by the work of Stuart Hall begin to speak of him with a kind of nostalgic affection, linking Hall to an earlier (read “simpler”) tradition of Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson, and other “Old Leftists”—a noteworthy but otherwise dimming Marxist memory. Such a turn hardly surprises me, for not only does Hall admit to an ongoing appreciation for Williams’s work and even advocate that we continue reading those “old time leftists,” but he fails to embrace fully or enthusiastically the metadiscourse of postmodern theory. More than that, he continues to use words like stereotype and refuses, as he tells Julie Drew, to police the term cultural studies.

Drew’s interview reminds me, as well, why I have found Hall's work especially useful in understanding my own discomfort with the postmodern and its many manifestations as a condition, a means of cultural critique, a self-proclaimed corrective to modernism, and a hip aesthetic. Hall's take on the postmodern is important here because it is through his distrust of certain directions in postmodern thought that Hall uncovers failures to understand difference as much more than separate groups of somewhat alike individuals vying for power. Hall declares himself unapologetically no theorist of theories, and that may be true. Still, his revision of the ways we understand how racism, ethnicity, difference, and diversity function in world cultures has had a powerful impact, not only on the work of media and cultural studies but well beyond. In what follows, I will take a closer look at Hall's discomfort with the postmodern and then suggest how Hall's thinking might be most useful to composition studies, especially as we turn our attention to discussions of multicultural education, literacy practices, and the problems of representation in composition.

A World in Fragments

Hall's uneasiness with postmodernism is not, as he makes clear, an objection to theory or to all that has been put forth in the name of the postmodern. It is, instead, what
Hall calls postmodern excess, "the celebration of fragmentation." Hall tells Drew:

I don’t want to celebrate fragmentation... If you’ve been through that, and you’ve been through the plantation and slave experience, you don’t celebrate fragmentation. So I emphasize diversity rather than fragmentation: many elements, none of them wholly integrated, but not just shards, not just splinterings. The act of splintering doesn’t suggest to me that anything emerges from it. Out of diversity, however, comes new culture, new cultural forms. Out of cultural crossovers comes new music, not emptiness. So, I want to stay this side of validating a kind of postmodern excess that I don’t find myself comfortable with. (177)

It is this insistence on diversity over fragmentation, on cultural change rather than pluralism, and (elsewhere in the interview) on the term multcultural as an adjective rather than multiculturalism as a noun—a fact, a state of existence—that I believe is most fruitful for composition and literacy studies, for it is here that Hall begins to address the real problem with postmodern play, especially as it disguises itself for serious reconsideration of cultural politics.

I should first make a distinction here that is at least implied by Hall’s comments: the distinction between postmodernism as a theoretical framework for analysis and postmodernism as exalted form. As a framework for cultural analysis, postmodern theory has given us useful ways to talk about that fragmented world that so concerns Hall, a world in which, as Jim Berlin among others has noted, “Cities are without centers, except for shopping centers and industrial centers, neither of which is at the center of anything but itself” (46).

As well, postmodern critique has been useful in our understanding of “difference” in a way a notion like identity politics does not allow for. Iris Marion Young, for example, juxtaposes postmodern theories of difference with formulations available through identity politics to explain how the postmodern uncovers an interrelatedness, an interdependence within difference where identity politics sees difference as the relatedness of things with more or less similarity in a multiplicity of possible respects” (99). Like Hall, then, Young insists that an understanding of difference also involves an understanding of how race, gender, and ethnicity intersect with each other as well as with class. This is a distinctive take on multiculturalism or difference. In Young’s terms, treating difference as a collection of discrete sets of identifiable boundaries leads us to develop binaries that “in Western discourse are structured by the dichotomy good/bad, pure/impure. The first side of the dichotomy is elevated over the second because it designates the unified, the self-identical, whereas the second side lies outside the unified as the chaotic, uniformed, transforming that always threatens to cross the border and break up the unity of the good” (99).

Hall’s concern, then, is not for the possibilities of postmodern critique and analysis, which are rich. It is instead the knowledge that a celebration of difference (fragmentation can easily mask underlying material conditions. In this context, cultural theorist Richard Leppert has charged that at the hands of postmodern excess “multiculturalism is reduced to the United Colors of Benetton, which is not about multiculturalism or unity at all” but about capturing a larger share of the global market. I am reminded here of Nike and Coca Cola and IBM, all developing slick
PR campaigns in which everybody has a chance to play and to succeed all of the time. Tribal people (always in ceremonial garb) network with sixth-graders, and girls in the inner city stay off drugs and in school. It’s a multicultural, classless, gender-bending world out there—that is, unless we look at the realities of Nike production, Coca Cola marketing, and IBM downsizing.

Looking Beyond Fragmentation
In composition studies, scholars and researchers have been making use of postmodern analysis to examine the implications of fragmentation and difference for many years now. Nearly a decade ago, Lester Faigley’s *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition* drew widespread attention to postmodern theory and the work of the classroom. In it, Faigley reminded his readers that the future direction of composition studies would have to take into account changing technologies and accompanying changes in forms of communication, as well as what he called “the heterogeneity of discourses circulating today” (217). These rapid changes increase the need to pay attention not only to how meaning is constructed but also to how it is produced and circulated through everything from networked classroom conversations to MTV. Even earlier, John Trimbur, in an analysis very much shaped by conversations with Iris Young on the nature of postmodernism and the critique of difference, refined our understanding of how consensus might be reached in collaborative groups based, he argues, “not so much on collective agreements as on collective explanations of how people differ, where their differences come from, and whether they can live and work together with these differences” (610).

It is, however, Mary Louise Pratt’s work that has had perhaps the first truly pervasive influence on ways composition scholars have come to talk about cultural crossover, collaboration, and multicultural literacy practices. The new music, the new cultural forms Hall speaks of are what Pratt has called the arts of the contact zone. Fragmentation is, indeed, one of the contact zone’s perils. In Pratt, as well as in Glória Anzaldúa’s border talk, we see an insistence on change, an understanding that, as David Bartholomae has written, there is no need “to import ‘multiple cultures,’ via ‘anthologies.’ They are there in the classroom, once the institution becomes willing to pay that kind of attention to student writing” (14-15).

Paying that kind of attention to student writing is exactly what Helen Fox did when, over a period of several years, she tutored, interviewed, and analyzed the writing and communication styles of international students encountering the styles and forms of academic writing in the U.S. Fox refuses to call her subjects “minority” students or even second language users. “They are,” she writes, “the World Majority. And we need to pay attention to them, to learn how the world makes sense to them, both to broaden our own intellectual interests and capabilities and to become more effective at helping them adopt the communicative styles and habits of mind that will foster their success in our system” (10). It is clear that Fox’s work focuses on how these students can and must adapt to
U.S. academic styles, but what also becomes apparent later in her study is that she is not entirely comfortable with that role as she writes of students who tell her, as one did straight out, “I am crossed between two cultures” (22).

It is here that Stuart Hall’s discussion of cultural diversity and change might help in our use of Fox’s work. Fox does recognize that these students struggle not simply with new ways of writing. In her stories of world majority students, she vividly depicts the students’ understanding and frustration that the new style of writing they are being asked to do is a part of acculturation. She describes a student who complains that learning to write “American style . . . normalizes you to the system, shaping on you new values and new ways of looking at the world” (77). Yet, acculturation is not simply a matter of adopting the language and values of one culture and rejecting another, perhaps original culture because, as Hall explains, even the two cultures our students struggle between are not discrete. “The borders,” Hall reminds us, “are all porous” (176). All cultures are borrowing from other cultures all of the time, always changing and yet always defining themselves as separate from one another at the same time that they rely on each other and on other cultures as well.

It would seem, then, that Fox’s students have come to understand what many teachers refuse to acknowledge and what Min-Zhan Lu writes of in “Professing U.S. Multiculturalism”—that is, that writing styles are always shifting, not simply with the preferences of the academy but because of the influx of many cultures, many differences. As a profession, we can call for a refiguring of standard forms, of academic style, but that means, first and foremost, giving up the assuredness with which many would like to assess writing skills. And such a shift does not necessarily address the concerns of those students trying to learn in new cultures.

Fox finds herself, in the end, wanting it both ways: both to teach U.S. academic discourse so her students can succeed in this system and to work for change in that system. “If,” Fox submits, “we believe we are ready for such a profound rethinking of the goals and purposes of the university, if we are ready to listen to the world, ‘higher education’ will never be the same” (136). It’s a big wish but, as it stands, only a wish because even in this fine study of students learning in new cultures, Fox tends to separate different cultural groups in rather standard ways. Each has its discrete way of understanding others and conveying information. Each has its culturally specific way of arguing or engaging in analysis. And each comes up short in the face of a U.S. system that stands in contrast to all other systems.

Hall’s comment that “increasingly, everybody lives in a mixed, mongrelized world” could serve to remind us in this and other cases like it, that even U.S. academic style is not one thing—easily assimilated or not. And, perhaps, that is where Fox’s work is leading eventually anyway. If we allow ourselves as academics to “listen to the world,” we might hear another language entirely that is ours and not ours, one that we already write and speak. That is not likely to happen, however, if our “outcomes assessment” programs continue to treat language and language acquisition as though they were easily understood and measured.
To understand language use as a cultural practice rather than a skill might bring us closer to understanding how cultural differences work in a language classroom. What Hall says of writing is an extension of what he says about all language use: that it is an act of representation and as such is not reflective of but constitutive of reality and of cultural meaning that, he tells us, "is already sediment in that language, so you reactivate all those other marks of meaning as well as what you’re trying to say. Of course, writing is also a production, a production of knowledge and a production of a version of the self" (173).

Cultural Meaning and Representation

For classroom instructors, much of this must seem far removed from what they do every day with their students. Yet, I see Hall’s most recent work as having significant impact on the classroom, the composition classroom in particular. Through the Media Education Foundation, Hall has helped create two videotaped presentations on representation and cultural production. Even more recently, Sage Publications, in association with The Open University, has published Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices as a textbook introduction to understanding the importance of representation as constituting cultural meaning. In each of these productions, Hall emphasizes the role the popular plays in the way we come to know and in the meanings we give to our world.

For Hall and for many in composition studies, questions of representation and signifying practices bring these issues of diversity, fragmentation, and meaning-making to the surface. If, as he tells Drew, “everything is not language; nothing operates outside meaning,” then the need to understand how we use language, how language is shaped by and shapes us, how we reproduce systems through meaning is something that can be achieved in our examination of signifying practices. The object in the end is not to explicate the text so that the text becomes ascendant but to understand how the text does its work.

And Why Does all of this Matter?

In his discussion of the 1975 Newsweek story “Why Johnny Can’t Write,” John Trimbur tells us, “Literacy crises . . . have served as strategic sites for what Gramsci calls the ‘reorganization of cultural hegemony’” (280). Literacy crises are, Trimbur argues, “ideological events . . . strategic pretexts for educational and cultural change that renegotiate the terms of cultural hegemony, the relations between classes and groups, and the meaning and use of literacy” (281). In discussions of difference, multicultural education, and border talk we have, I would argue, set forth a kind of literacy-crisis language. And we have talked a good deal about stereotyping and cultural representation and listening to the “Other.” Hall would remind us, though, that “no practice exists outside the framework of its meaning” and that the concerns we have put forward over multicultural education and the language of change must always be understood at a conjuncture of political/social/historical/economic concerns.
As I write this response, Californians have just approved Proposition 227 in an attempt to eliminate bilingual education in that state. Two days after 227 passed, Congress voted to decrease funding for bilingual education programs and to limit the time students should be allowed to spend in bilingual classrooms (Greene), and legislators across the nation were busy lobbying for English Only laws to regulate the use and teaching of language. In Congress, Representative Peter King of New York is continuing to push forward the National Language Act, which could effectively abolish all bilingual education and the funding those programs receive from the federal government. So, it does matter very much how we talk of difference and the representations we create that constitute difference in this culture. It also matters that we do not teach about representation as a textual issue alone, for it is a matter that finds form in text but originates from (it is worth repeating here) cultural, political, historical, and economic realities.

Reading through Julie Drew’s interview with Stuart Hall is a bit like reviewing old conversations about composition studies. What is our subject? Who is authorized to speak? What language do we use? How do we understand issues of diversity, cultural change, and professionalism? Hall tells Drew that, in retrospect, “I am struck by the fact that I have been preoccupied by the same kinds of questions throughout many different kinds of writings, and I only see this retrospectively when I look at things I’ve written. . . . The answers have changed, certainly, but the questions have remained largely the same.” So have we all been occupied by many of the same questions throughout our careers and in our professional organizations. And we have stopped to look through what Hall once called “a moment of profound danger” (“Theoretical Legacies”) when our conversations threatened to become isolated in the theoretical with no clear understanding of how that theory corresponds to our work as classroom teachers or as citizens in a world that must seem, at times, all fragments—nothing to hold onto or make sense of.

Notes
1Remarks made during a conversation with the author.

Works Cited
The Specificity of the Writing Classroom: A Response to Stuart Hall

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Reading Julie Drew's interview with Stuart Hall and then returning for the first time in a while to some of the other published work on cultural studies and composition, I realized how my theoretical engagements with cultural studies have shifted into the background over the four years that I have been teaching full-time since leaving graduate school, where cultural studies was an important stop in my journey from literary studies to rhetoric and composition. After an initial fit of consternation at this realization, I recognized that I haven't lost interest in cultural studies or find its insights no longer useful, so much as I have needed to attend to other issues, fight other battles. Mostly, I've been occupied in different ways with what is now commonly identified as "WPA" work. More specifically, I've had to accommodate myself to existing writing programs and the teachers of these programs, teachers who have been and are both my superiors and under my own administrative supervision. Dealing with these already existing institutional situations and the intellectual and workplace conditions they have presented to me has consequently taken up much of my attention and energy. Cultural studies theories and practices as they relate to composition, unfortunately, have not been features of these programs as I have encountered them; instead, I have been negotiating programs that reflect their