The Vitality of the Ungrateful Receiver: Making Giving Mutual between Composition and Postcolonial Studies

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The compulsion to "help" the needy whose needs one participates in creating and legislating ultimately leads to "bombing people into the acceptance of gifts." . . . The "needy" cannot always afford to refuse, so they persist in accepting ungratefully. . . . [T]he vitality of the ungrateful receiver lies not in destroying the giver, but in understanding that giving is mutual, and thereby, in baffling expectations and unsettling the identification process of giver, given and gift.

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This is an invested reading of a JAC special issue on "Exploring Borderlands: Postcolonial and Composition Studies" (JAC 18:1, 1998). I am particularly interested in exploring composition's vitality as "the ungrateful receiver" of the gifts of postcolonial studies because both fields have been vital to my thinking about the production and reception of meanings against the grain of global and internal domination. It has been my conviction that if those of us reading, writing, and teaching inside the panopticon of English Studies are to contest the asymmetrical power relations between the so-called metropolitan center and the third world, across divisions of sex, gender, class, or race, and also between literature and composition, research and teaching, and "published" and "student" writers, then we need to make giving mutual between postcolonial and composition studies.

As postcolonial theory reminds us, to proclaim oneself a radical worker inside U.S. English Studies is to confront its official function in global and internal domination—that is, to wrestle with our complicity with the compulsion of English to "help" the so-called "third world," "minority," "student," or "basic" writers creating and legislating their "needs." This is further complicated for those of us who have been institutionally placed and/or who self-identify with composition studies, which reminds us that to proclaim oneself a radical worker inside English Studies is also to confront its compulsion to bomb "composi-
tion teachers” into accepting the gifts of “literary theories.” As many in composition have argued, while the economic importance of work in composition may grudgingly be acknowledged, its intellectual and scholarly importance consistently escapes notice (R. Miller, “Composing” 165, Gunner 161). I find it particularly troubling that, in spite of the explicit concern of postcolonial studies to speak alongside the “other,” its traffic with composition studies has dutifully replicated the identification process of giver, given, gift as that process has been traditionally maintained between literary and composition studies. Composition has been assigned the role of a grateful recipient: an ideal “laboratory for articulating the pedagogical implications” of the theoretical and scholarly advances in diverse theories housed in the literature wing of English (R. Miller, “Composing” 168). The intellectual work of composition, as that work is evidenced in both the teaching of composition and in composition scholarship, continues to escape notice (Harris; Horner, Terms Chapter 4; Schilb). Efforts to make giving mutual between postcolonial and composition studies remain scarce and perfunctory in composition scholarship. In those works where the conviction that the former has something to learn and gain from the latter is expressed, that conviction is seldom accompanied by a detailed articulation of what, how, and why composition might help postcolonial studies revise its current theories and practices (see, for example, Lu, “Professing Multiculturalism,” or Bahri, “Terms of Engagement”).

Hiring, tenure, and promotion decisions in English departments across the U.S. also routinely operate to remind composition scholars and teachers that we cannot afford to refuse the gifts of literary theory in its various post-versions. For instance, literature faculty often consider it unreasonable that composition faculty should expect a candidate specializing in postcolonial studies to demonstrate any knowledge of current composition theory or should probe these candidates on their pedagogical stance and practices (even when the job description “dares” to require occasional teaching of first-year composition). The same literature faculty nevertheless deem it unthinkable that candidates specializing in composition could qualify for jobs which would “allow” them to occasionally offer literature courses unless the candidate proves to be well-versed in current literary—including postcolonial—theory.

A literature candidate who describes Paulo Freire as the guru of “problem-solving” (rather than “problem-posing”) may suffer no consequences (because most literature faculty can’t tell the difference?). I’d wager, however, that a composition candidate crediting Spivak with “Can the Subaltern Be Heard” rather than “Can the Subaltern Speak” would pay dearly for her error. Postcolonialist specialists in English departments often join other literature faculty in making public confes-
sions of their ignorance of composition theory, using that professed ignorance as an excuse for exempting themselves from having occasionally to teach a composition course (teaching to which some of them may have professed commitment at the time of their being hired). All must have intuited (without ever having bothered to open a single copy of a composition journal) that such “ignorance” would neither endanger their candidacy for tenure and promotion nor, once they have managed to establish themselves in postcolonial studies, disqualify them from giving keynote speeches to composition conferences and interviews to composition journals. In fact, enough precedents exist to reassure such faculty that if their stock crumbles at the MLA, they can always use their professed ignorance (accompanied by the right pinch of contrition and a quick reference to Freire) to bring about an uptick of their stock at the CCCC and NCTE.

I rely on sarcasm to call attention to my anger at not only the prevailing organization of English Studies but also my own failure to effectively unsettle such givens in my day-to-day practices in both scholarly and departmental matters. If institutional constraints continue to mark composition as the “needy” who “cannot always afford to refuse” the gift of postcolonial theory, and if, as attested to by all the articles in the JAC special issue, it is to the political interest of radical workers in composition studies to learn from postcolonial critiques of global and internal colonization in the past and the present, composition studies can nevertheless explore its vitality as an ungrateful receiver of that gift. Reading the JAC special issue with this question in mind, I note four potential points of departure for exploring that vitality.

Point One: Taking Notice of the Work of Composition

In “Towards a Mestiza Rhetoric: Gloria Anzaldúa on Composition and Postcoloniality” (Lunsford 1-27), Anzaldúa baffles academic expectations by claiming, “I didn’t even know I belonged into this postcolonial thing until Patricia Cloud said in a book flap that I am a feminist, postcolonial critic” (8). She then goes on to portray herself as having neither the time nor the patience to “study” postcolonial theory:

When Homi Bhabha was here, I did some reading and I went to his lecture, which I couldn’t understand. When Spivak was here it was the same thing. I took a class with Donna Haraway in feminist theory, and when I had to read “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” it took me weeks to decipher one sentence. Well, not weeks, but you know what I’m saying. . . . And then for your interview I got a copy of this postcolonial studies reader. But you know, I didn’t have time to really study a lot, so I made little notes about the things that I wanted to think about and maybe respond to in writing. (8)
Such an ungrateful attitude is in keeping with Anzaldúa’s conviction that both writing and postcoloniality are “emancipatory projects, about how to get from here to there” (15). The “there” Anzaldúa envisions is a Nepantla, a liminal borderland between worlds, realities, systems of knowledge and languages (17). The “here” she tries to confront is an historical time and geopolitical space where “English” is going to “have this kind of United Statesian-culture-swallowing-up-the-rest-of-the-world kind of mouth” (16). “Here” is also an educational and bodily space where “English” has devoured her “head”: “When I’m dealing with theory, it’s all in English, because I didn’t take any classes in which theory was taught in Spanish. So the body and the feeling parts of me come out in Spanish, and the intellectual, reasoning parts of me come out in English” (16). For Anzaldúa to begrudge the time and energy to “study” postcolonial theory is therefore to undo not only the linkage between “English” and “theory” in education and her head but also the power of “English” to swallow up the rest of the world.

Ironically, Anzaldúa’s explicit refusal to be grateful for the “help” of postcolonial theory also bears implicit witness to the pervasive power of this form of gift-giving and, most importantly, to the absence of any institutional pressure to take notice of the work of composition. As indicated by the passage cited at the beginning of this section, Anzaldúa was at least aware that Homi Bhabha “was here.” Spivak “was here” (8). When each was present, Anzaldúa felt compelled to “[do] some reading” and “[go] to” the lecture. She had actually “[taken] a class with Donna Haraway” where she “had to” read Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” And she admits to having “got[ten] a copy of this postcolonial studies reader” in preparation for her interview with Lunsford (8). Several questions come to mind: Who in composition studies might have been “here” during the same period? Did Anzaldúa feel compelled to do any reading and attend any of the lectures? Did she get hold of a composition theory reader in preparation for her interview with Lunsford? I pose these questions not to comment on Anzaldúa’s lack of involvement in composition studies but to comment on the prevailing organization of the U.S. academy.

What are the material givens of the “world of the academy” (which Anzaldúa reminds Lunsford that “we occupy” [16])? First, “people generally assume” that Anzaldúa must have read Foucault, Derrida, Irigaray or Cixous (16).

Q: You said that you hadn’t read them before you wrote Borderlands, but that the ideas—they’re “out there.”

A: Yes, the ideas are out there because we are all people who are in more or less the same territory. We occupy the world of the academy and of the late
20th century. We've read some of the same books, we've seen some of the same movies, we have similar ideas about relationships, whether we're French or born in the United States or raised here. (16-17)

Second, books in composition are not among the “same books” we—“all people who are in more or less the same territory”—have read. Although Anzaldúa seems equally surprised to see herself “picked up” by “composition people” (24), and even though she sees many of the questions raised by Lunsford and Lahoucine Ouzgane in preparation for the interview as “[being] there” in one of her book projects (9), she does not mention having encountered anyone who “generally assume[s]” that she “must have read” any of the work in composition studies. Neither does she refer to any work by author or title as she does to work in postcolonial studies. Likewise, when Lunsford points to some links she perceives between Anzaldúa’s work and the work of composition, Lunsford cannot rely on quick references to specific authors or book titles, as she is able to when asking Anzaldúa to place her work in relation to other fields of English Studies, such as to Homi Bhabha as “a very good example” of a “very high abstract language” (8) and to the various “styles” of Toni Morrison, Borges, or Cortazar (20). Instead, Lunsford has to rely on generalizations—“some in composition studies” or “people in composition”—when depicting the advances made on how to change our roles as the “gatekeepers” of the academy (13, 24).

The general lack of institutional expectation on “all people” to have read or heard of composition theory is probably most visible in Anzaldúa’s praise of James Sledd:

He was the first person ever to encourage me to talk about cultural stuff, ... and I used some Mexican words and some terms in Spanish. I had written some stories way back when I was working on my BA, and some when I working on my MA. They all code-switched, but when I wrote for James Sledd we were doing something different. We were trying to write formally: what we would call now theorizing; what was called then criticism. His encouragement was very important to me, and he was also very important to me as a role model. He was very much a maverick against the university; he was very much at odds, an outsider. From him I learned that an outsider is not just somebody of a different skin; it could be somebody who’s White, who’s usually an insider but who crosses back and forth between outsider and insider. So he was my model to think about insider/outsider, and then I had my whole life to think about Nosotras, us and them. (23)

Let’s imagine a different “world of the academy,” one where all people are expected to have taken serious notice of the complex work of composition. What kind of discussion would then ensue after this portrait of James Sledd?

Since composition is a dynamic and complex field, the actual tenor of the conversation is impossible to predict. Rather, it would have to
depend largely on the particular readings of the field held by the interviewer and the interviewee. Hypothetically, let's just presume that both were to agree with Richard Miller's definition of composition as "an institutional site reserved for investigating acts of reading and writing as evidenced in and by student texts" ("Composing" 169). Then it is conceivable that the interview would go on to discuss Sledd's teaching in terms of composition's history in focusing attention on how meaning gets made: on treating the institutional location—where students work—rather than the literary texts as the principal subject of study, and on examining the problems involved in mediating between the desires of individual students and the work institutionally required of them. It would likewise be a given, as common in composition scholarship, to talk about Sledd's teaching in terms of the particular reading and writing assignments, written comments, or class discussions he used to "encourage" students to produce writing which not only "code switched" but also "theoriz[ed]" cultural stuff. It would also be a given to acknowledge Sledd's contribution to scholarly debate on "students' right to their own language." The interview would then move on to discuss the relationship between Sledd's scholarship and his teaching practices.

I sketch these imaginary trajectories for continuing Anzaldúa's account of Sledd's influence on her work not to call attention to what is remiss in the interview but to call attention to what (as a student in my writing class has taught me to say [Lu 450-51]) "cannot able to" take place in a "territory" where the complex work of composition has continually escaped notice. Composition cannot afford to receive the gifts of Anzaldúa's interview without also examining carefully the material givens informing this interview. Given the systematic "swallowing" of the reality of composition in the world of the academy, when conversing with those within the "university wall" but housed outside and supposedly above composition, we need to also unsettle the identification process of givers, givens, and gifts.

One direction might be to ask those with the status to "grant" us interviews that they talk about our work not only in terms of the writing teachers they have had but also in terms of the (lack of) institutional pressure to take notice of the complex work of composition. While sound in theory, such a move could indeed be risky. It might make "leading" figures like Anzaldúa more hesitant to grant interviews. Yet, composition studies can hardly afford to refuse any of the gifts these interviews often bring. First, the move to interview our power-full "literary" others is itself subversive. It is itself an opportunity to make the "givers" take notice of the existence of intellectual sites such as JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory. It can work to inform the "givers" of what is currently going on in composition studies, in teaching as well
as scholarship (see, for example, Lunsford’s questions and responses to Anzaldúa on 8, 15, 24). Second, as illustrated by all the essays in the JAC special issue, composition has much to learn from postcolonial theory, if we are to further our research on processes of reading, writing, and teaching which push against the rules of English Studies and its global and internal ruling over differences in literacy practices. Third, the publication of interviews accrues cultural capital. It would be both politically naive and irresponsible to ignore the fact that composition workers like myself gain cultural capital by producing texts which present oneself as conversant with literary, postcolonial, or poststructural studies.

Given such material conditions, I wonder if we might instead start by at least making explicit in the introduction to (if not also the main body of) the interviews the institutional givens enabling and constraining the traffic among the various disciplines housing the interviewer, the interviewee, and their imagined audience. Such discussions might in turn help readers treat these interviews as means for examining not only what we can learn from the person interviewed but also how we might go about changing the institutional givens informing the interviews. They might incite readers to adopt more ungrateful reading postures, including actively examining the degree of attention given by the “givers” of interviews to the work of composition. On the one hand, given the current organization of English Studies, such a reading posture might indeed appear to be nothing but posturing. The outcome is regrettably predictable: nothing much would come out of such a reading posture other than making manifest, once again, what we already know—that is, the lack of institutional pressure on “leading” figures (in literary—poststructural, postmodern, or postcolonial—studies) to take the work of composition seriously. On the other hand, such an ungrateful reading posture could at least mark this lack as a focal point for composition’s contestation of the existing givens within English Studies. If nothing more, it would shift our own attitudes toward composition’s terms of engagement with the “givers” of interviews. Hopefully, such a shift in focus might affect not only how composition teachers and scholars talk to our power-full others but, eventually, also how they talk to us, so that the efforts to make giving mutual would be shared by both interviewee, interviewer, and the readers of such interviews.

Point Two: Problematizing the Developmental Plot
In discussing her views on when writers are ready to challenge the norms of a field, Anzaldúa uses two analogies, both of which carry the developmental plot of “you have to know and master the norms before you can be innovative”: 
You have to know how to wire the house before you can start being an innovative electrician. (13, my emphasis)

It's kind of like a fish in the Pacific Ocean, with the analogy that the Pacific Ocean is the dominant field and the fish is this postcolonial, this feminist, or this queer, or whoever is trying to make changes. I think that before you can make any changes in composition studies, philosophy or whatever it is, you have to have a certain awareness of the territory, be familiar with it and you have to be able to maneuver in it before you can say, "Here's an alternative model for this particular field, for its norms, for its rules and regulations, for its laws." (6, my emphasis)

The fish and electrician analogies make sense when viewed in relation to several points Anzaldúa makes. First, Anzaldúa rejects the false dichotomy between “nos” and “otras,” posing instead the concept of “nosotras” (7-8). She reminds us that “we [the colonized] are complicitous for being in such close proximity and in such intimacy with the other. . . . the other is in me” (8). Second, she points out that she is “inside” the walled city of the university as a result of not only historical necessity but also personal choice: “As for me, I like English and I majored in English at a time when I wasn’t allowed Spanish” (16). Third, she views her writing as “only partly new”: “most of it is cast in the Western tradition, because that’s all that I was immersed in” (13). Fourth, she attributes the popularity of her writing in part to her ability to gain access to the “appropriate” credentials to secure subsistence—grants and jobs (15)—and an audience among other writers, artists, and academicians and their students (7, 13). Given Anzaldúa’s concern to acknowledge the dominant in her postcoloniality and her writing, her choice of the fish and the electrician analogies are understandable, since they contain an imagery of immersion.

Working from a different set of concerns, composition studies have long questioned the function of the developmental frame, especially the plot line of “you have to . . . before you can,” in education politics and writing pedagogies. For instance, some in composition have conducted historical studies of the ways in which the academy has used this master plot to legislate the “needs” of students whose home discourse is perceived as “foreign” to the English promoted by the academy. Others have studied the potential discrepancy between the academy’s account of what students writers “can”—should be allowed to—do and the student writers’ counter accounts of what they “can” do—are interested in and capable of doing. How might we use this tradition of inquiry when studying Anzaldúa’s position on when writers are ready to be innovative?

One direction would be to problematize the developmental plot in her fish and electrician analogies by listening carefully to Anzaldúa’s own accounts of her schooling, where she seems to concur with
composition's contention with the academy's faith in the developmental myth. When talking about her current effort to "mix Spanglish" in theory as well as in poetry, Anzaldua states that "I think of style as trying to recover a childhood place where you code switch" (21, my emphasis). She has to recover that place because code switching once "was" the way Anzaldua "grew up with her family" (16). But since Spanish "was not allowed" by school, "[w]hen I'm in my head, stuff comes out in English. When I'm dealing with theory, it's all in English" (16). Given her personal educational history, Anzaldua literally "has to" wait until English has devoured her "head" and she "can" (is allowed to) code switch again. This suggests that the developmental plot in the fish and electrician analogies indeed reflects an historical reality experienced by students like Anzaldua. Schooling has historically been the site where the dominant uses the developmental myth to exercise its compulsion to "bomb" the "needy" bilingual student into believing she cannot work for change—pose alternatives or be innovative—until she had survived her rite of passage through the house of English.

However, a second set of stories indicates that in spite of such an historical reality, the developmental myth does not accurately reflect the student's own sense of what she can do—desires to do and is capable of doing. These stories recount Anzaldua's struggle for alternative style when doing her BA, MA, and Ph.D. Every time Anzaldua "code-switched," all the professors (except for James Sledd) in the "Comp Lit" and "English Lit" courses she took "marked [her] down" for not writing the "status-quo way" (23). Anzaldua's expressed frustration at the lack of encouragement she got from these literature classes suggests that she faults her teachers for "subtly wanting her to" refrain from innovative efforts. That is, they bombed her into accepting the norms of the field. Indeed, she uses these stories to indict college classrooms which coerce students like herself into believing that she "cannot"—has no ability to and is therefore not allowed to—be innovative until she has proven her fluency in the "status-quo way" and thus, earned the appropriate credentials (23).

In fact, I would argue that memories of her own frustration as a writing student are in part why Anzaldua hopes her own writing might serve an alternative pedagogical function for other student readers. For instance, she imagines one reader to say upon reading her work:

"I didn't know that Chicano Spanish was the bastard language. And if Chicano Spanish is a bastard language, what registers of English are also bastards and not allowed into the academy? ... And then maybe the reader will say, "I don't know, I'm a redneck and this is my language, and maybe I should write about this language for this particular class." (22)
This passage suggests that Anzaldúa hopes that her writing might lead student readers to recognize that they are both capable of and should be allowed, encouraged, to try out the alternative model she poses in her postcoloniality and writing. She hopes her writing would persuade professors teaching “this particular class” to not mark this student down for trying to be innovative, as her own professors had. She would not want any professor to use the developmental plot embedded in her fish and electrician analogies as a rationale for keeping her student readers from trying out the alternative models she poses in her writing.

To use Anzaldúa’s literacy narrative of her own student days to problematize the developmental myth in her analogies is in keeping with composition’s commitment to examine the potential discrepancy between teachers’ views of what students “can” do and students’ views of what they can do. This can in turn help both composition and postcolonial studies increase their vigilance toward how they talk about their positions on when a writer is ready to be innovative.

A second direction for applying composition’s contention with the developmental plot would be to consider Anzaldúa’s position on when students placed in “basic” sections of college writing courses can try out alternative or innovative models of writing. This is a difficult task since the interview makes no direct reference to this body of students. The absence of this body of students is common in postcolonial scholarship most probably because few working in that field have had any direct contact with or experience of having been placed as either a student or teacher in a “basic” writing course. Yet, it is nevertheless necessary. Composition’s commitment to the education of students traditionally kept outside the walls of the university and Anzaldúa’s interest to “connect” her writing with “the real-life, bodily experiences of people who were suffering because of some kind of oppression” (25) should theoretically lead to consideration of the experiences of student writers living at the bottom of academic hierarchies.

Whether Anzaldúa would consider all student readers of her work in any college classes ready to try out the alternative model she poses as a writer remains ambiguous. Does she imagine “the particular class” her “redneck” reader is taking the kind of “literature” classes she herself had been placed in during undergraduate and graduate school (22)? Or, would she consider those students placed in “basic” writing classes ready for similar innovative moves before they have been tested out of the “remedial” section of the academy?

Composition studies can help postcolonial writers like Anzaldúa think through their positions concerning these questions by providing insights and strategies for connecting their writing with the experiences of “basic” student writers. For instance, composition studies has tapped into the “hidden script” in “poor” student performances—their seeming
indifference to learning or their “error-ridden” prose—by asking and taking seriously students’ answers to a series of questions: How and why is it that some of them have failed to “have” the grades and “brains” necessary for entering credit-granting English courses? What do individual basic writers have to say about how and why they have (or have not) found the developmental plot convincing and/or viable for their own education? To what extent have the reading postures of teachers who contest or endorse the developmental frame affected the agency of these student writers as they try to write with and against the laws of English? Others in composition have also used these student literacy accounts to revise academic interpretations and representations of the writings of “basic” students (Fox, Social Uses; Hull and Rose; Hull et al.; Soliday). By studying student writing while it is still in process and still in its (less finished) form of notes, journals, drafts, or revisions, others in composition studies have also gathered a wealth of evidence that “basic” student writers are not only interested in but also capable of trying to push against the norms of English even as they learn to “maneuver in” them.

These traditions of inquiry in composition studies can help writers like Anzaldua explore ways of complicating her use of the word “can” in the developmental plot, so that the word would invoke the conflict between, on the one hand, what the students “can”—are allowed to—do by dominant modes of English instruction, and, on the other, what they “can” do—are interested in and have capability of doing—before the academy accredits them as indeed fluent in what the academy believes they “have to have” before being innovative. Doing so can help her prevent her fish and electrician analogies from being appropriated by the dominant to perpetuate the developmental myth and thus to protect the power of “English” to swallow other languages, realities, and experiences. As illustrated by all the articles in the JAC special issue, postcolonial theory can help composition teachers and students to further these traditions of inquiry by attending more rigorously to the specific and complex geopolitical context of individual literacy practices. At the same time, taking note of the work of composition might help writers like Anzaldua explore ways of more explicitly and more rigorously connecting their postcolonial perspectives and styles with the experience and efforts of student writers placed outside the walls of (credit earning) college literature classrooms traditionally attended and taught by these published writers, students representing one of the most subordinated groups within the walls of the university.

Point Three: Acknowledging the Materiality of Writing
Lunsford brings to her interview with Anzaldua a series of questions central to composition research on the composing process: “Are there any things about writing that are particularly hard for you? Or easy?”
(9) “Do you try to write at a regular time? Every day?” (10) “Do you compose at the word-processor?” “Do the words seem to come out as well from the ends of your fingers typing as they did when you were scripting?” (10). In response, Anzaldúa links the “problem of voice” (11)—her refusal to do “disembodied writing” and her struggle “to start with the feeling”—with the problem of engaging and disengaging oneself with writing (10). This in turn calls attention to the specific material conditions sustaining and constraining her work as she tries to “recommit” herself daily to her embodied writing, which she likens to “making a date” with herself:

I really have to get into the feeling... which I access sometimes by being very, very quiet and doing some deep breathing, or by some little tiny meditation, or by burning some incense. ... Sometimes I walk along the beach. So I access this state, I get all psyched up, and then I do the writing. I work four, five, six hours; and then I have to come off that... heightened, aware state. ... To disengage you have to take another walk, wash the dishes, go to the garden, talk on the telephone, just because it is too much. Your body cannot take it. (10)

Later in the interview, we learn that when the feminist architects (hired to put an addition on her house) asked what kind of space Anzaldúa wanted to live in, her answer was: “Tall, a lot of opening, a lot of window space” (19).

Lunsford’s questions also draw out the technological aspects of the materiality of writing. “Yes, I do [compose at the word-processor], at my desk, and sometimes I take my little lap-top to the coffee house or to the beach, or just outside” (10). Then Anzaldúa recalls a time when she had “to resort to handwriting” because her computer broke down during a four-week stay at an artists’ retreat. This “switched [her] over” from her plan to “do stories” to doing revisions of stories in hard copy, writing poems, and “writing exercises” (11).

These accounts depict a writer with access to the kind of time, quiet, personal space, natural environment, and technologies which are not always available to all writers. I have in mind here not only “professional” writers but also “student” writers having to, for instance, keep full-time or part-time jobs in non-academic settings and sharing crowded living spaces with others. For instance, as the interview reminds us, the younger Anzaldúa herself had to work under a very different set of conditions:

When we were growing up, we had to work after school. We had chores, we had field work, we had house work. And then it was time for bed, and I didn’t get to do my reading. So I would read under the covers with a flashlight in bed with my sister. And my brothers were in the same room, but my sister and I shared the same bed. And she was ready to tell my mom. To keep her entertained, and to keep her from going to my mom, I would tell her a story. I would make up a story—just something that had happened during the day. ... So I was writing stories very early. (4)
As illustrated by the different working conditions enjoyed by the younger Anzaldúa and the current day Anzaldúa as well as by research in composition studies, access to time, quiet, personal space, and technology are not always equally distributed along lines of class, race, ethnicity, and gender globally and within the U.S. (Canagarajah; Fox, *Defending* 10-17). The exchange between Lunsford and Anzaldúa reminds us of the need to examine the social, economic conditions sustaining and constraining the work of individual writers when exploring the viability of mestiza rhetoric. For to fail to do so would be to reify and universalize the mestiza rhetoric in ways classical rhetoric has been historically legislated in U.S. academy. We need to teach and learn mestiza rhetoric in accompaniment with rather than in detachment from considerations of the materiality of writing (Horner, “Students” 516-20).

The interview also hints at the importance of introducing the body into discussions of the materiality of writing. Anzaldúa states, “Some days I don’t feel like going to meet that appointment [to do this writing]. It’s too hard on my body, especially since I have diabetes; it takes out too much” (10). The issue of physical health is material on at least two levels: it affects the physical, emotional, and psychic energy demanded by the labor of writing, thus contesting the dichotomy between ideas and feelings; and it is affected by access to health care, which continues to be unevenly distributed within and outside the U.S. along race, class, and gender lines.

These references to the complex material conditions sustaining and constraining Anzaldúa’s struggle for a mestiza rhetoric suggest that if the purpose of asking students to study Anzaldúa’s writing is to help them practice the mestiza rhetoric in their own writings, then we need to consider more than merely the degree to which the student readers can “see themselves in the text” and whether “reading these other voices gives them permission to go out and acquire their own voices, to write in this way” (4, 25; emphasis mine). Rather, we also need to link individual students’ efforts to practice that rhetoric with the often different but equally complex materiality of Anzaldúa’s work and of individual students’ work. In this way, the question of how and why we might want to teach students to practice mestiza rhetoric would be linked to such questions as: Given the specific material conditions of her or his life, how would the individual student writer go about enacting the mestiza rhetoric promoted in the writing classroom? How might the student writer go about revising both that rhetoric and those material conditions when learning to enact it?

The questions Lunsford brings to her interview indicate that as a result of sustained work in areas such as the “composing process” and the “materiality of writing,” composition studies has come up with a wealth of strategies for pursuing these questions. Her questions also
call attention to the noticeable absence of such questions in other interviews with postcolonial writers (see, for example, interviews with Gayatri Spivak by Roony, and by Bahri and Vasudeva). While the question of how to construct and textually represent subject positions against the grain of transnational and internal colonization occupies these interviews, no attention is paid in any of them to either the actual process of composing or the complex material conditions sustaining the writing of a text such as “Can the Subaltern Speak?” This absence significantly delimits how both the participants and readers of such interviews investigate the often privileged material conditions of various U.S. academic postcolonial critics and writers. In contrast, Lunsford’s interview reminds us to explore the “accessibility” of postcolonial theory to diverse readers and writers in terms of not only its “very high abstract language” (Lunsford 9) but also the distinctive, often privileged, material conditions constraining and sustaining its production.

Point Four: Representing the “Student Writer”

As several articles in the JAC special issue illustrate, composition studies has much to offer postcolonial studies on how to confront our institutional authority to speak for student writers by taking into account what students have to say about themselves in relation to us and our teaching. Like other works in composition, these articles indicate a concern to acknowledge the specificity of individual student writers in terms of not only the students’ lived experience of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sex, or geographical divisions but also the link between these divisions and academic divisions between literature and composition, published and student writers, and across different levels of student writers. For instance, Lunsford reminds Anzaldúa that the “student” she has in mind is someone “in a first-year writing class, who may come from southern Texas and be a speaker of Spanish as a first language” (9). “Many of my students are from small farming communities in Ohio. Most of them are Anglo” and “don’t see themselves as having any race, any ethnicity, and often they don’t even think they have any range of sexuality” (9, 12). Others writings for the JAC special issue refer to “female students” in women’s studies classes (Jarratt 58), “basic writers” (Gunner 155), “Southwestern bilingual minority students” in a “first-year college” writing or literature class (Mejia 126), a self-identified “white male” student in “a sophomore level writing class entitled ‘American Experience in Literature’” (satisfying a “diversity requirement”) at “a large mid-western university” (Gavaskar 142, 148). Overall, we sense an acute awareness of individual students’ needs to negotiate with a “school identity defined by year in school, academic major, grade earned, and such other aspects of a student’s literacy
history that incorporate perceptions of what it means to be a 'good' or 'bad' student" (Gavaskar 138). This attention to the specific institutional location of the individual student is something I've not come across in any of the rare moments in the writings of postcolonial critics, Spivak for instance, when they make actual references to "students" or depict their actions and thoughts.

In "Terms of Engagement," Bahri cautions composition studies to use postcolonial materials—the literature and the theoretical concepts—with a high degree of vigilance (39). She joins others in postcolonial studies to argue that the association of the concept of "hybridity" with "metropolitan postcolonial celebrities" such as Bhabha and Rushdie can risk glamorizing "transnational border-crossing" and overlook "intransigent borders within," including "the deeply racial and class segregated nature of our cities," and the experiences of "scores of underclass immigrants in Anglo-American and illegal border-crossers" (39; see also Mejia). Composition's persistent attention to the specific institutional location of individual student writers suggests that composition studies can enhance that vigilance by highlighting yet another set of borders often neglected by postcolonial theory: namely, the borders within English studies across diverse fields and types of students.

Lunsford's interview enacts that vigilance along two such institutional borders. In naming Anzaldúa a postcolonial critic, the interview not only puts the internal "colonization of the Chicano, the Blacks, the Natives" (8) and the realities of a "woman," "queer," "child" (24) at the center of postcolonial studies but also contests the division between theoretical and creative writing within English Studies. In asking Anzaldúa to talk about her current work in relation to her earlier experience as a student writer and to the first-year writing students at Lunsford's institution, the interview also reminds us to examine the ways in which U.S. postcolonial academics represent, talk to, about, for, or alongside student writers.

In "Beside Ourselves: Rhetoric and Representation in Postcolonial Feminist Writing," Susan Jarratt argues through a detailed analysis of the writings of Trinh T. Minh-ha and Gayatri Spivak that in the writings of both critics "[a] principled resistance to the temptation to speak for India, for Vietnam, for women is joined with the principled impulse to put the voice of the 'other' in play in first-world academic discourse" (66). That is, these writers exemplify a model for speaking "beside, alongside, among, in common with, with the help and favor of, in the midst of others" (71). As Jarratt and others writing in the JAC special issue have cogently argued, postcolonial theory can inform composition on how to put the voices of those othered by international and internal divisions of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality in play in first-world academic discourse. At the same time, the recurring
references to “student writers” in the JAC special issue point to a common oversight in postcolonial theory: recognition of the need of academic intellectuals to resist the temptation of speaking for the “student writer.”

Composition can inform postcolonial studies on how to confront our role as the “professional representers” of student writers (Jarratt 66). Composition studies has a substantial tradition of trying to ensure that our impulse to put the voice of the “student writer” (especially basic writers) in play with first-world academic discourse is joined by our resistance to the temptation to speak for “student writers” (see, for example, Mejia, Gunner, Gavaskar.) To begin with, composition studies has addressed the politics of representing student writers by examining the ways in which dominant conventions in academic discourse name the differences between writers and non-writers and across diverse populations of writers; legislate the desires, efforts, and needs of these differently ranked writers; and solicit, analyze, evaluate the writings produced by these differently ranked writers (at different stages of the composing process) (Helmers; Horner, “Mapping”; R. Miller, “Fault Lines”; S. Miller, Textual). More recently, composition scholars have furthered the inquiry by asking how we as teachers and scholars of writing perceive and represent ourselves, and what potential gaps might exist between how we represent ourselves and how students might represent us (Royster and Taylor 30).

This tradition of inquiry is briefly evidenced in several essays in the JAC special issue. For instance, when discussing the ways in which feminist postcolonial theories might contribute to the reading practices of writing teachers, Jarratt points out:

I am not suggesting that students will consciously employ the complex tactics I have outlined in the writing of the two academic postcolonial feminists but rather that we might use Spivak’s and Trinh’s rhetorical gestures as guides for reading traces or symptoms of texts from students writing their own relations to institutional power. Imagining students capable of inscribing multiple selves could be an important reading posture for teachers concerned with subject construction in a postcolonial era. (66-67, emphasis mine)

The word “imagine” is key to Jarratt’s view of how “teachers of writing, language, and literature in U.S. universities” (71) might confront our ethical responsibility as “professional representers” (66). Jarratt argues that “a postcolonial intellectual cannot speak for these unrepresented groups but only to them in an imagined conversation across class lines and historical distances” (61 emphasis mine). Feminist postcolonial intellectuals resist the professional temptation to speak for the power-less by highlighting the “imagined” nature of the conversation. In urging us to adopt reading postures which “imagine”
our students “as capable of inscribing multiple selves,” Jarratt is also reminding us to confront our ethical responsibility: we cannot speak for the student writers—legislate what they can, want, or need to do—but only to them in an imagined conversation across social, historical, and institutional divisions.

The effort to imagine the viewpoints of student writers is also evidenced in Jarratt’s disclaimer: “I am not suggesting that students will consciously employ the complex tactics I have outlined in the writings of the two academic postcolonial feminists” (66, emphasis mine). The disclaimer indicates Jarratt’s concern to problematize the role of postcolonial feminist teachers: our institutional power to rank rhetors along the literate (intellectual, published, student, basic writers) and illiterate (“not a writer” 67) divide as well as our power to use our reading gestures to solicit or silence the voices of others. In “not suggesting” that students “will” consciously employ the tactics she herself so admired in the “two academic postcolonial feminists,” Jarratt likewise calls attention to the potential disjunction between the tactics individual students will employ, given the specific institutional as well as social and historical context of each act of reading and writing, and what teachers like herself are urging “us” to “imagine” the students as capable of and needing to do. I highlight Jarratt’s effort to acknowledge such disjunctions because it is in keeping with composition’s persistent concern to imagine conversations with student writers across academic divisions and because such efforts are often missing in other works which argue for the need and feasibility of teaching students to employ the “postcolonial” rhetoric enacted by writers such as Bhabha, Said, Spivak, and Anzaldúa.

To become ungrateful receivers of postcolonial theory, we need to accompany composition’s emerging impulse to put the voice of elite academic postcolonial feminists in play in first-world discourse with composition’s long standing knowledge of and expertise in resisting the temptation to speak for student writers—to measure their needs by the yardstick of elite academic postcolonial feminists. Composition research and teaching practices have long examined the teacher’s choice of “reading posture” (towards texts by student as well as published writers) as a primary institutional means for soliciting or excluding specific literacy practices. Composition can thus help postcolonial studies to become more reflexive about the ways in which teachers’ reading postures, whether informed by postcolonial or classic rhetoric, set constraints on how students go about writing and rewriting their relations to institutional power. More specifically, it can offer postcolonial studies insights on how to use writing assignments, written and oral responses to student papers, and qualitative research to imagine conversations with students concerning the reading postures of
teachers and to use such conversations to revise how we respond to and represent student writings in our teaching and scholarship.

There are vestiges of such strategies at work in several moments in the 

special issue, where the authors explicitly acknowledge the need to “imagine” what the student writers might be saying in their writings, about “our” effort to bring the voices of “postcolonial” writers and critics into writing classrooms. For instance, in “Tejano Arts of the U.S.-Mexico Contact Zone,” Jaime Armin Mejia cautions academic elites to recognize the potential gap between the voice of the published writer “we” select to speak for and to “ethnic minority” student writers and the concerns and realities of the actual student writer. Citing Sandra Jamieson, Mejia argues that if previous readings demand that the reader adopt a white, middle-class reading-subject position, which is also still male, alternative reading (featuring the cultural backgrounds or histories of “ethnic minority” students) “might be forcing the same kind of demand in identity construction, albeit a different one, on ethnic minority students who may not construct their identities ethnically” (129-30). Mejia further resists the temptation to speak for “ethnic minority students” by examining the institutional sources Mejia has used to back this representation of “ethnic minority students”: an ethnographic study by Shirley Brice Heath and Milbrey McLaughlin on young people (among them Latinos) of youth organizations in inner cities. “Invaluable and revealing as Heath and McLaughlin’s studies are about inner-city youth,” Mejia notes, “one nevertheless would like to have seen extended views from the ethnic minority youth’s own perspectives confirming their multilayered self-conceptions in contact zones” (132). Furthermore, “the perspectives of adults of color” living in comparable contact zones are absent (132). Mejia thus articulates a healthy skepticism common in composition theory towards how we represent the needs, realities, and desires of various bodies of student writers in our ethnographic research and teaching, in the texts we select, as well as in the reading postures we endorse.

In “I Don’t Identify With the Text: Exploring the Boundaries of Personal/Cultural in a Postcolonial Pedagogy,” Vandana S. Gavaskar makes another common move in composition research: She brings in the voice of students, both their perceptions of “us” as readers of texts (written by students as well as by published writers such as Anzaldúa and Mukherjee) and their perceptions of “us” as ideological workers. She refers us to one student who writes in a journal entry: “I am not a blank slate. . . . What categories are presented in class, and are students truly representative of those categories? I am forced as a white male to rethink and destroy identity from class to class” (142). Gavaskar reads this excerpt from a student journal to highlight the student’s effort to resist “both the perceived reification of his identity as a ‘category,’ and
a pedagogy that does not seem to acknowledge that there may be real life experiences with difference that students bring to a class" (142). Instead of treating such student texts as speaking from "a zone [the writing classroom] of nowhere-ness" and as by "a people [the writing students] afloat in a weightless ether of ahistoricity" (Bahri 39), as in certain versions of postcolonialism, Gavaskar asks us to read the student text and her interpretation of that student text in relation to the particular geopolitical and institutional space producing both texts and in relation to that student’s perception of that space. She reminds us that "[a]t the time of this writing, the student was simultaneously taking a class in multicultural American literature taught by a self-identified lesbian professor and a sophomore level writing class entitled 'American Experience in Literature' taught by Gavaskar, identified elsewhere in [this student's] text as a female Indian teacher" (142). She reminds us that in the "large mid-western university" where she teaches, such courses are described in "student underlife" as "PC." Because the sophomore level writing course also satisfies the University's diversity requirement, students perceive institutional mandates and the overtly identified ideology of the class as "particularist" (148).

While such moves to solicit student representations of "us" (the teacher of the writing course and the published writers whose work the students have been assigned to read) and to acknowledge the specific locations of the student writer (institutional as well as geopolitical) are standard in composition research, they are to my knowledge glaringly absent in the writings of all the postcolonial critics and writers cited by the essays in the JAC special issue. At the same time, it also seems that much less space and energy is given to such moves that in composition theory try to engage with postcolonial theory than in most regular issues of other composition journals.

For instance, it is becoming standard practice in composition theory to address the politics of representation by not only bringing in the "voice" of individual students but also examining the particular assignment used to solicit particular student texts, examining individual students' actual experience when producing these texts, and examining the degree to which the responses of the teacher and peers concerning these texts have affected those students' performance when revising that text or various versions of other texts. Continuing this tradition of inquiry can benefit composition's effort to learn from postcolonial studies. In the Anglo-American academy, "the lessons of postcolonialism are abstracted from their contexts and brought into discussion of marginality and victimage in domestic debates on diversity" (Bahri 35). Reflexivity on the extent to which teachers' reading and writing postures (in the writing of assignments and comments on student writings, as well as in conducting class discussions on student
and published texts) affect the rhetorical practices of students can help composition part ways with such cooptation of postcolonial theory and texts in some "multicultural" literature classes in the Anglo-American academy. Rather than using "postcolonialism" as a means for canonizing new themes such as abuse, trauma or migration when selecting teaching materials (and I'd add, when soliciting student writing), we might engage in serious discussions on how to use assignment writings, comments, and discussions to help students address the politics of representation when reading and writing such themes. Writing and reading trauma or migration can then go beyond reading and writing about the trauma or migration of an "other" and about relations of domination in which only "others" but not ourselves are implicated. Our impulse to let in those themes traditionally perceived as not belonging in the texts students write would thus be joined by a rigorous reflexivity on how we go about soliciting student writing addressing such themes. We would pose the question to ourselves and our students of who is writing about the victimage of whom, when, where, to whom.

Continual research on the responses of individual students to our effort to engage postcolonial theory and texts can also help us make giving mutual between composition and postcolonial studies. Together, we might extend our impulse to bring in the diverse voices of U.S. college students—"mainstream" as well as transnational and internal "immigrants"—into play with first world academic discourse on postcolonialism by joining that impulse with a rigorous resistance to our professional temptation to speak for our students.

Composition's Vitality as the Ungrateful Receiver

In identifying four possible points of departure, I hope to jump start rather than to exhaust how composition teachers and scholars might go about confronting the institutional givens of composition's exchange with postcolonial studies. Both postcolonial studies and composition studies are dynamic and heterogeneous institutional sites. My reading of composition's potential as the ungrateful receiver of postcolonial studies speaks more to my specific location within composition studies and thus to those issues with which I've been most invested in wrestling. Hopefully, the partiality of my reading will stimulate others to rework the contour of this provisional mapping from different locations and different readings of the fields and of their relations.

As a field of studies, composition is in a unique position to explore the vitality of the ungrateful receiver and to do so in relation not only to postcolonial studies but also to all emerging theories and fields in asymmetrical institutional power relations with composition. Composition is in this vital position on at least three levels. First, as an academic field, it is from its inception explicitly cross disciplinary in
aim. It has thus developed a solid tradition of reflecting on the strengths and limitations of its past and present exchanges with others disciplines—as, for instance, in its turn to the scientific objectivism of quantitative research. It has amassed a wealth of strategies for gift receiving and giving across disciplinary boundaries and against the grains of institutional hierarchies. Second, as a site of instruction, composition works with an unusually diverse body of students across all colleges, disciplines, and programs, as well as across all academic ranks. It is often more in direct contact with the specific and different concerns and interests of diverse student groups and thus in tune with how and why the dominant theories and practices of diverse fields might work (and not work) for specific students. Thirdly, as a work force, composition consists of members with training, interest, and work in programs as diverse as literary studies, creative writing, education, literacy studies, linguistics, rhetoric, etc. Vigilance towards academic hierarchies and their impact on how we speak and listen to one another is a lived necessity in the day to day experience of becoming and being a part of this work force. In short, the question of how to mobilize composition's vitality as the ungrateful receiver of the knowledge and practices of the power-full disciplines and fields is by no means new to the geography of composition. At most, to take this question to composition's exchange with postcolonial studies is to add a signpost to composition's institutional map. But it is a necessary sign if composition studies is to sustain its hybridity as an academic field, instructional site, and work force.

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