Making Contact:
Experience, Representation, and Difference

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"I just wanted to ask you," said a woman of East Indian descent—who’d explained that she’d been nominated by her classmates to approach me after the session—"Why did you turn our class into a race war?"

We had addressed issues of race and racial tensions when they emerged in course texts or students’ research materials during previous class sessions, when I’d sometimes turned discussion away from hot issues like racial difference and back to textual analysis. During this session’s very different discussion, a small group of students had tried to do the same. But by then, the conversation’s momentum had gathered, and I directed the discussion toward race rather than toward the reading or writing of a text with just an “ok” and an invitation to another student waiting to speak.

As I recall this conflicted moment, it seems to me that my first-year writing students and I experienced ourselves as powerless, that we felt ourselves caught up in a social system we couldn’t control or change: we were disconnected from our own roles in creating the situation, from each other, and, ultimately, from our own multiple, conflicting responses to it. In short, we were experiencing—and enacting—alienation. This particular experience of alienation has helped me to think further about how I can address class and other differences as broader social issues and as ongoing group dynamics in my teaching.

Using poststructuralist notions of differentiation, physiologist Karl Pribram’s holographic model of the brain, and Gestalt theory, I draw on composition studies to frame an ethical praxis for dealing with alienation and difference. In the process, I show how we create the experience of alienation by physically constricting awareness of internal and external stimuli, thus constricting our perceptions of self, others, and

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environment. As a result, we freeze our perceptual processes. Further, in using theoretical and philosophical systems, we concretize them into exploitative and totalitarian social structures.

By analyzing the classroom conflict and its circumstances, I argue that learning how we embody our perceptual processes can shift alienation toward expanded contact. I'm using the term “contact” to describe conscious awareness of material experience (sensory, emotional, kinaesthetic, and so on) of self and others. Thus, I understand contact as including psychological, physiological, and cognitive dimensions of awareness. In contrast, I understand alienation as the process of resisting, or cutting off, such awareness and, with it, one’s impulses to act in response to that awareness. Because it forecloses awareness and spontaneous response, alienation diminishes one’s energies and ability to invest fully in an interaction or endeavor. Such reduced self-awareness concomitantly reduces awareness of others and the ability to empathize with them. As a result, it enables mistreatment from slights to atrocities. Given the pernicious effects of alienation on self and others, I see ethics as rooted in the effort to increase one’s contact with one’s own and others’ experiences. I believe such contact in and of itself shifts perceptions, behaviors, and relational habits. In this article, I yoke these concepts with composition studies’ notion of praxis and with poststructuralist theory to show how we can undertake such ethical work by reconnecting language with its uses and their effects.

In the second section of this essay, I examine the impasse and opportunity that poststructuralist thought presents to composition studies, and I suggest we analyze the intersections between language and material experience to theorize alienation, identity, and change. Then I show how Pribram’s and Gestalt’s models of perception enable such analysis and how Gestalt encourages language practices that can shift alienation toward praxis. I examine a series of classroom interactions to explore how students and I undertook such a shift and so developed ad hoc means of recognizing and negotiating with difference. I conclude that this approach helps students and teachers devise more effective ways to negotiate difference and thus more ethical styles of contact and representation.

One View: Alienation as Language
With his notion of différence, Jacques Derrida links the problem of alienation to the emergence of language, which he describes as arche-writing, the moment of inscribing identities in names. To flesh out his
conceptions of arche-writing and *différance*, Derrida reads Levi-Strauss’ famous chapter “The Writing Lesson,” an anthropological account of how the South American Nambikwara group Levi-Strauss is researching “discovers” writing. In doing so, Derrida links language itself to alienation because it is inherently a naming that separates the “self,” or consciousness, from proprioception—our perception of internal stimuli, our felt-self—by inscribing that self within “a system of linguistically-social differences” (111). Derrida defines the proper name, “in the sense of consciousness,” as precisely the inscription of a (human) being within the abstract system of language:

To name . . . is the originary violence of language which consists in inscribing within a difference, in classifying . . . To think the unique within the system, to inscribe it there, such is the gesture of the arche-writing: arche-violence, loss of . . . a self-presence which has never been given but only dreamed of and always already split, repeated, incapable of appearing to itself except in its own disappearance. (112)

For Derrida, language as such produces alienation, and consciousness as such is the experience of alienation, the split between proprioception and perception. The metaphysical and empirical efforts to search for an unmediated experience, a “real” prior to the inscription in writing—or language—is a deluded quest. By critiquing Saussure’s linguistics, Derrida shows that the linguist can name the concept, the signified, only after defining the image, or signifier, and using it as the ground against which the notion of the “real” emerges. Thus, present experience can be named and understood only retrospectively, only in contrast to the signifier that supposedly echoes it. For Derrida, this retrospective origin (“the trace”) exemplifies our inscription into language, and the use of language as such alienates us from immediate experience. Language itself creates the phantom origin of an illusory immediate experience.

Derrida recognizes that in the moment of naming, of differentiating the thing named from the other, *difference* itself is the currency of identity. The construction of identity, of consciousness and an ethics based in our understanding of it, occurs through differentiation, through a contrastive process that inevitably erases the “reality” of the moment it names as origin and of the other against which, or whom, it defines itself. For Derrida, language, signification itself, inevitably effaces present experience and the other against whom identity is constructed. As a
result, he argues, an ethics that presumes a "real," an originary present experience underlying language, erases both immediate experience and the other.

Derrida’s recognition offers crucial tools for addressing alienation and disfranchisement, but its use also poses key risks. First, Derrida understands contact in black-and-white terms as the lost “self-presence which has never been given but only dreamed of and always already split, repeated, incapable of appearing to itself except in its own disappearance.” Thus, he misses how contact is actually (1) a continuum and (2) not a pre-linguistic experience of pure selfhood but an awareness of material experience that emerges in an interface between the sensory, kinesthetic, and emotional, on the one hand, and language on the other. Second, as a result, he formulates alienation as monolithic—as not only inevitable but immune to amelioration. That is, he doesn’t understand it as a matter of degree and as open to our intervention. In response to his understanding of alienation, many humanities theorists inspired by poststructuralism locate agency in language and texts, rather than in the interface between language and material experience—that is, in practices of language use. Such uses of Derrida’s work pose a theoretical, practical, and pedagogical impasse for composition studies.

They leave us mired in alienation, permanently cut off from contact with our experience. Attempts to reconnect with, or speak from, such experience appear at best naively utopian and at worst cynically expedient. In particular, they imply the futility of using language to combat alienation and to contact experience. Thus, they risk fostering the sense of powerlessness and disconnection that generate apathy and support the status quo of existing social relations. They can, in short, encourage a pervasive conservatism. In higher education, such conservatism opposes pedagogies that encourage students, especially those from non-middle-class backgrounds, to connect their life experience with the academic practices they’re learning. English studies in particular espouses this conservatism when faculty require students to undertake traditional practices like formal argument or textual analysis in ways decontextualized from the students’ other experiences and concerns.

This approach does little damage to students from relatively privileged backgrounds, for their life contexts frequently contain a rich vein of ore for forging such connections. For students from other backgrounds, often the opposite holds true. They frequently face a choice between dropping out or experiencing higher education as an exercise in alienation. This experience differential bolsters the socioeconomic status quo
by maintaining the educational and material gap between more and less privileged people. For more privileged students, the price of identifying with academic success involves othering those without it. Thus, they alienate themselves from the majority of their fellow citizens, most of whom inhabit significantly less privileged socioeconomic groups and experience less academic success if they attend college at all. Further, in othering less privileged people, the experience of alienation encourages these groups to mirror such exclusive dynamics, prompting them to intensify the divides of differential race and class experiences. People alienated by educational experiences tend to reproduce with their others the exclusivity that prompted their own alienation. When educators fail to confront alienation and to struggle for greater contact with experience, we effectively support the pervasive and crippling socioeconomic, political, and cultural inequities that ground our society. Thus, while Derrida’s work offers crucial insights into language’s role in producing alienation, it is prone, in the milieu of U.S. higher education, to uses that in fact intensify such alienation and, with it, socioeconomic and political inequities.

Yet, Derrida’s work has other possible uses. To evaluate its productive and destructive potential, we must investigate its uses in different ways and contexts. Gayatri Spivak’s use exemplifies both its risks and potential. For instance, Spivak does a Derridian analysis of Marx’s concept of use-value to illustrate the unavoidable dangers of reifying philosophical systems. In her account, totalitarian versions of “systematized Marxism” represent a devastating legacy of Marxist philosophy. She argues that systematized Marxism freezes Marx’s principle of reason—its **darauf ankommen**, its point or approaching moment—into a preordained given. In contrast, she poses the approach of treating this principle as a provisional goal, and a **process**, whose end and means must be constructed as it unfolds. The frozen state fossilizes not only Marxism’s unborn ends but the lives of people caught in its coercive institutionalizing. It effectively devastates both (97). Via Derrida, Spivak shows that proponents hardened Marx’s rationalized social good into institutions that dismissed the affective, visceral dimensions of people’s experiences and perceptions. Stalin’s effort to collectivize Soviet farming by forcing Russian peasants from farms to industrial centers and deporting those who resisted to labor camps is an extreme example of such institutionalizing. Rather than refining Marx’s vision of a just society to rally others, such proponents attempted to impose on those others the blurry phantasm of their envisioned social system. Thus, Spivak claims, the best hope for
an ethical practice is to continually scrutinize any philosophical system and its uses, especially as it constructs an erased experience and an erased other.

By deconstructing Marx’s concept of use-value, Spivak shows how textual marxism’s ideals led many socialist states into totalitarian oppression. Her analysis of how philosophical systems construct and erase others is useful because she links it with world events of great ethical and material significance. In doing so, she illustrates the power of Derridian analyses. Yet her work stops short of bringing this link to fruition. Her linkage implies that such textual analyses blossom only within a broader methodological approach, one that examines how the texts in question are used in specific sociopolitical contexts. Thus, her project’s form suggests that a viable method of cultural analysis must examine how philosophical systems are embodied not only in texts but in particular historical circumstances.

Yet, rather than integrating textual and social analysis, Spivak does extended close readings and only gestures toward larger sociopolitical connections. As a result, her essay’s form suggests that agency lies strictly in the texts rather than in the interface between texts and human actors. Thus Spivak’s use of Derrida moves from the examination of language itself toward exploring how specific language uses promote intensified alienation (or expanded contact). Yet, she stops short of explicitly advocating or enacting this methodological shift. Still, her project’s crucial links to material events suggest that the social effects of philosophical constructions (and erasures) of others play out not in texts but in their uses. In this view, agency emerges in the shifting interactions between texts and the embodied experiences of human actors in social contexts.

Like Derrida’s oeuvre, Spivak’s work produces both an impasse and an opportunity for composition studies. As long as our focus in theorizing rhetoric, the writing process, and writing instruction remains primarily textual, like Spivak, we will only gesture toward the crucial integration of textual and social analyses. To that extent, we truncate our capacity to generate work significant beyond our own disciplinary debates. We reduce our potential to foster social, cultural, and political change. Instead, we might pursue the track opened by Spivak’s gesture and use postmarxism to bring textual analyses into scrutiny of the micro-level social systems of our own classrooms. Thus, we can use Derrida’s work on othering, alienation, and erasure to prompt contact and change in our micro- (and macro-)social systems.
To do so, we must recognize that, as Derrida argues, our representations erase material reality as much as they reveal or correspond with it. Yet, these abstractions intertwine with our experience, which isn’t prior but material and continuous. Thus, they help to shape our bodily and psychic experience, our relations with others and environment. Language and material experience sculpt and pattern one another, generating agency in their connection. Derrida demonstrates how language (or consciousness) erases “pure,” immediate experience and constructs identity through differentiation from others. He highlights a crucial facet of its role in structuring experience, identity, and relations with others.

But consciousness (or awareness) includes more than language. It encompasses the material as well. As the cliché reminds us, the taste of an orange can’t be communicated fully in words, though those of us who’ve eaten oranges know it experientially. Similarly, we can’t communicate fully in language the kinesthetic sensations of playing a violin or downhill skiing. Such experiences form a portion of our consciousness and knowledge that sometimes intersects with language but primarily takes shape in the sensory and kinesthetic dimensions of our material existence. Derrida’s insight about language’s erasures of immediate experience does not leave us trapped in language, isolated from our immediate experience in wholesale alienation, as much poststructuralist theory suggests. Rather, it points us toward the pattern of intersection, the gridwork in which language and material experience interweave. To use Derrida’s work productively, we must find ways to investigate this interweave. I begin this investigation in the next section of this essay. I turn first to physiologist Karl Pribram’s holographic model of the brain and then to Gestalt theory.

Another View: Alienation as Frozen Process
In this section, I draw on Pribram’s work and Gestalt to show how some practices of language use promote a shift from alienation toward expanded perception and contact. I argue that the resulting changes in awareness prompt us to revise our interactional habits and thus our identities. Such changes, I conclude, spring from a generative interplay among practice, theory, and perception.

Inspired by physicist David Bohm’s holographic model of the universe, Pribram proposed holography as a model for the perceptual workings of the human brain. Holograms emerge from a pattern of intersections, the grid created when two laser light beams intersect around an object. Pribram’s work uses this model to offer insight into how
human perception operates, how it shapes our capacities to learn and act, and how we sometimes disrupt it and so produce alienation, or what Pribram calls apraxia. Since its development in the late 1960s and early 1970s, his model has become one of the competing scientific explanations of human consciousness, and it continues to inspire much research in relevant fields, from physiology to psychology to philosophy.

Pribram addresses the physiological aspects of human perception and representation by examining memory. “Re-membering,” he explains, “is a process that depends on transforming a deep structure, a dis-membered representation, which is holonomically organized and thus of a form different from either the experienced memory or the sensory array that originated the process” (Brain and Perception, xxviii). Here, the dis-membered representation is a deep structure that the brain re-assembles into “an experienced ‘memory’” by addressing content at the prompting of internal stimuli or external sensory input (xxvii–i). The brain produces representations that are holograms, projections of reality. It does so by restructuring fragmented images into revisable wholes, thus enacting a kind of différance in which meaning shifts with different recollections of an image (as it does for Derrida in different uses of a word).

This shift is reminiscent of Derrida’s understanding of the trace (the desired but nonexistent, erased origin). Here the representation springs from a desire to recall an external phenomenon, but that phenomenon is erased by the very process of formulating it as a representation. Like language in Derrida’s understanding, underlying structures—here dendritic pathways rather than linguistic patterns—both shape human representations and are themselves partially reshaped in the process of constructing a depiction. Thus, in Pribram’s terms, differentiation (différance) operates not in language but at the intersection among discourse, sensation, and perception. In turn, this intersection generates human consciousness and subjectivity.

In Pribram’s terms, our perceptual apparatus continuously self-replicates and self-modifies. It is a psychophysiological-cognitive form that embodies praxis, as a mutually shaping relation between theory and practice. Pribram defines praxis, in opposition to skill, as the process of “learning what to do” (153). The capacity for praxis is rooted in perception, and loss of proficiency in particular forms of praxis, or apraxia, results from loss of the individual’s ability to perceive or experience parts of the self (for example, an arm) or parts of the external world (149–55). Thus, Pribram concludes that “apraxias result from a failure in ‘centering’ of the corporeal self: an awkwardness more pervasive than the
impairment of skills” (155). Because our psychophysiological perceptual apparatus both self-replicates and self-modifies, Pribram argues that structure and process are actually the same phenomenon viewed at different scales. Like ocean waves viewed from 10,000 feet or from the shore, representations (perceptions) can appear as structured images or as processes that “exert considerable force” and “are seething with activity” (xxviii–xxix). Thus, our perceptions aren’t static images but the ongoing activity of our perceptual processes.

Because praxis depends on perception, these processes shape our possibilities for enacting it. This holds true for both categories of perception: perception itself (sensing externally produced stimuli—another’s touch, for example—and proprioception (sensing internally produced stimuli, such as hunger). Some bodily processes and habits reproduce truncated perception and proprioception. Thus, they intensify alienation—or apraxia.

In apraxia, we reproduce our existing perceptions and social interactions and so block new perceptions and learning. We shrink our capacities to experiment with revising our perceptions and with shifting the dynamics of our individual and collective relationships. Thus through alienation, we reify class and cultural differences into dynamics of systemic exploitation by replicating existing inequities. In short, the holographic gridwork of our perceptual process shapes our contact with self and others, our formation of identity and relationships.

Pribram’s model addresses the physiological and sensory components of alienation and contact. Gestalt theory addresses their sensory and affective components. Based in early twentieth-century experiments with visual perception, Gestalt postulates that humans perceive both material and psychological phenomena in wholes or patterns, rather than in fragmented units. Gestalt theory enables us to investigate how particular language practices contribute to alienation and contact by encouraging specific bodily and perceptual habits, while Pribram’s model effectively grounds Gestalt theories of perception in physiological research.

Together, Pribram’s work and Gestalt offer an alternative to Derrida’s monolithic view of alienation. They provide a way to use language to shift alienation toward expanded contact by reconnecting thought with bodily and emotional awareness. As Gestalt theorist Paul Goodman illustrates, language practices can foster either praxis, contact, and learning or apraxia and alienation. Goodman shows how the process of producing identity and self-other relationships through differentiation knits language use with material experience and bodily habits. He focuses on how
language uses shape individuals and our perceptual capacities. According to Goodman, the self forms largely through particular practices of language use:

From one angle, it is useful to define "personality" as a structure of speech habits. . . . Most thinking is subvocal speaking; basic beliefs are importantly habits of syntax and style; and almost all evaluation that does not spring directly from organic appetites is likely to be a set of rhetorical attitudes. (321)

Here, the practices of language use, its varied forms rather than its content or systemic structure, produce the self, as Goodman suggests by describing "basic beliefs" as "habits of syntax and style" and evaluation as "a set of rhetorical attitudes." This is particularly true given rhetoric's connotations of function and effects. For Goodman, language is one of the media we use to form relations between self and other, self and the social world. It is a medium of the contact that grounds our experience. He holds that this experience forms not in a "pre-verbal" reality that precedes language but through the interaction between an organism—a person, for example—and that organism's environment. It takes shape at the "contact-boundary," the boundary between the organism and its environment. Thus, this boundary constructs the self. Goodman stresses its semipermeability, as a medium that relates organism to environment. Citing the "sensitive skin" as his central example, he argues that the contact-boundary "does not separate the organism and its environment" but "contains and protects it, and at the same time it touches the environment. . . . [It] is not so much a part of the 'organism' as it is essentially the organ of a particular relation of the organism and the environment" (229). Thus, the contact-boundary makes experience possible by mediating interaction between the organism and its environment, between self and others. It brokers the process of differentiation and so shapes the self. As for Derrida, the self is constructed in and through the process of differentiation. Experience, however, isn't a lost condition prior to this contact but precisely the differentiation process, the contact itself.

Goodman locates the contact-boundary at other organs of sensory and motor response, as well as at the skin. Because language use is a communicative motor response that relates self and environment, it acts as part of this boundary. Unlike poststructuralists, Goodman sees language as one component of that boundary. This boundary meshes bodily sensations (physiological responses to internal and external stimuli) with
an abstractive system (language, for example) to produce the grid that forms our experience. By integrating sensation with abstraction, we project our holistic images of the world. Thus, the contact-boundary governs our processes of knowing because it mediates two interfaces: self-environment and sensation-abstraction.7

Goodman argues that the potential for alienation and apraxia emerges at these two interfaces. The capacities to abstract and to sacrifice self-awareness for environment-awareness can truncate perception and proprioception. For instance, as a person abstracts her intellectual position from her emotional stake in a discussion, she may decrease her body awareness. As a result, she might miss how a critical edge in her tone or a defensive facial expression intensifies conflict and decreases the chances for resolution. Conversely, if she cuts off awareness of her own vulnerability, she may lose the capacity to see and respect vulnerabilities increased by race, class, and other factors. Goodman holds that language, as a form of abstraction, can foster such disconnection.

Thus, like Derrida, he sees the birth of language as a moment that sparks the danger of alienation and the search for a lost self-presence. But rather than defining alienation strictly in terms of language, Goodman associates it with tool making and "other acts of abstraction," as well. He describes its effects on perception and proprioception to emphasize the human experience of split consciousness: "There is abstracted from the undifferentiated felt-self a notion, image, behavior, and feeling of the 'self' that reflects the other persons" (313–14). In short we internalize others' perceptions of us, often in conflict with our felt experience and without awareness. Thus, we embody contradictory truths without resolving them. In the process, we focus our attention on external stimuli while truncating awareness of internal stimuli.

Noting that modernity fosters "a chronic low-tension disequilibrium, a continual irk of danger and frustration," Goodman explains that to cope with this irk we routinely enter low-grade emergency functioning by heightening awareness of the abstracted self while truncating awareness of the felt-self:

Both of the emergency functions, deliberate blotting-out [of internal bodily stimuli] and undeliberate hyperactivity are called into play, as follows: . . . the attention is turned away from the proprioceptive demands and the sense of body-as-part-of-the-self is diminished. . . . Toward the more direct environmental threat, on the other hand, the attention is heightened to meet the danger, even when there is no danger. But what is
given by such attentiveness is "alien," it is irrelevant to any felt awareness of oneself, for the proprioceptive has been diminished. . . . If the process is long continued, the state of deliberate alertness to danger becomes rather a state of muscular readiness than of sensory acceptance: a man stares, but does not thereby see any better, indeed soon he sees worse. . . . To sum up, we have here the typical picture of neurosis: underaware proprioception and finally perception, and hypertonus of deliberateness and muscularity. (263–65)

Thus, Goodman depicts alienation as neurosis, as fundamentally linked to language and practices of abstraction, and at the same time as modifications to the human organism's physiological capacities (for instance, of perceiving stimuli from both inside and outside the body). Like Pribram's conception of apraxia, Goodman's version of alienation centers on the loss of perceptual and proprioceptual functions and therefore loss of possible actions in the world. For example, a person who cuts off his body awareness may lose the capacity to perceive both his own and others' needs for support. Such perceptual habits encourage the myth of individualism and social mobility because they erase awareness of our own social supports and our capacity to recognize and honor others' needs for comparable supports. In contrast, praxis, defined both as "learning what to do" and as the process of integrating theory with practice, depends on precisely these perceptual and proprioceptual functions. In apraxia our self-modifying perceptual equipment freezes into inefficiency; it replicates itself and our perceptions, rather than refining and revising them. Thus, alienation produces apraxia: we lose proficiency, first in perceiving difference and second in learning, case by case, how to negotiate with it.

Moving from apraxia to praxis requires an understanding of how our perceptual equipment freezes. As Derrida and Spivak suggest, that dysfunction does result from abstraction. But Goodman offers a productive alternative to their explanation of abstraction. He shows how both apraxias and praxes work through the process of abstraction (for example, through language) to shape individuals' present perceptions and experiences:

> Abstractions draw away from the more sensory and material particularity of the experience . . . . Habits, for instance, techniques or knowledge are other fixed forms: they are assimilations to the more conservative organic structure . . . . Whether healthy or neurotic, the past and every other fixity persists by the present functioning: an abstraction persists when it proves
itself in present speech, a technique when it is practiced. . . . *It is not by inertia but by function that a form persists, and it is not by lapse of time but by lack of function that a form is forgotten.* (292)

Such habits and abstractions form the "self-maintaining structures" of Pribram's holonomic brain model, the structures that continually self-modify in an adaptive process. With Pribram's work, Goodman's theory illuminates how we enact reification in our bodily structures and behaviors and how we can intervene in that enactment. Alienation as Goodman defines it freezes physiological and perceptual structures into rigidity rather than grasping their duality as simultaneously structures and processes. Thus, his definition parallels Spivak's description of how systematic Marxism clots philosophical Marxism's goals. For Goodman, alienation doesn't equal consciousness as such, as it does for Derrida. Rather, alienation is consciousness fixated in the experience of structure, awareness cut off from the ongoing processes that continually (re)generate our perceptions.

In their conception of psychophysiological structures that both self-reproduce and self-modify, Gestalt and the holonomic model offer an alternative to poststructuralist and other philosophical theories of the persistence of form. These holistic systems work with the motoric, cognitive, and affective process of learning what to do in a given concrete situation. To address the persistence and modification of form, they shift focus from textual product to the speaker, hearer, or reader's process. They show that to (re)develop praxis and replace alienation with contact, we must limber our perceptual processes and so revitalize our capacities to "learn what to do." That is, we must redevelop our own bodily and emotional awareness so we can better see how we participate in generating tensions and how we erase others' positions.

Language practices offer a crucial means of softening apraxia into praxis. For instance, they play a crucial role in one approach to encouraging this shift—namely, Gestalt theorist Joseph Zinker's phenomenological listening. Zinker's *In Search of Good Form* defines the phenomenological world as "the experienced world" and explains that each person's psychophysiological process is "a highly personal sensory experience at this moment in time and place" (96). Emphasizing that "*Actuality as it is experienced is a private affair,*" Zinker argues that an other's interpretation of the "real" meaning of one's behavior interferes with such phenomenological experience (96). Instead, he advocates listening phenomenologically, hearing an other's experience in that
person's terms to engage with difference. Rather than accessing an other's unmediated experience in doing so, "we allow this experience of the system to evoke figures, images, and metaphors in ourselves" (34).

Zinker's synthesis integrates proprioception with perception. Their interweave produces the self-environment, sensation-discourse interfaces that form our experience. Like Goodman, Zinker holds that these interfaces shape our perceptual process, which he argues is inherently figurative. Because this process structures our perceptions generally, it also forms our images of others' experiences.

Zinker's use of phenomenology suggests a human perceptual process that projects a consciousness, splits it between proprioception and perception, then refracts these two beams into each other's paths. Thus we grasp an other's experience in the only way we can—through the filter of our own. For Zinker, the question isn't the poststructuralist problem of the impossibility of accessing an erased origin but one of refining our interfaces to produce richer images. In this approach, all representations are explicitly understood as projections. We each produce our own images while providing ourselves and our representations as the objects that inspire others' images. We are always simultaneously perceivers and perceptions. Thus, the problem of ethical relations with self and others becomes one of focusing our perceptual systems' sensory, affective, and intellectual components to refine our pictures. This is an undertaking of praxis that works by synthesizing philosophy with practice.

As a form of praxis, phenomenological listening integrates poststructuralism's fragmentation imagery with Gestalt's holistic figures: the two beams of a fundamentally split consciousness re-integrate in a grid that generates the whole of a new image. Phenomenological listening brings us into direct contact with this grid, which weaves proprioception with perception. It expands our awareness of both the other's self-representation and of our own visceral-intellectual responses to that position. It re-embodies us. Through it, we reconnect with our blocked proprioceptions and perceptions, and so combat alienation. Phenomenological listening encourages change in our psycho-physiological processes of knowing and forms a crucial step in a praxis of constructing ethical relationships. It enables us to see both how we contribute to tensions and how we erase others' positions. By using it, we can reconnect representation with experience.

This reconnection requires us to dissolve apraxia into praxis. Another method for doing so appears in Gestalt theorist Gordon Wheeler's method of developing awareness of our own "structured grounds." This
awareness enables us to examine and revise our existing praxes, apraxias, and perceptual processes. As in phenomenological listening, language practices contribute crucially to Wheeler's approach. Describing structured ground as "the personal subjective past," Wheeler explains that Gestalt sees the past not in causal, Freudian terms but as "a clue, a way to understanding the subjective organization, or organized ground, of [one's] present felt reality" (76). He explains that changes in habits, perceptual processes and other abstractions must emerge from this structured ground. Because it composes our behavioral repertoire as well as our perceptions, this ground shapes what Wheeler calls "the contact that is possible," the interactional modes an individual has learned to use. He argues that our existing modes, or contact styles, offer the primary opportunity for developing awareness of our behavioral and perceptual structures. Given that such awareness grounds change, existing contact styles (habitual criticism or placation, for example) form the soil from which that change grows.

Wheeler shows that integrating new practices into existing structures requires working with people's experienced realities, the kinds of lived experiences Spivak argues were dismissed by systematizing Marxism in its attempts at social transformation:

Therapeutic change flows from going to the contact that is possible . . . the complex interpersonal intervention of joining-and-analyzing that contact process, thereby destructuring it, unblocks the rich and spontaneous possibility of a new and more satisfying creative adjustment, a new organization of self in the field. . . . Gestalt formation means a resolution of figure and ground, in terms of each other. . . . (145–46)

I interpret "therapeutic change" here as the integration of new modes of perception, proprioception, and action into a person's existing structured ground—as learning. Wheeler's process of "joining-and-analyzing" the possible contact and so "destructuring it" sharpens our perceptual and proprioceptual awarenesses. This participatory examination drives any therapeutic change because developing awareness of our perceptual process can ultimately shift that process. Thus, like phenomenological listening, developing awareness of structured ground is a form of praxis that synthesizes philosophy with practice. As such, it can help us to recast our perceptions. Clearly our perceptual habits and the process of changing them involve physical and intellectual capacities beyond language use. Yet, language practices play a central role, not only because they
figure prominently in contact styles but because they contribute substantially to the analytic components of revision strategies like phenomenological listening and developing awareness of our structured grounds.

By helping us to develop awareness of our existing praxes, these revision strategies refine our perceptual apparatuses and so produce sharper, more detailed pictures. In turn, these images enrich our perceptions of the range of actions available to us. Thus, any such new awareness generates experiential shifts. These revisions prompt us to experiment with new contact styles, which in turn entail holistic (though not necessarily comprehensive) shifts in an individual’s prior praxes. Through them, we reknit the strands linking the abstract, imaged self with the felt-self, the proprioceptual experience of oneself. As Goodman explains, such revisions fundamentally change previous processes of perception and contact: “When a new configuration comes into being, both the old achieved habit of the contacting organism and the previous state of what is approached and contacted are destroyed in the interest of the new contact” (232–33). Destructuring the contacted object, creatively mobilizing environmentally available resources to meet a viscerally felt need, revises one’s perceptual structures.

Yet, only experimenting with new contact styles, only experiencing our own power of integration, can spark such holistic reorganizations of awareness. We change by experiencing situations in a new way, and this experience entails both revised perceptions and revised behaviors. Because our changes ripple into our social and material environments, those change as well. For instance, if one person’s experience of racial tensions shifts, her revised perceptions and behaviors elicit some changes, however subtle, in her context. Both the contacting organism and the previous state of what is contacted are changed. Thus, completing the cycle of self-revision requires shifts not only in perceptual processes but in praxes, or contact styles.

Compositionists have developed an understanding of praxis as the continuous, mutually constitutive interplay of practice and theory. This emphasis on praxis positions composition to grasp tools like phenomenological listening and developing awareness of structured ground. Its ability to use such tools and its attention to language practices enable composition to use theoretical and philosophical concepts to circumnavigate the perceived impasse of language in order to ameliorate alienation and expand contact. Change—personal, social, and systemic—emerges from a rhythmic interplay in which perception and praxis revise one another. As part of this interplay, language practices can foster alienation
or contactful awareness. They can sever us from ourselves and others and so promote static experience, or they can help us to reconnect and grow. Composition has the capacity to teach language practices that shift alienated, static experience toward contact and growth. To grasp this potential, we must understand language practices’ dynamics in particular situations, which requires us to examine not only the play within language itself but the interweave between language use and material experience. In the next section, I analyze a series of classroom interactions to examine this interweave and to suggest how we can construct pedagogies that use it to foster change.

**Contacting Difference: Process Thawed**

The first-year writing class described in this paper’s opening vignette comprised a mix of ethnicities. Class intersected with this mix in fairly predictable but significant ways. Of the twenty-four people who stayed in the course, two are first-generation immigrants, one a Vietnamese woman, the other a man from the Balkans; fourteen are at least second-generation Americans, one of East Indian descent, thirteen of European descent. All of these people, except one European American woman, came from either the inner ring of working class suburbs surrounding Detroit or from outer rings that mingle working class and professional residents. The other eight students are African American. All, without exception, lived in the city of Detroit. As the city’s stereotype suggests, Detroit is deeply scarred by urban blight, and the majority of its neighborhoods—with some notable exceptions—are at or near the poverty line.

I’d designed the course to encourage students to explore how language serves as a contact-boundary. In doing so, I was pursuing two pedagogical goals. First, I wanted students to experience both viscerally and intellectually the role of the cultural past in forming their present selves, relationships, and environments. Second, I wanted them to experiment with strategies for negotiating with difference, with fundamentally incommensurable perspectives and life experiences. I see such work as prerequisites to productive intellectual and writerly endeavors, to collective action, and to transformation, whether personal, group or sociocultural. Thus, by describing how we pursued these pedagogical goals, I hope to contribute to a praxis of change.

To help initiate our work toward these goals, we used Mary Louise Pratt’s “Arts of the Contact Zone,” which reads an early seventeenth-century text by the Andean mestizo Guaman Poma as autoethnography, a genre that, she argues, operates in the “contact zone.” To prompt
students' subsequent historical analysis papers, I asked them to use Pratt's essay as a frame for reading another text. Using regional archives of historical documents, archives they'd discovered through previous assignments, students were to find a document that they could read, in Pratt's terms, as autoethnographic. Their interpretations were to be grounded not only in close readings of the document but in their research on the historical and cultural circumstances from which it sprang. While class members chose various issues, six students—four African American and two European American—researched the 1967 riots.

In our work with people's research materials, mini-discussions erupted and catalyzed class energies around a conflict that clearly divided these students, many of whose relatives or older acquaintances had lived through the events. I chose two of the papers that examined the 1967 riots and reproduced them anonymously for class discussion. In doing so, I hoped to foster the second of the two course's two pedagogical goals: to experiment with strategies for recognizing and negotiating with difference, with fundamentally incommensurable perspectives and life experiences.

I asked students to read the two papers in preparation for the next class meeting. One paper was written by an African American woman whose older relatives had lived through the riots. This paper analyzed a news article written from the rioters' perspective as autoethnographic, and it contextualized the document and the riots themselves in the history of police brutality and institutionalized racism that led to the civil unrest. The other paper was written by a Caucasian woman whose grandfather had lost his corner store during the riots and, with it, his capacity to support his wife and five children. The papers took nearly, but not simply, opposing perspectives. Rather than asking students to analyze the papers' construction, I requested they write half-page statements responding to each paper by describing their own perspective on it and what shaped that perspective. Having explained that they'd be asked to read their statements aloud during the following class session, I opened that period by emphasizing that whether students were responding to a reader's statement or to a respondent's position, they were to follow a given format: the plan for the day was to respond by summarizing what the preceding speaker had said until both parties agreed on the definition of the speaker's position. Not agreed on the position itself—just on what that position was.

I was, in short, asking students to practice Zinker's phenomenological listening. I hoped to encourage them to recognize and negotiate with difference, to work at the intersection among discourse, sensation, and
perception, where consciousness and subjectivity take shape. By asking students to listen phenomenologically to one another and to rephrase what they heard until speaker and listener reached agreement, I hoped we might thaw our perceptual processes. Doing so could revitalize our capacities to "learn what to do," to shift the polarized structures of our individual and group relationships. I hoped the process would refine our perceptual apparatuses. If so, we could produce richer, more ethical pictures of the riots, as well as of their effects on our present experiences and on our varied personal and sociocultural grounds.

But this process of summarizing another's perspective until that person agreed the summary was accurate proved to be explosive and very difficult. The problem arose not from any inability to summarize but from tensions like those that spark heated department meetings, professional caucuses, or academic senate gatherings: people perceive out of their own grounds and interests, and mediating the various processes of listening to take in new information, listening to gather fodder for one's response, and formulating that response complicates the built-in subjectivity that already underlies the process of knowing anything.

Still, I hoped students' descriptions of their perspectives on the two papers and the sources of those perspectives would prompt them to develop awareness of, and to articulate, their "structured grounds." This work offered students a chance to experience directly how, per Goodman, their rhetorical and stylistic habits persist in their present functioning, here in developing perspectives on the student papers we discussed and on the events of the 1967 riots.

I started, in Wheeler's terms, from our existing contact, polarization around perceptions of the riots, to try to facilitate all of our integration of new forms of language use, new contact styles. By asking students to rephrase each other's positions to reach speaker-hearer agreement, I tried to initiate "the complex interpersonal intervention of joining-and-analyzing that contact process, thereby deconstructing it." I sought to facilitate the emerging contact by working with its tension rather than risk preempting it in an effort to impose some other contact form (for example, insisting that speakers base their positions outside anecdotal family experiences), a form that could well have made the budding contact inaccessible to my students. As a contact process, our language uses during that class session were sparked by work with assigned texts and activities, yet what made them viable as existing contact was their growth from a present-centered interaction. By beginning the process of deconstructing, of simultaneously working in and analyzing, that contact
process, I hoped to foster "the rich and spontaneous possibility of a new and more satisfying creative adjustment."

The class session helped to catalyze that process, but its work needed more time to unfold. The session’s cognitive, emotional, and social tensions strained everyone involved. It was at the end of this meeting that the woman of East Indian ancestry spoke for her European American and Asian American classmates—and, I believe, only these classmates—to ask me why I’d started a race war in the class.

Of course, it was crucial to me not to leave the students at this juncture. I felt this way for several reasons, but most of all because I believe it’s important to work to genuinely recognize and negotiate with difference, with fundamentally incommensurable perspectives and life experiences. I see such work as an experimental praxis that fosters intellectual and writerly growth. In Gestalt terms, our class system was stuck in conflict over our differences, and we needed to develop awareness of how our own processes generated that stuckness. In Pribram’s terms, we needed to learn what to do, to develop a praxis to productively address our situation.

In our tense class meeting, students had solidified the classroom’s geography much more sharply than usual into a distribution of Asian and European Americans on one side of the room, African Americans on the other. While of course I’d shaped the class session’s procedural structure and facilitated its process, students’ inquiry about why I had turned the class into a race war suggests that they’d cut off awareness of their own active part in creating the dynamic that had emerged. The class’ geography and inquiry suggest restricted proprioception. People’s difficulties in summarizing a speaker’s position to that speaker’s satisfaction imply restricted perception as well. As a class, we were, for the moment, experiencing physiological, visceral alienation. As a result, we (myself included) were operating cognitively unaware of our own embodied, affective roles in producing the structure—the process—in which we found ourselves.

In perceptual terms, we were truncating our awareness and so producing blurry pictures of our interaction and our roles in it. Our experience of alienation sprang from our particular forms of language use, from contact styles in which we cut off awareness, first of our own roles in replicating our structural stuckness, and second of external stimuli such as other class members’ articulated perspectives. Ironically, despite the session’s tautly strung emotions, we seemed to experience ourselves as disembodied minds. By truncating our bodily and perceptual
awarenesses, we diminished our possibilities for producing clear, detai-
tailed images of the situation. Through the unfocused pictures we
generated from this disembodied, perceptually constricted stance, we
created our own systemic alienation. As a result, we shrank our
chances to transform a process that replicated our conflicts without
resolving them.

In Wheeler's terms, such transformation required that we destructure
our existing contact process by enacting and analyzing it. That work
meant examining our varied perceptions, their production, and their
interaction. It required us to clarify and detail our blurry pictures. To do
so, we had to refine the interfaces between our perceptions and proprio-
ceptions. I encouraged this work by devoting the following class session
not to the syllabus' scheduled reading but to an experiment in fostering
awareness of our contact process and in revising it into "a new and more
satisfying creative adjustment."

At my request, the student writers of the two Detroit riot papers we'd
discussed as a group had given me pieces from their source materials. For
class, I duplicated a single page of each person's archival documents and
asked students to work in pairs, insisting that they collaborate with
someone across the room from them, which, in the classroom's currently
frozen geography, meant the relatively high possibility of working with
someone of a different race. I asked each pair to choose one of the two
pages of archival documents I'd duplicated and to do the following
assignment: each person was to write her or his own perspective on the
materials and afterwards read it to the other person; partners then
summarized each other's perspective. This undertaking of course mir-
rored the preceding session's procedural structure of rephrasing a partner's
position until both people agreed that the representation was accurate.

In asking students to do this in-class assignment, I hoped to encourage
their awareness of their processes of listening to and representing an other
person's perspective. Doing this in pairs offered a way to scale down the
intensity of the larger group exchange, to involve each person, including
those who'd withdrawn into silence during the previous discussion, and
to foster students' sense of undertaking this process collaboratively with
a partner, rather than in racially structured sub-groups. Working with an
individual across the room meant that students could begin to develop this
collaborative partnership with a substantially different other.9

I also hoped, through this work, to foster awareness of our embodied
selves. I gambled that walking across the contested space could prompt
people to experience and support themselves through the fear of going
into physically, as well as psychically and intellectually, other territory. To the extent that we could each increase embodied, visceral awareness, we would work against alienation, first by amplifying our proprioception, and second by replacing bodily and emotional constriction with a revised creative adjustment. By again articulating their perspectives to one another and then rephrasing each other's positions, I hoped students might develop awareness of themselves as selves by increasing their awareness of others as others, that they might experience self-other boundaries in the process of differentiating. The experiment was my effort to nurture proprioception of the psycho-physiological sensations of experiencing difference and to do so in a scaled, relatively supported interaction. I hoped that increased proprioception would help students to generate refined perception-proprioception interfaces and, with them, richer pictures of the situation.

I understood at the time that I was asking people to do something difficult. But in retrospect I see far more of the struggle inherent in the psycho-physiological undertaking of walking across the room, of moving through its frozen geography. Looking back, I remember anxiously tapping feet, nervously drumming fingers, some outright refusals, and I know that I was underaware of the impact on my students of what I asked. In short, the structures of alienation are as deeply embedded in my own bodily and habitual processes as in those of my students or of anyone else.

Thawing this fixated experience requires developing awareness to reconnect and retrain our proprioceptual and perceptual capacities. It relies on Wheeler's destructuration of contact styles, the joining-and-analysis that produces aware differentiation. As I recall my class sessions, I realize that my underaware perception of my students' anxieties and proprioception of my own—my alienation—prompted me to move too quickly from that destructuration into action. In the semesters since, I've begun experimenting with efforts to establish ongoing practices that could help the class, as a group, to increase awareness of the psycho-physiological dimensions of our experiential processes, to foster aware differentiation.

But while my push into action occurred early, our work in pairs with differentiation tilled the ground for an experiment with alternative ways of experiencing difference. As students worked with the same partner, who likely held significantly different perspectives on a polarized historical event that seemed to hold visceral significance for nearly every person in the room, I asked them to undertake another collaborative project. With one class session and one homework assignment at their disposal, they
were to devise a class plan—a plan to help one another to incorporate a significantly different perspective into the revisions of their historical analysis papers. After bringing their proposals to groups of six and then to a class vote, they decided on the following plan: Students would work in groups of three or four. Each person would bring for group members copies of one archival document significant to her or his paper but not copies of the paper draft already composed. Group members would have one week to read the archival documents and write perspective statements on those documents. In a subsequent class session, they would explain their perspectives to the writer, who could ask for clarification and elaboration as he or she developed revision ideas.

Thus, my students accomplished a double move. First, they shifted from initially combative responses to each other’s positions into a focus on understanding, though not necessarily agreeing with, one another’s positions. Next, they examined how their own perceptions had been shaped. This double move melted the group’s frozen social geography. I believe my students and I refined our perception-proprioception interfaces, our perceptual processes. To the extent we did so, we amplified our possibilities for acting in the world, for learning what to do on an ongoing basis. In supporting students to devise and enact their own plan for incorporating others’ perspectives substantively into their historical analysis papers, I sought to engage them in experiments with using language to negotiate a collective solution, to develop new praxes. Thus, the assignment offered them the opportunity for a simultaneously visceral and cognitive experience of using the contact medium of language to negotiate ethical self-other relationships in the process of collaboratively designing a plan to address a collective need. I have space only for a brief reading of how this change is enacted in one student’s text.

Tina, the writer whose grandfather lost his corner store in the riots, produced a final paper that works thoughtfully not only to represent the riots but to theorize its own representation. The paper shows a powerful integration of new perceptual and proprioceptual moves, new habits of language use, and new habits of contact:

I have witnessed many different opinions of the damages that the riots had on the city of Detroit. In addition, I have witnessed many different philosophies of who should take blame for the riots. I think that these different beliefs are caused by an individual’s prior experiences and learning. . . . That is why I view the riots differently than some of my classmates might. For some, the riots may have been the start of a new life.
One of my classmates asserted that maybe rioters figured that new things would be built if they rioted, thus a new beginning (Latham). In this case, the riots would be viewed as positive. For others, like my family and me, the riots may have been the destruction of home, income, and stability. In that case, they would definitely not be viewed as positive. . . . Mary Louise Pratt introduced me to something called the contact zone. . . . It seemed to me that one day in class, our classroom itself was a contact zone. I learned a lot from my classmates that day. I learned about “their side” of the story. At first, I thought that the particular class discussion was a crazy idea, but now I realize that it helped me to understand things that, until then, I was unable to understand. . . . I was brought up believing that black people ruined the city of Detroit, “that the riots destroyed my family’s roots” ([cites her own earlier paper], 4). It is for that reason that I have a certain opinion about the riots. This opinion is rooted in my upbringing, and from now on, I will consider other people’s perspectives when trying to decipher anything. The reason that I wrote this paper was to make other people aware of the forgotten side of the store owners, but also to learn a little bit more about the whole situation in itself. This paper taught me a lot of things about myself that I never before realized. Although I am more open minded now, I still cannot forget the tragedy that shattered the lives of my family. I will always be fascinated with the Detroit Riots of 1967, and I will never forget the effects it had on me, past and present.

These passages from Tina’s paper demonstrate a fundamental shift in her picture of this historical event. While they might be read as a student’s presentation of what she believes the teacher wants to hear, the fact that Tina retains and validates her own perspective suggests instead that she is considering alternative perspectives in relation to her own. Further, the fact that I used the contact zone as a metaphor for texts but never for our class discussions highlights Tina’s role in defining her experience. That is, she applied the metaphor to those class discussions to elaborate her understanding of the process of coming into contact with others’ perspectives.

These passages also indicate changes in her perceptual process itself. In particular, she has amplified her awareness of her own structured ground and so expanded her proprioception. She’s deepened her awareness and extended her understanding of the visceral, intellectual force of the cultural past in shaping her present world and her present experience. At the same time, she’s expanded her awareness of others’ perceptions and their different perceptual grounds. Thus, her image of the riots is richer whether or not she explicitly redefines her position on why they
occurred. Because she has destructured new material—integrated it rather than swallowing or rejecting it wholesale—Tina has accomplished Goodman's reorganization of experience. As a result, she's transformed not only her specific perceptions of the riots and related material but her perceptual and representational habits themselves. She's produced a refined perception-proprioception interface that generates not only a new picture but a revision of the perceptual process.

This destructuration involves a complex process. In it, one contacts an other's perspective, understanding it phenomenologically---in the other's terms. Yet, at the same time, one validates and explores one's own intellectual and affective investments, one's visceral responses. Tina succeeds in this endeavor because she's developed the psycho-physiological perceptual skills to take in different, conflicting perspectives, to process the difference rather than tensing defensively and constricting awareness or assimilation of it. Her success diminishes alienation and enhances the experience of flowing perception and proprioception. Through it, she has accomplished the complex visceral-intellectual undertaking of grappling substantively with difference rather than rejecting a conflicting perspective or swallowing it wholesale. With that success, Tina has taught herself how to think through the sociopolitical effects of representations (her own and others') and to negotiate among the positions they embody. In the same move, she's shifted her relations not only with herself and her colleagues but with me as instructor and with the educational institution. This is so because she's actively participated in directing her own processes of learning and self-transformation, rather than taking the detached, alienated student role described in much composition research.10 Thus, Tina's experiment with new habits of contact through language has enabled her to devise a successful ad hoc means of recognizing and negotiating with difference, with fundamentally incommensurable perspectives and life experiences.

Growing Contact
Tina developed new praxes for negotiating with difference by softening her own experience from (partial) alienation into expanded contact. By refining her perception-proprioception interface, she increased awareness of her sensory and affective experience and of her own structured ground. Tina melted the frozen sameness of an alienated segment of consciousness into the flow of perception and proprioception. Her work evokes a holistically embodied experience of awareness that is simulta-
neously visceral and intellectual. This experience shifts subjectivity and ideology simultaneously. It yokes philosophical systems’ abstractions with perception and proprioception to increase the flow of contact in consciousness. In place of decontextualized ideals’ rigid grip, we feel the undulating current of experience. Our challenge is to root ethical and practical goals in this stream, to rhythmically remake means and ends according to our felt needs and resources.

The paradox of grounding anything in a flowing source is at the root of ethics. Ethics entails praxis, the integration of philosophy with practice. Praxis is also at the heart of writing, writing instruction, and the negotiation of fundamental differences. In praxes, projected goals remain provisional, their achievement a process whose ends and means are fundamentally prestructured and fundamentally in flux, self-revising. Ethical praxis grows from contact, which swirls the currents of our material perceptual processes into our abstract ideals. Through it, our abstractions flow into quickening streams.

An embodied approach to the relations between sensation and abstraction, self and environment—self and other—can help us, as teachers and theorists, to use conceptual systems to grow viable praxes. Both phenomenological and poststructuralist theories stress the impossibility of knowing an other’s experience, emphasizing that the problem of negotiating with others is fundamentally a problem of projections. By taking an embodied approach to that negotiation, composition teachers and theorists can work with the projective nature of knowing to refine the perception-proprioception interfaces through which we project our images of reality and others. We can engage with students in this negotiation to foster mutually transformative interactions.

Most importantly, we can work to expand our own awareness, specifically our contact with students’ experiences in (and of) our classrooms. By doing so, we can better understand our classroom dynamics in systemic terms. As we recognize disjunctures between our theory and our practices, we gain greater insight into our own roles in classroom systems. This insight in turn increases our potential to modify our roles and thus to better negotiate differences with our students. Altering instructor roles promotes changes in classroom systems because changed language use practices invite different responses—for example, a position that invalidates an interlocutor’s experience invites defensiveness or withdrawal, while acknowledgment of that experience invites the relief of being heard and the willingness to consider other views. My failure to recognize the difficulty of what I asked and my students’ anxieties no
doubt prompted students to respond with some resistance. By acknowledging their anxieties and finding a way to ameliorate them, I could well have encouraged more students to bring their destructurations productively into their final papers. Thus, in shifting our language use practices, we can shift our classroom systems’ dynamics as well. Such changes can allow us to model practices like phenomenological listening for students, as well as to offer them the opportunity to experience more effective negotiation of differences and the revised, more reciprocal dynamics that result from such practices.

We can’t guarantee that students will take these practices with them into their interactions in systems beyond our classrooms. But we can model the kind of change each of us has most potential to make—namely, self-revision. By demonstrating such change and by inviting students to experience the benefits of our expanded contact with their experiences (and our greater respect for their differences), we can most effectively invite them to take up such practices themselves. When they do so, the resulting changes at the individual and microsocial levels ripple into wider social fields. Through these changes, our ideals intersect with our material experiences and so shift alienation toward a flowing experience that fosters more ethical contact with ourselves and others.

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Notes

1. My sincere thanks to Jonathan Arac, Ellen Barton, Jean Ferguson Carr, Dennis Gorzelsky, Richard Marback, Tom Morton, Frances Ranney, Ruth Ray, Jason Sapan, Gordon Wheeler, Lynn Worsham, JAC’s anonymous readers, and especially to Pamela Batzel. Their responses to this paper helped me to define what I was trying to say.

2. These definitions are based in my understanding of Gestalt theorists’ work and are unfolded in greater detail throughout this article. In using them, I don’t mean to suggest that unmediated contact is possible, nor that alienation can be entirely transcended. Rather, I argue that we can ameliorate alienation and expand our range of contact. Ethics, as I understand it, is rooted in such work. This position is analogous to Gestalt theorist Gordon Wheeler’s argument that resistances to contact are in fact “contact-functions.” For Wheeler, the goal of working with resistances isn’t to eradicate them (which is impossible) but rather to balance polarities and to expand contact in order to optimize individuals’ and groups’ abilities to function effectively and, by implication, ethically. (See Wheeler 110–32).
3. On page xv of *Brain and Perception*, Pribram cites the following texts on "the holographic hypothesis of brain function in perception as developed in my laboratory": Barrett's "Cerebral Cortex"; "Vibrating Strings"; "Uncertainty Relations"; "Structural Information;" and "Sensory Systems"; Pribram's own "Dimensions of Remembering," *Languages of the Brain*, "Localization and Distribution"; and Pribram, Nuwer, and Baron. Citations of Bohm's work in *Brain and Perception* include two of Bohm's own works ("Mind and Matter" and "Quantum Theory"), as well as Bohm and Hiley; and Bohm, Hiley, and Stuart.

4. Goodman's works encompassed "psychotherapy, community planning, linguistics, literary theory, philosophy, sociology, politics, education, media criticism, as well as poems, plays, and fiction" (Stoehr 2). A few of his best-known works include *Growing Up Absurd*, *The Empire City*, and *Making Do* (see Wheeler, 67–68).

5. Gordon Wheeler refers to Goodman as the primary author of Volume II (see Wheeler 67). As I cite only the second volume of *Gestalt Therapy* here, I refer to the text as Goodman's work. In his 1994 introduction, Stoehr describes this book as "still the primary text of the new synthesis in psychotherapy that has become an international movement" (1–2).

6. Emphasis is in original texts unless otherwise noted.

7. In "Writing Bodies," Kristie Fleckenstein describes those interfaces with the term "somatic mind." Like Marion Joan Francoz and Richard E. Miller, she calls for compositionists to theorize these intersections.

8. This approach emerged from two sources. The first is a *Ways of Reading* prompt that asks students to read parts of Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* through the lens of Pratt’s analysis of Guaman Poma (Bartholomae and Petrosky). For the most recent version of the original assignment, see Sequence Two, "The Arts of the Contact Zone," Assignment 3, "Autoethnography," 799–800. The second is an assignment sequence developed at the University of Pittsburgh by Jean Ferguson Carr. The sequence, "Rereading the Lives of Ourselves and Others," was used in 1995 as the English Department’s staff training sequence for new Teaching Assistants and Fellows. In it, students collected archival materials in relation to both Patricia Limerick's "Empire of Innocence" and Pratt’s essay. For a fuller description, see Carr’s interview.

9. Given the ratio of eight African-American students to sixteen European- or Asian-American students, this process inevitably produced pairs without an African-American participant, and that composition of course affected the kinds of exchanges—and the kinds of perceptual shifts—available to students. The classroom’s imbalance and its effects reflect a statistically milder version of this problem in American society as a whole.

10. See, for instance, Spellemeyer’s and Brodkey’s texts.
Works Cited


