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Facing the Center

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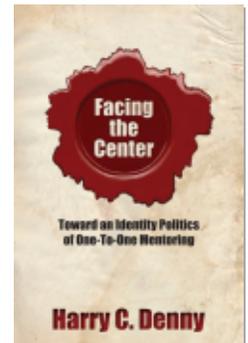
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FACING NATIONALITY IN THE WRITING CENTER

Scene 1: An older undergraduate who says she's from the Caribbean sits down for a conference. She wants to work on proofreading her draft because she's worried about her "broken English." As the student hands her paper to the tutor, she in turn resists taking it. The consultant then talks to her about the writing center's policy against editing and suggests they read the paper aloud together and to stop when the student has usage questions. As the student reads the paper aloud, the tutor hears errors with prepositions, verb forms, and idiomatic expressions. The student doesn't stop because they appear to sound "right" to her. The tutor knows these errors are wrong, but doesn't know why; she just knows they sound "wrong."

Each of the earlier chapters in this book examined forms of identity that are central to who we are, considered their histories and politics and connected them to the context of work in writing centers. A continuum that runs across these identity formations is their mutability, the degree to which identities can be reducible or made invisible to the majority. By and large, race and sex are legible faces, and most people don't seek to convert or hide them. Instead, those identity markers come to signify as collective identities around which powerful symbolic and cultural capital has risen. Class and sexuality also index central axes for community identity, yet their expressions, historically, possess different social and cultural viability and stigma. People of color and women don't face pressure to become white or men, for the most part; instead, they contend with social and cultural pressures, institutions, and structures that inevitably privilege dominant identities, forcing those on the margins to develop assimilationist or separatist strategies in relation to the center. Working-class people and sexual minorities face a different environment, one that takes as its goal forced movement from margin to center. Setting aside the pressure to become middle class or heterosexual, these identity formations also share with others the question of whether to pass, oppose or subvert the mainstream. In writing centers,

the subjects of each of these chapters are quite common, even if the research on them is in its infancy. Just as frequent in our professional conversations, is the issue of how we contend with writers whose first language is not English. These people represent a struggle over identity that intersects with what is an ongoing challenge to American identity. For the woman in the scenario above, what motivates her desire to write without accented language, even though I suspect she takes pride in her spoken version? What does it mean for a tutor to refuse the sort of editing that she seeks? How might championing the student's right to her own language—telling her what's right for her—be just as problematic as policing authentic language acquisition? Is it possible for a tutor not to go far enough in a session, just like it might be a problem to go too far, to take over?

This book attempts to make historical, ongoing identity movements in the U.S. local to writing centers, their scholarship and practices. Race and sex have the longest organized and sustained struggle for equality with genealogies extending to the nation's colonial origins, while mobilization around class is a close third dovetailing with the country's ongoing historic transformations of political economy.¹⁷ Each of these movements has had powerful moments of success—the end of slavery, women's suffrage, the rise of unions—but still has long roads to traverse for pay equity, living wages, and the end of systemic discrimination, among other agenda items. Sexual minorities have our own lengthy history with organizing, working for social justice and facing daunting setbacks. Composition teachers and professors in the disciplines often make students explore these identities as a means to foster self-awareness and agency as writers and to cultivate knowledge of the routines of social processes in everyday lives, fostering critical thinking and honing cognitive abilities. But as Omi and Winant (1986) point out, our national identity is a culmination and paradox of ethnicities melting into one another and producing a hybridity that confounds the mainstream: Our diversity exceeds any possibility for cohesiveness, yet our nation aspires for a common bond that's ever illusory. Our history and collective sense of self has a conflicted relationship with immigration, whether forced or voluntary, and other identities that claim citi-

17. From the mid-nineteenth century on, the United States economy moved from an agrarian, subsistence economy to industrialization and on toward a post-Fordism, where capital has become thoroughly global, producing transnational corporations whose products, jobs and loyalties transcend local needs and national borders or security (Jameson 1991).

zenship. We take great pride in professing metaphors that allude to our diversity (we are a quilt, a mosaic, a melting pot, etc.) and have folklore replete with rags-to-riches stories that confirm the American Dream and the power of meritocracy. At the same time, Americans have a deep reputation of antipathy toward immigrants or international visitors, often edging toward outright racist, ethnocentric and isolationist practices and policies (as the “blame the immigrants” mentality illustrated in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks or recurrent economic crises and reactions to them).

Often those attitudes get projected onto language use, with tensions roiling over whether to impose English as an official language, despite its widespread linguistic dominance, albeit with a wide range of vernaculars each with their own politics and internal conflict. In the U.S., then, a specialized identity politics exists at the intersection of nationality and language use. As Paul Kei Matsuda charts, it overlaps with the 1970s democratization of higher education when non-native speakers of English joined other formerly excluded groups defined by class, race, and ethnicity (2006, 22). For this chapter, I take as its subject the role that second language writers play in the everyday work of writing centers. While our literature and professional conversations brim with talk of sharing recipes or prescriptions to attend to them, I’ve always been struck by the Othering, either explicit or lurking just under the surface. *They* are a problem that requires solving, an irritant and frustration that resists resolution. Of course, this quest for the quick fix or a magic pill isn’t restricted to second language (L2) writers because the rhetoric of marginalization is remarkably common: What do we do with black English? How do we handle “under-prepared” students? Why do *they* have to flaunt it? Although so many of us practitioners endlessly lecture faculty and first language (L1) students alike about writing as a process that’s individual, iterative, and recursive, we lapse in our deep thinking when Others represent challenges to our comfort with established routines. Instead of embracing what Beth Bouquet (2002) might call a pedagogy of improvisation, riffing off a client’s needs and strengths, we recoil, anxious that we might fail, say something wrong, or coach someone in a problematic direction.

Just as often, we witness offensive comments scrawled on student papers or spoken in meetings, noxious sentiments whose public performance wouldn’t be tolerated today in relation to other groups of people. Such slurs, I’m sure, continue unabated away from the “safe”

contact zone of campus, but L2 writers often are the objects of public discourse not ordinarily fitting the polite decorum that passes for common talk in the academy. I remember a senior faculty member at one of my former institutions who would complain endlessly in faculty meetings about students in her basic writing courses, referring to the “Orientals” as “illiterate.” Another faculty member would write in big red print at the top of L2 students’ papers, “This is terrible!” or, “You’re stupid!” and always punctuate his offended sensibility with, “Go to the writing center and fix your paper!” In both cases, I’m pretty sure both instructors viewed what they did as “tough love,” pushing students toward assimilating into a culture, without regard to their connections to it or the individual histories they brought to gaining a L1 education with a L2 background. These examples are outrageous versions of more polite marginalization of L2 writers that goes on every day in writing centers, granted in more veiled and subtle expressions, but no less loaded with a charged set of assumptions. Tutors and faculty alike will often demurely say, “Well, you know, she’s ESL.” Just as frequently, colleagues who otherwise seem to have sophisticated understanding of L1 learning styles, needs, and practices, morph into figures who plead an inability to respond or attend to L2 learners. They ask, “Isn’t there an ESL specialist that we can hand this student off to?” or “Doesn’t this school have an intensive English language program?” While I honor the field of TESOL and the specialists whose research and techniques have much to teach writing center professionals, I remain committed to a mission where we don’t offload work when we in writing centers and composition classrooms can equip ourselves to ask deep questions, conduct our surveys of literature, and develop local practices, just as we ask clients to collaborate with consultants in being active participants in their own learning.

When I return to the woman mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the issue of accent seems the richest for conversation with both her and her tutor. For the woman, I’d want to explore her use of “broken English,” a term that I’d find offensive if it were uttered by my staff, but a concept that I’ve heard people from any number of Caribbean countries use to describe their hybrid languages. Some have referred to them as patois or Creole combinations of French, Spanish, English, and remnants of African languages. For her, I suspect “broken” is a code for recognizing the linguistic difference between her language use and the privileged version for her classes and more broadly

dominant society. Turning to my tutor's response, I understand her hesitance to take on surface error, especially when higher-order concerns or global errors that impact on meaning are wise priorities to address. However, the strategy leaves me wondering what problems lurk in trying to eliminate a writer's accent: What obligations do we have to educate students in the politics of their language use? Is it appropriate or fair to enable a student's false sense of correctness or ability, even with the best of intentions?

The dynamic lead me to remember two of the most powerful keynote speeches I've heard in my career. The first is a talk Paul Matsuda (2004) gave at a Northeast Writing Centers Association conference where he shared his own story about coming to learn English as a multilingual speaker and writer. Matsuda left the audience with a powerful message: He encouraged us to think deeply about our tolerance for accented language and what that means for our willingness to work to understand one another. Nancy Grimm (2006) has echoed this sentiment in a speech she gave at the University of Illinois's National Conference on Writing Centers as Public Space. Like Matsuda, she spoke to the spaces where people refuse to get past accents and the domains where listeners have an obligation to hear. Her point was elegant: Those moments of resistance speak less about the L2 interlocutor and more about our own identity politics and what it signifies about us. In effect, it signals a symbiotic performance, a performance to speak or write, and one to hear and read. Our refusals translate into silencing, a mechanism to shutdown individuals and communities and to marginalize them; our willingness to be open testifies to genuine dialogue, to hearing and making space for the Other at the center.

Each group must contend with face, but the stakes are differential. While Severino (2004, 2006), M. Harris (1994), and M. Harris and Silva (1993) have written about the significant differences between ESL and native-speaking writing center students, only Grimm (1999) and Bawarshi and Pelkowski (2003) have moved toward consideration of the intense politics at play in teaching and learning culturally laden rhetorical and linguistic conventions in conferences. Frequently, interaction is predicated on banking American English codes and practices, implying that they are static and non-responsive to negotiating use (and presumably that Americans are incapable of hearing accent or dialect). Canagarajah (2006a), Matsuda (2006) and others have fostered awareness of the need to embrace concepts of multiliteracy and

cultural bumping as means to make way for transactional learning, but little of this debate has extended beyond TESOL or composition studies to writing centers. Rather, similar to their own historical positioning in institutions, writing centers have reacted to the presence of the ESL writers as “problems” to “fix.” I want this chapter to push that discussion by addressing the identity politics at play when sessions address the needs of L2 consultants and students.

To better understand the deeper issues at play in the identity politics of nationality, particularly in the context of writing centers, this chapter next turns toward a common grounding in theoretical issues that circulate around the concept. It will argue that to know nationality is to appreciate the interplay of imagined communities (writ large as nations) and the discursive practices and consequences of citizenship. How people come to an American national identity as well as the socio-cultural ideology parroted through widely circulated discourses represent the tensions at the heart of a national history marked with tremendous jingoism, xenophobia, and a celebration of immigrant meritocratic drive and success. Just as race, class, gender, and sexuality are among the most powerful means of cleaving citizenry in the U.S., the use of language and how we signify is central to circulating, enforcing, and performing difference. Language itself in the U.S. is a common bond that unifies everyone (otherwise inclined to be divided against one another) against common protagonist, one whose dominant (or perceived dominant) language isn't an illusory common code of English around which Americans often rally to exclude. The object of this odd coalescing is the multilingual speaker and writer. From this foundation, the section then reviews critical insights from multilingual scholarship on important distinctions between experiences and language learning motivations of international students and permanent residents. The section closes by visiting the charge of critical multilingualists that teachers and tutors must critically examine the global function of English, the degree of tolerance for its regional dialects, and the pedagogical, socio-cultural, and psychological implications of teaching “standard” English to the exclusion of its dialects or other linguistic traditions.

THEORIZING NATIONALITY AND THE WRITING CENTER

Benedict Anderson (1991) says nationality has to be understood in relation to cultural practices that produce meanings, enabling citizens to

imagine themselves as insiders, but just as important, to signify others as outsiders. That work takes place through a shared literacy and language that creates a common meaning and an assumed understanding. An imagined community, according to Anderson, is a national identity. It no longer is just a group of people within a common border; instead, an imagined community is a shared way of knowing, doing, and being, the participation in which (or the exclusion from which) has real consequences over whether the majority confers or refuses citizenship. Because the population of the U.S. has historically been in flux (ebbs and tides of immigration) the nexus of geography and culture have never been stable enough to serve as foundations for a national collective identity. On the other hand, we've never taken on the diasporatic identity around which communities in Africa, Asia and Europe have loosely organized. Citizens with histories greater than a couple generations (at significant distance from our immigrant, slave or colonized pasts) are much more likely to identify in terms of regions, states, even cities. As a result, myths and language work together as shared bonds for national identity. Patton and Caserio wrote in a special 2000 issue of *Cultural Studies* on citizenship that the American form of it has gotten confused about its role in national identity. It has gone off course, they believe, as a consequence of identity movements, the ones that this book explores, pressing social equality (or citizenship rights) for communities or classes of people (blacks, women, gays), without also simultaneously connecting expansion of equality with demands for social justice. Today then, we have achieved a wide sense of equality without any commonwealth to bind us together for mutual support. Nancy Fraser (1997), who they cite, believes that without attention to the unequal distribution of wealth and privilege, identity politics becomes rudderless and citizenship purposeless. In that vacuum, a competing version of citizenship exists, one with concern for the Other; This version has appeared frequently in our national history proffering citizenship by exclusion: a sense of collective identity predicated, in the first instance, on who we're *not*, and in the second instance, on a more expansive notion of who we'll *allow*. Patton and Caserio suggest Americans have long-held contradictions for how we contend with immigrants who seek to become one of us, if even on a transitory basis. We celebrate the immigrant who embraces capitalism and meritocracy, yet we're contemptuous of the immigrant who fails or becomes critical, even suspicious, of our cultural myths (2000, 6). We embrace the success stories,

and vilify the failures. We love the visitors who consume and spend money, but despise those who seem to poach finite resources to which our own citizens lack access.

Our paradoxical attitudes toward outsiders, toward Others, lurk at the heart of tensions over how we respond to people who don't speak or write in English, the enigmatic linguistic code that binds the majority together in this country. Our ambivalence veils our nationalism and unresolved politics and policy about how we perform and rally around it. But more than how English or which English or if English binds Americans together, the conflict we have over it is as much about policing our national identity as it is about performing jingoistic attitudes thinly tied to nativism and racial/ethnic bias. Ilona Leki writes, "Socio-political factors influence not only students' reasons for coming [to the U.S.] but also their attitudes and experiences once they arrive" (1992, 40). She notes that western European students are often warmly received, whereas African students confront the widespread racism that native-born African Americans experience in everyday life. Asian students, while embraced by institutions, Leki comments, face resentment from American students for their work habits and access to resources that their reputations warrant. Her insight here confirms the racially-tinged global attitudes of Americans. For students from historically colonized countries, we fall back on our national history of supremacy and conflict as those places struggle with economic development or represent levels of industrial and corporate modernization, innovation, and collective wealth that we now struggle to match, let alone maintain. Yet just as curious, Americans don't react to students from European countries with the same threat and jealousy reserved for other regions of the world. Europeans, as such, represent a nostalgia and romanticization over which Americans of European descent like to fawn, even if we're suspicious of what we project as their cosmopolitanism and moral relativism. L2 use of English—and Americans' tolerance of it—shifts depending on the subject and her or his perceived country of origin. More directly, face matters in this context. French or Italian-accented English signifies as urbane, while pan-Asian or –African accents are viewed as odious, annoying inflections that must be stamped out. My former colleague who derided "the Orientals" and their illiteracy had, oddly enough, infinite patience for continental tongues.

Conventional L2 scholarship makes highly qualified, but tremendously important distinctions between international and

permanent-resident/immigrant L2 students. International students, Leki (1992) reports, come to the U.S. to further their education and expect (not always) to return to home countries once finished. The ones who stay typically come from less privileged economic backgrounds and families and eventually join the ranks of permanent residents, documented or not. International students bring with them, like permanent residents, wide-ranging cultural differences that make integrating with American students difficult, if not untenable. Some, Leki points out, view our culture as permissive and chaotic, and others see us as terribly provincial, with values and rituals entirely too restrictive and uptight. Joy Reid (2006) argues that international L2 writers are principally “eye” learners of language and are the products of language pedagogy that places a premium on rule-based grammar knowledge and reading in first and additional languages. She adds, “Usually. . . their listening and oral skills are hampered by lack of experience, nonnative English-speaking teachers, and the culture shock that comes from being immersed in a foreign culture, the language of which sounds like so much ‘noise,’ so different from their studied English language” (78). Typically, errors in writing reflect the cultural specificity of American English, from usage to idioms, as well as the interference or translation of students’ L1 on their L2 writing contexts.

Permanent-resident L2 writers, students who come to the U.S. as economic or political refugees or as conventional immigrants, often have oral fluency in their L1 but have wide-ranging schooling in it that impacts on their ability to compose L1 discourse (Leki 1992, 77). Even when students struggle with writing, Leki notes, many have facility with spoken English (granted accented or done in cadences uncommon to native speakers), particularly when they are from countries where it is the language of commerce or an official language (43). Unlike international students, permanent residents seek to identify with or participate in American culture and resist tracking that separates them from their native-English speaking peers, even if away from classrooms or school they revert to their L1 environments. These “ear” language learners, Reid says, acquire English through proximity as well as trial and error (2006, 77). She adds that these students often have some level of secondary education, if not intensive ESL tutoring, that leads to greater cultural literacy, despite frequent L2 and L1 reading deficiencies that have a symbiotic relationship to writing problems. Permanent residents tend to display errors with grammar, vocabulary and idioms (cultural

expressions as I would name them). It's notable that permanent-resident and international students don't produce radically different sorts of errors in their writing and that the focus is on surface (not invention or rhetorical) errors and differences. Further, leading linguistic writers also appear to suggest that the permanent-resident L2 writers share with class- and racially-marginalized students differential access to educational capital and resources that put a drag on their wider learning and achievement.

Reid makes a passing reference to the relationship between individual, community and society that is a powerful insight. Besides variance in family attitudes toward education and sorts of pedagogy students experience, Reid also points out students may reflect cultural difference that, "values reflective thought or cooperation above the analysis and competition valued in many U.S. classrooms" (2006, 80). What I like here is that she points out that even before we get to writing, before we get to its products, L2 students possess historical and cultural capital substantively different than our own. Our assumptions about how to perform in a classroom are culturally specific and reflect our eyes, our ways of imaging the classroom. It's another instance, as I mention in the chapter on race, where we can import and map onto our students terribly colonizing ideas about knowing. We risk implanting on students Americanist or Western sensibilities about teaching and learning, about the primacy of individual over communities, when just as often the epistemologies that they bring to bear have promised to transform our epistemologies, to enable us to reimagine the familiar through the eyes of another. I fear in our rush to monolingualist hegemony in our English classrooms or writing centers, we don't allow spaces to understand how the logic and everyday use of the language—of Englishes—by visitors, citizens, and immigrants, can create opportunities to expand possibilities for our own epistemology and expression, rather than coerce slavish adoption that lacks dialogue and problem-posing.

It's this unilateralism in our approach to English and mentoring/teaching it that I hear frustrating critics like Suresh Canagarajah (2006b) and Alastair Pennycook. Canagarajah advocates what he calls hybridity, an embrace of the dawning reality of multilingualism, understanding that no linguistic culture in these days of global media and consumption culture goes untouched by English, nor does English escape their influences on it, albeit more subtle (2006b, 216). He wouldn't assert that difference doesn't exist; what he pushes for is

awareness of the implications of how it signifies and in what ways linguistic difference is used to reify privilege and marginalization, to, in effect, shore up center and margin. Canagarajah would oppose moves to any approach to L2 teaching where standard English is understood as a normative and students' own forms of expression were somehow pathological. He would instead support working from where students' own linguistic experiences rest, deeply understanding the choices they make in their literacy, and then pivoting that insight for use with other discourses and their rhetorical contexts. Pennycook (2007) shares that mindset and fosters awareness of the ascendancy of what he terms "global Englishes," the inevitable geopolitical power of the English language, but also calls attentions to its potential for appropriation and resistance. As he writes:

[Global Englishes] suggests that we need to move beyond arguments about homogeneity or heterogeneity, or imperialism and nation states, and instead focus on translocal and transcultural flows. English is a translocal language, a language of fluidity and fixity that moves across, while becoming embedded in, the materiality of localities and social relations. English is bound up with transcultural flows, a language of imagined communities and refashioning identities. (5-6)

Pennycook's use of cultural flows references what he understands as "cultural forms" moving between cultures and being used for local purposes to put voice to resistance (6). To him, the most powerful expression of that challenge is the wide-spread global appropriation of Hip Hop music and language as a cross-cultural genre of empowerment and protest, a form that itself is still seen in many quarters in the U.S. as subversive and threatening to dominant/mainstream culture (even as members of the dominant culture are among its chief consumers). In his use of "imagined communities," Pennycook brings this discussion full circle suggesting our language makes possible our collective identities. In fact, I'm not so sure we can imagine communities outside of the language over and through which we contest our identities.

Language, as this section has explored, makes possible our shared understanding of communities (even nationalities bound by linguistic traditions that transcend geographic boundaries), but it's also the means through which our practices cleave out who's included, left out, and the symbolic import of all that discursive haggling. In the next two sections, I take a closer look at how multilingual writers are pressured

in writing centers and wider learning contexts to paper over their linguistic differences and to develop, practice, and perform in dominant codes of English expression. The drive to “fit-in” and write in a “standard” code of English that’s constantly evolving and arbitrary is completely understandable. Multilingual writers face real material consequences for failing to gain facility with the dominant code—lowered grades, diminished access to graduate programs, barriers to employment. While understanding the importance and utility of accommodating the mainstream, I also advocate an awareness of resistant or subversive relationships to multilingual identity that writing center practitioners and others can offer to learners.

ERASING AND MUTING NATIONAL IDENTITIES IN THE WRITING CENTERS

The myth of the melting pot holds powerful sway in American culture. We imagine ourselves as a collective, yet the referents for what binds us are illusive, symbolic, and transitory. The protocol for becoming American or *Americanizing* oneself, then, is a moving target slipping just beyond reach, or a bar always rising (or falling). For permanent-resident or international multilingual writers, Kenji Yoshino’s (2007) concepts of identity politics are especially germane. To convert their identities of origin would mean to surrender or become Americans, to somehow jettison what’s intrinsic to their being. I don’t know that that sort of change is possible since most multilingual writers possess identities tied to their race or ethnicity. American identity, by contrast, operates from an imagined community thoroughly symbolic and completely detached from a shared core ethnicity. As an amalgam or hybrid identity, native-born Americans are, ironically enough, in more of a position to attempt to convert who we are, than anyone trying to become one of us. Instead, multilingual writers face huge pressure to pass (maintaining a private acceptance of “original” identity, but rendering it invisible to the majority) or to cover (keeping remnants of “original” identity, but making performance of it non-threatening or acceptable to the majority). Permanent-resident and international students often seek to pass, wanting a public face that makes them generally indistinguishable from mainstream American college students. Eric Liu (1999) argues that marginalized people seek to overcompensate for their difference by out-performing the majority. The “model minority,” he says, doesn’t just try to be the ideal student through academic performance,

the over-achiever; this student often tries to out-American American students. To cover, then, becomes a less intensive standpoint, one that moves multilingual writers away from the pressure to jettison the public performance of linguistic heritage but toward a negotiation of how they can perform their ethnic identities in ways that are acceptable to the majority. To replace passing with covering means no longer trying to erase all traces of linguistic capital and instead playing up one's acquisition and internalization of American cultural capital in language use.

Regardless of the cultural and linguistic capital that students possess, multilingual writers more often than not, especially in writing centers, seek to acquire language facility in ways that enable them to save face and to blend in with English-majority students. Despite the clichéd notion of the individualistic, carefree spirit of college students, conforming to received notions of group identity is a powerful motivator for multilingual writers seeking to write and speak like other English-speaking students. Carol Severino (2006) describes the assimilationist goal of L2 learning, the push to pass or cover, as “blend[ing] and melt[ing] into the desired discourse communities and avoid[ing] social stigma by controlling any features that in the eyes of audiences with power and influence might mark a writer as inadequately educated or lower class” (338). Severino complicates the pressure to “fit in” by noting that L2 writers must navigate the pull of American culture, its hegemonic allure for consumption, with the push to avoid stigma, to resist marginalization read through the cultural values attached to economic class in the U.S. Being *too* accented or *too* ethnic represents what my students from Asian countries problematically call “fresh off the boat,” or FOB. When these students have expressed utter contempt for FOBs, I push them to complicate the loaded, offensive history of the concept. Typically, they roll their eyes and dismiss me, suggesting I just can't possibly understand the positions from which they speak.¹⁸

These first- and second-generation L2 students have sophisticated linguistic repertoires and are veterans of mapping and morphing their original identities onto American versions. They are quite different from international students who just don't have the same stakes or

18. Sexual minorities and African Americans have long histories of reclaiming and re-encoding formerly derisive terms or slurs. “Queer” serves as one of the more obvious examples of a term once hurled as an epithet that now enables the LGBT community to understand itself in more progressive, inclusive ways. For some in the community, the term is still fraught with tension, and its use outside of the community by heterosexuals, allies or not, remains complicated and unsettling.

motives to cover, even though they too seek to cover. Ilona Leki puts it best:

Permanent-resident ESL students are likely to know all the icons of American teen culture but may be suffering from anomie, that is, confusion about which culture they actually belong to, that of their families or that of their new peers in the United States. International or visa students usually do not at all mind associating with other internationals and often feel more comfortable with these students than with Americans since other internationals are experiencing similar adjustments and problems. The internationals typically are not interested in being taken for Americans. (1992, 42)

While the international students often don't seek to pass as many permanent-resident students do, they share a common concern in many contexts of covering in the classroom, blending in and not sticking out because of their linguistic ability. They internalize and seek to perform language in ways that minimize their cultural difference because they understand quickly the price that students pay for not identifying with the majority monolingual culture. The consequences of stigma involve marginalization, diminished respect in the classroom by provincial native-born instructors and students, and inequitable assessment of scholarship and other performances. If, as Grimm (2006) and Matsuda (2004) suggest, Americans choose to have tin ears for linguistic diversity, if we allow accent to interfere with our willingness to hear and understand, then it's no surprise that students would seek to protect themselves, to guard against experiences that diminish their sense of security and place in sites where learning and teaching happen.

English is continually changing, evolving, and mutating for an infinite range of possible contexts (disciplinary, institutional, community, etc.), reflecting the cultural and social practices of a moment in time and signaling new ways of thinking, believing and doing. For immigrant and international L2 writers, this fluidity represents a moving target of rules and conventions that can't be anything but daunting. When I revisit the experience of the immigrant student that I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, I see that she represents an endless stream of students who are seen in writing centers everywhere. Attempting to select the proper response to her writing makes me feel deeply conflicted because her desire to cover is understandable, a strategic response to a vexing moment. Without knowing her instructor, I wouldn't have been able to give her sound advice on whether her

professor is the sort, like my former colleagues, who live for “gotcha” moments when they can pounce and humiliate an L2 writer for transgressing arbitrary rules of usage and style. Her professor could just as easily be one of those that Grimm and Matsuda would take pride in, colleagues whose assessment criteria have a wide range of elements that attend to task, argument, genre, organization or a multitude of other traits. For them, usage and style would still be critical components of a grade or feedback, but struggling with them wouldn’t be deal breakers for an evaluation. While a student might not receive an outstanding grade, she could still pass or do well on the assignment for satisfying other elements that the instructor wants to address. I suspect students would find that to be a reasonable approach. In fact, Ferris (2003) has documented students’ preferences for feedback that’s both written out (narrative as opposed to symbols) and delivered through effective, dialogic conferencing. In the field though, tutors and students often are shooting in the dark when professors don’t (or can’t) clearly communicate their values, even rubrics, in assessment and evaluating writing. What’s a tutor or student to do then?

An ethnical response to the situation, to me, is to process and name the dynamics and tensions at place and to work with students to understand what their professors’ expectations are. From that common ground, we negotiate what’s reasonably possible in our relatively short time together. Before we turn to their paper, we talk about their process and review the assignment, syllabi, or their memories of what their professors expect. Assuming we can’t address argument, organization, or other higher-order concerns, I steer multilingual writers toward reducing global error that impacts on meaning rather than addressing more local error that just annoys L1 readers. This practice involves a read through of the paper together, where I note on the paper points I’d like for us to return to. It also provides an opportunity to improvise error analysis and triage what I’m hearing. To me, two critical moments come in this work: the first, presenting the constellation of errors and negotiating what to address first; and the second, helping a student understand that as they “finish” their paper, like any work of writing, it remains incomplete and in process. The improvised laundry list helps the student and me understand the scope of what we need to address, but it also signals that the student can make choices and have agency about what and how he chooses to deal with his writing. In their quest to cover or perform assimilation of linguistic practice, I

want multilingual writers to have agency and a vocabulary for what they want, but importantly, for immigrant and international students alike, I advocate that they understand the arbitrary application of rules. More directly, I want students to understand, particularly in situations where idiomatic expression and other form usage are hanging them up, that rules are illusory. True facility, I argue with them, comes with cultural immersion, a process fraught with complications that must be acknowledged because they pose promise *and* loss.

To accommodate the mainstream as a multilingual writer is to acknowledge its sway and power. It's a strategic calculation about one's role in a society, particularly in the U.S. where the majority isn't often charitable or kind in its response to those perceived as outsiders. I'm drawn to revisiting the student with whom I started off this chapter. Her representation of her language as "broken" still makes me wince, but I hear that sort of characterization over and over again. It makes me empathetic to the motivation of students in this position; they want the codes and practices to blend in with the majority in ways that mitigate the stigma that would inevitably confront them. Anyone with the privilege and opportunity to work with learners under these sorts of pressures has a moral obligation to guide them toward knowledge and practices that empower them. We have a concurrent responsibility to raise awareness in the communities through which we and these writers circulate, of the power and possibility of imagining linguistic communities in more inclusive ways, ways that invite comfort with accent and dialogue about linguistic differences. Teachers and tutors also have a duty, as the next section will examine, to enable clients to make strategic decisions about multiliteracy. In other words, to understand the possibilities for opposing and subverting the dominant ways of English language learning and usage in the variety of contexts in which they encounter them.

FOREGROUNDING AND SUBVERTING NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE WRITING CENTER

One of the great treasures of living and teaching in New York City is the opportunity to work with students who possess rich linguistic backgrounds. At each of the schools where I've taught, I have encountered students whose histories and literacy biographies stretched my ability to comprehend the complexity they bring to learning and teaching. One summer I worked with a Chinese national who slipped into

an essay a cryptic line about coming to America locked in a container on an ocean-going ship. To this day, I can't pass the docks in south Brooklyn or Elizabeth, NJ, without thinking about what he had gone through in those weeks of escaping poverty in China for a life in New York City. Helping him learn proper syntax and idioms seemed silly in comparison to getting his story right. For his part, this student wasn't interested in dwelling or expanding on the experience. He was more focused on completing this core composition course so that he could direct more of his energies toward finance courses that were his passion. Then there was Sheku who was another client from a legal studies course. He struggled to critically think and organize his thoughts in relation to a very specialized legal genre of analytic papers. Sheku's spoken English was fine, but his written literacy required work to be at level with his peers. His ability to write was also confounded by his use of prosthetics that slowed his writing. Character by character was etched slowly, suggesting that his ability to manipulate the devices was still a work in progress. He never talked about how he lost his hands and forearms, but I learned from a colleague that he was the victim of torture in Liberia. Sheku had lived what I had only casually watched in the film *Blood Diamond*. Finally, there's Marina, one of my tutors from the Staten Island campus, who effortlessly switched from Russian to a Brooklyn working-class English and on to polished academic English. I don't know the story of her language acquisition, but I do know that she's one of my strongest tutors, even if too brutally honest in her assessments and a bit strident in her empiricism.

I share these brief glimpses because each student represents a movement away from assimilation into American linguistic conventions or passive consumption of academic modes of expression. None of these students seek to make themselves more acceptable to the mainstream, to blend in and not offend the sensibilities of the center. Instead, they seek to have a strategic relationship to academic and mainstream English, one that provides routes to material success, but that doesn't require them to lose their cultural heritage and sense of self. Being in New York City emerges as a powerful variable here; I wonder to what degree these strategies are viable because tolerance for linguistic diversity is relatively high here. Elsewhere in the country, where the population may be less accepting of non-academic English, or even their faces or differences, I wonder if these students would have the same level of confidence or sense of agency and purpose to move through higher education.

Juxtaposed to the multilingual writer who has a justifiable motive to assimilate mainstream American culture through communication practices, opposition and subversion are other possibilities. In all honesty, I haven't encountered students in writing centers who outright refused to perform dominant linguistic practice, so much as I have seen students who occupied very different worlds that had direct impact on their academic lives. Such students literally move between two (or more) linguistic traditions that take on a very autonomous feel. In this sense I'm thinking of the ostensible self-segregation that I see on campus that also gets played out in linguistic practices out in the city. I'm thinking of the students who only use English to survive in the classroom but then return to the other languages outside of it. I remember my partner telling me about a student who he worked with at his institution. She told him that her family didn't permit her to speak English at home, that there was essentially cultural separation away from school that was about maintaining and holding onto a cultural identity in the face of tremendous pressures to meld with the dominant culture. I got the sense that many first-generation immigrant families attached themselves to ethnic and cultural communities that continue to exist as self-contained units and that actively seek to maintain strong ties to their sites of origin. That people can maintain powerful cultural and speech communities beyond the linguistic majority—heck, independent of it—is amazing.

L2 scholars argue two anti-assimilationist positions under which these students' strategies might fall. One position, Carol Severino argues, is the separatist position focused on “preserv[ing] and celebrat[ing] linguistic diversity, not eradicate[ing] it” (2006, 339). By this approach, students refuse to cover or assimilate, maintaining agency in their own home language. In practical terms, being oppositional involves occasions where L2 students mesh languages where appropriate, incorporating L2 rhetorical flourishes and usage as a way to impact on writing and expression, to move L1 readers onto different grounds for understanding L2 expression. In a collaborative essay, leading L2 scholars discuss whether students ought to be invited to write in home languages, particularly when it teaches them to think and reflect upon audience, and suggest:

Teachers who [invite students to occasionally write in a home language] are usually seeking to increase students' ownership and investment in

writing and also trying to give them a more palpable experience of a basic principle of rhetoric: audience and purpose determine genre *and* language choice. Such writing occasions might well propel students to go on and revise and copyedit in their home language. This activity will help them take more ownership of the copyediting process too. If a teacher doesn't know the home language or is not experienced in the home dialect, that teacher will be in the interesting and fruitful position of having less knowledge and authority about the language being used than the student has. (Bean et al. 2006, 229)

This approach resonates with what Canagarajah (2006a) and Pennycook (2007) advocate above. Not understanding language as either/or, but moving toward an environment where languages transform one another, creating the possibility for hybridity and L1 and L2 ways of knowing, speaking, writing, and doing to bump into one another in productive ways. I'm also committed to having L2 writers and speakers as tutors because they have much greater facility and experience to model code-switching (techniques of moving between and across languages).

Besides the separatist approach, Severino writes about the accommodationist L2 position. Accommodationists, Severino explains, are "not giving up home oral and written discourse patterns in order to assimilate but [are] instead acquiring *new* discourse patterns, thus enlarging their rhetorical repertoires for different occasions." Accommodationists advocate multilingualism as part of a more expansive embrace of linguistic diversity that resists the loss and colonialism associated with assimilation (2006, 340). In Marina and many of my multilingual students, I see the influence of this mindset. Marina's meshing of languages, rhetorical traditions, and linguistic difference makes her tremendously effective when she workshops papers. Problem-posing and challenging ways of argument seem like second nature to her, and the precision with which she coaches students toward revising prose represents an awareness of craft and structure that L1 students rarely possess or perform. Shuling, one of my tutors at another institution, would build rapport, negotiate focus, and conduct sessions with such amazing chemistry with L1 students, observers would often wonder if her clients were long-standing peers or friends. When she would conduct sessions in Mandarin with other Chinese students working on English papers, I wouldn't know what was going on, but the non-verbal cues they would give off signified just as well. For both of these women, their power

and promise as students and tutors comes at the nexus of L1 and L2 and finding ways to work in the academy that haven't stifled one or the other, but enabled them to mesh and flourish.

PARTING THOUGHTS

I suspect that if we gave more space to multilingual learners to voice their preferences and frustrations, they would, more often than not, parallel the cues that we ought to take from tutors like Marina and Shuling. They would tell us of the everyday improvised use of academic and other Englishes; they'd likely share stories of collaborative learning beyond classrooms and writing centers; and they would tell us to both "get over" all of our angst about language learning and to "get a clue" about the pressure they face learning in a language whose codes are as daunting as the culture and society from which they arise. Multilingual writers seek to perform—to speak, to write, to be—like the often-monolingual majority because those sets of practices promise a modicum of safety and security from the discursive violence that they would surely face otherwise. Such damage is typically more psychic and amorphous, but nonetheless felt genuinely. The pain inflicted by insults can be just as injurious as real punches that can land on people. Still, on how many campuses around the country can a multilingual student—regardless of standing as international, undocumented citizen, or a permanent resident—find true, unqualified safety? Recurrent media spectacles and political battles over national immigration policy reflect a wide-range of attitudes from outright xenophobia to ethnocentrism. And they are further complicated by anti-international sentiment both following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and during the ongoing economic upheaval in the new millennium. In this context, multilingual speakers represent a level of diversity seldom seen outside major urban centers, yet the wider U.S. political economy is not well-equipped today to cope with either the socio-cultural difference they represent or the ever-deepening cultural, political, and economic globalization of transnational capitalism that these speakers index. Further, since multilingual students will more often than not present bodies and cultural practices that signify as different from the majority, they can often be doubly conspicuous. That reality leads me to wonder about their safety on campus and around the country and what we can do to further make campuses welcoming and to increase awareness of the opportunities L2 students have to share and the needs they bring.

How does all this connect to the writing center then? What obligation do tutors have to help a client blend in and assimilate or to resist and challenge, pushing wider society to adapt? I find myself going back to what Nancy Grimm advocates in *Good Intentions*: She suggests consultants imagine themselves as cultural informants, mentoring students, regardless of their face or what they seek, to bridge from where they are to where they wish to go. I remember working with many immigrant students who would preface their work with introductions that contained palpable shame about their “broken English,” the same code the woman above used with one of my tutors, as if their language, on its face, wasn’t legitimate. They sought to mitigate the consequences of their accents and literacies because they realized not doing so had consequences. One time, my client was a public school teacher in New York City, facing the loss of her job because she hadn’t certified her literacy by a looming deadline. I never knew what kind of elementary teacher she was. All I knew was that she struggled to write without accent, the typical issues that the L2 scholars say are to be expected. Her essays reflected solid understanding of the readings that prompted the essay task, effective arguments and sound organization, but her prose was chock full of error—problems that never interfered with understanding, yet ones I’m sure examiners found odious. Over and over again, she’d get high scores in the general knowledge test and just fail the essay, thereby failing certification. After about four years of trying (and long since I’d stopped working with her and had moved on to another post) I got an excited email. She had finally passed. At once chagrined and gratified for her, I wondered, had she just finally overcome her accent, or had she finally stumbled onto a reader of her essay that thought holistically about the traits of effective writing and could read past any accent that she was still displaying? I wrote back to her and asked about her life. She was still teaching, loving the neighborhood school, and watching her own children grow and begin to think about colleges. The accent in her prose was still there, but I understood her perfectly. I wished my student the best and encouraged her to stay in touch. A flash of melancholy crept over me as I thought of my years working with those teachers, and yet I was embarrassed, wondering about the damage that had been done to her sense of voice, agency and confidence with expression by those classes I taught so pragmatically focused on test prep. I take solace that my work with these teachers, albeit immersed in the worst of current-traditional composition

pedagogy (I gave them tight templates and a foolproof formula for writing), made a difference one student at a time. It was subversive in that I enabled the students to look behind the writing assessment curtain, to demystify its process and to develop strategies to cope. Still, I wondered whether and how I could have done more to help them contest, to oppose the institutions that they faced. The system was structured such that not taking the test wasn't an option, protesting the scoring not feasible, so working to pass the test, develop a teaching career and change the face of New York schools was their only option. In that sense, change was happening, just not in the immediately tangible ways that many activists want. But it was change nevertheless.